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ROGER POUIVET & DARIUSZ ŁUKASIEWICZ

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THE COMMON-CORE/DIVERSITY DILEMMA: REVISIONS OF HUMEAN THOUGHT, NEW EMPIRICAL RESEARCH, AND THE LIMITS OF RATIONAL RELIGIOUS BELIEF

BRANDEN THORNHILL-MILLER & PETER MILLICAN

Hertford College, University of Oxford

Abstract. This paper is the product of an interdisciplinary, interreligious dialogue aiming to outline some of the possibilities and rational limits of supernatural religious belief, in the light of a critique of David Hume's familiar sceptical arguments – including a rejection of his famous Maxim on miracles – combined with a range of striking recent empirical research. The Humean nexus leads us to the formulation of a new 'Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma' (CCDD), which suggests that the contradictions between different religious belief systems, in conjunction with new understandings of the cognitive forces that shape their common features, persuasively challenge the rationality of most kinds of supernatural belief. In support of this conclusion, we survey empirical research concerning intercessory prayer, religious experience, near-death experience, and various cognitive biases (e.g. agency detection, theory of mind, egocentric and confirmation bias). But we then go on to consider evidence that supernaturalism – even when rationally unwarranted – has significant beneficial individual and social effects, despite others (such as tribalism) that are far less desirable. This prompts the formulation of a 'Normal/Objective Dilemma' (NOD), identifying important trade-offs to be found in the choice between our humanly evolved 'normal' outlook on the world, and one that is more rational and 'objective'. Can we retain the pragmatic benefits of supernatural belief while avoiding irrationality and intergroup conflict? It may well seem that rationality is incompatible with any wilful sacrifice of objectivity (and we appreciate the force of this austere view). But in a situation of uncertainty, an attractive compromise may be available by moving from the competing factions and mutual contradictions of 'first-order' supernaturalism to a more abstract and tolerant 'second-order' view, which itself can be given some distinctive (albeit controversial) intellectual support through the increasingly popular Fine Tuning Argument. We end by proposing a 'Maxim of the Moon' to express the undogmatic spirit of this second-order religiosity, providing a cautionary

metaphor to counter the pervasive bias endemic to the human condition, and offering a more cooperation- and humility-enhancing understanding of religious diversity in a tense and precarious globalised age.

This paper is the product of a dialogue between two contrasting points of view: on the one hand, a psychologist, sympathetic to spiritual perspectives as informed by contemporary empirical research; on the other hand, an analytic philosopher, with a sceptical and naturalistic attitude to religion very much in the spirit of David Hume. Our aim has been to outline some of the possibilities and rational limits of supernatural belief, in the light of both important recent empirical research and a new critique of Hume's familiar sceptical arguments. Our larger hope is that, through this dialogue and by facing up to some of the serious challenges to reasoning about religious beliefs from any human perspective, we might encourage more progress in interreligious dialogue and in the naturalism/supernaturalism debate.

I. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Our topic is the epistemology of religious belief: specifically, belief in supernatural agents such as gods, angels, and spirits. And we are concerned with the evidence for (or against) such invisible powers derived from reported miracles, religious experiences, and other instances of perceived supernatural agency, which we consider to be the predominant *evidential* influence on religious belief.[1] Scepticism about such proposed instances of supernatural agency has tended to focus on either their intrinsic improbability or the contradictions between different supernatural accounts. Both of these objections have roots in the work of Hume, whose influence is clear in the writing of more recent sceptics such as Bertrand Russell and J. L. Mackie. In §II and §III of this paper, we shall highlight errors in Hume's famous arguments, indicating that the sceptical case is not nearly as straightforward as its advocates often assume. Nevertheless, by combining the lessons to be learned from these discussions, we shall formulate a dilemma that represents a significant new challenge to the evidential value of such phenomena:

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[1] That is, amongst those who self-consciously assess their beliefs and respond to evidence. No doubt most people adopt their religious (or anti-religious) views from their family and society without much systematic evidential reflection.

The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma

That in so far as religious phenomena (e.g. miracle reports, religious experiences, or other apparent perceptions of supernatural agency) point towards specific aspects of particular religions, their diversity and mutual opposition undermines their evidential force; while in so far as such phenomena involve a 'common core' of similarity, they point towards a proximate common cause for these phenomena that is natural rather than supernatural.[2]

The latter part of this dilemma depends on *recent empirical discoveries* which suggest that the general characteristics of religious phenomena are broadly – and increasingly – explicable in naturalistic terms. In §§IV-VI we shall flesh out this claim, drawing on a wide range of recent empirical research.[3]

The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma (CCDD) is, we believe, a serious threat to any form of *first-order supernaturalism*: supernaturalist beliefs that claim unique authority for some particular religious tradition in preference to all others.[4] But it does not so obviously undermine what we call *second-order supernaturalism*, which maintains that the universe in general, and the religious sensitivities of humanity in particular, have been formed by supernatural powers *working through natural processes*. Indeed the same natural mechanisms that predispose us towards religious belief can be appealed to not only by the atheist – who takes them to 'explain away' supernaturalist beliefs – but also by the second-order theist – who takes them to be tendencies 'designed in' to our human nature, or at least 'evolved in' within a universe designed to foster such evolution. Second-order theism is thus likely to be particularly attractive to adherents of the Fine-Tuning Argument for the existence of God, a recent and popular variant of the Design Argument which

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[2] As we shall see, however, a natural (proximate) common cause is consistent with a supernatural *ultimate* cause.

[3] For obvious reasons of space, however, our coverage of the many empirical studies has had to be representative and highly selective rather than exhaustive, just as we have made no attempt to survey the rich literature spanning the philosophies of science and religion.

[4] *First-order supernaturalism*, thus understood, ranges from the very simple (e.g. unreflective and literalistic endorsement of one particular religious tradition while entirely dismissing all others) to the highly sophisticated (e.g. maintenance of tradition-specific beliefs, interpreted through reflective theological principles that allow for metaphorical understanding and acknowledge some degree of truth in other traditions).

builds on the apparent discovery of certain 'anthropic coincidences' in the laws of physics. If the universe has in fact been finely tuned to be especially conducive to the evolution of higher life forms with moral and religious sensitivities, then it is only to be expected that such life forms will proliferate across the multitude of galaxies we observe, and that religion will evolve in many different ways, yielding a wide variety of specific religious systems. This possibility therefore casts doubt on the unique authority of *any* particular religious orthodoxy, while at the same time potentially supporting the theory of a cosmic Designer in a manner that is potentially friendly to more general religious attitudes.

The considerations raised in this paper thus leave open the rational possibility of second-order theism – or deism – based on philosophical argument and on observations abstracted from across the religious traditions of humanity. But such a position will fail to satisfy the vast majority of believers, including even those philosophers who (like F. R. Tennant, Basil Mitchell, and Richard Swinburne) aim to establish their theism on the basis of a 'cumulative case' that supplements the theistic arguments with an appeal to historical records and contemporary experience as providing evidence of *specific* supernatural intervention in human history. Indeed, if the distinctive claims of *all* religious traditions are mutually defeating – as the Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma suggests – then it might seem that the evidential basis even for second-order supernaturalism is crucially undermined, leaving naturalism as the default winner between the remaining rational options (e.g. on grounds of ontological parsimony).

At this point, however, the theist has available an unexpected response that deserves more attention than it has hitherto been given, fighting back using the atheist's own empirical weapons. For given the recent psychological evidence that we are naturally prone to religious thinking, some might conclude that such natural tendencies should be *embraced*, especially where they are empirically associated – as sometimes proves to be the case – with various aspects of healthy mental functioning and personal benefits. In §VII we thus introduce a second dilemma, which is more practical than epistemological, and can potentially play a role (as we shall further see in §VIII) in the case for second-order supernaturalism:

> *The Normal/Objective Dilemma*
> If the psychological causes of religious belief are associated with normal, healthy, mental functioning and various positive (individual and social)

outcomes, should these rationally weigh with us more heavily than objective epistemological considerations would allow?

This quandary bears interesting – and somewhat ironic – comparison with the 'very dangerous dilemma' famously raised by Hume's own philosophical thinking at the end of Book 1 of his *Treatise of Human Nature*.[5] Having concluded that purely rational, objective thinking leads to total scepticism, from which we are saved only by the irrational intrusions of the human imagination, Hume balances the follies to which we are led if we allow the imagination to dominate against the crippling scepticism that reason, unaided by the imagination, delivers: 'We have, therefore, no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all' (*T* 1.4.7.7). Hume's own answer to this dilemma is unclear – and its interpretation is controversial – but it involves at least some subordination of pure reason to more practical considerations, and even perhaps to the emotions. One of the authors of the current paper[6] inclines towards an answer to these dilemmas suggested by Hume's later thought in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*,[7] an answer that may vindicate objective reason so as to enable it to provide a dispassionate critique of religion. The other author is more sympathetic to our need, as psychological beings, to accommodate our natural religious tendencies within our intellectual lives. But both of us are agreed that there is plenty of scope for reasonable debate here, and the verdict is less clear cut than is commonly supposed by enthusiasts on either side.

II. REJECTING HUME'S MAXIM ON MIRACLES

Although Humean themes will feature strongly here, we explicitly reject two of Hume's most familiar claims about belief in miracles. The first of these is the famous Maxim which concludes his theoretical discussion of testimony for miracles in Part 1 of *Enquiry* Section 10:

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[5] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: A Critical Edition, Vol. 1*, ed. by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1739/40] 2007); subsequently cited in text as '*T*' followed by location in the standard format of book.part.section. paragraph.

[6] See Peter Millican, 'Hume's Chief Argument', in *The Oxford Handbook of Hume*, ed. by Paul Russell (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

[7] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Peter Millican (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, [1748] 2007); subsequently cited in text as '*E*' followed by location in the standard format of section.paragraph.

'That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony
be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the
fact, which it endeavours to establish: ... ' (*E* 10.13, quotation marks in
original)

This Maxim can be interpreted in a number of ways, some of which are
more plausibly true than others (but then correspondingly unexciting).
John Earman,[8] for example, takes Hume to be saying that a miracle report
should be ascribed a probability of more than 0.5 only if its evidential
force is such as to render the miracle more probably true than false –
a plain tautology that is of little use. Another common way of reading the
Maxim is as asserting that 'extraordinary claims require extraordinary
evidence' – a plausible claim, but too non-specific and ambiguous to be
directly applied or refuted.[9] Slightly more pointedly, the Maxim may be
understood as encapsulating a dilemma: that the more extraordinary the
event reported, the less probable the report, so that the religious advocate
who wishes to render probable the report of a miracle cannot have it
both ways. Again this sounds quite plausible, but nothing that Hume says
provides a solid basis either for this interpretation or for the correctness
of such a claim.[10] We believe that Hume's intended conclusion was far
more specific than any of these, and would – if accepted – undermine
almost any miracle report. As we shall now explain, however, his
argument for it is faulty.

Hume starts from the very reasonable principle that the evidential
force of testimony can be known only through induction from experience,
by which we learn which factors – such as 'the opposition of contrary
testimony; ... the character or number of the witnesses; ... the manner of
their delivering their testimony' (*E* 10.7) – are best (or least) correlated
with true reports. But having explained this, Hume then immediately

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[8] John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles* (Oxford: Oxford
University Press, 2000), p. 41.

[9] This precise formulation was used by Carl Sagan (in *Cosmos* Episode 12), though
various antecedents can be found dating back to the 18th century. Note that an atheist
and a theist are likely to disagree regarding the 'extraordinariness' of supernatural claims;
hence deployment of this maxim against such claims is apt to seem question-begging.

[10] It is easy to provide a Bayesian argument to the effect that a report's overall plausibility
(with the relevant conditional probabilities held constant) must diminish in proportion
to the prior probability of what is reported. But without some specific argument regarding
the actual magnitude of the relevant prior and conditional probabilities, it is impossible
to show that the conditional probability of the miracle, given the testimony, can never
reach 0.5 or more.

introduces a further factor to put into this equation:

> Suppose, for instance, that the fact, which the testimony endeavours
> to establish, partakes of the extraordinary and the marvellous; in that
> case, the evidence, resulting from the testimony, admits of a diminution,
> greater or less, in proportion as the fact is more or less unusual. (*E* 10.8)

The unusualness of a reported event, Hume argues, should be balanced
on the other side of the scale against the characteristics of the testimony
that incline us to believe it, potentially resulting in 'a counterpoize, and
mutual destruction of belief and authority' (*E* 10.8). The most extreme
possible case of such 'counterpoize' is where the reported fact

> instead of being only marvellous, is really miraculous; and ... *the
> testimony, considered apart and in itself*, amounts to an entire proof;
> in that case, there is proof against proof, of which the strongest must
> prevail, but still with a diminution of its force, in proportion to that of its
> antagonist. (*E* 10.11; emphasis added)

Notice here how Hume understands the strength of the testimony –
'considered apart and in itself' – as yielding a single overall measure of
proof which can then appropriately be weighed against the strength of
the counter-proof that arises from the miraculousness (i.e. the extreme
lack of conformity to our uniform experience) of the alleged event.[11] The
stronger of these two proofs 'must prevail, but still with a diminution
of its force, in proportion to that of its antagonist'. So the confidence we
place in the testimony (or – depending on which way the scales point –
in the inductive evidence against the supposed event) will depend on the
extent to which the testimonial proof (or alternatively the proof from
experience) over-balances its antagonist (see diagram overpage).

Thus the *overall* credibility depends on this contest between *the proof
constituted by the inductive evidence in favour of the testimony 'considered
apart and in itself'* (weighing down on the left-hand tray) and *the proof
constituted by the uniform evidence of nature against the reported event*
(weighing down on the right-hand tray). We have 'proof against proof',
with the overall credibility given not by either 'proof' individually, but by

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[11] Millican ('Twenty Questions about Hume's "Of Miracles"', in *Philosophy and
Religion: Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 68, ed. Anthony O'Hear, 2011, pp.
152–92) refers to this as Hume's 'Independence Assumption', explaining both its key role
in Hume's argument (§8) and its failure in cases where testimony can be false in many
ways (§19), as briefly discussed below. For explication of Hume's notion of 'proof', see §2
and §6 of the same paper.

the result of weighing them against each other.[12] In the setup illustrated below, this will be indicated by the direction of the pointer at the top of the scales once they have settled.

In favour of the testimony
Consistency of the testimony
Good character of the witnesses
Number of the witnesses
Convincing manner of delivery

Credibility

Against the testimony
Unusualness of the event
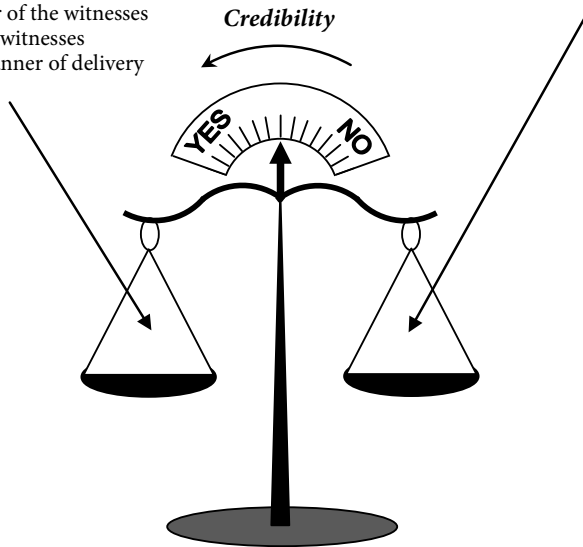
Just two paragraphs later,[13] Hume reaches the famous Maxim which is the culmination of Section 10 Part 1:

Hume's Maxim on Miracles

The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), '*That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous,*

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[12] This refutes Earman's interpretation (Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles*, p. 41; 'Bayes, Hume, Price, and Miracles', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 113 (2002), 91–109 (p. 97)), which would instead involve a calculation, prior to the weighing operation, of two overall judgements – namely the conditional probability (given the testimony) of the event, and of its absence – which are then put in the balance against each other.

[13] The intervening paragraph 12 makes the point that any alleged miracle is *ipso facto* an event that would be maximally out of line with past experience, and hence will have a minimal inductive probability. Hume's reference to 'laws of nature' in that paragraph has led some to misunderstand him as treating miracles as a special case, but in fact his argument is clearly intended to be a straightforward application of the general principles he has already expounded. For discussion of the controversial interpretative issues raised by this paragraph, see Millican, 'Twenty Questions about Hume's "Of Miracles"', §§10-12.

than the fact, which it endeavours to establish ... ' (*E* 10.13, emphasis added)

The rest of the paragraph makes clear that here testimony 'sufficient to *establish*' some event means testimony sufficient to render the event *more probable than not;* while 'more miraculous' here is to be read simply as 'less [initially] probable'.[14] The language of the Maxim again indicates that Hume understands any 'kind' of testimony as having a typical probability of falsehood 'considered apart and in itself', *independently* of the particular event reported – let us call this probability *f*. And it is this general probability of falsehood (inductively derived from our experience of that kind of testimony) which is to be weighed in the balance against *m*, the initial probability of the event reported (inductively derived from our experience of that kind of event), to discover which is the more likely.

All this might seem fairly straightforward, but there is a serious fallacy in Hume's reasoning which was indirectly pointed out by some contemporary critics but has been generally overlooked more recently. To put the point crudely, his Maxim can work well *if there is only one way of the testimony's being false* (e.g. with a yes/no medical diagnostic test), but fails *if it is possible for testimony of the relevant kind to be false in many different ways*. For in the latter case, when testimony is presented in favour of some alleged event *M*, and we assess the relative probability of the following two alternatives:

*True positive report:*testimony is true – *M* did in fact occur,

*False positive report:*testimony is false – *M* did not in fact occur,

the latter probability cannot appropriately be calculated in terms of the simple 'probability of falsehood' *f*.[15] If testimony can be false in many different ways, then the *specific* probability of a false positive report of *M* in particular is likely to be much lower than the *non-specific* probability of falsehood in general, and the testimony correspondingly becomes

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[14] See Millican, 'Twenty Questions about Hume's "Of Miracles"', §7 for the textual detail.

[15] This therefore undermines the derivation of Hume's Maxim, which follows if one is permitted to calculate the initial probability of a true positive report as $(1 – f) \times m$ and the probability of a false positive report as $f \times (1 – m)$. The former dominates the latter if and only if *m* is greater than *f*, yielding something like a straight contest between the miracle testimony and the 'testimony of nature', which seems to be the thought behind Hume's reasoning. For more discussion, see Millican, 'Twenty Questions about Hume's "Of Miracles"', §§7-8.

more credible as the probability of a false positive *M*-report decreases. The relevant question, when faced with a report of *M*, becomes not 'how likely is it that this person would report some falsehood or other?', but rather, 'how likely is it that this person would falsely report *M in particular*?'.

Some nice examples that can be used to illustrate this point were given by both George Campbell (1762) and Richard Price (1768), the most philosophically acute of Hume's early critics. But such cases had already been anticipated in 1736 by Joseph Butler, in a discussion explicitly quoted by both Campbell and Price:[16]

> There is a very strong presumption against ... the most ordinary facts, before the proof of them; which yet is overcome by almost any proof. There is a presumption of millions to one, against the story of Caesar, or of any other man. For suppose a number of common facts so and so circumstanced, of which one had no kind of proof, should happen to come into one's thoughts; every one would, without any possible doubt, conclude them to be false. And the like may be said of a single common fact.[17]

After quoting Butler, Campbell continues:

> What then, I may subjoin, shall be said of an uncommon fact? In order to illustrate the observation above cited, suppose, first, one at random mentions, that at such an hour, of such a day, in such a part of the heavens, a comet *will* appear; the conclusion from experience would be not as millions, but as infinite to one, that the proposition is false. Instead of this, suppose you have the testimony of but one man of integrity, who is skill'd in astronomy, that at such an hour, of such a day, in such a part of the heavens, a comet *did* appear; you will not hesitate one moment to give him credit.[18]

Thus Hume's Maxim – despite its evidently widespread seductive appeal – gives absurd results if applied to everyday and non-miraculous

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[16] For Campbell, see below. Richard Price, *On the Importance of Christianity and the Nature of Historical Evidence, and Miracles: Dissertation IV of Four Dissertations*, second edition (London: A. Millar and T. Cadell, 1768) provides a lottery example at §2, pp. 407-9, and acknowledges Butler on pp. 440-2.

[17] Joseph Butler, *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*, ed. by W. E. Gladstone (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1736] 1896), II ii 3 [§11].

[18] George Campbell, *A Dissertation on Miracles* (Edinburgh: A. Kincaid & J. Bell, 1762), I §1, p. 31.

cases. To take Campbell's example of a comet, it was surely antecedently vanishingly improbable that a comet should, on the night after which the first version of this paper was presented, be visible in a clear sky between the stars δ- and ω-Piscium. Yet having seen this reported in the newspapers,[19] we *rightly* believed it. The general probability of an error in such a newspaper report – let us suppose this to be 1% – is vastly greater than the tiny initial probability of the event reported. So according to Hume's Maxim the report should not be credible. But we are *right* to believe it because the crucial probability that has to be compared with that of the event reported is not *the general probability of error in such reports*, but rather, *the specific probability that the newspaper would erroneously report a comet in just that position*. This specific probability is even tinier than the probability that a comet would actually appear there – indeed presumably around 100 times less (given a 1% general frequency of errors).

Hume certainly knew of Campbell's objections (and probably Price's also),[20] but he did not revise his argument, perhaps because he failed to remember, or misunderstood, the Maxim for which he himself had argued. We noted above that it is often interpreted in ways that seem obviously true – even vacuous – and it might be that Hume had such an interpretation in mind when considering Campbell's objections, and hence failed to appreciate their force. More charitably, we suspect that he may have had in mind a different Maxim, one that is non-vacuous yet far more defensible than his own, while remaining very much in the same spirit:

> **Revised Humean Maxim on Miracles**
> That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle *M* (i.e. render it more probable than not), unless the testimony is of such a kind, that the occurrence of a false *M* report of that kind (*given that M does not in fact occur*) would be even less probable than *M* itself.

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[19] The comet C/2011 L4 Pan-STARRS was at that point in the sky when this talk was given on 15th March 2013. See, for example: http://www.universetoday.com/100169/comet-panstarrs-how-to-see-it-in-march-2013/ [accessed 09/03/2013].

[20] Hume wrote to Hugh Blair in 1761 discussing the manuscript of Campbell's *Dissertation*, and then to Campbell himself in 1762 (David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. by John Young Thomson Greig (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), Vol. I, pp. 348-51, 360-1). He knew Richard Price personally, but we have no record of his making any response to Price's dissertation on miracles. Neither Campbell nor Price spelled out exactly how his argument had gone wrong, so it would be unsurprising if Hume failed to appreciate the full significance of their objections.

This Maxim can be derived mathematically as follows. We begin from the observation that the threshold of credibility of an *M* report (of a given kind) comes at the point when such a report is more likely to have been generated truly than falsely (i.e. a 'true positive' is more likely than a 'false positive'). The probability of occurrence of a true *M* report is equal to the initial probability of *M* (call this *m*) multiplied by the probability that *M*, given that it occurs, will be truly reported (for simplicity, call this *T*). The probability of occurrence of a false *M* report is equal to the initial probability of *M*'s non-occurrence, namely (1−*m*), multiplied by the overall probability that *M* would be reported given that it does not occur (call this *F*).[21] So we now have that testimony for *M* is credible (if and) only if:

$$(1-m) \times F < m \times T.$$

But *M* is supposedly miraculous, so the initial probability *m* is tiny. And as long as it is not *even less probable* that *M* should go unreported if true (which it surely isn't), we have $T \leq (1-m)$ and hence, multiplying both sides by *F*:

$$T \times F \leq (1-m) \times F.$$

Stringing our two inequalities together, we get:

$$T \times F \leq (1-m) \times F < m \times T$$

and now taking out the middle term, this yields $T \times F < m \times T$, which on cancelling *T*s leaves:

$$F < m$$

Therefore testimony for *M* is credible in accordance the Revised Maxim above. Notice that this Maxim, unlike Hume's, focuses not on an *inverse epistemic* probability – that a report of *M*, having been given, is true or false – but rather, on a *direct causal* probability – that a report of *M* *will be given* in circumstances where *M* has not, in fact, occurred. And this has the virtue of making crystal clear that we have now moved into the realm of *empirical psychology* rather than pure philosophy: the most crucial question here is how prone people are to generating reports

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[21] *F* is an average value, and false reporting could be more likely in some circumstances than others without undermining this reasoning. But note that both *T* and *F* are specific to *M*, and are likely to vary depending on the particular miracle reported – unlike Hume's original Maxim, this revised version does *not* make the implausible assumption that all items of testimony of a given 'kind' should have the same typical probability of truth.

of miracles and religious experiences *naturally* (i.e. in the absence of special supernatural intervention). If it then turns out that this is entirely common, the claim that such reports give significant evidence of the supernatural is substantially undermined.[22]

III. CONTRARY RELIGIONS AND A DILEMMA FOR THE BELIEVER

Having erected a high threshold of credibility by means of his Maxim, Hume moves on in Part 2 of *Enquiry* 10 to argue that no actual testimony for a miracle has ever got close to reaching that threshold. He gives a battery of arguments, focusing mainly on the dubious provenance of miracle stories, which are quickly propagated through our love of '*surprize* and *wonder*', and the enthusiasm of religionists for 'promoting so holy a cause' (*E* 10.17). Hume might also usefully have added here some discussion from his *Natural History of Religion*,[23] concerning humans' tendency to ascribe events to gods and spirits, a disposition which also helps to explain both why supernatural miracle stories seem so plausible in some cultural settings and why, by contrast, the progress of science tends to undermine them:

> ... We hang in perpetual suspence between life and death, health and sickness, plenty and want; which are distributed amongst the human species by secret and unknown causes, whose operation is oft unexpected, and always unaccountable. These *unknown causes*, then, become the

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[22] Note that both Hume's original Maxim and our Revised Maxim require some judgement regarding the initial probability of the miracle M itself (i.e. m in our formal discussion). Moreover, the naturalist and supernaturalist are quite likely to disagree here (cf. note 9 above), even if they fully accept the same Maxim. Unfortunately there is no systematic way to remove the element of judgement regarding the overall plausibility of a supernaturalist world-view: to the atheist, the supposition of a divine realm may be a metaphysical extravagance that could only be justified by overwhelming evidence, while to the theist, it might seem to be a relatively modest addition of another level of immaterial intelligent agents in a world that already contains such agents. These judgements can, however, be swayed by empirical evidence, for example of Darwinian evolution and the physical basis of consciousness, which have persuaded most contemporary philosophers that our own intelligent agency is firmly grounded in the physical world rather than any immaterial realm.

[23] David Hume, *A Dissertation on the Passions; The Natural History of Religion*, ed. by Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1757] 2007); *Natural History* subsequently cited in text as '*N*' followed by location in the standard format of section. paragraph.

constant object of our hope and fear ... Could men anatomize nature, ...
they would find, that these causes are nothing but the particular fabric
and structure of the minute parts of their own bodies and of external
objects; and that, by a regular and constant machinery, all the events are
produced, about which they are so much concerned. But ... the ignorant
multitude ... can only conceive the *unknown causes* in a general and
confused manner ...

There is an universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like
themselves ... We find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds;
and by a natural propensity, if not corrected by experience and reflection,
ascribe malice or good-will to every thing, that hurts or pleases us. ... No
wonder, then, that mankind, being placed in such an absolute ignorance
of causes, and ... at the same time so anxious concerning their future
fortune, should immediately acknowledge a dependence on invisible
powers, possessed of sentiment and intelligence. ...

In proportion as any man's course of life is governed by accident, we
always find, that he encreases in superstition ... All human life, especially
before the institution of order and good government, being subject to
fortuitous accidents; it is natural, that superstition should prevail every
where in barbarous ages ... (*N* 3.1-3)

Obviously any such explanation of the origin of religion is to some extent
speculative, but Hume's account certainly contains plausible elements.[24]
And that humanity has a love of 'surprize and wonder' is evident enough:
the propagation of 'urban myths', conspiracy theories, paranormal and
miracle cures, monster and alien sightings etc. over the web and the
more sensational media demonstrates sufficiently that this passion is still
widespread today.

Moving back now to his discussion of miracles, Hume's next argument
is more distinctive and philosophically interesting, though also rather
dubious:

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[24] Indeed in this passage Hume unites and presages two important modern theories
of religion: (a) religion as shaped by projection of self and anthropomorphism (Stewart
Guthrie, 'A Cognitive Theory of Religion', *Current Anthropology*, 1980, 181–203); and (b)
religion and magic as originating from a need for control in an unpredictable world (e.g.
Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Garden City, New
York: Doubleday, 1945)). Hume also hints at the *hypersensitive agency detection device*
(HADD) and *theory of mind* (ToM) cognitive mechanisms discussed later. But as we
shall see in §V, his account of the origin of religion could usefully be supplemented by
consideration of religious and 'near death' experiences.

> I may add as a *fourth* reason ... that, in matters of religion, whatever is different is contrary; and that it is impossible the religions of ancient ROME, of TURKEY, of SIAM, and of CHINA should, all of them, be established on any solid foundation. Every miracle, therefore, pretended to have been wrought in any of these religions (and all of them abound in miracles), as its direct scope is to establish the particular system to which it is attributed; so has it the same force, though more indirectly, to overthrow every other system. In destroying a rival system, it likewise destroys the credit of those miracles, on which that system was established; so that all the prodigies of different religions are to be regarded as contrary facts, and the evidences of these prodigies, whether weak or strong, as opposite to each other. (*E* 10.24)

This argument, unlike the earlier ones, depends crucially on the idea that each miracle claim is being used to support a specific religious belief, from which Hume takes it to follow that where those beliefs conflict, the miracle claims are in turn rendered indirectly contrary to each other. Putting this semi-formally, suppose we receive two reports of extraordinary events M_1 and M_2 which – understood as supernatural miracles – are invoked in favour of religious beliefs R_1 and R_2 respectively.[25] Supposing that they do indeed provide convincing support for their corresponding religions, we have that $M_1 \to R_1$ and $M_2 \to R_2$. The contrapositive equivalent of the latter is that $\neg R_2 \to \neg M_2$, while if the two religions conflict (i.e. some essential doctrine of R_1 is logically incompatible with some essential doctrine of R_2) then we also have that $R_1 \to \neg R_2$. Putting all this together, we now have $M_1 \to R_1$, $R_1 \to \neg R_2$, and $\neg R_2 \to \neg M_2$, which by transitivity of implication yield $M_1 \to \neg M_2$. This seems, in essence, to be Hume's argument.

The biggest problem with this line of reasoning is that it works only if the implications (symbolised by '$\to$') are all taken to be *certain*: Hume, uncharacteristically, is here failing to notice how differently things fall out if the evidential relationships are merely *probabilistic*. To illustrate this, suppose we are faced with just three competing theories: $R1$, $R2$ and N, where the last is a scientific naturalism that denies any supernatural intervention. Suppose also that we are initially inclined to discount the supernaturalist theories, so that if our state of belief were to be represented

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[25] This wording is intended to make clear that M_1 and M_2 are here understood as specific *events* (e.g. the reviving of a man from the dead, or the raising of a building into the air), and do not involve any interpretation of how those events might have been caused (e.g. through God's or other supernatural agency).

probabilistically, the appropriate figures would be roughly 5% for each of $R1$ and $R2$, and 90% for N. We then witness an apparently supernatural event $M1$, associated with (and claimed in support of) $R1$, while the believers in $R2$ either deny its occurrence, ascribe it to a lesser spirit, or claim it as performed by their own deity for some reason. If our personal experience of the event – and its apparently supernatural character – is sufficiently compelling,[26] then it might force us to give up our belief in N, most likely in favour of $R1$. But notice that in this situation, our acceptance of the miracle could well increase the probability that we assign to $R1$ *and* to $R2$, by favouring *both* supernaturalist theories over naturalism (we might, for example, end up assigning probabilities of 60% to $R1$, 30% to $R2$, and 10% to N). This revised position would in turn *increase* the credibility of any report of a supernatural miracle $M2$ associated with (and claimed in support of) $R2$, thus generating an overall *positive* evidential relationship between $M1$ and $M2$. If a sufficiently strong report in favour of $M2$ were then forthcoming, that would only further confirm our rejection of N, while presumably levelling up the contest between $R1$ and $R2$. (We might also, of course, begin to speculate that neither $R1$ nor $R2$ has the whole truth, and consider other options accordingly, but the crucial point here is that the antipathy between $R1$ and $R2$ need not imply any such antipathy between $M1$ and $M2$.)

So Hume goes much too far when arguing that miracles 'pretended to have been wrought' in contrary religions are 'to be regarded as contrary facts'. This would be true only on the supposition that each miracle's occurrence is intimately tied to the truth of the corresponding religion (and specifically to those crucial doctrines that make the religions logically contrary). Such claims have, no doubt, been advanced by apologists – for example, in arguing that Jesus' miracles prove him beyond doubt to have been the Son of God – but they are highly implausible. M_1 and M_2 are not 'contrary facts' in themselves, but only through the doctrinal implications that have been drawn from them, and it would be entirely possible for an adherent of either religion to accept *both M_1 and M_2* while denying (at least one of) these doctrinal implications. Indeed, as we have seen, M_1 and M_2 need not be 'contrary' even in the weak sense of merely making each other *less probable*, despite the strict contrariety of their associated religions, R_1 and R_2.

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[26] For the sake of the example we here take for granted that personal witnessing of a miraculous event can be sufficiently convincing to compel belief.

The example just discussed might seem artificial, but it is of obvious application to our contemporary situation, in which the key contest – especially given the recent trend towards multi-culturalism and acceptance of religious diversity – is arguably not so much among different religions, as between supernaturalism as a whole and scientific naturalism. From this perspective, some modern believers might be entirely happy to appeal relatively indiscriminately to the huge cloud of miracle stories available within the combined religious traditions of the world, as demonstrating the widespread activity of supernatural powers. This would mean, however, giving up the idea that miracles can provide any specific vindication of particular theological doctrines, including the central doctrine of monotheism. And such a strategy is therefore unlikely to appeal to any conventional Jew, Christian, or Muslim, since the abundance of supernatural manifestations reported in diverse religious traditions would most naturally point towards polytheism instead.[27] But there is also another very significant cost to this strategy, especially in the context of Hume's earlier arguments, because the widespread proliferation of miracle reports does not necessarily increase the likelihood of genuine supernatural activity. The problem here for the supernaturalist position is that there are two quite different ways of accounting for this proliferation:

(S) Supernatural activity is commonplace throughout the world and across the centuries, and is accordingly reported widely.

(N) There is no genuine supernatural activity, but humans are naturally drawn towards belief in the supernatural, with a vivid imagination driven by hopes and fears, cognitive biases, lack of critical judgement, and a delight in miracle stories etc.

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[27] This is not to deny that a Christian could explain away non-Christian supernatural manifestations – for example, by attributing them to evil spirits or other forces. But this very move undercuts any appeal to miracles as a basis for specific religious beliefs, because once intermediate supernatural agents (whose veracity cannot be guaranteed) are brought into the picture, it becomes obvious that mere humans will be unable to tell with any reliability what source any miracle has. Who is to say that an evil spirit could not raise a man from the dead and generate prophecies (etc.) sufficient to convince gullible mortals that God is communicating His will to them? Such a spirit might do this deliberately in order to inspire the development of incompatible monotheistic religious beliefs that are held so fervently as to lead to millennia of bloody conflicts – for more on this sort of concern, see Peter Millican, 'The Devil's Advocate', *Cogito*, 3 (1989), 193–207 (or <http://www.millican.org/papers/1989DevAdv.pdf> for a corrected version).

Hume has already proffered a number of considerations in favour of (N), but notice in particular the relevance of his observation at *E* 10.20 that widely accepted religious miracles (such as those in the Gospels) tend to date from ancient times. The point here is that *both* (S) and (N) imply a broad equivalence between supernatural reports from the ancient and the modern world, thus undermining the conventional eighteenth-century Protestants' belief 'that miracles had long ago ceased'.[28] This conveniently insulated their supernaturalism from contemporary testing, whereas parity between ancient and modern removes this insulation, making the supernaturalist hypothesis testable through critical examination of some of the profusion of *contemporary* reports of miracles. And if it then turns out – as Hume would expect and practical experience seems to show – that most such reports that can be carefully and independently investigated are disconfirmed (e.g. as due to misinterpretation or illusion, exaggeration or deceit, various cognitive biases or simply 'healings' that fail to last),[29] then this will significantly favour (N) over (S). The strategy of appealing to a multitude of witnesses can thus seriously backfire, if some of this profusion of testimony – when critically investigated – turns out to be due to widespread behaviour or psychological phenomena that undermine, rather than confirm, the credibility of such reports.[30]

Although Hume himself does not argue in quite this way, the course of his discussion after presenting his 'contrary religions' argument strongly suggests that he is thinking along broadly similar lines. This would explain why he goes on to cite several miracle stories that are relatively well attested (and therefore might otherwise seem to weaken, rather

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[28] Lorraine Daston, 'Marvelous Facts and Miraculous Evidence in Early Modern Europe', *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (1991), 93–124. Hume echoes this general belief at *T* 3.1.2.7.

[29] Relevant cognitive biases and other processes will be surveyed later. Reports of systematic scientific investigations into specific instances of paranormal phenomena may be found in a variety of 'skeptical' publications. See <http://www.csicop.org/resources> for links, including to <http://www.skeptic.com/> and <http://www.randi.org/site/> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[30] A parallel case might be where a plausible salesman is promoting some supposedly wonderful product – for example a 'miracle cure' or a 'dead cert' investment – with lots of apparently strong arguments, endorsements from satisfied customers, and so forth. At first one might be fairly easily persuaded that the claims, though surprising, are genuine. But the discovery that there is a huge profusion of such salesmen, each with their own favoured products and plausible patter, will lead one to conclude that there is a quite different explanation for *all* of this activity.

than strengthen, his overall case). The point here is not that Christian believers are *logically compelled to deny* the miracles of rival religions (as the contrary religions argument would suggest), but rather, that these believers *will in fact want to deny* them. Such denial will no doubt largely be motivated by simple scepticism towards rival religious beliefs, but it might also reflect an awareness that insufficiently discriminating acceptance of the miraculous, by putting Christian miracles on a par with others, both undermines any special claims for Christianity and also casts doubt on the entire collection. To echo structurally similar thoughts expressed by Hume in a quite different context (*T* 1.4.7.6), 'if we assent to every' supposedly well-attested miracle story associated with any religion, 'beside that' these religions 'are often contrary to each other', such stories will 'lead us into such errors, absurdities, and obscurities, that we must at last become asham'd of our credulity'.[31]

In practice, we suspect that few sophisticated Christians exhibit such excessive credulity, since they are more likely to deny the existence of contemporary Christian miracles (even those endorsed by the Roman Catholic Church in canonisation proceedings) than to accept the miracle stories of other religions. Wholesale rejection of *religious experience*, however, would be far more problematic, given the major and ongoing role that it has played in religious understanding and practice. So in this case, a more plausible response to the considerations above may be to embrace the universality of these experiences, interpreting them as pointing toward the divine in a way that is accessible to those of all faiths. This response can be supported by the observation that such experiences seem to manifest a 'common core' of characteristics, across different times, cultures, and religions. So here, it might seem, Hume's 'contrary religions' argument finally loses its bite. But again we encounter a parallel problem to the case of miracles, since the very commonality which enables the various religious experiences to be mutually supporting – and suggests a common cause – again invites the further suggestion that this common cause is *natural* rather than *supernatural*. Admittedly, the threat to supernaturalism is somewhat different in this case, since the naturalist explanation is far less likely to deny the reality of 'internal' religious experiences than of 'external' miracles. But the same internality that makes religious experiences relatively secure from objective refutation, at the same time stands in the way of any convincing proof

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[31] The context is his *Treatise* quandary mentioned in §I above.

that they are due to the intervention of supernatural agents rather than our own bodies and brains. Meanwhile, their plausibility as evidence of such external supernatural agency remains hostage to the fortunes of physiological and psychological research, which, as we shall see, increasingly threatens to account for them in naturalistic terms.

Putting these points together, the believer in supernatural agency is faced with a dilemma in claiming evidence for such agency from either miracle reports or religious experiences:

> **The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma**
>
> That in so far as religious phenomena (e.g. miracle reports, religious experiences, or other apparent perceptions of supernatural agency) point towards specific aspects of particular religions, their diversity and mutual opposition undermines their evidential force; while in so far as such phenomena involve a 'common core' of similarity, they point towards a proximate common cause for these phenomena that is natural rather than supernatural.[32]

We have already seen some philosophical arguments that support this dilemma, ranging from our reinterpretation of Hume's Maxim, which stresses the centrality of the *causal explanation of (false) miracle reports*, to our discussion of his 'contrary religions' argument, which highlights the difficulty of supporting any particular supernaturalist explanatory framework when so many conflict. Now it is time to add further substance to these points, by turning to recent empirical studies of religious phenomena.

IV. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH SUPPORTING THE SCEPTICAL HORN OF THE CCDD

The first horn of our Dilemma might be called *oppositional* or *sceptical*, and the second *common-core* or *naturalistic*. Empirical research can

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[32] As noted in §I above, this last claim is not *a priori*, but depends on the nature of the 'common core'. If, for example, it turned out to be common – over a wide range of religions – that evil people were miraculously struck dead when cursed by a holy person, or if 'common core' religious experiences involved revelation of previously unknown facts that afterwards turned out to be true, then these things might be most easily explicable in terms of a suitably motivated supernatural agent. The problem is that the 'common core' revealed by systematic investigation seems to contain nothing that demands, or corroborates, such supernatural explanation. But recall also from §I that a *proximate* natural cause is compatible with a *deeper* supernatural cause, so this does not rule out what we have called *second-order supernaturalism*.

accordingly support the Dilemma in either of two ways: either by pointing to opposing claims from different religions that tend to undermine each other, or by revealing a 'common core' of phenomena that turn out to be explicable in naturalistic terms. We shall take the latter, naturalistic, approach towards religious experiences in §V below. Miracle reports, on the other hand, we view more sceptically. Of course, alleged miracles are generally hard to assess objectively, owing to their sporadic and unpredictable nature.[33] But one particularly important and prevalent variety of would-be miracles has been studied extensively, with results that confirm sceptical expectations.

'Medical Miracles' and Intercessory Prayer

One of the most universal forms of miracle popularly claimed as evidence for the veracity of supernatural beliefs is the answering of prayers, often for the healing of ourselves or others. But a meta-analysis of the fourteen most rigorously conducted investigations concluded 'There is no scientifically discernible effect for intercessory prayer as assessed in controlled studies.'[34] While a minority of studies have shown some small (but overall equivocal) effects,[35] others, including the most carefully structured, large-scale, double-blind, randomised study, actually showed a substantial, significant *negative* impact on the health outcomes of prayed-for patients[36] – findings that critical observers might find particularly striking given that the majority of intercessory prayer studies have been carried out by researchers of sympathetic Christian orientation.[37] Those wishing to defend the positive evidential value of prayer may respond that experimental methodologies are not, for various

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[33] Competing doctrinal claims would be another target of the sceptical approach, though these are perhaps even more difficult to assess empirically.

[34] Kevin S. Masters, Glen I. Spielmans and Jason T. Goodson, 'Are There Demonstrable Effects of Distant Intercessory Prayer? A Meta-Analytic Review', *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 32 (2006), 21–26 (p. 21).

[35] Leanne Roberts and others, 'Intercessory Prayer for the Alleviation of Ill Health', in *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, 2009 <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD000368.pub3/abstract> [accessed 18/05/2014].

[36] Herbert Benson and others, 'Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer (STEP) in Cardiac Bypass Patients: A Multicenter Randomized Trial of Uncertainty and Certainty of Receiving Intercessory Prayer', *American Heart Journal*, 151 (2006), 934–42.

[37] Masters, Spielmans and Goodson, 'Are There Demonstrable Effects of Distant Intercessory Prayer? A Meta-Analytic Review'.

reasons, well suited to the evaluation of divine intervention.[38] Such a response, however, risks being overly deferential to religion and fails to appreciate the rational burden of proof suggested by the sceptical horn of our Dilemma. For prayer is popularly attributed with the power to effect medical cures in many *different* religions, and is commonly understood within them as evidence of *specific* religious truth. Yet religions conflict on the various specifics, so such evidential claims cannot reasonably be accepted unless they have solid empirical backing to distinguish them from the claims that they implicitly contradict. Without such differential support, the best that could be hoped for is evidence of prayer's efficacy in general, which then might perhaps buttress claims for second-order supernaturalism. But since empirical studies appear to yield no significant positive evidence, we must currently reject such 'medical miracles' as providing evidence for any form of supernaturalism, even while leaving open the theoretical possibility that God (or gods) might act in this way 'secretly' when not being tested.

Despite lack of evidence for the medical efficacy of intercessory prayer, high regard for the power of prayer *as a general personal practice* may be more justified, based upon its substantial positive effects on subjective well-being[39] and interpersonal relations,[40] its association with healthy behaviour,[41] and the genuinely dramatic health improvements that it can facilitate through the placebo effect.[42] These benefits foreshadow aspects

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[38] Ralph W Hood, Peter C Hill and Bernard Spilka, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach* (New York: Guilford Press, 2009), p. 468.

[39] John Maltby, Christopher Alan Lewis and Liza Day, 'Prayer and Subjective Well-Being: The Application of a Cognitive-Behavioural Framework', *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 11 (2008), 119–29 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13674670701485722> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[40] Ryan H. Bremner, Sander L. Koole and Brad J. Bushman, '"Pray for Those Who Mistreat You": Effects of Prayer on Anger and Aggression', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37 (2011), 830–37 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146167211402215> [accessed 12/02/2015]; Nathaniel M. Lambert, Frank D. Fincham, Dana C. LaVallee, and others, 'Praying Together and Staying Together: Couple Prayer and Trust', *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 4 (2012), 1–9 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0023060> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[41] See for example, Nathaniel M. Lambert, Frank D. Fincham, Loren D. Marks, and others, 'Invocations and Intoxication: Does Prayer Decrease Alcohol Consumption?', *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 24 (2010), 209–19 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0018746> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[42] Anne Harrington, 'The Placebo Effect: What's Interesting for Scholars of Religion?', *Zygon*, 46 (2011), 265–80 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.2010.01188.x>

of the 'Normal/Objective Dilemma' which will be discussed later. Even more directly, however, they point forward to the second 'naturalistic' horn of our primary Dilemma.

V. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH SUPPORTING THE NATURALISTIC HORN OF THE CCDD

The *naturalistic* horn of our Dilemma – for obvious reasons – has far more scope for support from empirical research. Indeed, as we shall see, important new research from the psychology of religion, religious studies, and the cognitive science of religion now offers the prospect of persuasive naturalistic explanation for what appears to be a 'common core' of key religious phenomena such as religious experiences, afterlife beliefs, and the apparent perception of supernatural agency.

Meditative and Introvertive Religious Experience

According to the 'perennial philosophy', a position espoused by scholars such as William James,[43] Walter Stace,[44] and Ninian Smart,[45] there exists a common core to religious experiences across human cultures and religious traditions. Opposing this, 'constructivists' or diversity theorists, such as Steven Katz[46] and Wayne Proudfoot,[47] have argued that religious experiences are constructed by – or at least are not separable from – language, culture, tradition, and context.[48] More recently, we have seen a resurgence of the common core position, riding a wave of new empirical evidence. It has also been recognised that a common core position need not deny the role of language, culture, and context,

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[accessed 12/02/2015].

[43] William James, *The Varieties Of Religious Experience: A Study In Human Nature* (New York: Longmans Green and Co., 1902).

[44] W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960).

[45] Ninian Smart, 'Interpretation and Mystical Experience', *Religious Studies*, 1 (1965), 75–87 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0034412500002341> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[46] Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

[47] Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

[48] For a detailed critique, from a humanistic perspective, of the philosophical assumptions underpinning this position, see Gregory Shushan, 'Extraordinary Experiences and Religious Beliefs: Deconstructing Some Contemporary Philosophical Axioms', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, in press.

nor the role that cognitive appraisal and interpretative processes play in shaping underlying experiences. Thus different cultural characteristics or objectives can be 'mixed in', modulating the individual religious experiences that are still, in fundamental ways, similar.[49]

Further investigations into the biological basis of these experiences has revealed that appropriately identified religious experiences appear to activate a family of neurobiological systems that are also involved in non-religious functions.[50] Ingesting entheogens like psilocybin under appropriate conditions can also produce experiences qualitatively indistinguishable from spontaneously occurring religious experiences,[51] or from those induced by meditation and prayer.[52] And psychometric studies, making extensive use of the standard measurement of religious or mystical experience,[53] have shown factor structures supporting the existence of a common core to religious experience in samples of Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist populations, from different continents and with varying understandings of the origin and nature of their experiences, from within their different cultural, religious, and linguistic traditions.[54]

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[49] See the following for detailed review and discussion: Ralph W. Hood Jr, Peter C. Hill and Bernard Spilka, *The Psychology of Religion, Fourth Edition: An Empirical Approach* (New York: Guilford Press, 2009); Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[50] Alexander A. Fingelkurts and Andrew A. Fingelkurts, 'Is Our Brain Hardwired to Produce God, or Is Our Brain Hardwired to Perceive God? A Systematic Review on the Role of the Brain in Mediating Religious Experience', *Cognitive Processing*, 10 (2009), 293–326 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10339-009-0261-3> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[51] R. R. Griffiths and others, 'Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical-Type Experiences Having Substantial and Sustained Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance', *Psychopharmacology*, 187 (2006), 268–83 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s00213-006-0457-5> [accessed 12/02/2015]; Walter N. Pahnke, 'Drugs and Mysticism', *International Journal of Parapsychology*, 8 (1966), 295–313.

[52] David E. Nichols and Benjamin R. Chemel, 'The Neuropharmacology of Religious Experience: Hallucinogens and the Experience of the Divine', in *Where God and Science Meet: How Brain and Evolutionary Studies Alter Our Understanding of Religion* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), iii, pp. 1–33.

[53] Ralph W. Hood, 'The Construction and Preliminary Validation of a Measure of Reported Mystical Experience', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 14 (1975), 29–41.

[54] Francis-Vincent Anthony, Chris A. M. Hermans and Carl Sterkens, 'A Comparative Study of Mystical Experience among Christian, Muslim, and Hindu Students in Tamil Nadu, India', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 49 (2010), 264–77 <http://dx.doi.

