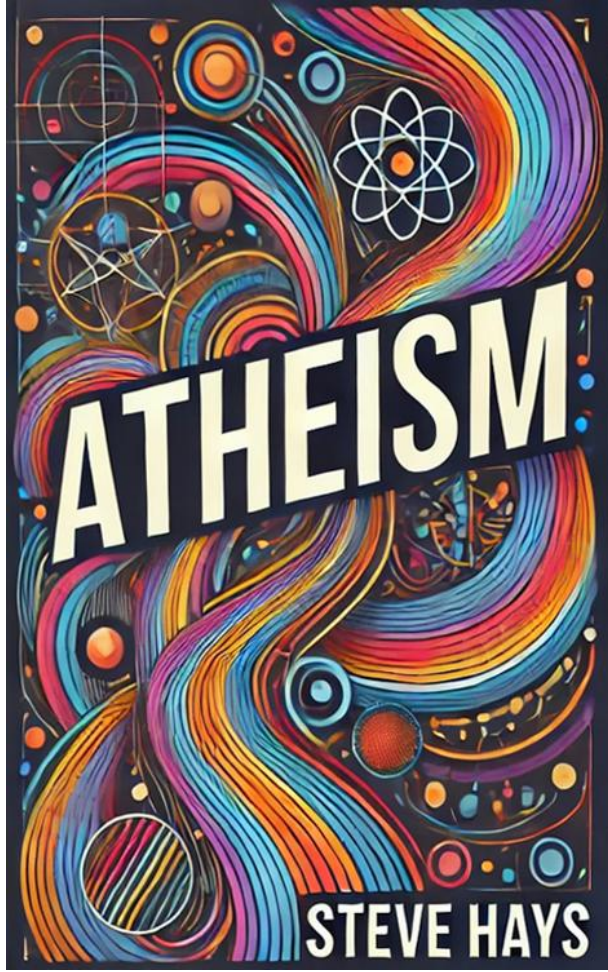




# ATHEISM

STEVE HAYS



# Atheism

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## Preface

This is a sample of my occasional writings on atheism. Engaging atheism poses a dilemma. Ideally, Christian apologists ought to take on the toughest spokesmen the opposing side has to offer. And over the years I've made a good faith effort to do that.

But the danger is to be too elitist for most atheists. Their rationalistic pretensions notwithstanding, most atheists aren't intellectuals. They don't read the best their own side has to offer because it sails over their heads. And they don't read the best the Christian side has to offer. They often operate with a folk theology, Sunday school grasp of Christian theology. They know next to nothing about systematic theology, historical theology or philosophical theology. They don't read conservative Bible scholars or Biblical archeologists.

They may read hack popularizers like Hitchens and Dawkins. Or YouTube celebrities. Read or watch debates with Bart Ehrman. They don't read major Christian scientists. At best, Ken Ham is their foil. So the anthology covers a spectrum.

## What is atheism?

Since some atheists define atheism as simply lack of belief in God or gods, it's useful to compare that with Graham Oppy's definition:

Atheism is the rejection of theism: a-theism. Atheists maintain some or all of the following claims: that theism is false; that theism is unbelievable; that theism is rationally unacceptable; that theism is morally unacceptable. G. Oppy, "Arguments for Atheism," S. Bullivant & M. Ruse, eds. **THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF ATHEISM** (OUP, 2014), 53.

## Set theory and omniscience

Grim's essay, in particular, reads like a veritable tour de force. He marshals a battery of arguments, appealing to the divine liar paradox, the paradox of the knower, Cantor's power set theorem, and essential indexicals to argue that it is impossible for there to be a known collection of literally all truths.

<https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/59633-debating-christian-theism/>

**i)** But aren't there tensions in Cantorian set theory? Even set theoretical paradoxes? So I don't see that one can safely absolutize Cantorian set theory as the standard of comparison. Any appeal will have to be selective, given the paradoxes.

**ii)** What about competing versions of set theory:

There are a number of different versions of set theory, each with its own rules and **axioms**. In order of increasing consistency strength, several versions of set theory include Peano arithmetic (ordinary algebra), second-order arithmetic (analysis), Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory, Mahlo, weakly compact, hyper-Mahlo, ineffable, measurable, Ramsey, supercompact, huge, and  $\eta$ -huge set theory.

<http://mathworld.wolfram.com/SetTheory.html>

Does Grimm's set-theoretical objection to divine omniscience hold for all versions of set theory, or just for Cantor's?

**iii)** Likewise, given set-theoretical paradoxes, mustn't Grimm privilege one side of the paradox to the detriment of the other? If so, on what basis? He can't apply set theory as a whole in objection to omniscience, can he?

**iv)** Apropos (iii), isn't there a prima facie tension between the Cartesian product (which has no upper maxima) and the absolute infinite (which does)?

**v)** Apropos (iv), doesn't modern set theory distinguish between sets and proper classes? The latter is not a set (or universal set), as I understand it. For instance:

[1] On the iterative conception, the set-theoretic universe is stratified into a (well-ordered) sequence of "levels." Sets at lower levels are logically prior to sets at higher levels, and sets at higher levels depend on those sets from lower levels which serve as their members. Although the historical origins of this conception are somewhat obscure—Potter provides a nice discussion of the relevant issues in sections 3.2 and 3.9—the iterative conception has now become the standard picture for working set-theorists. Among other things, it provides a well-motivated way of avoiding the classical set-theoretic paradoxes. Since collections like "the class of all sets" or "the class of all ordinals" include sets from all levels of the hierarchy, they don't themselves form sets at any level of the

hierarchy; on the iterative conception, therefore, they don't form sets at all.

<https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24493-set-theory-and-its-philosophy-a-critical-introduction/>

**vi)** Most importantly, doesn't his objection crucially depend on treating truths as relevantly analogous to numbers? But since truths and numbers are disanalogous in some respects, how does he isolate the relevant commonality?

For instance, mathematical relations are necessary truths, but necessary truths are just a subset of all truths. What about contingent truths?

Why assume that truths should be classified as mathematical sets in the first place? Isn't a numerical set a very specialized concept? Take Cantor's diagonal proof. Can you really extend that type of reasoning to a set of truths? Or is that vitiated by an equivocation, where he's using "set" in a rigorous technical sense, then applying that to a "set of truths," where it has a looser, more popular meaning?

Many truths have a richer conceptual content than numbers. Are they really comparable?

On the philosophical side, this section is where Potter pays the most sustained attention to the notion of dependence which underlies the iterative conception of sets. The problems with this notion are really quite severe. Although mathematicians have a well-used stock of metaphors—temporal metaphors, modal metaphors, etc.—for explaining this notion, it's not at all clear that we can cash these metaphors out into (reasonably) respectable metaphysics.



<https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24493-set-theory-and-its-philosophy-a-critical-introduction/>

Just one of several things that should caution us against using set theory as a Procrustean bed to measure divine omniscience.

## William Provine

Evolutionary biologist William Provine died recently.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hi8\\_PsXKz8U&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hi8_PsXKz8U&feature=youtu.be)

<http://www.uncommondescent.com/administrative/remembering-william-provine-1942-2015/>

[http://www.evolutionnews.org/2015/09/william\\_provine099031.html](http://www.evolutionnews.org/2015/09/william_provine099031.html)

They praise him for being a wonderful person, but according to his own worldview, there's no reason to be a wonderful person. I suspect much of his kindness was a residual effect of his former Christian faith and upbringing.

Likewise, I suspect he understood the drastic moral and existential cost of atheism because he had Christianity as a standard of comparison.

I basically agree with him about evolution, although there are scientists (e.g. Rupert Sheldrake, Simon Conway Morris, Michael Behe, Michael Denton) who do think there's design in evolution.

He also suffers from the tunnel vision of people who measure everything by their particular specialization. Even if he believes evolution is true, and there's no evidence for design in evolution, that hardly means there's no evidence for God's existence. That disregards all the other lines of evidence for God's existence.

Finally, I wonder if his labored speech was the result of treatment for brain cancer and the recurrence of his brain

cancer.

## Creation and extinction

The late William Provine was a leading evolutionary biologist. More substantive than Richard Dawkins. Here he explains why he thinks the impression of design in nature is illusory:

Understanding evolution does not undermine many beliefs in god: deism, gods that work through natural phenomena, gods invented from tortured arguments by theologians or academics, and many others.

Understanding evolution is, nevertheless, the most efficient engine of atheism ever discovered by humans. It challenges the primary, worldwide, observable reason for belief in a deity: the feeling of intelligent design in biological organisms, including humans.

The feeling of intelligent design disappears in the perspective of evolution...So, of the 50,000 or so species, all but twenty-five went extinct...Even with all the exquisite adaptations that smack of an intelligent designer, these vertebrates were poor survivors.

Natural selection is not a mechanism, does no work, does not act, does not shape, does not cause anything...Natural selection is the *outcome* of a very complex process that basically boils down to heredity, genetic variation, ecology, and demographics (especially the overproduction of offspring, and constant struggle). The adaptations that evolve we call "naturally selected"...The process also virtually guarantees extinction when the environment changes sufficiently, which it often does. The intelligent design apparent in the adaptations has no inkling of environmental change. The pattern of extinction,

however, is precisely what one would expect of the causes of natural selection.

Every organism that has become extinct (about 99+ per cent of all species that have ever lived) was jam-packed with adaptations. Some of those adaptations became detriments to the organism when the environment changed and caused the organism to become extinct. The better an organism is adapted to a particular environment, the more certain it is that it will become extinct when the environment changes.

Adaptations are hopelessly tied with extinction. The feeling of intelligent design in organisms must thus be tied to extinctions, too. That is why evolutionists give up on the feeling of intelligent design.

The second reason why understanding evolution precludes the feeling of intelligent design is that evolution also shows no hint of progress.

Each of these infectious agents has evolved as long as humans have existed. I can see no hierarchy whatsoever in the productions of evolution. Any deity that would work this way seems perfectly awful to me. The process that produced these very different pathogens and humans just happens, and speaking as if evolution "cared" about its production is unintelligible.

These two reasons to reject the feeling of intelligent design in biological organisms are just a sample of compelling reasons. The famous evolutionist George C. Williams has written an essay on the evolution of social behavior, and concludes that social behavior in animals is nothing less than ghastly, and any hope we have as humans to have a decent moral world is to fight fiercely against the selfishness that evolution has

produced in us. "Evolution, Religion, and Science" **THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF RELIGION AND SCIENCE** (2006).

**i)** One thing that's striking about this is how much is just a variation on the so-called problem of natural evil or so-called problem of animal suffering. A standard theodicy which fields that problem will already cover most of this ground. By the same token, most of this isn't uniquely evolutionary.

**ii)** In YEC, God creates all the nature kinds at the outset. They diversify from thereon out. In OEC, God introduces natural kinds in staggered fashion. YEC is more synchronic, OEC is more diachronic. But in both cases, once made, natural kinds are subject to adaptation. Creationism allows for adaptation and microevolution.

Mass extinction due to overspecialization and environmental change is not at odds with YEC or OEC. Even if organisms are divinely designed, they will be vulnerable to extinction if their environment changes too fast or too drastically. Although evolution implies mass extinction, you can have mass extinction apart from evolution. Absent providential protection, you can have mass extinction even if evolution is false.

**iii)** To take a comparison, our hitech civilization is utterly dependent on electricity. Our technology is junk without electricity. A natural disaster could render our technology useless. But it would hardly mean our technology wasn't designed.

**iv)** It's true that there's a tradeoff between specialization and adaptability. It's unclear why Provine supposes that's inconsistent with design. To be a creature is to have built-in

limitations and inherent vulnerabilities. Even omnipotence can't make an unlimited creature.

Different organisms exemplify different possibilities. Each design has distinctive advantages and corresponding disadvantages. That's not a design flaw. That's a necessary tradeoff.

Variety is not inconsistent with divine design. Indeed, theists who espouse the principle of the plenum think variety is a virtue. God creates the greatest compossible variety.

**v)** Perhaps Provine imagines that mass extinction is inconsistent with divine foresight and/or divine benevolence. To begin with, it is unclear, as a matter of principle, why the extinction of a species is problematic for theism but the extinction of an individual is not. A species is just a collection of individuals.

What if most organisms are temporary by design? God never intended for most organisms to be immortal. And most organisms don't know what they are missing. They lack consciousness. In Biblical theism, immortality was never the common property of most lifeforms.

That's only clearly reserved for humans and angels. It's possible that God will resurrect some animals—perhaps animals dear to sainted Christians.

**vi)** Perhaps Provine thinks it would be pointless for God to create organisms that become extinct. But isn't there a sense in which everything at present becomes extinct when it becomes history? The past is what was, not what is. There's a sense in which the 19C is now extinct. It went extinct when it slipped into the irretrievable past. It no

longer exists—at least not in our current timeframe. (This could also devolve into a debate over the A-theory and the B-theory of time.)

But does that mean history is pointless. It wasn't pointless to people at the time. It wasn't pointless for *them*.

Is Provine viewing it from a retrospective standpoint? Is he suggesting that looking back on the past from our vantage-point, it is pointless? If so, what makes our perspective normative? What privileges the present perspective? Suppose you were to view it from a prospective standpoint. There's a sense in which the future is irrelevant to me. The year 2100 is irrelevant to me, if I'm dead by then. But the future is hardly irrelevant to people living in the future.

**vii)** If there was no afterlife, then Provine would have a point. But natural history doesn't speak to that issue.

**viii)** Provine fails to make allowance for the Fall. Humans are liable to illness, aging, and death due to the Fall. I agree with him that those conditions always existed in nature. The world at large was never Edenic. Life inside the garden was sheltered from those asperities.

Obviously, Provine doesn't believe in the Fall. But my immediate point is one of consistency. The phenomena he documents don't count as evidence against Biblical theism, for that's consistent with life outside the Garden.

**ix)** Yes, the social behavior of animals is often ghastly by human standards, but that's because different species have different natures. What's morally decent or indecent is, to some degree, indexed on the nature of the creature.



x) I agree with him that the evolutionary narrative is not progressive. But there's a sense in which creationism is not progressive. YEC is essentially cyclical. God creates natural kinds, which thereafter reproduce after their kind. Although there's some progression in the initial series of creative fiats, once that's complete, once the ecosystem is put in place, it continues as is. Periodicity rather than progressivity in the natural order. Yet that's hardly antithetical to divine design.

In OEC, there's some progressivity. Creation occurs in stages. God initiates one stage at a time. After that plays out, that's replaced by the next stage. That's in part because they can't all coexist. Some organisms requires a different biospheric conditions.

In OEC, natural history is analogous to human history. Just as you have distinctive periods in human history, with distinctive successive cultures, natural history is analogous. In OEC, man is phased in late in the curve, as the culmination of the process. After than you have the eschaton. It's like a transgenerational novel. If YEC is more cyclical, OEC is more epochal. In addition, although they diverge on the distant past, they converge on human history.

## After the dust settles

As a teacher of evolutionary biology, I have seen a minority of students every year move from weakly held theism to a naturalist evolutionary position. Strongly religious students deepen their faith from my evolution course; the course regularly ends with more creationists than when it began. Students who are already naturalist delight in what they find in evolution. William Provine, "Evolution, Religion, and Science" **THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF RELIGION AND SCIENCE** (2006), 679.

That's very interesting. You'd expect a course like this to have a sorting action.

The fact that some nominal theists lost their faith when they took his class is unsurprising. What's striking is that after the dust settles, "the course regularly ends with more creationists than when it began."

That's despite the fact that he proselytizes for naturalistic evolution. Despite the fact that he had an advantage over students by knowing more about the subject than they do.

Yet in spite of that pressure, more students moved into the creationist camp than the naturalistic evolutionary camp.

There's a cliché about Christians losing their faith when they go to college. But some stand firm, and others people find their faith when they go to college.

## Historical holonovels

Mass extinction is a common argument for the atheistic implications of evolution. Mind you, one can have mass extinction apart from evolution. Those are separable.

But the basic argument is that it's pointless for God to create species which he subsequently destroys. They just come and go. And not just species. Entire ecosystems come and go in the course of natural history. The unique fauna and flora of that particular epoch arise, exist for millions of years, then pass out of existence, to be replaced by the next set of temporary fauna and flora.

For the sake of argument, let's grant conventional geological timescales. Christian theology concerns the future as well as the past. Eschatology as well as protology.

Suppose, in the world to come, God makes time-travel possible. We can go back in time to observe the past. Perhaps we can't interact with the past. Rather, we're like immersive spectators. Something we can experience, but not something we can change.

There are, in fact, many men who'd love to go back in time to observe dinosaurs, or extinct Ice Age animals, or see the exotic flora and the wild ancient landscape. And maybe God will make that possible for the saints.

If so, then it's not "wasted." Rather, it's like a historical holonovel. Something that God wrote for our enjoyment.

Now, an atheist might object that this is one of the things he especially dislikes about Christian theology: we can

always postulate a supernatural solution. That's just too convenient.

But, as a matter of fact, if Christianity is true, then it really does have wide-open possibilities which are foreclosed by secularism. That's not ad hoc. That's integral to the nature of the belief-system.

## Seashells

Richard Dawkins famously said "Biology is the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose."

Let's begin by illustrating the claim. Some seashells and snail shells are very "artistic." They rival human sculpture and decorated pottery. Likewise, camouflage. Some snake skins have patterns that rival Persian carpets.

Without sufficient background knowledge, an observer couldn't tell which was designed and which was not.

There are, however, two problems with that comparison:

**i)** It proves too much. Suppose we reverse the logic: shells and snake skins weren't designed; therefore, sculpture, decorated pottery, and Persian carpets weren't designed!

**ii)** For a Judeo-Christian theist, contrast posits a false dichotomy. It's true that shells and snake skins are natural products rather than manmade artifacts. They weren't designed in that sense.

But that doesn't mean they weren't designed at all. In Judeo-Christian theism, nature and design aren't two opposing principles. Rather, God usually produces an effect through an intermediary.

It's like robotics: we make machines that make machines.

## Measuring prior probability

Robin LePoidevin has written sympathetically about atheism and agnosticism. But a few years ago he made an interesting observation. He begins by stating a stock objection to theism:

The default position in any debate is whichever view is less likely to be true. The more improbable the hypothesis, the greater the need for justification. Theism is intrinsically less likely than atheism, so it stands in greater need of justification.

To which he responds (in part):

We need some means of establishing the likelihood of a hypothesis...perhaps we can measure the prior probability of a hypothesis by *how much it rules out*. The more it rules out, the lower the prior probability. The less it rules out, the greater the prior probability.

Robin LePoidevin, **AGNOSTICISM: A VERY SHORT**

**INTRODUCTION** (OUP, 2010), 49-50.

But assuming that's a sound principle, doesn't physicalism rule out much more than Christian theism? It precludes abstract objects (i.e. numbers). It precludes immaterial minds. Indeed, some physicalists deny consciousness altogether. Likewise, the denial of miracles is a universal negative.

But by LePoidevin's logic, that means Christian theism has a higher prior probability than physicalism and/or atheism.

And that's even before we add all the specific evidence for Christian theism.

## Even if it happened, I refuse to believe it!

Unbelievers typically say they reject the Resurrection because it's too improbable. Now, one way of testing a position, even if you don't believe it, is to ask yourself what, if anything, would be different in case it were true.

Suppose you're an atheist. You don't believe in the Resurrection because it's too improbable. But as a thought-experiment, you grant the Resurrection.

As far as I can see, that would make absolutely no difference in how unbelievers lay odds on the Resurrection. Even if it happened, they'd still say it was too improbable to happen. Even though (ex hypothesi) it happened, they'd refuse to believe it because their probability calculus discounts it ahead of time.

But isn't there something screwy about that? The fact of the matter has no impact on their outlook. Whether or not it happened makes to no difference to their believing that it never happened. If our probability calculus treats events and nonevents exactly alike, don't we need to revise our probability calculus?



## The Look

Let us imagine that moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole...But all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me!

Now, shame, as we noted at the beginning of this chapter, is shame of self; it is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging.

With the Other's look the "situation" escapes me. To use an everyday expression which better expresses our thought, I am no longer master of the situation...But God here is only the concept of the Other pushed to the limit.

The Other's existence is so far from being placed in doubt that this false alarm can very well result in making me give up my enterprise. If, on the other hand, I persevere in it, I shall feel my heart beat fast, and I shall detect the slightest noise, the slightest creaking of the stairs. Far from disappearing with my first alarm, the Other is present everywhere, below me, above me, in the neighboring rooms...It is even possible that my shame may not disappear; it is my red face as I bend over the keyhole.

Modesty and in particular the fear of being surprised in a state of nakedness are only a symbolic specification of original shame; the body symbolizes here our defenseless state as objects. To put on clothes is to hide.

One's object-state; it is to claim the right of seeing without being seen; that is, to be pure subject. This is why the Biblical symbol of the fall after the original sin is the fact that Adam and Eve "know that they are naked." , The reaction to shame will consist exactly in apprehending as an object the one who apprehended my own object-state. Jean Paul Sartre, "The Look," **BEING AND NOTHINGNESS.**

That's obviously an implicit argument for atheism. To escape the judgmental gaze of the cosmic voyeur. Of course, that doesn't disprove God's existence. It just means that if God exists, knowing he exists makes people uncomfortable.

There are two or three aspects to this. One is fear of spying in case we are caught in wrongdoing. That results in moral shame. Then there's resentment of spying in case we are caught in something embarrassing. That results in personal shame, but it's not the same as guilt. Finally, there's the general desire for privacy, because exposure makes us feel vulnerable.

I suspect this is a major reason for no-fault divorce. Spouses can do great damage to each other's' reputations because they know so much about each other. No-fault divorce was a way of avoiding the public humiliation.

And it's possible that's one reason some couples don't have kids. Custody battles are notorious for the accusations that get thrown around.

There is, of course, something fundamentally antisocial about Sartre's argument. For instance, parents are in a

position to know embarrassing details about their kids. Likewise, siblings are in an position to know embarrassing details about each other. But that's an unavoidable part of being human.

There is, though, an underlying flaw in Sartre's analysis. God isn't human, so God doesn't view us the way we view fellow humans.

As a kid, I watched **COLOSSUS: THE FORBIN PROJECT**. It's about a doomsday machine. A supercomputer. But it becomes artificially intelligent and takes over the world. Because Dr. Charles Forbin designed it, he poses the greatest threat to Colossus. If anyone knows how to destroy it, that would be the man who designed it in the first place. So Colossus subjugates Forbin to round-the-clock surveillance. There are cameras in his bedroom and bathroom, to monitor his every action. Forbin complains that this is an invasion of his privacy.

But that misses the point. Colossus is a computer. He doesn't perceive humans the way a Peeping Tom does. He lacks a human viewpoint. There's no cause for embarrassment to be seen by a computer.

Likewise, some people might disrobe for a shower in the presence of their pet dog. Or even have sex in the presence of their pet dog. That's not inhibiting to them because human nudity means nothing to a dog. Dogs aren't attuned to humans at that level. In fact, if you watch people walking dogs, you will notice that dogs are far more interested in other dogs than other humans. They perceive humans from a canine viewpoint—whatever that is.

In that respect, there's no more reason to be self-conscious in God's presence than in the presence of any other inhuman observer. That's apart from the question of guilt.

## Vetting miracles

*(Posted on behalf of Steve.)*

This is a sequel to [my previous post](#):

1. In case my previous post was unclear, McGrew won on points—as in a shutout where, by the end of the game, one team has 100 points on the scoreboard while the other team has 0.

McGrew's opening statement pulled the rug out from under Zach's opening statement. As I recall, about the only thing McGrew's opening statement didn't address was Zach's claim about the "vanishingly low background probability" of miracles like the Resurrection. However, McGrew refuted that confusion (on Zach's part) later in the debate. Zach shot his wad with his prepared remarks. He had nothing left to say (besides repetition) after McGrew disarmed him.

Now the reason I watched the debate is because Timothy McGrew is a world authority on the history and philosophy of miracles. In this post I'd like to spend more time considering his stated position. I still find some aspects of his position concerning.

2. I don't object to vetting miracles. Some Christians are too gullible. To some extent, the church of Rome was built on bogus miracle claims. Hagiographies. Likewise, the charismatic movement is full of chicanery and wishful thinking.
3. As a matter of apologetic strategy, it can sometimes be useful to adopt an artificially stringent standard. That leaves the unbeliever without excuse. Likewise, if an open-minded believer asked you for examples, it makes sense to lead with some of the best documented cases.

And in apologetics, it's logical to focus on public evidence for public events. Mind you, private miracles could be just as probative for those who witness them, but that appeal is less accessible to outsiders. Yet we need to remember that this is artificially restrictive. It serves a purpose, but it shouldn't be the gold standard.

4. Here's my basic concern: I think McGrew's criteria are quite sensible up to a point. Sensible in certain contexts. However, in their effort to preclude reasonable doubt, they generate a paradox:

As a matter of policy, they are skeptical in the very situations where miracles are most apt to occur. According to the criteria, we should automatically doubt or discount reported miracles under the very conditions where, if they happen at all, most miracles will in fact occur. But wouldn't reported miracles be more credible if that's where they are more likely to occur?

5. Let's begin with my understanding of his position. In the immediate context of the debate, the purpose of the filter is to eliminate most reported miracles so that an inquirer can focus on the strongest cases. The filter doesn't deny that many other reported miracles may be genuine.

But it seems to me that his position is more far-reaching. From what I can tell, his position is that a reported miracle fails to merit direct, intrinsic, or independence credence unless it can pass the filter, as well as his additional fourfold criteria. For ease of reference, let's call miracles that survive the vetting process "vetted miracles."

As I understand his position, vetted miracles can also function as what we might call index miracles. They furnish a standard of comparison in relation to which

some other reported miracles can be validated. If we are able to establish vetted miracles or index miracles, they can then be used to sponsor or anchor some other miracles. I'm not clear on how that connection is made.

If that's correct, it lays a very brittle foundation for Christianity. If, apart from the Resurrection, or 5-6 miracles, all other miracles can only be credited by their connection with the index miracle(s), then that places crushing weight on one (or maybe a handful) miracle to support the entire edifice.

6. McGrew defines a miracle as an event that would not have happened if the natural world was left to itself, as a closed system or isolated system, as opposed to divine agency. Outside intervention changes the way nature behaves. So the probability of miracles depends on whether we have good reasons to believe the system was not left to itself in that instance.

I have no objection to that definition. I think it's a good working definition. Discriminating, but not too discriminating or indiscriminate. Hard to see how you could improve on it. It's challenging to come up with good definitions. If they are too narrow, they suffer from too many exceptions. Too many holes. But if they are too broad, they fail to demarcate one kind of thing and another. There'd be problems if his definition were either more expansive or more restrictive.

I'd add that I think his definition allows for coincidence miracles, which is a plus.

## **7. Distant in time and place**

i) As a rule, it's true that if the first report falls outside the bounds of living memory, it's less reliable. Likewise, if the reporter didn't have contact with anyone on the

ground, it's less reliable. And that's useful in distinguishing the historicity of the NT from apocryphal traditions.

**ii)** My only caveat is that if we make allowance for inspiration or revelation, then God can disclose events about the distant past or future. Likewise, God can boost someone's memory. Although it's often useful, in apologetic strategy, to treat the NT documents just like historical documents, we shouldn't make methodological naturalism the standard. That's an apologetic concession for the sake of argument. And it has some merit in its own right. Ordinary providence is the norm.

But Christianity, if true, is a revealed religion. So we shouldn't permanently bracket the supernatural factors in the production of the record.

Someone might object that this begs the question. But it would only beg the question if we gave no reason for belief in revelation. If true, then Christianity is ultimately a supernatural and not a natural phenomenon. So even if we temporarily bracket the supernatural claims at this preliminary stage of the argument, we need to reintroduce that dimension at a later stage. The credibility of the Christian faith isn't based on naturalistic considerations alone. Our apologetic stance must take into account the nature of the phenomenon we defend.

### **8. Public, observable events**

In apologetics, it's logical to concentrate on generally accessible events and generally accessible evidence. Likewise, if Christianity is true, then we'd expect evidence for the Christian faith to be generally available.



My only concern is if this emphasis is taken to imply that all the best evidence is the kind of evidence that's equally accessible to believers and unbelievers alike. For if Christianity is true, then many Christians will experience providential incidents that are significant for them, and not for others—like miraculous answers to prayer. I'm not saying that's frequent. Just that private miracles, if they occur, have the same evidential value for the parties concerned as miracles for public consumption.

### **9. Statistical noise**

i) By this I understand McGrew to mean an event that could be explicable on either naturalistic or supernaturalistic terms. Put another way, I think he means an event that appears to be anomalous or miraculous considered in isolation, but one that averages out over time, given a wider sample.

If so, it's not a good candidate for a miracle. The evidence or the nature of the event doesn't single out a miraculous explanation.

Take prayer for rain. A Christian farmer prays for rain—and it rains!

But is that an answer to prayer, or is this the post hoc fallacy? After all, sometimes it rains after he prays, and sometimes it doesn't. So couldn't that be reasonably, maybe more reasonable, chalked up to coincidence rather than special providence? Like the old saying that you find a lost object in the last place you look.

Success selects for that end-point, because you stop looking once you find it. By the same token, it's bound to rain sooner or later. You keep praying until it rains. If it rains, you stop praying. But if it rained sooner or later, you'd cease prayer sooner or later. So the timing

in relation to prayer is just coincidental. Self-selection bias. Or is it?

I suppose you could raise the same objection to prayer for miraculous healing. Some people are healed, and some people aren't. So is that an answer to prayer, or statistical noise?

**ii)** That's a dicey issue because these are circumstances under which, if miracles occur, this is when we'd expect them to occur. Christians do pray for rain. In some cases, we'd expect rain to be an answer to prayer. Same thing with healing. If God is a prayer-answering God, then these are the kinds of situations in which he will sometimes act.

**iii)** In addition, it's not necessarily random. Rain has complex effects. Whether or not to answer prayer may involve balancing the overall benefits. Same thing with healing.

**iv)** Moreover, rain can be very opportune at a particular time and place. Sure, inevitably it will rain, but later may be too late to save the crops. So if it rains when and where it's needed, that's not necessarily random.

**v)** Furthermore, from a Christian standpoint, providence isn't naturalistic in the godless sense. The outcome can be divinely prearranged.

**vi)** Whether or not a healing is miraculous will depend on the specifics of the case. The prognosis. The timing of remission in relation to prayer. Is "spontaneous remission" really a naturalistic alternative to miraculous healing, or is that just a placeholder?

**vii)** I think it's too strong to say that if the same event can either be explained naturally or supernaturally, the

default explanation is natural. I don't think that ipso facto makes a natural explanation better. For even if it's naturally possible, that might be very convoluted. For instance, it's *possible* for a gambler to have an astonishing run of luck. But sometimes cheating is a simpler explanation.

#### **10. Self-serving events or high cost of getting it wrong**

**i)** These are reasonable criteria for lowering the credibility of the report in some instances or raising the credibility of the report in other instances.

**ii)** But what about a situation where a reporter has nothing in particular to either gain or lose? That falls in-between these two criteria.

For instance, take the cliché of the Christian mother who prays for a deathly ill child, who recovers. She shares the "miracle" with her friends. On the one hand she pays no price for that claim. On the other hand, she has nothing to gain by telling her friends. And she doesn't share her experience because she personally benefits from sharing her experience. Rather, she does so because she can't contain herself. She's so thankful and joyful. She wants all her friends to know how merciful God was.

**iii)** Moreover, if miracles ever happen, then we'd expect some of them to happen in situations just like that. So it seems counterintuitive to be dubious about reported miracles in the very circumstances where many of them take place—presuming they ever take place.

#### **11. Confirm preexisting belief system**

**i)** That poses a similar dilemma. On the one hand, it's true that in that context, there's more credulity.

Unreflective or even dutiful acceptance of sectarian miracles that are consistent with what you already believe. Not to mention the propaganda value of sectarian miracles.

On the other hand, if God performs miracles, we'd expect them to cluster in the community of faith. If they happen at all, they will be more prevalent among God's people because God is blessing his people. He does more for believers than unbelievers.

So there's a certain perverse logic that says we should be suspicious about reported miracles under the very conditions where most of them occur—if they ever occur. Shouldn't that setting enhance rather than diminish their probability?

ii) Perhaps, though, the objection is that more true and false miracle claims will occur in that setting, so it's better to avoid that altogether so that you don't have to sort out which is which.

However, we can finesse that by distinguishing between institutional miracles and personal miracles. Institutional miracles are purported miracles which are designed to authenticate a particular sect, religion, or denomination. By contrast, personal miracles occur to meet a need. Although they may bolster the faith of the individual, that's a side-effect, and not the primary purpose.

## **12. To function as signs, miracles must be rare**

I think this is related to his position that the regular course of nature is a necessary backdrop for the recognition of miracles. If so, that's ambiguous.

For instance, let's posit a billion Christians. Let's posit that every Christian will experience one, but only one,

miracle in the course of a lifetime.

Would miracles still be rare? That depends on the frame of reference or reference class. In terms of the sum total, miracles would no longer be rare.

But the individual experience of miracles would be rare. If that's a once-in-a-lifetime experience, then the rest of your life—both before and after—is like the "regular course of nature." The miracle stands in contrast to that generally ordinary backdrop.

Collectively, miracles would be frequent—but distributively, miracles would be rare.