It now appears that much past confusion surrounding religious experience derived partly from a poor taxonomic understanding of the phenomena. More recently, both religious[55] and neuroscientific[56] studies have converged towards a consensus that 'religious experience' represents a heterogeneous group of phenomena that must be disaggregated in order to be systematically investigated. By focusing on specific features that identify different parts and types of experience, it seems that stronger evidence might emerge for a common, biologically based, core within these types. One example is that of 'introvertive mystical experience'. Identified as unity devoid of content, or as 'pure consciousness', it arguably must represent a tradition-transcending 'common core' since it is an *emptying* experience – wordless, thoughtless, and not constructed by language.[57] Although more work needs to be done on this topic, when Andrew Newberg and colleagues conducted a comparative neuroimaging study on Franciscan nuns praying and Tibetan monks meditating to achieve this state, both groups showed decreased activity in the orientation association area of the parietal lobe.[58] This part of the brain's right hemisphere provides the sense of body and spatial orientation, so when it shuts down, the body seems no longer aware of its boundaries or of space and time, making the self appear to merge with all things. This work illustrates how taxonomically informed and specifically targeted neuroscientific research into various types of 'religious experience' offers promising prospects for further confirmation of the common core thesis. But as we shall see, there is

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org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2010.01508.x> [accessed 12/02/2015]. Zhuo Chen, Ralph W. Hood, Jr, Lijun Yang, and P. J. Watson, 'Mystical Experience Among Tibetan Buddhists: The Common Core Thesis Revisited', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 50 (2011), 328–38 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2011.01570.x> [accessed 08/03/2015].

[55] Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[56] Fingelkurts and Fingelkurts, 'Is Our Brain Hardwired to Produce God, or Is Our Brain Hardwired to Perceive God? A Systematic Review on the Role of the Brain in Mediating Religious Experience'.

[57] Robert K. C. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness : Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Robert K. C. Forman, *The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[58] Andrew Newberg and others, 'Cerebral Blood Flow during Meditative Prayer: Preliminary Findings and Methodological Issues', *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 97 (2003), 625–30 <http://dx.doi.org/10.2466/pms.2003.97.2.625> [accessed 12/02/2015].

already persuasive new evidence both within and outside the lab that some other types of religious experience have a tradition-transcending cause that is likely of natural origin.

Near-Death Experiences and the Universal Origin of Afterlife Beliefs

As the name of the category suggests, near-death experiences (NDEs) involve a recognised core of phenomena, and they are interpreted as religious within many different traditions. Gregory Shushan has recently produced an important survey of five major, geographically distant, linguistically isolated, early world traditions with little or no known cultural influence on each other.[59] Analyzing diverse written accounts of afterlife beliefs from Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt, Sumeria and Old Babylonian Mesopotamia, India, Pre-Buddhist China, and Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, he demonstrates that the same nine features of NDEs are found with striking consistency.[60] Shushan has also, with similar results, extended these findings to anthropological data on extremely isolated indigenous groups from several parts of the world in modern history.[61]

Making this material even more threatening to first-order super-naturalism is Shushan's documentation that a substantial number of these more modern groups (that have ethnographic records or can be queried) directly state that *NDEs are the origin of their beliefs concerning the afterlife* – the same causal chain of NDEs leading to new-found belief in the afterlife that is commonly witnessed in modern medical settings.[62] Contemporary clinical experience independently corroborates the existence of a cross-culturally consistent common core to NDEs which,

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[59] Gregory Shushan, *Conceptions of the Afterlife in Early Civilizations: Universalism, Constructivism and Near-Death Experience* (London; New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), vi.

[60] Namely: Out-of-body experience (OBE), viewing of one's body, entering/emerging from darkness, encounters with ancestors or dead relatives, presence of beings of light, judgement/evaluation (or life review), reaching obstacles/barriers or limits, journeys to other realms (home or origin), and experience of 'oneness' and association of self with ultimate reality or the divine.

[61] Gregory Shushan, 'Near-Death Experience and the Origins of Afterlife Beliefs' (presented at the Ian Ramsey Centre Seminar Series on Science and Religion, University of Oxford, 2012).

[62] Pirn van Lommel and others, 'Near-Death Experience in Survivors of Cardiac Arrest: A Prospective Study in the Netherlands', *The Lancet*, 358 (2001), 2039–45 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(01)07100-8> [accessed 12/02/2015].

being observed in both children and adults,[63] including atheists and even the congenitally blind,[64] seems universal and unconditioned by particular beliefs or past experience. Further demonstrating the fallibility of the supernaturalist conclusions that people are likely to draw from such an experience, Thomas Metzinger's research suggests that people who have a similar experience – no matter how it happens or may be falsely induced – will, for example, feel as though they genuinely left their body.[65]

Many researchers have turned their attention to NDEs over the last decade or so, with a wide range of competing physiological and psychological hypotheses vying to account for them.[66] Since these experiences are associated with extreme physical trauma (involving sense organs, blood flow, breathing, neurotransmitters and brain chemistry etc.), often combined with mental stress (including pain, fear, panic, thoughts of mortality etc.) and then followed by physiological and psychological relief as the patient recovers,[67] it is not surprising that there are plenty of potential explanatory candidates. So although there is as yet no comprehensive and generally agreed explanation of near-death experiences, it seems likely that some such naturalistic explanation (or combination of explanations) will eventually be forthcoming.[68] The alternative supposition – that they involve genuine perceptions of supernatural encounters with God, ancestors, or other spirits – seems by contrast metaphysically extravagant, and is hard to square with the range of interpretation to which they are subject, depending on the religious tradition. Admittedly the interpretation given often fits well

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[63] Enrico Facco and Christian Agrillo, 'Near-Death Experiences between Science and Prejudice', *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 6 (2012) <http://dx.doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2012.00209> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[64] Mark Fox, *Religion, Spirituality, and the Near-Death Experience* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003).

[65] Thomas Metzinger, 'Out-of-Body Experiences as the Origin of the Concept of a Soul', *Mind and Matter*, 3 (2005), 57–84.

[66] Facco and Agrillo, 'Near-Death Experiences between Science and Prejudice'.

[67] NDEs are reported, of course, only by those who recover sufficiently to tell about the experience, and temporal memory cannot be relied upon in these circumstances; hence some symptoms of NDEs may have their source in the period of recovery, even if they are self-ascribed to 'the moment of death'.

[68] Lack of agreement concerning naturalistic explanations is perfectly normal early in scientific investigations, and consensus might be particularly difficult to achieve in regard to NDEs, given that they involve such a complex variety of interrelated and poorly understood medical, physiological and psychological factors.

with the religious tradition in question, so it is not surprising that these experiences are commonly interpreted as evidence for supernaturalism. But any such evidence is further undermined if Shushan's conclusion is correct, that religious conceptions of the afterlife have themselves been fashioned to fit with NDEs. The upshot is that one of the major features of supernatural belief systems – the belief in spirits and life after death – harmonises well with the perspective informing the Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma. Here the diversity in detail of afterlife beliefs tends to undermine them all as revelatory of metaphysical truth, while their similarities point, not towards a genuinely supernatural basis, but rather, towards a common natural cause: the human experience of NDEs across all cultures and epochs.

Attribution of Events to Supernatural Agents

Recent research in the cognitive science of religion also provides a persuasive naturalistic explanation for the near-universal tendency to attribute events to supernatural agents. Previous studies had often explored these phenomena in the same manner as paranormal beliefs (e.g. déjà vu, telepathy, clairvoyance, extrasensory perception) and in relation to things like personality extremes and psychosis-proneness.[69] Such research indicated, for example, that belief in miraculous events and/or paranormal phenomena is associated with tendencies towards magical thinking and the finding of meaning in coincidences or randomly generated patterns.[70] In particular, such beliefs appear to be independently associated, in some populations, with a measurably

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[69] Andrew M. Greeley, *The Sociology of the Paranormal: A Reconnaissance*, Studies in Religion and Ethnicity (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1975); Michael A. Thalbourne, 'An Attempt to Predict Precognition Scores using Transliminality-Relevant Variables', *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 61 (1996), 129–40.

[70] Paola Bressan, 'The Connection between Random Sequences, Everyday Coincidences, and Belief in the Paranormal', *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 16 (2002), 17–34 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/acp.754> [accessed 12/02/2015]. For a review of recent studies considering how this and other biases (e.g. transliminality, suggestibility, and false memory) foster paranormal belief, see Christopher C. French and Krissy Wilson, 'Cognitive Factors Underlying Paranormal Beliefs and Experiences', in *Tall Tales about the Mind and Brain: Separating Fact from Fiction*, ed. by Sergio Della Sala (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 3–22; and Peter Brugger and Christine Mohr, 'The Paranormal Mind: How the Study of Anomalous Experiences and Beliefs May Inform Cognitive Neuroscience', *Cortex*, 44 (2008), 1291–98 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2008.05.008> [accessed 12/02/2015].

biased representation of randomness and chance, and the tendency to perceive coincidences disproportionately within one's own life.[71] At best, however, these studies explain some of the variation we observe in supernatural beliefs due to extremes in individual differences. Only with the arrival of the cognitive science of religion have we come closer to a persuasively comprehensive set of cognitive explanations for why such supernatural beliefs have been the *norm* across cultures and throughout human history. Several proposed psychological mechanisms are relevant, but the two most important – both of them entirely normal rather than pathological – are the *hypersensitive* (or *hyperactive*) *agency detection device* and *theory of mind*.

Our *hypersensitive agency detection device* (HADD)[72] is the human cognitive operator that has been postulated to explain why it is normal for us to see agency rather than randomness everywhere in the world around us: why we see faces in clouds, attribute illness and bad weather to witchcraft, and perceive the hand of fate in our lives rather than the action of abstract and impersonal forces. The evolutionary advantage of its hyperactivity is commonly explained with the observation that the cost of perceiving more agents than actually exist (e.g. mistaking wind in the tall grass for a predator) is low, while perceiving too few agents (e.g. mistaking a predator for wind) would, at some point, be fatal. Given that humans evolved in a world where a very high proportion of the preventable threats were indeed from perceivable agents – either animal or human – this theory seems entirely plausible.

Theory of mind (ToM) refers to the capacity to attribute mental states – such as beliefs, desires, and intentions – to oneself and to others.[73] Although the existence of fully-developed ToM in non-human animals is controversial,[74] in humans it is clearly a normal, pervasive

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[71] Paola Bressan, Peter Kramer and Mara Germani, 'Visual Attentional Capture Predicts Belief in a Meaningful World', *Cortex*, 44 (2008), 1299–1306; Jochen Musch and Katja Ehrenberg, 'Probability Misjudgment, Cognitive Ability, and Belief in the Paranormal', *British Journal of Psychology*, 93 (2002), 169–77 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1348/000712602162517> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[72] Justin L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004).

[73] David Premack and Guy Woodruff, 'Does the Chimpanzee Have a Theory of Mind?', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 1 (1978), 515–26 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X00076512> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[74] Josep Call and Michael Tomasello, 'Does the Chimpanzee Have a Theory of Mind? 30 Years Later', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 12 (2008), 187–92 <http://dx.doi.

influence on the interpretation of events and behaviour. Like the HADD, ToM also has a very plausible evolutionary explanation, drawing on the 'social brain hypothesis' that humanity's success as a species results from the evolution of mental capacities that allow us to navigate the complex social and cooperative problems that arise through co-existing in larger – numerically safer and more powerful – communities.[75] But as with the hyperactivity evident in our HADD, we consistently overextend ToM, projecting humanlike qualities of consciousness even to inanimate objects and abstract forces, and are thus predisposed to see gods, spirits, witches and other agents – whether visible or invisible – acting in the world. Along with near-death and out-of-body experiences, and other disembodied experiences such as dreams, the naturalness with which ToM impels us to continue extending consciousness to the dead provides another clear foundation for humanity's common predilection for belief in the afterlife.[76] When we naturally speak of things like a car that did not 'want to run' or an 'angry storm', we are witnessing the excessive (albeit entirely normal) anthropomorphizing operation of ToM, a process which makes it perfectly understandable that we should also worry about offending unseen beings or appeasing the invisible dead.

To summarize, HADD and ToM together lead us to find specific kinds of meaning and design in randomness, to see the action of invisible agents even in unplanned, non-intentional processes, and to attempt to relate to such agents as we would to other intentional beings. Working together, these two processes – all by themselves – seem to provide a reasonably persuasive naturalistic explanation for the belief in invisible, intelligent supernatural agents like the gods and spirits found universally across human cultures. And a growing number of studies are adding further support to these theories. For instance, young children exhibit 'promiscuously teleological thinking',[77] taking the existence of mountains to be explained by the purpose of giving animals something

org/10.1016/j.tics.2008.02.010> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[75] Robin I. M. Dunbar, 'The Social Brain Hypothesis', *Brain*, 9 (1998), 10; Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[76] Jesse Bering, *The Belief Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012).

[77] Deborah Kelemen, 'Are Children "Intuitive Theists"? Reasoning About Purpose and Design in Nature', *Psychological Science*, 15 (2004), 295–301 <http://dx.doi.org/10.11 11/j.0956-7976.2004.00672.x> [accessed 12/02/2015].

to climb. And the naturalness of such thinking has also been confirmed by other studies, such as those showing how Alzheimer's patients revert to it when their disease strips away the more sophisticated thinking that they have previously learned through their education,[78] while even professional scientists tend to default to teleological thinking when placed under time pressure.[79]

Of further relevance to religion is a close relationship between agency detection and social emotions, as seen in studies showing that inducing loneliness increases belief in the supernatural and in the tendency to anthropomorphise objects.[80] One recent brain-imaging study has also shown how ToM relates directly to theistic belief: neural activation patterns confirm that devout Christians actually do think of God as a person rather than an abstract entity, recruiting the same social-cognition brain areas during prayer that they do when talking to a good friend.[81] And still other studies have revealed our increased tendency to see illusory patterns, including non-existent agents, when we are made to feel that we lack control of our lives or immediate situation.[82] This mounting tally of empirical evidence has clearly demonstrated the naturalness and instinctiveness of our agent-oriented, anthropomorphic bias, and also its shaping influence both on supernatural belief and on other aspects of our thoughts and feelings. As we shall soon see, other pervasive cognitive biases also have an important role to play in the understanding of religious phenomena, and of the relationship between rationality and human religious beliefs.

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[78] Tania Lombrozo, Deborah Kelemen, and Deborah Zaitchik, 'Inferring Design Evidence of a Preference for Teleological Explanations in Patients with Alzheimer's Disease', *Psychological Science*, 18 (2007), 999–1006 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.02015.x> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[79] Deborah Kelemen, Joshua Rottman, and Rebecca Seston, 'Professional Physical Scientists Display Tenacious Teleological Tendencies: Purpose-Based Reasoning as a Cognitive Default', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 142:4 (2013), 1074-1083.

[80] Nicholas Epley, Adam Waytz, and John T. Cacioppo, 'On Seeing Human: A Three-Factor Theory of Anthropomorphism', *Psychological Review*, 114 (2007), 864–86 <http://dx.doi.org/doi: DOI: 10.1037/0033-295X.114.4.864> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[81] U. Schjoedt and others, 'Highly Religious Participants Recruit Areas of Social Cognition in Personal Prayer', *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 4:2 (2009), 199-207 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsn050> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[82] Jennifer A. Whitson and Adam D. Galinsky, 'Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception', *Science*, 322 (2008), 115–17 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1126/science.1159845> [accessed 12/02/2015].

VI. THE COMMON CLAIM OF UNCOMMON AUTHORITY

The two horns of our Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma focus respectively on the *opposition* between the distinctive features of various religions, and the *commonality* that can be found in their 'core' features. Yet these contrasting aspects come together in the common tendency of religions to claim special or even unique authority for their distinctive doctrines. Here we can appeal to the naturalistic strand of our discussion to explain why religions are so assertive and persistent in their claims to special authority, even in the face of obvious disagreement from countless competing faiths. We shall find that aspects of their very commonality explain this phenomenon of enduring opposition.

Egocentric and Confirmation Bias

Among the most powerful and pervasive biases generally distorting human perceptions, interpretations, and judgements are the various manifestations of human egocentric need and perspective. As a general term, 'egocentric bias' can refer to a variety of processes related to the 'self' and its needs that help shape our experience, understanding, interpretations, and basic motivations. Such bias helps to explain, for example, the typical judgement that one has done more than one's fair share of work on a project, and the common – but often false – perception that one's beliefs or actions are the most natural and appropriate.[83]

Another set of related and overlapping processes, referred to as 'selective perception', involves the general tendency to view situations from one particular frame of reference or to attend to some details and not others. One classic study of selective perception, involving a particularly violent football game between Dartmouth and Princeton, anatomised how partisan observers seemed to have witnessed two entirely different games.[84] Selective exposure and attention to only certain sources of information – namely, those that are unlikely to conflict with our pre-existing beliefs – compounds this problem further and shapes our choices of friends and news sources as well as social, religious, and political affiliations.[85] These examples are closely related to

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[83] Michael Ross and Fiore Sicoly, 'Egocentric Biases in Availability and Attribution', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37:3 (1979), 322-36.

[84] Albert H. Hastorf and Hadley Cantril, 'They Saw a Game: A Case Study', *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 49 (1954), 129-34.

[85] Kate Sweeny *et al.*, 'Information Avoidance: Who, What, When, and Why', *Review of General Psychology*, 14 (2010), 340–53 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0021288> [accessed

confirmation bias, an extraordinarily potent and pervasive phenomenon that involves – whether consciously or unconsciously – the selective gathering of information or its interpretation in ways that confirm rather than challenge our preconceived beliefs (thus linking selective perception to the drive to minimise cognitive dissonance).

Numerous studies since Wason's seminal work[86] have demonstrated that we pay vastly disproportionate attention to information that confirms our beliefs, and neglect the crucial truth-seeking act of attempting to disconfirm currently held views. More recently, however, brain-imaging studies have shown that when we have a strong emotional state motivating our reasoning (as commonly observed in political, religious, or other partisan thinking), our reasoning is qualitatively different from that seen in 'cool' reasoning tasks where emotion is being consciously regulated. Indeed, activation patterns in the aroused state suggest that we are being chemically rewarded for finding confirming evidence and for ignoring disconfirming information, *regardless of its veracity*.[87] This supports Nickerson's striking assessment:

> If one were to attempt to identify a single problematic aspect of human reasoning that deserves attention above all others, the confirmation bias would have to be among the candidates for consideration. Many have written about this bias, and it appears to be sufficiently strong and pervasive that one is led to wonder whether the bias, by itself, might account for a significant fraction of the disputes, altercations, and misunderstandings that occur among individuals, groups, and nations.[88]

Confirmation bias – even without any other distorting effects – casts great doubt on our ability to reason reliably, especially when emotionally invested (as all sides typically are when addressing religious questions). But it also primes us to overlook other biases (such as the HADD and ToM discussed above) and to *prefer* their irrational results, thus compounding other errors and prejudices, and helping to produce a potent cocktail

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[86] Peter C. Wason, 'On the Failure to Eliminate Hypotheses in a Conceptual Task', *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology: Comparative and Physiological Psychology*, 12 (1960), 129–40.

[87] Drew Westen and others, 'Neural Bases of Motivated Reasoning: An fMRI Study of Emotional Constraints on Partisan Political Judgment in the 2004 US Presidential Election', *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 18 (2006), 1947–58.

[88] Raymond S. Nickerson, 'Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises', *Review of General Psychology*, 2 (1998), 175-220.

of reason-contaminating effects. Even people applying the scientific method,[89] the best means yet devised to detect and correct such errors, must be monitored carefully to reduce the effects and incidences of these biases,[90] a fact acknowledged in the recognition that many kinds of trials must be *double*-blind to be considered valid.

The Need for Significance and Social Cohesion

The interrelated biases mentioned so far also interact strongly with a number of other processes and pressures that motivate individuals, cultures, and religious traditions to righteously assert their distinctiveness and importance in comparison to rivals. For example, the normal egocentric need for every individual to feel significant or special can be seen in the satisfaction of leader and proselyte in the perception that they are the ones that are right, chosen, or share special knowledge. We can add to this mix such familiar factors as childhood acceptance of authority, the social pressures of tradition and conformity, and processes of identity construction, not to mention the drive that most social organizations have to retain their identity and social influence.

From an evolutionary point of view, it is not at all surprising that children naturally defer to the authority of adults and the traditions of their society. Indeed, humanity's ability to copy effective behaviour (e.g. hunting, fishing, weaving, using astronomy to navigate or to schedule crop-planting) is a distinctive characteristic that has allowed us to succeed so extraordinarily as a species.[91] But beside these examples that have instrumentally clear goals, there is a vast array of other cultural elements that every individual must also learn but which have *no instrumental explanation* beyond being simply the 'way things are done' in a given cultural context.[92] Children have to learn the arbitrary meaning of

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[89] See Robert N. McCauley, *Why Religion Is Natural and Science Is Not* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), for a discussion of this issue relative to our topic.

[90] See, for example, Joseph P. Simmons, Leif D. Nelson and Uri Simonsohn, *False-Positive Psychology: Undisclosed Flexibility in Data Collection and Analysis Allows Presenting Anything as Significant* (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 23 May 2011) <http://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1850704> [accessed 21/02/2014].

[91] Victoria Horner and Andrew Whiten, 'Causal Knowledge and Imitation/Emulation Switching in Chimpanzees (Pan troglodytes) and Children (Homo sapiens)', *Animal Cognition*, 8 (2005), 164–81 http://doi.org/10.1007/s10071-004-0239-6 [accessed 8/3/2015].

[92] Horner and Whiten, 'Causal Knowledge and Imitation/Emulation Switching in Chimpanzees (Pan troglodytes) and Children (Homo sapiens)', p.164.

numerous symbols – both linguistic and otherwise – as well as customs, social etiquette, religious rituals, and fashion; thus they are faced with a world of unexplained or inexplicable cultural norms that for the most part must simply be accepted and learned by rote or through imitation.

Learning all these arbitrary cultural elements is difficult and extraordinarily costly in time and effort – what purpose could justify such investment in the absence of direct instrumental or pragmatic value? Anthropology's increasingly persuasive answer is *social cohesion*,[93] and evolutionary theory concurs, particularly with regard to the central role of religion. Evolutionary theories of the origin of religion have ranged from viewing it as a directly biologically-based adaptation promoting cooperation[94] to seeing it as a fuzzy category with no distinctive biological basis, which merely incorporates the haphazard by-products of nonreligious cognitive processes.[95] Between these two extremes is the view that religion may have started as a by-product of other cognitive processes but then, once it emerged, became culturally selected and further developed due to its strong survival value.[96] Some important research has also recently suggested how religious beliefs might be related to the dual-processing model of normal human cognition,[97] a promising framework to integrate with some of the religion-related biases and evidential claims surveyed earlier.

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[93] Harvey Whitehouse, 'The Coexistence Problem in Psychology, Anthropology, and Evolutionary Theory', *Human Development*, 54 (2011), 191–99 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1159/000329149> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[94] David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[95] Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts That Fashion God, Spirits and Ancestors* (London: Vintage, 2002); Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (Walnut Creek, CA: Rowman Altamira, 2004).

[96] Scott Atran and Joseph Henrich, 'The Evolution of Religion: How Cognitive By-Products, Adaptive Learning Heuristics, Ritual Displays, and Group Competition Generate Deep Commitments to Prosocial Religions', *Biological Theory*, 5 (2010), 18–30. For a useful survey of explanatory approaches to religion 'as a solution to the challenge of cooperation', see Graham Wood, 'Cognitive Science and Religious Belief', *Philosophy Compass*, 6/10 (2011), 734-45.

[97] Nicolas Baumard and Pascal Boyer, 'Religious Beliefs as Reflective Elaborations on Intuitions: A Modified Dual-Process Model', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22 (2013), 295–300 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0963721413478610> [accessed 26/02/2015].

Various other perspectives also suggest that social cohesion is a central function, and perhaps the primary *raison d'être*, of religion.[98] The word 'religion' itself has a long etymological history tracing back to the Latin root *re-ligare* meaning to *bind* or *connect*. And it is common for the religious to distrust atheists, fearing that society and its moral values would fall apart without supernatural belief.[99] There may, indeed, be some degree of truth to this perception: reason-based social contracts that constrain individual interests to promote cooperation are more likely to fail than those with a religious dimension, because in some circumstances defection can become selfishly rational, with relatively limited and calculable egoistic consequences (at least if supernatural retribution is discounted).[100]

Now it seems that we may not only have good naturalistic explanations for central features that religious traditions hold in common, but also common-core explanations for the processes that distinguish them and impede their dialogue with other worldviews. Ultimately what much of this literature suggests is that while we might outwardly acknowledge that we – whether as individuals, 'tribe', or culture – are not *uniquely right* in what we think or do, inwardly we almost irresistibly tend to think that we are.[101] And this can apply just as much to naturalists as supernaturalists. So if we are serious about pursuing self-understanding, interreligious dialogue, or rational evaluation of disagreement, we must systematically compensate for a potent set of cognitive biases every step of the way, remaining constantly alert to our profound and pervasive ability to deceive ourselves as well as others. As Benjamin Franklin once

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[98] Jesse Graham and Jonathan Haidt, 'Beyond Beliefs: Religions Bind Individuals Into Moral Communities', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14 (2010), 140–50 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1088868309353415> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[99] Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis and Douglas Hartmann, 'Atheists As "Other": Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society', *American Sociological Review*, 71 (2006), 211–34 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/000312240607100203> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[100] Scott Atran and Jeremy Ginges, 'Religious and Sacred Imperatives in Human Conflict', *Science*, 336 (2012), 855–57 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1126/science.1216902> [accessed 12/02/2015]; Richard Sosis and Eric R. Bressler, 'Cooperation and Commune Longevity: A Test of the Costly Signaling Theory of Religion', *Cross-Cultural Research*, 37 (2003), 211–39 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1069397103037002003> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[101] Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

observed, 'so convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable creature*, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do'.[102]

VII. NORMALITY, OBJECTIVITY, AND GROUP IDENTITY

We have seen that there are many natural factors conducive to religious belief, and although some of these generate relevant sensory evidence (e.g. religious and near-death experiences), most act by biasing the subject's judgement or interpretation of experience, particularly in the direction of attributing events to invisible intelligent powers, and generally in cultural conformity with their society and religious upbringing. Hence it is not surprising that supernaturalists have often been accused of being 'cognitively challenged', a dismissive attitude that has sometimes drawn sustenance from studies showing a negative correlation between religiosity and intelligence.[103] This effect, however, is small: a meta-analysis of 63 studies suggests a modest negative correlation between intelligence and religious beliefs of -0.24, with an even weaker negative correlation between intelligence and religious practices.[104] Moreover, large-scale studies controlling for relevant personality and demographic variables, like the US Christian sample analysed by G. J. Lewis *et al.*, will likely continue to show that only about 1% of the variance even in fundamentalism is explained by intelligence; the percentage for less extreme *religiosity* is a fraction of that, and the relationship may disappear entirely for *spirituality*.[105] More importantly, even if religious

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[102] Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: With Related Documents*, ed. by Louis Masur, 2nd edn (New York: Macmillan, 2003), p. 56.

[103] E.g. Sharon Bertsch and Bryan J. Pesta, 'The Wonderlic Personnel Test and Elementary Cognitive Tasks as Predictors of Religious Sectarianism, Scriptural Acceptance and Religious Questioning', *Intelligence*, 37 (2009), 231–37; Richard Lynn, John Harvey and Helmuth Nyborg, 'Average Intelligence Predicts Atheism Rates across 137 Nations', *Intelligence*, 37 (2009), 11–15; C.L. Reeve, 'Expanding the G-Nexus: Further Evidence Regarding the Relations among National IQ, Religiosity and National Health Outcomes', *Intelligence*, 37 (2009), 495–505 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.intell.2009.06.003> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[104] Miron Zuckerman, Jordan Silberman and Judith A. Hall, 'The Relation Between Intelligence and Religiosity: A Meta-Analysis and Some Proposed Explanations', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 17 (2013), 325–54 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1088868313497266> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[105] G.J. Lewis, S.J. Ritchie and T.C. Bates, 'The Relationship between Intelligence and Multiple Domains of Religious Belief: Evidence from a Large Adult US Sample',

believers were *on average* several IQ points lower than non-believers, the obvious existence of so many extremely intelligent believers and equally unintelligent atheists makes clear the weakness of any general statistical argument for the irrationality of belief.

In fact, a similarly disparaging counter-argument may now be attempted on the other side, suggesting that it is the disbeliever's mind – rather than that of the believer – which is abnormal and somehow deficient.[106] In a series of four studies on different populations, Ara Norenzayan *et al.* have shown that deficits related to empathising and theory of mind, as seen in persons with autism and those tending towards autism, were associated with significantly less belief in a personal God.[107] In one such study, for instance, the participants with autism were only 11% as likely as matched normal controls to strongly endorse belief in God. But again, it is far too crude to assume that such a correlation demonstrates a determining general tendency, or implies some significant *deficit* on the part of all non-believers.

Other recent research might reframe this debate more helpfully. Gordon Pennycook *et al.*, for example, have shown that both religious and paranormal belief can be partially explained by a *preference* for an intuitive, as opposed to analytical, cognitive *style* (rather than a difference in ability).[108] Moreover, a series of carefully constructed studies on various samples has shown that levels of religious belief can be reduced by triggering people to use their already-existing analytic thinking abilities to solve unrelated problems.[109] Thus it is vitally important to distinguish those who selectively *choose* not to think

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Intelligence, 39 (2011), 468–72 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.intell.2011.08.002> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[106] E.g. Kelly Clark, 'Is Atheism "Normal"? Reflections from the Cognitive Science of Religion' (Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion, University of Oxford, 2013) <http://www.ianramseycentre.info/videos/atheism-normal-csr.html> [accessed 2/11/2013].

[107] Ara Norenzayan, Will M. Gervais and Kali H. Trzesniewski, 'Mentalizing Deficits Constrain Belief in a Personal God', *PLoS ONE*, 7 (2012), e36880 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0036880> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[108] Gordon Pennycook and others, 'Analytic Cognitive Style Predicts Religious and Paranormal Belief', *Cognition*, 123 (2012), 335–46 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2012.03.003> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[109] Will M. Gervais and Ara Norenzayan, 'Analytic Thinking Promotes Religious Disbelief', *Science*, 336 (2012), 493–96 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1126/science.1215647> [accessed 12/02/2015].

systematically or scientifically *about religious matters*, from those who are simply incapable of doing so *in general*. Religiosity does not imply intellectual weakness, but it can involve motivated cognition and/or changes in cognitive style that, from the outside, can easily be mistaken for weakness.[110]

The suggestion that there is any place for *choice* in this matter might at first seem cognitively irresponsible, since it is commonly presupposed that epistemological duty requires us to 'do our best' to scout out the truth wherever it may lie. Against this presupposition, we have already remarked in §V how our *hypersensitive agency detection device* (HADD) and *theory of mind* (ToM) – sources of major cognitive biases associated with supernaturalist 'irrationality' – can be seen as evolutionarily useful.[111] Another nearly universal human irrationality, the *optimistic bias*, likewise seems often to contribute to our individual and collective achievement and well-being,[112] precisely by systematically distorting our judgements and perceptions in a positive direction. By contrast, studies of the phenomenon of 'depressive realism' indicate that the clinically depressed commonly have a more accurate perception of reality, as seen for example when estimating odds of success in an undertaking.[113] But if depression is the price to pay for objectivity, then most of us would probably prefer to cling to our illusions, just as we might rationally prefer to be deceived if it would allow us to take full advantage of the healing powers of the placebo effect. Likewise, even if the considerations in §IV

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[110] See the following articles for discussion of motivated cognition and how individuals, directed by their religious beliefs (and ideology more generally), change their cognitive style or limit their thinking in some domains in order to help insulate cultural elements or aspects of their worldview from change: Branden Miller, 'Recovering the Full Wealth of Conviction and Cognition: Psychology's Modernist Critique of Fundamentalism in Postmodern Perspective', *Journal of Faith and Science Exchange*, 2 (1998), 91–103; John T. Jost and others, 'Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition', *Psychological Bulletin*, 129 (2003), 339–75 <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1037/0033-2909.129.3.339> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[111] Though it is important not to take for granted that traits which are *adaptations* (arising from their usefulness in evolutionary history) will necessarily continue to be *adaptive* (i.e. useful for us) in the modern context.

[112] E.g. Joelle C. Ruthig and others, 'Academic Optimistic Bias: Implications for College Student Performance and Well-Being', *Social Psychology of Education*, 10 (2007), 115–37 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11218-006-9002-y> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[113] Michael T. Moore and David M. Fresco, 'Depressive Realism: A Meta-Analytic Review', *Clinical Psychology Review*, 32 (2012), 496–509 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2012.05.004> [accessed 12/02/2015].

and §V above intellectually persuade us that prayer and meditation give no access to the divine, we might well decide not only to continue with these practices but even to retain the refuted beliefs that underlie them, if we consider that supernatural belief and religious observance can enhance happiness,[114] increase longevity,[115] and facilitate desirable behavioural change such as recovery from addiction.[116] Why should we heed the calls to epistemological duty, when harsh scientific objectivity is not only difficult and unnatural – requiring years of education to develop – but also apparently leads to mental anguish rather than health? To put this in terms of a second dilemma:[117]

> *The Normal/Objective Dilemma*
> If the psychological causes of religious belief are associated with normal, healthy, mental functioning and various positive (individual and social) outcomes, should these rationally weigh with us more heavily than objective epistemological considerations would allow?

The social perspective introduced in §VI above is also particularly relevant here, especially given recent evidence that it is the very *irrationality* of religious beliefs that can make them so effective as means of social cohesion and community building. As Atran and Ginges suggest, '... costly and seemingly arbitrary ritual commitment to apparently absurd beliefs deepens trust, galvanizing group solidarity for common defense and blinding members to exit strategies'.[118] This would help to explain extreme ritual practices (e.g. scarification, human sacrifice, genital mutilation, and traumatising initiations) as well as exclusivist, fundamentalist-style beliefs that seem oblivious to rational considerations. Groups holding

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[114] Ellen Childs, 'Religious Attendance and Happiness: Examining Gaps in the Current Literature – A Research Note', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 49 (2010), 550–60 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2010.01528.x> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[115] Michael E. McCullough and others, 'Religious Involvement and Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review', *Health Psychology*, 19 (2000), 211–22 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0278-6133.19.3.211> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[116] Lambert, Fincham, Marks, and others, 'Invocations and Intoxication: Does Prayer Decrease Alcohol Consumption?'.

[117] In the light of our earlier discussions, the Normal/Objective Dilemma can also be expressed more generally as involving a choice between being more humanly 'normal' (by being irrational or biased in some respect), and being more 'objective', 'rational', or 'unbiased' (and thus more humanly 'abnormal' in this same respect), in contexts where each choice is likely to entail some unrecognised costs and/or benefits.

[118] Atran and Ginges, 'Religious and Sacred Imperatives in Human Conflict', p. 855.

beliefs in fundamentalist ways tend to have a stronger sense of in-group trust, belonging, order, and identity. They also, however, tend to be more insular and xenophobic, and spend considerable time reaffirming and reiterating beliefs that often seem quite unreasonable to others, precisely because those beliefs – which form the all-important basis of their in-group identity and community – are so vital to maintain.[119]

Religion, Intergroup Conflict and Globalisation

The dark side of the exclusivity and certainty that produces in-group cohesion is the conflict with out-groups and the common tendency to vilify the 'other' that it also creates. For most of human history, it has been entirely typical to consider some of these 'others' as wholly 'evil' people, often associated with a duty for the rest of 'us' to separate and then destroy them.[120] Pluralist supernatural beliefs, as well as orthodox religious teachings of tolerance, may neutralise or limit some of this aggression and discrimination,[121] but overall – as one meta-analysis of race in the US has recently confirmed – it appears that the large majority of religious humanitarianism is still expressed towards our particular in-group.[122] And cross-cultural research is making it increasingly clear that prejudice and religiosity tend to correlate with each another across the globe,[123] whether measured by self-report or more implicit methods.[124] The relationship is not, however, uncomplicated, and

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[119] Thornhill-Miller, 'Recovering the Full Wealth of Conviction and Cognition: Psychology's Modernist Critique of Fundamentalism in Postmodern Perspective'.

[120] Jordan B. Peterson, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

[121] Bruce Hunsberger, 'Religion and Prejudice: The Role of Religious Fundamentalism, Quest, and Right-Wing Authoritarianism', *Journal of Social Issues*, 51 (1995), 113–29 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1995.tb01326.x> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[122] Deborah L. Hall, David C. Matz and Wendy Wood, 'Why Don't We Practice What We Preach? A Meta-Analytic Review of Religious Racism', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14 (2010), 126–39 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1088868309352179> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[123] Peer Scheepers, Mèrove Gijsberts and Evelyn Hello, 'Religiosity and Prejudice against Ethnic Minorities in Europe: Cross-National Tests on a Controversial Relationship', *Review of Religious Research*, 43 (2002), 242–65 <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3512331> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[124] Megan K. Johnson, Wade C. Rowatt and Jordan LaBouff, 'Priming Christian Religious Concepts Increases Racial Prejudice', *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 1 (2010), 119–26 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1948550609357246> [accessed 12/02/2015]; Jonathan E. Ramsay and others, 'Rethinking Value Violation: Priming

a more fine-grained approach would seem to suggest that prejudice, in general, is most strongly associated with the authoritarian aspects of fundamentalism. Nonetheless, some kinds of prejudice and conflict (e.g. concerning homosexuals, women, or members of other religious groups) often still seem directly associated with mere orthodoxy of religious belief.[125] All these trends are complicated by individual differences in personality, context, and religious doctrine, but the overall picture appears consistent: for some strong believers – often those most likely to be strident and influential within a devout community – the very existence of other people living happily and well according to an entirely different symbolic belief system can constitute a threat and a potential source of aggression.[126]

The wars, pogroms, and discrimination that result from in-group/out-group processes, are, of course, not the exclusive product of religion or supernatural beliefs, since ideologies and tribalism of all kinds can produce such divides. A war survey carried out by the BBC even suggests that *non*-religious absolutist ideologies and forms of tribalism have been responsible for more war, death, and destruction in recorded history than purely religious motivations.[127] But clearly supernatural belief systems – and those that involve *certainty* and *exclusivity* in particular – constitute a significant part of the problem, especially when (beyond the examples already cited) the mere implicit contextual presence of religious symbols is shown to increase intergroup bias even among the non-religious.[128]

Religion Increases Prejudice in Singaporean Christians and Buddhists', *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 24 (2014), 1–15 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1050861 9.2012.761525> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[125] Bruce Hunsberger and Lynne M. Jackson, 'Religion, Meaning, and Prejudice', *Journal of Social Issues*, 61 (2005), 807–26 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00433.x> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[126] Jordan B Peterson and Metanexus Cogito, 'Neuropsychology and Mythology of Motivation for Group Aggression', *Encyclopedia of violence, peace and conflict*, 1999, 529–45.

[127] Greg Austin, Todd Kranock and Thom Oommen, 'God and War: An Audit and an Exploration', BBC, 2003. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/world/04/war_audit_pdf/pdf/war_audit.pdf> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[128] Jordan P. LaBouff and others, 'Differences in Attitudes Toward Outgroups in Religious and Nonreligious Contexts in a Multinational Sample: A Situational Context Priming Study', *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 22 (2012), 1–9 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10508619.2012.634778> [accessed 12/02/2015].

The rise over the past century of various forms of fundamentalist-style religious belief in response to globalisation has recently crescendoed, arguably becoming a defining characteristic and source of conflict in our age.[129] Some progress has been made in understanding both the conflicts between these extremist groups, and the collision course they have set with the rest of the world. For example, various triggers of uncertainty,[130] meaning, or worldview threats, and reminders of death[131] have all been shown to increase both religious zealotry and intergroup prejudice. In the context of our vastly expanded destructive power, there is particular danger in the current cocktail of clashing cultures, with a modern crisis of identity and meaning-making at its core.[132] Overall, then, if consideration of the practical benefit of holding religious beliefs is admissible in the naturalism/supernaturalism debate, we would argue that again there is much greater reason to discourage rather than encourage *first-order* supernaturalist beliefs. The in-group benefits to be gained are outweighed by the actual and potential out-group damage. And with such massive destructive power increasingly wielded around the world, there is perhaps today no greater threat to humanity than intergroup conflict motivated by exclusivist and other-worldly religious thinking.[133]

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[129] Branden Thornhill-Miller, 'The Modern Missionary Position: The Psychology of Fundamentalist Sects in Global Context' (65th Annual Minns Lecture series, 'The Experience of Religious Varieties: Psychology of Religion for the 21st Century', Harvard University, Boston, MA, 2007), available at: <http://www.minnslectures.org/archive/thornhillmiller/thornhillmiller.html> [accessed 12/02/2015]; Michael B. Salzman, 'Globalization, Religious Fundamentalism and the Need for Meaning', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 32 (2008), 318–27 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2008.04.006> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[130] Ian McGregor, Kyle Nash and Mike Prentice, 'Reactive Approach Motivation (RAM) for Religion', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 99 (2010), 148–61 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0019702> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[131] Zachary K. Rothschild, Abdolhossein Abdollahi and Tom Pyszczynski, 'Does Peace Have a Prayer? The Effect of Mortality Salience, Compassionate Values, and Religious Fundamentalism on Hostility toward out-Groups', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45 (2009), 816–27 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2009.05.016> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[132] Branden Thornhill-Miller, 'The Modern Missionary Position: The Psychology of Fundamentalist Sects in Global Context'.

[133] Branden Thornhill-Miller, 'Critical Factors for the Long-Term Survival of Humanity', in *Humanity 3000 Seminar Proceedings*, 3, 1 vols. (Seattle, Washington: Foundation For the Future, 2001), pp. 49–50.

VIII. RECONCILIATION, SECOND-ORDER RELIGION, AND THE MAXIM OF THE MOON

Since the Enlightenment, many Western intellectuals – and social scientists in particular – have anticipated the death of religion as a leftover relic of our primitive past and a form of institutionalised ignorance.[134] Recent experience, however, might suggest instead the death of this 'secularization hypothesis', as religious influence reasserts itself around the world and psychological research (some of which we have discussed) discovers why supernatural thinking is so 'intuitive' and so hard to eliminate even when the effort is made. Science and technology, once seen as religion's executioners, continue their relentless advance into every corner of modern life. But supernaturalism, instead of being displaced by scientific thinking, seems to find increasingly sophisticated ways of coexisting with it in the various domains of everyday life, the two either accepted simultaneously, or hybridised, or used alternately (typically without conflict and often even without awareness).[135] Such 'explanatory coexistence', whereby humans appear to understand the world in *both* naturalistic *and* supernaturalistic terms, can be conceptualised in various ways,[136] but would seem irrational from typical philosophical and scientific points of view. Harvey Whitehouse has argued, however, that instead of viewing supernaturalist thinking primarily in 'intellectualist' terms, as a rival attempt to make sense of the world, anthropological perspectives suggest that we should consider equally its 'psychological' impact (e.g. feelings of comfort and control in the face of uncertainty) and its 'functionalist' role (e.g. how it functions to maintain and reproduce social institutions that meet individuals'

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[134] Jeffrey K. Hadden, 'Toward Desacralizing Secularization Theory', *Social Forces*, 65 (1987), 587-611 <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2578520> [accessed 12/02/2015]. However David Hume, by far the most important philosophical source of religious scepticism over the period concerned, seems to have considered that 'superstitious delusion' will continue 'as long as the world endures' (*E* 10.2).

[135] E. Margaret Evans and Jonathan D. Lane, 'Contradictory or Complementary? Creationist and Evolutionist Explanations of the Origin(s) of Species', *Human Development*, 54 (2011), 144–59 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1159/000329130> [accessed 12/02/2015]; Paul L. Harris, 'Conflicting Thoughts about Death', *Human Development*, 54 (2011), 160–68 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1159/000329133> [accessed 12/02/2015].

[136] Cristine H. Legare and Aku Visala, 'Between Religion and Science: Integrating Psychological and Philosophical Accounts of Explanatory Coexistence', *Human Development*, 54 (2011), 169–84 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1159/000329135> [accessed 12/02/2015].

biological needs).[137] Functionally, naturalistic and supernaturalistic thinking can be seen as outcomes of two different human *learning systems*, the one oriented towards 'understanding and managing *physical-causal* relationships in a mechanistic fashion', and the other 'concerned with understanding and managing *social relationships* in a normative and deferential fashion'.[138] So even though supernaturalist beliefs serve poorly as explanations of how the world works, they might be seen as well-motivated – even 'rational' in a sense – if they function effectively to improve individual well-being and to supply the norms and customs that hold communities together.[139]

Perhaps the various practical benefits of religion to the individual – social support, sense of meaning and security, comfort in times of grief, prayer-placebo – could equally well be delivered by non-supernatural means (e.g. non-religious group membership and forms of meditation, psychotherapy, etc.). However, as David Wulff summarises B.F. Skinner's view expressed near his retirement, 'Religion may be necessary for ordinary people ... [because some aspects of it] could be replaced only through an extraordinary management effort'.[140] That is to say, the very naturalness of religion gives some reason to doubt its easy replaceability, historically immersed as we are in well-established religious traditions whose rituals have evolved to fit human needs.[141]

Faced with this situation, the idea of 'coexistence' – allowing both science and religion to play an important part in one's life, without either threatening the other – may seem pragmatically attractive, even if of doubtful intellectual coherence. One problem here is that some of the desired effects of religious belief (e.g. in-group trust, reduction of existential uncertainty, prayer-placebo) appear to depend significantly

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[137] Harvey Whitehouse, 'The Coexistence Problem in Psychology, Anthropology, and Evolutionary Theory', p. 191.

[138] Whitehouse, 'The Coexistence Problem in Psychology, Anthropology, and Evolutionary Theory', p. 191.

[139] Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[140] David M. Wulff, *Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary*, 2nd edn (Oxford, England: John Wiley and Sons, 1997), p. 135.

[141] But who can say how things might look and feel after another hundred or thousand years of objective scientific enquiry and secular cultural development? For another helpful review of the adaptive functions of religious traditions, and the challenges faced by sciences that would replace them, see Wulff, *Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary*, pp. 156–8.

on a firm, exclusivist-style certainty in one's convictions. And particularly in the light of our Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma, such certainty is extremely hard to reconcile with taking science and critical thinking at all seriously. It also, as we have seen, almost inevitably fosters – at least amongst some individuals – the out-group hostility which is so dangerous as even to represent a challenge to our collective survival in the modern context.

Thus, from a rational, empirically-informed point of view, there seem to be two plausible ways forward: walking a path either of scepticism or of reconciliation. The austere intellectual response to the considerations in this paper (more likely to appeal to the sceptical Humean) may be to 'bite the bullet' of cool, parsimonious reason and learn to live with a godless world, something that many unbelievers have apparently managed well and which might – with sustained effort and perhaps sensitive reshaping of social structures – turn out to be possible for nearly all of us. The more subtle (and less intellectually straightforward) response is to abandon the competing dogmatisms of *first-order supernaturalism* and instead fall back onto an undogmatic version of its *second-order* cousin, finding intimations of divinity in the general structures of the world and in our own religious instincts, while remaining fully committed to the enterprise of natural science. On this understanding of things, although creation is seen as *ultimately* deriving from a supernatural source, that source is distant and unknowable, and the role of science is to reveal the *proximate* foundation of our existence: the empirical universe through whose causal processes we have been made. Thus even while believing that the world itself is ultimately created and sustained by a guiding supernatural power, our scientific and historical enquiry can proceed in the same way as for the atheist, without resort to magical or supernatural intervention in the causal order.[142]

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[142] Unless, of course, such first-order supernatural intervention turns out to be well evidenced even in the teeth of sceptical considerations such as the Common-Core/ Diversity Dilemma. Recall again that the Dilemma is *empirically* based, and does not rule out the possibility of future good evidence for first-order supernatural intrusions into nature. For a more optimistic approach somewhat along these lines, see Kelly James Clark and Justin L. Barrett, 'Reidian Religious Epistemology and the Cognitive Science of Religion', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 79 (2011), 639-75, who suggest that our evolved tendencies to see purpose in the world constitute a non-specific 'god-faculty' (pp. 652-4) that can properly be ascribed default authority (on the principles of Thomas Reid), but can also be supported by personal religious experience (pp. 667-70).

As explained in the introduction to this paper, such second-order supernaturalism has become increasingly attractive in recent years, owing to developments not only in the *psychology* of religion but also in the *philosophy* of religion, where the Fine Tuning Argument points in precisely this direction. Unsurprisingly, the assessment of the argument is disputed, but we doubt that it is decisively refutable given the current state of knowledge,[143] as long as its conclusion is suitably restricted.[144] Moreover, some popular attempts to rebut it appeal to the idea of selection effects operating over a multitude of universes, a controversial view which goes radically beyond any experienced reality and could perhaps reasonably be considered metaphysically extravagant.[145] This position might well change, however, and in the future – possibly a distant future – the development of physics will probably either strengthen or weaken the argument, for example by either corroborating the naturalistic inexplicability of the 'anthropic coincidences', by explaining them away, or by vindicating the notion of an evolutionary or selective multiverse. But in the meantime, it is not obviously *unreasonable* to base one's religious commitments on this optimistic second-order theistic view, as long as it remains unrefuted and seems to bring substantial psychological and social benefits. Perhaps by the time human physics has settled this issue, we shall also be in a better situation to judge how well different aspects of human society can cope without religion (for better or worse).

Those who pursue this second-order path will be faced with the question of how to reap the desirable benefits of religion while remaining

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[143] A contrast with other traditional theistic arguments, since we view Ontological Arguments as logically refutable (Peter Millican, 'The One Fatal Flaw in Anselm's Argument', *Mind*, 113 (2004), 437–76), Cosmological Arguments as vitiated by their reliance on general principles that seem initially plausible but go hugely beyond the scope of our experience, and Moral Arguments as founded on meta-ethical views that are both dubious in themselves and hostage to naturalistic accounts of morality. But these topics are obviously too big to discuss further here.

[144] For example, we doubt whether the Argument can legitimately be taken to point towards a *morally perfect* creator, given that a morally defective (or indifferent) creator might equally be motivated to create a finely-tuned universe. For more brief remarks on its strengths and weaknesses, see Peter Millican, 'Critical Survey of the Literature on Hume and the First *Enquiry*', in *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*, ed. by Peter Millican (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp. 413–74 (pp. 460–1).

[145] Hence dismissal of the Fine Tuning Argument on this basis cannot so easily claim the traditional atheistic virtue of ontological parsimony.

above the first-order fray of disagreement, irrationality, and dogmatism. But in seeking a means of religious expression – both in thought and action – they will inevitably be drawn towards religious language and practices that differentiate them from others pursuing a similar path elsewhere in the world, often without being able to provide any convincing rationale for these differences (for reasons explained in this paper).[146] The obvious prescription is for an undogmatic and non-prejudicial acceptance of these differences as cultural preferences rather than matters of existential conflict. And crucially, such acceptance is far easier to achieve at the second-order level, for here the divine is taken to provide the source and sustenance of nature in general, rather than a causal agent influencing human history directly through specific (and cross-culturally disputed) actions, commandments, and sacred texts.

One way of conceptualising this undogmatic approach to cultural religious practices is based on the oral teachings attributed to the Buddha in the *Surangama Sutra*. Formulated as a general principle that has been dubbed the 'Maxim of the Moon',[147] it cautions us against the blinding force of human cognitive bias by suggesting that all our pursuits of knowledge – including all our religions – are like 'fingers pointing at the moon'. The problem is that too often we mistake our own finger for the moon and allow it to eclipse our view. The moon, like the Truth, is a distant, intangible beauty that we cannot bring fully into our presence, and as the psychological literature now so richly illustrates, when we try to apprehend it, rather than sharing a pure vision of what is really there, much of what we find is instead a shadowy reflection of our own, limited self. It is, however, both a fundamental scientific objective and a basic religious teaching that we should strive to see beyond our own 'pointing fingers', in order to reach more truth in what they so emphatically attempt to indicate.