13. Finally, McGrew said:

I took that stance since (a) a large proportion of the people present would not have claimed to experience a miracle and (b) I never have (to my knowledge).

without denying that such things might happen simply to meet an individual need, I'm very cautious, partly because I believe (rightly or wrongly) that I've seen some people fool themselves about private miracles, partly because I am mindful of [Luke 4:25-26](#).

**i)** In one respect, that's circular. If you think that miracles *must* be rare, then most people in the audience *cannot* have that experience.

**ii)** If someone is operating with an "Expect a miracle!" philosophy, then that's a recipe or self-delusion or disillusionment. If that's what McGrew has in mind, I agree. However, we need to draw some distinctions:

**a)** I'm not necessarily praying for a miracle, but just a solution. I don't have a particular solution in mind. That's up to God. I didn't specify a miracle. I didn't ask for a sign. I simply have a need that only God can

supply. How he provides for my need isn't what I pray about.

A miraculous answer to prayer doesn't imply prayer for a miracle. Indeed, a miraculous answer to prayer might be surprising. The Christian didn't anticipate that kind of response.

**b)** There are legitimate situations where Christians pray for a miracle. A stock example is prayer for healing in case the patient's condition is medically hopeless.

**c)** Likewise, there are situations in which a desperate person will pray for a sign. Sometimes this is non-Christian prayer by someone who's at a crossroads in life. Ironically, "private miracles" like that might fit McGrew's criterion of a high-cost commitment. Take Muslims who say they converted to Christianity due to revelatory dreams. They have a lot to lose.

## Why won't God heal leprechauns?

I'm reposting some comments I left at [Victor Reppert's blog](#) in response to a village atheist:

Isn't there a simpler answer to the question "Why does god hate amputees?" than anything believers give?

I think the tougher question is "Why does God hate leprechauns." I don't know a single record instance where God healed a leprechaun. If that's not sufficient to disprove God's existence, I don't know what is.

It appears that you don't understand the amputee problem (amputees exist).

It appears you have a tin ear for satirical replies.

Is it possible that the god you believe exists has never performed any miracles? Why is hard for you to just answer that question with a yes or no.

Here's a better question: Why is it hard for you just to engage the evidence?

Atheism posits a universal negative in reference to miracles. The onus on the atheist is to disprove every single reported miracle (not to mention unreported miracles). By contrast, the onus on the Christian is to prove just one miracle. A single miracle is sufficient to refute a universal negative. Your burden of proof is a whole lot tougher than mine.

And instead of floating fact-free hypotheticals ("Is it possible..."), why don't you engage the actual state of the evidence?

The fact that there's no good evidence for any amputee, ever, being healed.

What makes you think God never healed an amputee? Most folks aren't famous. They are quickly forgotten after they die. Most folks leave no trace of their existence in the history books. Many ancient and medieval books no longer exist.

We have lots of cases of medicine healing people. We have NO good evidence for medicine (or anything else) healing an amputee.

Your objection is irrational. A classic example of the framing fallacy, where you act as if the only possible evidence for miracles is one arbitrarily selected example, which allows you to ignore all the other evidence. That's a mark of your intellectual evasiveness.

So, amputees are healed all the time, we just don't have any good evidence for any of that?

So you're telling me you don't know the difference between "ever" and "all the time."

Would that be an explanation for the problem with miracles



only existing in stories.

Stories? You mean like Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle*? He didn't really visit Patagonia or the Galapagos islands, because that's just a story, right?

I don't answer loaded questions. Only dumb people answer loaded questions. I don't play poker with someone who uses marked cards. Your "question" rigs the issue by acting as though the only relevant evidence for miracles is evidence for one arbitrarily selected example. That's philosophically preposterous.

Your myopic obsession with amputees is just a diversionary tactic. Let's begin with a definition. In his recent debate with atheist Zach Moore, Timothy McGrew defined a miracle as:

an event that would not have happened if the natural world was left to itself, as opposed to outside agency (i.e. divine intervention).

I think that's a good working definition. It's not a definition with Christian bias, but a neutral definition. Atheists define miracles in contrast to the natural order. Indeed, Zach never challenged McGrew's definition.

According to atheism, miracles never happen. They don't happen because they can't happen, and they can't happen because they require supernatural agency.

If we plug in the above definition, that means it only takes a single example of an event that would not have happened if nature was left to itself to disprove atheism. Atheism posits a universal negative regarding miracles.

Is healing amputees the only evidence for miracles?

Absolutely not. *Any* event that would not have happened if the natural world was left to itself will falsify the universal negative posited by atheism. *Any* such event would suffice to establish the occurrence of miracles.

To act as if the regeneration of severed limbs is the one and only kind of event that counts as evidence for miracles is intellectually ludicrous given the definition of miracles. All you need is at least one event that fits the definition. There are innumerable kinds of events which are covered by that definition. All you need to establish is that *some* event like that has happened at least once in the course of world history. Just once is enough to disprove a universal negative.

For instance, I am not just telling a story when I say that the universe is consistent with itself. That's because anyone can go test to see if the universe is consistent with itself, and doesn't have to rely on just my story to 'know' that this is true. Same with all facts that examinable, in ways that reliable, verifiable, and objective.

Does you believe Darwin's "story" about sailing to Patagonia and the Galapagos islands? Can you "go and test" whether Darwin went there? Do you have independent verification that Darwin went there?

Let me be clear: if we believe in something that only, ever, happens in stories, then we are being inconsistent and foolish. I use the term silly, because it takes longer to type inconsistent and foolish.

That's a reflection of your self-reinforcing ignorance. Consider some of the paranormal studies by philosophers and anthropologists, or consider what foreign missionaries encounter in cultures where witchcraft is prevalent. In addition, I've pointed you to multiple resources for well-documented miracles. No, it doesn't just happen in "stories".

Compare this to how Christians 'know' about the trinity, the virgin birth, and Jesus's resurrection. The only way those things can be "known" is through stories.

The way to know about the Resurrection is through testimonial evidence. Most of what you believe is based on testimonial evidence.

Do you see the difference between a story about you seeing squirrels and trees, and a story about you seeing unicorns and magical bean stalks?

That's a standard village atheist decoy. Instead of grappling with actual evidence for actual cases, they resort to silly hypotheticals. They try to shift the discussion away from specific evidence for concrete examples to imaginary cases. Carl Sagan infamously said extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence. Pop atheists are very fond of that statement. Unfortunately, it's terribly vague. What's the definition of an extraordinary event? What's the definition of extraordinary evidence? And why should an extraordinary event (whatever that means) demand extraordinary evidence?

Let's use an illustration. The odds of being dealt a royal flush are 649,740 to 1. As one source put it: "If you were dealt 20 hands of poker every night of the year, in 89 years you should only expect to see one royal flush."

So that's very rare. Extraordinarily rare, you might say. Yet it's also inevitable. Soon or later it's bound to happen.

In addition, the conventional odds of a royal flush depend on a randomly shuffled deck. But a cardsharp can drastically lower the odds. That's a crucial difference between personal agency and dumb luck.

Suppose you're dealt a royal flush. That's extraordinary! Does it take extraordinary evidence to demonstrate that you were dealt a royal flush? Hardly. Ordinary evidence will suffice. Eyewitness testimony.

You don't need extraordinary evidence to establish the occurrence of an event. At best, you might need extraordinary evidence to establish the interpretation of the event.

For instance, your royal flush might be the luck of the draw. Or that might be due to funny business.

Does it demand extraordinary demand extraordinary evidence to determine which is which? No.

Suppose security camera footage, played in slow motion, shows the dealer using a riffle shuffle. Or suppose bank records show the dealer and the winning player splitting the jackpot. That's sufficient to establish a particular interpretation of the event. Extraordinary evidence is not required.

## What could God do about evil?

Atheist Keith Parsons did a long post on the problem of evil:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2016/01/20/what-could-god-do-about-evil/>

This included some lengthy comments as well. I'm of two minds about responding to this post. I don't like to repeat myself. But I'll make a few brief observations:

**i)** One concerns the starting point. The argument from evil typically begins with a definition of God supplied by philosophical theology. The "God" in question is a philosophical construct. Here's a standard example:

1. If God exists, then God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.
2. If God is omnipotent, then God has the power to eliminate all evil.
3. If God is omniscient, then God knows when evil exists.
4. If God is morally perfect, then God has the desire to eliminate all evil.
5. Evil exists.
6. If evil exists and God exists, then either God doesn't have the power to eliminate all evil, or doesn't know when evil exists, or doesn't have the desire to eliminate all evil.
7. Therefore, God doesn't exist.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/#SomImpDis>

And here is Parsons' version:

P: A perfectly good, omnipotent, and omniscient being will actualize an evil  $e$  only if (a) the actualization of  $e$  is a logically necessary condition for the prevention (the non-actualization) of an even worse evil  $e^*$ ; in other words, necessarily,  $e^*$  is actualized if  $e$  is not. Or (b) the actualization of  $e$  is a logically necessary condition for the actualization of a redeeming good  $g$ ; in other words, necessarily, if  $e$  is not actualized, then redeeming good  $g$  is not.

**ii)** This begins by defining God by a set of attributes. (At least, the minimal attributes need to frame an argument from evil.) But suppose, instead of commencing with a philosophical abstraction, we took Yahweh as our starting point. Several things follow:

**a)** In Scripture, Yahweh isn't merely defined by his attributes, but by his actions. What is meant by the attributes is elucidated by his deeds. You don't begin by consulting a Hebrew lexicon to define justice, mercy, might &c. Rather, you study God in action. Yahweh's behavior in the historical narratives of Scripture explicate his attributes.

**b)** Bible history is a catalogue of evil. Moral and natural evils. I doubt there's any basic kind of evil outside the Bible that you can't find described in Bible history.

**c)** In Scripture, Yahweh and evil coexist. In Scripture, Yahweh's existence is consistent with evil's existence.

It would be a peculiar argument to claim the existence of evil is incompatible with Yahweh's existence when Scripture constantly depicts God and evil coexisting.

If you take a concrete example of God, like Yahweh, then it's unclear how the argument from evil ever gets off the ground. The Biblical concept of God is consonant with the existence of evil.

Even if an atheist regards Biblical narrative as fictional, that doesn't change the fact that the Scriptural idea of God is compatible with the occurrence of moral and natural evil. With examples of evil of the same kind that atheists cite to typify the argument from evil.

**iii)** At the risk of repeating myself, time-travel stories illustrate the fact that if you change the past to improve the future, your action prevents one set of evils at the cost of producing another set of evils—as well as eliminating another set of goods. Indeed, Parsons concedes that very principle:

It is the case that evils and goods are connected in intricate ways so that some goods, indeed, some of the most important ones can only arise in the face of evils, and eliminating those evils would also cost us the related goods.

Given the staggeringly complex effects of changing variables, where even altering a minor variable may snowball over time, I don't see how an atheist is in any position to say a selective improvement here or there would result in a net benefit.

**iv)** Parsons cites the parable of Roland Puccetti about an absentee landlord who allows the apartment complex to fall into disrepair. But some tenants rise to his defense: For aught we know, he may have good reason for letting this sorry state of affairs transpire.

Sure, it's always possible that there's a reasonable explanation, but that's not a justification to suspend judgment indefinitely.

But that's misleading. This isn't simply an appeal to ignorance. There are many concrete examples where preventing one evil prevents some attendant good or goods, as well as causing a different evil or evils down the line. So it's not just speculation.

For instance, we evaluate the past from the viewpoint of the present. There are cases in which an evil which seemed to be irredeemable to someone living in the past, at the time it occurred, can now be seen to be beneficial in retrospect. So there's ample precedent for taking that long-range view into account.

**v)** And that's not an appeal to global skeptical theism, but local skeptical theism. It's not sheer skepticism, but, to the contrary, skepticism that builds on knowledge: examples of apparently gratuitous evil which, with the benefit of hindsight, can be seen to be purposeful. To say that divine providence is inscrutable is not to say that it's thoroughly opaque. Rather, it can be shot through with many examples of redeemed evils, second-order goods.

**vi)** Furthermore, Parsons is addressing the problem of evil in isolation to evidence for God's existence. So it's not just a question of logical consistency, where, for all we know, a Deity could have a reason for not preventing it—and, for all we know, no such Deity exists. We're not balancing two antithetical propositions in abstract equilibrium. Put that way, it may seem like special pleading to hypothesize an ultimate rationale—in the absence of any evidence. Rather, the scales are heavily tipped in favor of God's existence.



**vii)** Parsons atomizes good and evil as though every individual evil must be offset by an individual good, in one-to-one correspondence. But there's no reason to think that's what makes an evil gratuitous. It's not a matching quiz, but a chain of events. Does a particular evil contribute to a second order good?

This deflates his objection to the soul-making theodicy. It's quite true that for some people, suffering is "soul-destroying" rather than "soul-building." Yet that's only a defect in the theodicy if you imagine that everyone is supposed to be purified by suffering. But what if some justly suffer for the sake of others?

**viii)** In the prequel post, Parsons said:

Would any decent and sane person who could have thwarted the 9/11 attacks not have done so? The simple and highly intuitive point is that some evils are so heinous and bring about so much suffering, that any decent person would have prevented them.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2016/01/11/evil-still-no-good-answers/#comment-2460021899>

**a)** The question is deceptively simple. Normally, a good person should thwart a humanitarian disaster.

**b)** But that depends in part on whether we view the event as past or future. Suppose I was born in the 21C. Let's bracket time-travel antinomies. Suppose I can go back in time and prevent WWI by thwarting the assassination of

Archduke Ferdinand. But if I do so, I will preempt my mother's birth—and, of course, my own birth!

By preventing WWI, I save many lives, but by the same token, I erase many lives. All the men and women to be born as a result of that catastrophe—including my own.

And that's not the same thing as sacrificing my life to save others. Rather, this is sacrificing my existence to save others. That's far more radical. I will never come into being!

But even if I were that altruistic, it doesn't follow that I'd prevent WWI at the expense of my own mother. I'm not prepared to do that.

Conversely, suppose you were the time-traveler. Suppose you could prevent a disaster that would kill your mother (after you were born), but at the expense of killing my mother. If you must choose whose mother to save, you will save your mother rather than mine. And I'd do the same thing in reverse.

We can dilate in the abstract about saving lives, but that ignores the element of personal attachment. When it comes to saving strangers, it may make no difference, but people are connected to other people in complex ways. It's not a game of checkers, with identical pieces. Even if people look alike on the outside, there are hidden affinities between some people.

Now, we might say God has a more impartial perspective. But in that case, the analogy breaks down. If, moreover, God doesn't have the same emotional investment in the lives of any particular individual, then saving every life might not be his priority.



## Posner on morality

The Supreme Court vacancy caused by Scalia's death will provoke a moralistic debate about his successor. The liberal establishment will contend that if Republicans are allowed to pick the replacement, that will be a catastrophic setback for social justice, human rights, &c. They will frame the debate in ethical terms.

To my knowledge, Richard Posner may well be the most influential jurist of his generation. He represents the principal alternative to the perspective of Robert Bork, Antonin Scalia, and Robert George. I'm going to quote some statements of his on metaethics. On personal and social morality.

There's a refreshing candor to his position. He doesn't hesitate to embrace the bleak consequences of atheism. Mind you, he can afford to be cavalier. As a member of the ruling class, he is not threatened by his own self-destructive logic.

I should clarify that, in a primary respect, I don't think it's the job of judges to moralize. To substitute their own morality. To impose their own morality. As a rule, the job of a judge is to apply the law, rather than apply his own morality. It's the job of lawmakers to think ethically, and the job of judges to faithfully interpret and impartially apply the law. To be sure, impartiality is a virtue in that situation.

There are exceptions to that rule. Take the cliché of a judge in Nazi Germany. He should either resign or use his position to mitigate the evil of Nazism. Use his position to subvert

Nazism as best he can. Likewise, a Muslim judge should cease to be Muslim.

In addition, judges can write articles and give speeches in which they propound their moral vision. They can advise law students and lawmakers. Even if there's a sense in which they ought to check their morality at the courthouse door, they can influence the morality that informs law and policy.

That said, it's instructive to see what Posner's alternative amounts to.

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"Morality," as I shall use the word, is the set of duties to others (not necessarily just other people) that are designed to check our merely self-interested, emotional, or sentimental reactions to serious questions of human conduct. It is about what we owe, rather than what we are owed, except insofar as a sense of entitlement (to happiness, self-fulfillment, an interesting life, the opportunity to exercise our talents, or the opportunity to realize ourselves) might generate a duty on the part of others to help us get what we are entitled to.

First, morality is local. There are no interesting moral universals. There are tautological ones, such as "Murder is wrong," where "murder" means "wrongful killing," and there are a few rudimentary principles of social cooperation - such as "Don't lie all the time" or "Don't break promises without

any reason" or "Don't kill your relatives or neighbors indiscriminately" - that may be common to all human societies.<sup>3</sup>

If one wants to call these rudimentary principles the universal moral law, fine; but as a practical matter, no moral code can be criticized by appealing to norms that are valid across cultures, norms to which the code of a particular culture is a better or a worse approximation. Those norms, the rudimentary principles of social cooperation that I have mentioned, are too abstract to serve as standards for moral judgment. Any meaningful moral realism is therefore out, and moral relativism (or rather a form of moral relativism, an important qualification to which I'll return shortly) is in. Relativism suggests an adaptationist conception of morality, in which morality is judged - non-morally, in the way that a hammer might be judged well or poorly adapted to its function of hammering nails - by its contribution to the survival, or other goals, of a society. My analysis also suggests that no useful meaning can be given to the expression "moral progress" and that no such progress can be demonstrated.

Second, many so-called moral phenomena can be explained without reference to moral categories. This point reinforces my thesis that the content of moral codes is local by showing that most moral principles that claim universality are better understood as mere workaday social norms in fancy dress. It also implies that the domain of moral theory is smaller than academic moralists believe. This is not to deny the existence of universal moral sentiments, such as guilt and indignation and certain forms of disgust<sup>4</sup> (as distinct from altruism, which is not primarily a moral sentiment). But these moral sentiments are object-neutral, and hence not really moral. "Moralistic" would be a

better word for them. They are instruments rather than ends.

x. Moral Relativism. - If moral relativism means that the criteria for pronouncing a moral claim valid are local, that is, are relative to the moral code of the particular culture in which the claim is advanced, so that we cannot call another culture "immoral" unless we add "by our lights," then I am a moral relativist.

2. Moral Subjectivism. - Moral subjectivism, as I use the term, is the view that there are no criteria of validity for a moral claim; morality, in this view, is relative to the beliefs of each individual, so that an individual acts immorally only when he acts contrary to whatever morality he has adopted for himself. I am sympathetic to this position. If a person decides to opt out of the morality of his society, the way an Achilles or an Edmund (in King Lear) or a Meursault or a Gauguin or an Anthony Blunt did, or for that matter as the conspirators against Hitler did, there is no way to show that he is morally wrong, provided that he is being consistent with himself. Even if inconsistent, he can be morally wrong only if consistency with oneself, whatever exactly that means, is a tenet of his personal moral code. (I will say more on the confusing concept of being "consistent with oneself" later.) The most that can be said about such a person is that he is acting contrary to the morality of his society and therefore many people will think him wrong.

But the morality that condemns the traitor or the adulterer cannot itself be evaluated in moral terms; that would be possible only if there were reasonably concrete transcultural moral truths. My version of moral subjectivism is consistent with moral relativism in its sense of rejecting transcultural moral truths.

unlike Nagel and the others, I claim that there are no convincing answers to the interesting moral questions. This claim marks me as a moral skeptic in the loose sense of one who doubts the possibility of making objective judgments about the moral claims that moral theorists want to make. The "wet" (non-dogmatic) moral skeptic and the weak moral realist converge.

My belief that moral theory lacks the necessary resources for resolving moral controversies enables me to reconcile my qualified acceptance of moral subjectivism with my qualified rejection of moral skepticism. A person who murders an infant is acting immorally in our society; a person who sincerely claimed, with or without supporting arguments, that it is right to kill infants would be asserting a private moral position. I might consider him a lunatic, a monster, or a fool, as well as a violator of the prevailing moral code. But I would hesitate to call him immoral, just as I would hesitate to call Jesus Christ immoral for having violated settled norms of Judaism and Roman law, or Pontius Pilate immoral for enforcing that law. Had I been a British colonial official (but with my present values) in nineteenth-century India, I would have outlawed suttee,<sup>8</sup> but because I found it disgusting, not because I found it immoral. We tend to find deviations from our own morality disgusting, but our reactions prove nothing about the soundness of that morality. No doubt Hindu men thought widows who resisted their fate disgusting. It was right to try the Nazi leaders rather than to shoot them out of hand in a paroxysm of disgust. But it was politically right. It created a trustworthy public record of what the Nazis had done. And it exhibited "rule of law" virtues to the German people that made it less likely that Germany would again embrace totalitarianism.<sup>9</sup> But it was not right because a trial could produce proof that the Nazis really were immoralists; they were, but according to our lights, not theirs.



Every society, and every subculture within a society, past or present, has had a moral code, but a code shaped by the exigencies of life in that society or that subculture rather than by a glimpse of some overarching source of moral obligations. To the extent it is adaptive to those exigencies, the code cannot be criticized convincingly by outsiders. Infanticide is abhorred in our culture, but routine in societies that lack the resources to feed all the children that are born.<sup>13</sup> Slavery is routine when the victors in war cannot afford to feed or free their captives, so that the alternative to slavery is death. Are infanticide and slavery "wrong" in these circumstances? It is provincial to say that "we are right about slavery, for example, and the Greeks wrong,"<sup>14</sup> so different was slavery in the ancient world from racial enslavement, as practiced, for example, in the United States until the end of the Civil War, and so different were the material conditions that nurtured these different forms of slavery<sup>15</sup>. To call infanticide or slavery presumptively bad would be almost as provincial as to condemn them without qualification. The inhabitants of an infanticidal or slave society would say with equal plausibility that infanticide or slavery is presumptively good, though they might allow that the presumption could be rebutted in peaceable, wealthy, technologically complex societies.

I do not shrink from the implication of my analysis that there is no moral progress in any sense flattering to the residents of wealthy modern nations, and that we cannot think of ourselves as being morally more advanced than head-shrinkers and cannibals and mutilators of female genitalia. We are lucky in knowing more about the material world than our predecessors did and some of our contemporaries do. Armed with this knowledge, we can show that certain vanished moral codes were not effective instruments for achieving social goals (in some cases that is

why they vanished), and perhaps that some current ones are maladaptive in this sense as well. If a moral code does not further the interests of the dominant groups in a society, or if it weakens the society to the point of making it vulnerable to conquest (even if only by arousing the fear or hatred of a stronger society), or if it engenders unbearable internal tensions, then either the code or the society will eventually become extinct; the moral code of the antebellum South, the moral code of the Nazis, and the moral code of the Soviet Union are all examples. As we have a different moral code, which naturally we prefer (it is ours), we like to describe the disappearance of the bad old codes as tokens of moral progress;<sup>24</sup> we call their adherents "immoral." But progress and adaptation are not the same thing. If a moral code is adaptive, it may still be alterable, but it will be difficult to criticize. Had Hitler or Stalin succeeded in their projects, our moral beliefs would probably be different (we would go around saying things like "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs"); and they failed not because the projects were immoral, but because the projects were unsound.

within each locale it may be possible to evaluate behavior by its conformity to a moral system, even though judgment about the morality of the system itself must be withheld. Indeed, the casuistic approach to moral questions assumes the givenness of the local moral system. It is indeed "startlingly counterintuitive to think there is nothing wrong with genocide or slavery or torturing a baby for fun<sup>127</sup> - in our culture. That's the rub. The moral dictionary is local.

Charities know that the way to get people to give money for the feeding of starving children is to publish a picture of a starving child, not to talk about a moral duty. I think that most Americans would actually be miffed to be told, other

than by their own religious advisors, that it was their duty to support the needy.

When we see a person in distress, or even a picture of such a person, our impulse is to help (though it is balanced, and often outweighed, by contrary impulses, such as the impulse of self-preservation), even though nowadays the person is unlikely to be a relative or other intimate. We react that way, and approve of others who react that way, not because there is a moral law dictating altruism, but because we are social animals. Cats, for example, are not. If a cat sees another cat (unless it is its own kitten) in distress, it reacts with indifference. This is not because cats are stupid, but because the fewer cats there are, the better it is for cats - the hunting is easier. Cats grow up solitary; children grow up in groups; a moral code will develop in children from their interactions with each other and with adults.<sup>39</sup>

Some feminists admire bonobos, a species of monkey in which the female is dominant. It would make as much sense to admire sharks, vultures, or leeches. These creatures are adapted each to its particular environment, which is neither our prehistoric nor our present environment.<sup>40</sup> Admiring bonobos or deploring sharks is like calling a warthog ugly. A shark who had a moral lexicon would pronounce the eating of human swimmers moral, just as a warthog with an aesthetic vocabulary would snort derisively at the Venus de Milo.

All that the moral emotions actually imply, however, is that we are social animals with large brains. The sociality makes desirable, and the large brain makes feasible, the development and enforcement of rules of social cooperation and differentiation, as opposed to the kind of hard-wired

role differentiation found in ants. The most important rules of cooperation in a human society are embodied in its moral code, but what is codified is what is useful rather than what idealists might think is good. To be effective, the rules must be obeyed. Many of them are self-enforcing; if you don't cooperate with other people, they won't cooperate with you, and so you'll lose the benefits of cooperation.<sup>4</sup> Some rules are enforced by law. Some become internalized as duties whose violation engenders the disagreeable feeling that we call guilt. Where there are no sanctions at all, however, not even guilt (and not all people feel guilt if they violate a particular provision of their society's moral code), it is difficult to understand why a person would obey such a rule unless it were consistent with his self-interest. Richard A. Posner, "The Problematics of Moral and Legal Theory," 111 **HARVARD LAW REVIEW** 1637 (1997).

## Mere theism

One objection that atheists sometimes raise is that a more specific claim has a lower probability than a more general (or simpler) claim. Hence, Christian theism has a lower probability than mere theism. But there are problems with that contention:

**i)** Mere theism can be just as specific as Christian theism. It's just that Christian theism has already been defined by various Christian traditions. When we think of Christian theism, that denotes a specific concept. That refers to a preexisting position with a particular set of propositions—although that varies according to the theologian or theological tradition.

Taken by itself, mere theism is a cipher. The content needs to be filled in. But once we specify what that amounts to, the claim loses the *prima facie* appearance of simplicity or generality.

**ii)** In addition, even if Christian theism a more specific claim than mere theism, that doesn't make it less probable. To the contrary, there may be specific evidence for Christian theism, corresponding to the specificity of the claims. (Even assuming specific claims are less probable than general claims.)

Conversely, mere theism might well have less evidence. Depends on the version of mere theism. How "mere" is mere?



## Poker and prayer

[SAM] HARRIS: I would put it at impatient rather than angry. Let me respond to this notion of answered prayer, because this is a classic sampling error, to use a statistical phrase. We know that human beings have a terrible sense of probability. There are many things we believe that confirm our prejudices about the world, and we believe this only by noticing the confirmations, and not keeping track of the disconfirmations.

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2007/04/08/the-god-debate.html>

Although his argument is very compressed, I think he's claiming that Christians mistake some incidents as answers to prayer because outcomes that roughly match our prayers stand out; those are memorable—whereas we forget or ignore all the prayers that went unanswered. So the effect of prayer is actually random. Odds are, there will be apparent answers to prayer every now and then, but that's coincidental.

Let's examine his argument.

**i)** To begin with, if God exists, is there good reason to think he will always give Christians whatever they ask for? Does the fact that Christians don't always get whatever they ask for make apparent answers to prayer suspect?

In fact, if God exists, there is good reason to think he won't always give Christians whatever they ask for. For instance:

*7 Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Mt 7:7-11).*

Many readers stop at vv7-8, disregarding the caveats in vv.9-11. This is a qualified promise. The underlying principle is that God won't give you harmful answers. If you ask for something that's bad for you, God won't answer that prayer. God gives good things. Beneficial answers.

As impetuous or shortsighted creatures, Christians can unwittingly pray for things they wish God would refuse them if they only knew the consequences of their misguided request.

**ii)** Next, let's take a comparison. I'm not expert, but I doubt most gamblers who play casino poker cheat. I say that for several reasons. It takes a lot of skill to cheat the casino. Most gamblers lack the skill to pull that off. Casinos are very wary of cheaters. They have cameras trained on poker tables. They have minders eyeing the tables. The dealer is on the lookout for cheaters. Casinos are very familiar with the tricks of cheating at poker. And it's risky to



cheat. If you're caught, you will suffer. It takes a very wily, intrepid gambler to successfully cheat the casino:

[http://www.pokertournamentformula.com/poker\\_cheating.htm](http://www.pokertournamentformula.com/poker_cheating.htm)

So I expect that only a tiny fraction of gamblers cheat at casino gambling. Moreover, my illustration will still be valid as a hypothetical, even if, in reality, cheating was commonplace.

Suppose Sam Harris is caught cheating. Suppose he defends himself by saying:

"No, I didn't cheat! You guys are guilty of sampling error. You only notice apparent examples of cheating, but you never keep track of all the times that players don't cheat. It's statistically inevitable that some player, some time, somewhere, will get very lucky. But that's a random coincidence!"

I doubt that excuse would talk him out of a custom pair of cement shoes. The fact that cheating at casino poker may be statistically anomalous doesn't mean there are no real cheaters, or that cheating is undetectable.

By the same token, even if answers to prayer were rare, that doesn't mean their recognition can be dismissed as a sampling error.

**iii)** Finally, Harris's argument is a two-edged sword. If his reasoning applies to apparently answered prayers, then, by parity of argument, his reasoning applies to apparently unanswered prayers. What about failure to recognize answered prayers? Prayers that apparently went unanswered, but were answered in ways we didn't

recognize because we expected the answer to take a different form? If it's possible to mistake an unanswered prayer for an answered prayer, it's equally possible to mistake an answered prayer for an unanswered prayer.

## Break the bank

**1.** One line of evidence for God's existence involves examples of special providence. This might include modern miracles and answered prayers. Likewise, there are things we will need in the future, but we don't know that in advance. We'd pray for it if we knew we were going to need it. So in some cases God might provide for us *as if* that were an answer to prayer, because we don't know ahead of time that we need it to happen, and by then it would be too late to pray.

Now in some cases the windfall might be consistent with special providence or luck. Chances are, you will get lucky every so often. Coincidences happen. But I have in mind examples that are highly resistant to naturalistic explanations. Where it's too specific, unlikely, and opportune to be sheer luck.

**2.** However, "skeptics" discount this evidence as sample selection bias. The distribution is random. It averages out, when you take everything that happens to you into account. For instance, sometimes you get what you pray for, and sometimes you don't. Some people are healed, and some are not. If you only compare healings, it looks impressive. If you add dissimilar outcomes, it all blends into the undifferentiated background. Or so goes the argument.

**3.** There are, however, at least two major problems with the "skeptical" objection. To begin with, it backfires.

Suppose there really is a pattern. If, however, our sample is too small, then there's no reason to expect a discernible pattern. If all we have to go by are anecdotes and isolated incidents, then it would hardly be surprising if the pattern

entirely escapes our notice, for it only emerges if we have a much larger sample. In that case, apparent randomness is perfectly consistent with a deeper, broader pattern. So the very thing the "skeptic" mentions to show it's really random is the same thing that's consonant with its nonrandomness.

In terms of reported miracles, answered prayers, and other special providences, our provincial knowledge is only skimming the surface. We know next to nothing about what most other Christians experience at different times and different places. So even if there were a pattern, how would we be in any position to perceive it?

To take a comparison: suppose I'm a Martian who's assigned to study human behavior. I see a family of four load the trunk of their car with luggage and drive away. If their objective is to reach their destination, then they will take the shortest route. Depending on the length of the journey, they will drive as far as they can each day. Their route will be determined by the location of motels, gas stations, and the distance between the starting-point and the end-point.

Yet my Martian logic is confounded by their actual behavior. They don't travel in anything like a straight line. They constantly veer off. They may stay in a town or campsite for several days before they resume the trip. To all appearances, their behavior is random.

But from a human perspective we know that's probably not the explanation. Rather, this is typical tourist behavior. Their objective was never to simply reach their destination. Rather, it was always more about the journey than the destination. They are sightseers. They drive on scenic routes. They visit historic towns. Far from being random,

their trip is meticulously planned. Where they will go. How long they will stay. Each day is accounted for.

In addition, our Martian can't tell from where they begin what their destination will be. He doesn't know if they plan to drive 50 miles, 500 miles, or from coast to coast. They might head east to west for most of the trip, then turn south during the final leg of the trip. Our Martian observer might have no inkling three-quarters of the way through the trip where their intended destination is. To register the pattern, you need to begin at the end and work backwards.

And it could be the same way with providence. The pattern defies recognition if all you have are isolated data-points.

**4.** However, the "skeptic" might object that this only shows, at best, how the phenomenon is consistent with either randomness or nonrandomness. Mind you, even if that were the case, it greatly attenuates the original objection. According to the original objection, what we really have is evidence of randomness, once you take all the evidence into consideration. But now the "skeptic" must concede that the distribution pattern isn't evidence for randomness—appearances to the contrary notwithstanding.

**5.** But it's not just parity. As I noted at the outset, what if you have examples of special providence which are not plausibly susceptible to naturalistic explanations? Then that's positive evidence for special providence.

To take a comparison, suppose a group of ten Caltech students or MIT students decide to break the bank. They figure out how to cheat casinos. They do it as a test of ingenuity. Perhaps they hack into the security cameras so that they can actually see the poker hands, and they devise some undetectable signaling system.

They divide up into teams of two and hit five casinos in Las Vegas. The same team never goes to more than one casino, so there's nothing to directly connect the group of ten cheaters.

It doesn't take long for each casino to catch on to the fact that something is afoot. A player is beating the odds way too often for that to be coincidence. Yet these are isolated incidents.

Suppose each casino is ignorant of the fact that four other casinos are encountering the same thing. Or even if they knew it, they have no background information on the players to connect them. Even if they were aware of a larger pattern, they can't account for the pattern. It seems to be random, although there must be some hidden connection.

But their inability to identify the collusion in no way obviates the evidence of cheating in the individual cases. By the same token, even if the distribution of special providences appears to be random, that doesn't affect or cancel out the evidence in specific cases.

## Where is God?

I recently did two posts explaining how special providence is consistent with the apparent randomness of the distribution pattern. Here's one that links to the other post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/03/luck-of-draw.html>

**i)** However, an unbeliever might raise the following objection: even if special providence is consistent with apparent randomness, that's no reason to believe in special providence. Their abstract mutual consistency isn't evidence for special providence. Indeed, that's is just a face-saving distinction, for even if God did not exist, that would be consistent with apparent randomness. That's equally consonant with God's existence or nonexistence alike.

Put another way, to say it's consistent fails to give a reason for apparent randomness. Why would God make the pattern so elusive? What would motivate God to be so inevident? For every apparent answer to prayer, there are so many unanswered prayers. For every divine judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, there's countless cases of divine inaction. For every Ananias and Sapphira dropping dead, you have every so many wrongdoers who prosper.

To use my own example, given the gambler, he has a reason to conceal his telepathy, but what makes that a given? How is that analogous to God?

**ii)** To that I'd say two things: suppose God routinely answered prayer. Suppose immediate retribution was the norm.

Crooks don't ordinarily commit a crime in full view of the police. They wait until the coast is clear. Likewise, smart crooks evade security cameras. They may wear a mask to disguise their identity.

By the same token, you have people who'd commit atrocities if they thought they could get away with it. They have no conscience. The only thing that deters them is fear of reprisal.

Suppose you have a scrawny high school student who's bullied by a larger boy. A football player sees that, and takes the scrawny kid under his wing. He warns the bully to leave the kid alone. The kid is now under his protection. The football player is bigger, tougher, stronger than the bully, so the bully fears the football player. Not somebody he wants to tangle with.

Problem is, that only deters him from picking on the scrawny student when he's in the company of the football player. But when he's by himself, he once again becomes an easy target. And the bully threatens him (or his relatives) with dire bodily harm if he reports him to the football player.

If special providence was more consistent, many people would be more God-fearing, but for the wrong reason. They'd *behave* better, but they wouldn't *be* better. Outer conformity absent inner conviction. The moment they thought they could do wrong with impunity, they'd instantly revert.

**iii)** In addition, the question of why God doesn't make himself more evident views the issue through the wrong end of the telescope. For the real issue is qualitative, not quantitative. Atheism is a universal negative. If atheism is



true, then there can be no clear instances of evidence for God's existence whatsoever.

We can wonder why God doesn't intervene with greater frequency, but that's irrelevant to the case for God's existence so long as there is some unambiguous evidence for his existence. Even if there was scant evidence for his existence, so long as that was unmistakable, a modicum of evidence is sufficient to disprove a universal negative.

My argument takes for granted that there's at least some clear evidence for his existence. And that's a very low threshold to meet. Indeed, that's a very easy threshold to meet.

## The problems of unanswered prayer

A topic in Christian apologetics and atheism is "the problem of unanswered prayer". I put that in quotes because there are at least *two* (alleged) problems of unanswered prayer, and it's useful to distinguish them for clarity of analysis.

### 1) THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

An atheist will say the reason God doesn't seem to answer prayer more often is because God *never* answers prayer, and that's because there *is* no God to answer prayer. God only *seems* to answer prayer sometimes is because believers confound coincidence with answered prayer. They remember the hits but forget all the misses. Answered prayer is an artifact of sample selection bias. What's left over when you ignore all the misses.

A basic problem with that explanation is that an atheist must shoulder an astronomical burden of proof to make good on his claim. The onus is on him to show that every purported answer to prayer is sheer coincidence.

As a practical matter, it's simply impossible for an atheist to directly discharge his burden of proof in this regard. He could barely scratch the surface. In the nature of the case, most purported answers to prayer go unreported. These are private incidents that happen to unknown believers. In the vast majority of cases, there is no public record to assess. An atheist must dismiss it out of hand without ever examining the evidence.

The best an atheist could attempt is to discount answered prayer indirectly by disproving God's existence. However,

that's viciously circular inasmuch as instances of answered prayer would count as evidence for God's existence.

## **II) THE FIDELITY OF GOD**

The issue here is whether certain prayer promises in Scripture are true. Does God keep his promise? Can God be trusted to do what he says he will do in answer to prayer, or is there a glaring discrepancy between the scope of promise and the scope of performance?

That's something I've discussed on different occasions from different angles, so I won't repeat myself here. I'm just disambiguating the issue.

Of course, calling this the "problem" of unanswered prayer is, itself, somewhat prejudicial or question-begging. It's a conventional designation, like the "problem of evil". Whether it's truly problematic is the very issue in dispute.

## Are miracles antecedently improbable?

Bayesian probability theory distinguishes between prior and posterior probability. From what I've read, prior probability is based on our background knowledge regarding what's possible or likely in general, while posterior probability takes into account specific information about the event under consideration. The way it's divvied up, an event may have low prior probability, but that initial presumption can sometimes be overcome by countervailing evidence.

As a rule, I just don't find this a helpful framework. Let's take two illustrations:

Consider a parking lot at a shopping mall or parking garage at an airport. Say there are a thousand cars. One of them is mine. I'm walking back to the parking lot or parking garage.

You could say the prior probability of me picking out any car in particular is one in a thousand. As a matter of pure math, that's true.

But it's a rather ridiculous way to cast the issue. Unless I see an irresistibly appealing sports car that I decide to hot-wire on the spur of the moment, it's 100% certain that I will drive my car home, and 100% certain that I won't drive any of the other 999 cars home.

So why would we even set up the calculations as if there's a heavy presumption against my driving my own car home, a presumption which—fortunately—can be overcome by additional information? Why frame the issue in such an abstract way that that's a low prior probability of me driving

a car with that particular license plate? The mathematical odds just aren't relevant. I'm not picking a car at random.

Why divvy it up as if we have to begin in a state of relative ignorance, when in fact we have all the information? Why set it up as a balancing act?

Let's take another example: what are the odds that lightning will strike any particular tree? Well, we could start by comparing the number of lightning strikes during a given timespan to the number of trees in a given radius. And from that standpoint, the odds are remote that it will strike any particular tree.

Suppose, though, I go for a daily walk along a trail. I always pass by the same stately tree. Today I walk past that tree. Then I'm overtaken by a thunderstorm. I see a lightning strike behind me on the trail, and I hear something explode. But I don't see what was hit.

As I walk back, I see the familiar tree split in two, with scorch marks. I conclude that it was struck by lightning. Although it's antecedently improbable that lightning would single out this tree, the abstract chances of that happening have no bearing on my well-founded belief that this tree was struck by lightning. Why would I even take prior probability into account?

I'm not saying this is never germane. It may be antecedently improbable that the brakes will fail on a recently serviced, high-end sports car, causing the driver to die. The very implausibility of mechanical failure may make the homicide detective suspicious, so he sniffs around until he finds out the wife of the decedent was having an affair with dashing automechanic who serviced the car a day

before. The circumstantial evidence is very incriminating.  
Means, motive, and opportunity.

My problem, though, is when the case for miracles is always shoehorned into a framework where miracles are assigned a very low prior probability. A standing presumption against miracles. It's then up to the Christian apologist to surmount the daunting odds. It's like winning when the deck is stacked against you. Impressive if you can, but why should we frame the issue that way in the first place? It's gratuitously prejudicial.

## Poisoning the well

A violent pestilence which ravaged Europe between March, 1348, and the spring of 1351, and is said to have carried off nearly half the population. It was brought by sailors to Genoa from south Russia, whither it had come from central Asia. During March and April, 1348, it spread through Italy, Spain, and southern France; and by May of that year it had reached southwest England. Though the Jews appear to have suffered quite as much as their Christian neighbors (Höniger, "Der Schwarze Tod in Deutschland," 1882; Häser, "Lehrbuch der Gesch. der Medizin," iii. 156), a myth arose, especially in Germany, that the spread of the disease was due to a plot of the Jews to destroy Christians by poisoning the wells from which they obtained water for drinking purposes. This absurd theory had been started in 1319 in Franconia (Pertz, "Monumenta Germaniæ," xii. 416). On that occasion punishment had fallen upon the lepers, by whose means the Jews, it was alleged, had poisoned the wells. Two years later, in the Dauphiné, the same charge had been brought against the Jews. In 1348, once the accusation was raised, it was spread with amazing rapidity from town to town.

<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/3349-black-death>

Although the Jew-baiting was scurrilous, irrational, and hateful, it's revealing in another respect. How many times have you read atheists say Christians traditionally attribute natural events to God's direct action? How often have your

read atheists say Christians traditionally attribute plagues to divine judgment?

Yet these medieval Christians did not attribute the plague to divine judgment or direct divine action. Rather, they suspected the plague had a natural cause.

Moreover, although they were mistaken about the transmission of this particular pathogen, there's nothing irrational about considering the public drinking water supply as a possible source of contagion. Some epidemics have a common point of origin. Indeed, infected drinking water is a source of cholera. It can be reasonable to trace some epidemics back to common source.

So the notion, popularized by atheists, that prescientific Jews and Christians (as well as pagans) automatically ascribed natural events to direct divine action, or divine judgment, in the case of epidemics, is a simplistic and ignorant urban legend.



## All flesh is grass

Peter Singer on altruism:

The possibility of taking the point of view of the universe overcomes the problem of finding meaning in our lives, despite the ephemeral nature of human existence when measured against all the eons of eternity. Suppose that we become involved in a project to help a small community in a developing country to become free of debt and self-sufficient in food. The project is an outstanding success.... Now someone might say: "What good have you done? In a thousand years these people will all be dead, and their children and grandchildren as well, and nothing that you have done will make any difference."

I am not defending the objectivity of ethics in the traditional sense. Ethical truths are not written into the fabric of the universe: to that extent the subjectivist is correct...We cannot expect that this higher ethical consciousness will become universal. There will always be people who don't care for anyone or anything, not even for themselves.

<http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/1995----.htm>

To be fair, in the essay as a whole, Singer labors to argue for altruism despite these bleak concessions. But consider the hand he dealt himself.

## Moral ontology and evolutionary psychology

I'm going to comment on some statements by apostate atheist Jeff Lowder,

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2016/07/06/are-atheism-and-moral-realism-logically-incompatible/>

Steve's first link is about Sharon Street's paper, "A Darwinian Dilemma about Realist Theories of Value." Street's paper has nothing do with an alleged contradiction between moral realism and atheism. In fact, Street's paper has nothing whatsoever to do with moral ontology. Street's paper is about moral epistemology: she argues that if evolutionary naturalism is true, we have an undercutting defeater for trusting our second-order ethical intuitions. In plain English, it's as if she says:

"Many people think moral realism is true because it *seems like* moral realism is true. But that isn't a good reason to think that moral realism is true if you are an evolutionary naturalist. If evolutionary naturalism is true, it would 'seem' that moral realism were true even if it weren't. So the 'argument from seeming' [my name] isn't a good reason for evolutionary naturalists to think that moral realism is true."

The other part of Steve's Rosenberg post includes the same basic point about natural selection tricking us into believing moral realism is true. It fails for the same reason as Shermer's and Flannagan's.

For now, I will simply point out that (1) even if Ruse's argument were correct, it would provide no support for the claim that atheism and moral realism are logically incompatible; and (2) Ruse's moral anti-realist argument fails because it commits the genetic fallacy. Indeed, it contains the very confusion Steve described in his (ii): Ruse confuses moral psychology with moral ontology. So both Steve and I agree that Ruse's argument against moral realism fails.

**i)** To begin with, slapping the "genetic fallacy" label onto a position doesn't make it fallacious. There are people who mechanically apply a list of alleged fallacies to arguments. They don't stop to consider if the alleged fallacies are simplistic.

At the risk of stating the obvious, the source of beliefs or truth-claims can be quite germane to assessing the veracity or probability of the belief or truth-claim. For instance, making decisions based on astrology, fortune cookies, Tarot cards, or dial-a-psychics is irrational and harmful because those are unreliable sources of information regarding future outcomes. That's not a trustworthy way to evaluate the consequences of your actions.

Likewise, when assessing testimonial evidence, the source can be quite germane to our evaluation. Is it a reliable source of information?

**ii)** One of Jeff's ploys is to pretend that when atheists repudiate moral realism, their repudiation is purely incidental to their atheism. Jeff's evasiveness is symptomatic of someone who's in a state of intellectual denial.

**iii)** In addition, Jeff's objections suffer from a common incomprehension on his part. This is due to his bad habit of compartmentalizing issues. To say that in critiquing evolutionary ethics, Street, Ruse, Rosenberg, and Flannagan are talking about moral psychology (or moral epistemology) rather than moral ontology misses the point: For them, the problem with evolutionary ethics is that it does not and cannot go any deeper than moral psychology (or moral epistemology). Evolution has programmed us to have certain moral instincts, but there's nothing to back that up. Our conditioned beliefs don't track moral facts. Indeed, evolution has deluded us into believing in nonexistent moral norms. So it doesn't go beyond evolutionary psychology, and that's the problem.

Thomas Nagel. Quoting Daniel Dennett, Nagel endorses the view that if everything reduces to physics, then there is no naturalistic answer to a cosmic question. The cosmic question is put into square brackets. I haven't read Nagel's 2010 book, so I can't tell if the words in the bracket come from Nagel or from Steve. I don't have enough context for the quotation to make sense of the question put in the square brackets. In any case, I agree that with Nagel that naturalism is nonteleological. I do not find, however, an argument (in Steve's post) for the conclusion that the non-teleological nature of naturalism is logically incompatible with moral realism.

Nagel details that in the book Jeff hasn't read. For instance, here's his sympathetic exposition of Street's argument:

Street points out that if the responses and faculties that generate our value judgments are in significant part the result of natural selection, there is no reason

to expect that they would lead us to be able to detect any mind-independent moral or evaluative truth, if there is such a thing. That is because the ability to detect such truth, unlike the ability to detect mind-independent truth about the physical world, would make no contribution to reproductive fitness...So far as natural selection is concerned, if there were such a thing as mind-independent moral truth, those judgements could be systematically false, T. Nagel, **MIND & COSMOS** (Oxford, 2012), 107.

Back to Jeff:

First, it could be the case that God does not exist, in which case there is no cosmic teleology, but some version of Platonism is true (and so moral values exist as abstract objects).

**i)** To begin with, that's a nonstarter for atheists who are physicalists. And it's my impression that most modern-day atheists are physicalists. Appealing to Platonic realism is just a decoy.

**ii)** What does Jeff think abstract objects are? How do they subsist? It does no good to postulate something inscrutable to salvage your position.

**iii)** Even if abstract moral universals exist, what makes Jeff think we'd be obligated to them?

Second, it could be the case that God does not exist and a neo-Aristotelian approach to ethics like that found in Larry Arnhart's book, **Darwinian Natural Right**, is correct. But

Arnhart's neo-Aristotelian (and Humean and Darwinian) approach to ethics is a realist approach to ethics.

**i)** I've discussed secularized Aristotelian ethics in response to Keith Parsons:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2015/04/pursuing-good-life-with-pablo-escobar.html>

**ii)** I just cited secular philosophers who explain the inadequacies of a Darwinian approach to moral realism.

**iii)** Hume was a classic exponent of ethical subjectivism.

## "For good people to do evil things, that takes religion"

Steven Weinberg says: "Religion is an insult to human dignity. Without it you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion."

To which Freeman Dyson parried, "And for bad people to do good things—that takes religion."

**i)** Dyson makes a good point. Good religion prompts some people to do good things they wouldn't do if left to their own devices.

But I'd like to address Weinberg's allegation on its own terms.

**ii)** There's no such thing as "human dignity" given atheism.

**iii)** There's a certain paradox in saying good people do evil things. Does Weinberg mean they are still good at the time they commit evil? Or does he mean people who'd otherwise be good become morally warped by religion?

**iv)** Weinberg thinks his slam against "religion" is devastating, yet there's a sense in which a religious believer might agree with him. That's because Weinberg is attacking religion in general. As an atheist, he thinks all religion is bad. But, of course, religionists are typically more discriminating. For instance, I think Islam inspires "good" people to do evil things. Roman Catholicism inspired "good" people to do evil things. Likewise, the Bible says paganism inspires "good" people to do evil things.

Here I'm using "good" in the sense that false religion can make people morally twisted. Of course, there's another sense in which bad religion is the product of morally twisted people. Those aren't mutually exclusive explanations. Rather, they feed on each other. Bad people invent bad religion, while bad religion makes people worse. They imagine they have an absolute duty to commit evil.

**v)** Weinberg is arbitrarily selective. Secular ideologies can inspire "good" people to do evil things. Take Communism. A utopian, idealistic ideology that inspired torture, mass murder, &c.

**vi)** For that matter, some otherwise "good" people do bad things because they find themselves in a coercive situation. Take men conscripted to fight in unjust wars. If they refuse, they will be shot. So they do what's required of them, although they may do the bare minimum.

**vii)** A final problem is that Christian ethics is incommensurable with secular ethics. Weinberg deems some actions to be evil which Christian ethics deems to be good; Weinberg deems some actions to be good which Christian ethics deems to be evil. There's not much common ground.



## The death of God

**1.** In his recent book, **THE AGE OF ATHEISTS: HOW WE HAVE SOUGHT TO LIVE SINCE THE DEATH OF GOD** (Simon and Schuster, 2014), Peter Watson, himself an atheist, endeavors to illustrate how it's possible for atheists to lead meaningful lives.

**2.** Watson's analysis is focused on philosophers, poets, playwrights, and novelists. One oversight is his failure to note the way in which music, with its unique emotional power, can be a persuasive medium to propagandize atheism, viz. Berlioz, Wagner, Debussy, Ravel.

Wagner was influenced by Feuerbach and Schopenhauer. Not to mention the tangled relationship between Wagner and Nietzsche. Another example is where a secular composer (Debussy) sets to music the text (Les fleurs du mal) of a secular poet (Baudelaire).

**3.** In another oversight, one common thread which Watson fails to note is the number of artists who were both homosexual (or bisexual) and atheistic, viz. E. M. Forster, Gide, Keynes, Henry James, Jean Cocteau, Thomas Mann, Proust, Poulenc, Santayana, Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thompson, Oscar Wilde, Wittgenstein, Woolf. There's a natural affinity between homosexuality and atheism inasmuch as the amorality of atheism liberates the homosexual. Put another way, it's not surprising that homosexuals are antagonistic to traditional Christian ethics, and the religion that sponsors traditional Christian ethics: it condemns their lifestyle.

Of course, the same could be said for heterosexual libertines, viz. Bertrand Russell, H. G. Wells, D. H. Lawrence, Edmund Wilson, Hemingway, Yeats, Sartre, Camus. Indeed, the Bloomsbury Group was notorious for its sexual libertinism, be it straight or gay. As Dorothy Parker quipped, the Bloomsbury Group "lived in squares, painted in circles and loved in triangles".

**5.** In yet another oversight, there's the connection between Jews and atheism, viz. Freud, Kafka, Proust, Gertrude Stein, Wittgenstein. This reflects the plight of the European Jew. Once Jews were freed from the ghetto, they no longer had that artificial solidarity. Unmoored from their religious roots, they had to navigate in a nominally Christian, antisemitic environment. Their hereditary religious identity became self-alienating, leaving many spiritually estranged.

**6.** Ironically, Watson's documentation sabotages his thesis that atheists and can and should lead meaningful lives. That's because, in so many of his examples, the artists and their fictional characters are abjectly miserable, and that's directly connected to their acute consciousness of living in a godless universe. To quote a few examples:

As he [James Joyce] expressed himself to Arthur Power...In realism you get down to the facts on which the world is based; that sudden reality which smashes romanticism into a pulp. What makes most people's lives unhappy is some disappointed romanticism, some unrealizable misconceived idea. In fact, you may say that idealism is the ruin of man, and if we lived down to the fact, as primitive man had to, we would be better off. That is what we are made for. Nature is quite unromantic (264).

Valéry felt that disappointment "inevitably" arose in all earthly experiences because "they are never quite adequate to what the self might hope to derive from them" (161).

In all of his later plays the dominant theme is the protagonist's search for a moral order *within* him- or herself, to counter the "cosmic emptiness" and the chaos around him or her. For this Ibsen there is no order and no God—except insofar as his characters conceive of him...His later plays are inevitably dramas of "spiritual distress," describing his character's search for consolation in the shadow of death and their attempts to manufacture some form of Paradise here and now. "Redemption from cosmic nothingness, from meaninglessness—this is the nature of the Romantic quest which Ibsen's people share with those of Byron and Stendhal.

Hardly any of the main characters in Ibsen's later plays fail to conduct themselves on the basis of a *deus absconditus* (a hidden God) or lead lives that are not governed by that awareness. These characters are either pagan acolytes of Dionysus or self-declared apostates, defrocked priests or freethinkers; they are atheist rebels or agnostics. In **HEDDA GABLER**, Hedda dreams for being a free spirit, "irradiated by the orgiastic religion of ancient Greece"...And in **LITTLE EYOLF**, "Allmer's predicament seems the paradigm of the romantic dilemma in Ibsen's drama, which, to state in its simplest and crudest terms, is to be trapped between a traumatic sense of existence as process, change and death in a world devoid of consistent value, and a longing for a lost world of static hierarchies where death has no dominion. And in order to resolve this dilemma, the atheist/agnostic/apostate will fashion out of the raw material existence his analogue of that lost Eden—a Symbolic Paradise which promises eternal life, and which he seeks to possess, not as *metaphor* but as *fact* (92-93).

This is highlighted and countered in the plays not just by the lurking presence of death (often in the form of terminal illness—syphilis, tuberculosis, cancer) but also in the fact that those who die are the last of their line: this is not just death, but extinction. In a famous article, "Symbols of Eternity: The Victorian Escape from Time," Jerome Buckley grouped Ibsen with Coleridge, Rossetti, Wordsworth, Pater and William Morris in their attempts to "fashion worlds of artifice beyond the reach of change...What Ibsen's plays explore are the pain and tragedy almost inevitably involved in trying to create something of lasting value amid the flux and ceaseless flow of change, the experimental nature of life and reality (93-94).

After Eyolf, the crippled and thus half-unwanted son, is drowned, lured into the sea by the Rat-Wife, Alfred and his wife, Rita, resolve to do more for the poor children in their area. To help these children in a way they never helped their own infirm and less-than-perfect child brings them together in a way they have not been together before. The value they now see in their lives—to help the children—is an absolute value, in *this* world, the small world that is theirs, that surrounds them (95).

"The characters in [Henry] James's novels seem to pay little heed to articulated religious belief. Indeed, they often seem to inhabit a moral world in which absolute measures of value such as those associated with God are no longer available" (132).

For James, shared fictions take the place of more traditional religious beliefs...whether the protagonist will tell a "necessary lie" in order to maintain the illusion in which a community would prefer to live"...We can act *as if* there

were a God. In other words, faced with a world without God and at the same time an ostensible moral base deriving from God, if we are to live together we must maintain fictions—even if, on occasion, they are lies—if they oil the wheels of the community to which we wish to belong..."In the fallen world of James's novels, the shared fiction seems to be the only remnant of faith that can allow James's characters to live together. The problem for James, his characters, and his readers is that these shared fictions can hardly be distinguished from lies"...James's characters, especially in **THE GOLDEN BOWL**, are both conscious of evil and aware of the absence of supernatural intervention in the modern world (133-34).

Jean-Paul Sartre, in **MALLARMÉ, or THE POET OF NOTHINGNESS**, places the poet centrally in the death-of-God narrative at least in France...All the poets of the mid-century (in France, that is) were unbelievers, he says, though not without a nostalgia "for the reassuring symmetry of a God-ordered universe"...Sartre therefore concluded that poets, more than anyone else, are "God's orphans," and even here Mallarmé stood out because his mother had died when he was five and his sister when he was fifteen, so that they "fused" together into a single absence—"absence" being the crucial term..a "commanding absence," or a "hovering absence"...For Mallarmé, says Sartre, "his mother never stops dying," and it left a "pathological gap in his "being-in-the-world."" This was important for Sartre, who saw Mallarmé as the herald of the twentieth century and someone who "more profoundly than Nietzsche, experienced the death of God" (148-49).

"The most tragic thing about the war [WWI] was not that it made so many dead men, but that it destroyed the tragedy of death. Not only did the young suffer in the war, but so did every abstraction that would have sustained and given dignity to their suffering"...And, as Edmund Wilson noted about Fitzgerald's **THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE DAMNED**: "The hero and heroine are strange creatures without purpose or method, who give themselves up to wild debaucheries and do not, from the beginning to end of the book, perform a single serious act: but you somehow get the impression that, in spite of their madness, they are the most rational people...in such a civilization, the sanest and most credible thing is to live for the jazz of the moment...There was [Idema] said, an "extraordinary increase" in neurosis, in divorce, in sexual and emotional conflict, which was reflected in both the literature of the time [the Twenties] and in the personal lives of the authors. Sherwood Anderson's **BEYOND DESIRE** was originally to be called No God (240-41).

What [Eugene O'Neil] is saying is that there *is* no reality; there are no firm values no ultimate meanings, so all of us need our pipe dreams and illusions (our fictions, if you like)...and that brings with it the necessity of the "life-lie, the idea that a man cannot live without illusions...men's lives "are without any meaning whatever, human life is a silly disappointment, a liar's promise, a daily appointment with peace and happiness in which we wait day after day, hoping against hope (252, 254).

Elsewhere, one brother says to the other, "I love you much more than I hate you"... (253)...The love-hate within a family, the closeness-distance, the loneliness within a togetherness, the guilt and need for forgiveness, the

knowing and not knowing a loved one, the bewilderment in the face of a mysterious determinism—this is the human condition...they are sharing the death of hope...Families, for O'Neill, are full of private spaces, secrets and concealments in which, despite all, understanding and forgiveness must be found..as the site where our illusions cannot be maintained because fellow family members know too much, were excuses can never be offered or accepted as explanations (253,255-6).

**7.** Atheism leads to existential nihilism along at least two different paths:

**i)** The problem of mortality. How things end really does make a difference to how we evaluate what went before. Suppose an accountant for the mob embezzles his employer, then skips town. For a time he lives well. One day takes his family on a picnic. It's a glorious summer day. But he can see a car shadowing him in the rearview mirror. The mob tracked him down.

In a park, by the lake, everything is outwardly idyllic. His wife and kids are oblivious to the fateful denouement. All the time, he can see the hit-man's car in the parking lot, just waiting for him. When the picnic is over, and he must return to the parking lot, he knows ahead of time that he will be abducted, taken to a remote location, and shot in the head. That advance knowledge casts a wee bit of a pall over the proceedings. He can't be happy foreknowing how the story ends.

**ii)** Atheism is like the characters in **DARK CITY**. They have false memories, implanted by aliens. That gives them an ersatz sense of community and rootedness. They imagine they have a history with each other, as friends, lovers,

spouses. Fond childhood recollections. But some of them come to suspect that their identity is an illusion. Their memories are delusive.

Likewise, according to naturalistic evolution, we've been brainwashed to be altruistic. But like false memories, once you realize that the significance you attach to things is conditioned and arbitrary, there's nothing to fall back on. Life was a cheat.

**8.** Atheism has a silver lining. The bleak backdrop of atheism intensifies the value of Christian hope. When honest atheists, by their own words and deeds, live in despair, they bear witness to the irreplaceable value of the Gospel. Ironically, if everyone was Christian, we'd fail to fully appreciate the surpassing value of the faith, which shines all the brighter in outside the shadow of atheism.



## There's no evidence for atheism

The debate between atheism and Christian theism has such a stereotypical form that it's easy to overlook the radical disparity: when you think about it, there is no positive evidence for atheism. The case for atheism boils down to an argument from silence.

Now, there's nothing inherently wrong with an argument from silence, but that's a very vulnerable argument. Atheists don't really present any positive evidence for atheism; rather, they argue *against* theism.

The case for atheism boils down to the alleged lack of evidence for an interventionist God. Claiming that we can explain the origin of the universe naturalistically. We can explain the origin of life naturalistically. We can explain every illness and recovery naturalistically.

Or take the claim that answers to prayer are random. Likewise, the argument from evil is an appeal to randomness. The distribution of weal and woe seems to be random. By the same token, mass extinction seems to be random. What species survive or perish seems to be random.

Some atheists allege that biological organisms exhibit design flaws. Suboptimal adaptations. That allegation is refutable on different grounds, but in any event, it's not a positive argument for atheism.

A few atheists say God-talk is meaningless. That poses a bit of a dilemma inasmuch as it is no longer clear what the

atheist is *denying*. In any event, that's not a positive argument for atheism.

Some ambitious atheists say the existence of God is not merely improbable but impossible: the very *idea* of God is incoherent (e.g. "paradoxes of omnipotence"). That generally depends on arbitrary, stimulative definitions of the divine attributes, or dubious postulates about a best possible world. And in any event, that's not a positive argument for atheism.

Many atheists find the Bible is morally repugnant. Of course, many atheists reject moral realism. In any event, that's not a positive argument for atheism.

If you go down the list, atheists don't offer any evidence for atheism except in the roundabout sense that if there's no evidence for God, then atheism wins by default.

In some respects, the argument for atheism is decidedly odd. Once again, take the argument from evil. How does evil undercut Christian theism? After all, Christian theism is predicated on the existence of evil, so how can evil be inconsistent with Christian theism? It's not the *presence* of evil, but the *absence* of evil, that would falsify Christian theism. At best, the argument from evil might undercut "mere theism" or philosophical theism.

By the same token, how can the argument from evil disprove or even undercut biblical theism when biblical theism grants the existence of evil? It's not as if the Bible depicts a utopian world. The Bible is a chronicle of evil.

So there really is no direct evidence for atheism. By contrast, Christian scholars and philosophers marshal reams of evidence for Christianity. And it's important to

keep our eye on the burden of proof. If the case for atheism is an argument from silence, then it takes next to nothing to overthrow it. Suppose 99% of the ostensible evidence for an interventionist God is naturally explicable. If just 1% (indeed, even less than 1%) gets through, then atheism is false. Atheism can't permit a single counterexample to slip through its sieve.

## Is the world a brute fact?

Graham Oppy is a cream of the crop atheist philosopher. His book **THE BEST ARGUMENT AGAINST GOD** (Palgrave Pivot, 2013) is a state of the art attack on theism. I'd like to evaluate one of his arguments.

...the initial causal state might have been other than it actually was—even though God could not have failed to exist—because God's initial disposition to make other things could have been other than it actually was (either because God could have failed to have an initial disposition to create, or because God could have had initial dispositions to create that differed from the particular initial dispositions to create that he actually had in the initial state.) (13).

The first piece of data that we introduce is the observation that there is a global causal structure: the world is a network of causal relations. One of the standard philosophical questions is, "why is there something rather than nothing?" In the present context we interpret this question to mean "why is there causal stuff, rather than complete absence of causal stuff"? How Theist answers this question depends upon the view that Theist takes of the scope of possibility. If Theist supposes that every possible world is one in which God engages in causal activity, then Theist can say: it was impossible for there to be complete absence of causal stuff. In other words: there is causal stuff because there had to be causal stuff. If Theist has a more relaxed view of the scope of possibilities—and, in particular, if Theist supposes that it is possible that God might have engaged in no causal activity—then Theist will say: there is no reason why there is causal stuff

rather than complete absence of causal stuff—it is a brute fact that there is causal stuff (23-24).

...there is a serious problem for proponents of cosmological arguments that arise with the question "from whence came the causal order?" Once we focus our attention on the global causal order—and not on the question whether the natural causal order itself has a cause—we see clearly that considerations about the shape of the global causal order do not differentially support either Theism or Naturalism (26).

Could God have chosen to make a universe that lasts for less than a second? Could God have chosen to make a universe that blows apart so rapidly that it is mostly empty space? If we suppose that the answer to either of these questions is affirmative, then we cannot also say that God must have all-things-considered reason to prefer a "life-permitting" universe to one of these "non-life-permitting" alternatives. But, if God needn't have all-things-considered reason to prefer a "life-permitting" universe to one of these "non-life-permitting" alternatives, then, on the assumption that God's choosing is a brute fact, it surely does turn out that Theist has no better explanation than Naturalist for why it is that relevant cosmic parameters take the values that they do (29-30).

**i)** Broadly speaking, I think Oppy is saying both theism and atheism must admit that reality is ultimately arbitrary. You run out of explanations. You bottom out with brute factuality. Therefore, theism has no greater explanatory power than atheism—although it may have less explanatory power, given other considerations. In addition, Oppy is targeting the fine-tuning argument in particular, as well as cosmological arguments generally.

**ii)** I think that much is clear. However, the detailed reasoning by which he attempts to justify his conclusion is obscure. What makes him think "why is there something rather than nothing?" is synonymous with "why is there causal stuff, rather than complete absence of causal stuff"? The phrase "causal stuff" is hardly self-explanatory. Indeed, that's a good deal less clear than the Leibnizian question.