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[146] This is not to say that religious language and practice will be taken uncritically from the prevailing culture, making second-order religion outwardly indistinguishable from its first-order source. For example, this undogmatic second-order approach is likely to put considerably more emphasis on inclusive religious ritual – in which people can participate whatever their belief – than on the recitation of creeds designed to exclude the unorthodox.

[147] Branden Thornhill-Miller, 'We Sing the Body Eclectic', *First and Second Church in Boston* (Boston, Massachusetts: WERS 88.9 FM, 1996); Thornhill-Miller, 'The Modern Missionary Position: The Psychology of Fundamentalist Sects in Global Context'.

How much of the moon is genuinely revealed by our cultural religious pointers, and how much eclipsed by them, is very unclear. In respect of *first-order supernaturalism*, however, the Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma suggests that once we have rationally removed all the overlapping fingers associated with our different religions, there may be no distinguishing traits left to view. From this perspective, first-order supernaturalism would now appear to be more a trick of the light than any solid reality, a tapestry of seductive visions perhaps, but considerably less helpful, necessary, or convincing today than in our human past. But there may be another vision of the moon, as a luminous, *second-order* ultimate reality of some kind that yet lies beyond the comprehension of all our individual efforts to point to it. We have seen how first-order religions, as inspired and inspiring human products, collectively reveal a great deal about us. In thus helping us to understand ourselves, they may also be thought to offer a reflection of second-order mysteries and wonders that yet still lie beyond our grasp.[148]

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF MODEST ATHEISM

J. L. SCHELLENBERG

Mount Saint Vincent University

Abstract. Distinguishing between the old atheism, the new atheism, and modest atheism, and also between belief and acceptance, and belief and acceptance tokens and types, I defend the disjunctive view that either modest atheistic belief or modest atheistic acceptance, construed as type, is today epistemically justified in the context of philosophical inquiry. Central to my defence is a deductive version of the hiddenness argument and an emphasis on the early stage of philosophical inquiry that we presently occupy.

I begin with distinctions between what I shall call the old atheism, the new atheism, and modest atheism. The old atheism, exemplified by J. L. Mackie in his book *The Miracle of Theism* (1982) and by hundreds of others, especially from the Enlightenment on, has the following three features. It is narrowly personalist (that is, concerned only with a conception of God as person, or something like a person); it is commonly supported by philosophical arguments; and it is purely negative (that is to say, restricted to denying the existence of a personal God).

The new atheism, exemplified by Richard Dawkins in his book *The God Delusion* (2006) and by at least three others (though many more are cheering the 'four horsemen' on), lacks each of these features. For it is quite generally opposed to the idea of transcendent or supernatural realities and thus has a broader than personalist focus; it tends, moreover, to depend on appeals, implicit or explicit, to a certain positive metaphysics, namely, scientific naturalism (hereafter: naturalism); and because of the previous point, it cannot be said to restrict itself to a purely negative claim.

In my view, there are a number of things wrong with the new atheism, and its epistemological approach – to the extent that it has one – is flawed. Ideology-infused bellicosity too often takes the place of careful reasoning

here. If atheism depends on such a flawed epistemology, then atheism should be rejected by philosophers. Happily (or unhappily, depending on your view), atheism does not depend on it, and so we cannot turn that conditional into a sound instance of modus ponens. Most obviously, there is also the less flamboyant but more formidable *old* atheism, whose arguments against theism and in support of its own negative claim have, over the past few centuries, been something of a thorn in the side for theistic philosophers.

When I was young, I identified with the old atheism, and sought to enlarge its store of arguments with new philosophical arguments from hiddenness, horrors, and free will (yes, there is a free will offence as well as a free will defence). But in the last decade or so I have moved to a more nuanced position which I shall here call modest atheism.

At first glance modest atheism may seem somewhat *less* than modest, for it does not reject any of the three features distinguishing old atheism, instead adding to them. (It might therefore also be called old atheism *plus*.) But what it adds makes for an overall stance that includes a modest, even sceptical strain. Modest atheism supposes to be false a certain precise affirmative proposition about the existence of an ultimate divine reality influential in both western philosophy and western religion – that the divine exists as person and actor – while regarding it as epistemically possible (by which I mean 'not justifiedly deniable') that some other affirmative proposition about the existence of a religious ultimate, perhaps one unknown or even unknowable to us today, should one day prove to be true. While it closes the book on personal theism, it is open – and explicitly open – to the discovery of other forms of divine reality. And it is so (quite ironically given the preoccupations of the new atheism, whose opposition in the name of science to all things religious we have already noted) at least partly in light of what *science* teaches us about our place in evolutionary time, a place which, when we make the appropriate transition from human to scientific timescales, we will see to be at the very *beginning* of intelligent inquiry on our planet, which our self-important species has grown accustomed to treating as though it were the end.

I take it that the old atheism is not thus open. Indeed, here we hit on an assumption apparently shared by the old and the new atheists. This assumption is that there is truth in religion *only if* something like personal theism is true. If this assumption is not being made by the old atheists, then how shall we explain the fact that, after reaching atheism,

they venture no further in religious investigation? Most old atheists, just like new atheists, are naturalists, even if they don't crudely conflate atheism with naturalism at the conceptual level. And if this assumption is not being made by the *new* atheists, then how shall we explain the fact that they *do* tend to conflate atheism with naturalism?

Modest atheism, therefore, is unlike each of the other atheisms in its openness to nontheistic religious discoveries, perhaps ones occurring only in the far future. It does not rule them out. That is to say, it is more modest.

In this essay I want to defend the claim that modest atheism is in good shape, epistemologically. But to prepare the way for this defence some more distinctions are needed. We need to distinguish between atheism (of any kind) as proposition, as belief, and as acceptance, and then also between belief and acceptance tokens and types.

Much of what I have said so far could be understood on the assumption that atheism is a *proposition* or *claim* of some kind – in the case of modest atheism, the proposition that no personal God exists but some other depiction of the divine may someday prove correct. In philosophical discussions of whether atheism is *true* this propositional interpretation is clearly being applied. For only propositions are literally true or false. But we might also – and sometimes do – ask whether so-and-so's atheism is well grounded or justified, or speak (as I did earlier) of a person's state of mind as exemplifying atheism. And here we are usually instead thinking about a certain individual's *belief* that an atheistic proposition is true. But there is yet a third possibility, which tends to be overlooked in philosophy today but will become more salient as the distinction in epistemology between belief and acceptance is further clarified and utilized – a process which, perhaps optimistically, I think is well underway. This is that the atheism of a philosopher such as myself, or of any person, may amount to an *acceptance* of the relevant proposition rather than belief of it. In close but not quite complete conformity with what L. Jonathan Cohen says about that distinction in his excellent book on the subject (1992), I suggest that the term 'acceptance' is most helpfully used to name what is described when we speak of in a fully voluntary manner forming and maintaining *a policy of treating a proposition as true*, using it as a basis for inference. A corollary is that the term 'acceptance' ought to be distinguished from 'belief,' which rather names a less than fully voluntary disposition (or set of dispositions) such as the involuntary disposition Cohen himself identifies with belief: namely, the disposition

to feel a proposition true in relevant circumstances. It seems clear that sometimes the 'position' of a philosopher on this issue or that should be understood in terms of that philosopher's accepting a certain proposition rather than in terms of belief. And perhaps at an early stage of investigation, of the sort I have said we will see ourselves to be in when we fully absorb scientific timescales, there will often be occasion for acceptance even if not for belief.

Suppose, then, that we have seen the differences between atheism as proposition, as belief, and as acceptance. Suppose also that we have noticed that the conditions of belief's justification might be different from those attaching to the justification of acceptance (more on this later), and accordingly that the epistemology of atheism as *belief* might be different from the epistemology of atheism as *acceptance*. There is still – and finally – the distinction between belief and acceptance *tokens* and *types* to take note of.

This is really a distinction between different senses of the expressions 'belief that p' and 'acceptance that p'. Sometimes it is a certain *way* of believing or accepting, *the* belief or acceptance that p, that we have in mind when we use such an expression, and to use it correctly we need not presuppose that this belief or acceptance is realized in anyone (even if its appropriateness to this or that mental or social context is discussed); but in another sense what we may have in mind is *his* or *her* belief or acceptance that p, and in evaluating the belief or acceptance thus understood we evaluate *the person who exemplifies it* by way of assessing their relevant dispositions (the dispositions involved in their coming to, or not ceasing to, include in their mental repertoire the belief or acceptance in question). In the former abstract case what we have is a belief or acceptance *type*; in the latter concrete case it is a belief or acceptance *token*.

In considering the justification of a belief or acceptance type in connection with the existence of God what we are looking for is a *worthiness of instantiation* that abstract discussion of whether belief or acceptance is best among available responses (either *the* best or *a* best, and either way such as cannot be exceeded) will help us discern; such discussion, in my view, is the task of philosophers, and I shall be engaging in it here. Whereas in evaluating belief or acceptance tokens the relevant desideratum is what we may call *responsibility*, which amounts to something like the proper fulfilment of all relevant duties and the exercise of intellectual virtue in the formation and maintenance

of belief or acceptance by the relevant believer or accepter. There *is* this *connection* between the two levels of evaluation that may be noted: if one declares a certain response type to be unjustified within a certain context and so unworthy of being instantiated, then one will also think that, other things being equal, investigation of the most responsible and virtuous sort will in that context lead to such a response type not being instantiated by the investigator, and so the investigator will, in the token sense, not be justified in exhibiting that response. But there are obviously many variables that can prevent facts about type and token justifications from matching up here, such as persistent controversy over type justification, the amounts of information particular investigators have about the results of formal inquiry, and so on.

So when I say that I mean to defend the thesis that modest atheism is in good shape, epistemologically, do I have in mind atheism as belief or acceptance, and will it be belief or acceptance as token or type? What I've just said about the task of philosophers leads me to a focus on response *types*. And the distinction between belief and acceptance affords the defence of modest atheism some flexibility here, which I intend to make use of. The view I shall defend is accordingly the following: that *either* modest atheistic belief or modest atheistic acceptance, construed as type, is today justified (i.e., worthy of being instantiated) within the context of philosophical inquiry about things religious. Since this is the view I mean to defend, it may from here on be assumed that when I speak of atheistic belief or acceptance I am speaking of a certain *type* of stance. I myself think modest atheistic *belief* is justified, but I shall argue only for the weaker disjunctive claim. And the final result I'm aiming at is indeed a successful *defence* – in a short paper I cannot hope to establish my conclusion but I do intend to advance its cause, to put it in a more favourable light.

Even so, I have my work cut out for me. How will the defence proceed? I want now to suggest that here too modest atheism can do something to earn its name, for it is also in a way modest in the sort of reasoning it uses to support itself. At first, you will want to say, once again, that what I count as modesty here is really immodesty! For the reasoning I have in mind is *deductive* reasoning – and haven't we long since come to appreciate that deductive arguments for the nonexistence of God are hopelessly over-optimistic? Hasn't atheistic philosophy of religion in the past few decades come to focus, much more modestly and appropriately, on *inductive* reasoning, such as the probabilistic reasoning of William Rowe or Paul Draper (Howard-Snyder, ed. 1996)?

My reason for focusing on deductive arguments, and daring to call what I am doing modest, is in part bound up with what is required to justify *belief* on big issues such as those of philosophy at an evolutionarily early stage of inquiry such as our own. I would *not* say that no philosophical beliefs at all can presently be justified; that way an inquiry-stultifying scepticism looms. But I do say that a justification for philosophical belief is, at an early stage of inquiry, much easier to provide where *compelling* grounds, such as those embodied by an apparently sound deductive argument, are available. In the absence of compelling grounds, in particular where probabilistic arguments alone are given, I think inquirers should be much more reluctant to claim justification for philosophical belief as opposed to, say, an increase in the probability that a certain philosophical claim is true. My modesty consists, in part, in this reluctance.

But my *im*modesty, you may now say, consists in my suggestion that the high bar I have set up *can be reached* in the case of atheism! Well, is it any *more* modest to assume that no other good deductive arguments against the existence of God will be discovered than have already been discovered at a relatively early point in the evolution of intelligence, say, 1982? This, it appears, is what any pre-emptive argument of the sort suggested by the critic must assume. In any case, here it is important to recall my disjunctive approach, which will be satisfied even if only *acceptance* of the proposition put forward by the modest atheist can in some way be justified. Deductive arguments, as we will see, may have a role to play in relation to acceptance too.

So which deductive argument(s) for the nonexistence of God will I advance? Well, when I saw the line-up of topics and speakers gracing the conference on the epistemology of atheism for which this paper was written, I noticed that the hiddenness argument was to receive considerable discussion. Since – as I note perhaps *without* modesty but I think truthfully – I was responsible for getting that way of reasoning into discussion a couple of decades ago (Schellenberg 1993), I decided that I might as well jump on the bandwagon and convey how I view the hiddenness argument at present, using this to develop my case. But there is another reason for focusing on the hiddenness argument here. Since it is a relatively new argument, driven in part by secularization processes that have had some considerable influence in the last few centuries, it fits nicely with my emphasis on how we are still very much at the *beginning*

of things where religion and its discussion are concerned and nowhere near the end.

But what matters here is whether the hiddenness argument is a good argument, capable of justifying atheistic belief or acceptance. So let's have a look. There are various ways of formulating the argument. The way I have chosen to use is the following:

(1) If no perfectly loving God exists, then God does not exist.

(2) If a perfectly loving God exists, then there exists a God who is always open to personal relationship with any finite person.

(3) If there exists a God who is always open to personal relationship with any finite person, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

(4) If a perfectly loving God exists, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists (from 2 & 3).

(5) Some finite persons are or have been nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

(6) No perfectly loving God exists (from 4 & 5).

(7) God does not exist (from 1 & 6).

The phraseology here is a bit loose in places, but if one wants to convey a clear first impression it helps not to weigh the argument down with numerous explanatory clauses, and we can tighten things up as we go along.

The first thing to notice about the argument is that the inferences at steps (4), (6), and (7) are clearly deductively valid. So we can focus on whether the premises should win our belief or acceptance.

Shall we go along with premise (1): if no perfectly loving God exists, then God does not exist? Well, the idea of a person-like God – which as I've noted is the idea of God that the modest atheist, like the old atheist, is concerned with – represents one way in which the religious idea of an *ultimate reality* has been interpreted by human beings. Notice also that it is only or mainly as a candidate for metaphysical and axiological ultimacy that God comes to have a place in the discussions of western philosophy. Now, as one might expect, given that word 'ultimate', God is commonly regarded as having all knowledge and all power – or at least as much as it makes sense to suppose a person like God could have. For

the same reason of ultimacy, God is said to be the source of our existence and perfectly good. But God is also commonly said to be *perfectly loving* toward created beings. And this attribute is at least as obviously essential as the others. For the best love, love of the sort we rightly admire, is one of the most impressive features any person, man or woman, can display. Perhaps it is one of the results of recent cultural evolution that we can now see this more clearly than humans once did. How could a candidate for 'greatest possible person' be anything but a fraud if it weren't always possessed of the greatest possible love? Whatever stunning attributes it displayed, we would then be able to imagine an even greater person, who *was* perfectly loving. It seems incumbent, therefore, on everyone who today reflects on the existence of God to acknowledge that if God exists, God is perfectly loving. Christians of course have specially emphasized this attribute but for all theists and atheists in philosophy there is good reason to do so.

Let's move on, then, to premise (2): if a perfectly loving God exists, then there exists a God who is always open to personal relationship with any finite person. That phrase 'personal relationship' should at this point be tightened up a bit: what I have in mind is a *conscious and (positively) meaningful* relationship. I should also acknowledge a point that, once acknowledged, will remain tacit: namely, that the scope of premise (2) is restricted to finite persons who are *relevantly capable*, where the relevant capacities are cognitive and affective capacities sufficient to be able at the time in question to be in a meaningful conscious relationship with God – such things as a capacity then to feel the presence of God, recognizing it as such; a capacity to exhibit attitudes of trust, gratitude, and obedience to God, and so on.

Now, some theists might be inclined to resist this premise because of a prior commitment to a religious scripture or creed incompatible with it or in tension with it. Isn't the God of the Bible, for example, often portrayed as somewhat distant relationally? But none of this can be relevant here where we are considering what the modest atheist must do to rise above epistemological suspicion. The modest atheist, who like the old atheist is working within a *philosophical* frame of reference, cannot be limited by theological assumptions which have been formed because of the need to find room for God in *our* world. It shouldn't need to be said, but in the present circumstances of inquiry in philosophy of religion, which is filled with believing philosophers, it has to be *emphasized* that philosophers cannot assume because of some consensus in their

communities that God exists and so has only those qualities compatible with creating a world like *ours*, but must seek to be guided by reason when considering what a God would be like.

So what does careful reasoning, which seeks to be attentive to all that we humans have learned, tell us? Well, it makes it clear that people who admirably love you (and thus any who *perfectly* love you) are invariably open to a kind of personal relationship with you in which the two of you can interact meaningfully and consciously with each other. Indeed, since they love you in this way, they want to be close to you, and close in a way you can appreciate, so you can turn to them for advice or draw on their support or just feel them present with you when that's needed. (Of course if they admirably love you, they'll value being with you for its own sake, too.) Now, it's true that they won't *force* any of this on you, which is one reason why I only used the word 'open' when stating this premise. There is even room here for a sort of withdrawal *within* relationship. But if they aren't at least open to such relationship, it would be a mistake to say they admirably love you.

To see this with full clarity, imagine that you're listening to a friend, who's describing his parents: 'Wow, are they ever great – I wish everyone could have parents like mine, who are so wonderfully loving! Granted, they don't want anything to do with me. They're never around. Sometimes I find myself looking for them – once, I have to admit, I even called out for them when I was sick – but to no avail. Apparently they're just not open to a relationship with me right now. But it's so good that they love me as much and as beautifully as they do!' If you heard your friend talking like this, you'd think he was seriously confused. And you'd be right. His parents, if your friend's description of them is correct, could certainly be lots of other things – even impressive things, like the best corporate lawyer in the country and the President – but their attitude toward their son, whatever it is, does not include an admirable love.

I expect you'll see how all of this can be applied to God. A careful look at the concept of love should lead us to affirm that God is always open to personal relationship with each of *us* (or with each of the beings a God would or might create, whoever they are), if God exists and is perfectly loving – which is to say that premise (2) is true.

Now, so far I've been treating the concept of 'openness' to relationship as one we all understand, and at an intuitive level I'm sure this is the case. But as we move on to premise (3) – if there exists a God who is always open to personal relationship with any finite person, then no

finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists – we will need to probe this concept a bit more carefully. So let's have a look at that word 'open' and how it behaves, logically speaking. In particular, let's note a sufficient condition of someone *not* being open in the relevant way:

Not Open

If a person A, without having brought about this condition through resistance of personal relationship with person B, is at some time in a state of *nonbelief* in relation to the proposition that B exists, where B at that time knows this and could ensure that A's nonbelief is at that time changed to belief, then it is not the case that B is open at the time in question to having a personal relationship with A then.

Indeed, in such circumstances B (if B exists) is *consciously preventing* such a relationship from existing at that time. And if anything is obvious, it is that you cannot be open to a relationship in the relevant way while consciously preventing it! We can apply this to God, who of course possesses all relevant knowledge and ability: if any finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to God's existence, then there is no God always open to personal relationship with each finite person. Another way of putting that point gives us its contrapositive, which is premise (3): if there exists a God who is always open to personal relationship with each finite person, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

So premise (3) seems quite clearly believable too. What about the last premise that needs to be checked, premise (5): some finite persons – and of course I have in mind human beings – are or have been nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists? Here again theology may tempt some theistic thinkers to suppose that our modest atheist is stepping outside the bounds of what should be believed. For might not any one of us be secretly resistant to a holy and demanding God, blinded to the motives that grip us? If so, then perhaps those who don't believe in God are, in a way, hiding from God. Might the proponent of the hiddenness argument have managed to get things backward in this way?

Notice first that she needn't be thinking about herself: perhaps *other* nonbelievers strike her as displaying nonresistance by the same standards that leave her questioning her own. Indeed, how could

an investigator help noticing that some people who don't believe in God still have an admirable track record of investigation, and emotionally are, if anything, biased in favour of God? Some people who find that the evidence of argument and experience has taken belief in God away in midstream, as it were, in the midst of *a strenuous religious life*, would *love* to believe in God. What reason could someone have to say that *they* are resisting a relationship with God? It strains – and indeed breaks – credulity. The evidence of nonresistance here can pile up in such a way that an honest inquirer judges it to be stronger than any counterevidence. Even if in such circumstances one thinks belief is unjustified because of new and unsuspected evidence that only future inquiry may reveal, clearly *acceptance* of a premise like (5) is justified given that the available evidence strongly supports it.

But even this is a weaker stance than is justified when we consider that we needn't stay focused on people who have *thought about* the existence of God and so have come within the range of motives for resisting it. Behind them, as it were, stretching into places far distant from any affected by Western culture, and also into times long ago, before humans had so much as conceived of an all knowing, all good and loving creator of the universe, we find evidence of individuals and communities who, though capable of possessing it, lacked belief in God, and obviously without ever having blinded themselves by resisting God in any way. How *could* there be resistance in such a case? The critic of (5) needs you to look away from all this evidence for nonresistant nonbelief. But to do so would be to fall prey to blindness of another kind.

The four premises of the hiddenness argument therefore seem clearly true. Since, as we have already seen, its three inferences are clearly valid, it follows that the argument seems clearly sound. Shall we therefore pronounce in favour of a belief or acceptance type of response to modest atheism?

Many philosophers will think that there could still be good reasons not to do so. For example, it may be said that there are powerful defeating objections showing one or another of the hiddenness argument's premises to be false or undercutting the justification for believing or accepting some such premise, or that there are equally strong arguments for *theism* to be weighed on the other side. Of course there isn't time here to examine closely all the reasoning I've just alluded to, but I think some illuminating general comments may still be made.

Let's start with the last idea mentioned, that of equally strong arguments for theism. Even the most respected and spirited defenders of theism – take Richard Swinburne, for example – would shrink from a claim of the sort I have made on behalf of atheism: they would deny that there is a sound deductive proof of the truth of theism. And it is not hard to see why things should be harder here for theism than for atheism. If the existence of God requires that there be a person who is all powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good and loving, as well as the creator of the universe, then arguments for theism have the task of showing that *all* those conditions are *present*. But an argument for atheism need only show that *one* such condition is *absent*. (It may, for example, endeavour to show, as does the hiddenness argument, that perfect love is absent.) And the latter task might be expected to be the easier one. Indeed, it is notorious that the so-called theistic proofs are quite incapable of proving the existence of a being with the whole collection of properties possessed by the theistic God. (Even the ontological argument suffers from this incapacity, for although it purports to prove the existence of a greatest possible being, there is nothing in it to imply that a greatest possible being would be a greatest possible *person*, with such properties as knowledge and love.) Atheism does not have an analogous problem, and so we have the argumentative asymmetry.

What about the alleged *defeating objections to premises* of the hiddenness argument (or to our belief or acceptance of them)? I myself have done a thorough investigation of these objections and have found them all wanting. Indeed, I have created many new objections, in order to test the argument – with the same result. Now, it is of course true that others, especially philosophers who are theists, may disagree with me about one or another objection. But there is an important point to be noted here: namely, that such disagreement is frequently not *philosophically* grounded. Oftentimes I appear to be met by philosophers who are operating as theologians rather than as philosophers when they question the hiddenness argument.

Perhaps the clearest example of what I am talking about here appears near the end of a paper by the American philosophers Ted Poston and Trent Dougherty (2007: 196):

> In the final analysis Schellenberg's argument fails because it envisions God as requiring too much: explicit, highly confident belief at all times. Fortunately, God is more generous. The Christian tradition attests that God will accept far less, he will 'meet us where we are'.

Now, at first this may seem a relevant criticism. But listen to it carefully. When I first did so, I was truly startled: How could it be thought that the hiddenness argument depicts God as *requiring* belief of anyone and thus as *un*generous – with the implication that if the hiddenness argument were right about God, God would be leaving some – namely nonresistant nonbelievers – out in the cold, since they are unable to come up with what is required? After all, what the hiddenness argument clearly says is that God would generously *offer* belief – and the *explicit* relationship made possible thereby – to all, and so there *would be* no nonresistant nonbelievers in a world created by God. But then I saw that there is in Poston and Dougherty a tendency to assume that God exists and that whatever is being said about God *must apply to the actual world* – even when that comes in the context of an atheistic argument! Why else would it be supposed, when someone like me claims that God would favour explicit relationship, that those in the actual world who don't have what it takes to participate in such relationship are going to be left out? How could what God wants be too much unless creatures are unable to deliver it, and how could they be thought unable to deliver it unless we are thinking about *our* world instead of the world the hiddenness argument says would exist if God existed, in which all who are nonresistant believe?

Sadly, many allegedly philosophical objections to the hiddenness argument display a tendency similar to the one I claim to have found in Poston and Dougherty, even if not so brazenly. Within a philosophical context they can have no weight at all. In a philosophical context, where we have to let the voice of authority grow dim and think for ourselves about what a perfect personal being would be like, we may notice points that undermine the *allegedly* undermining objections to the hiddenness argument.

This holds also for a strategy quite popular today, known as 'sceptical theism,' which questions how we could justifiedly rule out the existence of *unknown* goods for the sake of which God is hidden. Accepting this move in the absence of some special theological bias or preconception seems to require forgetting what theism has got us talking about in the first place – an ultimate person. Consider by way of analogy a single man who marries and has children: Does this behaviour not rightly constrain the goods he is willing to pursue, at least insofar as he is a loving husband and father? Though when he was on his own he spent time with many female friends and was otherwise preoccupied with his own wide-ranging pursuits, travelling to far-flung regions of the earth for months

at a time, shifting from place to place and from one activity to another, now things are different – and quite naturally and rightly so. Now he has a family to help provide for, to support in emotional and financial ways. He can't just take off for Greece or France for long periods at a time to indulge his own interests. Better, he has *new* interests which lead him happily to say no when invitations to do such things arise. Similarly with God, if God is to be regarded as a loving person – an *ultimately* loving person – who has created vulnerable finite persons to be the object of Divine love. The 'God' described by sceptical theists who may, for all we know, have purposes quite unrelated to us that require hiddenness *from* us is not an ultimately loving being at all. If construed personally, such a God is comparable to a limited or delinquent father or mother who simply can't or won't live up to the demands taken on board when the commitments of marriage and family are entered into.

I suggest, therefore, that on the basis of such considerations as I have briefly aired a great deal can be done to warrant, in the context of philosophical inquiry, setting aside our two counter-suggestions – concerning equally strong arguments for theism and crippling objections to the hiddenness argument – without entering into many details of the associated reasoning.

But here's another counter-suggestion. Perhaps it will be suggested that there is also *non-propositional experiential evidence* to be considered here. Might not people who find themselves in the grip of suitably powerful experiences apparently of God have grounds for resisting the hiddenness argument – perhaps for saying that *something* is wrong with it, even if they know not what and though they lack any reasoning to offer against it? Recently philosophers of religion have been much concerned with questions of this sort, often defending an affirmative answer (Swinburne 2004, Alston 1991, Plantinga 2000). But the most that could conceivably be shown by this means is that theistic religious experience brings a non-atheistic response to the question of God's existence up to a level of worthiness *for those inquirers who find themselves in the relevant experiential circumstances*. It could not be shown that it brings an atheistic response *down* to a level of *un*worthiness for those who lack such non-propositional evidence.

Obviously there is no space here for a proper discussion of the epistemology of religious experience. But again some general comments suggest themselves which show that what I've found conceivable here is not actually to be expected, given the facts on the ground. For example,

experiences apparently of God, to do the epistemic work required of them here, would have to be more forceful and also more *discriminating* than religious experiences often are. By 'discriminating' I mean they would need to clearly have theistic as opposed to any other religious content.

Now when we have perceptual experiences of other human persons our experiences commonly are discriminating in the relevant way: I see from the phenomenological details of my experience that it is John Greco before me and not Paul Draper or Roger Pouivet. Religious perceptual experiences are often much more fluid and malleable. It will, I suspect, be much easier in many cases to get someone to back down from the claim that the omni-God of traditional personalist theism was present to her to the claim that *something* powerfully transcendent was present to her than it will be to get me to back down from the claim that I saw John Greco to the claim that *some human being or other* stood before me. And if their degree of modesty about such things is tailored to our possible evolutionary immaturity, which here as elsewhere we are called to take into account, I think even philosophical inquirers in the grip of religious experience may accordingly often find its epistemic force less obvious and relevant than would be required to support the judgment we are considering. And we have not yet said anything about the problem, which arises for those who reject the argument I've just given, of religious experiential diversity.

So without too much discussion of details we can see that alleged proofs of theism, objections to the hiddenness argument, and suggestions about theistic religious experience may not gain much traction among those who earnestly and *as philosophers* investigate the question whether there is a God and, in *that* context, wonder what force the hiddenness argument should be regarded as having.

So what exactly am I proposing – that a *belief* response to modest atheism is justified for philosophers thinking about the existence of God, or that *acceptance* is? I will provide some more defence for each of the disjuncts of the disjunction suggested here in turn, hoping to impress each relevant investigator with at least *one* of my arguments and thus successfully to defend the *disjunction* in relation to everyone.

Let's start with belief. Each of the premises and also each of the inference claims of the hiddenness argument can be made to appear worthy of belief, and the counter-suggestions we have considered seem not obviously capable of diminishing this justification for the belief that the theistic God does not exist. Now, of course, we have been unable

here to examine many details of those counter-arguments; but nor
have we been able to examine other important deductive arguments for
atheism, which, as I have maintained elsewhere (Schellenberg 2007), can
be combined with the hiddenness argument to produce an even more
forceful case for atheistic belief. A definitive outcome is, for these reasons,
not in the cards today but I still conclude that atheistic belief in the part
of philosophical inquiry concerning God has been made defensible,
or more defensible, by my arguments in this paper – especially since it
is a modest atheism that I have in mind, open to the idea that other
conceptions of the divine demand inquiry.

But precisely this modesty, and its rootedness in scientific facts about
our place in time, an objector may now wish to query more closely in
an attempt to overturn my conclusion about atheistic belief. Are we not
'in over our heads' when we reach a belief about the existence of God,
given the vast diversity of arguments from perhaps better equipped
future inquirers that we are in the nature of the case unable to sample?
Elsewhere, I have defended such reasoning in relation to the broader
idea that there is no ultimate divine reality (Schellenberg 2007). Why
isn't it equally applicable to the narrower but equally profound claim that
there is no personal God?

Well, modest atheism, let us remember, denies only the existence of
a person-like ultimate: an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good and
loving creator of the universe. It makes the negative claim that there is
no *such* divine being. This is not nearly so ambitious or profound a claim
as the positive claim that there *is* such a being, or even as the negative
claim that there is no religious reality of any kind, for it has many fewer
metaphysical consequences. Think of how thorough a story of the overall
nature of things you could tell, knowing that there is a God! But if all
you know is that there *isn't* a God, you've just ruled out one way things
could be. Indeed, you've only ruled out one *religious* way things could
be; many other religious ways things could be, with similar metaphysical
implications, remain. And so there's no justification, given only modest
atheism, for an endorsement of such profound metaphysical claims
as that of naturalism – though many immodest theists are mistakenly
inclined to see the latter as following from atheism.

It should also be noted that by seeking only to refute traditional
theism, we remain 'close to home' and need to mobilize no more than
certain concepts and considerations we already possess. For the basic idea
of a personal God, as traditionally understood, extrapolates from certain

basic facts about ourselves – our limited power, knowledge, goodness, love – and thus from human qualities we do already know something about even at the present stage of our development. All my claims in this paper about how *such* a God could be revealed to us are unaffected by the awareness that many *other* conceptions of the divine remain to be explored and may indeed be outside the range of our current powers of conceptualization.

Here's another thought worth considering in this context. (It's related to the last one in that it simplifies the atheist's job even further.) Some of my arguments can make use of insights that draw on recent findings, for example in psychology and feminist thought, where we find a natural connection between admirable love and commitment to relationship. Thus their claims need to be considered as contenders for the status of propositions quite 'clear' in themselves but only now becoming clear to us: that is, as representing the forward edge of new and positive evolutionary developments. If this can be shown for atheism but not for theism, then once more we see how arguments justifying modest atheistic belief may be available even given only our present resources, though the arguments for theism fall short.

Having said all that in defence of modest atheistic belief in philosophy, I think another interesting argument that can be made, if that defence fails, is for atheism's *acceptability*. Of course we would expect philosophers who believe atheistically to also act upon this belief in inquiry, but arguments for acceptance are arguments for something like acting on the modest atheistic claim even when you *don't* yet believe it. And here, as Cohen makes clear (1992), pragmatic considerations concerning the needs of inquiry may be importantly relevant.

So consider these facts. (1) Inquiry about religion in western philosophy has been going on for thousands of years, and for most of that time has almost obsessively focused on theism and things theistic, hardly ever venturing into the potentially vast regions beyond. (2) The latest report (Chalmers and Bourget 2013) has it that 73% of philosophers today favour atheism. Now, the figure would surely be different if we restricted our concern to the opinions of so-called philosophers *of religion*, who are predominantly believing theists. But while it might be argued that this is deserving of notice on the grounds that philosophers of religion are the *experts* on religion in philosophy, we would need to set against this point the fact that most of these so-called philosophers of religion, again, have not ventured beyond theism in their investigations,

and also the fact that (3) many of them are deeply motivated by loyalty to their religious communities, and so should perhaps be regarded as doing theology – even if *philosophical* theology – rather than philosophy (Draper & Nichols 2013, Schellenberg 2009). Finally, we need to note – as, in part, a consequence of points already made – that (4) acceptance of atheism does not in any way imply (as those suppose who erroneously think one must accept either theism or naturalism) that we are closing the door to the truth of religious claims. Indeed, we are opening it more widely than has ever been done before!

What should a philosopher say who seeks to be sensitive to all these facts – while sensitive also to our temporal position and unwilling to endorse atheistic *belief* – and who notices that the latest arguments for atheism are as apparently forceful as the hiddenness argument? I think she should favour the *acceptance* of atheism.

Now it can be difficult to achieve a proper balance: When do you accept a conclusion and when do you say we should wait for more evidence? Many philosophers today would say that we are rushing things if we accept that theism is false. I would suggest that we know enough to do so. The details theistic ideas contain allow inferences about what most fundamentally has value and how it is realized *if this filling for the idea of an ultimate divine reality is realized* – and also the inference to atheism – to be made. And I say we should get on with exploring other fillings for the idea of a divine reality, leaving open the possibility that the latter is true and so neither believing nor accepting that it is false. I have named the more general proposition here, the proposition more general than theism, 'ultimism'. The idea is that even at this early stage of religious investigation we should draw conclusions where we can, to help keep inquiry moving, while being very careful not to foreclose inquiry where we shouldn't. The distinction I have suggested between the epistemic status of ultimism, which says only that there is a metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically ultimate reality of *some* kind, and that of its personalist elaboration seems to me to get this balance about right and to respond appropriately to the needs of inquiry concerning religion in philosophy. But if so, then even if modest atheistic *belief* is thought to be unjustified in the precincts of philosophy, atheistic *acceptance* can still be justified.

A concluding summary, then, might run as follows. Epistemological considerations can be seen to favour an atheistic response in philosophy to questions about God's existence when we consider our subject

carefully, distinguishing between belief and acceptance, and in a context governed by scientific timescales. The sort of atheism that is thus justified is a *modest* atheism. It claims to have extinguished the light from, at most, one of the many facets of the concept of a Divine reality. And it makes this claim only after discovering arguments of seemingly compelling force. These arguments can be used to defend modest atheistic belief as the preferable response to questions about a personal God in the context of philosophical inquiry. And even if this conclusion were to be left unsecured, perhaps because of the demands of deep time scepticism, there would still be reason to take such arguments as justifying the *acceptance* of modest atheism at the present stage of religious inquiry. It seems, therefore, that a modern and modest atheism can acquit itself admirably at the bar of epistemological reason.

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IS ATHEISM (THE FACT) GOOD EVIDENCE
FOR ATHEISM (THE THESIS)?
ON JOHN SCHELLENBERG'S ARGUMENT
FROM IGNORANCE

CYRILLE MICHON

Université de Nantes

Abstract. The argument from ignorance mounted by John Schellenberg argues from the existence of non-faulty unbelief to the non-existence of God, from the fact of atheism or agnosticism to the truth of atheism. It relies on two putative conceptual relations: between the idea of love and that of personal relationship, and between personal relationship and existential belief on each side of the relation concerning the other relatum. I argue that each is debatable, and so the argument cannot proceed.

Atheism is the *thesis* that there is no God. But it is also the *fact* that some people believe that thesis, they believe that there is no God. Of course, the precise content of both the thesis and the fact depends on the notion of God that is at stake. We may at least conceive a distinction between a concept of God relying on a pure metaphysical property, like that of supreme or necessary being, or of first cause, involving some special attributes (the so-called omni-attributes: omnipotence, omniscience, omniperfection) and a concept that relies on a moral dimension and adds to the idea of supremacy, perfection or creation, that such a being is personal, endowed with knowledge and volition, and is a loving person – a supremely or perfectly loving person. Since the metaphysical thesis that there is a first being (in perfection, causality, etc.) is only philosophical, or proper to some philosophers, we could call it 'philosophical theism' and its denial 'philosophical atheism'. The concept of a first being which is a person, and a loving person, can be understood by philosophers, and some may even argue that the first being is or has to be personal.

But it is certainly a concept that applies to what traditional religions, like Judaism, Christianity and Islam call God. I will then speak of a religious conception of God, and accordingly of 'religious theism' and 'religious atheism'. One can be a philosophical theist and a religious atheist, if one thinks that the first being is not a person, but say, the universe.

The distinction is important because many arguments for the existence of God are arguments for the existence of a supreme being, without consideration for any personal attribute. And arguments against the existence of God, like the argument from evil, are arguments against the existence of a moral God. The argument from evil, if it works, proves that there is no supreme being that is morally good, thus leaving open the possibility that there is a supreme being, that is not morally good (of course if 'supreme being' implies 'moral goodness', this position is not open). And one can be convinced by both kinds of arguments and so be a philosophical theist and a religious atheist. Philosophers might prefer to use different terms for different concepts and theses. In John Schellenberg's terminology, theism and atheism should be understood only according to their religious understanding, as the affirmation or the denial that there is a supreme being who is personal and loving. Philosophical theism should be called 'ultimism', the thesis that there is an ultimate reality. Note that ultimism is not exactly what I have called philosophical theism, because Schellenberg wants the ultimate reality to be ultimate not only ontologically but also axiologically.

Now, using Schellenberg's narrow concepts of theism and atheism, it is a fact that many people are theists, that many are atheists, and that many are agnostic (it might be that some agnostics and some atheists are ultimists). If we consider the motivation they have, the kind of reasons or justifications they could give for their stance, we can note an asymmetry. Many theists do not believe that there is a God on the basis of any argument, they rely on some religious tradition, that offers them a so-called revelation to which they give credit, or faith. They may have reasons to believe that the revelation is true, that the testimonies are reliable, but in the end, there seems to be an irreducible 'act of faith', a jump over rational argumentation that does not seem to be irrational, merely above rational arguments. Others simply feel and think that there is a personal God, maybe on the basis of a certain revelation, but maybe not, and they would justify their belief by the strength of an interior illumination or certitude, comparable to perceptual certainty. Atheism cannot be based on anything of the sort. The *fact* of atheism can be

causally *explained* by some sort of influence of an atheistic culture and tradition over the persons, but the *thesis* of atheism can only be *justified* on the basis of rational arguments, arguments for the non-existence of God.

I will begin with some general remarks on the argument from ignorance as an atheistic argument (I) and then propose a closer examination of Schellenberg's version of it: first of its general structure (II), and then of the two premises that rely on conceptual relations between the idea of love and that of personal relationship (III), and between personal relationship and existential belief concerning the *relata* of such a relation (IV). I will argue that each is debatable, and that, as a consequence, the argument is not built on solid grounds.

I. ATHEISTIC ARGUMENTS

Arguments for the non-existence of God cannot be of the empirical sort, the way I prove that there is no butter in the fridge by opening its door and showing that none of the stuff inside is butter. It has to be a rational proof that there is no God. When the proof has a deductive form, it is a proof that the existence of God is *impossible*. In the same way, deductive proofs of the existence of God argue that its existence is necessary. In both cases the modality may be absolute or only conditional. *A priori* arguments prove that God is absolutely impossible or absolutely necessary. They do so through an exploration of the concept of God, and argue that the very content of that concept implies that there cannot be any instance of it, or that there must be one. For example, if the concept of God implies that any God is omnipotent, and if omnipotence is an inconsistent concept (it leads to contradictions), then there can be no God. Alternatively, if the concept of God is that of a necessary or perfect being (or of that than which no greater can be conceived), and if this concept is such that there would result a contradiction if it were not exemplified, then there must be a God. *A posteriori* arguments introduce at least one empirical premise, and it is in virtue both of the concept of God and of that empirical fact, that God's existence is considered as impossible or necessary: the modality is then conditional upon the considered empirical fact. For example, the atheist argument from evil starts form the two premises (1) that God, conceived at least as omnipotent and morally good, is incompatible with evil (or a certain amount of evil), and (2) that there is such evil, to conclude that there is no God. The

first premise is conceptual, the second is empirical, and the conclusion is factual but it is *conditionally* necessary: given the fact of evil, there can be no God. In the same way, the cosmological argument concludes to the necessity of the existence of a first cause, given the existence of contingent beings. A priori arguments are all deductive, a posteriori ones can be constructed deductively or inductively: given a certain concept of God, the empirical fact is considered as implying the non-existence (vs the existence) of God, or only as raising its probability.

The atheistic argument from ignorance or unbelief (or argument from Divine Hiddenness),[1] that is from the fact of atheism (belief that there is no God) or agnosticism (no belief that there is one), is of the *a posteriori* kind, and, at least in Schellenberg's version, it receives a deductive form. In its most simple and condensed version (on the model of the argument from evil as presented above), it can be expressed thus:

(1) If there is a loving God, there is no ignorance of God's existence without resistance

(2) There is ignorance of God's existence without resistance

(3) *So*, there is no God

This concise version helps to make the following quite general points.

First, it displays the distinction between the conceptual premise – the *incompatibility* between God and ignorance – and the factual one – the *fact* of nonresistant unbelief (atheism and agnosticism). Both can be discussed, but I will admit the truth of the second premise: there is some atheism (denial of God's existence) and agnosticism (doubt or ignorance about God's existence) that cannot be attributed to voluntary resistance on the part of the unbeliever. It might be contended, and has been, that atheism, and maybe agnosticism too, is always voluntary, or the result of voluntary action (aversion from God or form the search for God) or inaction (voluntary indifference). For example, following Paul's statement (Rom. 1:18) that the pagans are inexcusable not to have recognized the unique God, creator of heaven and earth, one might argue that reason

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[1] I prefer the other two labels because of the misleading consequence of the third: only what exists can hide. Of course, the idea of divine hiddenness has a long tradition in religious thought, if only because of Isaiah 45: 15 ('Truly you are a God who has been hiding himself, the God and Saviour of Israel'). It refers then to the fact that God does not manifest itself, the Deus absconditus of Augustine and Pascal. But the use that has been made of it to express only the absence of manifestation of God, and to infer from it that there is no God is misleading.

shows the existence and uniqueness of a creator, and that all unbelief concerning it is due to some voluntary resistance. I think we can discard this objection for the sole reason that, even if it were true, it would only make the point that philosophical theism, or ultimism, is a natural belief, one that can be abandoned only with some resistance. But what is at stake is religious theism, and unbelief in a personal and loving God. And even Paul did not say that such a God should have to be recognized.[2] So I will concentrate on the content and justification of the first premise.

Another remark is that the first premise relies on the divine attribute of love, and even of perfect love, as we will see, which is an important difference with the atheistic argument form evil, relying on divine omnipotence and moral goodness. Love is a less easy attribute to define and to work with, but it is of course all-important in the religious conception of God. Since it is God's love that the argument claims to be incompatible with the fact of unbelief, there is no way out by a modest change of the concept of God. One cannot easily escape just by making the point that God is not perfectly loving, after all, as one could avoid the argument from evil by limiting divine omnipotence (and leaving intact the attribute of divine goodness). In addition, the argument is different from the argument from evil in that there could be evil without ignorance of God, and there could be ignorance without evil.[3] Of course, one might always say that ignorance is a kind of evil, but it is not the kind of evil usually considered, the one that seems to be incompatible with its permission by a morally good person. If it is incompatible with its permission by one who could avoid it, it must be on the basis of the love, and not of the goodness, even moral goodness, of that one.[4]

Finally, it is obvious that so presented, the argument has the deductive form of *modus tollens* (of course one could give it the form of a *modus ponens*). It could receive an inductive reformulation with the precision that one of the two premises is only probable, and since there is a good case for the second one, it should concern the first. If instead of a conceptual truth, the first premise were presented in such a way that there are good

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[2] This is not to say that Paul's statement has not been interpreted that way. The idea that atheism is always faulty has a long history.

[3] For this point, see Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch.8 'The Hiddenness of God', pp. 135-150.

[4] Therein might lie the force of the argument from ignorance for people of faith: it challenges what might seem most proper to God, and to the value of faith – the perfect love of God for created persons.

reasons to think that a loving God would not allow ignorance, then the fact of ignorance would give good reason to think (it would raise the probability) that there is no God. Schellenberg has himself devised such an inductive version: using the analogy between God's love for finite creatures and human parental love (maternal mainly).[5] This leads us to consider the content and justification of the premises. It will be better to consider them with the more developed version of the argument.

II. THE ATHEIST ARGUMENT FROM IGNORANCE

In this volume, John Schellenberg presents one of his own versions of the argument from ignorance (or Divine Hiddenness). For the ease of the reader, I recall it here:

(1) If no perfectly loving God exists, then God does not exist.

(2) If a perfectly loving God exists, then there exists a God who is always open to personal relationship with each finite person.

(3) If there exists a God who is always open to personal relationship with each finite person, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

(4) If a perfectly loving God exists, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists (from 2 & 3).

(5) Some finite persons are or have been nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

(6) No perfectly loving God exists (from 4 & 5).

(7) God does not exist (from 1 & 6).

Since Schellenberg comments upon it, I recommend his comments to the reader. Just a few words: the first premise underlines that the conception of God at stake is that of religious theism, that of a loving, and even a perfectly loving God. And it authorizes the conclusion (7), once (6) is reached. The core argument is (2)-(6), and we see that (5) is the factual premise, stating the fact of unbelief (our 2. above), while

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[5] See for example his 'What Divine Hiddenness Reveals: A Collaborative Discussion', in Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (eds.), *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 33-61.

(4) is another formulation of the conceptual one (our 1. above). But (4) is itself an intermediary conclusion, from (2) and (3) which offer then a justification of the conceptual premise. The conceptual incompatibility between a perfectly loving God and nonresistant unbelief is based on two conceptual relations. One concerns the necessary openness of a perfectly loving God to personal relations with finite persons (2), and the other is the incompatibility between such an openness and nonresistant unbelief (3). This second conceptual premise makes two claims:

(3a) the sole openness of a perfectly loving God to personal relationship implies that such a relationship exists with nonresistant finite persons,

(3b) the existence of a personal relationship implies that both related persons believe that the other exists.[6]

(3b) seems to be merely definitional, but it is of course all-important for the argument. And Schellenberg is eager to maintain (3a) and (3b) together: abstracting from the divine person, he links *openness to a personal relationship* and reality of existential belief when he defines the complex predicate of a person being *not open to personal relationship*:

Not open to personal relationship: If a person A, without having brought about this condition through resistance of relationship with person B, is at some time in a state of *nonbelief* in relation to the proposition that B exists, where at that time B knows this and could change A's nonbelief to belief, then it is not the case that B is at that time open to meaningful, conscious relationship with A.[7]

This definition really conveys two components: that a personal relationship implies existential belief, and that the sole openness to a relationship (and so to existential belief) is incompatible with unbelief, if the unbeliever is nonresistant and if the other person knows it and could change unbelief to belief – which is the case if the other person is a God. We will see that there is room for controversy over the two aspects, and so I prefer to consider that the conceptual premise of the argument from unbelief (4) relies on three premises: (2), (3a) and (3b).[8]

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[6] Of course only the belief in the existence of God by the finite person concerns us (the divine belief that the finite person exists is or should not be a problem)

[7] Ref.: here p. XXX

[8] So (2) and (3b) express conceptual propositions involving the concept of God, while (3a) does not, but relates the two concepts of personal relation and existential belief.

Before going to the details, and still taking (3) as a unique premise, we can see that Schellenberg expresses a maximalist and a minimalist requirement on God's perfect love. The maximalist one (2) concerns time: a perfectly loving God should *always* be open to personal relationship. The minimalist requirement (3) concerns the mode and content of the relationship: it has to be a *belief*, and its content is that of an existential statement (there is a God). Both express a necessary condition for perfect love, but the second one is just a threshold: it does not exclude that the mode and content of the relationship be much richer. It does not exclude that it be a direct perception (vision) of the divine essence, with full apprehension of all its aspects (attributes, persons, etc.), and not only of its existence. If Schellenberg does not formulate a maximalist requirement concerning mode and content, it is not only because the argument does not need it (the minimalist requirement joined to the maximalist one concerning time is sufficient to lead to a contradiction with nonresistant unbelief). Schellenberg also endorses the view that a perfectly loving God could allow for a progressive or developmental discovery of its nature by the nonresistant beloved. That is, Schellenberg makes room for the idea that there might be some good for the finite persons to only have a restricted access to God, if and when that is compatible with their own good. But such a restricted access cannot admit a stage of full ignorance of God: it presupposes existential belief at any time. The progressive discovery of God's nature must start with at least that condition for personal relationship. In the terms of Schellenberg's initial work:

> No doubt there are, if there is a God, many other interesting and important religious truths not clearly entailed or rendered probable by the proposition 'God exists', but I do not see that awareness of these is essential to a personal relationship with God if such a relationship is construed … in developmental terms. Belief in the existence of a perfectly loving God, on the other hand, is clearly necessary to get one started in such a relationship: without it … explicit Divine-human reciprocity is ruled out.[9]

We could then say that Schellenberg adopts a principle of Maximal Access (concerning time), a principle of Minimal Access (concerning content), and a principle or Restricted Access that we could formulate thus:

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[9] See John Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 41.

Restricted Access: A perfectly loving God does not necessarily give to all nonresistant finite persons more access to a personal relationship with Him than is required by their own good.