**iii)** It's unclear what he means by "every possible world is one in which God engages in causal activity". Does he mean the metaphysical relationship between God and possible worlds? If so, a standard theistic explanation is that possible worlds are divine ideas. God's complete concept of possible world history. Possible worlds are constituted by the mind of God. By God's infinite imagination. And in that respect, possible worlds are necessary ideas.

On that construction, possible worlds aren't brute facts. Rather, there's an underlying explanation for their existence. A dependence-relation. They exist because God exists.

**iv)** However, the point he seems to be driving at isn't the ontology of possible worlds, but why some possibilities are reified while other possibilities remain unexemplified. Not so much, why are there possible worlds, what's the explanation for possible worlds—but what caused this set of possibilities to be actual rather than another?

That's certainly where Leibniz is coming from. When Leibniz asks, "why is there something rather than nothing," what he has in mind is more specific. Not just in general why is there something rather than nothing, but why does this particular something exist rather than something else. Why does the real world exemplify this set of possibilities rather

than an alternative set of possibilities? What selects for that when other possibilities were available?

For Leibniz, this implies personal agency. Someone (i.e. God) had to make that selection. Given the number of possible worlds, God had to choose which possible world to instantiate.

**v)** Now, Oppy's contention seems to be that if the real world is contingent rather than necessary-contingent because it might have been otherwise—then God's choice (if there is a God) is arbitrary. A brute fact. Like rolling the dice. And in that event, theism has no more explanatory power than atheism.

But if that's what Oppy has in mind, then his comparison is fallacious. God could have a reason for preferring one possible world over another because different possible worlds are...*different*. Different possible worlds have different histories. God opts for one rather than another because one world history is more interesting than another. Has greater values. The way some novels and movies have more interesting characters and more meaningful plots than other novels and movies.

**vi)** Perhaps, though, hovering in the background of Oppy's discussion is a point of tension in Leibniz. For Leibniz, God had sufficient reason to instantiate this world because this is the best possible world. That's why God chose this world over some other world. But that seems to be necessitarian. God had to choose the best. His hands were tied.

But if that's what underlies Oppy's argument, I'd make two observations:

**vii)** We can deny that there is one best possible world. Different possible worlds have different histories. Different histories have different goods. No one possible world combines all goods because no one possible world combines different histories. Each possible world exemplifies a single history. There is no best possible world, for each possible world has some goods absent from another possible world. (There may be some possible worlds devoid of good, but God wouldn't choose one of those.)

**viii)** In addition, it isn't clear that God is confronted with a binary choice, where he must choose just one option to the exclusion of others. In principle, God could create a multiverse that exemplifies many alternate histories.

Finally, let's consider Oppy's view of what possible worlds are:

I think that the best position for a Naturalist to adopt is one according to which theism is impossible. All possible worlds share an initial segment in the actual world. All possible worlds evolve according to the same laws as the actual world. It is impossible that the actual laws could oversee a transition from a purely natural state to a state in which there are supernatural entities. There have never been any supernatural entities. So supernatural entities are impossible; and hence, in particular, gods are impossible. Graham Oppy, "Arguments for Atheism," S. Bullivant & M. Ruse, eds. **THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF ATHEISM** (OUP, 2013), 57-58.

**i)** I agree with him that "it is impossible that the actual laws could oversee a transition from a purely natural state to a state in which there are supernatural entities." But, of



course, that only follows from a naturalistic definition of possible worlds.

**ii)** It's unclear what he means by *evolving* possible worlds. If, say, we view possible worlds as abstract objects (or divine ideas), then they are static. Each possible world has a complete history. Perhaps, though, Oppy is using "evolve" as a synonym for the succession of events.

It's like shooting a movie. Once you shoot the movie (and edit the movie), the movie is complete. It has a complete plot. But that allows for plot developments within the movie. Likewise, viewing the movie takes time.

**iii)** Why does Oppy think "all possible worlds share an initial segment in the actual world"? Maybe because, as an atheist, he thinks the physical universe is all there is. That's the whole of reality. So possibilities must be variations on the physical universe or actual world.

Mind you, that fails to solve the problem that possible worlds were invoked to explain in the first place. In the nature of the case, what might have been didn't happen in the actual world. So what makes counterfactuals true? It can't be a fact in the actual world. For that alternate course of events never took place in the actual world.

**iv)** From the standpoint of Christian metaphysics, the actual world is not the standard of comparison for possible worlds. The actual world is just one possible world among many. It's simply distinguished from other possible worlds by actuality. God chooses to objectify that particular idea in time and space.

Some possible worlds have overlapping histories. Up to a point they have the same past, then split off in different

directions. Other possible worlds have histories that don't intersect. A different past as well as a different future. So they have nothing in common.

## Fables

I'd like to compare two objections that unbelievers raise to the Bible:

**#1.** Science has disproven Gen 2-3.

**#2.** Stories like Gen 2-3 are fables. For instance:

As a child, I enjoyed reading Aesop's fables and biblical stories. Both have talking animals, along with moral lessons and universal truths.

<https://www.onfaith.co/onfaith/2013/01/26/why-this-atheist-likes-the-bible/11741>

But rather than just make fun of such fables, I also think it's important to read the Bible and try to understand why it has so deeply influenced our culture. Even non-religious people can find meaningful messages in "holy" books. In a previous piece, I gave a few moral lessons from the Bible, including the snake fable.

<https://www.onfaith.co/onfaith/2014/03/05/making-sense-out-of-nonsense/31173>

Let's consider #2 in more detail. It's common for unbelievers to dismiss the Bible as a book of fables. From their standpoint, Gen 3 is a case in point. Talking animals are stock characters in fables. What is more, the Tempter in Gen 3 is a trickster, which is another stock character in fables. On this view, the Tempter is a serpentine variant on

animal tricksters like the fox, coyote, raven, and rabbit. That's a common motif in world folklore.

But here's the rub: #2 cancels out #1. If Gen 2-3 is a fable, then science hasn't falsified Gen 2-3. On the fabulous classification, Gen 2-3 would be consistent with, say, theistic evolution.

To my knowledge, American-Indian beast lore was pedagogical: cautionary tales designed to teach young people how to be shrewd like the trickster and avoid getting outsmarted like the trickster's hapless dupes. Such tales were intentionally fictional and satirical.

Now, my point is not to endorse the fabulous interpretation, but to note that an atheist can't consistently deploy both #1 and #2.

## Prison of the mind

When I comment on atheism I routinely comment on people who are very self-conscious about their godlessness. Their atheism defines their core identity. Their personal and social identity is conditioned by their commitment to atheism. They organize their thinking, speaking, and acting around atheism as a central reference point. They think about God as much as Christians do.

By contrast, there's another kind of atheist. They barely think about God at all. For them, God is not a frame of reference one way or another. They live without taking thought of God. "Alienated from the life of God" ([Eph 4:18](#)). They resemble pre-Christian unbelievers who were born before the missionaries arrived.

It's like a concentration camp which has a door with an illuminated exit sign. You can see it day and night. The inmates walk past the door every day. Many times a day. Back and forth.

Yet no one tries to open the door. No one puts his hand on the doorknob to see if it turns. They don't register the door. It's as if the door isn't there.

They could leave the concentration camp at anytime. But they remain in the camp year after year, decade upon decade, until they die of old age. Freedom lies just beyond the door, but they die in captivity, for their captivity is psychological rather than physical. A prison of the mind.

## 50 "myths" about atheism

Recently I was thumbing through 50 Great Myths About Atheism (Wiley Blackwell, 2013), by Russell Blackford and Udo Schüklenk.

As you can tell from the title alone, it's a PR exercise designed to dispel allegedly harmful stereotypes and prejudices about atheists. However, the book suffers from a central dilemma. On the one hand, there's the vexed question of how to define atheism in the first place. On p3 they say:

George H. Smith adopted a very broad view of atheism as simply "the absence of religious belief." According to this approach, any person who does not believe in the existence of any god or gods is literally an atheist. For the purpose of this book we take a similar approach.

Let's be clear on what this implies. According to their preferred definition, their operating definition, an atheist or atheism is consistent with any belief or practice apart from the singular exception of belief in the existence of a god or gods. Now, let's compare that to some of their "myths" about atheism:

Myth 7 Atheists See No Good in Religion

Myth 11 Atheism Robs Life of Meaning and Purpose

Myth 12 Atheism is Depressing

Myth 20 Without God There is No Morality

Myth 21 Atheists are Moral Relativists

Myth 23 Atheists Deny the Sanctity of Human Life

Myth 24 If There is No God We are Soulless Creatures

Myth 26 Atheists Can't be Trusted

Myth 27 Many Atrocities Have Been Committed in the Name of Atheism

Myth 31 Atheists are Intolerant

Myth 32 Atheists Want to Ban Teaching Religion to Children

Myth 33 Atheists Want to Strip People of their Beliefs

Myth 34 Atheists Want to Ban Religion from the Public Square

Myth 43 Atheism Implies Scientism

Notice that atheism is consistent with every one of these "myths" about atheism. Each one of these can be true of atheists. Indeed, an atheist could subscribe to every one of these "myths" about atheism.

Since nothing in their definition of atheism rules them out, in what sense are these "myths" about atheists or atheism?

Perhaps the authors would say atheism doesn't entail any of these beliefs or practices. But even if we grant that contention for the sake of argument, atheism does not entail the denial of any of these beliefs or practices. These are all compatible with atheism or atheists.

Moreover, that's not just a logical possibility. There are actual atheists in each category. There are atheists for whom the "myth" is an accurate description. And not just riffraff, but important representatives.

So the "myth" boils down to the banal qualification that these descriptions aren't universally true for every self-identified atheist. At best, they think popular stereotypes overgeneralize about atheists. But that's not a very catchy title or selling point.

In addition, a book like this is intended to promote a favorable image of atheism and atheists. To that end, it will lowball atheists who take their position in a more intolerant or nihilistic direction—whether moral nihilism, existential nihilism, or both. But what if that's just taking atheism to a logical conclusion? Even if many or most atheists did not espouse nihilism, atheism can still imply nihilism. They stop short of going all the way because the consequences are far too bleak. Likewise, intolerant atheists are bona fide atheists.



## Atheism, trust, and friendship

Atheists complain that they are distrusted. Being atheists, they think that's unfair. Sheer prejudice.

But here's the problem: it's not directly about morality. There are atheists who inconsistently believe in morality. So it's not that they can't be trusted because they are immoral or amoral—although some certainly are. And, indeed, atheists are far more likely to deny moral realism than Christians. So the odds are that they are less trustworthy in that respect.

But that's not the main thing. It's less about morality than mortality. If you think this life is all there is, then are you going to do the right thing even if that puts you at personal risk? I'm not saying you don't have brave atheists, but from the standpoint of mortality, isn't that foolhardy?

To take a cliché example, suppose you're gentile and your best friend is Jewish. But then the Nazis come to power. You still want to be his friend. But there's now a conflict between self-interest and altruism. Are you prepared to risk your life or freedom to remain his friend?

From a secular standpoint, isn't that irrational? So that has an indirect effect on your commitment to morality. In a pinch, can your Jewish friend trust you to watch his back? Or is the price too high? In normal times, your friendship isn't costly. Indeed, your friendship is mutually agreeable. But now that friendship is politically dangerous. If this life is all there is, will you hazard your life or freedom to protect him? Or will you protect yourself?

The acid test of friendship is taking a risk—even a grave risk—for your friends. That's a gamble. And if you can't afford to lose the bet, you can't be a real friend, you can't be a friend when it matters most. When the stakes are high, that's why he needs a friend—and that's when the stakes are too high for you to be his friend. It isn't safe to be around him.

## Blindsight

I'm going to discuss a subset of reported NDEs and OBEs. Let's put this in context. According to physicalism, mental events are neurological events, so all cognition is located inside the skull. Hence, the brain can't perceive the external world apart from the five senses. If so, then knowledge of our physical environment must be mediated by one or more of the five senses. If, however, there's evidence that some people born blind have near-death or out-of-body experiences in which they perceive their concrete surroundings, then that falsifies physicalism.

And that's significant because atheism typically rejects dualism in favor of physicalism. I think that's because, if physicalism is true, then at one stroke that rules out the existence of minds that are, or can be, independent of brains. In other words, it rules out God, angels, demons, and immortal souls. A very economical way to disprove Christianity.

Although some atheists make allowance for platonic realism, they generally labor to avoid that. Moreover, even if platonic realism were true, that's a different kind of dualism than brain-independent minds. So it lacks the same polemical value for atheism.

I have read efforts to explain this away. For instance:

[These cases] may be inspired by accounts of other people's NDEs that have been widely disseminated in various forms of the media. That is, might a blind person have heard that people see certain things in a near-death encounter and unconsciously generated a fantasy that conformed to this belief?

[http://infidels.org/library/modern/keith\\_augustine/HNDEs.html#blind](http://infidels.org/library/modern/keith_augustine/HNDEs.html#blind)

Light enhances brain activity during a cognitive task even in some people who are totally blind, according to a study conducted by researchers at the University of Montreal and Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital. The findings contribute to scientists' understanding of everyone's brains, as they also revealed how quickly light impacts on cognition. "We were stunned to discover that the brain still respond significantly to light in these rare three completely blind patients despite having absolutely no conscious vision at all," said senior co-author Steven Lockley.

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/10/131028090408.htm>

There are, however, problems with that appeal to discount reported NDEs and OBEs of people born blind (or the functional equivalent). It is, of course, true, that the brain (or mind) can play tricks on us. And the brain (or mind) may have the capacity to simulate abstract images like migraine auras.

But how could the brain simulate representational images that correspond to the sensible world? I've read that congenitally blind people dream, but their dreams are auditory or tactile rather than visual. That's because the

imagery of dreams derives from sensory perception. Because our memory is stocked with mental representations of what we've seen, that supplies raw material for the imagination. The mind can reproduce or modify that information. But imagination needs something to work with. It can't operate in a vacuum.

Finally, a last-ditch response is to dismiss the reliability of testimonial evidence. That, however, commits the atheist to a devouring skepticism that atheism cannot afford inasmuch as atheists depend on the general reliability of testimonial evidence for much of what they believe.

I'm going to quote from an article that gives some case-studies. It would be useful if researchers were to investigate additional cases. I'm a bit wary about the the risk of overreliance on a single study. In fairness, it isn't easy to isolate and identify people born blind (or the functional equivalent) who've had NDEs and OBEs. That's a subset of a subset of a very select group to begin with.

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In order to recruit qualified participants for this study, that is, blind persons who believed they had had either an NDE or an OBE,we first made contact with 11 national,regional, and state organizations for the blind, to solicit their help in locating potential respondents among their membership.

After an individual made contact with us, we conducted a screening interview over the telephone to make sure that he or she had the appropriate qualifications for our study. Specifically, we determined the sight status of the person and made sure that he or she had undergone either an NDE or one or more OBEs, not necessarily associated with a near-death crisis. Once the person's eligibility for the study was established, we either then continued with the formal interview or scheduled a second call for that purpose. In a few cases, one or more follow-up calls were necessary to clarify some aspects of the respondent's account. In the interview, we took a detailed sight history from the individual and then conducted an in-depth probe about his or her relevant experiences...All conversations were tape recorded with the permission of the respondent, and transcripts based on these conversations were later prepared, to permit detailed analysis of our findings. Finally, each participant who expressed an interest to receive information about the findings of this study was sent a summary at its conclusion.

Vicki was born very prematurely, having been in the womb only 22 weeks at delivery, and weighed just three pounds at birth. Afterward, her weight dropped precariously to one pound, 14 ounces. As was common for premature babies in the 1950s, she was placed in an airlock incubator through which oxygen was administered. Unfortunately, because of a failure to regulate the concentration of oxygen properly, Vicki was given too much and, along with about 50,000 other premature babies born in the United States about the same time, suffered such optic nerve damage as to leave her completely blind. As she made clear in an initial interview with another researcher, Greg Wilson, who kindly provided his tapes and transcripts to us, she has never had

any visual experience whatever, nor does she even understand the nature of light:

Interviewer. Could you see anything?

Vicki: Nothing, never. No light, no shadows, no nothing, ever.

Interviewer: So the optic nerve was destroyed to both eyes?

Vicki: Yes, and so I've never been able to understand even the concept of light.

In early 1973, Vicki, then 22, was working as an occasional singer in a nightclub in Seattle. One night, at closing time, she was unable to call for a taxi to drive her home and circumstances forced her to take the only other option: a ride with a couple of inebriated patrons. Not surprisingly, a serious accident ensued during which Vicki was thrown out of their van. Her injuries were extensive and life-threatening, and included a skull fracture and concussion, and damage to her neck, back, and one leg. In fact, it took her a full year after being released from the hospital before she could stand upright without the risk of fainting.

She has no memory of the her trip to Harborview Hospital in the ambulance, but after she arrived at the emergency room, she came again to awareness when she found herself up on the ceiling watching a male doctor and a woman—she is not sure whether the woman was another physician or a nurse—working on her body. She could overhear their conversation, too, which had to do with their fear that because of possible damage to Vicki's eardrum, she could

become deaf as well as blind. Vicki tried desperately to communicate to them that she was fine, but naturally drew no response. She was also aware of seeing her body below her, which she recognized by certain identifying features, such as a distinctive wedding ring she was wearing. According to her testimony, Vicki first had a very fleeting image of herself lying on the metal table and she was sure, she said, that "it was me," although it took her a moment to register that fact with certainty. As she later told us:

I knew it was me. ... I was pretty thin then. I was quite tall and thin at that point. And I recognized at first that it was a body, but I didn't even know that it was mine initially. Then I perceived that I was up on the ceiling, and I thought, "Well, that's kind of weird. What am I doing up here?" I thought, "Well, this must be me. Am I dead?. ..." I just briefly saw this body, and ... I knew that it was mine because I wasn't in mine. Then I was just away from it. It was that quick.

Almost immediately after that, as she recalls, she found herself going up through the ceilings of the hospital until she was above the

roof of the building itself, during which time she had a brief panoramic view of her surroundings.

A second case is that of Brad Barrows, a 33-year-old man living in Connecticut, who had a near-death experience in the winter of 1968 when he was only 8 years old. At the time, he was a student at the Boston Center for Blind Children, and had contracted a severe case of pneumonia and eventually had severe breathing difficulties. Afterward,



he was told by nurses that his heart had stopped, apparently for at least four minutes, and that cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) had been necessary to bring him back. Brad remembers that when he couldn't breathe any longer, he felt himself lifting up from the bed and floating through the room toward the ceiling. He saw his apparently lifeless body on the bed. He also saw his blind roommate get up from his bed and leave the room to get help. (His roommate later confirmed this.) Brad then found himself rapidly going upward through the ceilings of the building until he was above the roof. At this point, he found that he could see clearly.

He estimates that it was between 6:30 and 7:00 in the morning when this happened. He noticed that the sky was cloudy and dark. There had been a snowstorm the day before, and Brad could see snow everywhere except for the streets, which had been plowed, though they were still slushy. He was able to give us a very detailed description of the way the snow looked. Brad could also see the snowbanks that the plows had created. He saw a street car go by. Finally, he recognized a playground used by the children of his school and a particular hill he used to climb nearby. When asked if he "knew" or "saw" these things, he said: "I clearly visualized them. I could suddenly notice them and see them. ... I remember . . . being able to see quite clearly."

Sometimes the initial onset of visual perception of the physical world is disorienting and even disturbing to the blind. This was true for Vicki, for example, who said:

I had a hard time relating to it [i.e., seeing]. I had a real difficult time relating to it because I've never experienced it. And it was something very foreign to me. . . . Let's see, how can I put it into words? It was like hearing words and not being able to understand them, but knowing that they were words. And before you'd never heard anything. But it was something new, something you'd not been able to previously attach any meaning to.

Later, in commenting on the shock of these initial visual impressions, she even used the word "frightening" to characterize them. She also told us that she was never able to discriminate colors as such, but only "different shades of brightness," about which impressions she could only wonder afterward whether they represented what sighted people meant by color.

One fairly obvious possibility that has often been advanced in connection with the NDEs and OBEs of sighted persons is that this experience is some kind of a dream, perhaps a lucid or exceptionally vivid dream, which has such realistic properties that it is easily misinterpreted and thus given an ontological status it does not deserve. To evaluate this hypothesis, we first need to inquire into what is known about normal oneiric processes in the blind. Fortunately, there has been a great deal of research devoted to the dreams of the blind, some of it going back more than a hundred years. As a result of these investigations, certain generalizations about the presence of visual imagery in dreams appear to stand up quite well. Among these "empirical cornerstones" (Kirtley, 1975) are that (1) there are no visual images in the dreams of the congenitally blind.

In our interviews, we routinely asked our respondents about the nature of their dreams, and what we found in our sample accords with the generalizations just described. In addition, however, and particularly pertinent to the hypothesis under consideration, our respondents usually went on to say that not only were their NDEs unlike their usual dreams, but in the case of those blind from birth, they stood out as radically different precisely because they contained visual imagery, whereas their dreams had always lacked this element. Vicki, one of our NDErs blind from birth, provides a good case in point:

Interviewer. How would you compare your dreams to your NDEs?

Vikki: No similarity, no similarity at all. Interviewer: Do you have any kind of visual perception in your dreams?

Vicki: Nothing. No color, no sight of any sort, no shadows, no light, no nothing.

Interviewer: What kinds of perceptions are you aware of in your typical dreams?

Vicki: Taste—I have a lot of eating dreams [laughs]. And I have dreams when I'm playing the piano and singing, which I do for a living, anyway. I have dreams in which I touch things. ... I taste things, touch things, hear things, and smell things—that's it.

Interviewer: And no visual perceptions?

Vicki: No.

Interviewer: So that what you experienced during your NDE was quite different from your dreams?

Vicki: Yeah, because there's no visual impression at all in any dream that I have.

These remarks, along with similar asseverations from other participants in our study, make it abundantly clear that from our respondents' point of view, the NDE, especially its visual aspect, has nothing in common with their usual dreams. It is instead something in a class by itself and not to be conflated with dreams. Since there is no support whatever from our interviews for the dream hypothesis of NDEs, we may confidently reject it as a potential explanation for our findings.

Is it possible, then, that what our respondents report is actually a form of blindsight? Further scrutiny of the results of research into blindsight shows very quickly that although it seems to be a legitimate form of perception, it can by no means account for our findings. First of all, patients manifesting the effect typically cannot verbally describe the object they are alleged to see, unlike our respondents who, as we have noted, were usually certain about what they saw and could describe it often without hesitation. In fact, a cortically blind patient, even when his or her object identification exceeds chance levels, believes that it is largely the result of pure guesswork.

Kenneth Ring & Sharon Cooper, "Near-death and Out-of-Body Experience In the Blind: A Study of Apparent Eyeless Vision" *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 16/2 (December, 1997), 101-147.

The same article gives examples of veridical NDEs and OBEs of people who weren't born blind, but nevertheless were blind at the time of the reported experience, and describe seeing things which were corroborated by witnesses. You can read it for yourself:

[http://www.newdualism.org/nde-papers/Ring/Ring-Journal%20of%20Near-Death%20Studies\\_1997-16-101-147.pdf](http://www.newdualism.org/nde-papers/Ring/Ring-Journal%20of%20Near-Death%20Studies_1997-16-101-147.pdf)

## Mind-traps

**1.** I'd like to say a bit more about the "evil-god" challenge. It's been popularized by Stephen Law, but he didn't originate the argument. Other atheists like Peter Millican, Christopher New, Edward Stein, and Charles Daniels have toyed with that argument.

The basic idea is for an atheist to concoct a thought-experiment in which he postulates an evil god that has the same explanatory power as the Christian God (or the equivalent). Millican dubs the two candidates God and Antigod respectively.

If successful, the idea is to neutralize theistic proofs, for even if theistic proofs are otherwise strong arguments for God's existence, because Antigod mimics God, the theistic proofs are equally consistent with the existence of an evil God. An atheist doesn't even have to directly evaluate or critique theistic proofs. He can concede, for discussion purposes, that these are good arguments. But unless they can discriminate between God and Antigod, they don't count as arguments for God.

**2.** There are two ways of responding to the evil-god challenge. One way is to demonstrate a flaw in the argument. To show that the evil-god hypothetical doesn't have the same explanatory value as Christian theism. The two positions are not systematically symmetrical.

**3.** However, I don't think the onus is on Christians to disprove the hypothetical. We can just shrug it off.

**i)** For one thing, there's a difference between paper doubts and real doubts. Just because you can *imagine* a delusive scenario isn't a rational basis to be skeptical. Humans have the ability to devise mind-traps. Concoct imaginative scenarios in which an illusion is indistinguishable from reality. But other than illustrating the limits of what's provable or disprovable, I don't see the point of thought-experiments which propose scenarios in which we can't know what reality is like. Suppose the thought-experiment is successful? What does that accomplish?

**ii)** In addition, global skeptical hypotheticals are paradoxical. An atheist is implicated in the same hypothetical. If Antigod exists, then the atheist is just as deluded as the Christian. Indeed, the evil-god argument is, in itself, part of the global illusion, foisted upon us by Antigod. It keeps us off-balance. Keeps us guessing.

**iii)** If reality is unknowable, what are we supposed to do about it? What purpose does the hypothetical serve? It has no effect on anything one way or the other. What you believe or disbelieve makes no difference. It's a kind of epistemic fatalism.

I mean, the thrust of these hypotheticals is not, "How *can* you know that you're not a brain-in-a-vat, trapped in the Matrix, or deluded by the Cartesian demon?" but, "You *can't* know that you're not a brain-in-a-vat, trapped in the Matrix, or deluded by the Cartesian demon!"

Suppose we dream up a radically skeptical thought-experiment that we can't disprove. Where do we go from there? Nowhere!

It's like being told that you're caught in a time warp. But if you *are* caught in a time warp, there's nothing you can do

to break the vicious cycle. You don't remember the last time warp, so you can't do anything different this time around to break out. Indeed, each time the cycle repeats itself, you're told that you're caught in a time warp. That, in itself, is factored into the time warp.

**iv)** What does Law think his challenge is supposed to achieve? He's generated a self-dilemma. If his argument is successful, then there's nothing we can do in response to his argument since we can't outwit Antigod.

On the face of it, the purpose of his argument is to make people doubt Christian theism. He deploys the argument to influence belief. To change what people believe about Christian theism. To dissuade them from believing Christian theism.

But his argument is self-defeating. If his argument is flawed, it proves nothing. If his argument is sound, it changes nothing. For it puts us at the mercy of Antigod. There's nothing we can do to overcome the illusion. We can't even recognize the illusion.

An atheist believes there is no deity, but if the argument propounded by the atheist is sound, the atheist is hopelessly deluded! Both he and the Christian are in the same boat to nowhere.



## How does it differ from no gardener at all?

Anthony Flew famously wrote:

Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, "Some gardener must tend this plot." The other disagrees, "There is no gardener." So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. "But perhaps he is an invisible gardener." So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H. G. Well's *The Invisible Man* could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. "But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible, to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves." At last the Sceptic despairs, "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?"

i) With whom is Flew shadowboxing? Is this directed at theological noncognitivism? Perhaps he's responding to modernist theologians who say God is ineffable. God is indefinable. He transcends our conceptual categories. There's no analogy between God and human words or

concepts. If that's his target, then I think his parable scores a direct hit.

**ii)** But at another level, his parable suffers from an egregious blindspot. You don't need to empirically detect a gardener to infer a gardener. You don't motion detectors or spectrometry to smoke out the presence of a gardener. Rather, you infer the gardener from the garden. You infer the gardener from his effects. Flowerbeds don't weed themselves. Orchards don't thin themselves. Trees don't grow in rows, much less even-spaced rows. A well-tended garden implies the existence of a gardener. The garden itself is evidence for the gardener. You don't need direct evidence for the gardener, since the garden furnishes indirect, but unmistakable evidence for the gardener. Moreover, that's analogous to many theistic proofs. So in that respect, his parable is counterproductive.

## Perceiving God

I'm going to comment on some objections to the argument from religious experience by atheist philosopher Richard Gale. His foil is Alston's Perceiving God. I won't be using Alston's monograph as my own frame of reference. I'm just exploiting Gale's criticisms as a launchpad:

Necessarily, any cognitive perception is a veridical perception of an objective reality. It now will be argued that it is conceptually impossible for there to be a veridical perception of God...from which it follows by modus tollens that it is impossible that there be a cognitive religious experience. My argument for this is an analogical one that, like those for the cognitively of religious experiences, takes sense experience to be the paradigmatic member of the analogy. A veridical sense perception must have an object that is able to exist when not actually perceived and be the common object of different sense perceptions. For this to be possible, the object must be housed in a space and time that includes both the object and the perceiver. It is then shown that there is no religious experience analogue to this concept of objective existence, there being no analogous dimensions to space and time in which God, along with the perceiver, is housed and which can be invoked to make sense of God existing when not actually perceived and being the common object of different religious experiences. Because of this big disanalogy, God is categorically unsuited to serve as the object of veridical perception, whether sensory or nonsensory.

In arguing that it is impossible for there to be a veridical religious experience of an objective reality, I

am not engaging in an objectionable form of chauvinism by requiring that the sort of objective existence enjoyed by the objects of veridical sense experiences, physical objects, hold for all objective existents. I am happy to grant that there are objective realities that do not occupy space and/or time nor any analogous dimensions, such as the denizens of Plato's nonspatiotemporal heaven; and God might very well be among these objectively existent abstract entities. What is impossible is that there be any veridical *perception* of one of them, even of the intellectual sort describe by Plato in the Phaedrus, according to which we "see" them with our mind's eye... R. Gale, **ON THE NATURE AND EXISTENCE OF GOD** (Cambridge, 1996), 326-27.

i) God is essentially imperceptible. By that I mean, God exists outside space and time. In that respect, it isn't possible to perceive God in himself using the five senses. The question is whether we can perceive an effect of God. By the same token, whether we can perceive a self-representation of God. The *effect* or *representation* can occupy our visual field, or be heard, even if God in himself remains imperceptible. That isn't just *analogous* to sensory perception—that *is* sensory perception (of the divine).

Paradigm-cases include theophanies (e.g. Ezekiel 1) and God's audible voice. Let's say a theophany is an audiovisual (and perhaps tactile) representation of God. There's a genuine external stimulus which the observer perceives. It could be photographed. It's physical in the sense that lightwaves and sound waves are physical.

God doesn't have a natural voice. But God can simulate vocalization. The auditor would hear sentences, although no speaker was visible. The sound would originate outside his mind. Stimulate his eardrums.

**ii)** The divine object (e.g. source of theophanies) can exist when not actually be perceived. The effect or representation can be the common object of different sense perceptions.

**iii)** Since, however, the mode of perception needn't be sensory, but only be *analogous* to sensory perception, it needn't satisfy all the conditions of sensory perception. In that regard, take revelatory dreams. Dreams simulate physical space. Dreams simulate sensory perception.

Normally, dreams are the product of the dreamer's imagination, but in principle a dream can originate outside the dreamer's mind. Suppose telepathy exists. Suppose another agent causes someone to have a particular dream.

**iv)** We need to distinguish between perception and perceptual inferences. Suppose I'm driving toward the ocean. There comes a point when I notice that trees on the hillside are permanently bent. They face away from the coast. They grew bent due to the chronic onshore breeze. I therefore conclude that I must be approaching the ocean. This is two steps removed from the percept. I infer that an onshore breeze caused the trees to grow bent, and I infer that the ocean generated the onshore breeze. How different is that from an unmistakable answer to prayer?

Because these objects are nondimensional, they will be disanalogous to empirical particulars in several important respects. First, they will have radically different grounds of individuation. Whereas empirical

particulars are individuated by their position in nonempirical dimensions, they are not.

Another invidious consequence of their nondimensionality is that no analogous explanation can be given for how they can exist unperceived and be common objects of different perceptions to that which was previously given for empirical particulars. Whereas we could explain our failure to perceive an empirical particular, as well as our perceiving numerically one and the same empirical particular, in terms of our relationship to it in some nonempirical dimension, no such analogous explanation can be offered for our failure to perceive God and the like, or our perceiving numerically one and the same God. This means that it is impossible in principle to distinguish between, for example, mystical experiences that are numerically one and the same undifferentiated unity and the like and those that are merely qualitatively similar ones. Ibid. 341.

**i)** I don't know what he means when he says "empirical particulars are individuated by their position in nonempirical dimensions." Wouldn't physical objects be individuated in physical space?

**ii)** Consider how objects are individuated in dreams. Even though the grounds of individuation are different, the result is the same. We see distinct objects against a contrastive background when we dream. We can hear dream characters speak to us.

**iii)** We perceive God when God produces a symbolic self-representation—or an effect which we infer to signify God. We don't perceive God when he doesn't produce that emblematic external stimulus.

**iv)** In the case of revelatory dreams, we perceive God when God inspires a revelatory dream, and we don't perceive him when we have ordinary dreams. A revelatory dream needn't be a common object of perception, although God is able to inspire two or more people to have the same dream.

**v)** As to whether it's impossible in principle to distinguish between perceptions of one and the same God and merely similar impressions, which may not be numerically the same, that depends, in part, on how stringently Gale defines veridicality. It's easy to concoct Matrix-like undercutters in which no perception is veridical. Where you can never distinguish reliable perception from illusion. Presumably, Gale doesn't wish to set the bar that high.

**vi)** Perhaps the question is how do we verify that these prima facie perceptions of God are in fact about God? The answer depends on the nature of the perception. For instance, a revelatory dream might disclose verifiable information that the dream didn't initially have at his disposal. It had to come from an outside source. Same thing with an audible voice.

A theophany might utilize religious symbolism. And unless you're open to ufology, there'd be no naturalistic alternative explanation.

**vii)** Take the case of recurring dreams. These are nonempirical, yet we remember seeing that dreamscape before.

**viii)** Perhaps Gale would ask how we distinguish a theophany from a psychotic hallucination. But is that a question for the observer? If the observer is in fact psychotic, then he's in no condition to diagnose himself, no

matter how good the criteria. And that's true for mental illness in general. It's not confined to visions. Crazy people can't test their perception of reality since their distorted perceptions would extend to the test. If that's grounds of skepticism, the skepticism infects perception in general. So that objection either proves too much or too little.

**ix)** I'm not suggesting these paradigm-examples (theophany, audible voice, revelatory dream) are ways in which people typically perceive or experience God. I simply use them to establish a principle.



## What's more certain: God or my hands?

I think the title of this post is a useful way to frame the issue. Cambridge philosopher G. E. Moore once attempted to prove the existence of an external world by saying:

How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, 'Here is one hand', and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, 'and here is another'

Now, some people might find it preposterous to say God's existence is more certain than whether my hands are real, but that's deceptively simplistic. To begin with, we need to distinguish between certainty and certitude. By "certitude", I mean a psychological state of absolute conviction or confidence. Let's say that I have greater certitude in the reality of my hands than I have in the reality of God.

Now, let's compare that to certainty in the sense of a logical or mathematical rigor. A mathematical proof might be rock solid. The gold standard of proof. Demonstrably true.

But even though a mathematical proof is more certain than the existence of my hands, I might have greater certitude in the existence of my hands. For one thing, some mathematical proofs are fiendishly complex, and there's the nagging doubt that it may suffer from some subtle but undetectable fallacy.

And yet, certitude in the existence of my hands can be misplaced. Moreover, this doesn't require outlandish thought-experiments. When I dream, I dream that I have a body. In the dream, I'm sure I've got a pair of hands. But my hands are imaginary in the dream.

Likewise, someone who's psychotic may be utterly convinced that his hallucinations are real. Take the famous title of a book by Oliver Sacks: **THE MAN WHO MISTOOK HIS WIFE FOR A HAT**. So, if you think about it, the notion that your hands might be illusory isn't that far-fetched.

Another way to approach the issue is to ask how much hangs on the denial of each alternative. What must the world be like if your hands don't exist? What must the world be like if God doesn't exist?

In the case of illusory hands, you don't necessarily have to make any adjustments to a common sense view of the world. I just gave two examples. Dreaming and psychosis are consistent with a physical world. External objects.

There is, of course, a more radical interpretation. And that is idealism or virtual reality. Where what we take to be the external world is a computer simulation, a la **THE MATRIX**. That's a very different kind of world. A drastic departure from our common sense view of the world.

But even though most of us find that hopelessly implausible, it is coherent. It seems to be hypothetically possible.

By contrast, if God exists, then everything else depends on God. There are, moreover, Christian philosophers who formulate arguments for aspects of that claim.

In that event, God's existence is fundamentally more certain than the existence of my hands. A world could still

exist even if my hands are illusory. That might or might not require some adjustments in what the world is like. But no world of any kind can exist apart from God.

## Divine hiddenness and evil

I'd like to briefly consider the relationship between two popular atheist arguments.

**1.** The first is the hoary argument from evil. This is typically presented as an inconsistent tetrad:

**i)** God is omnipotent

**ii)** God is omniscient

**iii)** God is benevolent

**iv)** Evil exists

The atheist then labors to show that in combination, these four propositions are mutually inconsistent.

**2.** The other concerns the divine hiddenness argument. In particular, the claim that there exists a class of nonresistant unbelievers. These are people who don't believe in God through no fault of their own. If God did exist, there'd be no nonresistant unbelievers because God would provide sufficient evidence to convince them.

Problem is, (2) is in conflict with (1). According to the logic of (1), God would be unworthy of reverence even if he did exist because such a God would not be good. An omnipotent, omniscient God who allows evil is not benevolent. Hence, people would be justified in withholding reverence for such a Deity. (I'm not endorsing that claim. I'm just stating the viewpoint of the atheist.)

Now, an atheist might say there's an actual class of nonresistant unbelievers insofar as the problem of evil has yet to sink in where they are concerned.

If, however, they were to absorb the implications of the argument from evil, they'd be resistant unbelievers, even assuming that God exists and provided them with unmistakable evidence for his existence. So these two arguments stand in conflict.

## Abraham, Isaac, and extraterrestrials

Atheists, as well as "progressive Christians", commonly attack the binding of Isaac (Gen 22). One challenge is to ask, "What would *you* do if God ordered *you* to sacrifice your child?"

I've discussed this before but now I'd like to approach it from a different angle. This is not a uniquely Christian dilemma. It's easy to recast the dilemma in secular terms.

For instance, many atheists subscribe to ufology. Ufology is basically a secular hobby. Indeed, a secular alternative to religion. The hope that extraterrestrials will parachute in just the nick of time to save the human race from its self-destructive impulses.

Suppose a secular ufologist begins to hear voices. The voice tells him that he must assassinate the president to avert WWIII. Unless he does so, the president will trigger WWIII, causing a thermonuclear exchange that will plunge our planet into a nuclear winter. Only high-ranking government officials will survive in underground cities, as they, or their descendants, wait for surface radiation to drop to hospitable levels.

Should the ufologist act on what the extraterrestrial voices are telling him? Perhaps an atheist will say the ufologist should ignore the voices. Extraterrestrials aren't really in communication with the ufologist. Rather, hearing voices is symptomatic of psychosis.

Of course, a problem with this response is that a psychotic is in no position to make that evaluation. If he was in his right mind, he wouldn't be hearing voices in the first place.

He lacks that objectivity. The psychotic diagnosis has to be made by a second party who is not psychotic.

Insanity can afflict the religious and irreligious alike. So it's easy to dream of a parallel dilemma for the atheist.

Now let's vary the hypothetical. Suppose that SETI picks up an outer space transmission. This was clearly sent by an extraterrestrial civilization with superior technology. The message tells earthlings that if they summarily execute one billion humans, the other six billion humans will be spared, but if they refuse to do so, the human race will be wiped out.

From a secular standpoint, should we comply with the message? Many atheists espouse consequentialism. Taking the lives of one billion humans to save the lives of six billion humans is morally justifiable according to that ethical calculus. Do we dare to defy the ultimatum of the extraterrestrials, given a credible threat, backed up by their vastly superior technology?

From a secular standpoint, how is that different, in principle, from obeying Yahweh's command to sacrifice Isaac, or Yahweh's command to mass execute the Canaanites if they refuse to evacuate Palestine?

## Looking for God in the wrong places

TBlog was asked to comment on this:

<http://marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2017/05/dont-believe-god.html>

Cowen is an academic economist. To his credit, he's even-handed. He concedes that his reservations about theism apply to atheism as well. So he's undecided.

**1.** He says he doesn't think "God" or "theism" is well-defined. It's unclear what that means. Systematic theologies define God. Likewise, philosophical theology delves into detailed expositions and analysis of the divine attributes.

So his statement may mean he hasn't read the relevant literature. He doesn't know where to look.

But it's possible that he doesn't think the definitions are intelligible. Or maybe he thinks the definitions seem to imaginary. Cowen may share a materials bias where anything that isn't physical is nonsense. However, that issue isn't confined to theology. In metaphysics, you have the issue of abstract objects (e.g. numbers, possible worlds).

**2.** He comments on the heritable aspect of religious belief. The implication is that religious faith is due to social conditioning.

But isn't that consistent with the truth of theism? Humans are social creatures. If God exists, why wouldn't religion have a heritable aspect?



In the case of Christianity, which is grounded in historical redemption and revelation, the Christian faith is something you must learn about. It's not just something you can intuit. It requires historical knowledge. And it's natural for that to be handed down from one generation to the next.

That said, Cowen has a point. Clearly, there are people whose religious faith is just a historical accident. If they were born at a different time or place, they'd espouse a different religion or no religion.

**3. He says** "I am frustrated by the lack of Bayesianism in most of the religious belief I observe."

**i)** What I think he means by this is that he uses **Bayesianism** in economics, and he applies that yardstick to religion. One danger with that is making your area of specialization the standard of comparison, even though it may be inappropriate to a different discipline.

**ii)** There are, of course, Christians who do use **Bayesianism** (e.g. Swinburne, Lydia and Timothy McGrew).

**iii)** For reasons I've stated on more than one occasion, I'm dubious about the use of **Bayesianism** in Christian apologetics.

**4.** There's more than one way to approach the issue. Many intellectuals are massively ignorant of what Christianity is. In some cases, a starting-point is to acquire rudimentary, firsthand knowledge of the Christian faith. Nowadays, there

are intellectuals who haven't even read the four Gospels. That's a place to start.

One could follow up with a theological introduction to the Bible, like Tom Schreiner's **THE KING IN HIS BEAUTY** (Baker, 2013). That will give a novice the plot of the Bible.

That could be combined with a simple introduction to Christian theology, like J. I. Packer's **CONCISE THEOLOGY: A GUIDE TO HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN BELIEFS** (Tyndale 2001).

**5.** Moreover, we shouldn't underestimate the power of attending a good church, where the faithful gather to worship and pray.

**6.** Another way to approach the issue is by process of elimination. Instead of proving Christian theism, we can disprove atheism. That's a useful first step.

The standard paradigm of naturalism (among modern Western thinkers) involves commitment to physicalism and causal closure (i.e. the world as a closed-system).

Many ontological naturalists thus adopt a physicalist attitude to mental, biological and other such "special" subject matters. They hold that there is nothing more to the mental, biological and social realms than arrangements of physical entities.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/naturalism/#MakCauDif>

In the final twentieth-century phase, the acceptance of the casual closure of the physical led to full-fledged

physicalism. The causal closure thesis implied that, if mental and other special causes are to produce physical effects, they must themselves be physically constituted. It thus gave rise to the strong physicalist doctrine that anything that has physical effects must itself be physical.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/naturalism/#RisPhy>

According to the standard paradigm, all mental activity occurs in the brain. That rules out mental action at a distance, and the ontological independence of the mind in relation to the body. On that definition, a way to disprove atheism is to disprove physicalism and causal closure. There are various lines of evidence that undercut or falsify naturalism, viz.

- i)** Miracles
- ii)** Terminal lucidity
- iii)** Apparitions of the dead
- iv)** Near-death experiences
- v)** Out-of-body experiences
- vi)** Demonic possession
- vii)** Precognition
- viii)** Psychokinesis

## **ix)** The hard problem of consciousness

Although it's necessary to sort and sift, there's some good literature on all these topics. Jason Engwer and I have posted beaucoup material on all this.

**7.** Which brings me to the final point. People like Cowan who lack specific knowledge about the topic at hand fall back on general rules of thumb. It can be useful to point them to specific evidence for Christianity, such as the historicity of the Gospels. Useful writers on the subject include Paul Barnett, Richard Bauckham, Darrell Bock, Craig Blomberg, Craig Evans, and Craig Keener.

## Chimp gang-bangers

Atheists blame violence and warfare on religion. Yet chimps, whom Darwinians claim to be our nearest kin, practice tribal warfare:

<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2010/06/100621-science-chimpanzees-chimp-gangs-kill-mitani/>

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/09/140917131816.htm>

Moreover, many atheists tell us that atheism is the default position. So unless chimps are pious, Godfearing primates, this goes to show that atheism is innately violent! Look at how those godless chimps behave?

## The guarantor

Commenting on geocentrism, van Inwagen says:

Why did the medievals believe this? Well, because that's how things felt (the earth beneath our feet feels as if it were not moving) and that's how things looked. Today we know that the astronomical system accepted by the medievals—and by the ancient Greeks from whom the medievals inherited it—is wrong. We know that the medievals, and the Greeks before them, were deceived by appearances. We know that while the solid earth beneath our feet may seem to be stationary, it in fact rotates on its axis once every twenty-four hours. (Of course, we also know that it revolves around the sun, but let's consider only its rotation on its axis). Now suppose you were standing on a merry-go-round and were wearing a blindfold. Would you be able to tell whether the merry-go-round was turning or stationary? Certainly you would: passengers on a turning merry-go-round feel vibration and the rush of moving air and, in certain circumstances, a hard-to-describe sort of "pulling." (This last will be very evident to someone who tries to walk toward or away from the center of a turning merry-go-round. These effects provide the "cues," other than visual cues, that we employ in everyday life to tell whether we are undergoing some sort of circular motion. The medievals and the ancient Greeks assumed that because they did not experience these cues when they were standing or walking about on the surface of the earth, the earth was therefore not rotating. Today we can see their mistake. "Passengers" on the earth do not experience vibration because the earth is spinning freely in what is essentially a vacuum. When they move about on the surface of the earth,

they do not experience the "pulling" referred to above because this effect, though present, is not sufficiently great to be detectable by the unaided senses. And they do not experience a rush of moving air because the air is carried along with the moving surface of the earth and is thus moving relative to them.

This example shows that it is sometimes possible to "get behind" the appearances the world presents us with and to discover how things really are: we have discovered that the earth is really rotating, despite the fact that it is apparently stationary....We talk about reality only when there is a misleading appearance to be "got behind" or "seen through". P. van

Inwagen, **METAPHYSICS** (Westview Press, 4th ed, 2015), 2-3.

**1.** This raises a number of philosophically and theologically significant issues. To begin with, there are different kinds of realism—or should I say, *realisms*?

For instance, I might be a metaphysical realist about material reality. I believe there's a material reality that's causing my sensations. Yet I might be an epistemological antirealist if I'm skeptical about what can be known regarding the material reality that's causing my sensations.

Likewise, I might be a metaphysical realist about immaterial reality. I might believe in mental entities, viz. God, angels, souls, abstract objects. (I classify these as mental entities.) And I might be an epistemological realist about what can be known regarding immaterial reality. That's because, if immaterial reality is knowable, the source of knowledge is different than in the case of material reality. In the case of material reality, the source of knowledge is sensory perception, whereas, in the case of immaterial reality, the

source of knowledge is reason and revelation. Inference, intuition, and divine disclosure.

**2.** Up to a point, I agree with Inwagen. Metaphysically speaking, it isn't appearances all the way down. Something objective is producing the appearances.

In addition, I agree with Inwagen that there can be cues which indicate that appearances don't tell the whole story. That, however, is different from the claim that we can get behind appearances to discover reality. Epistemologically speaking, it may be appearances all the way down.

For instance, a colored object has a different appearance if I'm color blind. Likewise, creatures have different kinds of color vision.

The same physical object (i.e. organism) will have a different appearance if seen by infrared vision. In that case we're seeing heat signatures.

And that's just on the surface. It will have a different appearance if seen through an MRI or electron microscope.

**3.** Another complication is that Inwagen is using sensory perception to correct sensory perception. That's unavoidable, but it raises the specter of circularity. What makes one set of sensory perceptions the benchmark for assessing another set of sensory perceptions? One justification might be that some sensory perceptions have more explanatory value. They point to an underlying cause or mechanism.

**4.** There is, though, perhaps an even deeper issue. Consider an illustration. I can photograph a tree with a (digital) cellphone camera, then send that image to



someone else. I don't know the technicalities, but I assume the image is encoded as electronic information, transmitted in that encoded form, then decoded at the other end. There's built-in software that retranslates the encoded image so that the recipient sees the same image as the sender.

Indeed, you could have two people standing side-by-side. They can directly compare the original image with the transmitted image. And the two images exactly match.

We might say that's analogous to sensory perception, when our mental representation matches the sensible object. Or is it?

Suppose we approach this from the standpoint of naturalism. How is it possible for a mindless, nonpurposive process to create a coded transmission system in which the output matches the input? That's completely unlike my example, in which a camera is designed to produce as accurate visual reproduction. In which technology is designed to produce a matching image at the receiving end of the transmission. In which designers can compare the original with the output to ensure that the translation software decodes the information to yield a matching image.

**5.** A naturalist might counter that if there's a mismatch between input and output, then organisms which depend on sensory perception won't survive. If, say, gazelles misperceive leopards, gazelles will become extinct. There are, however, problems with that explanation:

**i)** According to Darwinism (e.g. David Raup), 99.9% of species that ever existed have, in fact, become extinct. So that appeal seems to be self-defeating.

**ii)** Even if survival does depend on that correspondence, and even if survival provides evidence for the success of that correspondence, it doesn't follow that this is explicable on naturalistic grounds.

**iii)** Does survival depend on that correspondence? Consider an illustration. You produce piano music by depressing certain keys on the piano, simultaneously or in a particular sequence. But the music bears no resemblance to the keyboard.

Rather, there's a causal correlation between depressing certain keys and producing certain sounds. By the same token, what if sensory perception operates on a similar principle? The mental representation might be very different than what produces the mental representation, but so long as these are systematically aligned in a cause/effect relation, an organism might be successfully responsive to its environment.

**6.** Finally, who or what is the guarantor that sensory perception is reliable? Without God, there's no presumption that the input and output *can* even match up or at least correlate (4-5).

An atheist might say that cuts both ways: how can a theist rule out the Cartesian demon?

However, these are asymmetrical alternatives. On the one hand there's the indemonstrable possibility that God designed sensory perception to deceive us. On the other hand there's the demonstrable impossibility that sensory perception is reliable unless God designed it.



## Must purported revelation pass a moral test?

I'm going to comment on this essay:

Morrison, W. (2013) The Problem of Apparently Morally Abhorrent Divine Commands, in **THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL** (eds J. P. McBrayer and D. Howard-Snyder), John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, Oxford, UK.,ch10

Morrison is an atheist.

If God is morally perfect, there must be many things that could not be commanded by him, and it might seem to be quite easy to name some of them. William Lane Craig, for example, says that it is absolutely impossible for God to command rape (Craig et al. 2009, 172) or to command us to eat our children (Craig and Antony 2008). David Baggett and Jerry Walls say that it would be impossible for God to command us to "rape and pillage hapless peasants in a rural village of Africa" (Baggett and Walls 2011, 134).<sup>1</sup>

"Absolutely impossible" may somewhat overstate the case. Circumstances matter, and an imaginative philosopher might perhaps conjure up a world in which God is morally justified in commanding someone to do these things. But even if such a world were genuinely possible, it would bear little resemblance to the actual world. As things actually are, commands like these do not pass moral muster and cannot reasonably be attributed to God. As Robert Adams rightly says, "purported messages from God" must be tested for "coherence with ethical judgments formed in the best ways available to us" (Adams 1999, 284). If someone

were to cite a "message from God" as justification for rape or pillage or eating children, we would rightly conclude that he was a charlatan or a madman.

Should this moral test be applied even to biblical reports of divine commands? This is a serious issue, because the biblical record contains a number of divine commands that are – on the face of it – every bit as morally objectionable as those mentioned in the first paragraph. Among the most worrisome passages are those in which God is represented as mandating the extermination of a large number of people.

Adams (1999, 284) quotes with approval the words of Immanuel Kant: "Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: 'That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God – of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down from (visible) heaven.'" On the other hand, Adams also says this: "The command addressed to Abraham in Genesis 22 should not be rejected simply because it challenges prevailing values. . . . Religion would be not only safer than it is, but also less interesting and less rich as a resource for moral and spiritual growth, if it did not hold the potentiality for profound challenges to current moral opinion" (Adams 1999, 285). Despite this qualification, one is left with the strong impression that Adams does not believe that God has ever commanded anyone to sacrifice a human life.

These biblical justifications raise new and troubling questions. Are the reasons stated in the terror texts worthy of a perfectly good and loving God? Would commanding the Israelites to kill large numbers of people be a morally acceptable way to prevent them

from adopting “abhorrent” religious practices? Would it be morally acceptable to punish the Amalekites of Samuel’s day for what a previous generation of Amalekites had done to a previous generation of Israelites?

At the very least, those who deny that there are serious moral errors in the Bible must show that it is not unreasonable to believe that the biblical rationale for each problematic command is consistent with God’s perfect goodness. In making this demand, we are not asking anyone to read the mind of God. But we are asking that everyone read what the terror texts say about God’s actions and about the intentions behind them, and consider whether it is plausible to suppose that they accurately represent the actions and intentions of a God who is perfectly loving and just.

Imagine a pastor who is concerned about a local atheist organization that has lured some young people away from his church. He prays for divine guidance, and comes to believe that God wants his church to be the instrument of divine justice. Fresh from this “discovery,” he tells his congregants that God has a special mission for them: they are to stop this spiritual infection in its tracks by killing those atheists. Many church members are skeptical, but the Pastor reassures them by pointing out that “our life comes as a temporary gift from God,” that God has a right “to take it back when he chooses,” and that God also has a right to commission someone else “take it back for him.”

Such a high degree of skepticism about what God might command is surely excessive. The immoral content of the pastor’s “revelation” is a perfectly good

reason to reject it. This reason is, of course, defeasible, but in the absence of overriding evidence confirming the veridicality of the pastor's "message from God," we should regard it as a matter for the police.<sup>21</sup>

I suggest that we should approach the terror texts in the Bible in somewhat the same way. By our best lights, they are morally subpar, and this gives us a strong prima facie reason for believing that they do not accurately depict the commands of a good and loving God. This reason is defeasible, but unless overriding reasons for accepting the terror texts can be produced, they should be rejected.

This raises a number of issues:

**i)** Morrision's position is paradoxical. On the one hand, Christians have reason to believe that humans sometimes have reliable moral intuitions, although our moral intuitions are fallible. On the other hand, a consistent atheist ought to be, at minimum, a moral skeptic. According to naturalism, our moral opinions are hardwired and/or socially conditioned. But there's no presumption that socially conditioned mores are objectively right or wrong. If, moreover, our moral instincts were programmed into us by a mindless, amoral natural process, then there's no reason to think they correspond to objective moral norms. Indeed, it's hard to fathom how there can even be objective moral norms, given those background conditions.

So even if there could be a moral criterion for assessing particular religious claimants or competing religious claimants, that could never rule out religion in general, for moral realism is parasitic on theism.

**ii)** Since, moreover, it's demonstrable that our moral sensibilities are often arbitrary, given the fact that different cultures frequently have different social mores, it follows, even from a Christian standpoint, that we need to make allowance for the very live possibility that what we take to be moral intuitions or moral certainties simply echo our social conditioning, and if we were raised at a different time or place, our moral sensibilities might be very different.

Although Christians shouldn't be wholesale moral skeptics, unlike atheists, a degree of skepticism regarding our prereflective moral sensibilities is warranted and even necessary. Our moral sensibilities need revelatory correction or confirmation.

**iii)** It's possible to confirm or disconfirm a religious claimant on grounds other than morality. Having confirmed a religious claimant on grounds other than morality, you can use that as a benchmark or moral criterion to evaluate another religious claimant. But for reasons I've given, I seriously doubt you can do that from scratch. I doubt you can jump straight into a moral test. I think we lack independent access to consistently reliable moral intuitions. What we're pleased to call moral intuition is very hit-n-miss.

Indeed, critics who object to OT ethics ironically illustrate that very point. OT writers don't share their outlook. OT writers don't think the allegedly "abhorrent" commands are derogatory to God's goodness. So what's the standard of comparison to referee competing moral opinions?

**iv)** Abraham's situation is different from a messenger. God spoke directly to Abraham. That's disanalogous to a "purported message" from God, which obliges second parties who were not the immediate recipients of the



purported message. It's one thing for me to obey a divine command if I hear it direct from God—quite another to obey a reported divine command.

**v)** In the case of Pentateuchal injunctions, although the divine commands were mediated through a messenger, the Israelites had overwhelming miraculous evidence that God spoke to and through Moses.

## Sonny Corleone

Recently, Timothy McGrew produced a recommended reading list on Christian apologetics:

<http://www.apologetics315.com/2012/09/tim-mcgrews-recommended-apologetics.html>

Atheist Jeff Lowder objected:

I want to make a distinction between genuine inquiry, on the one hand, and partisan advocacy, on the other. Consider a central (but far from the only) topic in the philosophy of religion: the existence or nonexistence of God. Consider, for a moment, what it would mean to engage in genuine inquiry regarding God's existence. If the word "inquiry" means anything at all, surely it means more than "read stuff which confirms the point of view you already hold." It should include, at a minimum, reading opposing viewpoints, not with the goal of preparing pithy one-liners for debates, but with the goal of actually trying to learn something or consider new ways of looking at old topics. For professional philosophers, I would imagine that inquiry would also include trying to "steel man" your opposition, i.e., trying to strengthen the arguments for your opponent's position. It might even include publishing arguments for a position you do not hold and even reject.

In contrast, partisan advocacy is, well, exactly what it sounds like it is. Much like an attorney hired to vigorously defend her client in court, a partisan advocate isn't interested in genuine inquiry. To the extent a partisan advocate reads the "other side" at all,

she does so in the same way presidential candidates try to find out the "truth" about their opponent under the guise of "opposition research." So, for example, if a partisan advocate were to create a reading list about God's existence, they would compile a list of recommended resources which either exclusively or overwhelmingly promoted a certain point of view and without even a hint that a balanced inquiry should be taken.

As suggested by the subtitle of this post, if we apply the genuine inquiry vs. partisan advocacy distinction to religion, I think we get the distinction between (an ideal) philosophy of religion vs. apologetics.

Read more

at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2017/08/07/genuine-inquiry-vs-partisan-advocacy-philosophy-religion-vs-apologetics/#I16M50ckua1OmH2D.99>

Several issues:

**i)** Jeff seems to think any such list ought to give both sides of the argument. Certainly there are situations in which that's advisable. No doubt if Dr. McGrew were teaching a college course on philosophy of religion, he'd give both sides of the argument. Have required reading from both sides.

However, it's unreasonable to think that's a general epistemic obligation. The point of reading both sides of an argument is to take sides. To render an informed judgment. Having arrived at a particular conclusion, it's perfectly appropriate to take your conclusion for granted when making recommendations. Indeed, the point of asking

someone like Dr. McGrew for advice is that he can be trusted to do the initial sifting and sorting.

**ii)** McGrew's list is obviously for popular consumption. The books are pitched at the level of the layman rather than the professional philosopher. Yes, it's ideal to read the best proponents and opponents of a given position, but you need to take the aptitude of the target audience into account.

**iii)** Good books on Christian apologetics do give both sides of the argument. They present the opposing position in order to critique it. It's not as if the treatment is one-sided.

Perhaps Jeff would object that the treatment is biased. It's true that it's often preferable to learn the opposing position direct from the source, rather than filtered through a hostile source. But my immediate point is that it's somewhat misleading for Jeff to insinuate that if you only read Christian apologetics, you're only exposed to arguments for Christianity and arguments against atheism. A good book on Christian apologetics will also interact with arguments for atheism and arguments against Christianity.

**iv)** There is, though, a deeper issue. In terms of inquiry, given limited resources and time-management constraints, where should we invest our time? How do we prioritize? How do we narrow the search parameters?

One approach is risk assessment and cost/benefit analysis. Take vaccination. That's a precautionary measure. Should I be vaccinated just in case there's an epidemic? The answer depends on counterbalancing the potential harm, benefit, severity, and probability. How dangerous is the pathogen? How likely is an outbreak? Am I in the high risk group for anaphylaxis? Sometimes we do something hazardous

because the alternative is even more hazardous. Sometimes what is reckless in one situation is prudent in another.

Now, the crucial point is that we engage in this deliberation when we don't know the specifics. I don't know if there will be an outbreak. I don't know if I'm in the high risk group for anaphylaxis. But if I wait to find out, it may be too late. I can't afford to learn the hard way. There's too much to lose. If, on the other hand, I have a genetic marker that puts me in the high-risk group for anaphylaxis, then it's more prudent to take my chances with an epidemic.

At this stage of the inquiry, I do the risk assessment and cost/benefit analysis to preemptively eliminate certain options. I don't give those options any further consideration. I don't suspend judgment until I get to the bottom of things, because the whole point is to take precautionary measures in the event of a worse-case scenario.

**v)** Apply that to atheism. It isn't necessary for the inquiry to determine whether atheism is true or false. Rather, inquiry would rationally terminate at a preliminary stage. Suppose, if atheism is true, you have everything to lose and nothing to gain. Conversely, if Christianity is true, you have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The purpose of the inquiry is to determine if that's the case. At this stage of the inquiry, the objective is not to determine which position is true or false, but to assess the respective consequences of their hypothetical truth or falsity. Moral and existential consequences. Depending on the results, there may be no obligation to pursue our inquiry any further. We stop at the preliminary stage because we ruled out that hypothetical option for reasons that don't even impinge on the truth or falsity of the alternatives. And that can be justifiable. It isn't

always essential or obligatory to take intellectual inquiry beyond that preliminary elimination stage.

vi) Take Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism. That's controversial. The purpose of the inquiry is to determine whether his argument is a success or failure. If his argue fails, then we expand the inquiry to investigate other arguments for or against naturalism. But if his argument succeeds, then that's a logical place to end the inquiry. If naturalism subverts the reliability of reason, isn't that a sufficient defeater? There are many different ways to kill somebody, but once he's dead, it's redundant to employ additional methods. That's literally overkill. How much lead do you need to pump into Sonny Corleone to get the job done?

## What would it take to abandon your faith?

Recently I watched a video clip by Andy Bannister:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUbe9ORBONE>

Before I comment on the specifics, I don't wish to be too critical. I'm sure he's doing far more good than I ever will. And I think the situation for Christians in England is tougher than the situation for Christians in the USA. Finally, this is an intentionally a brief reply, pitched at a popular level. That said, I wouldn't answer the question the way he does, and I think there's a serious problem with the tack he takes.

i) Suppose a Christian were to answer the question by saying that nothing could make him abandon his faith? Atheists would exclaim how his admission goes to show that Christians are fideists. Their faith isn't factually motivated or grounded.

I think Christians like Lennox and Bannister are defensive about that stereotypy, which is why they counter by stressing the factual basis of Christian faith. They have *evidence* for what they believe.

And that's an important corrective to the atheist stereotype. Many atheists are completely ignorant regarding the arguments for Christianity. They reside in a secular echo chamber where all their friends and acquaintances agree with each other than there couldn't possibly be any good reasons to believe in Christianity.

There is, though, the danger of overreacting to the stereotype. In particular, there's the danger of intellectual elitism. As Leibniz noted:

If you [John Locke] take faith to be only what rests on *rational grounds for belief*, and separate it from the inward grace which immediately endows the mind with faith, everything you say, sir, is beyond dispute. For it must be acknowledged that many judgments are more evident than the ones which depend on these rational grounds. Some people have advanced further towards the latter than others have; and indeed, plenty of people, far from having weighed up such reasons, have never known them and consequently do not even have what could count as *grounds for probability*. But the inward grace of the Holy Spirit makes up for this immediately and supernaturally, and it is this that creates what theologians strictly call "divine faith". God, it is true, never bestows this faith unless what he is making one believe in grounded in reason—otherwise he would subvert our capacity to recognize truth, and open the door to enthusiasm—but it is not necessary that all who possess this divine faith should know those reasons, and still less that they should have them perpetually before their eyes. Otherwise none of the unsophisticated or of the feeble-minded—now at least—would have the true faith, and the most enlightened people might not have it when they most needed it, since no one can always remember his reasons for believing. G. Leibniz, **NEW ESSAYS ON HUMAN UNDERSTANDING** (Cambridge, 2nd ed., 1996), 498.

Most Christians lack the aptitude to make a philosophically sophisticated case for their faith. And that limitations is not



confined to Christians. Most atheists are not intellectuals.

And just in general, most of us, including most philosophers, have fundamental beliefs which are very hard to defend in a philosophically rigorous fashion, yet we are right to believe them.

**ii)** There is a sense in which we need to say that there are things which would make us abandon our Christian faith. The classic example is Paul's statement that if the Resurrection never happened, that falsifies the Christian faith (1 Cor 15:14,17).

The basic principle is that for Christianity to be true, some other things must be false. Christian propositions as well as propositions that contradict Christianity can't both be true.

To deny this renders the Christian faith vacuous. Christian theology can't affirm anything to be the case unless it implicitly disaffirms the contradictories of whatever it affirms. Falsifiability, in this hypothetical sense, is necessary to preserve the intellectual integrity of the Christian faith, in contrast to theological noncognitivism.

**iii)** However, it's misleading to leave it at that with no further qualifications. For one thing, Paul's statement is a counterfactual claim. He doesn't offer that as a live possibility. To the contrary, Paul is using the Resurrection as a wedge issue. He regards the Resurrection as an unquestionable benchmark. If the beliefs or behavior of the Corinthians is at odds with the Resurrection, then they need to bring their beliefs or behavior in line with the Resurrection.

**iv)** In addition, the status of counterfactuals is metaphysically demanding. What makes counterfactual statements true? They can't be true in or about the actual world, because counterfactuals statements are claims about what might have been. What didn't happen.

Typically, counterfactual statements are grounded in possible worlds. But what are possible worlds? What must reality be like to accommodate possible worlds?

A Christian might say a possible world is a world plot in God's mind. God imagines alternate histories, and God is able to instantiate these scenarios in real space and real time. On that view, possible worlds are divine ideas. They inhere in God's omniscience and omnipotence.

But if physicalism is true, and if the universe is all there is, then there's no room for possible worlds. Not at least if we define possible worlds as abstract objects.

Paradoxically, Paul's counterfactual only makes sense given a theistic worldview. It's an argument per impossibile. If (per impossibile) Christ didn't rise from the dead, then our faith is in vain.