Note that traditional theistic conceptions admit also such a principle. In Christianity for example, there is a Maximal Access Principle concerning content, with the idea that nonresistant finite persons will receive the gift of beatific vision of the divine essence in glory; there is a principle of Minimal Access concerning time, since such a knowledge is not due before death, and can be preceded by an imperfect knowledge (natural or supernatural) implying belief in God's existence but needs not; and the principle of Restricted Access, as formulated above, is also endorsed and serves to justify the possibility of unbelief among nonresistant people: the good of 'soul-making' can be realized not only through a progressive discovery of God's essence and will, but also through a temporary (initial or not) ignorance of God. This should be argued at length, but we can just mention the idea that the development of an authentic moral life does not require faith nor any kind of belief in God's existence (some might even say that it is more authentic without such a belief), and that it might be for the good of the people (their personal moral development) that a loving God allow nonbelief. We can also stress that it is only with the fact of ignorance by some that the good of testimony (by words and life examples) can be realized by others.[10]

This remark is just made to underline the proximity between Schellenberg's requirements and the traditional theistic ones. But of course, it could not be argued against Schellenberg that he has unduly understood the principle of Restricted Access with a maximalist requirement on time, leaving room for restriction only concerning the content (while he could have reversed the two requirements). Schellenberg does not argue from Restricted Access to (2) and (3). He defends (2) and (3) and makes room for Restricted Access, so that he does not require that a loving God should give full vision from the beginning of human life. Whoever wants to reject Schellenberg's conclusion must reject one of the premises he endorses. And if the reality of nonresistant unbelief is admitted (premise 5), one then has to reject either (2) or (3) – and in that case either (3a) or (3b). To this I now turn.

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[10] See Michael Murray 'Deus Absconditus', in Howard-Snyder and Moser, *Divine Hiddenness*, pp. 62-81.

III. LOVE AND CONSTANT OPENNESS
TO PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The first premise (2) relies on a putative conceptual relationship between the concept of love and that of openness to personal relationship. Before considering the constancy of the openness in the case of God, Schellenberg seems to assume something like

A. If X loves Y, X affords to Y the possibility of (= is open to) a personal relationship, conscious and meaningful, with X

This proposition is not precise enough, since it does not say for how long this openness or offer should last. Concerning love between finite persons, proposition A might seem to be plausible, but only understood with a minimalist reference to time

A1. If X loves Y, X affords *sometimes* to Y the possibility of a personal relationship, conscious and meaningful, with X

The reason why this restriction should be added is that love might not be constant between finite persons, and that even when they love each other, their love might not be strong enough to overcome reasons for breaking, at least for a while, a personal relationship: the lover might prefer to allow, if only by game, the beloved to think that she no more exists (is dead). Of course, both reasons (intermittence and weakness of love) should be discarded when the lover is God. And this has to do mainly with the perfection of God's love. So we can propose

A2. If X *perfectly* loves Y, X *always* affords to Y the possibility of (= is *always* open to) a personal relationship, conscious and meaningful, with X

But A2 is debatable concerning finite persons who love each other. It might be that the lover has reasons to hide, and reasons that are not only compatible with her love, but dependent on her love. A perfectly loving mother could be in a situation in which her love for her child drives her to hide up to the point of the child ignoring whether her mother is (still) alive. For example, the mother could be under the threat of a malevolent agent who would kill the child or make him suffer, if she did not hide. So

A3. If X *perfectly* loves Y, X *always* affords to Y the possibility of (= is *always* open to) a personal relationship, conscious and meaningful, with X, *unless X has reasons to hide from Y*

Those reasons could be reasons to hide *always*, or reasons to hide *sometimes*. The first sort of reason is imaginable in the scenario suggested above. But it is clear that a God would not have such reasons to hide: there is no threat that cannot be overcome by an omnipotent being. At least no threat of that kind, coming from another agent. And this is understandable even without a precise definition of omnipotence. So I think we could accept this modification of A3

A3*. If X is *omnipotent* and *perfectly* loves Y, X *always* affords to Y the possibility of (= is *always* open to) a personal relationship, conscious and meaningful, with X, *unless X has reasons to hide sometimes*

And A3* certainly implies this slight modification of A1:

A1*. If X is *omnipotent* and *perfectly* loves Y, X *sometimes* affords to Y the possibility of (= is *sometimes* open to) a personal relationship, conscious and meaningful, with X

But of course, what is at stake is the proposition needed for the argument from ignorance to proceed, the proposition which says that a God would *never* have any reason to hide from the beloved, or that a God would *always* offer the possibility of a personal relationship, that is A2 applied to God, or more precisely

A2*. If X is *omnipotent* and *perfectly* loves Y, X *always* affords to Y the possibility of (= is *always* open to) a personal relationship, conscious and meaningful, with X

The generalization over Y to any finite person is not a problem, and (2) follows from A2*. So we have to evaluate A2*.

There is no problem with the idea that love favours the existence of personal relationship (usually love asks for love in return). There is no problem with the idea that an omnipotent lover would suppress the obstacles to a personal relationship if he or she wanted to. And there is no problem with the idea that there is no kind of external threat that would give an omnipotent and perfect lover a reason to hide: it would be an obstacle that an omnipotent lover could easily suppress. But is it true that an omnipotent and perfect lover could not have any reason to hide for a while, because of a greater good (that is greater than the knowledge of the lover) which would justify the lover's hiddenness?

Let the analogy with parental love come in, and let us suppose that it is constant love with no insurmountable obstacle. What reason could a loving mother have, whose love for her young child is close to perfect

love (at least insofar as it is constant), to hide from her child if there were
no obstacle (including threats) she could easily suppress? Remember
that hiding does not mean simply disappearing from sight as in a game
of hide-and-seek (this allows for personal relationship in the seeking,
and certainly does not suppress in the child the belief that her mother
exists).[11] It would mean to allow full ignorance (unbelief) of the mother's
existence. The addition of the length of the hiding (sometimes for all life
long) and of the troubles (evils) the child may encounter during that time
makes the question more pressing, but even without those, according to
Schellenberg, the mother would not have any reason to hide, and so she
would not hide.

In response to this strong statement, many have opposed that there
are reasons to hide that have nothing to do with obstacles or threats.
A perfect lover might choose to hide, in the strict sense, in order to
allow for the *soul making* of the beloved. Among aspects of *soul making*,
freedom would be greater if the belief in the lover's existence might limit
the choices of the beloved. This can be understood in different ways: one
is that full recognition of an omnipotent and perfect lover would prompt
maximal love in return, without real possibility of refusal. Another way
is to consider that, if the lover were also a remunerator of good and bad
deeds, and if the beloved did also believe it, then moral choices would
be greatly influenced, if not determined, by this awareness, the desire of
happiness and the fear of condemnation. *Authenticity* of moral choices
would be compromised by such considerations, since moral choices
would always be performed with selfish reasons available. In the same way
moral development can be thought to be greater without such belief in the
existence of a perfect and omnipotent lover who is also a remunerator.
And finally, it might be true that, from the point of view of the lover, it
would be better to be known and loved than to be ignored, but only if
knowledge and love were realized *in a certain way*, while it might be
better to be ignored than to be known and loved *in another way*.[12]

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[11] Not to be open to a personal relationship implies that the beloved does not believe
that the lover exists, either without having ever believed it, of after doing so. If the lover
were hiding in the sense that there would be no communication with the beloved, but
the beloved still did believe in the lover's existence, that would be enough for some kind
of conscious and meaningful relationship, such as waiting for X, hoping to see X again,
praying to X, and of course loving X. It is only if Y did not believe (anymore) that X
existed, that such relations would be undermined.

[12] Peter van Inwagen makes this point in *The Problem of Evil*.

Consider a young boy whose mother is absent. He doesn't lose his belief in her existence, but he knows that she does not look at him, and that she won't know when she comes back what he has been doing, and so will not punish him if, for example, he spends some time doing things that have been forbidden ('Don't watch TV when I am away'). If he chooses to obey her mother's command, this choice might be considered as more free, and morally superior to an act of obedience with the belief that the mother is present and/or will know and punish disobedient behaviour. Knowing this and wanting her child to improve morally, the mother would have a reason to hide, in the usual sense. The same might be argued for an improvement in different skills: the child would improve if he were left alone, having to solve problems by his own and not always with the aid of his mother. Why not suppose that a loving mother could have a reason to hide in the strict sense, at least for a while, if she were convinced that this situation would allow for different improvements, moral and others, in her child? And if this were true of a loving mother, why would it not be true of God?

One reaction can be that a mother might have good reasons to hide in the usual sense, for the good of her child, but she would never voluntarily hide in the strict sense and have her child ignore her existence. The first, usual, way of hiding is a plausible strategy for parents in moral education, or as a test of their children's love for them. But they would never (and in fact never do) allow for a full ignorance of their existence in their children. And neither would God, the argument goes on. I am not convinced, and it might be a point where the analogy between divine and finite parental love breaks down. If the parents really believed it would be better for their child to ignore their existence for a while, they certainly *should* hide. If they never *do* hide, that might be because they never have such a belief, or because, even if they had, their own instinct and feelings are such that they cannot hide in that sense. But this is a limitation on parental love that we should not transfer to God. And concerning the belief they never have, they might be wrong. Since an omniscient God believes only what is true, the real point is then: could it be the case that ignorance of God (unbelief) is sometimes better for a finite nonresistant person?

If it were a greater good for a child to ignore the existence of her mother for a while, the duration and conditions of this ignorance might be quite important. Ignorance might be good for a short time, and in circumstances in which it does not add evil to evils. Yes, but all that is

at stake is whether it is better *overall* for the child to ignore her mother, however long this ignorance might be, and whatever the circumstances. What we can admit is that she has no reasons (apart from obstacles or threats we decided not to consider since they could be overcome by an omnipotent lover) to hide *always*. Let us even admit that hiddenness should never be for more than a short period, relative to the whole of human life. Now, ignorance of God may last all life long, and if this earthly human life were the whole of human life, then unbelief would certainly be incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent and perfectly loving God. But what if earthly life were only a short period compared with the whole of human life? I agree that this is adding a new premise, but it is a so common one in the different versions of religious theism, that it should not be considered as begging the question. In any case, if you admit that God can hide, in the strict sense, but only for a while, this can give a good reason to deny that there is a God if earthly life is the whole of human life. It cannot, as such, give a good reason to deny theism understood as the conjunction of the existence of a perfectly loving God and of eternal life.

Maybe the analogy with a loving mother is not appropriate under all aspects. Maybe God is more like an anonymous benevolent person who wants the moral good of some people: she hides from those she is helping, because she wants them to behave without awareness of the help they receive, without acting from gratitude, and also without any hope concerning other future helps. She wants them to act and behave for the purest reasons they could have. Maybe God's way and mode of being is that of a silent person who does not express her love through signs and words, but whose love is real and has consequences that remain unseen from the beloved, for a while.[13]

IV. PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP AND EXISTENTIAL BELIEF

Consider now premise (3). We have seen that it should be split in two parts

(3a) the sole openness of a perfectly loving God to personal relationships implies that such a relationship exists with non resistant finite persons,

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[13] See Michael Rea, 'Divine Hiddenness, Divine Silence', in Louis Pojman & Michael Rea (eds), *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, 6th edition (Stamford, CT: Wadsworth/ Cengage, 2011) pp. 266-75.

(3b) the existence of a personal relationship implies that both related persons believe that the other exists.

Let us first consider that (3a) is unproblematic and concentrate on (3b). Ted Poston and Trent Dougherty have argued that the concept of belief (resp. unbelief) might be ambiguous in different ways.[14] One ambiguity is between *de re* and *de dicto* belief. The sergeant Garcia believes that Zorro is a brigand but does not believe that don Diego is one: he even believes that don Diego is not a brigand. We might say only that he believes *of* don Diego that he is a brigand. That is a *de re* belief while the other two are *de dicto* beliefs (one true, one false). Is saying that X believes that Y exists attributing to X a *de dicto* belief or a *de re* belief concerning Y? Does the existence of a personal relationship imply the belief, on the beloved's part, that the lover exists under a certain concept (in that case, the concept of 'God') or does it imply only that there is a concept under which the beloved believes that the lover exists? It certainly is possible to have a personal relationship with someone, believing that the person exists, but ignoring his or her real identity. So one could believe that one is having a relation with someone whom one does not recognize.

Who else could we take God to be? Here I see two answers that have some credits. One is that people may have some relations to abstract values, like truth, justice or beauty, as well as with the supreme good or happiness: they may cherish, value, or seek them. They might believe that such things exist, but not believe that they are in fact identical with (or constituted by) God. But if God is truth, justice, beauty and/or (the source of) happiness, then a relation with one of these is a (*de re*) relation with God. And belief that one of these exists is a *de re* belief that God exists. This answer has a long tradition for it, but it might be contested that a relation with Truth or Justice is not a personal relation. And so, even though it were would be a relation with God, it would not be a personal relation. Well maybe, but maybe not. In any case, this leads me to the second answer, which also has a certain tradition for it, and even an evangelical root. It suggests that any human person might be,

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[14] Ted Poston and Trent Dougherty, 'Divine Hiddenness and the Nature of Belief', *Religious Studies*, 43 (2007), 183-98. They consider two other features of belief that could allow for ambiguity: the distinction between partial and full belief (degrees of belief) and that between diachronic and synchronic belief. The last one corresponds to our concern with time in part III.

in a way, a re-presentation of God. One could explain that each finite person is a child of God, or is inhabited by God, or is an incarnation of the divinity. The important point is not so much the metaphysical explanation than the practical consequence that follows: 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' (Mt. 25:40). If it is true that having a personal relation (of love, despising or hatred) with another finite person is to have it with God, then, one can have a personal relation with God without realizing it. Should we say that, in such a case, one could believe *de re* that God exists, without believing it *de dicto* (one would have an existential belief concerning God, of God, but not under the concept of God)? Or rather that one can have a personal relation with someone without believing that this person exists?

If we understand that one might entertain a personal relationship with somebody else one does not recognize, and that existential belief might be *de re*, propositions (3a) and (3b), and so (3), might be true, but they won't lead to the conclusion that there is no God. The reason is that in proposition (4), the fact of ignorance, the fact that some people believe that God does not exist, or do not believe that there is a God, all those are probably true only with a *de dicto* reading. And it would be fallacious to change the meaning of 'belief' (resp. 'ignorance') in both premises. If one wants to stick to the *de dicto* understanding of 'belief' in (3), then it might be argued that (3) is not true. Either because (3b) would not be true: personal relationship with someone does not imply that one recognizes that person and so has a *de dicto* belief that she exists (thus if one maintains that relationship with another finite person is *de re* a relation with God). Or, if you consider that a personal relationship with someone implies a *de dicto* existential belief concerning that person (3b), (3) could be denied because of (3a): it might be that an omnipotent perfectly loving God would not *always* bring about personal relationships involving *de dicto* existential belief with every finite person. Now, (3a) might be denied and (2) held true only if 'personal relationship' in (2) were understood as not involving *de dicto* existential belief, and so there would be some equivocation between (2) and (3) this time. But if 'personal relationship' is understood similarly in (2) and in (3a) as involving *de dicto* existential belief, in case (3a) would be denied, (2) also would have to be denied. Is it a problem? Well, all that has been said until now leads to the assumption that there is no obvious contradiction in the idea that a perfectly loving God needs not be *always* open to a personal

relationship with any finite person (2), if God's power were such that any allowed personal relationship would be brought about (3a) and if 'personal relationship' implied the having of a *de dicto* existential belief concerning the lover (3b). This might be maintained for the reasons mentioned above (III), while constant openness to *de re* personal relationships, so to say, might be ascribed to God nonetheless. God could hide (sometimes) *de dicto* without (ever) hiding *de re*.

CONCLUSION

Schellenberg has given form to a very powerful argument against the existence of God, often felt without being thought with rigor by believers. The very fact of unbelief is evidence against the existence of an omnipotent and perfectly loving God. And the reason is that love seeks personal relationships and personal relationship implies existential belief concerning the related persons. But the validity of the argument requires a Principle of Maximal Access in time (always) to God on the part of finite persons: they would at least believe that there is a God if they did not resist to such a relationship. This must hold, according to Schellenberg, even if the great good of soul making allows for a certain Restricted Access Principle: nonresistant finite persons might grow in the quality and quantity of their knowledge of God, but they could not start from a period of complete (existential) ignorance. In that sense, a perfectly loving God would never hide. The fact that some people do not believe that there is a perfectly loving God is then in full contradiction with the existence of such a God.

We have considered two objections that might defeat the soundness of the argument. One is that it is not obvious that even perfect love by an omnipotent lover implies that the lover would *never* hide from the beloved. It might imply that the lover would *not always* hide, and not hide for a long time. But with the assumption that earthly life might be only a small part of the existence of finite persons, earthly ignorance of God would not be proof that there is no God. The other objection was made with the assumption that a perfectly loving God would always allow for personal relationship. It questioned the presupposition that such a relationship necessarily involved *de dicto* existential belief (belief that God, conceived as God, exists). True, one might not have a personal relationship with another without believing in the existence of that other, but one might be ignorant of who exactly that other is. In the case of God,

one might have a relation to Truth or Justice, while not realizing that those absolute values are God. One might have personal relationships with other finite persons without realizing that such relations involve a relation with God.

If one of these objections has some force, and we can ignore the question of which one, the argument from ignorance is not conclusive. This does not mean that it has no force. It might still have an inductive value. And it certainly constrains in some ways the representation of God, and of God's love in particular. The hidden God, if it exists, cannot be fully analogous to a perfectly loving mother.

IS AN ATHEIST UNJUST? THEISM VS. ATHEISM DEBATE IN THE LIGHT OF MORAL AND EPISTEMIC IMPERATIVES

JACEK WOJTYSIAK

John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin

Abstract. In the article I reconstruct Karol Wojtyła's argument against atheism. According to Wojtyła, an atheist is unjust because of not rendering absolute honour to God. In my opinion the argument is sound if one applies it to theists or negative atheists (but not to positive atheists) and if one presupposes that there are moral obligations to only supposed persons. The argument meets some objections (amongst others, the problems of multiplying obligations and the inability of an atheist giving honour to God). A discussion of them leads me to an interpretation of the theism-atheism controversy as being the conflict of two imperatives: the imperative of justice and the imperative of evidence.

I. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS[1]

Theism and atheism are not only philosophical doctrines, but also opposing ways of life and of knowing the world.[2] Despite significant discrepancies, they probably share some common moral and epistemic

[2] Theism as a philosophical doctrine claims that there is exactly one (metaphysically) ultimate, transcendent, personal and (morally) good being called God. The content of this doctrine can be extended or reduced. Therefore atheism can be understood strictly as a negation of this doctrine as a whole or as a negation of any its variety or part. The above distinction is significant for understanding practical theism and atheism, which are the ways of life with or without the relationship to God. My article deals with theism

principles (imperatives). In cases where those principles conflict, theists and atheists differ in preferences as to the priority of one of the principles over the others. In this text, I will show this difference in preferences taking as an example the principle of justice, or the moral imperative of justice (MIJ), and the principle of evidence, or the epistemic imperative of justification (EIJ). I will attempt to show how the understanding and the position of those imperatives affect one of the aspects in the debate between theism and atheism.

The starting point of my considerations will be an intriguing essay by a Polish philosopher, Karol Wojtyła (1983/1958), later known as Pope John Paul II.[3] In this article, he defends the claim that an atheist violates the (classically understood) principle of justice. After presenting Wojtyła's argument and rendering it more precise (sections II, III), I will show its premises related to the Thomistic concept of justice and religion (section IV). Next, I will consider an objection that may be raised against Wojtyła's argument (section V). This discussion will lead me to the interpretation of the theism vs. atheism controversy as the conflict between MIJ and EIJ (section VI). The analyses – which I will perform in sections VII-IX – of those imperatives (and their presuppositions) and of different varieties of atheism (and theism) will prove useful in the clarification of the controversy and in the assessment of Wojtyła's claim. Finally, I accept it with a modification, overcoming further objections against it and indicating cultural consequences of the decline in the attitude of religious reverence (section X and conclusion).

II. THE ORIGINAL VERSION OF WOJTYŁA'S ARGUMENT

Below I present the original version of Wojtyła's argument, making a list of quotations from his article (1983/1958). I put them in the order that represents the course of argument that may be attributed to Wojtyła.

(W1) 'To be just means to render what is due to a person [...]. Showing respect to the rights of persons who do not clearly and tangibly strive for it is a particular manifestation of justice.' (p. 109)

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and atheism in the strict sense, however, after introducing the necessary changes, my argument can be applied to their reduced versions.

[3] Wojtyła's article cited here was written in 1957-1958. At the time, Wojtyła was a lecturer in ethics at the Catholic University of Lublin. All quotations from Wojtyła's text are in my translation from the original Polish.

(W2) 'Reason alone leads man to the conclusion of the existence of the First Cause, which is the first being, i.e. God.' (p.107)

(W3) 'If God is the First Cause to which everything, and thus also man, owes its existence, therefore it is man, as a creature capable of knowing this truth, that should bring it to expression in his life [...].' (p. 107)

(W4) 'Doing this, he fulfils the elementary duty of justice.' (p. 107)

(W5) 'If he does not do it, he offends justice.' (p. 107)

(W6 – conclusion) '[An atheistic attitude] is *ex definitione* devoid of an [essential] manifestation of justice.' (p. 107)

(W1) is a quasi definition of justice. (W2) is an epistemological-ontological claim concerning the existence of God and the attainability of the rational knowledge of it. (W3) is a deontic consequence of the application of the quasi-definition (W1) to God whose existence is stated in claim (W2). From this consequence Wojtyła derives the evaluative statements: (W4) and (W5). The latter leads him to the conclusion (W6) on the injustice of an atheist's attitude.[4]

III. A RECONSTRUCTION OF WOJTYŁA'S ARGUMENT

Wojtyła's presentation of the argument is clear but informal and inexact. It is possible to give it a more precise form. Here is a proposal of how to do this.[5]

Let the variable *x* represent an element in the set of people. Let us assume the following definition (equivalence).

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[4] Wojtyła's article (and the above reasoning) does not directly concern the attitude of atheism, but the independent ethics proposed by an eminent Polish philosopher-atheist Tadeusz Kotarbiński; he believed that moral norms should be derived from sources independent of religion (and worldview). According to Wojtyła, Kotarbiński's independent ethics is 'natural ethics', or even 'Christian ethics', 'minus all that refers to God in it' (1983/1958: 106). Thus it is no wonder that such ethics does not include norms regulating the relationships between man and God, which makes it poorer 'by one justice' (Wojtyła 1983/1968: 110). A person acting upon such ethics would in practice assume an atheistic attitude, which to Wojtyła is unjust by nature.

[5] Assigning symbols to the steps of the original reasoning of Wojtyła, I used the letter 'W' (from the first letters of his name). Now I am using letters 'WW' (from the first letter of Wojtyła's name and the first letter of my name). The argument could obviously be formulated even more precisely, but I would not like to let my care for its correctness blur its clarity and simplicity. I also do not address the question of the relationship between indicative and normative statements.

(WW1) *x* is just iff *x* renders each person what is due to him or her.

Note that a person's due mentioned in the definition refers also to God (if this person exists):

(WW2) Absolute honour is due to God as the Creator of the world and the highest and the best person.

So we can accept the following implication:

(WW3) If *x* is just, then *x* renders (also) absolute honour to God.

Performing a transposition, we obtain:

(WW4) If *x* does not render (also) absolute honour to God, then *x* is not just.

Because atheism consists, in practice, in not rendering honour to God, a person of whom the antecedent of this implication holds true may be called an atheist.[6] Thus we are entitled to say that

(WW5) An atheist does not render absolute honour to God.

From (WW4) and (WW5) we infer, according to *modus ponendo ponens*, the conclusion:

(WW6) An atheist is not (in full) just.

The above argument presupposes the thesis of the existence of (a personal and good) God. If we accept this thesis, the argument can help us to understand the practical consequences of theoretical theism (see footnote 6). What if we do not accept this thesis? In this case we can state an objection that the argument can be sound only for theists (who have justified their theism). This problem will be developed in section V.

IV. THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF THE ARGUMENT AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS' CONCEPTION

Wojtyła's argument rests on two presuppositions: (WW1) – the definition of justice, and (WW2) – the thesis about honour being due to God. I will

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[6] A theoretical theist may also be a practical atheist, as it is possible to accept the thesis of the existence of God without rendering Him honour. Such an attitude, however, is inconsistent. Similarly, combining theoretical atheism with practical theism does not seem consistent (contrary to some philosophers of religion). We will return to this issue in further considerations, introducing additional distinctions.

attempt to elucidate them in the context of St. Thomas Aquinas' views to which Wojtyła seems to refer.

Aquinas defines justice as follows (ST: 2a2ae, Q58, a1):

> [...] justitia est habitus secundum quem aliquis constanti et perpetua voluntate jus suum unicuique tribuit ('justice is the habit whereby a person with a lasting and constant will renders to each his due').

This definition of justice – referring, among others, to Aristotle – presents it as a virtue that consists in maintaining appropriate proportions in relationships with other persons. The basis for those relationships may be, among others, a position those persons hold in relation to us in a hierarchy. The principle of rendering each his due is quite well rooted in our moral intuitions, although it may be interpreted and applied in various ways.

Aquinas applies this principle, among others, to the 'man – God' relationship. He is entitled to do this, because he holds a conviction (in his own opinion, legitimate and true!) that there exists the personal God. A variety of justice that refers to God he calls religion. Religion consists in rendering due honour to God ('paying [*reddere honorem debitum*] the debt of honour to God' (ST: 2a2ae, Q81, a2) or 'giving due honour to God' (ST: 2a2ae, Q81, a4)).

The ground for the binding force of the virtue (obligation) of religion is, according to St. Thomas, the highest position of God in the hierarchy of beings. Thus, if the criterion of whether honour is due to someone is this person's 'superiority' (*excellentia* – excellence) in relation to the one who gives honour (e.g. a father in relation to his son or a king to his subject), then special – highest – honour is due to God, because

> 'God infinitely surpasses and completely transcends all other things, his excellence is unparalleled.' (ST: 2a2ae, Q81, a4)

It is worth noting that St. Thomas infers the obligation of rendering (absolute) honour to God from His highest (absolute) ontic position, while Wojtyła (see above II W3) stresses the moment of gratitude to God for giving man the gift of existence. The two approaches can be reconciled and accepted under the following conditions:

(i) the absolute superiority of God over other beings is the consequence of (or is meaningfully related to) the fact that He is their creator;

(ii) creating something *ex nihilo* is the fundamental (primary, border-line) good or the paradigmatic form of goodness – without it nothing (except God) could achieve any good;

(iii) it is admissible (by analogy or metaphor) to regard the fact of having received existence from God as a gift or a present, although (as a contemporary brilliant critic of theism has put it) if A is to make a gift to B, then A and B must both already exist (Everitt 2004: 130).[7]

As we can see, both (WW1) and (WW2) can be clarified and defended in the context of the classic, and rather trustworthy, philosophical conceptions. Despite this, an atheist can easily raise a very serious objection against the discussed reasoning.

V. AN ATHEIST'S OBJECTION AND WOJTYŁA'S RESPONSE

Wojtyła (1983/1958: 107-108) realized that such an objection can be made and reconstructed it (as it were, on behalf of an atheist) in the following way:

> [...] I may be just or unjust only in relation to someone who really exists; because I am not convinced about the real existence of God, therefore it is out of the question for me to commit an injustice to Him. Only a person who has [...] the belief that God exists [...] may be guilty of such an injustice.

In other words: the obligation to render honour to God concerns only those who accept the thesis of His existence. Thus the above reasoning is conclusive, but refers only to people who have theistic beliefs but do not follow their practical consequences (determined in the context of quite universally accepted moral principles). The reasoning, however, does not concern people whose system of beliefs can be qualified as atheism.

Wojtyła answers (1983/1958: 108-109) by stating that for the cited objection to be valid, 'it should be first [...] irrefutably proved' that God does not exist (and that 'man is an independent being'). He also suggests that such a 'proof' has never been given, since 'so many people, both very simple and very educated' are convinced of the existence of God, while others 'cannot with complete certainty reject the existence of God, but to greater or lesser extent reckon with His possibility'. Because of these doubts, an atheist is morally obliged to ask the following question:

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[7] Let us observe that in many cultures of the world there is a deeply rooted obligation of gratitude to parents for the gift of life, despite the above semantic difficulty (and despite the fact that the recipient of that 'gift' – sometimes a difficult or painful one – has not asked for it).

Yet, am I not unjust towards the Being of whose existence so many people are deeply convinced? Just like a person of a subtle, delicate conscience is anxious not to harm even his unknown fellow human beings, even unconsciously. (Wojtyła 1983/1958: 110)

As we can see, in his response Wojtyła attempts to limit the validity of the objection to a very narrow (in his opinion) group of atheists – those who, as a result of 'irrefutable proof', are certain that God does not exist. He also assumes that for the obligation of rendering honour (or more broadly: of being just) to be binding, the conviction of the very possibility of God's existence, and not of His actual existence, is sufficient. I will later try to make both suggestions more precise and to discuss them. Before I do this, however, I will reconstruct the essence of the 'theism vs. atheism' debate, as it appears in the light of the considerations I have presented so far.

VI. THE NATURE OF THE VITAL CONTROVERSY BETWEEN THEISM AND ATHEISM

In our lives we are guided by various moral and epistemic imperatives. Two of them are particularly important to our issue. The first is the moral imperative (or principle) of justice (MIJ), which can be formulated as follows:

(MIJ) Render to each his due!

The second one is the epistemic imperative (or principle) of justification (EIJ). Let us express it by the words:

(EIJ) Accept only the beliefs for which you have sufficient justification![8]

The moral imperative of honour (MIH) with which theists (religious people) express their obligation of justice towards God is a particular variation of MIJ. This variation says:

(MIH) Render absolute honour to God![9]

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[8] EIJ corresponds to the famous principle of evidentialism that William Clifford expressed in the following way: 'it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence'. I do not enter here into a discussion about this principle's validity. See Alvin Plantinga (2000: 67-107, esp. p. 89).

[9] In order not to become entangled in cultural limitations, we can initially formulate MIH as follows: Render absolute honour to whoever is worthy of it! We simultaneously

Usually MIJ and EIJ do not conflict. However, there may arise a conflict between EIJ and the mentioned MIJ variation, i.e. MIH. An atheist might still say:

> (A) I cannot fulfil MIH (MIJ in reference to God) because, in order to do this, I would have to accept the existence of God; then, however, I would violate EIJ, which is a priority imperative to me.

To such a declaration, a theist might respond as follows:

> (T) The exact fulfilment of EIJ in reference to the belief concerning the existence of God is impossible; if 'God infinitely surpasses and completely transcends all other things', His superiority is incomparable, no human being can have (in a natural way) such knowledge of Him as to acquire sufficient grounds to accept a belief in His existence;[10] however, rigorous respect for EIJ in reference to God leads to the violation of MIH, which I consider as the fundamental variation of MIJ – the imperative that has priority in my life.

As we can see, in practice the 'theism vs. atheism' controversy is (or sometimes happens to be) a controversy based on a conflict between two imperatives: MIJ (MIH) and EIJ. It is no wonder that sometimes the attitude of atheism causes moral outrage among theists: after all, atheists seem to violate MIJ (MIH). On the other hand, the theistic (religious, cultic) attitude not infrequently makes atheists respond with what I would call epistemic scorn: How can one engage in any activity towards a person whose existence is disputed or doubtful? Such an attitude clearly seems to violate EIJ.

It follows from the above that the key to understanding this essential aspect of the 'theism vs. atheism' controversy is the question whether MIJ (MIH) and EIJ are binding. Below, I will draw attention to some problems related to those imperatives, which might help clarify, and perhaps solve or weaken the mentioned controversy (conflict). Discussing those

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assume that only a perfect (also morally perfect) person and the one that is distinguished from us and from the world by absolute ontic pre-eminence is worthy of such honour. This person is commonly called *God*.

[10] See above section IV. We can know God only by effects of His activity, but if God infinitely surpasses His effects, natural knowledge about Him seems to be impossible. No human knowledge about God – knowledge based on the acquaintance of imperfect objects present in the world – can grasp Divine essence. What is more, each attempt at such knowledge – as an attempt at the 'objectification' of God – would violate God's majesty.

problems I will use, among others, the above listed suggestions made by Wojtyła in his answer to an atheist's objection.

VII. EPISTEMIC IMPERATIVE OF JUSTIFICATION

Those who accept the validity of EIJ must remember that its exact fulfilment encounters serious difficulties in practice. We do not have enough time and appropriate means to justify all our beliefs. A great part of our beliefs we hold without a sufficient justification, but it would be difficult to dispense with them in life. We also know that different standards of justification – from more rigorous to more liberal – are applicable to different types of beliefs, and philosophy is an area where it is difficult to find irrefutable justifications and decisive criteria to settle disputes between conflicting beliefs.

I believe that the application of EIJ to philosophical (and worldview-related) discussions should consist in rejecting completely unjustified beliefs and accepting the beliefs for which their proponents can find appropriate reasons. It is enough that those reasons are understandable and disputable to the opponent and that bringing them up for discussion may lead its participants to change their positions. If we accept the above criterion, we may find that at least some theists and some atheists respect EIJ with regard to the beliefs that identify them. From now, speaking of 'theism/atheism', I will refer to rational (justified in the above sense) theism/atheism.

VIII. TWO TYPES OF ATHEISM

In this context, it is worthwhile to cite the distinction between two types of atheism proposed by Michael Martin (2007: 1) in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*. According to him:

- a negative atheist is 'someone without a belief in God; he or she need not be someone who believes that God does not exist';
- while a positive atheist is the 'one who believes that there is no God.'[11]

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[11] My reasoning is limited here in the first place to the 'atheism in the narrow sense', which refers to the theistically understood God (and not to God, or god, understood in any way). However, as I previously remarked, after the necessary modifications, it can also be applied to atheism in the wider sense.

Martin (2007: 2) adds that

> For positive atheism [...] to be successfully defended, two tasks must
> be accomplished. First, the reasons for believing in a theistic God must
> be refuted; in other words, negative atheism [...] must be established.
> Second, reasons for disbelieving in the theistic God must be given.

Applying the above distinction to MIH question, it is easy to note that
an atheist who accomplished the above two tasks – that is, whose views
can be qualified as justified positive atheism – is not bound by MIH,
because such an atheist is justified in believing that God does not exist.
But what about a negative atheist – one that justified his rejecting the
reasons for theistic belief (and thus justified 'the absence of belief in
a personal theistic God'), but has no 'reasons for disbelieving in the
theistic God' (and thus no reasons for believing that 'there is no God')?

IX. MORAL IMPERATIVE OF JUSTICE AND EXISTENTIAL BELIEFS

In order to answer the question whether a negative atheist is bound
by MIH, it is necessary to consider if there are situations where MIJ is
binding despite the absence of belief in the existence of the person to
whom we owe something. Since,

– if there are situations where someone should adhere to the principle
  of justice although he is not convinced that the person towards
  whom he is obliged to act justly exists, and at the same time has no
  justified belief that this person does not exist,
– it can be suspected that MIH is binding also for someone who is
  not convinced that God exists, although at the same time he has no
  justified belief that God does not exist.

Let us consider two situations.

(1) I am driving at night through a non-built-up area. I have no good
reasons to assume that there is a pedestrian there at that hour. However,
I have no sufficient reason to exclude such a possibility or to believe
that there is (for certain) no pedestrian on the road. However, MIJ, or
a similar moral principle (otherwise included in the traffic code), tells
me to drive with caution: if it turned out that a pedestrian was walking
along that road, I might harm him, and he has a right to inviolability.

(2) In my garden, where there are no apple-trees, I have found a large
quantity of tasty apples. I have no sufficient reasons to believe that I was

given them by my neighbour (who has an apple-tree): he does not like me and is mean. On the other hand, I have no grounds to believe that the apples are not a present from my neighbour: wind would not blow all those apples here, and other neighbours live too far. Worse still, I have neither the time nor the means to make a quick inquiry into the cause of the presence of the apples in my garden. I believe that in this situation I am – according to MIJ – obliged (at least conditionally) to thank my neighbour for delivering apples: thanks are always due to the donor.

I believe that it is possible to multiply examples of situations where – as we are inclined to presume – someone has obligations, although he is not sufficiently convinced of the existence of the person to whom he is obliged.[12] Both above examples, despite the difference between them, meet this condition. Obviously, the obligation in situation (1) is clearer – the danger of harming someone is the reason why not the belief in the existence (here and now) of a pedestrian, but the belief in the very possibility of his existence constitutes a sufficient ground for an obligation to certain behaviours. In the case of MIH, no one is harmed if this imperative is not fulfilled. There is, however, a danger of taking a wrong stance towards an alleged person who deserves gratitude or honour.

Case (2) quite closely resembles the position of a negative atheist towards God. The gardener would not harm the neighbour if he did not thank him. What is more, the gardener is not convinced that there is a donor of apples and that this donor (deserving thanks) is the same person as his closest neighbour. However, it seems that in view of the absence of sufficient reasons for the thesis that there is not a donor identical with the neighbour, the gardener has a duty to thank the neighbour (in some way). If he does not do it, his relationship to the neighbour will not be right.

Perhaps our situation in life is similar to that of the gardener. We live, but we cannot give the ultimate metaphysical explanation to our life. We

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[12] I do not insist that cases (1) and (2) are typical and incontrovertible examples of such situations. They are only meant to show that there are events in life that call for reflection regarding whether they possibly entail obligation towards persons of whose existence we are not sufficiently certain. To give another example: It is generally believed that one should not detonate a building if there may be people inside. The principle discussed here is also cited by anti-abortionists who claim that it is forbidden to destroy a human foetus even if we were unable to determine the precise moment when the life of the human person begins.

have no proof demonstrating that our life is a gift from God. However, we have also no reasons to irrefutably exclude this possibility.[13] If it turns out that this possibility obtains, and we have not rendered honour to God, it will also turn out that we have violated MIJ. Thus it seems that Wojtyła is right when he extends MIH application to people who do not believe in the existence of God, but (as I quoted above) 'reckon with His possibility'.

X. OBJECTIONS AND ANSWERS

The above analyses have led me to the thesis that MIH binds both theists and negative atheists, that is people who are not convinced of the existence of God but do not have sufficient reasons for their disbelieving in God. It is worthwhile to confront the claim I am defending with some possible objections and counterarguments.

(C1) **Counterargument from multiplying obligations.** If the very possibility of the existence of MIJ object binds us to apply the principle, we find ourselves in a situation of having a great number of obligations. This might paralyse our action: apart from being obliged to fulfil duties to real individuals that we know, we would be obliged to fulfil duties to individuals that are only supposed – including God. It is difficult to fulfil all those obligations efficiently.

Answer. Obviously, some limitations should be put on the validity of MIJ towards only supposed individuals. Perhaps such a limitation can follow from establishing the probability of the belief in the existence/ nonexistence of a given person (or the degree of probability we are inclined to attribute to the existence/nonexistence of a given person), above/below which MIJ would not be binding. However, it is difficult to develop such a theory of probability, as it would have to be different for different types of MIJ application.

I believe that here it is enough to refer to an intuitive sense of the importance of the matter: some obligations are so important that they are binding even in the case (like in situation (1) – see above: IX) where we admit only a possibility of the existence of their object; other obligations

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[13] This concerns especially the variety of negative atheism that follows from agnosticism: the 'position of neither believing nor disbelieving that God exists' (because of a lack of 'good reasons' for both attitudes – sceptical agnosticism; or because of 'equally good reasons' for both reasons – cancellation agnosticism) (Martin 2007: 2-3).

are not so important – they are binding only when the existence of their object is obvious. In my opinion, the obligation contained in MIH belongs to the first category. The fact of our life is the fundamental metaphysical datum; if we admit the possibility that our life is a gift of God, or remains in an essential relationship to God, we owe Him gratitude or honour as an attitude that expresses this relationship.

(C2) Counterargument from the hiddenness of God. If there are no reasons sufficient to incline all rational subjects to belief in God's existence, then either God does not exist, or He deliberately hides his existence. The first case invalidates MIH, because it is impossible to render honour to someone who does not exist. The second case invalidates MIH, because the hiddenness of God indicates that He does not want to be known and rendered honour towards.

Answer. As to the first case. The thesis that God does not exist does not follow from the thesis that there are no proofs of the existence of God that convince everyone. Above, I attempted to show that only those who can demonstrate the truth of the first thesis are exempt from MIH.

As to the second case. We do not know motives for which God decided to remain hidden or not to reveal Himself clearly. Perhaps God wants to be known and honoured, but – as Wojtyła (1983/1958: 109) writes – 'does not impose Himself [or does not want to impose] on man with His rights'. Wojtyła mentions two supposed reasons of this 'non-imposing Himself': the unwillingness to violate human freedom (compare Swinburne 2004: 267-272) and the lack of consent to the violation of God's majesty (see above: VI. (T)).

In addition, let us observe that the fact that someone gives us a gift secretly or anonymously does not exempt us from the duty of gratitude. If we are unable to identify or find the giver, we are obliged at least to assume an intentional attitude of gratitude to him. This remains valid also for our supposed creator.

(C3) Counterargument from evil. A negative atheist is not obliged to respect MIH, if he discovers in the world (or in his life) so great evil or such a kind of evil – created or allowed by God – that it cancels His deserving honour.

Answer. If the fact of evil in the world falsifies the thesis of the existence of a God that is good and deserves honour, then an atheist has sufficient reasons to be convinced that the theistic God does not exist.

Then, however, he is not a negative atheist, but a positive one, so MIH does not bind him (as I indicated above).

(C4) Counterargument from inability. It is difficult to imagine how a negative atheist could follow MIH in practice. If he does not believe in God, he is unable to perform religious practices sincerely. He might imitate some external religious behaviours, but without an inner attitude that results from determinate theistic convictions.

Answer. The situation of a negative atheist who wants to follow MIH in practice is difficult, but not hopeless. I suppose that there are at least three possible ways to give honour to God without the belief that He exists: by a morally good life (i.e. a life that includes moral respect to all beings treated as if they were God's creatures or images); by refraining from the criticism of religious cult or opposition to it; by an intentional stance of conditional gratitude or conditional worship.

The last way could be expressed by the following prayer: 'If God exists, then I worship you God!'[14] This prayer seems strange, but we can find the analogies in some human behaviours (e.g. when we knock on the door of a lonely house, saying 'if there is anyone in there, open!'). What is more, the fact that a negative atheist admits the truth of the antecedent of this implication, makes the implication valid for him.

The problem of the way of rendering honour does not concern only a negative atheist. As St. Thomas Aquinas writes (ST: 2a2ae, Q81, a2, ad3):

> It belongs to the dictate of natural reason that man should do something through reverence for God. But that he should do this or that determinate thing does not belong to the dictate of natural reason, but is established by Divine or human law.

Thus it is clear that a lack of rational regulations concerning the way of rendering honour to God allows for a certain freedom in the choice of the way to fulfil MIH. This freedom may be limited by conscious (rationally motivated) and free membership of a determined religious or cultural community. A negative atheist has no moral obligation to participate in such a community. It seems, however, that – in the light of MIH – he has a moral obligation to refrain from the depreciation of a public religious cult, if this cult does not violate an important moral norm or lead to superstition. This condition, however, as Aquinas emphasizes (see ST: 2a2ae, Q81, a5, ad3; Q92-94, esp. Q92, a1), concerns theists also.

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[14] N.B., I am afraid that today many nominal Christians pray in this way.

CONCLUSION

In the present text I attempted – with the aid of philosophical arguments – to defend the thesis that MIH binds not only theists but also negative atheists (but not positive atheists). Certainly, those arguments would not convince everybody to the thesis I defend. I hope, however, that they enabled at least some clarification of one of the important aspects of the debate (conflict) between theism and atheism.

Considering the practical dimension of the controversy, it is also worthwhile to ask about the cultural consequences of atheism disseminating. I believe the main consequence is – speaking in the language assumed above – the weakening or atrophy of the attitude of rendering absolute honour to God. But what happens if one does not render absolute honour to (supposed) God? I believe that there are two possibilities:

- rendering absolute honour to persons or things that do not deserve it (as in the totalitarian cult of power, and perhaps also in the consumers cult of material things or the cult of show-business stars in entertainment);
- the absence of absolute honour to anyone or anything.

The evil of the cultural consequence of the first possibility is today universally known. Yet the evaluation of the cultural consequences of the second possibility remains an open issue. I doubt, however, that it is possible to live without the attitude of absolute reverence, without simultaneously falling into nihilism or value relativism.

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ATHEISTS AND BELIEVERS:
WORST FRIENDS OR BEST ENEMIES?

ROGER POUIVET

Université de Lorraine

Abstract. This article examines the question of whether the atheist and the believer can understand each other, to the point of being friends intellectually. The answer is no. The atheist and the believer can be best enemies, but their epistemic disagreement is definitely radical. For it is not a disagreement on religious belief itself, but about what *allows* the believer to believe. The article examines some aspects of John Greco's concept of 'friendly theism', the discussion of conciliationism and anti-conciliatonism, and the epistemic role of the Holy Spirit.

> *I came to the conclusion there was no medium, in true philosophy, between Atheism and Catholicity, and that a perfect consistent mind ... must embrace either the one or the other.*
>
> John Henry Cardinal Newman[1]

Is it really possible to exchange arguments between atheists and believers? We could be tempted to answer positively. Especially, if believers and atheists are philosophers, normally able to discuss independently of their personal deep convictions, because they are interested mainly by arguments. However, I want to show that intellectual friendship, that is to say, a good mutual understanding, leading to a common search for truth, on a neutral basis, is quite difficult between an atheist and a believer. If an atheist and a theist are friends, it is despite religion, and not about religion.[2] On such a topic, they can only be *best* enemies, respectful of

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[1] Newman (1994: 182).

[2] I will speak indifferently of the believer or theist, leaving aside the difficulties of the concept of theism.

one another, but in full and irreducible disagreement. I think we are encouraged to say the contrary by the fear to appear close-minded and intolerant.

I.

Let us first look at the way William Rowe describes the situation between the atheist and the believer.

> It is not difficult for an atheist to be friendly when he has reason to believe that the theist could not reasonably be expected to be acquainted with the grounds for disbelief that he (the atheist) possesses. For then the atheist may take the view that some theists are rationally justified in holding to theism, but would not be so were they to be acquainted with the grounds of belief – those grounds being sufficient to tip the scale in favour of atheism when balanced against the reasons the theist has in support of his belief. Friendly atheism becomes paradoxical, however, when the atheist contemplates believing that the theist has all the grounds for atheism that he, the atheist, has, and yet is rationally justified in maintaining his theistic belief. But even so excessively friendly a view as this perhaps can be held by the atheist if he also has some reason to think that the grounds for theism are not as telling as the theist is justified in taking them to be. (1979: 340)

According to Rowe, the *friendly atheist* thinks that the theist has done his best, and that the theist does not seem to be able to really do more. The friendly atheist adopts the attitude of a teacher realizing that a student cannot really go beyond what he has already done, simply because the student's capacities are limited. The friendly atheist considers that it is not really the fault of the theist that he believes in God: he simply lacks the epistemic reasons to disbelieve. Atheist friendship to the theist then resembles a form of condescension! Or, the atheist is less arrogant. He adopts the attitude of loving parents: their child believes in Santa Claus: they would find it too bad, especially on December 24, to explain to the child that the reasons for such a belief are unsustainable and she or he has to abandon it. It seems to me that this friendly atheist is actually someone who thinks that the theist may be sincere in his error, but facing up to his epistemic responsibilities, the theist *should renounce* his belief.

We find another and different account, this time of *friendly theism*, and not of friendly atheism, proposed by John Greco:

> I want to argue for a version of friendly theism. More exactly, I want
> to argue for an epistemology of religious belief on which three things
> can be true together: (a) belief in God is rational for some persons, (b)
> disbelief in God is rational for some persons, (c) no person is making
> an epistemic mistake or is otherwise epistemically flawed. (2008: 51)

John Greco claims that this position is friendlier than Rowe's one. It
explains, 'how two people [believer and unbeliever] can easily differ
in their knowledge of a third person, and yet both be epistemically
flawless' (2008: 52). Friendly theism is made possible by an interpersonal
conception of faith. Therefore, it seems that there is an asymmetry
between Rowe's friendly atheism and Greco's friendly theism. The friendly
atheist sees the theist as someone lacking epistemological lucidity or even
seriousness. This amounts even perhaps to a form of intellectual vice.
The friendly theist sees the atheist as someone who did not *experience*
a special interpersonal relationship with God. But the atheist, according
to Greco's friendly theist, is not at all lacking epistemological seriousness
and lucidity. The difference between the believer and the unbeliever,
according to the friendly theist, is more *existential* than *intellectual*. This
is the reason why John Greco's friendly theist is truly friendly, while the
Rowe's friendly atheist seems to finally be an arrogant or even scornful
character. I wonder if it would be a so good thing for the theist to be
friend with someone who thinks that theistic beliefs are not epistemically
serious, and even, perhaps, that they are mainly errors ... The only way
for the believer to stay friends with the atheist seems to be to renounce
his alleged crazy beliefs, at least when it has been explained to him that
they are false and shown why. Rowe's atheist is definitively a strange
friend for the theist.

Then, I propose to have another friendly theist, very different
from Greco's one. Let us suppose now that friendly theism is the exact
converse of friendly atheism. Such a friendly theism would not be much
friendlier than friendly atheism according to Rowe – it means, I think, it
would not be friendly at all. It would suggest that the atheist exaggerates
the strength of his arguments a lot, or that he does not *understand*
something, without being in this way culpable. He is not aware that he
is intellectually irresponsible, but surely he is. The friendly theist could
even interpret the atheist's incapacity to have a religious experience in
terms of an intellectual vice, exactly as Rowe's friendly atheist thinks
that the theist would be epistemically irresponsible still to believe after

it has been explained to him that his reasons are bad, or that there are good reasons not to believe. The friendly theist would think that the atheist does not experience something *because* he does not understand something, and that he does not understand something *because* he does not believe.

Nobody would think that the friendly theist I described is actually friendly. This discussion about friendship between theists and atheists leads me to the conclusion that they have no reason to be *intellectually friends* with each other. They can avoid getting on to the subject of religion, and appreciate each other as human beings, or even simply as colleagues in the department of philosophy. They may also belong to the same fire brigade and do in it a lot of valuable work together. They may also have affection towards each other. They may even be in love, why not? But *intellectually,* they disagree, fundamentally. And such a disagreement is nothing friendly. First, what constitutes a warranted belief, with perfect sense, for one, has no right to be believed, or even perhaps no sense, for another. Second, they are not intellectual peers and cannot consider each other this way.

Peter Geach says :

> If I did not judge Christian belief to be 'more true, more correct, more reasonable' than modern atheistic humanism, then I could not be a Christian. Obviously we who say this are 'using our language-game as a basis' from which to judge what other people maintain; but anybody is bound to do this if he makes a judgment that other people contest. (1990: 300)[3]

It would make no sense to relativize the disagreement, by saying that the atheist and the believer do not share the same language-game, as some Neo-Wittgensteinians suggest.[4] Or so to say that the theist judge the atheist in his own language game, and the atheist in his own one, and that they do not disagree finally, but that they live, so to say, in different worlds. But what does it change finally? The believer thinks that the atheist cannot understand because he does not believe, and the atheist thinks that the believer is blinded by his belief and unable to perceive the weakness of his reasons to believe or even that he lacks any reason.

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[3] Terms in quotation marks are those of Norman Malcolm. Peter Geach is responding to him in this passage.

[4] The best and most convincing formulation of this thesis remains for me the book by Dewi Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (1965).

II.

Conciliationism and anti-conciliationism are the two mains positions on the topic of *religious disagreement*. The first thesis claims that if the disputants are just as qualified and well positioned to assess a disputed proposition, then they ought to adopt a level of confidence that gives significant weight to the views of the other side. But if each one gives significant weight to the other views, can they still *believe* in what they are supposed to believe, even to a lesser degree? They seem simply to do *as if* they were believing something, but no more to *fully* believe it, or to believe to a certain degree. They even know that there are good reasons not to believe it. But is it possible to believe *p* and at the same time to know that there are good reasons for a competent person not to believe *p*?[5] For me a positive answer is not at all obvious. However, it is surely possible not to judge someone negatively, when he does not believe that *p,* and you believe that *p*. But this is something else than conciliationism. But does conciliationism makes sense, even if it appears to be the attitude encouraged by the dominant ethic of tolerance? Do you really have beliefs you think there are good reasons for competent persons not to have?

Anti-conciliationism claims that we may believe that *p* with confidence despite the fact that a qualified and well-positioned person, who seems as qualified as ourselves to assess the proposition's plausibility, hold *p* not to be epistemologically safe. Let us suppose my reader and I are excellent philosophers (not a problematic supposition), interested in the question of whether we have the right not to believe in God. Each of us is thoroughly acquainted with all of the extant arguments, thought experiments, and intuition pumps that the literature has to offer. None of us is in bad faith. We are more or less equally reliable when it comes to making judgments about the domain in question. Do we have to revise our original view, if each of us should give *equal weight* to his or her opinion and to the opinion of the other? One attitude, which sceptical philosophers encourage, would be to suspend our judgment.[6] But there is another possible attitude. No intellectual consideration forces someone to believe that atheism or agnosticism are superior to any competing

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[5] Moore's Paradox consists to say 'p and I do not believe that p'. Here the paradox would be 'I believe that p and I know good reasons not to believe p'.

[6] I am aware that it would be necessary here to consider all the sceptical literature about the suspension of judgment.

position concerning belief in God. It is a thesis that Peter van Inwagen seems to defend (in his paper 'Is God an Unnecessary Hypothesis'):

> Consider any proposition whose truth is known to be highly improbable but which is not known to be certainly false. (For example: the proposition that New York City will be destroyed by a huge meteorite at 11: 23 p.m. on August 12, 2073.) If someone who is aware of this known probability does not accept the denial of that proposition (and, of course, does not accept the proposition itself), that person violates no norm of rationality. (2005: 136)

So, even if theism were highly improbable, it is not irrational not to accept atheism or agnosticism, if theism is not known to be certainly false. In this case, the reason why atheists and theists have difficulties being intellectual friends is perhaps that all atheists *prefer* that all non-atheists change their mind and become atheists, simply because for them theism is very highly improbable, or that, at least, theists become agnostics, by suspending their judgment. But in fact, some non-atheists stay theists and even do not became agnostics, even after the atheist briefing. And the problem for the atheists is that such an attitude is not at all irrational, or even epistemically vicious. The reason why is given by Peter van Inwagen when he says:

> It would seem that all human beings have beliefs that are not forced on them by the totality of the relevant intellectual considerations of which they are aware. Most of our philosophical beliefs are like that. (2005: 142)

A Moorean Argument shows that sceptical doubts are always less believable finally than what they serve to raise doubt about. For example, the doubt about the fact that I have two hands is less believable than that the fact that *this* is my hand (and I show you my hand), and *this* is another one (and I show you the other one). A Moorean fact is one we know better than we know the premises of any philosophical argument to the contrary. It seems that a believer could always appeal to a Moorean Argument. This could be what Peter van Inwagen does in this passage:

> If someone tells me that, if I can adduce no articulable reason for believing in material things, then my belief in material things must be irrational, I'll reply that my critic has a mistaken and impossibly demanding theory of rationality. I want to say something similar about my belief in God. Why do I believe in God? Certainly not because I can write down some reason for believing in God that would force anyone who understood it to share my belief. There is no such reason. I can – I often do – set out

reasons for believing in God, but these reasons are not *coercive*: a person who understands them and is unmoved by them is not, by that very fact, irrational. (2005: 145)

According to Kit Fine, 'in this age of post-Moorean modesty, many of us are inclined to doubt that philosophy is in possession of arguments that might genuinely serve to undermine what we ordinarily believe' (2001: 2). This could be the case also of the religious believer. His religious beliefs are quite ordinary for him. Nothing special, just as philosophical beliefs could be, or scientific ones, for example. If the atheist says only that the believer has no argument to convince him to believe in the existence of God, how could it be a good argument against a Moorean Argument? But sceptics are generally not troubled by a Moorean Argument, because scepticism consists in ignoring such an argument, or in pretending that this is not an argument. Surely, the atheist could claim to have positive arguments against the existence of God – the 'Argument from Evil' or the 'Hiddenness Argument', and two dozen, at least, others. Fine adds something interesting in our context: 'It may perhaps be conceded that the arguments of the skeptic appear to be utterly compelling; but the Mooreans among us will hold that the very plausibility of our ordinary beliefs is reason enough for supposing that there must be something wrong in the skeptic's arguments, even if we are unable to say what it is.' (2001: 2)

However, first, this argument seems to immunize all belief, no matter how ridiculous it is: belief in aliens or belief in the return of the Great Pumpkin, belief in some gigantic conspiracy, and so on.[7] And second, the argument refers to 'common beliefs'. However, believing in the existence of God or that Jesus is the Son of God, let alone belief in Mary's virginity or her Immaculate Conception, these are not at all *ordinary* beliefs. It is possible to defend the right to believe that I have two hands, facing sceptical concerns. But some philosophers would judge it to be clearly unacceptable to propose an epistemological defence of our right to have religious beliefs on the basis of a Moorean Argument, or by saying that the existence of God is a Moorean fact! These are typically the kind of beliefs we *must* justify and not simply entertain without epistemological anxieties and proclaim without feeling the necessity to justify oneself.

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[7] I say nothing here of the Great Pumpkin Objection sometimes advanced against what Plantinga calls 'warranted Christian belief', but I discuss the point in Pouivet (2002) and (2013).

But I disagree with those philosophers who put aside religious beliefs, and especially have for these beliefs requirements they have for any other.[8] The possibility of a Moorean Argument by a believer is the reason why atheists and theists cannot be friends intellectually. Generally, of course, the believer uses such a Moorean Argument *implicitly*. What seems to the atheist a strong epistemological necessity to justify religious beliefs (and in fact the atheist claims it is impossible) appears to be without any sense, because it is exactly the kind of beliefs which are not to be justified. The atheist suspects that the believer succumbs to wishful thinking and even intellectual dishonesty.[9] But the theist would say that he does not succumb to wishful thinking and is not intellectually dishonest. But why does the believer adopt such an attitude? Because he believes he received a gift, a grace, to believe what he is believing. The atheist seems deprived of this grace. For a believer, religious beliefs are 'built in him'. Even if these beliefs appear 'extraordinary', and extraordinary irresponsible and dishonest in the eyes of an atheist, it is *because* he is an atheist, and not because of some epistemological defects of such beliefs.

Let us recall these passages of the New Testament: 'And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed *it* unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.' (Matthew 17:17), or: 'No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit' (1 Corinthians 12:3), among similar passages. Let us also recall Anselm's well-known prayer:

> I acknowledge, Lord, and I give thanks that You have created Your image in me, so that I may remember You, think of You, love You. But this image is so effaced and worn away by vice, so darkened by the smoke of sin, that it cannot do what it was made to do unless You renew it and reform it. I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand. For I believe this also, that 'unless I believe, I shall not understand' (Isa. 7:9). (1998: 87)

Without belief and even faith, no understanding is possible. It is the reason why, at least in a revealed religion, there can be no epistemic symmetry

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[8] See Van Inwagen (1998).

[9] Such an intellectual dishonesty is of course at the base of William Clifford's critique of religious beliefs.

between the believer and the atheist, and no epistemic parity. The believer prays for his more perfect conversion and for the conversion of the atheist; the atheist thinks that the believer is intellectually blinded. Or even, the atheists think the believer does not *really* believe what he says he believes; he imagines a God, he makes himself believe in all such things (on the model of the attitude we are supposed to adopt when we are reading a novel or watching a movie).[10]

The atheist could reply: 'I beg your pardon. Do you mean that if I am an atheist it is, precisely, that I have not received a divine grace, the gift of faith, which is the source of belief?[11] But if God is the source of your own belief in its existence, there is an obvious epistemological vicious circle. You believe that God exists because God is the source of your belief that God exists. Your reasoning is not serious. It shows, if necessary, what your pitiful epistemological attitude is, and even your intellectual blindness! Speaking this way, I try to stay within the limits of a friendly conversation.' Now, the theist might answer that there may well be good arguments for the existence of God, based on non-religious premises, and not at all supposing a divine grace. Such arguments (and even proofs) could be found in abundance in the works of the best philosophers and theologians. But it seems that only the one who has received from God an apprehension of divine things can assess the truth of the Gospel. And this is exactly the grace the atheist is deprived. The theist could recall one of the Jonathan Edwards' wonderful sermons:

> The mind of man is naturally full of prejudices against the truth of divine things: it is full of enmity against the doctrines of the gospel; which is a disadvantage to those arguments that prove their truth, and causes them to lose their force upon the mind. But when a person has discovered to him the divine excellency of Christian doctrines, this destroys the enmity, removes those prejudices, and sanctifies the reason, and causes it to lie open to the force of arguments for their truth ... God, in letting in this light into the soul, deals with man according to his nature, or as a rational creature; and makes use of his human faculties. But yet this light is not the less immediately from God for that; though the faculties are made use of, 'tis as the subject and not as the cause; and that acting of the faculties in it, is not the cause, but is either implied in the thing itself (in the light that is imparted), or is the consequence of it. (1999: 128)

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[10] On this attitude of religious make-believe, see the third chapter of Pouivet (2013).
[11] On such a possibility, see Pouivet (2013: 223-226).

Is it different from what Greco says: 'our knowledge of persons tends to come through perception and testimony rather than through reasoning or arguments' (2008: 52)? God in this case is supposed to be a person.[12]

> On the perception model, we learn about who God is and what God is like by means of experiencing God in our lives. On the testimony model, we come to know about God by means of someone telling us about Him – either God himself, or other people who have had an experience of God in their lives. (2008: 53)

According to Greco, the perception model and the testimony model make it easy to understand how people can have rational disagreements, when neither one or the other is making an epistemic mistake or is otherwise epistemically flawed. But it is just not that easy to see how the atheist will not be led to think that the disagreement results from the fact that the believer indulges himself in his own religious experience. It is precisely the alleged irrationality of such an experience he contests. Conversely, says the believer, if this experience is a grace, the one who does not have it is devoid of what gives the ability to understand the value of certain arguments that might be made in favour of the existence of God. Greco surely is right to say that 'it looks like the theist is going to have to say that there is something cognitively wrong with the atheist (or other non-theist) – that she (he) is epistemically flawed after all' (2008: 54). This is why the friendship between the atheist and the believer has to be based on something other than the recognition of their intellectual symmetry and parity. I mean that if the atheist believes that the theist is blinded, and if the theist believes that the atheist has not received a grace, how could they be friends intellectually? If they can understand and appreciate each other humanly, they are intellectually not only opposed but even *enemies*: they have *no* good mutual understanding, leading to a common search for truth, on a neutral basis. They can be the *best enemies*, still able to debate, for example, but they actually are *worst* possible *friends*, because there is something very important between them.

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[12] I will not discuss this point, but it is far from evident that God is a person. That there are three persons in one God does not mean that God is a person ... and neither does it mean that to believe in the existence of God is the same as to believe in the existence of a person. But we could say, more safely, that there is an analogy between belief in the existence of God and belief in the existence of a person. I leave this important but difficult topic aside.

III.

We have to consider the question of *the asymmetry of justification*. Discussions about peer disagreement often presuppose evidential equivalence. Believers and unbelievers would be equivalently familiar with the relevant evidence and arguments that bear on the question whether *p*. But in such discussions, we must take into account, to use Ernest Sosa's words, 'how deeply hidden and undisclosable reasons can be', and 'how epistemically effective a reason can be despite being dialectically ineffective' (2010: 296). And in the case of disagreement about religious matters, the asymmetry of justification plays a crucial role. They are hidden and undisclosable reasons to believe in God: they are dialectically ineffective, because they are the fruits of a divine gift,[13] even if they can be epistemically effective and, above all, rationally respectable.

The place of this grace, of this gift, forbids a definition of the atheist and the theist as epistemic peers. If the theist received an intellectual gift from divine grace, atheist and theist are of course not equally likely to be right. The believer benefits from divine help. The very notion of a sharable evidence, on which the atheist and the theist could be agree, and from which they can hope to convince each other, or even simply discuss, as if the question was to know the merit of a scientific hypothesis, makes no sense for such a reason in this context. Sometimes, philosophers seem to suppose that atheism, agnosticism, and theism are hypotheses of this kind, to be compared in an academic setting. But if faith, of which belief is a constitutive element, is not to be attracted by a hypothesis, but is truly a divine grace, the best possible relation between God and his creatures, the dialectical model of exchanging arguments simply cannot apply. This is sometimes supposed to be the model we use in the scientific debate (or we are supposed *to have* to use in such a debate). But the content of faith is not like a paper we send to referees with the hope that it can be accepted in a journal, or what is in discussion during a conference. The mistake is to think that this intellectual model, of working together on assumptions, or from neutral data, defines rationality.

The theist cannot and must not consider the atheist a peer on religious matters. Let us compare: one does not consider someone else to be a peer

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[13] Here we should develop the relationship between the virtues, gifts, beatitudes, and fruits of the Holy Spirit. Belief and faith are intellectual products whose source is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

about one's own headache. In this case, the belief's warrant does not come from a sharable basis between two disputants. In both cases, headache and religious faith, belief's warrant derives from the very fact believed even if there are no *sharable* reasons. So, it is perfectly *reasonable* for the theist to *downgrade* the atheist, even with no *independent* reason, sharable with the theist. The reference to a headache is not intended at all to suggest that faith is internal and subjective; and therefore, it would turn out to be inaccessible to arguments. It is simply to say that our reasons for believing something may not be shareable without being unreasonable. It is possible to consider them as sufficient to reject an atheist critique.

The type of knowledge we have of the existence of God is closer to the one we have of our own headache than it is to the existence of a certain planet in the universe. One does not believe in this existence as the conclusion of an argument. It is also close to the knowledge I have of the existence of my own wife. (Even if, of course, there is no relation between the two.) The atheist could not accept that a person can claim and believe in the existence of God in the same way that he believes in the existence of his headache or in the existence of his wife, that is to say without feeling obliged to give reasons the atheist expects, recognizes, and even, eventually, could finally share. But it just shows that the demand of the atheist is not acceptable, and that this demand does not enter in a friendly relation. The theist intends to monitor the rationality of one who has no reason to think himself irrational. It is like the situation of the one who is required to prove his nationality, even though it would make no sense to think that he can have another, and while he has no evidence to provide.[14]

We do not believe in God apart from God himself, as we believe in the existence of a planet because it is the best possible explanation of certain astronomical phenomena. Would it be friendly of someone to ask you to give credible evidence of your wife when you start talking to him about her? Sure, you could sometimes give him what he asks. However, he could have a level of epistemological requirement so high – the kind that the sceptic can display – that it would make satisfaction impossible. Anyway, it is no more a friendly relationship between interlocutors. Rather it is a strong disagreement between people who do not share much intellectually, even if they can of course respect each other (and even appreciate each other).

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[14] This has sometimes been the situation of some people in France in recent years.

Ernest Sosa says – but, I must be clear, he does not speak about religious beliefs – that 'our inability to defeat an opponent in public debate need not rationally require us to abandon our beliefs' (2010: 294). The theist downgrades his opponent's judgment that he is wrong, or that he has no good reasons to believe in the existence of God. To downgrade is simply to think that the atheist must go wrong somehow. And likely if the atheist goes wrong it is that he did not receive a certain gift. Such downgrading is based *on the very substance of the disagreement*: on this question, the existence of God and other beliefs about it, atheists and theists are more likely to be best intellectual enemies than good intellectual friends.

According to the equal weight view, when you learn of your friend's disagreement, you are called upon to consider him equally likely to be right. This is not at all possible for the theist: it would make no sense, exactly like if you would consider seriously the person who tells you that you do not have a headache or that your wife's existence is disputable because you have no better argument than that you do not feel well or that you love her! And there are perfectly good reasons for the theist to downgrade his opponent without intellectual embarrassment or shame. He does not disrespect him. If so, they are not good friends at all with regard to religion – because of the faithless assurance of the atheist – rather they will be best enemies.

It is important to add that the theist is not *at all* exempt from arguing from his side as fully and convincingly as he can manage, and even that it would be a form of respect to the atheist to argue. 'Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear' (1 Peter 3:15). But the believer's inability to defeat his opponent is not a reason for him to abandon his beliefs. In fact, are the arguments that everyone, atheist or theist, advance really intended to convince the other? Rather they seem to have a negative function: to show that those who believe in the existence of God, or that God does not exist, or that we cannot know whether God exists or not, do not consider themselves released from any epistemological obligations. They are not released from such obligations, but they do not believe on the basis of arguments, even if they would be able to deliver such arguments to defend their beliefs. This is the reason why we can have very serious doubts about the possibility that the disagreement between atheist and theist could be dispelled by an exchange of arguments, based on intellectual friendship. But that does not mean that religious belief is a subjective passion that would ridicule any rational theology, and

especially natural theology. However, the function of natural theory and rational theology is not foundational: they do not serve to give a basis to the theist beliefs.

There are many books in which a theist and atheist discuss and exchange arguments in the greatest respect one another. For example, *Atheism and Theism* is a dialogue, or so to speak, between Jack Smart and John Haldane (2003). So to speak, the book gives the impression of two parallel discourses, despite the efforts made by the two friends to exchange arguments. Something goes wrong. We know, in advance and without suspense at all, that they will obviously not change their minds; and indeed the arguments that they advance are already well-known to each other, even if they manage to give them a more contemporary look. In the preface to the second edition of this book (actually one of the best in this fashionable genre of a serious debate between serious philosophers who seriously disagree), we read that 'the majority of reviewers chose to observe the friendly and respectful character of (the) exchange' (2003: x). It would be far more interesting to know why Smart and Haldane are unable to convince each other, and why their exchange changes nothing regarding what they believe or do not believe! The final form of this preface seems to be simply a good example – of course, nothing bad in itself – of academic politeness. The protagonists say that they hope that 'this extended discussion will re-engage earlier readers and draw new ones into that common search of truth about atheism and theism' (2003: xi). In a sense, if it is simply to characterize the two opposing positions, the book, one more time, does this quite well. But if it is for the theist to notice he was blinded, or for the atheist suddenly to realize that his own arguments are not conclusive, really nobody thinks it will happen and even could happen.

In the original preface of the book, it is said that 'Haldane is committed to the proposition that if it were impossible, *in principle,* to prove the existence of God (allowing some breadth to the notion of proof), then what his religion teaches in this important respect is false' (2003: 4). But manifestly, Jack Smart resisted, and does not think at all that John Haldane possesses a proof of the existence of God, or even something close to a proof, like a justified true belief, or a hypothesis to the best explanation. That does not mean that the existence of God cannot be known by the light of natural reason. But this possibility does not imply that Jack has to be convinced by the arguments of John, even if Jack is intellectually honest, perfectly competent, and is even John's

friend. And nothing changes for Haldane if Smart is not convinced in his turn. Presumably, the ability of Haldane and Smart, impressive for sure, to give excellent arguments, was not decisive for either one or the other.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this paper, I quote William Rowe who says that 'it is not difficult for an atheist to be friendly when he has reason to believe that the theist could not reasonably be expected to be acquainted with the grounds for disbelief that he (the atheist) possesses' (1979: 340). I have come now to the conclusion that it is difficult for the theist to be friendly when he has reason to believe that the atheist could not reasonably be expected to be acquainted with the grounds for belief that he (the theist) possesses. These grounds consist basically of divine grace. This does not imply that religious belief is not reasonable. Indeed, we can rationally believe without having shareable reasons, such as those that we share in philosophical or scientific debates.

'But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man.' (1 Corinthians 2:15) This quotation explains what makes intellectual friendship between the believer and the unbeliever so difficult. The truly difficult question for the theist is not that of a hidden god, but why God does not extend His grace to all mankind, and why the atheist, intellectually honest and even generous, disagrees with him.

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THE MORAL EPISTEMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR ATHEISM

JOHN J. PARK

Christopher Newport University

Abstract. Numerous supposed immoral mandates and commands by God found in religious texts are introduced and discussed. Such passages are used to construct a logical contradiction contention that is called *the moral epistemological argument*. It is shown how there is a contradiction in that God is omnibenevolent, God can instruct human beings, and God at times provides us with unethical orders and laws. Given the existence of the contradiction, it is argued that an omnibenevolent God does not exist. Finally, this contention is defended from several objections.

Since the first century CE, scholars have been well aware of the apparent immoral laws and mandates decreed by the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God in numerous religious texts and have attempted to reconcile the seeming discrepancy between the existence of a God who is wholly good and yet has promulgated such purportedly unethical laws and orders. Today, New Atheists use such discrepancies to contend that one should not look to the Torah, Bible, or Quran for moral guidance. However, things will be taken a little further in this paper and such discrepancies will be used to argue for an ontological thesis that God does not exist. While there are positive arguments for God's existence such as the ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments, a new positive atheistic contention will be offered that is called *the moral epistemological argument*. It shall be contended that due to the supposed licentious beliefs and purported knowledge that God instructed to human beings through divine revelation, an omnibenevolent God really does not exist. First, the apparently immoral mandates contained within religious texts will be explored. Next, the moral epistemological argument will be given

and defended. While the moral epistemological argument may seem like a simple and obvious potential argument against God's existence, to the best of my knowledge, it has not been comprehensively and philosophically articulated before. Despite its simplicity, I believe the moral epistemological argument is a strong argument for atheism, it can be properly defended, and it is worth fleshing out. In what follows, I offer its first comprehensive articulation.

No doubt the mandates of God that shortly will be discussed below are at face value considered to be atrocious and nefarious given contemporary moral standards. The supposed immoral aspects of the religious texts have motivated religious scholars for nearly two millennia to attempt to reconcile such passages with the notion of an omnibenevolent God. However, those with an atheistic bent have used such passages to argue that one should not at all times look to religious scripture for moral guidance. In other words, one need not necessarily determine how one ought to act in a given scenario by turning to religious revelations. For example, Bertrand Russell makes such a move in his essay 'Why I Am Not a Christian (1927)'. The philosopher Wes Morriston has written extensively and critically on the apparent immoral mandates of God. However, from such discussions, he does not draw an ontological thesis that God does not exist. Rather, he merely concludes that such passages should not be taken seriously as moral mandates. For example, he states, 'I have argued that the genocide texts should be rejected on moral grounds.' (Morriston 2012: 14) He also concludes that it is highly unlikely that such commands were ever given (Morriston 2009). Other critical philosophers of God's commands such as Louise Antony (2011) and Edwin Curley (2011) also do not draw ontological claims. For instance, Curley's conclusion is only that such problematic passages are not the inspired word of God.

Modern day public intellectual atheists pretentiously known as the Brights or New Atheists have also made similar criticisms of religious texts. For example, Richard Dawkins writes:

> The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully. (2006, 31)

Daniel Dennett notes that the Old Testament God is one who 'could take sides in battles, and be both jealous and wrathful' (2006: 206). Christopher Hitchens states that the Canaanites were 'pitilessly driven out of their homes to make room for the ungrateful and mutinous children of Israel' (2007: 99). Sam Harris comments that if the Bible is true, then people should be stoning others to death for heresy, adultery, homosexuality, worshiping graven images, and 'other imaginary crimes'. In fact, putting to death idolaters in our midst reflects 'God's timeless wisdom' (2006: 8).

New Atheists, as public intellectuals, have written exoteric rather than esoteric works, so they have not defended their claims against the use of religious texts as moral compasses from the numerous attempts by religious scholars and philosophers to reconcile the problematic passages in the literature. Moreover, their use of such passages is not to deny the existence of God. It is not to make an ontological metaphysical claim. Rather, such use of the literature is merely for the sake of showing that given God's existence, his divine revelations bestowed upon human beings as presented in religious texts should not necessarily be followed. For instance, Dawkins states, 'All I am establishing is that modern morality, wherever else it comes from, does not come from the Bible.' (2006: 246) Similarly, Harris writes, 'The idea that the Bible is a perfect guide to morality is simply astounding, given the contents of the book.' (2006: 8) This point that the New Atheists do not make an ontological claim concerning God's existence regarding the problematic moral passages is not a criticism of them. For, their purposes in this context are explicitly stated as being non-ontological ones that merely argue that certain religious texts should not be read for moral guidance. Regarding their limited aims, they perhaps could have a strong support for their case if they additionally defended their premises from the numerous objections in the relevant literature from philosophers and religious scholars. However, what will be attempted here is the use of such problematic passages in order to make a new argument for an ontological metaphysical claim that an omnibenevolent God does not exist. An atheistic positive contention called the moral epistemological argument will be offered.

The topic of this paper is an interdisciplinary one. On the one hand, I address a central issue in Philosophy of Religion and Metaphysics concerning God's existence. However, as the examination of religious texts plays a crucial role, religion scholarship also is important here. I believe that philosophers have only just begun to take the issue of God's

supposed immoral commands seriously. As Michael Bergmann, Michael Murray, and Michael Rea note, 'Despite the interdisciplinary character of the questions [regarding God's supposed immoral mandates], however, philosophers have not been rushing to address the issue ... ' (2011: 4) Most of the work has been done by religion scholars.

There are three main general new contributions to the literature from this paper. The first is that I take an old topic concerning the purported immoral mandates of God, and fully theoretically articulate how one may use this as an argument for atheism.[1] The second contribution is that I address and object to several attempts from religious scholars to reconcile the problematic passages, such as the moral relativism approach. Some of these attempted reconciliations generally have not been discussed by philosophers, and many philosophers may not even be aware of them. Third, at times I provide novel counters against certain attempts to reconcile the problematic passages. To note, I will also address attempts to reconcile the morally problematic passages from philosophers.

I. THE SUPPOSED IMMORAL GOD

Although there will be further qualifications later, the scope of the moral epistemological argument for atheism covers the monotheistic Judeo-Christian-Islamic God. The Jewish Torah, which is the first five books of the Christian Old Testament, and the Bible apparently contain numerous instances where God decrees immoral laws and mandates. While Islamists believe that the likes of Abraham, Isaac, and Jesus were prophets, they maintain it is the Quran that the angel Gabriel revealed to Muhammad that is the ultimate revelation of God. This text also contains apparent unethical commands.

For example, in the Old Testament and in the Quran, God allows for slavery and blood vengeance (Quran 61:92; 75:45). In the Old Testament, the law of retaliation in Exodus is 'life must be paid for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. It is also hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound and bruise for bruise' (Exodus 21:23-24). The death

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[1] It is unclear whether Evan Fales offers a conclusion for atheism based on the problematic religious passages (2011). Regardless, even if he does, he does not articulate how the argument will go nor does he spell out the contradiction that is fundamental to the moral epistemological argument. As stated, to the best of my knowledge, I offer the first full articulation of this kind of argument for atheism.

penalty may be given to those who strike their parents (Exodus 21:15, 17), to homosexuals (Lev 20:13), adulterers (Lev 20:10), idolaters (Deut 13:6-11), and blasphemers (Lev 24:14). For those that break God's laws, it is said that 'The Lord will give you madness, blindness and a confused mind. You will have to feel around in the daylight like a blind man. You will fail in everything you do. People will hurt you and steal from you every day. There will be no one to save you' (Deut 28:28-29).

In the Old Testament, there also are numerous passages where women do not fare well in light of the decrees of God. Women who were found not to be virgins on their wedding night must be stoned to death (Deut 22:13-21). Prostitution by a priest's daughter mandated death by fire (Lev 21:9). In the Quran, women also do not fare well. God directs the inheritance of male children to be twice that of females (4:11). God orders for the beating of obstinately disobedient wives after one's attempts at admonishing and refusing to sleep in the same bed with them have failed (4:34). Moreover, God provides young female virgins for sexual gratification to those men who reach paradise (55:56; 56:35-38; 78:31-33).

While this discussion of supposedly appalling laws and orders given by God may continue for quite some time and are renounced by most modern day theists, God's mandates for war in the Old Testament must also be discussed. God orders Saul to kill all of the Amalekites, women and children. 'Now go, attack the Amalekites. Destroy everything that belongs to them as an offering to the Lord. Don't let anything live. Put to death men and women, children and small babies. Kill the cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.' (1 Sam 15:3) God commands Joshua on a wholesale and indiscriminate level to attack, kill, and destroy numerous cities and peoples such as in Libnah, Lachish, Eglon, Hebron, Debir, Hazor, and Canaan (Josh 10:40). As God says, 'you must not let anything that breathes remain alive' (Deut 20:16). God commands Moses in regards to Midian, 'Kill all the Midianite boys. Kill all the Midianite women who have had sexual relations. But save the girls for yourselves who have not had sexual relations with a man' (Num 31:17-18). The following passage promotes slavery, rape, and genocide:

> When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace. If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you, then all the people in it shall serve you as forced labour. If it does not submit to you peacefully, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it; and

when the Lord your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, livestock, and everything else in the town, all its spoil. You may enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you. Thus you shall treat all the towns that are very far from you, which are not towns of the nations here. (Deut 20: 10-18)

To note, while philosophers such as Paul Copan have pointed out such facts as that the Israelites in practice did not actually completely annihilate the population of Canaanites (2011), the main point for the aims of this paper is that as James Barr states, 'the problem is not whether the narratives are fact or fiction; the problem is that, whether fact or fiction, the ritual destruction is *commended*' (1993: 209). The fact that God orders and commends such ethnic cleansing and other immoral acts to occur is what is important for the moral epistemological argument.

Also, notice that in the New Testament, there are also many supposed immoral mandates. Jesus states, 'Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose.' (Matthew 5:17) Jesus says that he supports the moral laws of the Old Testament. Furthermore, in the New Testament in the Book of Revelations, after God purposefully wipes out a sizable portion of the human population by causing extreme natural disasters and plagues in which people beg for death due to their suffering but God does not let them die for five months, God commands the four angels of the Euphrates River and 200 million horsemen to kill another third of all humankind (Rev 9:13-15).[2] If this were to happen today, well over 2 billion people will be killed from the horsemen. All in all, we see that there are numerous apparent immoral mandates contained in the Quran and in the Old & New Testaments.

II. THE MORAL EPISTEMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Like the logical problem of evil, the moral epistemological argument is a logical contradiction problem for theism.[3] There is a contradiction

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[2] While some who will be killed are murderers, and thus, if capital punishment is justified, they deserve to be killed by the horsemen, others will be killed because they have different faiths or because they are thieves. A truly omnibenevolent God would not order the capital punishment of people due to the fact that they do not believe in him or that they are thieves.

[3] Only the logical rather than the evidential problem of evil is mentioned here.

in the fact that God is omnibenevolent, God has the power to provide knowledge of good and evil to human beings, and God at times gives immoral laws to people. To fully spell out the contradiction, God's omnibenevolence means that he has full knowledge of what is objectively right and wrong and that when God provides humans with laws and commands, they always should be moral rather than immoral ones.[4] Given that God has full knowledge of what is objectively right and wrong and that he has the power to perform divine revelation, when he does provide humans with moral precepts and orders, they must be moral rather than immoral. However, God apparently does not always provide human beings with beliefs of objectively virtuous laws and commands. At times God seemingly gives people maxims of utter depravity and wickedness. The contradiction lies in the fact that some of the purported moral knowledge that is given to humans by divine revelation is at times ethically and objectively wrong. Therefore, the existence of God and the existence of the supposed immoral mandates are incompatible with each other, where given the immoral mandates, we may conclude that the omnibenevolent God really does not exist.[5] Notice that in order to form the contradiction, one merely needs only one immoral command from God.

It may be understood that most theists will agree with the characteristics of God that are required in the moral epistemological argument. Most theists will think it is an uncontroversial fact that God is omnibenevolent such that God has full knowledge of what is objectively right and wrong and that he should not provide human beings with immoral laws. In addition to omnibenevolence, he also has the power to bestow moral laws upon humans through divine revelation. Of course, one may always in some way deny one of these attributes, which will allow one to escape the moral epistemological argument, and in this sense, the moral epistemological argument is limited. For instance, if one

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[4] The attribute of having full knowledge of right and wrong is listed under the category of omnibenevolence rather than under some specified knowledge attribute of God since a wholly good being should have full knowledge of right and wrong. Whether having full knowledge of right and wrong should be categorized under omnibenevolence or under some qualified knowledge characteristic of God such as omniscience matters not for the aims of this paper.

[5] Notice that the conclusion that an omnibenevolent God does not exist leaves open the possibility that an evil God exists, just as the problem of evil and the problem of hell do.

believes that God is not omnibenevolent as defined here, then this may be perfectly consistent with the fact that God can provide humans with immoral commands. If God cannot communicate with humans, then despite God's omnibenevolence, he lacks the capacity to instruct people in ethics. Thus, God does not really provide people with commands on how we ought to live our lives, whether they be moral or not. However, I take it that most theists do maintain that God is omnibenevolent in the sense that he has full knowledge of what is objectively right and wrong and that when he gives humans moral commands, he should give morally praiseworthy knowledge. Moreover, most theists will agree that God can communicate with human beings. Therefore, the moral epistemological argument may be taken to be a contention of significant scope.

Notice also that the moral epistemological argument is not to be confused with the problem of evil, even though both arguments deal in some way with right and wrong. On one variant, the problem of evil can also be thought of as a logical contradiction argument against God's existence. It states that there is a contradiction in the fact that God is omnibenevolent, where God attempts to eliminate evil as far as possible, God is omnipotent, and evil exists. Given the supposed contradiction and the existence of evil, the omnibenevolent God does not exist. First, regarding the crucial attributes of God in the two arguments, the moral epistemological argument, in order to formulate the contradiction, primarily requires God's omnibenevolence to mean that God has full knowledge of what is objectively right and wrong and that he should provide people with moral commands whenever he tells people how they should live their lives. While this understanding of omnibenevolence is perfectly consistent with attaching further attributes to the meaning of the concept, for the problem of evil, the primary focus on God's omnibenevolence in order to construct the relevant contradiction is different in that it is mainly used to argue that God is to eliminate the presence of evil as far as possible. Also, the problem of evil requires a significant degree of power for God in order to have the power to eliminate evil as far as possible. Thus, it is said in the problem of evil that God is omnipotent, although there may be certain restrictions to his omnipotence such as not being able to do what is logically impossible. However, for the moral epistemological argument, the measure of power required of God in order to sufficiently make the relevant case is that God has the power to communicate with human beings through divine revelation. It is a much weaker requirement of power for God. Second,

concerning the non-attributes of God, the problem of evil states that evil exists whereas the moral epistemological argument claims that the purported knowledge that God gives human beings of ethics is immoral and is not really moral knowledge at all. These are two different things, where the former is about natural evil and immoral actions performed between human beings that happen in the world, and the latter is about divine revelation and the supposed moral knowledge that God gives human beings. Notice that one celebrated counter to the problem of evil in order to account for human evil is the free will defence. God creates a greater state of affairs by providing people with the freedom to perform good or evil against each other. If this is the case, then the contradiction formulated by the problem of evil regarding the existence of human evil potentially disappears. However, notice for the moral epistemological argument that even if it is granted that human beings can make free choices, the contradiction in the moral epistemological argument still remains.

Also, the moral epistemological argument can be distinguished from the problem of hell, which is also a logical contradiction argument concluding that God does not exist. The problem of hell generally states that there is a contradiction in God being omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent and hell existing, where people are consigned to hell forever for eternal punishment (Adams 1993). Such a hell with its infinite punishment is evil, and given God's attributes, God should not have allowed for such a hell to exist. Given the supposed contradiction, we may then conclude that an omnibenevolent God does not exist. Notice the problem of hell states that an evil hell and location exists whereas the moral epistemological argument claims that the purported knowledge that God gives human beings of ethics is immoral and is not really moral knowledge at all. There are potential responses to the problem of hell, such as the universalist reply that hell is only for temporary rather than permanent residence or that there is no suffering in hell. Those who espouse the choice model response contend that hell is not for retributive purposes. Rather, it is for those who freely choose to be apart from God. They may be with God in heaven if they so choose, but they choose otherwise. Notice that even if such potential responses to the problem of hell are true, such responses by themselves will not sufficiently be able to respond to the moral epistemological argument given all the supposed immoral commands in scripture. The contradiction found in the moral

epistemological argument and in many of God's ethical commands still exists.

As previously stated, while I take it that most theists will understand the attributes of God as listed in the moral epistemological argument to be uncontroversial, such theists may counter that God does not really provide human beings with immoral commands and laws or that such orders can somehow be reconciled with an omnibenevolent God. It is this crucial premise regarding God's omnibenevolence in the moral epistemological argument that will now be defended.

III. THE MORAL EPISTEMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT DEFENDED

To note, most sophisticated scholarly work in reconciling problematic immoral passages in religious texts primarily comes from Christian philosophers and scholars, so the potential objections that will be addressed here will come from the Christian perspective, and mention of the Old and New Testament rather than the Quran will be used throughout. While it may be contentious whether Islamists and Jewish believers may make the below evolutionary argument, it may be understood that they may make all subsequently entertained objections, *mutatis mutandis*, and that similar responses to such objections as the ones provided in this paper may also be given to them *mutatis mutandis*.

The first important objection that will be examined is the evolutionary or developmental approach primarily championed by Julius Wellhausen but also espoused by others such as Peter van Inwagen (Wellhausen 1885, Arnold 1884, Maurice 1855, Albright 1940, van Inwagen 2011). In respect to the Hebrew Bible, the evolutionary account claims that there is a gradual and progressive development in moral perception for the Israelites. Analogous to the moral development of a child that goes through several stages of development into adulthood, God was a skilful teacher advancing the Israelites to higher moral levels only to the extent that they would be able and ready to receive such moral wisdom given a certain period in their moral development. At various stages, God taught only at the level that the Israelites could comprehend a moral lesson at a given time, but gradually God's moral lessons progressed in wisdom until it reached its pinnacle in the teachings contained in the New Testament. Therefore, there is no perceived inconsistency since the problematic passages in the Bible may be reconciled based on an evolutionary account.

First, there are highly questionable moral passages in the New Testament as well such as in the Book of Revelations, where it is commended that scores of those who do not worship the one true God but who have different faiths are killed by God (Revelations 9:13-21). Furthermore, recall that Jesus himself states his adherence to the laws of the Old Testament. It does not appear that God's moral teachings are evolving. Second, even if the Old Testament can be viewed as an early stage of moral development, the stated permissibility of revenge killings, rape, slavery, and genocide should never be given by an omnibenevolent God no matter how crude a level of moral development the Israelites were at. Just as one should never tell an unruly child that hitting other children is permissible, one should not tell a young group of Israelites that rape and genocide is permissible. For, imagine that a parent tells a child who is prone to disobedience that it is permissible to strike others including newborn infants, only to instruct him in his teenage years that such acts are morally wrong. Is this an instance of skilful moral direction or a highly questionable cultivation of the ethical? This is clearly an instance of morally wrong instruction, and this conclusion analogously would also hold for the case of God. If the evolutionary account is true, God deserves our righteous indignation for such a reprehensible method of moral teaching. In light of the evolutionary account, the problematic moral commands from God still strikes one as being very morally wrong. To note, while the theist may now claim that God works in mysterious ways, such a move will be addressed at the end of this essay.

Another potential objection is that of cultural moral relativism. Dennis Nineham and Cyril Rodd have generally argued that those in the Old Testament lived in an agrarian, slave-based, patriarchic, and polygamous society vastly different from our own, including in terms of morality (Nineham 1976, Rodd 2001). Now, on the cultural moral relativism view, adherents argue that what is morally true and false is relative to cultures. There is no absolute or universal moral truth at all. There is no independent objective perspective at all from which people or God may judge other cultures' moral systems. Rather the moral system of the Old Testament is true relative to the early Israelites, and the moral beliefs of current theists are true relative to their modern culture. Making this cultural relativist move is further beneficial in that this means modern day theists do not have to abide by the cultural laws of the Old Testament. Now, those who espouse a cultural moral

relativist position may attempt to escape the contradiction in the moral epistemological argument by claiming that the apparently problematic passages in religious texts are not problematic relative to the Old Testament moral culture. As the moral epistemological argument states that the given problematic passages are universally wrong, those theists who take the cultural relativist route may object to this premise.

While this is an interesting move in order to reconcile certain apparently problematic passages of the Old Testament, contemporary theists who make such a move may potentially only do so by failing to see the wider implications of cultural moral relativism. If moral truth is relative to cultures, then today's theist cannot properly criticize the ethical values of, for instance, Nazi Germany or the practices of slavery in the Antebellum American South. They cannot claim that the attempt of the extermination of the Jewish population in World War II Germany and slavery in the American South was wrong from an objective point of view. They cannot even claim that God would say that the Nazi Germans and slavery are objectively wrong. At most, they and God may claim that such atrocities are wrong relative to their own or a certain culture in a particular period of time, but they are morally correct relative to the perpetrator's culture. However, most modern day theists claim that such acts are objectively morally wrong and that God would say so as well. When pressed appropriately and shown what logically follows from cultural relativism, I take it that most theists will not espouse this strategy. Based on empirical evidence, theists commonly believe in an objective morality, not a relativistic one (Goodwin and Darley 2008). When Jesus says to treat others as you yourself would like to be treated, most Christians believe this to be a universal moral command that is true even for cultures with moral systems that are incompatible with this law for certain situations. When Jesus gave his moral teachings, at the time they were meant for the Jewish people and the early Christians as well as for the Ancient Romans, even though the Romans may be thought to have had a different moral culture. When so pressed, theists generally will understand that God's omnibenevolence means that God has full knowledge of what is *objectively* morally right and wrong, where it is presupposed that there is an objective or universal morality. If this is the case, then God's omnibenevolence means that when he provides human beings with instruction, it is instruction of what is objectively morally right. However, God at times tells humans to do things that are considered to be objectively wrong. Hence, the contradiction generally

remains. However, if one still maintains a cultural relativism in light of what I have just stated above, then as previously noted in my discussion of the scope of the moral epistemological argument and of the definition of omnibenevolence that presupposes the existence of an objective morality, such a divine being that has created a world in which there is no objective morality at all falls outside the moral epistemological argument's scope.

Third, theists may take what may be called the 'moral reading approach'. They may argue that an individual may pick and choose what moral commands in the religious texts to select based on what is in fact moral. Ethical critics of theism, such as Morriston, may also give this reply. By having knowledge of what is ethically right and wrong, problematic passages of religious texts may be eliminated as being irrelevant, and one may hold only on to those passages of moral commands that are praiseworthy. In this fashion, one may have an appropriate reading of religious texts that lies in accord with what is in fact morally right. This is consistent with many modern day theists also ignoring passages in religious texts that have been shown to be scientifically false. Not everything in religious texts must be taken to heart. Rather, people should ignore the problematic moral passages and focus only on the virtuous ones.

The response is that this does not eliminate the contradiction. God still decrees immoral commands and laws, so the contradiction still persists. It is just that on the moral reading approach, one may ignore such promulgations. However, personally ignoring certain of God's dictates does not mean that God did not make such dictates. Since such dictates supposedly exist, there is a contradiction. The theist then may counter that God did not make such dictates because they were produced merely as a cultural by-product, they were made by a false witness, they were misinterpretations of God's word, etc. The only commands he really made as captured in religious scripture are ethical ones, and any immoral commands are purely fabricated or misinterpretations of God's word. However, most religious texts are taken to be sacred scripture directly or indirectly coming from the word of God. The Bible is taken to be *holy* and generally should be treated as such by their followers. Second, as a burden of proof response, if certain passages of the Bible are fabricated or misinterpretations, then who is to deny that the entire Bible is also fabricated or is a misinterpretation? The entire Bible itself could very well have been produced as merely a cultural by-product,

as a misinterpretation, as a concoction constructed by false witnesses, etc. A theist making the move to say that the problematic passages are merely cultural by-products, misinterpretations, that they are produced by a false witness, etc., opens the floodgates for this type of criticism. Therefore, in this circumstance, the theist needs to provide a criterion that justifiably determines when a passage is really and accurately from God or not. The burden of proof squarely falls on the theist for this difficult task that somehow is able to show that the immoral commands did not really come from God but other ethical commands, many of which are stated in the same authored book or chapter as the supposedly inaccurate immoral mandates, actually did come from God. I take it that this is a significant and difficult burden of proof. To note, the theist may respond that since God is omnibenevolent, only the moral commands are really from God while the immoral ones must be fabricated or must be misinterpretations. This is the criterion for separating legitimate holy passages from the illegitimate ones. However, the question at hand is whether the supposed omnibenevolent God gave immoral commands or not. If one states that the supposed God did not do so because he is omnibenevolent, then one has simply begged the question at hand.

A fourth objection is the canonical approach, whose main champion is the biblical scholar Brevard Childs (1970, 2006). This view claims that eliminating certain passages in the Bible as in the moral reading approach while keeping certain others is a distortion of the Biblical witness and it demeans the very essence of scripture. Therefore, one must take the entire canonical evidence into consideration and understand individual passages in a wider context. One must keep in mind the meaning and import of the biblical texts as a whole when interpreting them. By looking at the integrated big picture and gathering a total contextual impression, the purportedly ethically problematic passages of the Bible can be seen in a different light and interpretation than if they were examined in isolation. For example, the supposedly ethically problematic acts of the Patriarchs in the book of Genesis, when examined based on the canonical approach and bringing in the book of Psalms (Psalms 105 & 106), can be seen as a lesson of redemption and God's purposes of salvation rather than being seen as an instance of certain Biblical characters having supposedly morally suspect intentions.

The first problem with this approach is that even if there is a systematic moral message in the Bible, an omnibenevolent God under no circumstances should explicitly still order for genocide, rape,

revenge killings, misogyny, and the like. There appears to be no excuse for uttering such commands from an entity that is omnibenevolent, especially when people actually did perform the relevant heinous acts in the specified situations. Systematization of overarching moral themes should have been reached through other more palatable means. Second, the canonical approach requires the moral tenets of the entire Bible to have a substantial degree of coherence and consistency, but the Bible is notoriously anything but that (Davies 2010: 92-97). There is not one unified moral vision to the Bible or an overarching general theme. Too many contradictions exist for coherence and systematization. For example, numerous instances of apparently immoral commands that directly contradict many of the teachings of, for instance, Jesus have already been examined above. Given the moral contradictions of peace and violence in the Bible, the Christian scholar Eryl Davies notes in light of the canonical approach that, 'Individual traditions are often suppressed in the interest of maintaining a coherent whole, and the plurality of perspectives is dissolved in an attempt to achieve a harmony where patently no harmony exists' (2010: 94). For example, notice the striking and contradicting passages in the Bible, where the first predicts a reign of peace and the second is a demand for war:

> They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks (Isaiah 2:4).

> Beat your ploughshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears (Joel 3:10).

Fifth is the paradigmatic approach, where one of the main proponents is the biblical scholar Christopher Wright (2004). This view generally claims that the Old Testament provides people with broad general moral principles that may help people in their decision-making. Such broad rules are to be understood as general models that human beings are to apply in the particular moral scenarios people may encounter in their everyday moral lives. Therefore, people should not pay attention to the specific laws and customs of the Old Testament, but they should focus on the general principles that underlie them. As with the canonical approach, there is an alternate underlying meaning and interpretation to the passages. For example, the law of the Jubilee year (Lev 25:8-55) – that forfeited property to a creditor must periodically be restored to the debtor – is no longer applied in today's age. However, from this passage

people may garner the underlying principle that they should show compassion to the poor.

The response, similar to the canonical approach, is that even if there is some kind of underlying benevolent message to the problematic passages of the Bible, an omnibenevolent God still should not explicitly state orders for pillaging, plundering, and ethnic cleansing. Underlying general principles should not be implicitly given by an omnibenevolent God by explicitly stating what are appalling moral injunctions, especially since people actually did perform the licentious acts in the relevant situations. Surely a truly omnibenevolent God would have used other means for moral education. Therefore, the inconsistency remains. For instance, it specifically may be asked what the underlying moral principle is to a particular problematic case. Take for instance the command for the genocide of the Canaanites. While Wright acknowledges the moral revulsion from reading the relevant chapters, he claims that the general underlying message is one of salvation and 'universal blessing' for the people of God. There is an underlying alternative meaning and interpretation to it all. However, what about the blessing of the slaughtered Canaanites who were also made in God's image? Doesn't God love all his children? Also, the supposed underlying principles or meanings to many passages still do not justify the explicit commands contained in those passages that were acted upon.[6] Bringing about the purported underlying moral theme of salvation and blessing for God's people and not for others by in part commending genocide and rape is severely morally unacceptable and should not have been ordered by a supposedly omnibenevolent God. An omnibenevolent God could have attained his supposed underlying message through more ethical means. Hence, the contradiction remains. It seems that in order to be saved, one potential avenue that may be taken is that the paradigmatic approach may then revert to the canonical approach. However, the canonical approach, as has been previously shown, is itself problematic.

On a more extreme note, philosophers such as Richard Swinburne (2011), William Lane Craig (2007), and Copan (2008) contend that things like genocide in the Bible are morally justified since this either helped the Israelites avoid becoming spiritually corrupted by other polytheistic

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[6] Commands for genocide were acted upon, but they may not have been completely carried out to fulfilment in all cases. For instance, the ancient Jewish people did kill many Canaanites, but they did not kill all of them.

nations or the other nations deserved punishment for their sinful lives. For example, Swinburne writes that ethnic and racial extermination is justified in that it is used to 'preserve the young monotheistic religion of Israel from lethal spiritual infection by the polytheism of the Canaanites ... ' (2011: 224). Craig says, 'So whom does God wrong in commanding the destruction of the Canaanites? Not the Canaanite adults, for they were corrupt and deserving of judgment.' (2007)

In ethics it is exceptionally difficult to justify genocide and ethnic cleaning for any reason. To claim the permissibility of wiping out a whole people, women, and children is beyond serious consideration. In fact, in philosophy I have only read theist philosophers of religion, who supposedly believe in the teachings of Jesus, try to do this. Regarding Craig's claim that the extermination of many races and ethnicities was deserved since they committed so many ostensible sins, what were taken at the time to be common immoral acts of relevant non-Jewish ethnicities were idolatry, incest, adultery, prostitution, child sacrifice, homosexuality, and bestiality. The most serious of these is child sacrifice. Let us put this to the side for now and discuss the other so-called sins. We will return and discuss child sacrifice later.