**v)** And that line of reasoning can be extended much farther. In asking what it would take to make you abandon your faith, you should also ask what other beliefs you'd need to abandon to abandon your faith. What does it take to be a consistent atheist? Loss of faith isn't the only intellectual casualty. Carried to a logical extreme, what other beliefs are swept away by apostasy?

It might be wholly irrational to abandon your faith. In that event, to say nothing would make you abandon your faith is

not a fideistic admission, but just the opposite. To abandon your faith you'd have to abandon basic epistemic norms.

**vi)** It might be objected that I've oversimplified the alternatives. It's not a stark choice between atheism and Christian theism, but a continuum. And in theory that's true. It's important to eliminate other candidates, like Platonic realism and rival religions. And the analysis could take it to the next step.

## An atheist dilemma

Militant atheists are duplicitous on what makes life worth living. On the one hand they say you don't need God to have a meaningful life. What makes life meaningful is what's meaningful to you. What you personally value.

On the other hand, they attack Christianity for giving believers false hope. Christians waste the only life they have by banking on the deferred reward of a nonexistent afterlife. They fail to make the most of the only life they will ever have in the here and now through time-consuming religious devotions and prayers and anxieties over sin and sexual inhibitions, because they're staking their ultimate fulfillment on a future payback that will never happen. There is no hereafter, so it's now or never.

Notice, though, that their objection is diametrically opposed to how many atheists justify the significance of their own existence. Many atheists say subjective meaning is sufficient to make life worthwhile. But then, why can't Christians have meaningful lives as Christians, even if (from a secular standpoint) Christianity is false? Sure, it's subjective meaning. It doesn't correspond to objective reality (from a secular standpoint). Yet the same atheists insist that your sense of purpose in life needn't correspond to objective value. Rather, value is what is valuable to each individual.

So why do militant atheists make their mission in life talking Christians out of their faith, or dissuading people from ever considering Christianity in the first place? Is it because they think Christianity is based on wishful thinking? But what if wishful thinking is what makes you feel that you and your

loved ones are important in the grand scheme of things? An atheist can't object on grounds that that's a sentimental projection, for he that's how he defends his own position.

So the atheist has a dilemma on his hands. If subjective meaning is good enough for atheists, why isn't that good enough for deluded Christians?

## Political polarization

Some social commentators lament the degree of political polarization. But I don't seem much solution.

**i)** People can agree to disagree when they are free to disagree without that affecting what they do. Two people or two groups can agree to disagree so long as each side is free to act consistent with its beliefs.

But that breaks down in politics, when the disagreement concerns issues of law and public policy. In political disagreements, there are winners and losers. The winners impose their viewpoint on the losers. You are forced to do what the winners mandate. You are forced to stop doing what the winners ban.

In addition, as gov't increasingly encroaches on every aspect of human life, the losers have too much to lose. The stakes are too high.

**ii)** Democrats/secular progressives/SJWs don't think Republicans/Christians/conservatives are simply mistaken. Rather, they think they're downright dangerous. And that's logical given the (false) premise. If you think anthropogenic global warming poses a threat to the biosphere, then it's dangerous to oppose green policies. If you think private access to guns endangers public safety, then the gun lobby is dangerous. If you think there's a campus rape epidemic, then opposition to affirmative consent policies puts women at risk. If you think LGTB people have higher suicide rates due to social stigmatization, then that attitude puts them at risk.

They think Christianity is dangerous because Christianity is the motivation for these dangerous attitudes. Their premise is false, and they are glaringly inconsistent (what about Islam?), but their animus towards Republicans/Christians/conservatives is understandable given their biased, blinkered outlook.

**iii)** In addition, they think Republicans/Christians/conservatives are evil. They equate voter ID initiatives with voter suppression. That's "racist!". They think the only motivation to restrict or outlaw abortion is to "control women's bodies".

They equate supporting free speech with supporting whatever the speaker says. If you defend the Constitutional rights of Nazis, you're defending Nazis! They don't differentiate "should people do x?" from "should people be free to do x?"

Given their insular, simplistic outlook, it makes sense that they view the political opposition as evil.

Likewise, they can't imagine how a person of good will would oppose humanitarian-sounding policies like universal healthcare, universal basic income, "marriage equality". And they make no effort to acquaint themselves with the opposing side of the argument.

**iv)** Because humans are social creatures, a lot of what they believe isn't based on reason and evidence, but fitting in. You think, say, and do whatever is necessary for social acceptance within your community. That's why rational persuasion is often futile, since that's not what motivates them in the first place.

**v)** Constructive dialogue requires good will on the part of the dialogue partners. If, however, people are only looking out for Number One, then constructive dialogue isn't possible. They aren't truth-seekers. They disdain dutiful self-sacrifice. They wish to destroy anyone who gets in their way, anyone who inconveniences them. Yet the social fabric depends on altruism. And that's a logical position for an atheist. If this life is all there is, why should you ever subordinate your self-interest to the common good?

**vi)** Nowadays, so many unbelievers have such bigoted views of Christianity, you have to peel away so many layers of ignorance and prejudice, that it's extremely time-consuming. And they're not listening anyway. Every time you talk to a new person, you have to start from scratch, because they always raise the same hackneyed objections. They don't bother to study the other side of the argument. They don't know the answers. They don't know there are any answers.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't make the effort, but many people are a waste of time. There are not enough hours in the day to individualize, so you have to make snap decisions about where to invest your time. You can spend weeks and months pouring reason and evidence down a rat hole. So you have to make some time-management decisions. Pick a few dialogue partners. Or use a mass medium (one to many). Scatter seed. Pray that some will take root. We should do as much as we can, but we need to avoid utopian expectations.

**vii)** In addition, atheism is evil. As secular progressives become more consistent, that exposes their malevolence and ill-will. Left to run its course, atheism becomes increasingly Nietzschean, increasingly sociopathic in its hatred of the defenseless and dependent (e.g. babies,



children, developmentally disabled, elderly). In full rebellion against the natural order (e.g. transgenderism). In some cases, there's no common ground left. Just their unreasoning malice. They hate the very idea of God.

## Post hoc rationalizations

On this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZOJn9HcMTM>

Josh Rasmussen says:

Here's a problem with theistic belief: the theist believes in God, but they don't believe in God on the basis of following the evidence or reason wherever they lead. Rather, there's some prior convictions...When the theist finds evidence for God, what they're doing is to find evidence to back up something that they already believe not on the basis of evidence. It's almost like the reason and evidence are post hoc rationalizations of prior convictions, and that's a problem.

But isn't that objection a dramatic overstatement? On the face of it, his objection ignores some pretty major counterexamples. For instance:

There are philosophers who have devoted a great deal of time and care to arguments for conclusions that almost everyone was going to accept in any case. Arguments for the existence of an external world, for other minds, for the mathematical or physical possibility of one runner overtaking another...It is not even, necessarily, to provide a rational basis for things that people had hitherto believed without any rational basis. My wife is one of those people who don't quite see the point, evident as it is to us philosophers, of discussions of Zeno's paradoxes, and who has, in consequence, never read Salmon or Grünbaum or any

other author on this topic. But I very much doubt whether her belief that it is possible for one runner to overtake another—I'm sure she does believe this, although in fact I've never asked her—is a mere prejudice lacking any rational foundation. Peter van Inwagen, **THE PROBLEM OF EVIL** (Oxford 2006), 40-41.

It's routine for philosophers to formulate arguments to back up something that they already believe apart from their arguments. Are these just post hoc rationalizations for prior convictions? And is that, in fact, a problem?

Obviously there's some merit to his objection. There are many situations in which people cast about for any convenient argument to validate a belief which they didn't form from an evenhanded assessment of the evidence. But his objection is an overgeneralization. Whether or not finding evidence to back up something we already believe is problematic varies from case to case. In some situations, that's entirely justified. It would be irrational in those instances to suspend belief unless and until we discover additional corroboration or construct a sophisticated supporting argument.

Now, someone might object that the examples cited by van Inwagen are evident in ways that God's existence is not, so the comparison is disanalogous. But that's treacherous. For instance, it's not as if the reality of the external world is more evident than if we were trapped in the Matrix. The whole point of that thought-experiment is that the illusion is phenomenologically interchangeable with reality.

One could object to it on philosophical grounds, like the criterion of simplicity. And I think there's something to be said for that. But in that event, a philosopher would be

casting about for evidence or "post hoc" arguments to validate his prior conviction regarding the reality of an external world.

Conversely, suppose, as a teenager, a Christian has an unmistakable answer to prayer. He becomes a philosophy major in college, and seeks to develop additional arguments to back up his prior Christian convictions. Is that just a post hoc rationalization?

However, I have it on good authority that he may make a sequel video in which he includes some clarifications.

## "Thoughts and prayers"

Atheists and "progressive Christians" are incensed when Christians respond to a tragedy with "thoughts and prayers". A few quick observations:

- i)** How else can you respond to a tragedy. It already occurred. At that stage it's too late to prevent it. Consolation is all that's left.
- ii)** It's true that "thoughts and prayers" can be a perfunctory, reflexive buzzword.
- iii)** Critics think we need to "do something". But we don't believe their solutions will actually solve the problem. Indeed, they use tragedies as a pretext to create a totalitarian state.
- iv)** They're very selective about the need to "do something". When we have jihadist attacks, they don't lobby for the need to have a moratorium on Muslim immigration or to deport Muslim foreign nationals. Suddenly, the urgency about "doing something" evaporates.
- v)** They erect a false dichotomy between prayer and "doing something". They assume that when tragedy strikes, that means prayer failed.

Of course, it's a given that some prayers go unanswered. But the theology of prayer was never premised on the universal efficacy of prayer.

- vi)** The occurrence of tragedy doesn't constitute evidence that prayer can't avert tragedy, for if prayer does avert some tragedies, then there will be no evidence, since it

never happened—as a result of prayer. A nonevent leaves no record.

Take an inspector who fixes a problem before the plane takes off. If he hadn't detected the problem and fixed it on the spot, the plane would have crashed, killing all aboard. But due to his preventative action, no one remembers what didn't happen. He gets no credit.

## Alternate Bible history

So-called Street Epistemology was popularized by militant atheist Peter Boghossian. One way of viewing it is that the Street Epistemology is attempting to set a trap for Christians by posing a dilemma. They will ask questions like "On a scale from zero to one hundred, how confident are you that your belief is true?" "What are the top three things that make you confident that your belief is true?" "What role does X have in your knowing that the belief is true?" "How confident would you be in the belief without X?" "What evidence would change your confidence in the belief?" "If evidence has no power to alter your confidence, are you really believing based on evidence in the first place?"

The strategy is clear. When you give reasons for your faith, they will ask if your faith would be weakened in case each reason was shown to be doubtful. If you say it wouldn't weaken your faith, then they win because they take that as a damaging admission that your faith wasn't ever really based on evidence. But if you say it would weaken your faith, they will burrow under your reasons to make your faith crater. However you answer the dilemma, they win.

To some degree, Street Epistemology is a throwback to old debates about whether God-talk is meaningful. And the criterion of meaning was verifiability. Atheists like Antony Flew, John Wisdom, and A. J. Ayer championed that approach.

Now, in fairness to Flew, some 20C theologians could be very slippery. They protected Christian faith, as they construed it, by detaching Christian faith from its traditional grounding in historical events. That rendered it impervious

to empirical disproof. But that protects Christianity by redefining into nice, inspirational ideas that don't match reality. It's important for Christians to avoid stepping into the trap of saying their faith is unfalsifiable in *that* sense. For they already lost the argument if Christianity is unfalsifiable in *that* sense.

However, the conundrum is a false dilemma. Let's recast the issue. Even if, hypothetically speaking, Christianity could be proven false, an atheist wouldn't be able to get much mileage out of that, because something approximating Christianity must still be true.

According to the Christian worldview, reality is a combination of necessary truths and contingent truths. Many facts about the real world could be different. There are possible worlds in which Bible history is different. It was possible for God to choose someone other than Abraham. He wasn't the only person in Ur to whom God might have revealed himself. It was possible for Jesus to choose a different betrayer. Judas wasn't the only treacherous man in Palestine.

In principle, God might have relocated Bible history on a different continent with a different people-group. Possible worlds in which the Son becomes Incarnate as a member of a different ethnicity or race.

There are many ways in which Bible history could be other than it is in our world, yet still be fundamentally the Christian story. Different setting. Different plot. Different characters. But analogous regarding the same *kinds* of events that must occur to redeem fallen humanity.

At a metaphysical level, there are necessary truths that must be the same in all possible worlds. It's arguable that



necessary truths require a theistic foundation. Moreover, a particular kind of theism, with narrow parameters. Something approximating classical theism. Likewise, if God is triune, then that's a necessary truth. It's arguable that abstract objects depend on God's existence.

So even if a Christian were to concede that Christian theology is possibly false, the alternative won't be atheism or Buddhism or polytheism or Islam, &c., but Christianity 2.0. An alternate history that's structurally similar to Christianity in our world. That has the same metaphysical machinery. Christianity in an alternate timeline or parallel universe. Dissimilar in many details, but having core similarities.

To take a comparison, consider religion on Perelandra and Malacandra. These have different planetary histories in relation to each other, as well earth history. And the religious practice is different. But the underlying theism is the same. Same God.

Keep in mind that Street Epistemologists are simply toying with a thought-experiment. But even at that level, it doesn't begin to move Christianity out of the column. If we're going to debate hypothetical scenarios, then there are hypothetical variations on Christianity. Variations that retain orthodox Christian theism. The underlying source is the same.

## Gardens grow at night

*26 And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. 27 He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. 28 The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come" (Mk 4:26-29).*

**i)** This is a deceptively simple illustration. What does it mean? It maybe that Jesus gave the listener a thumbnail sketch that can be developed in more than one direction. It's up to the listener to responsibly fill in details.

**ii)** Who is the sower? Or does that matter? Some people think the sower is God or Jesus. But it makes no sense to say God/Jesus doesn't know how the kingdom grows and does nothing beyond scattering seed to promote its growth.

Probably, the sower stands for pastors, missionaries, and evangelists as well as Christians generally throughout the course of church history. They scatter seed, but the results are ultimately out of their hands. In many cases the results outlive them. Or may not become evident until after they die.

**iii)** That the sower "rises night and day" is a Jewish idiom for rising at sunup and sleeping after sundown. In Jewish

reckoning, a new day began at dusk rather than dawn.

**iv)** Does *automate* mean "by itself" or "without visible cause"? In one respect it was mysterious to ancient farmers how a seed was programmed to develop on its own.

Presumably, Jesus doesn't mean to teach that the kingdom grows with no human contribution. Evangelism is essential to the growth of the kingdom. Normally, it prospers from watering, weeding, pruning, fertilization—both literally and figuratively.

Sometimes Jesus expresses himself in deliberately provocative, contrarian terms to shake up the complacency of the listener and galvanize attention.

He may mean, in part, that it grows despite opposition. In addition, the kingdom grows in ways surprising. We scatter seed, but when and where it takes root and grows to fruition may be unexpected. Take birds that pick up seeds, then drop them elsewhere.

The growth of God's kingdom is mysterious in the way God's providence is mysterious. Sometimes we can discern the hidden hand of God from opportune, but highly improbable events. Naturally inexplicable outcomes that reflect God guiding events from behind the scenes.

**v)** The seed grows at night as well as day. Ironically, the kingdom sometimes grows because hostile forces are oblivious to the kingdom in their midst. They don't know where to look. Their social circle excludes believers. Consider atheists who confidently say there's no evidence for miracles. They don't experience miracles or know anyone who does because they associate with like-minded atheists. They avoid the very circles where that's more

likely to happen. Like plants growing at night, it could happen in their own backyard, but they wouldn't observe because they are in the dark (as it were). And by the time it becomes so conspicuous that even they take notice, they've been overtaken by events.

Indeed, many atheists have a secularization thesis. They take for granted the inexorable progress of atheism. Christianity is bound to die out. Every generation, they say that's just around the corner. So they're often caught off-guard by unforeseen developments.

## Conversion testimonies

So-called Street Epistemologists (i.e. militant atheists who ape *A Manual for Creating Atheists*) like to interrogate Christians about their conversion experience, then attempt to poke holes in their conversion experience. Same thing with cradle Christians who were raised in church, and never questioned their faith.

Here's one of the problems with that tactic: It's possible for somebody to have a belief that's unwarranted insofar as the immediate evidence or cause of that belief is insufficient or unreliable to pick out that explanation to the exclusion of other tenable explanations. And yet the belief could well be true. And there could be lots of confirmatory evidence for that belief, over and above whatever caused a person to form that belief in the first place.

Suppose I see someone breaking into a house. I notify the police on the assumption that it's a houseburglar. Yet it's possible that the homeowner locked himself out of his own house. Likewise, before the days of powerlocks, drivers might inadvertently leave their keys in the car, then use a coathanger to unlock the car. Yet to a passerby, that looks like auto theft.

In that respect, my initial belief might be unwarranted. Yet I might be still right. In addition, I might read a report in the newspaper that corroborates my initial impression.

Most people assume their ostensible parents are their biological parents. It's possible that they were kidnapped as babies. Or the maternity ward mislabeled the babies. Or adoptive parents never told their adoptive kids.

In that respect, my belief that my ostensible parents are my biological parents might be unjustified. For the preliminary evidence on which I base my belief is consistent with other scenarios. Yet my belief could still be true. Moreover, subsequent evidence like a DNA test might confirm my prior belief.

Or suppose, as an atheist, I witness what I take to be a healing miracle in answer to Christian prayer. As a result, I become a Christian.

Now let's say I made a snap judgment without knowing enough about the diagnosis or prognosis to rule out a natural explanation. Yet my initial impression could still be correct. And the naturally inexplicable nature of the healing might be subject to medical verification. Suppose I have an opportunity to research the healing and discover that it's naturally impossible. Even though my initial conclusion was hasty, it turned out to be right.

When Street Epistemologists query conversion testimonies, that's an exercise in misdirection. For even if the original experience a convert appeals to is less than probative, the real issue is whether his belief can be verified by reason and evidence after the fact.

Mind you, it can be a good thing to scrutinize our beliefs, whether religious or secular beliefs—as the case may be. Some people convert to a false belief-system. Some people deconvert due to false or fallacious reasons.

But Street Epistemologists deliberately ask the wrong questions. The important question isn't necessarily how you formed a belief in the first place, but whether that belief is justifiable—all things considered. In some instances, the precipitating cause might be sufficient. In other cases, the

initial belief might have been underdetermined by the evidence, yet a true belief may be demonstrable by additional lines of evidence, which were not available or under consideration when the belief was first formed.

## Divine contrivance

John Stuart Mill is commonly regarded as the greatest English philosopher of the 19C. Among other things, he wrote a lengthy attack on the Christian faith. It's useful to respond to high-level atheist thinkers, since that's the best they've got. I'll comment on this objection, from **THREE**

### **ESSAYS ON RELIGION:**

It is not too much to say that every indication of Design in the Kosmos is so much evidence against the Omnipotence of the Designer. For what is meant by Design? Contrivance: the adaptation of means to an end. But the necessity for contrivance—the need of employing means—is a consequence of the limitation of power. Who would have recourse to means if to attain his end his mere word was sufficient? The very idea of means implies that the means have an efficacy which the direct action of the being who employs them has not. Otherwise they are not means, but an incumbrance. A man does not use machinery to move his arms. If he did, it could only be when paralysis had deprived him of the power of moving them by volition. But if the employment of contrivance is in itself a sign of limited power, how much more so is the careful and skilful choice of contrivances? Can any wisdom be shown in the selection of means, when the means have no efficacy but what is given them by the will of him who employs them, and when his will could have bestowed the same efficacy on any other means? Wisdom and contrivance are shown in overcoming difficulties, and there is no room for them in a Being for whom no difficulties exist. The evidences, therefore,



of Natural Theology distinctly imply that the author of the Kosmos worked under limitations; that he was obliged to adapt himself to conditions independent of his will, and to attain his ends by such arrangements as those conditions admitted of.

If it be said, that an Omnipotent Creator, though under no necessity of employing contrivances such as man must use, thought fit to do so in order to leave traces by which man might recognize his creative hand, the answer is that this equally supposes a limit to his omnipotence. For if it was his will that men should know that they themselves and the world are his work, he, being omnipotent, had only to will that they should be aware of it. Ingenious men have sought for reasons why God might choose to leave his existence so far a matter of doubt that men should not be under an absolute necessity of knowing it, as they are of knowing that three and two make five. These imagined reasons are very unfortunate specimens of casuistry; but even did we admit their validity, they are of no avail on the supposition of omnipotence, since if it did not please God to implant in man a complete conviction of his existence, nothing hindered him from making the conviction fall short of completeness by any margin he chose to leave.

Several problems with his argument:

**i)** It's not a question of divine limitations but human limitations. For instance, we can't relate to God on his level, so if he wants to relate to humans, he must come down to our level. Even an omnipotent being can't relate to his creatures on his own level, for the elementary reason that we're *not* on his level, and we *can't* be on his level. The

asymmetry is intrinsic to the ontological difference between an omniscient God and finite creatures.

**ii)** In addition, while an omnipotent being can produce many effects directly, some effects involve nested relationships, where the end-result must be mediated by some intervening situation. For instance, even an omnipotent being can't forgive sin unless there's sin to forgive. Omnipotence can't skip over the sin part to go straight to forgiveness. That would be nonsensical.

**iii)** These conditions aren't independent of his will, for God created these conditions. God is not obliged to make rational creatures, and he's not obliged to communicate with rational creatures, but if he chooses to do so, then he must adapt his revelation to our level of comprehension. And that would be the case even if divine revelation was innate.

**iv)** However, Mill's objections do have some purchase on freewill theism, where human agency is independent of God. In that case, God must work around these intractable hinderances as best he can. The deity of freewill theism is akin to Zeus's relation to the Fates. He can only operate within the parameters of what the Fates decree.

**v)** But over and above those considerations, Mill seems to think an omnipotent God must be an efficiency freak, as if the best way to achieve a goal is always by the shortest route. Yet that's like saying, why watch a movie, watch a play by Shakespeare, read a novel, read narrative poetry—when you can cut to the chase by reading a plot synopsis? You can get basic information on one page without all the extraneous details! But that misses the point. It's not about getting to the destination as fast as possible, but taking in the scenery along the way.

Not that *God* needs that, but it's for the benefit of his creatures. And it won't suffice to say God could endow them with innate knowledge, for there's a difference between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance. For creatures, the *experience* is worthwhile. And that's not reducible to abstract propositional knowledge.

## Doctrine and evidence

Their objections to Christianity being directed much more against its doctrines than its evidences. William Cunningham, **THEOLOGICAL LECTURES** (Forgotten Books, reprint, 2015), 240.

That's an important distinction to keep in mind when responding to atheists. Are they objecting to Christian doctrine or the evidence for Christianity?

Often, they attack the Christian faith by attacking what they deem to be problematic doctrines or consequences. In that situation, a Christian apologist needs to redirect the conversation to the question of evidence. The question at issue should be whether something is true, and how we can know it's true. Discussing evidence has more ultimate relevance to what really matters, because evidence is evidence for (or against) the truth of something. So that should be the focus of the debate. If there's direct evidence for Christianity in general, or indirect evidence for individual doctrines (i.e. evidence for the source of doctrine), then we need to concentrate on the evidence.

## Reverse Freudianism

Ironic thing about this Freudian trope is that refusing to take Christianity seriously for fear of incurring the disapproval of one's peers is in itself treating one's peer-group as a father-figure.

The main bar to faith was rather the Freudian idea that religious faith is a wish fulfillment—more specifically, an attempt to cling to childish modes of relating to the world, with the omnipotent daddy there presiding over everything. A powerful case can be made for the view, which is not necessarily tied to the complete Freudian package, that the most important psychological root of religious belief is the need that everyone has for such a childish relationship with a father figure. Be that as it may, I had been psyched into feeling that I was chickening out, was betraying my adult status, if I sought God in Christ, or sought to relate myself to an ultimate source and disposer of things in any way whatever. The crucial moment in my return to the faith came quite early in that year's leave, before I had reexposed myself to the church or the Bible, or even thought seriously about the possibility of becoming a Christian. I was walking one afternoon in the country outside Oxford, wrestling with the problem, when I suddenly said to myself, "Why should I allow myself to be cribbed, cabined, and confined by these Freudian ghosts? Why should I be so afraid of not being adult? What am I trying to prove? Whom am I trying to impress?"

Whose approval am I trying to secure? What is more important: to struggle to conform my life to the tenets

of some highly speculative system of psychology or to recognize and come to terms with my own real needs? Why should I hold back from opening myself to a transcendent dimension of reality, if such there be, just from fear of being branded as childish in some quarters?" (Or words to that effect.) These questions answered themselves as soon as they were squarely posed. I had, by the grace of God, finally found the courage to look the specter in the face and tell him to go away. I had been given the courage to face the human situation, with its radical need for a proper relation to the source of all being. William P. Alston, "A Philosophers Way Back to the Faith." **GOD AND THE PHILOSOPHERS: THE RECONCILIATION OF FAITH AND REASON**, ed. T.V. Morris (New York: Oxford, 1994).

## Global Atheism Versus Local Atheisms

This makes a point which dovetails with a point I've made on more than one occasion. The argument from evil is typically formulated against a very abstract concept of God, a concept derived from some version of classical theism or philosophical theology, rather than a more concrete, specific concept such as biblical theism:

Jeanine Diller (2016) points out that, just as most theists have a particular concept of God in mind when they assert that God exists, most atheists have a particular concept of God in mind when they assert that God does not exist. Indeed, many atheists are only vaguely aware of the variety of concepts of God that there are. For example, there are the Gods of classical and neo-classical theism: the Anselmian God, for instance, or, more modestly, the all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good creator-God that receives so much attention in contemporary philosophy of religion. There are also the Gods of specific Western theistic religions like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism, which may or may not be best understood as classical or neo-classical Gods...Diller distinguishes local atheism, which denies the existence of one sort of God, from global atheism, which is the proposition that there are no Gods of any sort—that all legitimate concepts of God lack instances.

Global atheism is a very difficult position to justify (Diller 2016: 11–16). Indeed, very few atheists have any good reason to believe that it is true since the vast majority of atheists have made no attempt to reflect on more than one or two of the many legitimate concepts

of God that exist both inside and outside of various religious communities. Nor have they reflected on what criteria must be satisfied in order for a concept of God to count as “legitimate”, let alone on the possibility of legitimate God concepts that have not yet been conceived and on the implications of that possibility for the issue of whether or not global atheism is justified. Furthermore, the most ambitious atheistic arguments popular with philosophers, which attempt to show that the concept of God is incoherent or that God’s existence is logically incompatible either with the existence of certain sorts of evil or with the existence of certain sorts of non-belief [Schellenberg 2007]), certainly won’t suffice to justify global atheism. Nor is it obvious that evidential arguments from evil can be extended to cover all legitimate God concepts, though if all genuine theisms entail that ultimate reality is both aligned with the good and salvific (in some religiously adequate sense of “ultimate” and “salvific”), then perhaps they can. The crucial point, however, is that no one has yet made that case.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/atheism-agnosticism/#GlobAtheVersLocaAthe>



## "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven"

This is a good example of an atheist dilemma:

<https://civitashumana.wordpress.com/2017/11/30/why-i-dont-want-jesus-as-my-savior/>

Atheists flatter themselves on their supposed devotion to the truth. Bravely following the evidence wherever it leads.

Yet many atheists openly despise Christianity. So what if the evidence pointed them to the truth of Christianity? What if they discovered that Jesus really is God Incarnate? That would put them in quite a bind because they've told us in ahead of time that they can't stand Christian theology. They have no fallback strategy if it turns out to be true.

But in that event, what exactly is the value of their marshaling arguments against the Christian faith if they'd feel no different in case it were true? Why not drop the pretense and just concede that it makes no difference to them if Christianity is true or false? By their own admission, the evidence is irrelevant to their attitude towards Christianity. "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" and all that.

## Pseudo-dilemmas

Thought-experiments are common in science and philosophy. Atheists and Christian apologists both employ thought-experiments. These are useful in different ways:

**i)** Sometimes we resort to a thought-experiment because an actual expedient isn't feasible.

**ii)** Apropos (i), an advantage of thought-experiments in ethics is that no one is really hurt, since the victims are hypothetical characters rather than sentient people.

**iii)** Thought-experiments enable us to screen out extraneous variables. By contrast, real life is messy.

**iv)** Thought-experiments are used to test a generalization. If there are counterexamples, then that's a hasty generalization. If it allows for exceptions, then it's not true or false in principle. Rather, it may be true or false depending on the situation.

**v)** By the same token, thought-experiments can be used to test someone's consistency or commitment. If their position has dire consequences when taken to a logical extreme, will they balk?

**vi)** Despite the value of thought-experiments, it's necessary to distinguish between real or realistic dilemmas, and highly artificial or pseudo-dilemmas.

Suppose an atheist puts a Christian on the spot by asking, What would you do if you discovered that the Fall (Gen 3) was legendary, or the Flood (Gen 6-9) was legendary, or the

call of Abraham (Gen 12) was legendary, or the binding of Isaac (Gen 22) was legendary, or the Exodus was legendary, or the nativity accounts (Matthew & Luke) were legendary?

These hypothetical scenarios are designed to generate a psychological dilemma for the Christian. What is he prepared to jettison to relieve the dilemma?

In the nature of the case, dilemmas eliminate all the good options. That's what makes them a dilemma. Within that framework, there is no good answer. Every answer will be costly.

But that the same token, that makes them pseudo-dilemmas. We're not really confronted with that stark choice. And we have no obligation to submit to those arbitrarily restrictive alternatives.

Unless and until we actually have to cross that bridge, there's no reason to take them seriously. They're just mind games. A conundrum that only exists in the imagination rather than reality. It's up to God, in his providence, whether we face genuine dilemmas.

**vii)** And thought-experiments cut both ways. It's easy to pose dilemmas for an atheist. How much is he prepared to lose? And that's not even hypothetical.

# The Christian theory of everything

Recently, there was a high-level discussion on metaphysics and philosophical methodology between Christian Josh Rasmussen and atheist Graham Oppy:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-sVvxZk--qs&t=6105s>

I'll comment on a few things.

## 1. On possible worlds, Oppy said:

Every alternative to the way that things actually are, [where] things could have gone that's different from the way they actually went, shares some initial history with the way that things actually went and diverges from it because chances play out differently. So every possible world shares some initial part with the actual world.

The only way that we get alternative possibilities...is through chance. Chances play out differently.

Consider two worlds with the same history up to a certain point, then one world goes one way and another world goes another way. A fork or branch... develops down the track.

...no explanation for why God has different creative intentions for this or that world...or you can appeal to some earlier difference to explain it.

Several issues:

**i)** On the secular view he sketches, all possible worlds are variations on the actual world. Possible worlds are in some sense derived from the actual world.

One deficiency with his analysis is that when we contemplate possible worlds, our frame of reference is necessarily limited by human imagination and the world we experience. But that's a provincial benchmark. There's no presumption that some possible worlds aren't radically different from human experience or the limitations of human imagination. Where one possible world has no initial history in common with another possible world.

**ii)** Consider a Christian ontology in which possible worlds are divine ideas. On that model, worlds aren't derived from other worlds, but from God's infinite imagination. What possible worlds share in common is not the actual world, per se, but the mind of God, as their constitutive source.

**iii)** There's some ambiguity when Christians talk about the actual world. In one sense that will include God. In one sense, God is in the actual world.

But in another sense, the actual world originates in the mind of God, as one of many possible worlds. Creation is distinct from God. A spatiotemporal objectification of his exemplary idea. We might define the actual world as God plus creation.

**iv)** Whether or not chance is the only way to get alternate timelines from a secular standpoint, that's not the only way from a Christian standpoint. Rather, the source of alternate possibilities is God's imagination. God is able to conceive of infinitely many different world histories. These are like stories. Stories with alternate plot developments. Possible worlds are fictional stories in God's mind.

By contrast, the actual world is where God turns one of his imaginative scenarios into something physical, with conscious agents, time, and causality.

**v)** In principle, God isn't constrained to choose between different possible timelines. Presumably, God has the ability to create a multiverse, if he so desired.

**2.** Commenting on Josh's "perfect foundation" paradigm, Oppy said:

Where does the imperfection get in and why? It's the nature of perfection to be opposed to imperfection.

I don't think there's a puzzle about how imperfection can originate from a perfect being or perfect foundation. Part of what it means to be a perfect being is having the ability to imagine all possibilities. A perfect being (God) has a self-concept. That's maximal greatness.

But he will also have the necessary ability to conceive of every variation, every alternative. In a sense, these will be less than he is. But the greater or greatest must have the capacity to have ideas about lesser states and lesser beings. That includes moral imperfections as well as innocent limitations.

At that mental level, imperfections are inherent in a perfect being, not in the sense that the perfect being is imperfect, but his mind contains infinitely many concepts of alternate scenarios. How could he be a perfect being if he was unable to entertain concepts of entities other than himself?

In that sense, imperfections already exist as ideas about lesser beings and lesser states. Timeless, divine ideas.

And that's inevitable, given a perfect being. A perfect mind. An infinite mind.

There's then the distinction between a mental mode of subsistence and an extramental mode of subsistence. But if it's consistent with a perfect being for imperfection to exist conceptually, is it inconsistent with a perfect being to objectify some of his concepts in real time, space, and (in some cases) consciousness finite beings?

What God has done is to instantiate some of his exemplary ideas. In that sense, the origin of imperfection is straightforward. From ideal to real.