Killing others because they practice a different religion, partake in incest, prostitution, adultery, homosexuality, and bestiality is not justified. Assuming that capital punishment is justified, people have an individual right to life; a right that cannot be so easily taken away via capital punishment except in the most egregious of circumstances such as in cases of premeditated murder. However, the so-called sins at hand are not even close to being crimes that are worthy of capital punishment. The mass genocide is not warranted for the purported sins in question. Furthermore, what would Jesus do; a man who kept the company of prostitutes and corrupt tax collectors? Jesus, arguably the most influential and most powerful moral philosopher in the history of ethics, famously also forgave a criminal who was dying next to him on a cross, and while hanging on the cross from nails through his body embedded in wood, he said in regard to his Roman persecutors (this is truly remarkable), 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). The right thing to do for those sinners, such as the Canaanites who probably were not even aware that their acts were supposed sins, is to try to change them and teach them the error of their ways with great patience (Morriston 2009). It is not to order for them to be killed: men, women, infants, animals, and all.

Concerning child sacrifice, does this justify capital punishment in the form of genocide? What is curious in this case is that God also commands for child sacrifice for his people: 'I defiled them through their very gifts, in their offering up all their firstborn, in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am the Lord.' (Ezek 20:26) However, regardless of this fact, even though child sacrifice warrants capital punishment, it only ethically warrants it for those who perform the sacrifice. To order that the right to life should be taken away for those who do not commit this crime, such as infants, and that they should be put to death in a mass genocide is egregiously morally wrong. It leads to a basic mistake in ethics of incorrectly and knowingly placing the moral blame and moral punishment on the wrong agents, which leads to disastrous, unethical, and horrendous effects.

Recall that Swinburne claims that the orders for genocide are required in order to protect the young spiritual minds of the Israelites so that they are not morally corrupted. To note, one of Hitler's main justifications for the Holocaust was similarly due to the reason that the Jewish people supposedly were immoral, and they were corrupting non-Jewish Germans. Imagine a third world country in the modern world that was largely polytheistic, but now they have widely adopted Christianity. One of their neighbouring countries practices a polytheistic religion which allows for things like bestiality, prostitution, child sacrifice, etc. This new Christian country then says that they are going to attempt to wipe out this other polytheistic nation not because they commit immoral acts, but rather, only so they do not themselves become spiritually corrupted from their neighbours. Even though it is the case that the polytheistic nation should be stopped for performing things like child sacrifice, is the moral thing to do in this case to order the killing of all the people of this polytheistic nation including the children who themselves would have been sacrificed? Is such a commendation of genocide warranted just to stop one's own people from being morally influenced and corrupted? This is clearly a perversion of morality, to order for a command of genocide in this case, especially since you do not need to kill their infants in order to stop your own people from being corrupted. Also, it makes a fundamental error in ethics of knowingly and falsely attributing moral blame on the children, some of whom would have been sacrificed themselves. Furthermore, what would Jesus do in this case? Patient moral education, love, and tolerance of sinners who may not even know the error of their ways so that they might find moral redemption would

be the remedy. Jesus would especially find orders for the killing of the babies of the polytheistic nation and taking away their right to life to be ethically repulsive. For the above reasons and via argument by analogy, Swinburne's justification for the many genocides is also not warranted.[7]

Finally, theists such as Alvin Plantinga (2011), Michael Bergmann (2009), and Mark Murphy (2011) make the appeal to ignorance. This is where humans ignorantly perceive apparent problematic moral passages in scripture, but such passages are really not problematic. God works in mysterious ways, and human beings are ignorant of his 'big picture', purposes, and final educational aims. One cannot know God's ultimate plan or purpose similar to how a small child cannot fully understand her parents' intentions, but one must be assured that the ultimate plan is such that somehow no logical contradiction exists. Notice that the appeal to ignorance for the moral epistemological argument does not *directly* demonstrate that there is no contradiction as all the previously entertained theistic objections in this paper attempt to do, but rather it functions in a more *indirect* fashion. In the case at hand, the theist cannot explicitly state why it is not the case that there is a contradiction. Rather, God works in mysterious ways, and God's plan has it set up such that it is not the case that there is a contradiction even though we do not know why.

However, the fact that God works in mysterious ways does not necessarily mean that no contradiction exists. For, in making such a move, the theist does not take into account that it could equally be the case that even though the supposed God works in mysterious ways, the apparent contradiction still persists. It does not immediately follow from the appeal to ignorance that the contradiction has been eliminated. The property of 'working in mysterious ways' does not in-and-of-itself necessarily lead to the fact that the supposed contradiction must then be eradicated. Rather, at this first initial stage of assessing the appeal to ignorance and the property 'working in mysterious ways', it is equally rational to conclude that there still may be a supposed contradiction or there may not be one, and thus, an agnosticism is warranted regarding the efficacy of the appeal to ignorance. It is equally rational that God works in mysterious ways always towards good or perhaps, on the other hand, sometimes towards evil. If the theist then claims that the supposed contradiction must be eradicated if God works in mysterious ways

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[7] For further reasons against Swinburne, see (Morriston 2011).

because the purported God is omnibenevolent, then this is once again begging the question. On the other hand, the fact remains that given all the concrete religious textual evidence discussed above, there is a rather sizable and significant level of justification that the supposed existence of an omnibenevolent God does at times lead to an apparent contradiction as stated in the moral epistemological argument. There is significant evidence that if God exists, at times God purportedly does issue immoral decrees. Due to this bevy of direct tangible evidence, this places a heavy and substantial burden of proof on the theist who makes the appeal to ignorance to show in a non-question begging way that even though God works in mysterious ways, the purported God and his existence in all the problematic passages eliminates rather than upholds the supposed contradiction. While this burden of proof counter as presently stated in-and-of-itself may be sufficient to respond to the appeal to ignorance, what is even stronger, this burden that the theist bears can never be met by the theist who makes the appeal to ignorance precisely because God works in mysterious ways, and no one can know or understand his plans; an understanding that is required in order to meet the burden.

CONCLUSION

I have newly articulated an argument for atheism called, 'the moral epistemological argument'. I have laid out the theoretical basis of how it is a logical contradiction contention and how it differs from other logical contradiction arguments such as the problem of evil and the problem of hell. I have supported it with problematic ethical religious passages, and I have defended this argument from potential counters from philosophers and religious scholars. Some of the attempts particularly from religious scholars have not been addressed generally by philosophers, and some of them may not even be known in many philosophical circles. Furthermore, at times I have provided novel rebuttals of the various ways theists may try to object to the moral epistemological argument. All in all, given the moral epistemological argument, I conclude that God does not exist.

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THE PROBLEM OF GOD'S EXISTENCE:
IN DEFENCE OF SCEPTICISM

IRENEUSZ ZIEMIŃSKI

University of Szczecin

Abstract. There are four main positions in the argument about whether God exists: atheism (God does not exist), theism (God exists), agnosticism (it is impossible to know whether God exists or not), and scepticism (at the moment we do not know whether God exists or not). From an epistemological standpoint, scepticism is the most rational; even if a decisive argument which would settle the debate has not been discovered yet, one cannot exclude the possibility of finding it eventually. Agnosticism is too radical (and even incoherent), but theism and atheism exceed the available data. However, from a practical standpoint, choosing theism or atheism seems to be more rational than scepticism (not to mention agnosticism); one of them is bound to be right, because there are only two possibilities, one of which has to be true: either God exists or not.

The main thesis I am going to defend[1] is that currently the question of whether God exists remains unanswered because the available data does not enable us to settle it. It does not mean that there is no possible evidence which could settle the dispute about the existence of God or that we will never be able to discover it; still, even if such evidence exists, we do not know it at the moment. In other words, this will be an attempt to justify the thesis that the most adequate standpoint on the matter of whether God exists is *scepticism*. First I will present my main assumptions, mainly concerning the concept of God (point 1), next I will outline the main standpoints on the matter and show the difficulties of

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theism (point 2), atheism (point 3), and agnosticism (point 4). Finally, in the last (and most important part), I will move on to the explication and attempt to justify scepticism (point 5).

I. ASSUMPTIONS

The main assumption is the belief that a rational discussion about the existence of God is possible. This means that the question whether God exists (and even more – what we know about God's existence) is rational. Regardless of whether there is a way of solving it, the problem is not senseless. On one hand, we know what we are talking about when talking about God's existence, on the other hand we understand what the possible solutions to the problem are (that is the different answers to the question: does God exist?). I therefore assume that, despite some opinions (mostly defended by such philosophers as A. J. Ayer, Ninian Smart, Paul Edwards, Kai Nielsen or Anthony Flew before his conversion), sentences like 'God exists', 'God does not exist' or 'we do not (and never will) know whether God exists or not' make sense.

I also assume that it is possible to discuss the problem of God's existence on a philosophical level. I will therefore try to avoid discussing the problem on a religious or common-sense base, treating the problem of God's existence as a theoretical question. Statements like 'God exists' or 'God does not exist' will be treated not as religious or nonreligious expressions but as metaphysical beliefs.

The next assumption concerns the concept of God I will be using. It is not an empirical concept (at least in the sense of a sense experience or its necessary connection with a sense experience); still it may be given an understandable meaning. The fundamental elements of this concept correspond with how God is understood by the monotheistic religions. Therefore it is neither a finite nor limited being (like Zeus); it also is not part of the world (it is not the entire world or an arrangement of finite things). It is a transcendent being in relation to the world (not in a dimensional, but ontic sense, resulting from a different way of existing). God has to be an independent being; that is, in His existence He does not depend on anything, having the foundation of His being in Himself (*ens a se*). God has to be a necessary being both existentially and essentially; this means that if He does exist, then He necessarily exists (God cannot be a random being that only happened to exist), and has to be necessarily entitled to all His attributes (which do not accidentally result from His

nature). God also has to be able to take action, be almighty (as in being able to do what is logically possible to do).[2] It would seem that He should also be an infinite being when it comes to the quantity as well as quality of attributes; that is, God should have an infinite number of attributes on a maximal level. However, since the concept of infinity (especially quantitative) leads to paradoxes, the attribute of infinity should be negatively defined as a lack of any ontic or axiological limits. It would mean that God is a flawless being and therefore deserves the appellation of an absolute being. Defined like this, God has to be a unique being; for if it were possible to think of two absolute beings, they would have to somehow be different and therefore at least one of them would not meet the criteria of an absolute being (one would have to have at least one deficiency or shortage). That is why the concept of God rules out being multitude.[3] Moreover, God – as a being able to take action – should have the attributes of a person (at least the ability to experience and evaluate different actions and choose between them). However, as almighty, He does not need a body but could effectively act by direct effectiveness of the will.[4]

Despite the adduced attributes, the concept of God is fundamentally negative since we could say more about what God is not than about what God really is. Still, He should not be treated as an Absolute Mystery (because this concept, if understood literally, is incoherent; it suggests that even though God is inscrutable, we do know about His inscrutability).

We can assume that this description of God is apparently coherent and therefore God is a possible being (or at least there are no arguments to assume that He is an impossible being). Proving the possibility of God is not necessary, because for the purpose of our discussion the thesis that His possibility is not out of the question is enough.[5] Moreover,

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[2] Thanks to such a definition we can omit the stone's paradox, formulated in modern terminology by C. W. Savage in his article 'The Paradox of the Stone', Philosophical Review (1967), pp. 74-79. This new and careful concept of omnipotence is recently defended by Richard Swinburne. See, for example, his book *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 1993).

[3] The most important defence of the uniqueness of the absolute being is, of course, Spinoza's *Ethics* (part one: 'Of God').

[4] We could find this concept in the Jewish Bible. According to me, it is possible to understand in such a way the metaphor of the word by which God has created the world.

[5] An excellent defence of the coherence of God is Swinburne's book *The Coherence of Theism*.

even if a correct proof of the possibility of God were not possible, it still would not prove that God is impossible, because we have no proof of the incoherency of the concept of God. Meanwhile it is difficult to decide who bears the burden of proof. Usually it is the duty of whoever formulates a more radical thesis, however in the dispute over whether the concept of God is coherent or not (and if it is possible to prove it) we do not know (nor can we settle in a neutral manner) which thesis is more radical. That is why we can consider the concept of God coherent and God as a possible being (at least until it is proven otherwise).

The main problem is the question of whether God exists, that is, if the outlined concept has an exemplification in reality. I assume that when raising the question of God's existence we do not only want to believe that He does or does not exist but know *about* Him (or at least have conclusive arguments for our belief or disbelief). I understand demanding knowledge as demanding certainty (or at least a probability higher than the probability of potential opposing hypotheses). I also assume the realist (correspondent) concept of truth, so the statement 'God exists' is true if God does actually exist, and false if He does not.

II. THE MAIN STANDPOINTS

There are four main standpoints on the issue of whether God exists: theism, atheism, agnosticism, and scepticism. Theism is a belief that God exists (the statement 'God exists' is true) and that we are able to justify it by rational argumentation.

Atheism is a belief that God does not exist (the statement 'God exists' is false whereas 'God does not exist' is true) and that we are able to justify it by rational argumentation. Atheism is not just a simple negation of theism (or a refusal to acknowledge the truthfulness of the statement 'God exists'), but a positive claim that God does not exist (it is not only the lack of conviction that God exists, but a conviction that He does not).[6]

Agnosticism is a belief that we do not know and never will whether God does or does not exist (this lack of knowledge is not relative to time

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[6] This means that I understand atheism in the traditional metaphysical way, which is different from the new concept of atheism (a-theism), defended by John Schellenberg. Schellenberg defines atheism as the negation of a personal God. See John Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993); *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995).

or circumstances but essential and irremovable). Agnosticism is not only refusing to acknowledge the truthfulness of theism or atheism but is a positive claim that it is impossible to settle the dispute over God's existence.[7]

Scepticism is a belief that we do not know if God does exist or not, but unlike agnosticism, it does not claim that we will never know the answer (although a lack of knowledge is our current situation, it is not necessarily impossible to overcome). Scepticism on the issue of God's existence is not only a suspension of judgment (a lack of acceptance for theism, atheism, or agnosticism) but, just like the three previously presented standpoints, is a positive claim, that we currently do not know if God exists or not. Scepticism does not deny the possibility of settling the dispute in the future (e.g. by discovering data which would prove the truthfulness of theism, atheism, or agnosticism). Scepticism does not claim that any of the three other standpoints are false, but that we currently do not know which (if any) is true or false. Understood like this, scepticism is not a total lack of knowledge (ignorance about one's own ignorance), but it is limited to not knowing whether God exists.

Besides the four mentioned standpoints, one more could be singled out: radical scepticism, which is understood as a complete suspension of judgment about the existence of God; however this standpoint rules out the possibility of any discussion and therefore will not be considered.

As I said before, this paper is an attempt to justify the thesis that among the highlighted standpoints on the issue of whether God exists, scepticism is the most adequate one. Meanwhile theism, atheism, and agnosticism (understood as theoretical standpoints) go beyond the available data. From a practical point of view it may be different – scepticism might turn out to be the least desirable (and even the least rational); however as a theoretical standpoint it is the most credible (and the most rational, if by rationality we mean the correlation between the level of acceptance for a statement and the arguments on behalf of its truthfulness).

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[7] My definition of agnosticism is, of course, connected with Kantian epistemology; I do not identify agnosticism with disbelieving in God because of lack of proof of His existence (as some philosophers do), but with our lack of knowledge about God's existence.

III. THEISM

As mentioned before, theism comes down to the thesis that God exists (the statement 'God exists' is true whereas 'God does not exist' is false). According to theists, this claim can be proven with certainty or at least with a high (higher than other hypotheses) probability. This means that the truthfulness of the statement 'God exists' is absolutely true (excluding the possibility of it turning out to be false) or at least more probable (with the accessible data) than the truthfulness of atheism, agnosticism, or scepticism.

Usually two types of arguments are made for theism: *a priori* arguments (referring to the content of the concept of God) and *a posteriori* arguments (supposed to prove the existence of God based on the empirical evidence). Some arguments are considered certain while others are treated as ways of proving theism to be probable. This distinction does not overlap with the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* arguments since among the first group some are merely attempts at making theism probable while some in the second group are attempting to prove the certainty of theism. *A priori* arguments are usually called ontological arguments whereas typical examples of an *a posteriori* argument are different versions of the cosmological argument.

The meaning of ontological arguments (regardless of how they are formulated in details) comes down to the claim that the existence of God results from the content of the name 'God' (it is impossible to think of God without at the same time thinking of His actual existence). This means that the statement 'God does not exist' is not only false but also self-contradictory.

There is no need to present all the criticism in the history of philosophy against the ontological argument.[8] It is however worth noticing that the main argument which was usually treated as a way of effectively refuting the ontological argument – the inability to treat existence as a predicate – is wrong (or at least there is not enough proof to treat is as right). Without going into details, it could be argued that even if existence is not a predicate (which in itself is doubtful) then possible existence, real existence, or necessary existence certainly is.[9] Moreover, we also do not

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[8] These problems are discussed in detail by Graham Oppy in his book *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[9] The thesis was defended by Norman Malcolm in his article 'Anselm's Ontological Arguments', *Philosophical Review* (1960), pp. 41-62.

know whether real existence is a predicate which should be attributed to God as an absolute being since there is no guarantee that real existence is a perfection. Regardless of the axiological discussion about the (positive or negative) value of existence, the ontological argument presents a different, more serious difficulty concerning the inability to prove the existence of God as a being radically transcendent towards the world. Even if we agree that the ontological argument is an effective mean of proving the necessity of the existence of *some* being, then it is still useless in proving the existence of a *specific* being (especially one transcendent to the world). The only existential statement which can be proved *a priori* is the statement 'something exists'.[10] Its trustfulness seems absolutely certain, since there are no possible conditions in which it would be false; 'something exists' can never turn out to be false – in a extreme situation at least the statement itself will exist (if it were to be false, then it would not be able to exist). The negation of the statement ('it is not true that something exists' or expressed differently – 'nothing exists') is clearly false, because there are no possible conditions in which it could be true. If 'nothing exists' were to be true, then it would be impossible for the statement to exist. Therefore the statement 'something exists' is not only a truth but a logically necessary truth. The problem is, however, that 'something exists' is a formula with one variable so it can be treated as a short version of 'at least one x exists'; but this formula does not prove *specifically which x* exists. If the word 'something' is replaced by any other name (God, chair, number, beauty) then none of the new sentences is necessarily true (its negation may be true). This means that even if something has to exist it does not mean that a specific being has to exist (even if this being was to be God). That is why the ontological argument cannot be acknowledged as conclusive.

Cosmological arguments (without going into the differences between specific formulations) are usually based on two main assumptions: the first one being a claim about the ontological (especially existential) contingency of the world, the other the thesis that the existence and structure of the world must have reason and explanation. These assumptions however, being the only way to justify the existence of

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[10] M. K. Munitz says that we could say also that the sentence 'the Universe exists' is a necessary truth. See his books *The Mystery of Existence: An Essay in Philosophical Cosmology* (New York: New York University Press, 1974); *The Ways of Philosophy* (New York; London: Macmillan, 1979).

God in an empirical way, also cause every cosmological argument to get caught in a vicious circle. Claiming that the world (and all its elements) is contingent may be true only if we assume it was created by an absolute and necessary being; since the contingency we are talking about is existential, the contingency of the world means that it is created every moment by a being which is the only adequate reason for its existence. The assumption about the contingency of the world understood like this is necessary because only a radically dependent creature (essentially dependent, consecutive, endangered by a constant possibility of collapsing into nothingness) may be a basis for a claim that there is a necessary being keeping the world in existence. So if we do not ascribe contingency to the world, we will not have adequate data for the thesis about the existence of its metaphysical and transcendent cause. At the same time, however, we can only say that the world is contingent when we state its dependence on the necessary being (that is, we assume the existence of God as the world's reason in the premises).

The second foundation of the cosmological arguments – the rule of sufficient reason – brings a similar difficulty. If the world must have an adequate reason for its existence (and nature), and this reason (because of the contingency of the world) cannot be immanent, then it can only be a transcendent necessary being. However assuming the metaphysical contingency of the world and the necessity of the reason of the world we beg the question, proclaiming the existence of a necessary being (excluding *a priori* other possibilities like the hypothesis of a world without any ultimate ontic reason or the hypothesis of the necessity of the world) as true. Thereby we can accept the premises of the cosmological argument as true only if we have already assumed its conclusion.

We deal with a similar situation in cases of different attempts of theistic arguments, for example referring to religious experiences or a supernatural Revelation (as a source of knowledge about the existence of God). If a specific experience is defined as a religious experience (as experiencing the direct presence of God) then the problem of God's existence is solved at the beginning by treating a religious experience as credible. However, the criteria of authenticity for religious experiences are inevitably subjective; just because some people think they experienced the presence of God does not mean God actually exists (or that He was subject to someone's religious perception). In all cases of such an experience, there is the possibility of illusion.

There are similar difficulties when attempting to justify theism based on a supernatural Revelation, miracles, or common belief in God during human history. This situation persuades us to conclude that (at least for now) we do not have a conclusive argument settling the dispute about the existence of God in favour of theism.

Showing the incorrectness (non-conclusiveness) of arguments supposed to justify the hypothesis that God exists by no means proves theism to be false. It does however show, that with the available data, the theistic hypothesis goes too far beyond the evidence, which was supposed to be in favour of God's existence. Precisely, this evidence can only be treated as credible arguments justifying theism if we understand it in the context of the previously assumed theistic thesis. In other words, recognizing specific data as evidence for theism is only possible if it is seen as the results of the actual existence of God (that is, by assuming theism is true).

IV. ATHEISM

Atheism is a standpoint claiming that God does not exist, that is, the statement 'God does not exist' is true and can be proved by rational argumentation. The truthfulness of the statement 'God does not exist' is certain or at least more probable than other hypotheses (especially theism). One of the attempts to justify the truthfulness of atheism is by referencing the non-conclusiveness of all theistic arguments (the fact that the arguments in favour of God's existence are non-conclusive is considered as an argument for the truthfulness of atheism). However this justification is not enough, since disproving the arguments in favour of the truthfulness of the statement 'God exists' does not in any way prove the truthfulness of 'God does not exist'; atheism, as a positive conviction needs stronger arguments. Usually they are *a priori* arguments which are supposed to prove the contradictory nature of the concept of God (also called ontological anti-arguments) and *a posteriori* arguments which are supposed to show it is impossible to reconcile the existence of God with some facts in the world.

When it comes to the first type of argumentation, the most common form is the attempt to prove that the concept of God as a being existentially necessary is self-contradictory (or even nonsensical). If God necessarily

exists then the statement 'God exists' must be an analytically true whereas the statement 'God does not exist' analytically false. However if the negation of any fact is not self-contradictory then any existence (also the existence of God) must be completely contingent. In that case, the concept of a necessary existing being has to be considered nonsensical (analogically to the concept of a square circle or a mountain without a valley), and thus God cannot exist.[11]

This objection is not conclusive, since it could be argued that the concept of a necessary being is rational (and not self-contradictory) and not only as an independent being but also as a being entitled to the predicate of a necessary being; even then the statement 'God (a necessary being) exists' would not have to be understood as an analytical and necessary truth. While the statement 'God exists' could indeed be an analytical truth for an absolute mind, but does not necessarily have to be such for a finite, human mind. Apart from all that, it could be noticed that the argument referring to the absurdity of the concept of God as an argument in favour of atheism (understood as a claim that theism is not just false, but it is absurd) has an undesirable consequence for atheism itself; if the statement 'God exists' is absurd then 'God does not exist' should be considered just as an absurd as well.

Other attempts to prove the contradictory nature of the concept of God (and therefore the impossibility of its exemplification), referencing paradoxes supposed to be connected to some attributes ascribed to God, are just as non-conclusive. One of the paradoxes is the sometimes suggested contradiction of the concept of omnipotence (if God is almighty then He can create a stone He would not be able to carry, and that falsifies the thesis about his omnipotence). If God is not almighty then He is a limited being and therefore does not deserve the name of an absolute (perfect) being. It is sometimes attempted in a similar manner to ascertain the impossibility of reconciling infinite mercy with infinite justice or God's immutability/constancy with His consciousness. However, all these (and similar to them) arguments are based on arbitrary (and uncertain) definitions of God's attributes. Nevertheless, nothing stands in the way of assuming such limitations of God's omnipotence or justice which would allow us to avoid the mentioned paradoxes. Moreover, even if there is a problem with the correct articulation of the

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[11] This argument was defended by Bertrand Russell, Paul Edwards, and in more sophisticated form by J. N. Findlay in his famous proof of God's nonexistence.

actual meaning of God's attributes, it still does not decide about His nonexistence (and even more about the impossibility of His existence). Therefore all attempts to prove the nonexistence of God by referring to the alleged inconsistency of His concept should be considered too weak to justify atheism.

Another form of justifying atheism are *a posteriori* arguments, mostly the problem of evil (the undeniable fact of evil existing in the world is supposed to rule out the existence of God). To cut it short, evil is treated as impossible to reconcile with God's goodness (as infinitely good, God should want to eliminate evil) and His omnipotence (as almighty God should be able to eradicate evil) therefore if evil exists, God cannot (being both infinitely good and almighty).

Supporters of the argument from evil sometimes add that any theodicy attempting to define evil not as directly *caused* by God but merely *allowed* by Him for certain reasons is illusory since in the case of an absolute being, creating something and allowing something to exist is the same action. Occasionally atheists declare that they respect God more than theists since by trusting that God (if He existed) would not permit any evil in the world, they prefer to negate His existence rather then hold Him responsible for the nightmare of unnecessary evil causing people (and other creatures capable of feeling) to suffer. This means that an atheist does not blame God whereas a theist, when trying to justify the existence of evil in the world, has to admit that the almighty and infinitely merciful God is (at least partially) responsible for it. This argument is based on the assumption that a theist commits blasphemy against God (blaming Him for evil and trying to defend Him) while an atheist by denying God's existence in the face of evil, does not ascribe any negative traits to God which would be in conflict with God's essence. Moreover, according to an atheist any arguments provided by the theist justifying why evil should exist in the world rather than not, are insufficient. They are all based on a anthropomorphic picture of God, ascribing to Him motives characteristic for people and not for an absolute being.

Without going into details of the argument about the presence of evil in the world one has to conclude that at least three arguments seem important to reconcile theistic position with the reality of evil. Firstly, the hypothesis of the greater good, claiming that without some types of evil some types of good could not exist (without suffering there would

be no compassion or helping the suffering).[12] The second argument is the thesis that facing the impossibility to create another absolute being, whatever He decides to create will be ontologically less perfect than God (evil as a form of imperfection is therefore a structural element of beings created as such). The third argument is the impossibility of excluding the truthfulness of the hypothesis of eschatological redemption in a cosmic universal salvation. This is why the argument about evil cannot be treated as a sufficient justification of atheism.

When it comes to the charge of having an anthropomorphic picture of God (inevitable in any theodicy) it should be stated that nobody trying to discuss God is free of this problem (also an atheist, agnostic, and sceptic). The thesis that all we know and experience, we know and experience as human beings (even if we constantly make the effort for it to be non-relativist, accurate). It is also difficult to treat the argument of the possible lack of respect for God shown by the theist who tries to defend Him and justify evil in the world, seriously. The case of supposed respect for God or lack of it is irrelevant in a theoretical discussion about the existence of God. This discussion does not concern how we are supposed to address God, but whether God actually exists. Atheism may come from really great respect for the being God would be if He existed, whereas theism may be connected with hostility towards God (or at least rebelling against Him). However, these attitudes are irrelevant to settling the metaphysical dispute about whether God exists, because they do not affect the logical value of both the theists' and atheists' claims.

These remarks show that also atheism (analogically to theism) should be considered a position going beyond the original testimonies supposed to justify it. This means that the evidence upon which an atheistic argumentation is based may only be considered adequate in justifying the statement 'God does not exist' if we earlier assume that God indeed does not exist and understand the available evidence (like evil) and concepts used to describe God's attributes (infinite mercy and almightiness) in the context of this assumption.

V. AGNOSTICISM

The indicated problems with attempting to justify theism and atheism may incline one to assume the agnostic position in the discussion about

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[12] For more about this argument, see Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

God's existence. Agnosticism is a belief that we do not and never will know the answer to the question whether God exists or not. The first argument in favour of agnosticism is the fact that theistic and atheistic argumentations are inconclusive. Since the fact that none of the theistic arguments is conclusive does not prove the truthfulness of atheism just like the inconclusiveness of atheistic arguments does not prove theism right, this could point towards the impossibility of settling the matter of God's existence. Despite being able to formulate multiple inconclusive arguments in favour of theism or atheism, no multiplication of them will make one claim more probable than the other. The difficulties of theism (evil in the world, troubles with an adequate description of God's attributes) or atheism (rationality of the world and at the same time none of its elements being unnecessary) are not enough to prove the opposite standpoint is true. What's more, it would be difficult to pinpoint a neutral criterion by which we could judge the importance and meaning of specific theistic and atheistic arguments (individually or collectively). After all, it is hard to agree that religious experiences are more important evidence than evil, or that the contingency of the world is a more adequate description of the world than its existential autonomy. We also cannot agree that despite the sometimes formulated arguments one of the hypotheses (theism or atheism) should be considered true because of its simplicity.[13] For on one hand the rule of simplicity may be a fruitful methodological rule in science but does not necessarily have to be an obvious metaphysical rule, on the other it is impossible to decide which of the competing hypotheses is simpler (the only difference between them is that theism is an affirmation whereas atheism a negation of the existence of a specific being).

Axiological and pragmatic arguments also cannot settle the dispute. On occasion atheists argue that their life is more heroic since it lacks the final fundament and guidance (at the same time free from egoistic morality, aiming at an afterlife prize), whereas theists try to argue that their life is based on unshakable and absolutely certain rules. However these types of arguments are entirely subjective and cannot be taken into account when trying to settle the theoretical dispute about God's existence. They may of course be relevant to the question of how to live, they can also have various persuasive or therapeutic purposes (giving a sense of, say, our participation in God creating the world or awakening

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[13] This is the idea defended by Richard Swinburne.

awareness of being responsible in the world whose fate is entirely up to humans), but are totally irrelevant to the question of whether God exists. This does not mean that theistic and atheistic arguments have no cognitive value. They can bring our attention to certain aspects of the world which we did not notice earlier or did not understand their importance (the argument from evil exposes the world's multiple flaws, whereas the argument from Revelation its dimensions, hard to explain in the frames of radical naturalism); however these arguments are either heuristic or persuasive[14] but they are not conclusive. Both atheist and theist cannot know if God exists or not, but they can only believe in His existence or nonexistence. So it could be concluded that in this situation agnosticism, as a belief that we do not know (and never will) whether God does exist or not, appears to be the most reasonable position.

When you put it like this, agnosticism is not a justified position. Despite the remarks about the inconclusiveness of all theistic and atheistic arguments being accurate, they are not enough to settle the dispute about the existence of God in favour of agnosticism. Theistic and atheistic arguments being incorrect (and also impossible to compare to each other as John Hick said) is not enough to prove that knowledge about the existence of God is out of the question. Agnosticism is right in claiming that we do not know whether God exists, but goes beyond the available evidence by saying that we will never know the answer. By stating the fundamental impossibility of having knowledge about the existence of God, an agnostic basically makes an additional assumption about the inscrutability of God's existence/non-existence. This statement however does not hold up, at least when understood literally since it is self-contradictory; if we claim that we cannot know anything about the existence/non-existence of God we in fact assume that we know at least one truth about His existence (that we do not know nothing about it). Moreover, assuming the absolute inscrutability of God's existence/ non-existence would make it impossible to even formulate the question (we would not know what we are talking about). In that case it is crucial to assume some sort of restriction to agnosticism; this viewpoint does not mean that we know *nothing* about the existence/non-existence of God, but that the problem is *insolvable*; but in declaring the problem of God's existence/non-existence insolvable we really say that we know something about the problem (that it is insolvable).

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[14] They are called 'the situations of disclosure' by Ian Ramsey.

However, even this restriction to agnosticism is not enough to acknowledge this position as legitimate since the insolubility of the question whether God exists can be understood either objectively or subjectively. In the first case the insolubility would come from within God's nature; this means that if God did not exist, no subject would be able to know it (which seems to be a coherent thesis). Still, if God did indeed exist no subject, even God himself, could know it; but this conclusion is absurd, because, if God is supposed to be God and He does exist, then at least He has to know about it. In that case the thesis that the question of whether God does exist or not is insoluble is unacceptable.

The claim that the insolubility of this problem comes from the limitations of the human mind is similarly difficult to agree with. The only argument in favour of this claim is the fact that until this day the question about God's existence still has not been answered (or that we still do not know what evidence could help us to solve the problem). However, the current lack of knowledge is not enough to justify the impossibility of knowing. Moreover, it is difficult to assume that we have an insight into the nature of our minds which would allow us to determine the limitations of our knowledge (the limits between what we can and cannot find out). We therefore have to agree that agnosticism also goes beyond the available data concerning the existence of God. This means it should be considered to be as inconclusive as theism and atheism. This could make one speak in favour of scepticism, in case of God's existence, as the most moderate standpoint.

VI. SCEPTICISM

Scepticism claims that we currently do not know whether God exists or not (but it does not exclude the possibility of solving the problem in the future). Three previously discussed standpoints came down to a choice: acknowledging one of the statements: 'God exists', 'God does not exist', 'it is not possible for us to know whether God does or does not exist' as true, despite none of the arguments supposedly in favour of theism, atheism, or agnosticism being sufficient to warrant this acknowledgment. Speaking in favour of scepticism is also a choice since it is not a conclusion of reasoning but a decision motivated by the lack of sufficient evidence in favour of the three mentioned standpoints. Choosing scepticism, however, seems to be the most rational decision,

because we really do not know not only whether God exists or not but even what could be a neutral argument that would allow us to settle which of three standpoints is true.

Choosing scepticism, that is believing the statement 'at the moment we do not know whether God does exist or not' to be true, is epistemologically justified. While theism, atheism and agnosticism are inconclusive, scepticism turns out to be free from this difficulty, because it does not go beyond the available evidence.

Moreover, scepticism is also free from the paradoxes the other standpoints have to face. One of the problems with theism is that God's existence is not obvious. If God is the only being which cannot be thought about as non-existing, then a question arises: why is it so difficult to discover His existence, or at least prove it?[15] Another difficulty theism has to face is the evident evil in the world; this does not disprove the theistic thesis but is a big problem that a theist has to face.

The world having a complicated (and at the same time organized and rational) structure is surely a problem for atheism. In every object we notice on one hand it being unnecessary (every object's non-existence is at least possible), on the other its rational structure composed into a consistent system of other objects. This is why the world as an organized system of ontologically unnecessary objects naturally forces on a human mind the idea of a transcendent mind which designed it and keeps it in existence. This means that existence and the rational structure of the world can barely be explained in just a naturalistic fashion (they may not prove the existence of a necessary being but can still be treated as its traces or signs). This is why atheism must exclude the possibility of interpreting the world as a trace of God (or at least prove its very low probability).

In the case of agnosticism we come across the impossibility of expressing it without contradicting ourselves. Claiming that knowledge about God's existence/non-existence leads to either a paradox, that even God himself could not know about His own existence, or to the incoherent thesis that we know the strict limitations of the human knowledge (separating what we can find out from what is impossible for us to get to know).

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[15] This problem was broadly discussed by John Schellenberg in *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason.*

The agnostic's position seems to be the worst since he/she has to express his/her view in such a way as to avoid contradiction. However the theist and atheist also have to admit that the above mentioned problems with their standpoints are troublesome. Apart from all that, there is no neutral criterion which would help us to settle which of the mentioned problems are of greater importance. In that case, if agnosticism, theism, and atheism go beyond the available evidence risking additional difficulties, we have the right to choose scepticism as the least problematic viewpoint in the dispute about God's existence. Scepticism also often faces serious charges but it is possible to at least weaken them if not refute.

One of the elementary counterarguments is ascribing an absurd position of suspending judgment to the sceptic; this position, no different really than remaining completely silent, is supposed to make any discussion impossible so it is often ignored as quite irrational. This charge does not however apply to the version of scepticism defended in this paper. Scepticism about God's existence is not a negative suspension of judgment but a *positive* judgment claiming that at the moment we do not know whether God exists or not.

On occasion scepticism is charged with leaving an incredibly important (perhaps even the most important) matter for the human life in suspension. It is suggested that in the case of God's existence/ non-existence (understood as an absolutely unique matter deciding about the shape of our entire life) one has to have a specific standpoint even if it is not a certain or even probable conclusion. This would mean that in the case of God's existence one is obliged to make a specific, positive choice (preferably choosing theism or atheism and in extreme cases agnosticism). Meanwhile scepticism is the least rational because it suspends our entire life in a void (or in an absurd waiting for the potential settling of the matter in the future).

This charge does not seem to be accurate because one can argue that choosing between the existence and nonexistence of God is not necessary from the practical point of view; a person is capable of making the most crucial decisions affecting their life without espousing the truthfulness of either theism, atheism, or agnosticism. The potential necessity to settle the discussed matter could only appear in the case of people feeling a strong desire to be certain about the existence or non-existence of God. Such necessity is relative and subjective because it depends on specific life circumstances or a person's character traits. Of course in the case of such a person, choosing theism or atheism rather than scepticism

may be more rational (in a pragmatic sense); such a solution however cannot resolve the theoretical discussion about whether God actually exists. Despite theism and atheism being more rational pragmatically (or more significant existentially), scepticism is still more rational epistemologically.

Another strategy to bring down scepticism is trying to prove it can never be consequently abided. This means that – no matter what our theoretical beliefs are – what we actually think about something is shown by our actions. So, even if we declare to be sceptics and at the same time take part in religious practices, then we are essentially theists; whereas if we claim to be sceptics and do not take part in any religious practices, then we are atheists. Since it is impossible to at the same time take and not take part in religious practices, any position we take will be a negation of scepticism.

This charge is not decisive if we make a distinction between faith as a religious or non-religious position and a theoretical stance on the matter of God's existence. On a theoretical level, scepticism is clearly described as a claim about our current lack of knowledge about the existence/non-existence of God whereas on the basis of faith (or religious practices) there may be a different solution. There is no contradiction between the belief that we currently do not know whether God exists or not and at the same time having faith that He does (and participating in appropriate religious practices) or believing He does not (and not taking part in religious practices). Despite such position might be rare, or even a sort of disparity between theoretical beliefs and religious faith, but it is certainly not impossible.

Moreover, one has to stress the fundamental independency of potential religious practices (or desisting from them) from theoretical beliefs; it is not the fact of fulfilling rituals that is important but the motivation behind it. One can be a theist (believe the statement 'God exists' to be true) at the same time believing none of the religions to be an appropriate form of worshipping God; one can be an atheist, agnostic, or sceptic and still ardently fulfil specific religious rituals hoping they will either strengthen us in our convictions or allow us to break free from them, giving us a chance to discover previously unknown truths about God (nothing stands in the way of an atheist participating in religious practices searching either for a confirmation of the thesis that God does not exist or for data which would allow him to reject atheism). No matter what the motivations are to fulfil (or not) religious practices, they

in themselves have no means to solve the theoretical dispute about the existence/non-existence of God.

Sometimes the contradiction of scepticism is not seen as a gap between theory and practice but within the theory itself (considered to be incoherent). If scepticism means declaring current lack of knowledge about something then it is contradictory because by proclaiming our lack of knowledge we already assume that we at least know about our lack of knowledge.

This charge, however, does not concern scepticism in the matter of God's existence/non-existence since it is not global scepticism (claiming that we do not know anything about any matter), but local scepticism claiming only that the dispute about God's existence is at the moment unsettled. Moreover, scepticism is not a claim that we know nothing about the existence of God (we then would not be able to even state the question) but simply that currently we do not know whether God does or does not exist.

Sometimes another charge against scepticism is formulated. According to critics, only the claim that at the moment there is no evidence enabling us to settle the matter of God's existence could justify scepticism. Sceptics, however, cannot know, that there is no evidence for the existence or nonexistence of God; such claim would go beyond available data. Sceptics can only say that he/she does not see evidence which could settle the dispute.

In answering, sceptics should accept that the statement 'at the moment there is no evidence allowing us to settle the dispute about God's existence' is too strong. According to me it is true, that we do not know such data, but we cannot say that such evidence does not exist. So we must say that we do not recognize evidence supporting either the existence or nonexistence of God.

There is, however, a more important charge, which seems to be the main argument against scepticism. This is the claim that if we are sceptics we are not able to recognise any evidence of His existence or nonexistence. This means that even if we see the God himself (or other quite obvious evidence of His existence), we could say that it is (or could be) simple illusion. Analogically, even if we see quite obvious evidence disproving God's existence, we could say that it is (or could be) illusion. So scepticism is the position which we could not override in any rational way but only in irrational illumination or dark faith.

This charge seems to me important and too difficult to answer. I hope, however, that this charge is not more difficult than counterarguments posed against theism, atheism, and agnosticism. According to some thinkers, if a sceptic sees God and hears His voice, s/he would accept God's existence. This is the position held by Norwood Russell Hanson: 'I'm not a stubborn guy. I would be a theist under some conditions. I'm open-minded. ... Okay. Okay. The conditions are these: Suppose, next Tuesday morning, just after breakfast, all of us in this world are knocked to our knees by a persuasive and ear-shattering thunderclap. Snow swirls, leaves drop from trees, the earth heaves and buckles, buildings topple, and towers tumble. The sky is ablaze with an eerie silvery light, and just then, as all of the people of this world look up, the heavens open, and the clouds pull apart, revealing an unbelievably radiant and immense Zeus-like figure towering over us like a hundreds Everests. He frowns darkly as lightning plays over the features of his Michelangeloid face, and then he points down, *at me*, and explains for every man, woman and child to hear: 'I've had quite enough of your too-clever logic chopping and world-watching in matters of theology. Be assured Norwood Russell Hanson, that I do most certainly exist!'[16]

I am not sure if this story is plausible, because I can imagine a sceptic who sees God and hears His voice but still thinks that the figure or voice are illusions. So, the main difficulty in the sceptic's position is that s/he could neither recognise any evidence as the evidence of God's existence, nor recognise any evidence as the evidence of God's nonexistence. In other words, if you are a sceptic, you will probably be a sceptic forever.

CONCLUSION

The result is rather depressing, because I should say that I do not know which theory is true – theism, atheism, agnosticism, or scepticism. I can say, however, that scepticism, as the least radical position, has the best justification, and that theism, atheism, and agnosticism go beyond the evidence. However, scepticism is not a good position from the practical point of view, because some humans cannot live without belief in God's existence or nonexistence. I am afraid, however, that our choice could only be practical and axiological; so, it could not settle the question on

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[16] N. R. Hanson, 'What I Don't Believe', in Stephen Toulmin, Harry Woolf (eds), *What I Do Not Believe, and Other Essays* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1972), pp. 309-31 (p. 322).

the theoretical level. We can believe that God exists or believe that He does not, but *we do not know which belief is true*. Both atheist and theist are in a good position, because they have a fifty percent chance of having made the right choice. This means that both theist and atheist are in much better position than a person who hopes to win in the gambling of even one dollar.

ATHEISTS' CHALLENGES
TO COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

PAUL CLAVIER

Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris

Abstract. In this paper I intend to identify some points of disagreement between theism and atheism. I will try to point out three epistemological clashes occurring in the controversial treatment of cosmological arguments. I am not assessing the arguments pro and contra, which have been thoroughly studied and discussed, but just trying to understand the misunderstanding.

By a cosmological argument, I will understand any argument to a first generating and sustaining cause of the universe. Suppose that, up to the present day, every purported cosmological argument has been defeated. This would not disprove theism. Would this provide a good presupposition in favour of agnosticism? Probably yes (except if the relevant God of theism was not creator, or if God's existence could be accessed without implying the dependence of the world on God's creative power).

But of course, this would not preclude the success of further attempts to make a positive case for a creator.

A more conclusive strategy would consist in finding out a flaw that generally dismisses every attempt to make a sound argument to a creator. A first flaw could be found in the very concept of creation out of nothing. A second flaw could be about which are the standards and which the right stopping point of a causal explanation of the world. And, finally, there could be Hume's argument against the necessity of a cause to every new existence. For, if even a new existence is not crying out for an explanation, a fortiori the mere existence of anything at all will not.

I.

Let us first deal with the widespread idea that there is something wrong
with the very concept of creation out of nothing, since it would contradict
the basic principle that nothing comes from nothing. Our first concern
will be then a brief inquiry into the alleged conflict between the concept
of creation out of nothing and the principle that out of nothing comes
nothing.

Let us consider first, the following definition of creating:

(1) x creates $y =_{\text{Def.}} x$ makes y come into existence.

Then let us phrase the so-called epicurean or lucretian[1] principle *ex
nihilo nihil fit* which I suggest to express positively:

(2) $(\forall a)$ $((a$ comes into existence$) \rightarrow (\exists b)$ $(a$ comes out of/from $b))$

Suppose now (3) C creates W out of nothing
By (1) & (3), we get:

(4) C makes W come into existence out of nothing.

And here is a crucial issue as to whether 'out of nothing' is referring to
a paradoxical origin of the creature OR qualifies the operation of the
creator.

In the first case, statement (4) should be read as (5) C makes {W come
into existence out of nothing}, but if W is made come into existence out
of nothing, then W comes into existence out of nothing; which would
certainly contradict (2). But instead of (5), (4) could be read as (6) C, out
of nothing, makes {W come into existence}.

This is the question of the scope of clauses in sentences including
factive verbs. If I make you laugh without reason, one may ask whether
I, having no reason to do that, make you laugh, or I make you laugh, but
you have no reason to laugh, you are just caused to laugh, by inhaling
a laughing gas I may have spread in your face. So, the phrase 'out of
nothing' does not necessarily describe the making-of of the creature.
It may only stipulate that creation operates without any pre-existent
substratum.[2] It just suggests that creation out of nothing is creation not

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[1] '*nullam rem e nihilo gigni divinitus unquam*': which means 'no reality was ever
produced by divine deeds' (Lucretius, *De rerum natura* I, 150, cf. '*nil posse creari de
nihilo*' (ibid., I, 155-156).

[2] Peter Geach has suggested a clear analysis of the concept of creation out of nothing.
He dismisses apparent difficulties arising 'from illicit manipulations of the word
"nothing" in "made out of nothing"'. 'Nothing' is not 'the stuff we are made of'. Creation

out of anything. This is the way Aquinas or Geach used to conceive of
creatio ex nihilo. Nevertheless, even on this account, creation out of
nothing still contradicts principle (2), since there is no *b* out of which
W comes into existence.

So if we wish to remain consistent with the basic knowledge (the
tautological evidence?) that nothing comes out of nothing, we will have
to qualify the epicurean principle of ontological conservation. It may
operate within the framework of physical events and transformations.
According to Lavoisier's famous rephrasing of the epicurean principle:
'*In* nature nothing gets lost, nothing gets created, everything gets
transformed.' But what obtains within nature, or given nature, may not
obtain concerning the very existence of nature. The epicurean principle
of ontological conservation may apply to every member of the collection
of natural entities, without applying to the collection itself. In this case,
the theist will certainly not commit the Fallacy of Composition. On the
contrary, he could suspect some atheists to commit it, since they claim
that the universe as a whole cannot be created out of nothing, like every
part of it.

Well and good, but then – one objector might say – what kind of action
do we ascribe to God when we pretend God creates the world? Surely we
do not ascribe to him any kind of action we are acquainted with. And
this may raise a difficulty for theistic metaphysics, for it hugely weakens
the intrinsic probability of the metaphysical hypothesis of creation out of
nothing. According to Mackie: 'the hypothesis of divine creation *is* very
unlikely.' Mackie considers that God the creator must be endowed with
a power 'of fulfilling intentions *directly*, without any physical or causal
mediation; without material or instruments'. But, as he puts it, 'There is
nothing in our background knowledge that makes it comprehensible. All
our knowledge of intention-fulfilment is of *embodied* intentions being
fulfilled *indirectly* by way of bodily changes and movements which are
causally related to the intended result ...'[3]

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out of nothing is to be conceived in terms of creation *not out of anything*. As already
phrased by Aquinas, *creatio non ex aliquo* is not a *creatio ex non aliquo*.

'God created an A' = $_{Def.}$ (God brought it about that ($\exists x$) (x is an A) & ~ ($\exists x$) (God
brought it about that x is an A)). In creating, God is not acting upon any individual. Nor
is he acting upon 'nothing'. (Peter T. Geach, *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge and
Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 83.)

[3] J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments For and Against the Existence of God*
(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 100.

This is a strong objection against the prior probability of the explanatory hypothesis of divine creation. Against this objection, Richard Swinburne claims that creating *ex nihilo* is 'a perfectly conceivable basic act' and that it successfully passes the test of verificationist criteria! Let us now turn to consider his defence of the conceivability of creation out of nothing. According to Swinburne, 'It is logically possible that I could just find myself able as easily to make appear before me an inkwell or to make a sixth finger grow, as I am at present able to move my hand. Various tests (for example, sealing off the room and keeping its content carefully weighed) could show that the inkwell or finger were not made of existing matter.'[4]

Let us comment upon this. Surely, all this is logically possible. Nevertheless, the tests recommended by Swinburne would only be relevant (and feasible) in the case of a partial creation, and in the case of a temporal one. For first, the process of verification here suggested requires a prior framework of physical objects and structures. It requires a neutral observer, a sworn bailiff, or every impartial witness. It requires a laboratory or a place closed to external contributions, whose content is likely to be carefully weighed. These requirements are not to be fulfilled if creation of everything out of nothing is to be tested. Second, it may not even be relevant at all, to the extent that creation may not essentially be a temporal process, nor a change of states of affairs.

Suppose now you really look at Mr. Swinburne making an inkwell appear before him or making a sixth finger grow. Would you infer that he is endowed with a creative power? I would not. Or at any rate, not immediately. If this appearing of inkwells or fingers were to happen once upon a unique time, or on certain circumstances, with a special mise en scène, my suggestion would be it is a magic trick, or an organized deception, an imposture.

If it were to happen more regularly, I would rather suggest that the epicurean intuition of the principle of ontological conservation is subject to qualifications. It would not be absurd to suggest that, for instance, fingers or even inkwells are not always to be considered like sets of entities whose number is definitely closed. (A four-dimensionalist doctrine of temporal parts could account for these strange phenomena. What we call a finger, for instance, should have to be replaced within a spacetime

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⁴ Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 49-50.

worm, where some objects like hands would have distinct temporal parts including perhaps different numbers of fingers on different subregions of time). I do not want to advocate the view that fingers and inkwells do appear from scratch or grow without pre-existent matter. But if they did, their coming into existence should not at all cost be interpreted in terms of creation by a supernatural agent. Fred Hoyle and Hermann Bondi's steady-state theory of the universe involved a hypothesis of matter constantly created to form new stars and galaxies to maintain a constant average density. This hypothesis was not that of a supernatural creation. It was but a refinement of a principle of conservation of matter-energy.

An ultimate explanation in terms of someone making something exist out of nothing may be the best explanation of why there is something rather than nothing, but since the explanation does not fit with what we know about processes, its explanatory power will have to be all the more strong than its prior probability is low, or at least not so high as Swinburne claims it is.

II.

Let us now turn to consider briefly the second possible misunderstanding between theist and atheists.

Seemingly, every cosmological argument rests upon one or another version of the PSR, and are based on the assumption of the impossibility of infinite causal regress. Then, if at least one of those assumptions prove to be false, we get a general defeater of cosmological argument.