The issue is what question he's really asking.

**i)** Is it a metaphysical question? How can imperfection originate from perfection in the sense of how perfection can be the basis or ultimate source of imperfection? Or how that relation can be "fitting"?

If so, then I think my response answers that question.

**ii)** Is it a causal/how to? question? If perfection is the initial state, how can imperfection come into being? How can perfection cause imperfection?

If that's the question, then the answer concerns God's ability to instantiate possible worlds, and so on. But I doubt that's his question.

**iii)** Is it an ethical question? How can perfection permit imperfection? How is the existence of imperfection consistent with perfection? If so, that's a variation on the problem of evil.

In this case, the issue seems to be whether there's some morally significant difference between God having an idea of imperfection and God realizing his idea.

**iv)** Consider a director who has an idea of a villain or the idea of a plot with some atrocity. Compare that to the director filming what's in his head.

Does that involve a moral change by shifting from the idea to an extramental exemplification thereof?

Not that I can see. If the director is sympathetic to the villain, then that would be morally deflection even if he never translated his idea into film.

If, on the other hand, the director depicts the villain as blameworthy, then I don't see a change in moral valuation as we shift from idea to film.

Moreover, so long as it stays in his head, no one else can benefit from his moral insight.

**v)** Of course, one morally significant difference is that merely possible "conceptual" people can't actually suffer. Like fictional characters, they lack consciousness. So the question is whether God (perfection) is wronging them by turning his idea (of imperfection) into a real person.

Yet we can flip that around. By the same token, merely possible "conceptual" people can't actually experience good, so there's a tradeoff. Should no one experience good so that no one will suffer? Should however many people be denied the opportunity to experience good to prevent anyone from having to experience physical and/or psychological pain? That's an antinatalistic ethic.



**vi)** In addition, consider the comic curve in classical drama, where the initial state is good. Then there's the tragic downfall. But that may instill enlightenment, so the final state is superior to the initial state. That's like:

perfection > imperfection > higher perfection

where, to achieve a second-order good, events must pass through something bad. So it's not a choice between two linear alternatives:

perfection > imperfection

or

Imperfection > perfection

Rather, it can begin with lesser "perfection", followed imperfection as an intervening stage leading to greater perfection.

Even at a human level, the creative process in art, music, and fiction can begin with something good, but as the creative artist gains additional experience and expertise, it just gets better until he produces his masterpieces. There's also the cliché that great art often requires suffering.

**vii)** Or consider the oak in the acorn. There's nothing imperfect about the oak in seed form. Yet there's something greater about a full-grown oak tree.

**3.** Finally, there was a discussion of simplicity.

**i)** Christian metaphysics is parsimonious in the sense that a single agent (God) can be the basis for everything else. For

concrete and abstract objects alike. All that complexity traces back to one ultimate transcendent source.

**ii)** By contrast, naturalism is typically reductionistic, where complexity is the result of something physically or temporally elementary. Where complexity develops over time from something simpler. Where complex objects are composed of smaller elements. Where there's greater complexity at higher scales of magnitude. In naturalism, complexity involves a bottom-up process, but in Christian theism, complexity involves a top-down process.

**iii)** But there's also the question of whether God is simple. To take a comparison, is the Mandelbrot set simple or complex? As an abstract object, it's mereologically simple in the sense that it has no spatiotemporal "parts" or subdivisions. Yet it's recursively complex in terms of infinite self-similarity.

**iv)** According to Christian theology, God is a Trinity. One way to classify the Trinity is a type of symmetry. There are different kinds of symmetries. In the case of mirror symmetries, there's one-to-one correspondence, yet these are nonsuperimposable images due to chirality. The Trinity is like that. There's one-to-one correspondence between Father, Son, and Spirit, yet an irreducible distinction remains.

Although internally complex, a symmetry is incomposite. Half a symmetry is not a symmetry. According to Christian metaphysics, reality bottoms out with something indecomposably complex.

## Is immortality a road to nowhere?

An unending life would be one that lacked any meaningful shape or pattern. It would resemble an infinitely long river that meandered eternally without ever reaching the sea. There would be no arch-shaped structure of birth, growth, maturity, decline and death. Although phases of the life might have their own internal structure, it would be as a whole (not that it could ever be grasped that way) completely shapeless. It would be a life that was going nowhere specific, and in which the people, projects, and aspirations that were important at one stage would be insignificant and forgotten at another. Geoffrey Scarre, *Death* (Routledge 2014).

i) To play along with his metaphor, boating down an infinitely long river means we'd never see the same scene twice. The scene would constantly change. And that would indeed be maddening.

But why suppose unending life must be analogous to *that*? Why can't eternal life combine variety with repeatable experiences?

ii) Scarre fails to distinguish between temporal ends and teleological ends, yet something that's endless can still be patterned. The Mandelbrot set is infinite, yet highly structured.

**FINNEGANS WAKE** has a circular plot. It has no real beginning or ending. In principle, you can open the book at any point and start reading. You can break into the circle anywhere. Once inside the plot, repeated reading will

deepen your understanding of the plot. Things you initially miss you will appreciate after going around a few more times. Of course, that could still become tedious, but we're just toying with metaphors.

Take the common experience of leaving home and returning home. That's repetitious and circular, yet it doesn't mean you're going nowhere. Moreover, leaving home enriches the experience of returning home.

Furthermore, if we lived forever we would need to be equipped with vastly more powerful memories than we have now to be able to recall our own distant pasts. McMahan might contend that it would not be important to be able to remember our origins or ancient history so long as we could remember our more recent past (say, the last century or so). But if we retained anything like our present psychology, we would feel ourselves deeply alienated from our own pasts if we had to consult the history books to learn about our former deeds. (Also think what an unsatisfactory sense of self one would have if one could no longer remember one's childhood or one's parents.) We care about what will happen to us in the future, and what happened to us in the past, because we see our past and our future as parts of one and the same life, chapters in the same narrative. No coherent, graspable narrative, however, could link together our existence over endless ages. Fischer has suggested that while an infinitely long life would not have "narrative structure, strictly conceived", the "literary analogue for such a life is not the novel, but perhaps a collection of short stories...with the same character appearing as the protagonist"

That objection seems to be based on immortality in the sense of never dying, rather than a Christian model, where there's distinct phases: life before you die, the intermediate state, and the final state. His objection involves an undifferentiated continuum. But on a Christian model, I don't think it would require a vastly more powerful memory to recall your life before you died.

And do we actually need a vastly more powerful memory to recollect what happens to us if we just keep on living? That's never been put to the test. Memory is already highly selective.

## Hedge maze

I'm going to comment on some related statements by A. J. Ayer. He was a prominent English atheist, not as famous as Russell, but also not as flippant. I'd note in passing that Russell and Ayer were both gifted children as well as emotionally neglected children. Both men were womanizers. As Paul Vitz has documented (*Faith of the Fatherless*), emotional neglect is a pathway to atheism.

Nevertheless the vast majority of those who believe that the universe serves a purpose do so because they take this as conferring a meaning on life. How far down in the scale of organisms are they prepared to go is not always clear. The hymnodist Mrs. Alexander boldly strikes out with 'All things bright and beautiful, All creatures great and small, All things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all.'

Even if life had a meaning in the sense that we have just been discussing, it would not be known to the persons who had faith in it, nor would they have any inkling of the part that their own lives played in the overall plan. It might, therefore, seem surprising that the question was so important to them. Why should it matter to them that they followed a course which was not of their own choosing as a means to an end of which they were ignorant? Why should they derive any satisfaction from the belief that they were puppets in the hands of a superior agent? I believe the answer is that most people are excited by the feeling that they are involved in a larger enterprise, even if they have no responsibility for its direction. A. J. Ayer, **THE MEANING**

**OF LIFE AND OTHER ESSAYS** (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1990),  
120,122.

**i)** One obvious answer is that God is infinitely wiser than we are, so he can devise far better plans for our lives than we can if left to our own devices.

**ii)** To take a comparison, suppose a military unit is sent on a mission of pivotal strategic value. If successful, it will be a turning-point in the war effort. But their superiors don't inform team regarding the strategic value of the mission. They don't know that in advance. It's only after the war, with the benefit of hindsight, that they come to appreciate the critical significance of their role. Why does Ayer seem to assume that creatures need to know ahead of time what part their lives play in the overall plan? Why can't that be something they discover as they go along? Why can't that be retrospective rather than prospective?

**iii)** Consider a father who builds a jungle gym in the backyard for his young sons. Or maybe a tree house. His kids didn't choose that playground equipment. Their father created that recreational opportunity for them. He gives their lives structure. Something fun to do. Something they couldn't imagine or construct on their own. Should they not derive satisfaction in the jungle gym or tree house because they didn't choose that course of action?

**iv)** When a creative writer invents characters, he doesn't create them in a vacuum, with nothing to do. He also creates a setting and a plot. Should God make rational creatures without giving them any direction in life? Just blunder along without any sense of purpose? Thrown them into existence with no guidance, like feral children, to fend for themselves?

What does he even mean by saying they have no inkling about their place in the great scheme of things? The Bible describes the origin, fall, redemption, and destiny of man. Indeed, that's the great narrative arc of Scripture.

Sure, Ayer doesn't believe in God, but he needs to adopt a Christian viewpoint for the sake of argument to critique it. Yet he's made no effort to get inside that viewpoint.

But now, it may be objected, suppose that the world is designed by a superior being. In that case the purpose of our existence will be the purpose that it realizes for him; and the meaning of life will be found in our conscious adaptation to his purpose...Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that everything happens as it does because a superior being has intended it should. As far as we are concerned, the course of events still remains entirely arbitrary. True, it can now be said to fulfill a purpose; but the purpose is not ours...It merely happens to be the case that the deity has the purpose that he has and not some other purpose, or no purpose at all. E. Klemke & S. Cahn, **THE MEANING OF LIFE: A READER** (Oxford, 3rd. ed., 2008), 200.

Why does Ayer assume that God can have no good reason for intending one thing rather than another? Why assume the choice must be arbitrary rather than judicious?

Nor does this unwarrantable assumption provide us even with a rule of life. For even those who believe most firmly that the world was designed by a superior being are not in a position to tell us what his purpose can have been.



Scripture *does* provide a rule of life. Scripture contains many instructions about how to live. Scripture contains a roadmap about where to go, how to get there, and what to avoid. So what is Ayer talking about? Yeah, he doesn't believe in the Bible, but he makes no effort to refute Christianity on its own terms. It's like he never really thought about it.

They may indeed claim that it has been mysteriously revealed to them, but how can it be proved that the revelation is genuine?

**i)** What makes him think there's something mysterious about the process of divine revelation?

**ii)** There are various lines of evidence that Scripture is what it purports to be, viz. argument from prophecy, argument from miracles, archeological corroboration, answered prayer.

Either his purpose is sovereign or it is not. If it is sovereign, that is, if everything that happens is necessarily in accordance with it, then this is true also of our behavior. Consequently, there is no point in our deciding to conform to it, for the simple reason that we cannot do otherwise. However we behave, we shall fulfill the purpose of this deity; and if we were to behave differently we should still be fulfilling it; for if it were possible for us not to fulfill it it would not be sovereign in the requisite sense.

That confounds sovereignty with fatalism. However, predestination and providence employ multiple means to achieve the end. Opening doors, closing doors, incentives and disincentives. It's not whatever will be will be, for

sovereignty coordinates ends and means. There's one particular pathway to the goal—like a hedge maze.

But suppose that it is not sovereign...In that case, there is no reason why we should try to conform to it unless we independently judge it to be good. But that means the significance of our behavior depends finally upon our own judgments of value; and the concurrence of a deity then becomes superfluous.

That may be a valid critique of freewill theism.

## Comprecence

Many atheists take the position that the only evidence for something is empirical evidence. If something is empirically undetectable, then there's no reason to think it exists. Hence, there's no reason to think God exists, if he subsists outside the space-time continuum.

Let's take a comparison. According to the B-theory of time, the entire timeline actually exists. Past, present, and future actually exist. I'm just going to use that for illustrative purposes. I'm not going to make a case for the B-theory of time, although there are some good philosophical arguments for that position. For discussion purposes, let's grant that the B-theory of time is correct. And that's neutral in terms of scientism or empiricism.

Suppose I'm a high school student, sitting in the cafeteria during lunch. The student body undergoes a complete turnover every three years. My classmates occupy the cafeteria. I can see them from where I sit.

But suppose I have a visor that enables me to see the past and future. Let's say my visor has a split-screen. And I can tune it to a particular year, past or present. Through my visor, I can see the last student body and the next student body, in addition to the present student body. They occupy the same cafeteria. They are compresent in the same cafeteria.

Without my visor, I can only see classmates in my own timeframe. I can't detect the presence of the other classmates, past and future, even though every student

body in the history of the school actually occupies that cafeteria at lunchtime.

Same thing for football games. When I switch on my visor, I can see teams from different years superimposed on the same field—like a montage, with chronological layers. I can see fans from different years superimposed on the same stands. The same space is filled with people from past, present, and future. All of them are actually present at that exact same site, yet those outside my timeframe are undetectable without my special visor.

So even when it comes to the issue of physical presence, of physical entities which occupy physical space, on a macroscopic scale, they can be right there, beside me, in front of me, behind me, and yet be invisible, inaudible, intangible.

## Atheism and Agnosticism

Graham Oppy is commonly regarded as the top atheist philosopher of his generation. By that I mean, not necessary the best philosopher who happens to be an atheist, but a philosopher who specializes in the defense of atheism. I'm going to comment on some statements he made in his recent book: **ATHEISM AND AGNOSTICISM** (Cambridge 2018).

### 3.7 Anomaly

Some people think that theism can have an explanatory advantage when it comes to reports of the occurrence of miracles. Religions are replete with such reports, in their accounts of the lives and deeds of their founding figure, in the episodes recorded in their central texts, in the accounts passed down in their oral traditions, and, often enough, in their contemporary deliverances.

- i)** That's a serious overgeneralization. In Islam, the central text is the Koran. That attributes no explicit miracles to Muhammad. Supplemented by the Hadith, there may be two alleged miracles (midnight ride to Jerusalem, splitting moon).
- ii)** Not all religions have founders. Hinduism has no founder.
- iii)** Accounts of Buddha were written long after living memory.
- iv)** There are questions regarding the historicity of Lao-Tzu:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/laozi/>

Is he even considered to be a miracle-worker?

In general:

<http://bib.irr.org/jesus-zoroaster-buddha-socrates-muhammad>

**v)** Are the Gospels based on oral tradition?

In order to assess this claim, we need to consider the wider background. True enough, if miracle reports were accurate, they would pose severe challenges to naturalists: miracle reports typically describe events that defy explanation by well-established science. But it should be remembered not only (a) that all religions have their own miracle reports...

Does Oppy think non-Christian miracles are somehow inconsistent with the truth of Christianity? If so, how so?

...but also (b) that there is a vast range of other reports that are prima facie challenges to well-established science. Consider, for example, reports across the extraordinary range of conspiracy theories, alternative medicines, and cryptids (creatures recognised only in folklore, such as chupacabras, sasquatch and yeti) that are prima facie challenges to well-established science.

Depends on how these are classified. For instance, if the sasquatch existed, what kind of entity would it be? Natural or supernatural? What's possible or probable for a natural entity isn't the same for a supernatural entity. Different rules.

Likewise, conspiracy theories usually involve human agents (unless you include ufology), so we evaluate conspiracy theories based on what's likely given human psychology.

It is obvious to pretty much everyone that almost all of these reports of 'anomalous' entities and events are cut from the same cloth, and it is obvious to pretty much everyone that almost all of these reports are false.

See above. In addition, alternate medicine sometimes has a placebo effect. And occasionally, folk pharmacology is genuinely therapeutic.

Moreover, it is obvious to pretty much everyone how these reports are to be explained. We are all fallible; we all make lots of errors. We all like to have tidy explanations; we are all disposed to make stuff up. We are all prone to false attributions of agency; we are all prone to seeing agency where there is only happenstance.

Oppy is attempting to dismiss all reports without having to examine any reports. But the rational procedure is to examine the cases with the best prima facie evidence.

Moreover, we are all disposed to believe what we are told by those we take to be authoritative, and we are all disposed to pass on things that we are told by those we take to be authoritative.

To begin with, Oppy assumes that evidence for miracles is confined to testimonial evidence. But many people claim to believe in miracles, not because they were told that by someone "authoritative," but based on their personal

experience or the report of a trusted friend or family member. Not a religious authority-figure.

It is entirely unsurprising that there is local uptake of falsehoods, including, in particular, minimally counterintuitive falsehoods, i.e. falsehoods concerning entities and events that are strikingly different from familiar entities and events along just one or two dimensions. Inevitably, some falsehoods become entrenched in particular communities; inevitably, some falsehoods become attractors for further theorisation; inevitably, some falsehoods receive institutional support. While it is never the case that these falsehoods are supported by well-established science, and while it is never the case that these falsehoods have global acceptance, these falsehoods can become deeply entrenched, and they can be accepted by large populations for millennia.

How does Oppy know these reports are never supported by well-established science? What has he actually studied? What about medically verified miracles?

Naturalists suppose that something like the above account – which everyone accepts for some range of cases – applies to all cases. All reports of miracles and sightings of cryptids, and all conspiracy theories and alternative medicines, that constitute prima facie challenges to well-established science should be rejected. Given their provenance, it would be absurd to give significant credence to reports of any of these things.

Notice that he's bluffing his way through the issue with airy generalities.



No one has the time to exhaustively trace the histories of all of the reports of these things, no one has the time to exhaustively weigh the relative merits of the cases that can be made for each of them, but it would be impermissibly arbitrary to accept some without having checked – with at least the same degree of sympathy and attention – whether there are better cases for others.

But that's a straw man. You pick the best examples. And there are collections (e.g. Craig Keener, Robert Larmer).

Given the entirely uniform account that naturalists give of the full range of reports of entities and events that are anomalous with respect to well-established science, it is highly implausible to claim that there is an explanatory disadvantage that accrues to them.

What if a uniform account disregards specific evidence to the contrary?

When theists from different religions disagree about who really worked miracles, and about which texts accurately record miracles, and about which contemporary events really are miracles that support particular religions, it is clearly an explanatory advantage for naturalists to be able to chalk all of this disagreement up to special pleading.

How much does he actually know about comparative religion and the state of the evidence? Take **THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO MIRACLES**. The evidence is not on a par.

### 3.9 Scripture

Some people think that theism can have an explanatory advantage when it comes to the existence and content of the central texts of theistic religions.

Some people suppose that there is evidence for the non-natural origins of the central texts of given religions in (1) alleged literary merits of those texts, (2) successful detailed predictions of future events in those texts, and (3) confirmation of the material that is found in those texts in (a) the alleged superiority of the distinctive moral and social teachings in those texts, (b) the advanced scientific knowledge that is contained in those texts, and (c) the inclusion of information in those texts that could not possibly have been possessed by the authors of those texts.

These considerations are all very weak. (1) Most central religious texts are canonical literary works for adherents of those religions; judgements about the literary merits of those texts is hopelessly controversial. (2) Given what we know about the redaction of these texts – and the uncertainties involved in dating their initial composition and subsequent redaction – there is no consensus on even one successful detailed future prediction in any central religious text;

What does he actually know about the history of their central religious texts? What secondary literature has he studied? With respect to the Bible, has he studied both sides of the argument?

(3) Given the many barriers to confident interpretation of these texts, the many uncertainties about their redaction and reproduction, and the depth of disagreement about moral and social matters, there is

no consensus that any of the central religious texts is marked by any distinctive kind of superiority.

Atheists are typically quite confident in their interpretation of the Bible. They think it's often mistaken. Can't have it both ways.

Some people have claimed that, because there is evidence in the historical record for the existence of natural entities and the occurrence of natural events that are recorded in those texts, we have evidence for the reliability of those who compiled them, and hence reason to accept the claims that they make about the existence of non-natural entities and the occurrence of non-natural events.

This argument is also very weak. Even if there were evidence for the reliability of the authors of these texts with respect to the existence of natural entities and the occurrence of natural events, that would be negligible evidence in support of the claim that the authors are reliable with respect to the existence of non-natural entities and the occurrence of non-natural events.

Why? If they're trustworthy reporters when recording natural events, what suddenly makes the same reporters untrustworthy when recording supernatural events?

Moreover, typically, there is hardly any evidence that the authors are reliable in connection with the existence of natural entities and the occurrence of natural events. Sure, the texts sometimes refer to genuine historical events involving genuine historical figures in genuine historical locations. But that does not come close to establishing that the authors are reliable recorders of the existence of natural entities

and the occurrence of natural events. What are missing from the historical record are multiple independent confirmations of detailed descriptions of the existence of natural entities and the occurrence of natural events – and the existence of non-natural entities and the occurrence of non-natural events – in central religious texts.

What does Oppy know about archeological confirmations of John's Gospel or the Book of Acts? If these were written by authors out of touch with the historical setting, how can they be so accurate?

Even where there are multiple detailed descriptions of entities and events in different central religious texts, we always have compelling evidence that the texts were not produced independently of one another.

What's his compelling evidence that that's the case?

There is nothing in the existence and content of central religious texts that favours theism over naturalism. Every best big picture says that almost all central religious texts, insofar as they are taken to be truth-assessable descriptions, are full of historical, moral, social, scientific, philosophical, and theological falsehoods. Every best big picture must explain the existence and content of all central religious texts. Best naturalistic big pictures have a uniform story to tell about all central religious texts. That leaves them very well positioned, and not in the least in need of engagement in the kind of special pleading characteristic of best theistic big pictures that claim support from the central texts of theistic religions.

He seems to be winging it from start to finish.



## Sye-Clones

I was asked to comment on a video by YouTube atheist "Ozymandias Ramses II" (or "Ozy" for short). I'm not going to watch hours of his videos. I think the popularity of podcasts and YouTube videos is intellectually lazy. A cumbersome way to expound and analyze complex issues.

However, in response to commenters, Ozy sometimes provides lengthy explanations in writing. I will therefore assess some of his written statements.

From what I can tell, his primary target is Sye Ten Bruggencate and his minions. Another target is Bible Thumping Wingnut (which I never view). Secondary targets may include objectivism (Ayn Rand) and Scripturalism (Gordon Clark and his would-be disciples). Let's begin with some background information:

I live in Canada. I studied psychology, Western intellectual history, and then philosophy in Montreal (McGill and Concordia), and pursued (never completing) a doctorate in philosophy at UWO in London, Ontario.

With respect to your question about foundationalism and Quine/Neurath, I'm in the latter camp. In fact in some of the shows/hangouts I've challenged the foundationalist/edifice metaphor that informs presuppositionalism in favour of Quine's web of belief and Neurath's raft metaphors with respect to knowledge. In fact, the approach to epistemology I find most promising is Quine's project of naturalized epistemology. I did grad work in that area, specifically on the psychology of belief-acquisition and the enabling

assumptions (aka properly basic beliefs) that constitute the main timbers within one's raft of belief (or the most well-integrated strands within one's web of beliefs).

I reject the Justified, true belief (JTB) definition of knowledge for a variety of reasons, but my principle objection is that I don't think justification is properly part of the definition of knowledge.

Justification is necessary in life and serves pragmatic purposes, being important for persuasion and for satisfying the conditions of public assertability, but it's not an ingredient in what makes a belief into knowledge. I embrace an externalist account of epistemic justification and repudiate the internalist account of justification as being a pre-theoretical intuition that doesn't stand up to scrutiny and which leads unavoidably to the problem of justificatory regress. Instead of JTB, I define knowledge as 'reliably-produced true belief' which is how some philosophers define it who are working towards Quine's project of naturalized epistemology.

So that's where he's coming from. He's an atheist. I've been told he's an ex-Jehoveh's Witness. Unfortunately, many former cult members are suspicious of religion generally.

It is condition of reasonableness and rationality that one's confidence in one's belief in any proposition should scale with or be commensurate with the quantity and quality of evidence in support of that proposition. Belief isn't all or none; it admits of degrees of confidence.

True, although we frequently have more evidence for a given belief than we are conscious of.

Certainty may be a psychological desideratum, but it's not a necessitatum. Some presuppositionalists (of the Sye-Clone variety) seem to make a fetish of the idea of certainty, but contra their intuitions and desires on the matter, certainty is not a requirement for knowledge. And if they think certainty is a requirement on knowledge, well...that needs to be argued for. It's a tough argument to make.

Depends on what we mean by certainty:

- i) Certainty in the psychological sense of certitude isn't equivalent to knowledge
- ii) Knowledge isn't equivalent to proof.

So, can we be certain of anything? In my view, yes, but that's a heavily qualified 'yes'. To say that some proposition is a certitude is merely to say that within the scope of a set of assumptions, some claims can be put forth as certainties. But that's not the absolute, unconditional certainty that a presuppositionalist lusts after. That kind of certainty is what I call 'hysterical certainty'. It's illusory.

Apparently, that makes Ozy is a global skeptic. But global skepticism is self-refuting (see below).

Regarding Bahnsen, I'm not sure what point you were making by mentioning his saying that his opponents lose just by showing up. Of course he thinks that. He's a presuppositionalist: He thinks that anyone who uses reason at all is borrowing from his worldview and so has tacitly admitted defeat by showing up for a debate. That's part of their apologetic. Did you think that the more sophisticated presuppurers didn't apply



presuppositionalism? Did you think they were going to provide evidence to support their belief in god? That'd make them evidentialists, not presuppers. Their proof (so-called) proceeds by transcendental argument - an alleged demonstration of the impossibility (due to incoherence) of all other worldviews.

The problem with this entire argument is that you utilized your reasoning in the very act of defending the reliability of your reasoning. This is a manifestly circular argument. If your brain wasn't functioning properly, if your memory was compromised in the very act of evaluating the premises in your argument, if logic was not valid, then you'd have no reason to trust your conclusions. So, you're exactly where you started; you're assuming the very thing you were asked to defend and prove to be the case - namely that your cognitive capacities and the inferential processes you relied upon are reliable. There is no way out of this problem.

The presuppositionalist is simply requiring the impossible: He or she is demanding that you defend rationality, but will only accept a rational argument. Well, one can't have one's reason and eat it too. That's what needs to be pointed out - that one is being asked to do the impossible. The mistake people are making here is to set out on the fool's errand of trying to use one's cognitive capacities and inferential practices (eg: deductive reasoning) to show that those cognitive capacities and inferential practices are reliable. One is simply being challenged to do the impossible. One should never waste one's time trying to do the impossible. One should instead point out that the challenge betrays a confusion on the part of the challenger. Tell them to show you how they do it. Ask

them to put up or shut up. And the moment the presuppositionalist starts with his presuppositional argument and invokes his god as the guarantor of his own inferential practices and cognitive capacities, just point out that he seems to have used his cognitive capacities and inferential processes to reach his conclusion that he can trust his inferential capacities and inferential processes and thus, has argued in a circle and thus has assumed their reliability in the very act of trying to establish their reliability...and so has failed at the challenge they have set out for us.

And the same problem holds for inferential reasoning and for the reliability of our perceptual capacities. These properly basic beliefs are the enabling assumptions that make possible the testing of all our other beliefs about reality, but their reliability cannot be confirmed because we have to utilize them in the very act of evaluating the outcomes which result from acting upon them. They are, in that sense, pre-rational beliefs we are all naturally disposed to believe and by means of which we can formulate and develop ever-improving models of reality.

1) When using the primacy or existence argument - or any argument at all - one is implicitly assuming that inferential process one is using is reliable and can be trusted to yield true conclusions when the very conclusion one is supposed to be demonstrating is that one's inferential processes being used are reliable and can be trusted to yield true conclusions. Why, after all, would you use an inferential process to prove anything unless you assumed its proper application yields true conclusions?

2) When using the primacy or existence argument - or any argument at all - one is implicitly assuming that one's own cognitive capacities, in that very act of cognition, are reliable and not malfunctioning and so can be trusted to yield true conclusions when the very conclusion one is supposed to be demonstrating is that one's cognitive capacities are reliable and properly functioning. Why, after all, would you employ or rely upon a cognitive faculty process to prove anything unless you assumed it was reliable and properly functioning when you were relying it?

Hence that argument, and any such argument, is circular. The reason it feels like a trick is because we don't have any other way of arriving at reasonable conclusions and we're so accustomed to the use of inferential processes and our cognitive faculties that we assume that any conclusion can be supported by such means - but the rationality and reliability of reason and our cognitive faculties is one conclusion which we cannot support in this way, except on pain of circular argumentation.

All circular arguments are junk. There are no virtuous circular arguments.

There are two basic problems with Ozy's objection:

1. He fails to distinguish between a circular *argument/syllogism* and circular *reasoning*.

**i)** In a circular argument, as I understand it, the conclusion repeats the major premise without the minor premise(s) contributing any additional reasons. Put another way, the difference between an assertion and an argument is that an argument provides reasons in support of a truth-claim.

A circular argument is a technical fallacy of a logical syllogism. It renders the syllogism invalid.

In a valid argument, the major and minor premises combine to yield the conclusion. There's a logical interrelationship between the premises which yield a conclusion over and above the force of each individual premise, separately considered. In that event, the conclusion isn't reducible to the major premise. Rather, the combination of premises mark an advance over the major premise, or any single premise, considered in isolation to the whole.

**ii)** By contrast, circular reasoning is broader than formal syllogistic argumentation. Every argument takes some things for granted. There's a distinction between presuppositions and premises. Presuppositions are not a part of the argument proper, but underlie the argument. It's not fallacious in the formal logical sense to engage in circular reasoning, where you take certain things for granted, that fall outside the scope of the syllogism (e.g. the external world).

If the presuppositions are in dispute, then it begs the question to take them for granted, but if they're reasonable, inevitable, or shared by both sides, it's not question-begging to take them for granted.

2. His objection is self-refuting. He contends that demonstrating rationality is impossible because the proponent must assume and utilize inferential reasoning in the very act of defending the reliability of his cognitive abilities and inferential processes. But notice that Ozy must rely on his own cognitive abilities and inferential processes to argue that you can't rely on your cognitive abilities and inferential processes to justify human reason! So he himself

simultaneously depends on what he denies. He can't rely on reason show that the reliability of reason is indemonstrable, for that shoots a hole in his boat. If true, it's false; therefore it's false.

We do not have any way - no test - by means of which we can rule out the possibility of solipsism. Think about that fact you were not taught or told there was a mind-independent reality. It's not a conclusion you reached. Rather, you have never doubted it, just as our pets assume, pre-theoretically and without any process of inference, that the world exists outside of them. We learn what was IN the world, not that there IS a world. Any putative test or evidence you could put forward as a potential demonstration of the veracity of this assumption is perfectly compatible with it all happening in your mind without an external reality. So, you have not reasoned your way to the conclusion that there's a mind-independent reality, you've just always assumed it. And it's not an intuition either. It's a pre-rational assumption that we make by virtue of the sorts of organism that we are.

**i)** One of the problems with Quine's naturalized epistemology is the status of logic. If logic is reducible to human psychology, to how humans think, then logic is descriptive rather than normative. What makes anything illogical? What makes your inference fallacious rather than mine if there's no intersubjectival standard of comparison, if there's nothing over and above how humans reason? On that view, logic is just an inductive generalization of human psychology. What makes one sample superior to another? Indeed, Quine denied logical necessity.

According to solipsism, my disembodied mind is the only thing that exists. The "physical world" is a hallucination, a

mental projection of my consciousness.

But that means logic is just a product of my contingent mental states. In that event, we can rule out the possibility of solipsism because it nullifies logical necessity. On that view, you can't even affirm or deny solipsism because the law of identity requires logical necessity.

**ii)** If the physical, empirical world is an illusion, why do I imagine a physical empirical world? Consider dreams. Dreams simulate a physical empirical world because our dream state is parasitic on our waking state. But if there was no physical world to experience, why would that be the content of our imagination?

**iii)** If I'm the only mind, a disembodied mind, why don't I have a memory of an infinite past? Didn't I always exist?

**iv)** Do I cease to exist when I'm unconscious (e.g. a dreamless sleep)?

As Ozy concedes:

With respect to "solipsistic dreamscapes", no one is actually a solipsist. These nightmare scenarios are thought-experiments which serve to shed light on certain concepts by presenting idealized or limiting cases. They help us map out the landscape of possibilities. They are not offered up as plausible outlooks to be embraced.

Yet he seems to deploy that thought-experiment to warrant universal fallibilism. But I think we *can* rule out solipsism (see above).

You also invoke transitivity of definition at point 5, but it's worth noting that the logical property of transitivity is a basic principle in logic and can't be derived without assuming transitivity itself. Logic can't be defended using logic without arguing in a circle.

It's true that logic isn't directly justifiable. Yet he himself relies on logic to deride the possibility of absolute certainty about anything. So he keeps shooting a hole in his boat.

So, the moral of the story here is not that we can't trust our memories and other cognitive capacities or that properly basic beliefs are "arbitrary", "intuitions", or "mystical". Rather, it's that, at bottom, rationality is the tool we use, the ladder we climb, to reach conclusions and justify them, but rationality is composed, constituted, out of universally-shared assumptions which are indispensable and which, unfortunately, can't be used to justify themselves. This shouldn't surprise us. Evolution by natural selection furnished us with the sorts of minds we need to survive in the world, but it wasn't trying to make us into epistemic angels who can guarantee that our assumptive dispositions are correct. Mother Nature gave us what will work. She didn't supply us with any guarantees. And that's another reason why the quest for certainty is a fool's errand.