But alas, both concerns have only proved to be very controversial issues.

William Rowe acknowledges that 'the Cosmological Argument might have been a *sound* argument'. He nevertheless asks: 'Why, after all, should we accept the idea that every being and every positive fact must have an explanation?'[5]

As emphasized by Patterson Brown, the quest for ultimate explanation in terms of essentially ordered causes is begging the question.[6] It is

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[5] William Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1978), p. 27.

[6] Patterson Brown, 'Infinite causal regression', *Philosophical Review* 75:4 (1966), 510-525 (p. 525). There is a complex proof by Stephen Davis consisting of 18 steps arguing that there can be no infinite regress for a series of hierarchical causes (that is, essentially ordered causes). There cannot exist only transitory contingent beings. There must exist at

because they conceive of causal relations in terms of essentially ordered causes that theists can raise and solve the question of an ultimate explanation. They pretend that the very existence of the whole series of states of affairs, be it finite or not, cries out for an ultimate explanation. Following a famous comparison by Leibniz, they are still demanding an author being responsible for the content of his book, even if the book had been sempiternally reprinted, by accidentally successive publishers.

On the other side, atheists will be happy with 'the principle that every occurrence has a preceding sufficient cause'. So they can easily conceive of 'a series of things or events running back infinitely in time, each determined by earlier ones, but with no further explanation of the series as a whole'.[7] A book is sufficiently explained by its being reprinted from the preceding edition.[8] This time, atheists could complain that this move from the contingency of the components of the universe to the contingency of the universe commits the Fallacy of Composition. As William Rowe puts it: '[For] it is one thing for there to be an explanation of the existence of each dependent being and quite another thing for there to be an explanation of why there are dependent beings at all.'[9]

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least an eternal non-contingent being. (Stephen T. Davis, 'The Cosmological argument', *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs* (Grand Rapids, MI: M. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1997), pp. 60-77.)

There is a simpler way out, suggested by Mackie, who as a true gentleman fairly defends Aquinas. He exonerates him from having committed the logical fallacy which consists in inferring 'at some time everything is not' from 'each thing at some time is not': 'If each thing were impermanent, it would be the most improbable good luck if the overlapping sequence kept up through infinite time. Secondly, even if this improbable luck holds, we might regard the series of overlapping time as itself a thing which had already lasted through infinite time, and so could not be impermanent.' J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, p. 89.

[7] Ibid., p. 86.

[8] This is nicely summarized by Cleanthes in Hume's *Dialogues*: 'In such a chain, too, or succession of objects, each part is caused by that which preceded it, and causes that which succeeds it. Where then is the difficulty? But the WHOLE, you say, wants a cause. I answer, that the uniting of these parts into a whole, [...] is performed merely by an arbitrary act of the mind, and has no influence on the nature of things. *Did I show you the particular causes of each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I should think it very unreasonable, should you afterwards ask me, what was the cause of the whole twenty. This is sufficiently explained in explaining the cause of the parts.*' (Emphasis added.) David Hume, *Dialogues*, ed. by J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 150.

[9] William L. Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 264.

The theist's argument seems to require mistakenly that, since we can ask for the cause of particular things, we can ask for the cause of the set of all contingent beings. Kretzmann considers 'there is no particular difficulty in dealing with the whole collection of dependent beings like with an object'. Quoting some remark by Bernard Katz: 'I do not think that pointing out that the existence of S is successive, or that there is no time when all its members simultaneously exist, is a good reason for concluding that S cannot be construed as a concrete being.'[10] But it could equally be said that there is no particular difficulty in treating the whole collection of dependent beings as different from any object.

In the preceding considerations about creation *ex nihilo*, we had noticed that the theist was denying that whereas physical processes are ruled by the principle of conservation, the existence of the whole could escape the rule. So the so-called Hume-Edwards principle is a weapon used by every side. It is clear that the recourse to epistemological rules is here opportunistically flexible. Anyway, Mackie himself acknowledges that there are cases where an infinite causal regress is not possible: 'Where the items are ordered by a relation of dependence, the regress must stand somewhere, it cannot be infinite or circular.' Mackie grants with some fair-play that this principle 'is at least highly plausible'.[11] But, he adds, 'the problem will be to decide when we have such a relation of dependence'.[12]

'Though we understand that where something has a temporally antecedent cause, it depends somehow upon it, it does not follow that everything (other than God) *needs* something else to depend on in this way.'[13]

This echoes Patterson Brown's considerations: talk of causes in terms of legal responsibility instead of mentioning only concomitances makes it easy to argue against infinite regress in per se ordered causal series. Patterson Brown wonders 1°) whether it is a relevant concept of cause, and 2°) whether it always applies to the observed phenomena.

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[10] Norman Kretzmann, *Metaphysics of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 102-103.

[11] J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, p.90. Our current intuitions are such that we would not expect 'a railway train consisting of an infinite series of carriages, the last pulled along by the second last, the second last by the third last, and so on, to get along without an engine'. But are our current intuitions still relevant when applied to the very existence of the universe? One could answer: 'they are of course *a fortiori* relevant', or 'they are probably off the mark'.

[12] Ibid., p. 91.

[13] Ibid., p. 92.

Both theists and atheists seem to be, each on their own side, begging the question, in disagreeing about what is a sufficient explanation, and what is its relevant stopping point.[14]

<div align="center">III.</div>

Suppose now the concept of creation out of nothing is free from contradiction, and that philosophers agree with the standards of explanation (I have a dream). Creation out of nothing is supposed to provide us with an explanation of why there is something rather than nothing at all. But the very question as to why there is something rather than nothing at all could prove to be pointless. One of the most radical atheistic strategies consists in denying that the mere existence of something, or even the coming into existence of something, cries out for an explanation.

Why should we not agree with Hume, wondering whether after all, something might arise without a cause? Hume has endeavoured to defeat the 'general maxim in philosophy', which is a version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, 'that *whatever begins to exist, must have a cause of existence*'.[15] Mackie, in his turn, claims it is at least conceivable that something might begin to exist out of nothing, without any reason or cause.[16]

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[14] '[I]f we ask what is the explanation of the necessary being, [...] the answer is meant to be internal to the necessary being [...] you see w*hy* the being exists when you understand *what* it is.' Nicholas Everitt, *The Non-Existence of God* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 74. Alexander Pruss points out, 'Claiming to be a brute fact should be a last resort. It would undercut the practice of science.' Alexander Pruss, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 255.

[15] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part III, Section III 'Why a cause is always necessary', 2nd edition, ed. by L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 78. Hume defeats Clarke and Locke's attempts to demonstrate the necessity of a cause in reducing causeless production to contradiction.

Clarke: 'Every thing, it is said, must have a cause; for if any thing wanted a cause, it would produce ITSELF; that is, exist before it existed; which is impossible.'

Locke : 'Whatever is produced without any cause, is produced by nothing; or in other words, has nothing for its cause. But nothing can never be a cause.'

Those purported demonstrations are all 'fallacious and sophistical' (ibid., p. 80). Clarke's sophism is to equate 'wanting for a cause' with 'producing itself'. And Locke's fallacy consists in equating 'to be produced without any cause' with 'to have nothing for its cause' or 'to be caused by nothing'. Which is in its turn begging the question, for in order to be produced, anything has to be produced by something.

[16] J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, pp. 89, 94.

Hume's point is this one: as such, the very coming into existence of anything does not cry out for an explanation. The brute fact that something (without further qualification) begins to exist does not forcedly require an explanation, a reason or a cause, why there is such a thing rather than not. This is the issue I would like to discuss now.

According to Hume, 'We can never demonstrate the necessity of a cause to every new existence, or new modification of existence, without shewing at the same time the impossibility there is, that any thing can ever begin to exist without some productive principle.' And, Hume says, the latter proposition is utterly incapable of a demonstrative proof: 'twill be easy for us to conceive any object to be non-existent this moment, and existent the next, without conjoining to it the distinct idea of a cause or productive principle.' Hume does not deny that the world may owe its existence to a cause. He just makes an epistemic point: 'it is not from knowledge or any scientific reasoning that we derive the opinion of the necessity of a cause to every new production.'[17]

Let us follow how Anscombe constructs Hume's argument. It is an argument from the imaginable possibility of separating the ideas of coming into existence and that of a productive principle, to the impossibility of demonstrating the necessity of a cause.

(1) All distinct ideas are separable.

(2) The ideas of cause and effect are distinct.

(3) It will be easy to think of an object's coming into existence without thinking of a cause.

(4) The separation of the idea of a cause from that of a beginning of existence is possible for the imagination.

(4a) It is possible to imagine something's beginning to exist without a cause.

(5) The actual separation of these objects [cause and beginning of existence] is so far possible that it implies no contradiction or absurdity.

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[17] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part III, Section III 'Why a cause is always necessary', p. 79. In a letter to John Stewart, Hume writes: 'But allow me to tell you that I never asserted so absurd a Proposition as that anything might arise without a cause: I only maintain'd, that our Certainty of the Falsehood of that Proposition proceeded neither from Intuition nor Demonstration, but from another Source', David Hume to John Stewart, February 1754, in *The Letters of David Hume*, 2 vols., ed. J. T. Grieg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 1, p. 187.

Anscombe remarks that Hume is allowed to say:

(6) For any beginning (or modification) of existence E and any particular cause C, I can imagine E's happening without C.

And to infer from this:

(7) For any beginning (or modification) of existence E, and any particular cause C, E can be supposed to happen without C : i.e. there is no contradiction or absurdity in the supposition.

But, as Anscombe emphasizes, the proposition does not give me the possibility of imagining an effect without any cause at all. It does not give me:

(8)* I can imagine this: there is a beginning (or modification) of existence without any cause.[18]

In Anscombe's view, there is a flaw, because from

'For any, it is possible that not ...' there does not follow: ' It is possible that for none ...' For instance: it does not follow from: 'For any colour, I can imagine that a rose is not that colour', that 'I can imagine that a rose has no colour'.

Our very ability to imagine for any cause, that a beginning or modification of existence does not depend on that cause, does not entail:

(9)* A beginning of existence can *happen* without any cause.[19]

To put it briefly: $(\forall E \, \forall C)$, I can imagine that E occurs without C.

But not: $(\forall E)$ I can imagine $(\forall C)$, E occurs without C.

If Anscombe is right, Hume would have mingled two different issues: 1°) Why should everything that begins to exist owe its existence to a cause? 2°) Why is there this cause of beginning of existence rather that another cause? Surely, Hume is put under pressure. These are indeed two distinct issues, but does it matter so much? Suppose there is a limited number of causes or at any rate a finite number of kinds of causes I can imagine to be responsible for the occurrence of E. Suppose I can imagine that E occurs without C_1, & I can imagine that E occurs without C_2, & without C_3, ... & without C_n. Am I entitled to say that I can imagine that E occurs

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[18] G. E. M. Anscombe, "'Whatever Has a Beginning of Existence Must Have a Cause": Hume's Argument Exposed', *Analysis*, 34 (1974), 145-151 (p. 149).

[19] G. E. M. Anscombe, "'Whatever Has a Beginning of Existence Must Have a Cause": Hume's Argument Exposed', pp. 148-9.

without the disjunction C_1 or C_2 or ... C_n, that is neither with C_1, nor with C_2, and so on, that is with none of them? Of course not. On this point Anscombe is right: there is a logical mistake. The only attainable conclusion, as Anscombe put it, is 'that the effect can occur with any particular cause which you have imagined it without'.[20]

Nevertheless all the successful attempts to imagine E occurring without the different C's (from C_1 to C_n) would cast a serious suspicion on the causal explanation of E's occurrence, and this is exactly what Hume intended to show.[21]

By the way, Anscombe has partly reconsidered the case. She considers that the description 'something coming into existence' 'was a mere title one gave to one's mental picture of something – a rabbit, say, or a star – coming into existence'. Anscombe esteems she has 'understood the existence of other things (like places, times, which on their turn presuppose 'processes measurable by some master time-keeping process') to be involved in something's coming into existence'. But she acknowledges 'it does not yet imply the existence of a cause'.[22] And even if we need to envisage ourselves 'as having reason to say something came into existence at this time and place and not at any other,'[23] talk of something coming into existence (but not arriving from elsewhere where it already existed) requires 'to make sure that *any* identification of this as this individual with something that was somewhere else is excluded ... The task is too much for me; [...] It seems that there is

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[20] Ibid.

[21] By the way, it looks quite easy to defeat Hume's inference from imaginability to possibility. Let us follow Anscombe's counter-example : 'I can imagine or think of a sprig of leaves as existing without there being any definite number of leaves that I think of it as having. But this does not mean that I can think of it as existing without having a *definite number of leaves*.' Ibid., p. 151. Cf. p. 150: 'If I say I can imagine a rabbit coming into being without a parent rabbit, well and good: I imagine a rabbit coming into being, and our observing that there is no parent rabbit about. But what am I to imagine if I imagine a rabbit coming into being without a cause? Well, I just imagine a rabbit coming into being. That this is the imagination of a rabbit coming into being without a cause *is* nothing but, as it were, the title of the picture. Indeed I can form an image and give my picture a title. But from my being able to do *that*, nothing whatever follows about what is possible to suppose "without contradiction or absurdity" as holding in reality.'

[22] G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Times, Beginning and Causes', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 60 (1974), repr. in *Collected Philosophical Papers,* Volume II (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), pp. 148-162 (p. 159).

[23] G. E. M. Anscombe, '"Whatever Has a Beginning of Existence Must Have a Cause": Hume's Argument Exposed', p. 160.

no experience which itself *positively* indicates that I have to do with a beginning of existence here, except indeed that the object is here now and was not here before. But, that being obviously insufficient, I have got to exclude other explanations of its arrival here. That it came into existence here is apparently to be arrived at by elimination.[24] This is quite the same criterion as Swinburne's test of *creatio ex nihilo*. But does it hold for the creation of the universe? Anscombe is happy to 'leave these questions, raised by the conception of a beginning of the world, where it is indeed very difficult not to flounder and flail about, gasping for breath and uncertain of talking sense'.[25] So, if even Miss Anscombe is gasping for breath, the atheists will not be without excuse.

Let us come back to Hume. In the last footnote of the *Enquiry*, Hume seems to triumph over what he terms 'that impious maxim of ancient philosophy, *Ex nihilo, nihil fit*, by which the creation of matter was excluded, [and which] ceases to be a maxim, according to this philosophy'.[26] Has Hume become a defender of creation out of nothing? Not exactly! The last section of the *Enquiry* goes on: 'Not only the will of the supreme Being may create matter; but, for aught we know a priori, the will of any other being might create it, or any other cause, that the most whimsical imagination can assign.' The way Hume defeats the maxim *Ex nihilo, nihil fit* proves to be very compromising for the rationality of metaphysical theism: 'If we reason *a priori*, anything may appear able to produce anything.'

Having defeated the justification of the maxim *Ex nihilo nihil fit*, Hume seems to grant that, as far as we know, *Ex quocumque quicquid fieri potest*. Since there is no *a priori* justification, the opinion of the necessity of a cause to every new production 'must necessarily arise from observation and experience'. And this epistemological point entitles Hume to dismiss the concept of creation as causal explanation of the world. This is Philo's objection to Cleanthes' 'experimental theism': 'Have worlds ever been formed under your eyes? [...] If you have, then cite your experience, and deliver your theory'.[27] Sure, none of us was ever able to observe a constant conjunction between creating activity and the

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[24] Ibid., p. 161.

[25] Ibid., p. 159

[26] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, section XII, Part III, ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 164.

[27] David Hume, *Dialogues*, Second Part, ed. by J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 53.

coming into existence of a world. Following Hume, Russell contends that since we cannot experience something like the universe, we cannot ask about its cause. The universe is 'just there, and that's all'.[28] Here again, there is the problem of moving from the contingency of the components of the universe to the contingency of the universe.

It seems then we have no *a priori* demonstrative reason to deny the possibility of something coming of a sudden into existence without a cause. This very point can be granted to Hume. But, as I shall try to explain, this does not jeopardize too much the thesis of creation.

It seems that a stronger defence of the requirement of a cause for anything (be it everlasting or endowed with a temporal beginning of existence) would consist in considering the very kind of thing that there is.

If the thing that begins to exist is an entity without a known property, alone in its kind, surely we are not able to deny it the ability of existing of its own, or to exist without a cause. The doubt cast by Hume on the PSR may be justified as long as we are dealing with vague statements like: anything can or could exist without a cause. But as soon as the thing whose causeless existence is at stake, and is described more accurately, then we may find some reason why we do not accept such a statement anymore.

This may provide a better starting point for an argument to a first sustaining cause.[29]

True, if you are able to conceive of one eternal self-sustained thing, then you have no reason to deny this property to any ultimate constituent of reality. So the universe could be made up of a vast collection of eternal self-sustained things. Generally speaking, Hume's claim against the necessity of a cause holds. But in this case, things would

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[28] Bertrand Russell and Frederick Copleston, 'Debate on the Existence of God', in John Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 167-190 (p. 175).

[29] This is the kind of inference that Maxwell makes, in his famous Bradford Lecture on *The Molecules* (1873). Maxwell agrees with Herschel that 'the exact quality of each molecule to all others of the same kind gives it the essential character of a manufactured article, and precludes the idea of its being eternal and self existent'. Then, Maxwell reaches his metaphysical conclusion: 'because matter cannot be eternal and self-existent it must have been created.' Of course, there is another possibility: things could be self-existent, and nevertheless they would receive their properties from a common source. But this is hard to conceive. Anyway we may need an additional step for the argument: for identity of properties doesn't necessarily preclude the idea of self-existence. It just makes this self existence less probable.

exist independently from each other, and then any likeness of structural or dispositional properties would become fully unaccountable. The regularity of so many entities falling into a finite number of identical sorts would not be just a riddle. It would cry out for an explanation. How could they fit together spontaneously without a coordinating cause, a common source, usually called a creator, on which they all depend? The inference to a creator provides a metaphysical explanation which solves simultaneously the problem of self-existence and the question why things must owe their existence to a single cause. In this case, it is the way you describe the data, and not some general principles of epistemology that make the difference.

But of course, one may be satisfied with the brute fact of the spatio-temporal order of the world, without asking for a further explanation.

To conclude: the debate about the soundness of cosmological arguments reveals at least three kinds of epistemological misunderstandings:

Disagreement on the coherence and the intrinsic probability of the concept of creation.

Disagreement about the explanatory standards.

Disagreement concerning the very question as to whether the coming into existence of anything as such is demanding an explanation.

Is it plausible that these disagreements are only due to ignorance of some epistemic principles or to logical mistakes? Does everything turn on a mistaken quantifier shift, or on the completist fallacy.?I do not think so.

It may of course happen that such or such debater commits a fallacy, or skips a crucial step in the justification of his premises or conclusion. But, as far as I know, this rarely changes their belief about the truth of the conclusion. At most they will refine their premises, change their definition and try to improve the steps of their argument, in order to be exonerated from being mistaken.

It is relatively easy for someone to change her mind about the number of the planets in the solar system. But how many philosophers have ever changed their mind about the existence of Jupiter (I mean the godhead, not the planet). And if they did, what should it prove? Anthony Kenny has finally departed from his earlier theism, having considered that God's traditional attributes were not consistent. Anthony Flew finally acknowledged that Swinburne was right. Which Anthony is right? Should we flee Flew's flaws? In a witty review of Swinburne's *Is there a God?*,

Richard Dawkins attacks the so-called simplicity of theistic explanation. Dawkins contests Swinburne's wondering about the orderliness of material objects (that is the repetitiveness and the retaining of structural and dispositional properties of particles of any one type): 'For him it would be simpler, more natural, less demanding of explanation, if all electrons were different from each other; worse, no one electron should naturally retain its properties for more than an instant at a time, but would be expected to change capriciously, haphazardly and fleetingly from moment to moment.'[30] Let us ask: 'Billions and billions of electrons, all with the same properties', so that once you've seen one, you've seen them all, is that a simple or a complex state of affairs? For R.S. it is not simple at all, for R.D. it is simple. So, once again, which Richard is right?

It is quite certain that Hume, if taught by Anscombe that he had forced his argument, would nevertheless maintain his conclusion and would search for a new argumentative path in order to reach it more correctly.

– David, you are completely mistaken! Not only you have committed a quantifier shift, but also you infer the possibility of causeless beginnings of existence from their mere imaginability.
– Ooops! I beg your pardon Miss Elizabeth. I promise I won't do it again. As a matter of fact, I entirely approve the detection of such flaws.[31]
– So you will correct your conclusion?
– Not at all, I stick to it.
– How dare you?
– For you yourself acknowledge the difficulty of the point.

I do not wish to imply that these debates are pointless. Statements about God's attributes and existence still have, in my view, a truth-value. And the epistemological controversies as to what is a sufficient explanation of the world, or as to what is evidence for what, are not a superficial disguise of our religious commitments or disbeliefs. They provide us with an explication of the background and of the basic beliefs involved on each side. They provide us with a logical clarification of our prejudices.

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[30] Richard Dawkins, 'Richard Swinburne's *Is There a God ?*', *The Sunday Times*, 4th February 1996.

[31] See, for instance, in the very same chapter: it does not follow 'because every husband must have a wife, that therefore every man must be marry'd'. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part III, Section III 'Why a cause is always necessary', p. 82.

They reveal preferences and reluctances in the need for explanations and, when developed in an atmosphere of loyalty, they improve the mutual respect of the debaters. They provide us, to some extent, with an opportunity of grounding exciting reasons on justifying ones. They may contribute to a better mutual understanding, but not forcedly to an agreement on the cosmological arguments.

Though I remain evidentialist in the first person, I cannot believe that the epistemological disagreements occurring in the assessment of the cosmological argument are due to flaws or faults, to fallacies or to unperceived shifts. So I would agree with foundationalism and coherentism in the third person.

The very possibility of such disagreements could be viewed as jeopardizing theistic commitments. For if there is a God, isn't it very likely that every rational being should have some epistemic access to his existence? Schellenberg's powerful argument from divine hiddenness could be displayed.

Swinburne's view that some 'epistemic distance' is required for human beings to act and decide for themselves without being under pressure may somehow account for that.

A crucial issue would then be: to what extent is a good God supposed to facilitate the justified belief that he exists and that human beings may rely on his providence? What proportion of which generation ought to have cognitive access to God's existence? What amount of hiddenness are we to expect from a perfectly loving God?

CAN ATHEISM BE EPISTEMICALLY RESPONSIBLE WHEN SO MANY PEOPLE BELIEVE IN GOD?

SÉBASTIEN RÉHAULT

Université de Lorraine

Abstract. Nowadays the argument for the existence of God based on the common consent of mankind is taken to be so bad that contemporary atheists do not even bother to mention it. And it seems very few theists think that the argument is worth defending. In this paper I shall argue to the contrary: not only is the argument better than usually thought, but widespread belief in God constitutes a *prima facie* defeater for every reasonable atheist.

> 'You could say it's as if we've been programmed to be collectively smart.'
> James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of the Crowds*

I. INTRODUCTION

When one considers the fact that several billion of the human race believe in the existence of God or in some kind of ultimate reality, even the most ardent sceptic will admit that the testimony we have on religious belief is quite impressive. But does this mean that the massive proportion of religious belief throughout human history points to the truth of that belief? In this paper, I will try to argue for the following thesis:

(T) Widespread belief in God is a *prima facie* defeater for atheism.

(T) is a version of the Common Consent Argument for the Existence of God, also known as the *consensus gentium* argument. To make it clear, we can consider (T) as the conclusion of the following reasoning:

(1) Widespread belief in God is *prima facie* evidence for theistic belief;

(2) Atheism is the denial of theistic belief;

(3) Therefore, widespread belief in God is a *prima facie* defeater for atheism.

In other words, the epistemic status of atheism is undermined by the fact that atheists are a tiny minority in the history of humanity. The fact that atheism is the exception and religious belief the rule is a problem for the responsible atheist, who wants to believe rightly, because if almost all human beings, past, present and maybe future, have religious belief, then it is less likely that atheism is true.

In order to defend (T), I will try to argue mainly for the truth of premise (1) of the argument – providing that premise (2) is true by definition and that conclusion (3) logically follows from premises (1) and (2). The argument for premise (1) is very simple:

(1) The vast majority of people have religious belief;

(2) Therefore religious belief is likely to be true.

This argument was very popular in the past, say before the Enlightenment, but it has fallen on very hard times since then. Classical versions of the argument can be found most notably in the writings of Seneca, Cicero, and Calvin. For example, in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin endorses the view that the widespread belief in God demonstrates the existence of an innate tendency to believe in God. And as far as we are entitled to attribute a theistic argument to Calvin, he seems to think that this innate tendency to believe in God is evidence for theistic belief. Here is a famous extract from the *Institutes*:

> There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretence of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty [...] there is, as the eminent pagan Cicero says, no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep seated conviction that there is a God. [...] Therefore, since from the beginning of the world there has been no region, no city, in short, no household, that could do without religion, there lies in this a tacit confession of a sense of deity inscribed in the hearts of all. (Calvin 1546: I, iii, 1)

Calvin's reasoning here runs on two arguments: first, it is an indisputable fact that religion is universal; second, the fact that religion is universal makes a major contribution to the epistemic status of theistic belief.

As I have said, with a few exceptions, that kind of reasoning is now viewed with contempt and suspicion. I think two main reasons explain this situation.

First, it can be explained by the progressive secularization of the Western world. As Charles Taylor has it, the secularity consists (1) in the separation of religion from public spaces, (2) in the falling off of religious belief and practice, and (3) in the move to a society where belief in God is just one option among others, and not the more natural or acceptable to embrace (Taylor 2007: 1-3). In such a context, appealing to the widespread belief in God or, even worse, to the *universality* of religion, seems far less attractive than in the times of Calvin. Religious belief just doesn't seem to be universal anymore. Therefore the common consent argument for the existence of God cannot be valid.

Second, we have inherited from the Enlightenment a rather individualistic conception of epistemology, a conception dominated by a principle known as the epistemic self-reliance principle. According to this principle, the fact that someone else believes that *p* is never evidence for *p*, or it is at best poor evidence which should not be trusted without direct access to the evidence on which these others based their belief. In other words, an epistemically responsible agent must not rely on the testimony of others, but only on her own cognitive faculties. This principle implies the rejection of any authority in the epistemic domain: only if our reason is autonomous are we entitled to believe something. This idea can be traced back at least to Descartes and Locke, and has become prominent in the writings of Hume, Kant, and Voltaire. For example, in 'What is Enlightenment?' (1784), Kant insists that we must think for ourselves as individuals and never allow others to think for us, for to rely on others is the essence of passive thinking and prejudice. The motto is famous: '*Sapere aude*!' or 'Dare to think for yourself!'. Proponents of the self-reliance principle usually admit that in some areas, for example history or geography, testimony is inevitable, but that's why we don't have knowledge or legitimate certainty in those areas and that's why those areas are not models for rational knowledge. This philosophical resistance to the testimony of others can be very strong: according to Descartes, even when the others in question are experts and agree on some proposition *p*, I cannot tell I know the proposition *p* if I only believe *p* on account of what the experts say, without doing the reasoning justifying *p* by myself (Descartes 1704: Rule 3). If we accept this principle, then a theistic argument based on the common consent of

people cannot be epistemically acceptable, because it consists precisely in relying on the authority of others.

But the stress on epistemic autonomy typical of Enlightenment epistemology usually goes with another principle, namely the evidentialist principle. According to that principle, an epistemic agent ought to believe what fits her evidence. One of the most striking formulations of evidentialism is of course that of William Clifford in 'The Ethics of Belief': 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.' (Clifford 1877) Clifford's evidentialism has been preceded notably by Hume's rule: 'A wise man [...] proportions his belief to the evidence.' (Hume 1748)

The evidentialist principle was formulated not only to express how one ought to believe *generally*, but to show that religious belief *in particular* was unreasonable or irrational (van Inwagen 1998). For it is assumed that there isn't sufficient evidence for religious belief. Notably all traditional arguments for the existence of God have failed. Therefore, the ordinary believer believes in excess of any sufficient evidence.

My aim in the following is in fact quite modest. I want to suggest that there is an epistemic tension, if not a contradiction, between the self-reliance principle and the evidentialist principle. I will largely accept the evidentialist principle, albeit in a fallibilist way. What I will contest is the legitimacy of the self-reliance principle. To the contrary, I will argue for the epistemic value of appealing to the testimony of others and more specifically to common opinion as evidence for the proposition that the majority believes. As a consequence we can examine anew the traditional common consent argument for the existence of God, not as a conclusive proof, but as defeasible evidence that the responsible atheist should take into account.[1]

II. THE EPISTEMIC VALUE OF COMMON CONSENT

The appeal to common consent is natural. Intuitively, if we find ourselves in a situation where we are the only one in a group of epistemic peers to believe that a certain proposition p is true, we will feel a kind of discomfort or even a cognitive dissonance (believing at the same time that we *are*

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[1] The conclusion I argue for here is very close to that of Thomas Kelly in '*Consensus Gentium* : Reflections on the "Common Consent" Argument for the Existence of God' (2011). This paper owes actually very much to Kelly's work on this topic.

right and that we *can't* be right since everyone else disagrees). If we will not immediately think we're wrong, on the basis of what others believe, at least we will feel the need to look afresh at the available evidence. The intuition behind that feeling has a probabilistic nature. Suppose you are in a mathematics class: all the students but you get the same answer to a particular problem. What is the chance that you are the only one to get it right? For the majority to get it wrong, the same cognitive malfunction producing the same result must have occurred many times in different minds. For one person to be wrong, a cognitive malfunction needs only have occurred once. But the latter is generally more likely. Therefore in a case of peer disagreement, it is generally more likely that the majority is right than the lonely dissenter. In such a case, the number becomes evidence for the truth of the proposition that the majority believes.

Note that in the mathematics class example, we need to rule out the possibility that the students arrived at their answer by copying from a single member of the group. In the case of copying from a single member, the evidence supplied by the fact that the majority arrived at one answer is no stronger than the evidence supplied by the fact that this is the answer arrived at by the individual from whom the others had cheated. Maybe this individual is the mathematical genius of the group, so her belief is more trustworthy than yours! But it would not be a common consent argument anymore, only a particular case of testimonial belief based on the authority of an expert. The case of copying reveals an important feature of the epistemic value of common consent: massive agreement on a given proposition is evidence for that proposition inasmuch as a significant number of people arrive *independently* at that proposition (Kelly 2011: 152). I will return later to the problem of the independence of belief when I discuss religious belief.

Despite the epistemic value we intuitively attach to common consent, appealing to popular opinion is usually held with contempt by philosophers. It even has a place of choice in the philosophical bestiary of fallacies, under the name of fallacy of *argumentum ad populum*. It is assumed that to appeal to common beliefs is contrary to the duty of the philosopher, which is precisely to undermine popular opinion and to reach (and teach) intellectual autonomy.

But exactly what is supposed to be fallacious with appealing to common consent? The first possibility, following the cartesian stance, could be to dismiss all kinds of testimonial knowledge, whether it means belief acquired through the authority of common consent or belief

acquired through the authority of a few experts. I won't take time here to argue against this broad position, which is not specifically directed against the argument from common consent. Suffice to say that this position, which can be called epistemic egoism, does not seem tenable. First, a coherent epistemic egoist will end up with very few rational beliefs, inasmuch as a considerable amount of our beliefs are acquired through the authority of others (Pouivet 2005: 26). Second, the epistemic egoist is in fact incoherent, because she cannot consistently trust her own epistemic faculties but not those of others, providing there is generally no reason to think that her faculties are more reliable or trustworthy than those of others (Zagzebski 2009: 88). On the contrary, a virtuous epistemic agent must be reminded that the outputs of others' faculties should be *prima facie*, if not *ultima facie*, trusted.

Fair enough, will say the opponent to the common consent argument, but it only means that we sometimes need to trust others to acquire new beliefs: it may be justified where one of our beliefs conflicts with the opinion of an expert or a better informed agent, but it doesn't imply that we can trust the opinion of the crowd. In other words, a virtuous epistemic agent is one who is able to tell the difference between reliable authority and unreliable authority. And as a matter of fact, the majority view is not reliable, so we should not trust it. To prove her case, the opponent to the common consent argument will probably mention a typical case like the flat earth case. For centuries, it seems that the vast majority of people believed that the earth was flat. We now know this belief is false. Therefore if we had based our belief on what the majority believed during that time, we would have had a false belief. But is that kind of example sufficient to show that the common consent argument is a fallacy? Following Michael Huemer, I will consider three ways to understand the so-called fallacy of *argumentum ad populum* (Huemer 2013: 102-105). As it will appear, neither shows that relying on common agreement is a fallacy.

First, the opponent of the *argumentum ad populum* might want to say that the very existence of widespread belief does not provide *conclusive proof* for the proposition that the majority believes. The argument would go like this: (1) there are *some* cases, like the flat earth case, in which widespread beliefs are false; (2) therefore it is not epistemically responsible to appeal to popular opinion.

This objection to the rationality of the common consent argument is not very convincing. A belief-forming method needs not be infallible to

be rational and useful. In fact, all or nearly all belief-forming methods are fallible, including sensory observation and scientific reasoning. But this does not show that we must consider observation, science and all other belief-forming methods as fallacious. There is no reason to think that what applies to those belief-forming methods doesn't apply to the belief-forming method of common consent. And to use common consent as evidence for religious belief will be no exception to that rule: it will provide only *defeasible* evidence. As Michael Williams has it, fallibilism, based on the idea that human beings are prone to errors when engaging in the pursuit of truth, is the trademark of modern epistemology (Williams 2001: 41). A modern version of the common consent argument should follow the same path.

Second, the fallacy talk might mean that the very existence of widespread belief does not provide *any evidence at all* for the proposition that the majority believes. That would mean that very widely held beliefs are correct no more often than propositions drawn at random. So a responsible epistemic agent should not rely on them.

That interpretation of the *consensus gentium* argument seems completely unwarranted. First, the existence of several errors produced by one belief-forming method does not show that method to be completely evidentially worthless. Of course, that response would not be very convincing if it appears that widely held beliefs are very often false. But, and this is our second response to this interpretation, there are remarkable correlations between popular opinions and true beliefs. For example, a small minority of people still believe that the earth is flat, that the moon landings were fake or that the American government is allied with grey aliens; the majority disagrees. Few people believe themselves to be Elvis Presley or to be made of glass, while the majority of those around them disagree. In all these cases, the majority is right and the minority is wrong. And third, as it was said earlier, taken generally it is more probable that the majority is right than the minority, because a cognitive malfunction producing the same belief is less likely to appear many times in different minds than to appear a small number of times. Therefore widely held beliefs provide more evidence than propositions held from random guess.

Now the last way to understand the fallacy could be the following: appeal to popular opinion does not provide *strong* evidence for the proposition the majority believes. That solution rules out the first solution (for a belief-forming method needs not produce *infallible* conclusions

to be rational) and the second solution (for common consent *does* produce some evidence), but it denies that common consent is really reliable when we look for truth. There could be two ways to arrive at that conclusion. First, by considering that the flat earth case and a fewer similar cases (like, for example, the case of Giordano Bruno) constitute a large and random sample of popular beliefs in which a huge percentage turns out to be false. Second, by considering, maybe on the basis of ordinary background experience and knowledge, that the flat earth case and similar cases are *typical* of the situations where a dissenter believes against a majority view. But neither of these two possibilities seems decisive.

First, we could mention several cases of popular beliefs taken from a *really* random and large sample in which a huge percentage turns out to be true. For example, that 2 + 2 equal 4, that Abraham Lincoln really existed, that human beings differ from inanimate objects, that blood has an important function in the body, that the sun is bigger than it seems, that telepathy is impossible, that birds come from eggs or that Elvis Presley is dead. And more controversially I would add some normative beliefs, like the belief that killing a child for pleasure is bad, the belief that it is better to be free than to be a slave or the belief that the Grand Canyon is sublime. Despite cases like the flat earth case, the amount of true common beliefs is impressive and it should then be regarded as evidentially relevant.

Second, if we refer to the background of our ordinary experience and knowledge, it is safe to say that the flat earth case is *not* typical of situations of disagreement between a minority and a majority. Based on our ordinary experience, a typical case of a dissenter against a majority view would be the one who believes that the moon landings were fake, that condensation trails produced by airplanes are in fact chemtrails spread by secret military agencies, or that the US government is responsible for 9/11. Based on ordinary experience, typical cases of situations of disagreement of a minority against a majority view are cases where it is highly probable that the minority is wrong and the majority right.

From all this, I conclude that the epistemic value of common consent is higher than it is usually thought and that it is evidentially highly relevant. Again, I don't speak here of conclusive proof, but of defeasible or *prima facie* evidence that can be weakened or strengthened by other pieces of evidence. When common consent occurs on a given proposition and providing the consensus arrived at is the product of at least partly

independent belief, the more likely explanation of that fact will include the truth of the proposition, because it is more probable that a cognitive malfunction occurs a small number of times in a few minds than a great many times in many different minds. Thus, a responsible epistemic agent must learn to trust popular opinion and be very careful if one of her beliefs contradicts the majority view. As a consequence the responsible atheist must admit that vastly widespread religious belief is *prima facie* evidence against her own belief.

III. THE EPISTEMIC VALUE OF COMMON CONSENT FOR RELIGIOUS BELIEF

If what has been said previously is correct, we could construct a common consent argument for the existence of God, based on the idea that widespread belief counts as *prima facie* evidence for that belief. The complete argument would go like this:

(1) Religious belief is the majority view throughout human history;

(2) Atheism is the denial of religious belief;

(3) A false belief is essentially the product of a cognitive malfunction of some sort;

(4) It is more probable that a cognitive malfunction occurs a small number of times in a few minds than a great many times in many different minds;

(5) Therefore religious belief is *prima facie* more likely to be true than atheism.

I took some time to argue for premise (4), so I will take it largely for granted now. I won't take time to argue for premise (3): I don't think there is much turning on it here. I understand 'cognitive malfunction' in a very broad sense, including epistemic defaults for which the agent is responsible (like indifference to truth, dogmatism, or intellectual cowardice) and epistemic defaults for which the agent is less responsible or not responsible at all (like frame effects, context biases, content biases, defective cognitive faculties and so on).

In the conclusion of the line of reasoning, I emphasize that the evidence given by widespread religious belief is *prima facie* or defeasible: by itself it is not sufficient to make belief in God permissible when all the evidence is taken into account (Kelly 2010: 144). It has to be weighed

against other pieces of evidence for and against the existence of God. For example, it can be weakened by *contra* evidence given by the divine hiddenness argument or by the problem of evil, as well as by naturalistic explanations of belief in the divine. It can also be strengthened by arguments like the ontological argument, the cosmological argument, or the design argument. The common consent about the existence of God is only a *defeasible* reason to believe, but it is nonetheless a *reason*. And a reason the atheist must take seriously.

So now we're left with premise (1) and premise (2). The first one is an empirical premise. The second a logical premise.

I will begin with premise (2). Taken literally it is in fact false or at best approximate. Up to now I have talked interchangeably of 'belief in God', 'theistic belief' and 'religious belief'. In a broad sense, all these expressions are equivalent: they all point to something outside the physical universe. But in a narrow sense, 'theistic belief' and 'belief in God' have a more precise content than 'religious belief'. A theistic belief is a belief in the existence of a certain kind of person, all powerful, omniscient, perfectly good, creator and sustainer of the universe, and who takes care in one way or another of his creation, and most notably of human beings. I take 'belief in God' here to be strictly equivalent to 'theistic belief'. On the other hand, religious belief includes theistic belief and the various beliefs attached to it, like the particular creeds of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and their variants, but it also refers to the creeds of non-classical theistic religions like Hinduism or pantheism, to the creeds of non-theistic religions like the different variants of Buddhism and to all sorts of folk religions. In other words, one can have religious beliefs without believing in God or without being a classical theist, that is, while being some sort of atheist.

Literally speaking, atheism is not the denial of religious belief in general, but only of theism, which is a species of religious belief. Literally speaking, the denial of religious belief is metaphysical naturalism. Metaphysical naturalism is the claim that there are no supernatural entities or no entities that are not reducible to the entities appearing in our best scientific explanations. A religious belief implies that there is some ultimate and transcendent reality, it can be a personal god or something else, that is, a reality not reducible to the universe as it is described by the natural sciences. To be more precise, I will equate here religious belief with what John Schellenberg calls 'ultimism'. Ultimism is the view according to which there exists a reality that is ultimate

metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically (Schellenberg 2005). It identifies the most basic level of all religious beliefs, including classical theism. The argument from common consent is stronger when applied to ultimism than to theism for at least two reasons:

(1) As ultimism includes theism, there are more people committed to ultimism than to theism.

(2) Some of the more conclusive evidence against theism doesn't clearly apply to ultimism (for example the argument from divine hiddenness and the problem of evil).

In the following, and as previously, I will not clearly choose between theism and ultimism, partly because the argument from common consent remains fundamentally the same, all things being equal, in both cases. The other reason is, although this paper endorses theism, I think a religion identified with ultimism and free of the content attached to it by classical theism is a very rational option.

Finally, a few notes on the first premise of the common consent argument: it says that the vast majority of people believe in God or profess to have religious beliefs. Is that premise true? In the times of Cicero or Calvin, that premise was based mainly on the intuitions of the philosophers and theologians arguing for the argument, on the sayings of their relatives and on a few testimonies from abroad. Now that premise can be empirically tested with systematic and large surveys on the rates of belief in God in various countries worldwide. As a consequence, it is epistemically stronger than ever. I will mention two recent surveys to justify the first premise:

– According to a Gallup International Survey published in 2012, sixty per cent of the world population believes in God.

– According to a meta-survey made by the Pew Research Center and published the same year, eighty-four percent of the world population has a religion, while only sixteen percent is non-religious (which means atheist or agnostic). This meta-survey compiles two thousand and five hundred polls and surveys made in various countries worldwide.

So depending on whether you insist on classical theism or on ultimism, there are sixty to eighty percent of the world population that is religious. As I said in the beginning, the number is impressive and so it is impressive evidence for religious belief.

Although the evidence is far more shallow in that case, I think that this empirical premise should also be considered from a synchronic point of view or, maybe less pedantically, from a temporal point of view, that is, with an eye on the past. The percentage of ultimists and/or theists over the course of humanity's history is certainly much higher than just present-day ultimists and/or theists. If we include the number of religious believers of the past to the total number of believers, the argument from common consent becomes stronger, albeit defeasibly.

IV. OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

I turn now to the objections that can still be raised against the common consent argument for religious belief and I try to show how we can respond to them.

The first objection points to the intellectual merits of the majority of religious believers. We could call it the IQ objection. According to it, the unsophisticated and poorly informed are overtly represented among theists and religious believers, whereas the well-educated and critical reasoners are more likely to be atheists (Kelly 2010: 149). The idea behind this is that if it is legitimate to rely upon the testimony of others, the virtuous epistemic agent is the one who discriminates between those who are in a better position to judge the proposition in question. Generally, those in a better position are those who have thought deeply on the available evidence, who are the most educated, informed and critical of the reasoners. Since the evidence provided by a small group of high-quality reasoners is supposed to be higher than the evidence provided by the cumulative opinion of a large number of people comparatively less sophisticated, and since in matters of religion, the sophisticated reasoners are mostly atheists and/or naturalists, then the stronger evidence favours atheism and metaphysical naturalism.

How can one respond to that objection? First, as it has been convincingly argued for by James Surowiecki, the *cumulative* opinion of a large number of people who are not the best informed on a given proposition often provides better evidence for that proposition that the opinion of a small number of experts (Surowiecki 2004). One of the main reasons that explains the performance of collective intelligence over the judgment of a small group of experts is the diversity of skills and information displayed by people in the larger group, which makes it smarter overall. Second, there are in fact lots of very sophisticated

religious believers. It is especially true if we consider the number of past scientists and philosophers who were theists: from a temporal perspective, there are probably more sophisticated religious believers than sophisticated atheists. Of course, the fact that they lived in a time when almost everyone was a theist may have produced a context bias that diminishes the epistemic value of their belief. Third, it can be useful to point out that the majority of contemporary philosophers of religion are theists and/or defend the rationality of religion (according to *PhilPapers Survey*, the ratio is seven for ten). We can give two possible explanations of this datum.

First, the less charitable explanation: philosophy of religion attracts mostly philosophers who happen to be believers because they're looking for a way to justify their belief. As a consequence, the fact that they find the arguments for the rationality of religion stronger than the arguments for atheism is no surprise and constitutes poor evidence for their belief. But there is a more charitable explanation: even if the domain of religion attracts mostly religious philosophers, it doesn't imply that their judgment on the epistemic value of philosophical arguments is completely obscured by their previous belief. They need not accept or reject arguments just because arguments confirm or contradict their belief. For if we would accept this thesis in the domain of philosophy of religion, we should also accept it in other areas of philosophy and distrust whatever philosophers have to say. For example, contemporary metaphysicians and philosophers of mind are mostly naturalists and they were probably naturalists before they engaged in their inquiries: does that completely undermine their alleged expertise? I don't think so. So we shouldn't apply another standard to the philosophy of religion. On balance, therefore, it seems safe to say that the IQ objection is not very strong.

The second objection I want to examine is the objection from the demographics of theism. According to that objection, the widespread belief in God is not a significant piece of evidence for theism, because theistic belief is unevenly distributed around the world (Maitzen 2006). For example, in Saudi Arabia, 95 per cent of the population are Muslim and therefore theists, while in Thailand, 95 percent are Buddhist and therefore at most 5 per cent are theists. While atheism is virtually nonexistent in Africa, South America, and the Middle East, it increases in Europe, Canada, Japan, and Australia (Zuckerman 2011). It seems that the uneven distribution of belief in God is much more likely on

naturalism than on theism. Theistic explanations of that fact are not convincing, but it is easily explained by the influence of natural forces like culture, economics, and politics, which are not evenly distributed around the world. The aim of the objection is to undermine the rationality of the belief in a perfectly good personal god who would have implanted in all human beings a disposition to believe in him, provided that we don't resist him.

There are various ways to respond to the argument from the demographics of theism. First, it seems the objection doesn't apply to the common consent argument when it is applied to religious belief understood as ultimism: ultimism is really universal and evenly distributed, almost as religion is. Second, I think the objection presupposes a false alternative when it is applied to belief in God: either people come to believe in God because the belief is innate (and then it would be evenly distributed if God is good) or people believe in God through cultural transmission and social pressure (in which case we could predict that it will not be evenly distributed). But there is a third solution: people believe in God as a combined result of innate cognitive faculties (maybe implanted by God, by evolution, or by both of them) and cultural transmission and social pressure. That third solution has been convincingly argued for by cognitive scientists like Pascal Boyer and Justin Barrett. For example Barrett says:

> [...] children have a naturally developing receptivity to many core religious beliefs, particularly beliefs about the existence of supernatural beings. Given a little environmental encouragement, they become believers in superhuman agency. But this natural receptivity to religious ideas is limited. Many theological ideas, of the sorts religious specialists develop and many believers affirm as part of historic creeds do not number with those children are biased to acquire. Rather, these theological beliefs (such as nontemporality, nonspaciality, and the like) are conceptually difficult for children (and adults) and require special cultural scaffolding to spread effectively. In this regard, theological ideas share much in common with other ideas generated reflectively in special cultural conditions such as those found in modern science. (Barrett 2012: 150)

One of the factors that may contribute to a natural belief in gods is the human cognitive system for detective agents and agency around us. This adaptive system is called the Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device (HADD): it helped us survive in detecting predators, with nothing lost

when we attributed agency to the simple rustling of leaves. As Barrett argues, disposition to theistic belief is natural, but cultural transmission and social pressure play an important role to develop and refine the belief. But if cultural environment can modify the content of religious belief, it can also diminish it or even turn it into something else. For example, we can predict that the HADD will be less sensitive in a safer environment. That's why maybe atheism is more common in relatively affluent and safe post-industrial societies. Also, the natural disposition to explain certain events and situations by appealing to the activity of gods, can be satisfied by appealing to the causation of pseudo-agents (Barrett 2012: 212-216). Those pseudo-agents include for example Fate, Destiny, Chance, Providence, Nature, Government and State: we don't think of them as having minds or mental states, but they play the same explanatory role as superhuman agency because we sometimes treat them as quasi-agents with quasi-intentions. So we can easily imagine that in some cultural areas the reference to pseudo-agents has been fostered without significantly altering the natural disposition towards belief in superhuman agency. If we consider the example of Thailand mentioned above, where people are mostly Buddhist, the notions of Karma (the chain of cause and effect) or of Samsara (the endless cycle of death and rebirth) can easily function as pseudo-agents. Therefore, the diversity of the cultural environments surrounding belief can explain the uneven distribution of believe in God without undermining the possibility that God has implanted in us an innate tendency to believe in Him. As a consequence, despite the uneven distribution of belief, the fact of common consent is still a significant piece of evidence.

The third objection rests on the following reasoning: for massive agreement on a given proposition to be evidentially relevant, a significant number of people must have arrived *independently* at that proposition (remember the math class example and the case of cheating). But in the case of religious belief, we can assert that the convergence of belief is largely due to mutual influence and influence by common sources. Therefore the evidence given by massive religious belief is weaker than the proponent of the common consent argument claims (Kelly 2010: 152).

There are three ways to respond to that objection. First if we consider religious belief on a large scale, the mutual influence of the believers is not absolute: it is probable that a certain number of groups relatively isolated from one another nevertheless arrive at the same belief. Of

course it less true for theism than for ultimism. Second, as argued by Kelly, we should distinguish between the *acquisition* of religious belief and its *persistence*, which is impressive:

> Even in cases in which individuals initially acquire some belief from a common source, there is for each person the possibility of later abandoning it in the light of subsequent experience and reflection. In the case of religious belief, however, sufficiently many individuals do not do this that the strong supermajority persists over time. (Kelly 2010: 153)

For example, although we acquire the belief in Santa Claus and the belief in the tooth fairy because they are taught to us by our parents when we are children, we are a super strong majority to abandon such beliefs independently. On the other hand, although the proposition '2 + 2 = 4' is learnt from others and not independently, we massively persist in that belief over time, not because we have been influenced by others, but because it still seems true to us in light of subsequent experience and reflection. Finally, the fact that this proposition is true is the best explanation of the fact that it is widely held. The same could hold for religious belief. Thirdly, following the cognitive science of religion, we can distinguish between our natural tendency to believe in superhuman agency and later refinements of that belief inside a particular tradition: if the latter is acquired through cultural influence, the former is clearly largely autonomous. In other words several billions of human beings throughout history have probably arrived independently at the same belief, namely that there exists an ultimate reality that transcends the physical universe and that is responsible for the way things are. What has been acquired from mutual influence is all the later religious refinements that effectively vary from one culture to another.

CONCLUSION

My question was: can the atheist be epistemically responsible when so many people believe in God? My response is yes, provided she takes the fact of widespread religious belief as serious evidence for that belief and as a defeater for her belief. Of course that evidence is defeasible: it is added to the total evidence available, but it does not swamp any other evidence we can reach. If the atheist thinks the evidence of massive religious belief can be defeated by other pieces of evidence (like, for example, the problem of evil, the divine hiddenness argument, or the argument

from the demographics of theism), nonetheless she will be confronted by a huge challenge: to explain convincingly how is it possible that several billion human beings, belonging to such different cultural backgrounds, have been trapped in such an illusion, while a few epistemic elite were able to escape and to switch off their natural tendency to believe in God or in some kind of ultimate reality. If collective intelligence has proven to be effective in several areas and if religious belief is almost universal, then it seems reasonable to trust the common judgement of mankind on this subject and to be sceptical about the atheist stance.

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ARGUMENT FROM CHANCE

DARIUSZ ŁUKASIEWICZ

Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz[1]

Abstract. In the article, first I present the atheistic argument from pointless evil and the argument from chance. The essence of the argument from chance consists in the incompatibility of the existence of purposeless events and the existence of a God who planned the universe to the last detail. Second, I would like to show that there is a relation between the evidential argument from evil and the argument from chance. An analysis of the theistic argument from small probabilities is a helpful starting point for the presentation of how the two arguments are related.

I. ON THE ARGUMENT FROM CHANCE FOR THE NON-EXISTENCE OF GOD

In what follows I will first present the atheistic argument from pointless evil and the argument from chance. The essence of the argument from chance consists in the incompatibility of the existence of purposeless events and the existence of a God who planned the universe to the last detail. Second, I would like to show that there is a relation between the evidential argument from evil and the argument from chance.

One of the strongest atheistic arguments for the non-existence of God is the argument from evil, in particular, the evidential argument from evil. The argument in its basic form – as constructed by William Rowe – can be presented as follows:

(1) There exists pointless evil in the world.

(2) An omniscient, omnipotent and morally perfect being would not permit the occurrence of any case of pointless evil in the world.

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[1] I am grateful to Elżbieta Łukasiewicz for her reading and comments on this paper.

 Hence:

 (3) God does not exist.

In an analogous way, it is possible to build an argument for the non-existence of God from chance. It goes on as follows:

 (4) There exist chance events in the world.

 (5) An omniscient, omnipotent and morally perfect being would not permit the occurrence of any case of chance in the world.

 Hence:

 (3) God does not exist.

Perhaps it is worth noting that the argument from chance has never been very popular or frequently discussed, unlike the argument from evil. The reason might be that the concept of chance is very ambiguous, and, at the same time, in many cases it seems to be theologically harmless. Secondly, many theists believe that one can easily reject premise (4) in the argument from chance by saying simply that there are no chance events in the world.

 The crucial issue is how to understand 'chance' in the context of the argument from chance. It might seem that the atheistic argument from chance could be sound and valid if chance is understood in an ontological way and not as an epistemic concept, that is as our lack of knowledge and ignorance, which is logically harmless for theism. 'Ontological chance' could mean several things, for example:

 (a) an event which does not have any cause or any causal explanation;
 (b) a purposeless event (an event without purpose or an event that hasn't been planned or intended by anyone);
 (c) an unpredictable event (unpredictable even for an omniscient being);[2]
 (d) an event whose happening is extremely improbable.

However, I will try to show that the existence of ontological chance (random events) is not necessarily incompatible with theism. In other words, even if such events happen, they do not make the atheistic argument from chance sound. The justification of the last claim requires an explanation of the principles of the theology of chance in more detail.[3]

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[2] This meaning of chance is at play if an omniscient being exists in time and the world has an indeterministic nature, as current quantum physics suggests.

[3] The scientific reasons of 'theology of chance' have been discussed by David J. Bartholomew in his two books closely related to the topic: (1984) (2008).

Before we do that, we will consider the argument from chance in which chance is understood as a very improbable and purposeless event, and, therefore, we will call this argument 'the argument from small probabilities'. The argument from small probabilities deserves our attention because it can be used both by a theist and by an atheist.

The theist can argue as follows: if an event had a very small probability, like, for example, the emergence of life on Earth, but it happened in reality nonetheless, then the cause of its happening was the action of God, and hence, of course, God exists.[4] The atheist can argue for atheism as follows: if an event was very improbable, then it happened by chance (without any purpose or plan) and not by the action of God. If the universe has such a nature that the probability of the emergence of life and sentient beings on Earth or on any other planet was very small indeed, then the probability that God would have created the universe is very small too. Why so? Because an omnipotent being would not have created the world in which the probability of the existence of human beings as the pinnacle of creation – which is, perhaps, one of the most important Christian doctrines – was extremely small.

The atheist may also argue that God does not exist if he succeeds in the refutation of the theistic argument from very small probabilities. He can argue as follows: if an event, like the emergence of life and the appearance of human beings, whose probability was rather high and not extremely small (we will explain this high probability below), happened in reality, then there is a natural explanation of these events and the hypothesis of the existence of God is explanatorily useless. Moreover, the atheist can refer to the chance events as purposeless events, which, according to the Law of Large Numbers and in long-term outcomes, may lead to the emergence of life and the appearance of human beings as a result of cosmic and biological evolution. Some people even speak about 'an order emerging out of chaos' (Kaufmann 1995: 25). Thus, if the atheist were able to explain the happening of events which are usually attributed to God himself as their cause, then atheism would gain an argumentative advantage over theism, as, for example, Richard Dawkins believes.

An evaluation of this atheistic argument will be a bit easier if we pay attention to the theistic argument from very small probabilities mentioned above. The key point of this argument is exemplified by

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[4] In fact this type of reasoning is used by the defenders of Intelligent Design (William Dembski, Michael Behe and their followers).

the reasoning sometimes called 'the significance test argument'. The reasoning of this type was made for the first time by John Arbuthnot – a physician to Queen Anne – who was trying to explain the distribution of female and male births in London in the seventeenth century (1710). Arbuthnot's reasoning may be reconstructed in the following way:[5]

(6) The probability of a male birth is equal to the probability of a female birth and it is ½ in every individual case.

(7) Every case of a male birth and a female birth is independent of other births as every result of tossing a coin is independent of other results of tossing the same coin.

(8) It is possible that during one year some fluctuations will happen regarding the proportion of male and female births, for example, there will be more male births than female ones, or, conversely, but in the long run the proportion will equal 50% males to 50% females.

(9) The empirical data gathered by Arbuthnot for London (the records from London's parishes) extending over 82 years from 1629 to 1710 confirmed that every year there were more male births than female births and this fact was inconsistent with the *a priori* assumption that the number of births will be equal in both cases.

(10) The probability that 82 times in succession more boys than girls will be born is $(1/2)^{82}$ that means $0{,}2 \times 10^{-24}$ and this is a very small probability indeed.

John Arbuthnot inferred from this fact that the event which was so improbable could not happen by chance. He concluded, therefore, that it was God and his Providence who is responsible for what happened. He even suggested a possible reason which God could have for allowing or causing that distribution of sex, namely to keep a demographic equilibrium in the world because the number of boys should be larger than the number of girls since men die sooner than women.

Contemporary theists use, in principle, the same argumentative scheme in the arguments from small probabilities, but to much more complicated processes. If we assume, for example, that the appearance of life is a process consisting in the emergence of 2000 enzymes from

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[5] Bartholomew (1984: 38-39).

20 amino acids, then, as Fred Hoyle and Chandra Wickramashinge calculated, the probability of this event is $1/10^{40000}$. According to William Dembski's calculations, the probability of the emergence of the bacterial flagellum (*Escherichia coli*) is 1 in (10^{263}).[6] It is worthy of note that, given such a calculation of the probability of the appearance of life as counted above, and given that the *a priori* probability of the existence of the Creator is minimal but larger than 0, for example 1/50 000, it is possible, by resorting to the Bayes theorem, to count the probability of God's existence and this probability is almost one (0,98).[7] Hence, theism is epistemically more viable and rational than atheism (Bartholomew 1984: 57).

Another typical example of the application of the argument from very small probabilities is the fine-tuning hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, as some people claim, firstly, the probability of every cosmological constant, such as the speed of light, the constant of gravitational attraction, Planck's constant, and so on, which is suitable to cosmic and biological evolution, is very small. Secondly, the probability of all of the fundamental constants of physics which are suitable to the emergence and the existence of life calculated by multiplying together all of these small probabilities is extremely small. If this is so, then the chance hypothesis should be rejected and one should assume that the values of the basic cosmological constants were chosen and determined by a super intelligent mind.

The criticism of this argument relies on the demonstration that it is not clear enough whether the cosmic constants are independent of one another; it is possible, for example, that the value of some constants is determined by the value of others. In that case the probability of all of them would be significantly larger. It seems that what plays a very important role here, though not only here, is our common intuition that all possible values of cosmological constants are equally probable.[8] The *principle of*

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[6] Bartholomew (2008: 110).

[7] A= God exists, B= God does not exist, S = the existence of 2000 enzymes constructed from 20 amino acids.

P(A) = 1/50 000 and P(B) = 49 000/50 000 and $P(S/B) = 1/10^{40\,000}$.

P(S given A) or P(S/A) =1 because S can be taken as certain if God exists on the ground that he can bring about whatever he desires.

P(A given S)=[P(A) x P (S/A)] / [P(A) x P (S/A) + P(B) x P (S/B)]

$P(A/S) = [1/50\,000 \times 1] / [1/50\,000 \times 1 + 49\,000/50\,000 \times 1/10^{40\,000}] = 0.98$.

[8] Bartholomew (2008: 84).

insufficient reason says that if there is no reason to prefer one quantity to others, then all of them should be treated as equally probable. However, the application of this principle to cosmic and biological evolution is highly questionable and the theistic argument from small probabilities is perhaps based on a false assumption that all possibilities have the same probability. It is not necessarily true that each of these possibilities is equally probable. It has been discovered that, given the same number and kind of chemical substances, each time they were mixed in the same conditions, the same organic structures appeared. This result undermines the assumption of equal probabilities of all possibilities and it undermines the assumption of the independence of random events. If we reject, however, both these assumptions, the probabilities in question will be completely different. There is a fundamental metaphysical mistake which has been made in the theistic argument from small probabilities and this mistake depends on the way cosmic and organic entities are conceived of, i.e. they are regarded as *combinatorial* and purely *mechanical* objects.

Let us take as an exemplification of this mistake a very simple mathematical case. If I asked a randomly chosen person to give an example of an odd number, then the probability that I would guess what that number is seems to be extremely small because the set of odd numbers is infinite. However, this is simply not true because the probability of my knowing the number chosen is in fact much greater. This is because one can presume that a randomly asked person will choose one of the prototypical odd numbers from the set {3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15}. We are dealing here with the effect of a prototype (in its psychological version). An analogical phenomenon happens in nature and it is called 'the attractor', which makes one or some possibilities more probable than the rest of all possible ways how things could be. Simon Conway Morris has recently argued for the existence of convergence in the process of a biological evolution.[9] The existence of convergence makes the number of empirical possibilities on the subsequent levels of evolution much smaller than it would be were it to follow from purely mathematical calculations.

Therefore, we are allowed to reject the theistic argument from small probabilities. However, we are not allowed to infer that the world is deterministic or that there are no purposeless events. The conclusion from our considerations is weaker; there are chance events in the world

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[9] Conway Morris (2003: 328).

as modern science tells us. On the quantum level, there is a radioactive decay of atoms, on the molecular level genetic mutations happen, and on the level of human history there are human free choices and free actions. However, according to the Law of Large Numbers in nature, we observe the emergence of complex, functionally well-organized structures from many purposeless events which are not designed by any mind. These structures – emerging from 'chaos' – can be described by mathematical equations. The explanation of why this order in nature exists does not require the existence of God, who was to design and perhaps also to cause everything that happened and happens in the universe. There is no need of such a God and atheism seems to be a rational and well-grounded view. This conclusion seems to make the atheistic argument from chance stronger, which, let us repeat, goes as follows:

   (4) There exist chance events in the world.

   (5) An omniscient, omnipotent and morally perfect being would not permit the occurrence of any case of chance in the world.

   Hence:

   (6) God does not exist.

The evidence for the truth of premise (4) is provided by modern science. The rationale for premise (5) is the following one: God as the Creator of the universe and the supreme mind – by definition – had to design the world to the last detail leaving no room for chance and purposeless events in the world created.[10] Therefore, since such events happen in the world, God does not exist.

   However, perhaps a bit paradoxically, the criticism of the theistic argument from small probabilities provides reasons for theism. A theist can accept premise (4) of the atheistic argument but reject premise (5) of this argument. He can argue in the following way: if order can emerge in the world from a large number of random events (purposeless events), and such events really happen in the world, and, finally, order exists in the universe, then the existence of chance was in God's plan. The existence of chance is not only consistent with the divine will and with God's existence but it is part of God's plan. The last statement is the essence of 'the theology of chance' which has been mentioned above: the existence of chance is not only consistent with God's will and with

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[10] van Woundenberg (2013: 33).

God's existence but it is part of the divine plan and Providence and it is an expression of divine perfection:

> The picture of a world in which the details take care of themselves, leaving the big issues to the Creator, is more appealing and more worthy of directing our worship. This, perhaps, is a case where we are too prone to see God in the image of man as someone who thinks control depends on overseeing every detail.[11]

If this were so, then the critique of the theistic argument from small probabilities would be a very useful tool for theists and their refutation of the atheistic argument from evil; let us remember this argument again:

(1) There exists pointless evil in the world.

(2) An omniscient, omnipotent and morally perfect being would not permit the occurrence of any case of pointless evil in the world.

Hence:

(3) God does not exist.

Now, there exists pointless evil in the world (undeserved suffering in various forms) and at least some of those events are due to chance and are not designed by God. Such an order of the universe is not only logically and metaphysically possible, but it is morally just and theologically adequate.[12] Or, in brief: if there are purposeless events in the world, some of them can be evil.

And, finally, if there is no reason and no purpose for some events in the world, then, we may say, God is hidden in the mass of pointless events. But His hiddenness is only a hint how He acts in the universe of which He is the Maker and the only Lord.

Nicolai Hartmann had a truly deep insight into the nature of our world when he said that:

> It is absolutely plausible that to a finite mind something can appear to be contradictory which is fully possible in reality. A finite mind cannot

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[11] Bartholomew (2008: 153).

[12] Bartholomew states 'The bizarre picture of God seated in front of a celestial control panel watching microscopic happenings throughout the universe and reacting to them almost instantaneously may be logically possible but it hardly fits with the notion of the loving Father of orthodox Christian belief, neither does it accord with our idea of how high level control should take place' (2008: 153). Divine control in the world without chance is especially important if we try to explain the possibility of human freedom.

grasp the possibilities of the coexistence of things because it is not able to apprehend the whole of the universe.[13] [my translation DŁ]

Thus, the coexistence of purposeless events and God's plan is possible and it is possible as well that there exists a perfect and loving God.[14] The atheistic argument from chance is not sound and the evidential argument from evil is not sound either. It seems to me, however, that the criticism of the argument from chance is useful for a theist and for his refutation of the atheistic argument from evil in its evidential form. The two arguments are logically related which I was trying to show in my paper.

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[13] Hartmann (1949: 471).

[14] Peter van Inwagen seems to suggest a different concept of chance. In his view, a chance event is one that is not part of anyone's plan; it is an event that hasn't been planned or intended by anyone (1995: 42-66). However, the view regarding chance events presented in this article is not incompatible with van Inwagen's position because we can see a chance event as a type concept and any particular, individual event as a token chance event (a kind of an exemplification of a universal concept of chance). Then, we could say that a type chance event was in God's plan because of some reasons and a particular chance event was not intended or planned by anyone.

AN ATHEISTIC ARGUMENT FROM UGLINESS

SCOTT F. AIKIN & NICHOLAOS JONES

Vanderbilt University   University of Alabama in Huntsville

Abstract. The theistic argument from beauty has what we call an 'evil twin', the argument from ugliness. The argument yields either what we call 'atheist win', or, when faced with aesthetic theodicies, 'agnostic tie' with the argument from beauty.

I. EVIL TWINS FOR TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

The theistic argument from beauty is a teleological argument. Teleological arguments take the following form:

(1) The universe (or parts of it) exhibit property X.

(2) Property X is usually (if not always) brought about by the purposive actions of those who created objects for them to be X.

(3) The cases mentioned in Premise 1 are not explained (or fully explained) by human action.

(4) *Therefore:* The universe is (likely) the product of a purposive agent who created it to be X, namely God.

The variety of teleological arguments is as broad as substitution instances for X. The standard substitutions have been features of the universe (or it all) *fine-tuned* for life, or the fact of *moral action*. One further substitution has been *beauty*. Thus, *arguments from beauty*.

A truism about teleological arguments is that they have *evil twins*. Reality is a mixed bag, so for every argument from fine-tuning, there is an argument that shows how very little of the universe is inhabitable for living creatures and how poorly designed many of these creatures are.

For every case from the fact of moral action, there is a case from immoral action. This is the *evil twin problem* for teleological arguments.

We will pose the evil twin problem for the argument from beauty, so an *argument from ugliness*. The general strategy of evil twins will be in effect: either *play for atheist win* or *for agnostic tie*. To play for atheist win, one may, parallel to the argument from evil, attribute evil or complicity with evil to god, and thereby prove that he cannot be god proper. To play for agnostic tie, the case is that whatever means the theist would use to dismiss evil twin cases can be used against the good cases, too. Consequently, teleological arguments are a wash.

First, we will outline the argument from beauty in its various instantiations. Second, we will pose the problem of ugliness. Third, we will play for atheist win. Fourth, we will consider a few strategies for aesthetic theodicy, but they allow us to play for agnostic tie.

II. ARGUMENT FROM BEAUTY

The theistic argument from beauty has been around at least since Hesiod, who explains the grandeur of the world as a product of Gaia's love (*Theogony*, II.120). Plato, too, invokes the divine to account for beauty (Symposium, 210a-212c). Augustine gives an explicit version of the argument in the *Confessions*: 'We look upon the heavens and earth, and they cry aloud that they were made. ... It was You, Lord, who made them: for You are beautiful, and they are beautiful. ...' (XI. 4)

In short: God's greater beauty explains the beauty of creation. In the twentieth century, F.R. Tennant gave a version of the argument from beauty, noting that the world is 'saturat[ed]' with beauty (1928: 91). Nature, Tennant infers, must then be the product of a mind with intentions of aesthetic fulfilment. Mark Wynn, extending Tennant's line of thought, notes that: 'Most believers . . . are more likely to be impressed by the beauty of nature, when considering whether the world answers to providential purpose, than by mere regularity or order.' (1999: 15)

Wynn, however, is modest about how much the case from beauty can actually prove by itself, as it cannot be 'persuasive in isolation from other arguments' (1999: 36). Regardless, Wynn does take it to be a positive case.[1]

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[1] We should note here, perhaps, a corollary to our evil twin observation: evil twin arguments can be only as strong as the arguments to which they are twins. And so, if the

Finally, Richard Swinburne holds that 'God has a reason to create a beautiful inanimate world – that is, a beautiful physical universe' (2004: 121). God, being the source of good, will be instrumental in producing as much good in as many varieties as possible. So, if God creates a universe, it will be beautiful. Since the universe is beautiful (and a universe without a creative god would likely not be quite as beautiful as this one), we have reason to believe that God exists and has aesthetic values (2004: 190).

III. ARGUMENT FROM UGLINESS

The general problem for teleological arguments is that the world is a mixed bag. There is order, pleasure, goodwill, and beauty aplenty. There is also disorder, pain, hate, and ugliness too. To deny that is blinkered nonsense.[2] If we reason from effects to cause, then the cause of the universe, on the assumption we are attributing either the properties of the effects or the intention to cause these effects to the cause, will likely be a mixed bag too.

The argument from ugliness, too, has a pedigree. Plato saw it as a stalking horse to his theory of forms, and in the *Parmenides*, Socrates is challenged with the question whether there is a form for hair, dirt, or mud (130a-c). Marcus Aurelius notes the incoherence of his two related Stoic exercises of invoking 'disgust at what things are made of: liquid, dust, bones, filth' (*Meditations*, 9:36) but also appreciating the beauty in 'Nature's inadvertence' (*Meditations*, 3:2). William Blake's 'The Tyger' closes with the question: 'What immortal hand or eye dare frame thy fearful symmetry?'

The argument from ugliness, like that from beauty, begins with cases. Consider terrible art, perhaps songs by the 1980's rock group Ratt or Thomas Kinkade paintings. They are things merely to endure. Take the harsh call of crows, or the unsightly leaking of sap from a splintered

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argument from beauty itself is not a full case for God's existence, then the argument from ugliness can't be a full case either.

    [2] Consider Schopenhauer's line on this thought: 'If we were to conduct the most hardened and callous optimist through hospitals, infirmaries, operating theatres, through prisons, torture-chambers, and slave hovels, over battlefields and to places of execution; if we were to open to him all the dark abodes of misery, where it shuns the gaze of cold curiosity, and finally were to allow him to glance into the dungeon of Ugolino where prisoners starved to death, he too would certainly see in the end what kind of a world is this meilleur des mondes possible [best of all possible worlds].' (1969: 325)

tree limb. Consider the human form and the insipid and unwieldy elbow – even the most graceful can only but manage its awkward hinged angularity. The anglerfish of the deep and the aruana of the Amazon are hideous creatures. Mountain vistas may be beautiful, but they are few and far between. In the in-between, there are sticky and stinky swamps, boring groupings of trees, misplaced shrubbery, and intermittent villages filled with sticky and stinky children. Yuck. And, of course, there is vomit, puss, bile, phlegm, and faeces. It all, like impressionist painting, is tolerable only from very far away.

Why so much ugliness? Is it that there is a god who has upside down aesthetic sensibilities and wishes to impress them upon us? Is god ugly and that causes earthly ugliness? On the argument from beauty, God is beautiful or prefers beautiful things, and so there is beauty in the world. So, on the ugliness argument, perhaps God, given ugliness, does the same thing and serves up so much hideous business. Or, perhaps, instead of liking the ugly, God detests it and provides a healthy serving of ugly for us because he hates us. After all, Jesus heals lepers, the blind, and the lame – but not the ugly. The argument from evil is famously turned into a *kakodaimonia* argument, and so may the argument from ugliness: given the amount of ugly in the world, we have reason to believe that God either loves ugliness, is ugly, or hates us and tortures us with ugliness.[3] Given that God must be a unity of good things, a God satisfying any of those three disjuncts cannot be God. Atheism wins.

IV. STANDARD THEODICIES

Theodicy is the project of blocking inferences from the mixed bag of creation to the mixed nature of God. The problem of evil is that the case from evil has God either himself evil or at least complicit with it. The problem of ugliness has God either ugly himself or complicit in its creation. Theodicies deal with evil twins either as necessary means or as unavoidable by-products of their positive teleology. While there are many variations, we will mention just a few before offering their evil, ugly stepsisters. This should suffice for conveying the general spirit of *playing for agnostic tie*.

Necessary Counterpart theodicy. There could be no beauty without ugliness. For a world in which all things are beautiful is a world in which

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[3] See, for example, Stephen Law's 'Evil God Challenge' (2010).

nothing distinguishes the beautiful from the non-beautiful; and if there is no such distinction, then there are no beautiful things. Since it is the nature of a good God to create a beautiful world, any world (like ours) that God creates must also contain ugly things.

Free Will theodicy. We are free agents, by virtue of God-granted free will. This free will allows for important goods, such as morally responsible action, compassion, and the creation of beauty. An unavoidable consequence of free will, however, is that we sometimes choose to perform actions that generate ugliness: we eat too many beans and fart, play instruments unskilfully and produce cacophony, cut corners and cause oil spills, object to the 'establishment' and mount elephant shit in an art display. God could have created us without free will, thereby preventing choices that create ugliness, but the goods that God allows through granting free will more than outweigh the cost of ugliness.

Character-Building theodicy. Ugliness revolts us. However, since God is a unity of good things, God intends experiences of ugliness to be of benefit to us. Such benefit occurs when we take advantage of the opportunities experiences of ugliness offer us for developing valuable character traits. Perhaps God makes people ugly to give us an opportunity to be drawn to them by love rather than lust, or for them to learn to be happy with the way they are. Rumi seems to hold that experiences of ugliness offer us the chance to change our perspective and to acknowledge God's omnipotence and generosity: 'Both kinds of pictures (beautiful pictures and pictures devoid of beauty) are evidence of His mastery. The ugly ones are not evidence of his ugliness, they are evidence of His bounty.' (1926: 352) Brady argues that experiences of ugliness have epistemic value because 'they increase our "aesthetic intelligence" through the development of an engaged appreciative awareness of ugliness and all forms of aesthetic value' (2010: 39).

Laws-of-Nature theodicy. A world that behaves in regular and orderly ways permits effective, purposeful action. Hence, the existence of laws of nature is necessary for our having abilities to interact with our environment and with each other. These interactions allow for great goods, such as kindness, stewardship, and so on. However, a law-governed world inevitably produces some ugliness. For instance, the kind of laws that govern digestion also sometimes produce flatulence and decomposition. This ugliness, however, is more than outweighed by the benefits of a law-governed world.

Perspectival theodicy. God, who is a unity of good things, created us with limited epistemic capacities. An unavoidable consequence of our finitude is that we cannot experience creation as a unified whole. There are areas on paintings that, when considered in isolation, strike us as ugly, even though they are beautiful when considered holistically. Similarly, were we able to enlarge our perspective, we would realize with the theologian Said Nursi that disasters and other evils act as divine reminders, by warning us from peril, cleansing us of sin, or awakening us to divine presence (Saritoprak 2005: 27). For, as the Quran says, God 'made beautiful everything that He created' (32:7). And, as Bette Midler sings, 'From a distance, there is harmony, and it echoes through the land.' Ugliness, accordingly, is an unavoidable consequence of our limited perspectives.

V. REVERSE THEODICIES

Reverse theodicy is the project of constructing formal counterparts to standard theodicies in order to undermine the cogency of those theodicies. The project involves constructing accounts of why beauty is a necessary means for or unavoidable by-product of the existence of ugliness. These accounts, like those involved in standard theodicies, block inferences from the mixed bag of creation to the mixed nature of God – except, instead of blocking inferences to the claim that God is a unity of good things, they block the inference to the claim that God neither loves ugliness, is ugly, nor hates us and tortures us with ugliness.

Necessary Counterpart reverse-theodicy. There could be no ugliness without beauty. For a world in which all things are ugly is a world in which nothing distinguishes the ugly from the non-ugly; and if there is no such distinction, then there are no ugly things. Since if God either loves ugliness, is ugly, or hates us and tortures us with ugliness, it is the nature of God to create an ugly world, any world (like ours) that God creates must also contain beautiful things.

Free Will reverse-theodicy. We are free agents. This free will allows us to torment each other in ways that non-autonomous beings cannot. Consider William Edward Hickman, the model for the fictional hero Danny Renehan in Ayn Rand's unfinished novel *The Little Street*. In 1927, Hickman kidnapped the 12-year-old daughter of a banker, ransomed her for $1500, drove away from the ransom exchange with the daughter, dumped her body – dead, with her legs chopped off, internal organs

removed, torso drained of blood and stuffed with towels, and eyes wired open – from his car, and strew her organs throughout the Los Angeles area. The girl's body, when found, was ugly (to put it mildly). And what makes the sight especially repulsive is that someone deliberately mutilated her body: this was no accident, but rather the result of a process that, at any moment, Hickman could have stopped. Hickman's choice in the matter makes the situation especially depraved and the ugliness of the girl's body especially tragic. This special tragedy and depravity would not have been possible had Hickman lacked free will. An unavoidable consequence of free will, however, is that we sometimes choose to perform actions that generate beauty. Morticians, for example, sometimes choose to present corpses as radiant and peaceful. God could have created us without free will, thereby preventing choices that create beauty, but the ugliness that God allows through granting free will more than outweighs the cost of beauty.

Character-Destroying reverse-theodicy. If God either loves ugliness, is ugly, or hates us and tortures us with ugliness, God intends experiences of beauty to torment us. In 'The World Is Ugly, Don't You Know' My Chemical Romance sings of the anguish of unrequited love:

> The world is ugly,
> But you're beautiful to me.
> Are you thinking of me?
> Are you thinking of him?

Majestic mountains and pristine rivers foster bickering about conservation. Beautiful children foster parental anguish about injury or harm; beautiful bodies foster stress about aging and death. If there were not some beauty in the world, we would not be so tormented by ugliness (cf. Law 2010: 6).

Laws-of-Nature reverse-theodicy. A world that behaves in regular and orderly ways permits effective, purposeful action. Hence, the existence of laws of nature is necessary for our having abilities to interact with our environment and each other. These interactions allow for creation of ugliness: the stripping of mountainsides, the mangling of healthy bodies, and so on. However, a law-governed world inevitably produces some beauty. For instance, the laws that govern human physiology also sometimes produce a *Mona Lisa* or a Beethoven-like symphony. This beauty, however, is more than outweighed by the benefits of a law-governed world.

Perspectival reverse-theodicy. God, who either loves ugliness, is ugly, or hates us and tortures us with ugliness, created us as finite creatures with limited epistemic capacities. An unavoidable consequence of our finitude is that we cannot experience creation as a unified whole. Were we able to enlarge our perspective, we would realize that elements of the world that strike us as beautiful are, when considered holistically, ugly. Whence Camille Paglia:

> An apple tree laden with fruit: how peaceful, how picturesque. But remove the rosy filter of humanism from our gaze and look again. See nature spuming and frothing, its mad spermatic bubbles endlessly spilling out and smashing in that inhuman round of waste, carnage, and rot. (1990: 28)

Beauty, accordingly, is an unavoidable consequence of our limited perspectives. For, as Schopenhauer says, 'as with all inferior goods, human life is covered with false glitter on the outside: what suffers always hides itself' (1969: 383-384).

These reverse theodicies are not intended to be effective defences of the claim that God either loves ugliness, is ugly, or hates us and tortures us with ugliness. Rather, they are intended to explain away the existence of beauty in a way similar to the way standard theodicies explain away the existence of ugliness. The similarity of the explanations indicates that there is no good reason to treat the reverse theodicies differently than the standard theodicies, so that the two kinds of theodicy are equally effective (by virtue of being not at all effective or effective to the same degree). In either case, it follows that the standard theodicies fail to block inferences from the mixed bag of creation to the mixed nature of God. This suffices for agnostic tie.

We have not, of course, reversed all possible theodicies. But the general strategy for reverse theodicy is exportable: first, substitute mentions of *beauty* with *ugliness* (and *vice versa*); then identify supporting cases. The strategy is effective for any *prima-facie* reasonable theodicy, we conjecture, because the variety of ugliness in the world ensures suitable examples. This is just the problem with standard theodicies: because of the variety of beauty in the world, there will be supporting cases for *prima-facie* reasonable claim regarding the necessity or unavoidability of ugliness. In light of the reverse theodicies, however, these examples do not help to explain away the existence of ugliness, and so do not clear the

path from the existence of beautiful things to the existence of a beautiful God who creates those beautiful things.

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AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROBLEM
FOR RESURRECTION

YANN SCHMITT

CeSor, EHESS, Paris

Abstract. Some theists have adopted materialism for human persons. They associate this metaphysics with their belief in resurrection and focus on problems arising from personal identity, temporal gaps or material constitution, but, in this paper, I argue that being a materialist for human persons leads to an epistemological problem regarding our knowledge of God's life. The only way to avoid this problem is to choose a particular materialist metaphysics for human persons, that is, a constitution theory that emphasizes the irreducibility of the first-person perspective.

The coherence of theism has been challenged at length, but most of the time, divine attributes are examined. The internal coherence – for example, is it possible to be omnipotent? –, the coherence between a divine attribute and the others – for example, is it possible to be free and omniscient? – or the coherence of some attributes with world features such as evil were under fire for decades. Religious language and philosophical language about God have also been strongly considered. In this article, I would like to examine a particular case of another general problem. Using philosophical tools to express theistic claims requires us to verify if this use is compatible with our practice of philosophy of religion. In Schmitt (2012), regarding divine simplicity, I tried to clarify some implications of the choice of a particular ontology. Now, I will focus on the compatibility between theistic materialism and the epistemology of religious beliefs, or more narrowly on the epistemology of philosophy of religion.

Atheism is commonly associated with materialism for human persons (MHP). By MHP, I mean an ontological theory based upon

this principle: a person is a material object without any non-material substantial part. I insist on the negation of non-material *substantial* part because we can conceive consciousness as a part of the personal life or instantiations of properties as formal parts or ontological parts of the person. But, these kinds of parts, if they exist, are not substantial. Then, if like Descartes in his letter to Regius (January 1642), we consider that a human being is a substantial union of both a soul and a material body, we are not proponents of MHP, this seems pretty obvious. But if we believe that qualia exist and that they are not supported by any non-material substance, we are indeed materialist for human persons (HP). Usually, atheism is associated with materialism and it is fair to say that atheism is generally implied by materialism. The implication here is of course indirect but I summarize what could be a powerful argument for atheism if materialism appears to be true.

Proponents of Christian materialism such as Peter van Inwagen, Trenton Merricks or Lynne Rudder Baker try to accommodate their views on HP, that is MHP, and the core doctrine of their religion, Christianity in that case. Of course, some Jews or some Muslims could defend the compatibility of MHP with their beliefs. Nevertheless, I will focus on Christian materialism, or to say it more carefully, on arguments developed by Christian philosophers, but resurrection or survival are accepted beyond Christian communities, and then I hope my argument will have a wider interest, much of what is said can be applied to other religions and traditions and of course, it concerns atheists and theists as well.

Resurrection is one of the most commonly debated subjects for those who defend both MHP and theism. If a human person is only a material substance, it seems that she will vanish when she dies, when her heart or her brain activities stop. But fortunately, God has powerful means and can keep her and us alive and let our corpses slowly disappear. For the sake of the argument, I will accept that the conjunction of MHP and theism concerning resurrection is coherent.[1] Nevertheless, this trend of thoughts, if coherent and possibly true, leads to a currently unnoticed epistemological problem. For a theist, God is a spiritual substance or a spiritual agent, even if by 'spiritual substance' or 'spiritual agent' she

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[1] See van Inwagen (1998), Zimmerman (1999) and Baker (1995; 2007). See also Merricks (1999) for a sceptical position on how resurrection can take place if we adopt a MHP.

means something analogical with what is usually called 'a spiritual substance' or 'a spiritual agent'. But a materialist for HP believes that these notions are associated with false beliefs and illusions, especially the concept of a spiritual agent with mental properties. Hence, there is an epistemological objection based on MHP against theism. My point is that some kind of MHP can face out this epistemological challenge and some cannot. More precisely, taken together as complementary theories, MHP and an account of the non-reductionist first-person perspective (FPP) can lead to satisfactory theistic representations of God.

The materialist account of survival leads to an epistemological problem for MHP. In order to believe rationally that God intends to save people or wants that a miracle happens, etc., we have to master some mental concepts such as intention, preference, hope, knowledge, etc. But these concepts have an initial meaning when they apply to human persons and maybe to some animals. The difference between finite and infinite beings leads to well-known semantic problems in philosophy of religion. My point is to emphasize other difficulties in transferring mental concepts used for HP conceived as material beings to a spiritual being. No human person provides a ground for comparisons or analogies because we do not entertain any natural knowledge of a spiritual or mental substance. Neither introspection or external perception are acquaintances with a non-material substance enduring a mental and non-physical life.

Suppose you are a type-type identity proponent regarding the mind-body problem. You cannot apply your concept of knowledge to God because you already know that this concept is only satisfied by a material being, maybe a certain structure of the brain. But a materialist for HP does not have to adopt such a strong reductionist view, functionalists have already refuted the type-type theory at length and I will adopt their critiques.

Now suppose you are a token-token proponent. The problem for MHP is not related to our use of mental concepts but to events. If any mental event is a material event, or if any mental property instance is a physical property instance, how can we believe that God instantiates mental properties ? I think two answers can be suggested, two unsatisfying answers indeed.

1) Some psychologists explain that young and older people are spontaneously dualists.[2] For people who entertain dualist intuitions,

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[2] See for example Bloom (2007).

mental concepts or properties apply to an immaterial substance, their soul or simply themselves. So they entertain an attribution practice based on some illusory intuitions. But this practice is useful in everyday life, it does the job perfectly. Why could we not use it for God? Anthropomorphism could be a way to be related to God, provided some strong restrictions on what is projected from human to God. But using a global illusion to practice philosophy of religion is not satisfying at all. Suppose you want to defend the existence of free will on the assumption that we have a deceiving conception of our voluntary acts. Maybe you could deal with everyday practices and talks about volitions and freedom but you are surely not in position to argue for the existence of free will, and neither are you in position to explain free will properties.

2) The second proposal in order to solve the epistemological problem can be found in van Inwagen's papers on dualism and materialism.[3] He does not include events in his ontology and this exclusion could, in the first place, facilitate the development of a theistic account of MHP. Van Inwagen argues that properties and substances are the only elements of his ontology. He assumes that all substances can be and are material (except God) and that they exemplify different properties. Instead of the misleading difference between physical and mental properties, he claims that properties are different in content but not in nature. Some properties attribute mental aspects to substances which are purely material, and some attribute physical aspects. All properties have the same nature, they are abstract entities but these abstract entities have very different contents (that is, mental or physical contents). Then a material substance can have mental and physical properties, identical in nature but different in content. No dualistic conception of persons is required. The important point when we are dealing with the philosophy of religion problem is that mental properties have a content independent of the substances that instantiate them.

At this stage of reasoning, one could find an elegant way to defend mental properties attribution to God conceived as a non-material substance and, at the same time, to HP conceived as material beings. There are no physical events different form mental events in any kind of substance, but only events which are not defined by the content of the property but by the nature of the substance. So there are human events when physical and mental properties are instantiated by human beings

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[3] See van Inwagen (1995; 2007).

and they are divine events when mental properties are instantiated by God. The content of mental properties that we know from our experience of ourselves and others can be attributed to God. Van Inwagen goes further. There is no need for events. A well founded attribution of mental properties to God could be assumed. God, a spiritual substance, instantiates properties with a mental content and does not instantiate properties with a physical content, all mentions of events is omitted.

Of course, the proponent of this kind of solution has to develop a very abstract account of mental properties. In a functionalist theory of mind, mental properties are more general and abstract than physical properties. Being afraid is a mental property or state more general than having a certain neurological structure. For MHP in a theistic perspective, the point is that having a mental property characterizes physical and spiritual substances, animals, human persons and God. But is it really possible or legitimate to apply a concept to a mental substance if the first thing we know is that a mental substance is just an unknown substance or worth a kind of substance about which, in the first place, we only have illusions.

Van Inwagen argues that there is a real mystery in the possibility of subjective experiences in a material entity not because of the physical nature of persons but because of the mystery of the FPP relative to thoughts. We can use an argument provided by van Inwagen. Van Inwagen explains that we cannot appeal to the mystery of the body's identity or of the life's continuity in the case of life after death. Even if God's nature is mysterious or unknowable, there is no good reason to think that we cannot understand, or almost understand, our material constitution. So we should find an explanation of bodily resurrection and that is what van Inwagen provides in his paper. If we should accept that God's nature is mysterious, why do we have to believe that our thinking nature is mysterious? I do not see strong reasons for that.

More pressing: if the instantiation of a property with a mental content is mysterious, it is far less than what a theist materialist for HP has to deal with. Maybe thinking is mysterious, but then a thinking substance is far more mysterious. Being conscious of our limits, especially when we try to think about God, is an intellectual virtue. But if the substance and the instantiation of the property are mysterious, what are we thinking about when we talk about God's intention, intentional action etc., that is when we practice philosophy of religion? Should we adopt a radical negative theology? Like Bartleby, I would prefer not to. Invoking some analogy

between our thoughts and God is also a dead end if we do not know any thinking substance and declare that thinking, even for human persons, is a mysterious event or situation.

Another solution for the materialist for HP who wants to defend theism can be deduced from the aporias of van Inwagen's account. It is a middle way between substance dualistic accounts of HP and animalism, the reduction of HP to living animals, a position assumed by van Inwagen. FPP has to be emphasized in this third way (Baker 2001; 2013) because it has persistence conditions which preclude animalism and do not imply dualism.

If a FPP characterizes HP, if a HP is a material substance, and if we have a clear theory of these facts, then we can think about God, at least analogically. I take Baker's account to be a very promising way to rebut the epistemological objection.

The FPP for a human person is defined by Lynne Rudder Baker like this:

> An ability to conceive of oneself as oneself, from the first person, without recourse to a name, description, or other third-person referring device. (2013: 31)

The rudimentary stage of FFP can be found in mammals or infants. They do have consciousness and they act from a FPP, but they cannot conceive themselves as themselves, because of the lack of self concepts. Only adult human persons can have this ability illustrated or expressed by a reflexive use of pronouns in sentences like: 'I protested that I was overcharged.' In such cases, I conceive myself as myself, I use self concepts in order to perform self attributions. My relation to myself does not depend on a view from nowhere, neither on someone's point of view but on my singular point of view. Being able to use self concepts characterizes the robust stage of FPp. This evolved stage depends on language with first person terms mastered by adults or not too young children. It is often called self consciousness and Baker thinks FPP is essential to the person.

If FPP is not reducible to a third-person perspective or eliminable, it seems that we should defend some kind of dualism, for example a cartesian dualism for whom the FPP indicates the existence of a soul, a mental or spiritual substance different from the body which can be analyzed from a third-person perspective. Baker argues that the acknowledgment of the irreducibility of the FPP or the impossibility of eliminating the FPP does not imply any rejection of naturalism or materialism. Naturalism

in the broad sense (Baker 2000: 22) or materialism about the natural order only claim that there is no need for any soul or supernatural being if we want to understand the first-person ability. It does not exclude the possible existence of a God, but focusing on human thoughts, we can defend a genuine materialist theory of persons and the irreducible FPP as an ability of a material substance and not as an essential attribute of a mental substance separated from the body.

I accept without any further justification the irreducibility or the impossibility of eliminating FPP in a MHP because if it were not the case we would be back to some already examined claims very closed to van Inwagen's. Some could find that this strategy presupposes too much. The irreducibility or the impossibility of eliminating the FPP are strong claims that need powerful arguments which I shall not provide but my point is just to examine if, in philosophy of religion or in religious practices, someone can start a reasoning with the premise that a materialist conception of the mind is true.

Summarizing her materialist conception of HP, Baker explains:

> We whole persons are constituted by whole bodies. Brains have a special role in providing the mechanisms that make possible our mental lives. But it is not my brain itself that would like to go on a river cruise; it is not my brain that regrets having offended you. I did it; I regret it. And I am not identical to a brain. Neither brains nor minds are subjects of experience or are rational or moral agents; we persons are. (2011: 63)

To understand how materialism can be defended and how FPP makes a genuine difference in contrast with third-person perspective, the constitution relation is fundamental. Every particular individual is constituted by one or more aggregates of material particles. But what constitutes an individual is not what is identical with this individual. Persons are not their body like Michelangelo's David is not the piece of marble which constitutes the statue. The primary kind of David is not the primary kind of the piece of marble, and then, there are two objects.

Constitution is a relation between identity and separated existence. Constitution is not identity because it does not satisfy Leibniz's law, that is the identity of indiscernibles. David and the piece of marble have different modal properties so they cannot be identical, they are two different objects. For example, if someone melts the piece of marble, this piece still exists but is carved into another shape, and at the same time David was destroyed. The persistence conditions of David and of the

piece of marble are different, their modal properties are not identical. So, from Leibniz's law, David and the piece of marble are not identical. Constitution is also linked to the necessity of identity, that is if x is identical with y, then necessarily x is identical with y. No need here to enter in the controversial conception of a contingent identity.

But the relation of constitution is not mere coincidence between two objects located at the very same place. David depends on the piece of marble and on favourable circumstances, its aesthetic properties depend on the physical properties of the marble, on the form taken by the piece of marble and on its relations to artists, critics and maybe other statues and artworks – those are the favourable circumstances. It is worth noting that among the properties of David, there are extrinsic but essential properties such as being an object in the artistic world. So mereology cannot deal with constitution, mereological composition is not sufficient to analyze the emergence of David's properties from the properties of the piece of marble and from the artistic world.

So constitution is an asymmetric relation that introduces an ontological hierarchy because David is more complex than the piece of marble. David does not simply supervene on the piece of marble, supervenience characterizes a relation between properties of an object and not the relation between two objects. Of course, when an object is constituted by another one, it has new properties, especially new causal powers. These new causal powers indicate the existence of a new object dependent on the former but not identical with it.

The difference between body and person is maybe clearer now: two objects belong to two primary kinds but only one constitutes the other. The persistence conditions of a body which is a human organism could be the persistence of a shape or of a life belonging to human species. The difficulty of defining clear persistence conditions for any body is that bodies always gain and lose particles and always seem to change. The person does not face this unceasing change or the change in the person does not seem to be dependent on the gain or loss of a particle. So from Leibniz's law, we should acknowledge that persons are not identical with their bodies. But human persons are necessarily embodied, that they have to have a body in order to entertain a FPp. Being necessarily embodied does not imply that this person is necessarily composed of this body. A change in the body and maybe a change of the body itself is not incompatible with the persistence of the person if mechanisms that support our person-level activities or states operate.

This point urges us to understand how resurrection is possible if we are material beings with a FPP, that is persons constituted by material bodies. Baker (1995) exposes different conceptions of resurrection coherent with different non-dualistic views about HP. If you believe in an intermediate state between death and life after death, it is not a necessary condition that you have a soul sleeping in Christ but an intermediate and pre-resurrected body can have the same role. What is more surprising in Baker's defence of a non-dualistic conception of resurrection is her acceptation of temporal gaps. If persons are not composed of a soul and a body but constituted of a body, when they die, it seems that the body disappears, and then the person constituted of it also vanishes. Baker recalls van Inwagen's treatment of this problem (van Inwagen: 1998). She agrees with his analysis of Augustine's manuscript but departs from his rejection of temporal gap for HP. Augustine's manuscript cannot be resurrected by God because in order to be a Augustine's manuscript, the piece of matter that composed it has to have Augustine in its origin and in the causes that lead to the manuscript. Therefore, even God cannot produce a genuine Augustine's manuscript by himself. But human person resurrection does not depend, says Baker, on the origin, namely two other human persons, or at least parts of them, but it depends only on some body which is able to constitute the same person God wants to resurrect.

> If creation of a resurrected body is within the power of God at all, it seems to me equally in his power to produce the conditions necessary for the body to constitute Smith, where what makes Smith the person she is are her characteristic intentional states, including first-person reference to her body. The fact that a certain resurrection body would not exist without the direct intervention of God is irrelevant to whether or not it was Smith's body – just as the fact that a certain bionic body would not exist without the direct intervention of scientists and surgeons is irrelevant to whether or not it is Smith's body. (Baker 1995: 499)

Here an important point is worth to be noticed. It is not necessary for resurrection that the same body still exists or returns to life, it is more important that the same person, a material person, is still alive or returns to life. The resurrected person only needs to be constituted of a body that allows her to be the very person she was. Her materialism only implies that a person cannot exist without some body but not that a person cannot exist without any body changes (Baker 2011: 1). Michael Rea

objects that the resurrected body is a mere reincarnated body (2009: 13-4) because it is not the same body. But reincarnation depends on a preserved soul which is linked to a new body. In the constitution view, no soul is preserved, and then it is very strange to understand this theory of survival as a reincarnation. Despite this concern, I think Baker's account is more promising. It keeps together two important claims: the material person, that is a person constituted by a body, without any other entity as a soul, is preserved and it is possible that life after death would be highly different from mundane life and so the resurrected body could be very different from the mundane body provided it could make the person like she was before.[4]

FPP is not substantial by itself so it cannot be conserved like an autonomous entity. Even strong transformations like the one mentioned in the above quotation suppose a continuity. If a scientist practices a whole change of the particles composing a body, we generally believe he does not destroy the body and replaces it by another body worked out elsewhere. What is stipulated is that the living body is progressively transformed by successive substitutions of some parts. With that kind of change, the FPP is preserved because each function of the body that is necessary for the FPP is preserved by the thoroughness of the surgeon. Baker compares resurrection with this practice but God is not a surgeon. In one shot, he replaces the body by another one. This is a miracle performed by God which gives us a new life. If FPP depends on the proper functioning of the body and if we want to avoid the temporal gap problem, we need to say that God has to replace the dead body by a resurrected body immediately, this provides the continuity of the person we need. But here lies the problem of human nature and of the origin of the person pointed out by van Inwagen. The resurrected body is a created body and not a natural body. It no longer belongs to the primary kind 'human body'. The organism that constitutes the resurrected person does not belong to the species 'Homo sapiens' any longer since it was created by God as Augustine's manuscript in van Inwagen's story. It does not preclude that the person treats the resurrected body as her body, she can still adopt a FPP on it. It is her body, she refers to it from the inside and not from a third-person perspective. But her body is not a human

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[4] Baker does not fall in the same problems as Olson (1997) or Corcoran (1998) who suppose that human beings are essentially animals or organisms and then have problems to think of a resurrection where our body is radically different.

organism. So the resurrected person is always a person because of her FPP but she is not human. Being human is a property that the person has derivatively, from her being constituted by a human organism. If the body is not a human organism, the person constituted by this body cannot be human, a member of the human species, a point unobserved by Baker. Maybe this fact is not a problem. After death, we cannot say that a human person is human in a biological sense, belonging to the human species is an earthly fact, unlike being resurrected.[5] Baker urges us to consider that the doctrine of resurrection cannot require identity of the earthly body and the resurrected body because the earthly body seems essentially corruptible and the resurrected body is not (2011: 9).

I can restate my point in terms of identity. After resurrection, a person is numerically the same but qualitatively very different, and this difference is manifested by her new body which is generally called a glorified one. The problem of the temporal gap can be solved. The numerical identity of the body is not presupposed by our theory. The important point is that the person is numerically the same. But there is also a problem of temporal gap for personal identity over time. This worry seems less pressing for me. I think we can find a clear and good analogy of the rebirth of the person after death in our earthly life. When a person is sleeping and wakes up, it is difficult to say that there is not a temporal gap in her life but a perfect identity over time, despite this temporal gap. It is even clearer if we imagine someone in a coma. I do not want to suggest that a psychological account of personal numerical identity over time is needed. I think I do not have to decide which criterion is required or even if a criterion is absolutely required (Merricks 1998). But there is no origin problem pointed out by van Inwagen in that case. If we allow a temporal gap and then a new production of the body, even if the resurrected body is qualitatively the same, the new body is the base of emergence or re-emergence of the person. The person is not created directly by God as Augustine's manuscript is in van Inwagen's story. The person like every human person comes into existence because of the particular structure of a body in certain environmental conditions.

With this materialist theory of HP, we find grounds for analogy between our mental life and God's one in order to rebut the epistemological objection. In our ordinary life, we grasp mental concepts

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[5] For Christians, Jesus Christ would be an exception, I do not enter in this particular case, because the Incarnation is a very particular case of being a human person.

and properties and it is legitimate to think of God, at least analogically, as a mental substance. We do not project some delusions about us on God, we do not claim that there is a fundamental mystery in mental life. What has been shown is that theistic materialists have to express their beliefs, and especially resurrection, with a particular metaphysics for HP, that is a composition theory of persons which emphasizes FPp. This particular metaphysics is required to harmonize religious beliefs and their philosophical explication.

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