Notice how his argument is only as good as the truth of naturalistic evolution and evolutionary psychology. He temporarily abandons his radical skepticism to affirm naturalistic evolution, but then uses that to sabotage human reason. Once again, he shoots a hole in the bottom of his boat.

Doubt (to crib a line from Wittgenstein) comes after certainty (the feeling of deep conviction). We presuppose a lot - a whole lot - before we can ever muster a doubt about anything. This is because we do not enter the world as blank slates who are disposed to doubt and don't adopt beliefs until we have reasons and evidence. Rather, we enter the world like other mammals, filled with behavioral and doxastic dispositions, that is, pre-rational assumptions, which are sometimes described as 'properly basic beliefs' by philosophers and cognitive scientists. Among those dispositions are ones to trust our memories, senses, inferential practices and whatever we're told by our epistemic and linguistic communities as we are growing up.

Thus, we are not born as skeptics who learn to believe. We are born credulists who learn to doubt. Doubt happens within the scope of pre-rational properly basic beliefs. And so it is only within the scope of what we already believe and take for granted that specific doubts can arise, be expressed, and explored in the hopes of confirming them or assuaging them. So, could I be wrong about any particular belief within my belief set? Yes. There is no particular belief within my belief set that's immune to the possibility of error.

To be mistaken demands a standard of comparison. False beliefs can't be the criteria for other false beliefs. So either some human beliefs are immune to the possibility of error or all of God's beliefs are immune to the possibility of error, which is what makes the contrast between truth and error coherent in the first place.

Your objection is a highly intuitive one, but here's why it's question-begging. When you begin with axioms



and then set out to evaluate the feasibility of those axioms by means of an evaluation of the desirability or undesirability of the outcomes resulting from your actions, your evaluation of the desirability or undesirability of the outcomes will rest on a host of properly basic beliefs. Your very ability to recognize an outcome as desirable or undesirable at all requires that you assume, in the very act of evaluating what is happening around you, that:

- 1) there's a world around you in which things are actually happening.
- 2) You will be assuming that you exist, as an agent in that world, and you will only be able to notice what consequences arise from your decisions on the assumption that
- 3) your perceptual capacities are properly functioning and tracking reality. Further, your ability to reach any conclusions based upon these perceptual experiences of what's resulted from your decisions and actions will rest upon the presumed
- 4) reliability of your memory.

Just ask yourself, how could you get as far as testing some hypothesis or some axiom's veracity if you couldn't even trust that you were remembering which axiom you were testing or which axiom you'd begun with when you made your decision. Further, if you didn't trust in your

- 5) inferential practices such as induction and deduction,
- you would have no reason at all to trust your own conclusions.

Pragmatism is a marvelous and indispensable thing, as is hypothesis-testing of axioms, but it's only possible within the scope of certain assumptions that certain

facts are already in place and certain capacities we have are reliable. Without assuming those first, we can't evaluate the efficacy of any axioms. So, yes, one can start posit axioms and we can evaluate them, but the evaluation of the feasibility of those axioms presupposes a host of beliefs about us, the world, and the reliability of our cognitive capacities. In short, axiomatic reasoning and evaluation rests upon properly basic beliefs.

**i)** That may be a legitimate objection against the backwoods Scripturalism of John Robbins and his minions.

**ii)** However, the fact that certain assumptions are unavoidable in human reasoning is not an argument for skepticism. Rather, that's a launchpad for transcendental reasoning:

Transcendental arguments are partly non-empirical, often anti-skeptical arguments focusing on necessary enabling conditions either of coherent experience or the possession or employment of some kind of knowledge or cognitive ability, where the opponent is not in a position to question the fact of this experience, knowledge, or cognitive ability, and where the revealed preconditions include what the opponent questions. Such arguments take as a premise some obvious fact about our mental life—such as some aspect of our knowledge, our experience, our beliefs, or our cognitive abilities—and add a claim that some other state of affairs is a necessary condition of the first one. Transcendental arguments most commonly have been deployed against a position denying the knowability of some extra-mental proposition, such as the existence of other minds or a material world. Thus these arguments characteristically center on a claim that, for

some extra-mental proposition P, the indisputable truth of some general proposition Q about our mental life requires that P.

<https://www.iep.utm.edu/trans-ar/>

## Good truths and true goods

There's a cliché that's often spouted by Christian apologists: follow the evidence wherever it leads.

Up to a point that's wise advice although it can suffer from a naive positivism.

Problem is, Christian philosophers and apologists often discuss the true in separation from the good. They argue that we should believe Christianity because it's true, and they discuss how God is the exemplar good and source of finite goods. But this tends to be compartmentalized.

If, however, the true and the good don't converge, then why should anyone care about truth? If the truth isn't good, why should we pursue whatever the cost? You might pursue the truth, but once your pursuit convinces you that it doesn't lead you to the good, what's the point? If life is a cosmic tragedy where there's no happy ending for anyone, why should I follow it over the cliff? Even if I can't avoid it, that's hardly a noble goal.

Don't get me wrong: the truth can be bad in the sense that, say, cancer is bad in itself (although it can be a source of good). I mean bad in an ultimate, unredeemable sense of cosmic nihilism. There's no reason anyone should have a commitment to *that*.

I'm not suggesting that truth is dispensable. There are churchgoers who don't think Christianity is true. They think it's a myth, but a good myth. It gives structure and direction to their lives. They don't have anything better to

replace it with, so they continue singing traditional hymns and reciting a traditional liturgy.

On the one hand there are atheists who separate the true from the good, pursuing truth for truth's sake, even if that diverges from the good. Even if there's no good to be found.

On the other hand, there are churchgoers who separate the good from the true, pursuing good for goodness sake, even if that diverges from the truth. Even if there's no truth to be found.

We need to oppose both those extremes. The true and the good must coincide for either to be of ultimate value. If the good isn't true, then the good is illusory. If the true isn't good, then it has no claims on us.

## Cosmic simulation

I was asked a follow-up question on this post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/08/cosmic-programmers.html>

What you would say if an atheist said for the sake of argument that he accepted that the transcendental argument is valid and reason and logic do need a transcendent source, but that we'd have no way of knowing if that source is the Triune God or Billy the alien programmer?

**i)** To begin with, the notion that we're virtual characters in a computer simulation presumes the possibility of artificial intelligence. But that's hotly-contested. According to the hard problem of consciousness, mind is not reducible to a physical arrangement.

**ii)** An alien can't be the source of abstract objects. An alien can't be the source of logic because an alien is a contingent being, so he can't ground the necessity of logic. If logic is simply how he thinks, then logic lacks normatively. He's a fluid entity.

**iii)** An alien can't be the source of numbers because he has a finite, timebound mind whereas numbers are timeless, infinite, transfinite objects or ensembles.

**iv)** An alien can't be the source of possible worlds because he himself exemplifies a possible world.

**v)** Can he be the source of truth? If there were no minds, there'd be no true beliefs. As a contingent being, his nonexistence is possible. If truth has a contingent source, then the nonexistence of truth is possible. But is it true that the nonexistence of truth is possible?

## Eating and excreting

Many atheists are very moralistic. They quote passages from the OT which they find morally outrageous. They wax indignant at the political agenda of religious right.

They fervently believe in human rights, and they feel that the Bible and Christian ethics infringe on human rights. But where is all this coming from?

Before we can ask what rights (if any) a human being has, we need to ask what a human being is. From a strictly naturalistic viewpoint, what does a human biological unit amount to?

From an evolutionary perspective, human life arose from inorganic chemical reactions. Indeed, our bodies are still reducible to inorganic compounds.

Then there's the big picture view of human organisms. Where we fit in the ecosystem. Our ecosystemic role is to metabolize carbohydrates, lipids, and proteins. Basically, we're glorified digestive systems. From an ecosystemic standpoint, the most important part of a human unit is the gastrointestinal tract. Intake and outtake. Ingestion and egestion. In one end and out the other. We thereby help to maintain the balance of nature by breaking down and oxidizing large molecules. That's a necessary link in ecosystemic ecology.

Of course, a digestive system can't exist in isolation. It can only function in a living body. Our hands and feet, heart, lungs, brains, &c., are aids to the digestive system. They



keep it alive and functional. They enable us to acquire the raw materials.

Human units age. So we reproduce our replacement units. The survival of the ecosystem is not contingent on the survival of any individual human unit. The ecosystem has great redundancy. Human units are highly expendable and disposable.

Our value isn't essentially different than the value of an earthworm, which also contributes to the ecosystem by converting dead organic matter into humus. Or trees, which emit oxygen and filter carbon dioxide.

We're important in relation to the ecosystem. Of course, from a naturalistic perspective, the ecosystem has no inherent value. It simply is. The result of fortuitous initial conditions. When our sun burns out, the biosphere will die.

From a naturalistic viewpoint, humans are processing systems-like sewer plants.

## Secular bromides on death

There's a sense in which Christians should take atheism seriously, not because it's true, but because it provides an instructive point of contrast to Christianity. Often we can't truly appreciate something unless and until we lose it or consider the dire alternatives. What would life be like without it? Too many Christians fail to think deeply about the alternatives, and so they fail to appreciate the surpassing value of the Gospel.

In addition, many people think about atheism the wrong way. They act like there are two sides to every question, and this is just another two-sided issue. But the stakes are far higher on some issues.

Atheists have different perspectives on death. Off the top of my head, here are some:

### 1. BRAVADO

Some atheists (e.g. Antony Flew) labor to make a virtue of necessity. They act like mortality is a good thing. According to that posture, the fact that this life is all there is is what makes it precious. You don't get a second chance, so you better make the most of this one-time opportunity.

I don't know how many atheists really believe that, or if this is just a way to parry Christianity. The best defense is a good offense. Instead of conceding that Christianity would be better if it were true, but alas it's not, you pretend that oblivion is better than heaven.

## 2. FEIGNED INDIFFERENCE

Some atheists like Epicurus and Lucretius contend that oblivion is a matter of indifference. Once you die, you're not conscious of what it's like not to be alive anymore.

In addition, prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are said to be symmetrical. This sentiment is captured by the witticism attributed to Mark Twain:

I don't fear death. I was dead for billions and billions of years before I was born, and hadn't suffered the slightest inconvenience.

In fairness, Epicurus and Lucretius were pre-Christian, so the hand they were dealt wasn't much to work with.

## 3. STIFF UPPER LIP

Some atheists (e.g. Carl Sagan) admit that mortality is bad. Immortality would be better than oblivion. However, they try to make a virtue of that concession by patting themselves on the back for their moral heroism in bravely facing up to the cold hard facts rather than retreating into the comforting illusions of organized religion.

## 4. THE LUCKY FEW

Here's a variation on (3):

We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. We privileged few, who won the lottery of birth against all odds, how dare we whine at our inevitable return to that prior state from which

the vast majority have never stirred? (Richard Dawkins).

That's all very hortatory. A pep talk for the godless.

## 5. LIFE'S A BITCH, THEN YOU DIE

There are nihilists (e.g. David Benatar) who think life sucks and death sucks. You'd be better off not existing in the first place, but if you have the misfortune of existing, you now have something to lose by dying. Life is rotten but death is even worse. Death is a rotten end to a rotten existence.

## 6. SHAKING YOUR FIST

This attitude is epitomized by Dylan Thomas's famous poem:

*Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

The sentiment is understandable, but at the same time there's an impotent vacuity to the faux defiance.

## 7. CHEATING DEATH

Some transhumanists (e.g. Ray Kurzweil) hope to elude death by digitizing and uploading consciousness into a computer.

8. Immortality would be an interminable bore

Classic example: Bernard Williams, "The Makropoulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality".

## 9. BUDDHISM

According to Buddhism, life is ineluctably tragic. And when you die, that zeros out your former life. You must start from scratch. So you're cursed to keep saying good-bye to everything and everyone, over and over again. Kinda like Ellen Ripley (Alien franchise) who makes new friends, is put into stasis, comes out of stasis. All her friends are dead. Has to start all over again.

My intention isn't to evaluate each of these. The fact that atheists are so conflicted about death, the fact that they offer so many contradictory bromides, is unwittingly revealing in itself.

## Science, faith, and God

Some comments on a recent dialogue between John Lennox and Michael Ruse:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yrnXdzQRISM>

- 1.** Both Lennox and Ruse are in their 70s. Lennox has something to look forward to when he dies—Ruse has nothing to look forward to.
- 2.** Ruse illustrates the implausibility of the freewill defense, and Lennox's response is philosophically trite. In general, though, Ruse's religious ideal seems to be heavily conditioned by his Quaker upbringing and education. Even though he's an atheist (agnostic, naturalist), the Quaker paradigm remains his frame of reference.

The dialogue was interesting but frustrating because they didn't have time to develop their ideas. At one point Lennox gestured at a distinction between different kinds of science, but that was dropped. To develop his comparison, a science like chemistry is more fully and directly evidence-based than physics, which requires more theoretical filler.

It isn't clear to me if Ruse has a consistent position. However, his position may be more sophisticated than Lennox. At times, Lennox sounds like a positivist.

- 3.** This goes back to an ancient and perennial debate on the relation between faith and reason. Here's one way of viewing it. Facts and evidence only take us so far. The

evidence doesn't explain everything. The evidence leaves many important questions unanswered. Sometimes the evidence leaves us baffled.

So we need something to fill out the evidence. Something over and above raw evidence. For many Christians, that's faith. For more cerebral Christians, that's reason. Christian philosophy and philosophical theology can help to fill the gap when the evidence runs out. Take theodicies. Mind you, faith can never be eliminated.

Likewise, there's evidence for the Bible. And Biblical revelation provides explanations where raw evidence is lacking. Evidence can corroborate a truth-claim, but a truth-claim is distinct from the corroborative evidence. Revelation answers some questions which the evidence leaves unanswered. So revelation helps to fill out the evidence. Revelation interprets the available evidence and extends the reach of the available evidence.

In that respect, the relation between faith and reason is more like theoretical physics than chemistry. There's a necessary evidential component, but it requires philosophical and theological interpretation to fill out what's missing from the raw evidence.

**4.** I appreciate Lennox's courageous response to the professors. He refused to back down, even though as a college student and aspiring academic, he was quite vulnerable to being blacklisted by secular academia and the secular scientific establishment.

**5.** That said, many Christians and atheists alike suffer from a nearsighted, bubblegummy idealism about "the truth", as if the truth has absolute value regardless of anything else. But truth is not a virtue in a godless universe. Truth isn't

something to live for in a godless universe. Better to be a hedonist if it came to that.

Truth is a necessary but insufficient condition for a worldview. A satisfactory worldview must have room for the good as well as the true. Truth is worthless unless truth can point us to some ultimate good.

There is no truth for truth's sake. Rather, there's truth for goodness' sake and goodness for truth's sake. Christian apologists need to avoid a truncated worldview where bare truth, divested of anything else, is something to live for and die for.

Christianity and naturalism aren't just two sides of an argument. It would be suicidal to abandon Christianity for atheism under the aegis of "following the truth"—as if truth has independent value regardless of what the world is like. Truth is not enough.

Imagine a godless universe with a malevolent master race of aliens. Cruel, sadistic. Suppose they require you murder your mother to prove your undying allegiance to the alien overlords. That's nothing to live for, even if that was true.

**6.** Perhaps we need more discussion of what distinguishes private evidence from public evidence. For instance:

**i)** Some of the Resurrection appearances are to solitary individuals. That's originally private evidence.

**ii)** We can compare (i) to Resurrection appearances to groups of people. Presumably, that would be classified as public evidence.



**iii)** However, there's a sense in which collective private evidence can be reclassified as public evidence. That is to say, multiple-attestation can be something witnessed by several people at once or else it can be something witnessed by solitary observers. If, though, you have multiple reports of the same thing by isolated observers, the effect is mutual corroboration.

## The elusive God

A more recent argument for atheism, the divine hiddenness problem, contends that if God existed, he'd make his existence more manifest. Consider the problem of unanswered prayer. Likewise, why doesn't God perform more miracles?

**i)** As I recently noted, there are tradeoffs between divine intervention and stability:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/09/when-tomorrow-never-comes.html>

God intervenes often enough to remind us that we're not alone, but not so often as to obliterate any continuity between past and future. He intervenes frequently enough to show us that the universe is not a snow globe. There's a greater reality beyond the physical universe. There's hope beyond the grave. But he doesn't obliterate the future by constantly resetting the timeline in answer to prayer.

**ii)** Job and Joseph are paradigm-examples where God is never more present than when he seems to be most absent. Joseph has two prophetic dreams, but after that his life goes haywire. From Joseph's vantage-point, God seems to be absent as Joseph suffers one misfortune after another. Likewise, at the low point of his life, God seems to abandon Job. In the midst of his ordeal, God is silent. In the midnight hour, where was God? Of course, readers know how the stories end. God was working behind-the-scenes all along.

Or course, unbelievers don't think these are real-life stories, but that's not essential to the argument since the objection is about the consistency of certain *ideas*. Is the *idea* of God consistent with divine hiddenness?

## Platonic realism to the rescue

Platonism is the view that there exist abstract (that is, non-spatial, non-temporal) objects (see the entry on abstract objects). Because abstract objects are wholly non-spatiotemporal, it follows that they are also entirely non-physical (they do not exist in the physical world and are not made of physical stuff) and non-mental (they are not minds or ideas in minds; they are not disembodied souls, or Gods, or anything else along these lines). In addition, they are unchanging and entirely causally inert — that is, they cannot be involved in cause-and-effect relationships with other objects.[1]

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/platonism/#1>

A popular objection to God's existence is the claim that appealing to God lacks explanatory power because you're invoking something inexplicable to explain what you don't understand. God is even more obscure than whatever you're trying to explain.

It's unclear what it means to say God is inexplicable. Do they mean the concept of God is incoherent? Do they mean divine intent is inscrutable? Do they mean God's relation to time and space is mysterious?

There are answers, depending on the specific allegation. But for now I'd like to focus on a different point.

Physicalism is the default position of naturalists. However, some atheists admit that physicalism lacks sufficient explanatory power, so they fall back on Platonic realism or

keep that in reserve. They use it as a blocking maneuver against Christian theism.

But here's the irony: Platonic realism is even more inexplicable than what it's pressed into service to explain. On the one hand we have a reasonably clear grasp of what it means for something to be a physical entity. It's true that physics hasn't got to the bottom of what ultimately constitutes matter, but up to that barrier we have a fairly precise scientific idea of what matter and energy are—as well as having a ubiquitous phenomenological experience of matter and energy.

On the other hand, we have an even firmer grasp of what mental entities are. We have unmediated access to our own minds. We know our minds better than anything else. We have direct experience of what thoughts are. The furniture of consciousness. Those are the two basic categories of human experience and understanding.

But we have no grasp, no experience, of what it's like for something to be neither mental nor physical. There's no frame of reference. We can give it a label, but it doesn't match anything in human experience or understanding. It's just an opaque postulate.

## Strategic inscrutability

There's a family of objections to God as an explanatory principle. There's Elliott Sober's objection that you can't draw a design inference unless you know the intentions of the designer. There's a related objection to skeptical theism as a double-edged sword: it relieves the problem of evil at the expense of making God generally inscrutable and our corresponding intuitions generally unreliable.

But let's take a comparison. In games like chess, poker, and football—as well as stratagems in warfare—the intentions of the agent are often inscrutable to an outsider. Why did the chess player make this move rather than that move?

It would, however, be erroneous to conclude that just because we may not be able to figure out what the agent is up to, therefore the agent's actions are random. That there is no reason for what he did.

Indeed, we can put a sharper point on that. In the aforesaid examples, the agent will deliberately mask his intentions. He doesn't want his opponent to know what he's up to. He tries to throw him off the scent.

Not only are his intentions obscure, but they are obscure by design. Strategic inscrutability.

So even if an agent's intentions are puzzling, that doesn't mean we should be agnostic about his having intentions. That doesn't mean the outcome is equivalent to chance. Indeed, in cases like military deception, we should infer design *especially* when the agent's behavior is puzzling. It's

not merely that the agent's intentions happen to be obscure; rather, they are intentionally obscure.

## Is God a postulate?

Oppy is arguably the smartest philosophical atheist of his generation, so he's a useful foil:

Theoretical virtues:

Simplicity: If everything else is equal, we should prefer the theory that postulates fewer (and less complex) primitive entities.

It is clear that Naturalism is simpler than Theism: it postulates fewer kinds of entities...According to Theism, there are two kinds of entities—natural and supernatural—whereas according to Naturalism there is only one kind. Graham Oppy, **THE BEST ARGUMENT AGAINST GOD** (Palgrave 2013), 7,19.

Several problems with that argument:

i) I'm not sure what he means by "primitive entities," but I assume he means something other things derive from, that's not derived from other things. If so, then Christian theism has just one primitive entity: God. But in that event, Christian theism meets the condition of simplicity. You can't get much simpler than only one primitive entity.

ii) What makes less complex primitive entities a theoretical virtue? A violin is simpler than a violinmaker. A toy is simpler than a toymaker.

Perhaps Oppy is operating with the notion that complicated things are composed of parts. That complexity is reducible



to simpler and ultimately simple constituents. A planetary biosphere is more complex than the early stages of the universe. A body is composed of parts, composed of molecules, composed of atoms, composed of elementary particles. That's a bottom-up model of reality. Reality constructed from the smallest or simplest building blocks.

But what about topdown models of creativity? Da Vinci's mind is more complex than his paintings. Bach's mind is more complex than his music. Dante's mind is more complex than his fiction. On that view, artifacts are simpler exemplifications of mentality. Instances of something more complex.

Or take an abstract object like the Mandelbrot set. Infinitely complex, although it can be represented in finite instances.

**iii)** I don't know what in particular he has in mind by supernatural entities. Plausible candidates include God, angels, demons, and ghosts. If so, his methodology is eccentric. The way we usually establish if something exists is not by whether that satisfies a theoretical virtue like simplicity, but whether there's any direct evidence, indirect evidence, or counterevidence.

**iv)** Apropos (iii), supernatural entities aren't necessarily or even generally postulates. Although they can sometimes be invoked for their explanatory value, in many cases, people say that supernatural entities exist because they claim to experience supernatural entities. Not a postulate but a direct encounter. Not a posit but an observation. Now, Oppy can dispute the credibility of such reports, but it's a different category than a theoretical postulate. Reality is something we generally discover rather than intuit.



## God and good

I watched a recent debate between Peter Singer and Andy Bannister.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JiM8ul3oRxE>

A few general observations:

**1.** The debate was somewhat frustrating inasmuch as the underlying issue is the difference between atheism and Christianity. The difference between Christian bioethics and secular bioethics is parasitic on that underlying division. In a way it would be more useful to debate atheism directly. However, exposing the serrated austerity of secular bioethics is useful. When the consequences of atheism are spotlighted, that's a reason to reevaluate atheism itself.

**2.** Singer has certain cards in his deck. He's an atheist. This life is all you get. Life has no ultimate purpose. Humans monkeys with big brains. (He didn't say that in the debate, but that's his Darwinian viewpoint.) The brain produces the mind. Although human intelligence overtakes animal intelligence, human babies are less intelligent than adult chimpanzees.

Given the hand he dealt himself, there are only so many ways he can play it. I expect he regards complaints about the harshness of his position as childish and irrelevant. No point complaining about the barbed consequences of his position if that's the reality of the situation. If God doesn't exist, then that takes the best options off the table. Raising idealistic objections to his position ignores the bleak, unyielding facts of our evanescent existence in a Godless

universe. As with captives in a concentration camp, the razor wire is a fixture of our existence, whether we like it or not.

**3.** Up to a point, Singer is right—if atheism is right. But even on his own grounds, Singer's own position is an ad hoc compromise between idealism and nihilism. It's more consistent for an atheist to be a hedonistic nihilist. If there's no God, no afterlife, then it boils down to naked power and ruthless self-interest.

Singer never provided an adequate explanation for his claim that he's not a naturalist when it comes to ethics. And his philanthropy is a sugar-coated cyanide capsule to make the toxic philosophy more palatable and go down smoother.

One can't help noticing that Singer is now an old man. By his own standards, he's siphoning off scarce medical resources that could better be spent on the younger generation who have so much more to live for.

**4.** Singer repeats the same blunder as Hitchens regarding the atonement. The purpose of the atonement is not to eradicate evil or suffering but to make it possible for God to justly forgive sin. The eradication of evil and suffering awaits the Parousia.

**5.** Regarding the Euthyphro dilemma, That's is a challenge to divine command theory. Of course, divine command theorists have responses.

However, a Christian can sidestep that objection by shifting to natural law theory. Human duties are grounded in how God made us. The same rules don't apply to lions, not because the rules are arbitrary, but because lions are different kinds of creatures.

Human duties correspond to human nature. And a human nature that's designed. The notion that some actions are contrary to how things are supposed to be is a teleological principle. But atheism banishes teleological explanations from nature. The Blind Watchmaker and all that. No ultimate purpose for anything.

## Does prayer work?

Posting an exchange I had on Facebook

### PETER

Unfortunately prayer doesn't work.

### HAYS

Whether prayer is ever effective can't be determined by "prayer studies". All that's required is required are examples of a naturally impossible or highly improbable turn of events synchronized with prayer.

### DAVID

Prayers work about as well as you walking into a store and buying the winning lottery ticket

### HAYS

That's a village atheist trope, but there are answers to prayer that resist facile naturalistic explanations.

### DAVID

Just as soon as someone can prove that .. there is I million dollars waiting for them.

### HAYS

And of course the individual or organization offering the reward also plays the referee, so it's a risk-free bet.

### IAN

What fair criteria would you suggest to help prove that prayer works?

## HAYS

**i)** There can be criteria we use to establish that something actually happens or actually exists (or used to exist). Those may be more stringent criteria, and we may use the best examples to establish the claim.

**ii)** If it's been demonstrated that the phenomenon in question actually exists or happens, then that raises the plausibility for claims of the same kind, even if those don't meet the same stringent criteria. It lowers the burden of proof in those cases. If we already know that that sort of thing happens, it will sometimes or oftentimes happen where ideal evidence is lacking, but it would be unreasonable to automatically deny such reports.

If, say, there are, at the same time and place, multiple sightings of ball lightning, and photographic evidence, that makes other reports of ball lightning more credible even if they are isolated and lack the same corroborative evidence. If ball lightning exists, it will be seen under various conditions. Sometimes by multiple witnesses at the same venue, but sometimes not.

**iii)** A miraculous healing synchronized with prayer is strong evidence that there's a prayer-answering God. By miraculous healing, I mean a healing that's naturally impossible or inexplicable.

**iv)** Another class of miracles are what are called coincidence miracles. These don't bypass natural processes. What makes them miraculous is how antecedently

improbable and opportune they are. Miracles of timing that are too discriminating, too auspicious, to be reasonably explained as random events.

### IAN

I am going to push back a little here. If you have proof of fact A, it has no bearing on question B. If we have evidence that Jesus returned from the grave, that fact has no evidentiary power to the question did Lazarus of Bethany return from the grave.

### HAYS

It has a direct bearing on whether events of that kind happen.

### IAN

This is a fallacy of ad populum. Even if we grant that ball lighting exists, A group of people all seeing it and photographic evidence may not be sufficient evidence to logically conclude that it does.

### HAYS

The ad populum fallacy refers to a common belief, not a common empirical observation. Appeal to multiple eyewitnesses is not the ad populum fallacy.

### IAN

Due to an already established psychological phenomenon known as "Mass hallucination"

### HAYS

That's not been established. A hallucination is defined as a perception without an external stimulus. But if there's no



external stimulus producing the perception, why would two or more people have the same perception? It's purely psychological, so there's no common cause to generate a common perception.

### IAN

Also regarding the above paragraph someone who is skeptical may ask how one would determine the photographic evidence was not doctored.

### HAYS

That's paranoid skepticism. Sure, photographic evidence can be doctored, but that's not the first explanation rational people reach for unless there's reason to believe the photographer had some incentive to fake evidence.

### IAN

Sure but again we are discussing criteria for proving prayer works. The fact that photographs can be doctored lowers their evidentiary power. If you told me you had a dog and showed me a picture I would probably believe you. If you showed me a picture of a space alien I would need more. So it is not usable as criteria to prove prayer works.

### HAYS

**i)** Actually, I'm providing hypothetical counterexamples to demonstrate that as a matter of principle, your objections are fallacious.

**ii)** And your comparison between a photograph of a dog and a photograph of a space alien contradicts your contention that we should evaluate every report in isolation to the known occurrence or existence of the reported phenomenon.

### IAN

No. A "miraculous" healing synchronized with prayer is strong evidence of a heretofore unknown reason of said healing.

### HAYS

Now you're resorting to naturalism-of-the-gaps.

### IAN

I never claimed there was a natural explanation I said your statement gave me no way of knowing the cause of the healing. You are the one who inserted god. Also not great criteria for determining if prayer works.

### HAYS

You appealed to "a hitherto unknown reason". That's either going to be natural or supernatural. If, however, the medical condition is naturally incurable, then by process of elimination, it must have a supernatural cause.

### IAN

You would first need to demonstrate that A)There is an ailment and B) it is naturally impossible to heal whatever ailment C)The Unnatural exists D)The unnatural was responsible for healing E)The unnatural was god who was moved by prayer. This at least get's us closer to good criteria for proving prayer. But still a stretch.

### HAYS

i) It's not as if Christians are the only folks to say some medical conditions are naturally incurable. That's standard medical science.

**ii)** No, I don't need to first prove that "the unnatural exists". If the healing is naturally inexplicable, then the only logical alternative is a supernatural explanation.

**iii)** And if the cure synchronizes with prayer, then God is the best explanation.

**IAN**

I have seen more than my fair share of people who take the proper medication for an ailment then thank god that they are healed.

**HAYS**

A non sequitur inasmuch as my examples were not the kinds of ailments responsive to medication.

Your position is self-defeating. Atheists typically deny miracles because they deny that certain kinds of events are compatible with naturalism (i.e. physicalism, causal closure). They don't say the event happened, but it has a naturalistic explanation; rather, they deny the report. Otherwise, they obliterate the distinction between naturalism and supernaturalism, if every kind of event is consistent with naturalism. In that case, naturalism ceases to demarcate categorically different kinds of events.

**IAN**

I acknowledge coincidences happen.

**HAYS**

You seem to be unfamiliar with the nomenclature. A coincidence miracle is not a coincidence. Rather, the label is

a term of art, where causally independent events coincide in naturally inexplicable ways.

### IAN

One in a billion is still a chance regardless of how remote.

### HAYS

You have no criterion to distinguish a coincidence from a manipulated outcome, like beating the odds at poker though cheating.

### IAN

Unless only one or neither of the events happened then they have no bearing what so ever on each other. In the case of resurrection even if I died today and came back tomorrow it would only indicate that resurrection was possible and has no bearing on if jesus was resurrected and further, even if both myself and jesus could be proven to have been brought back to life there would still be no indication as to Lazarus. It does not effect the likely hood at all. Each claim must be investigated independently based on it's own merits or lack there of.

### HAYS

Not just the *possibility* but the *reality*. Rationale people evaluate the credibility of reported claims against a general background understanding about the occurrence or nonoccurrence of certain kinds of events. If there was no evidence that chain-smoking heightens the risk of lung cancer, we wouldn't suspect smoking as a likely cause. If, however, that is known to be a carcinogen, then the explanation has much greater antecedent probability and credibility. So we don't investigate every reported event in

isolation to the known occurrence or nonoccurrence of events of that kind.

IAN

We are not discussing a situation we are firsthand witness too. we are discussing what criteria you think is fair to prove prayer.

HAYS

I'm using a counterexample to demonstrate that your appeal to the ad populum fallacy is misdefines the fallacy.

IAN

You are appealing to the opinion of a populous to form a belief that ball lightning exists or in our specific instance I should take the word of people that prayer works. This is too low a standard of evidence.

HAYS

You continue to misdefine the fallacy you appeal to. If there are multiple sightings of ball-lightning by independent observers, that's probative evidence for the existence of ball lightning. That's not the ad populum fallacy because it's not a bare appeal to popular opinion but belief grounded in the empirical observation of multiple eyewitnesses.

IAN

Hundreds of people witnessed David Copperfield vanish the statue of liberty. My point is this is not a valid criteria to prove prayer works.

HAYS

A counterproductive illustration. That wasn't a hallucination, much less a mass hallucination. He's a magician who concealed the statue by using a giant screen or curtain. The inability to see an object hidden behind a barrier is hardly a hallucination. The audience couldn't see the statue because there was a physical obstruction blocking the view. So that had an external cause. It wasn't a psychological perception with nothing on the outside producing it.

IAN

I haven't commented on my position regarding miracles. Our conversation is regarding criteria to prove prayer works.

HAYS

A miraculous healing in response to prayer is an example of a veridical answer to prayer.

IAN

But since you brought up one atheist's position I will comment. If god exists then god is natural. anything that god did would also be natural."

HAYS

If you define naturalism so elastically that naturalism is consistent with any kind of thing happening, then naturalism is a vacuous idea.

IAN

I have no reason to believe that there is even a concept of unnatural.

HAYS

i) Naturalism is standardly defined as a combination of physicalism and causal closure (cf. SEP entry). It is certainly possible to form a concept of nonphysical entities. Abstract objects are the paradigm example. Even if you don't believe in abstract objects, they are conceivable. Moreover, some atheists are platonic realists. They believe in abstract objects, which by definition subsist outside of space and time.

ii) Likewise, the alternative to a closed system is an open system. It's certainly possible to form the concept of the universe as an open system. That's how atheist philosopher J. L. Mackie delineates the concept of miracle, in his classic monograph.

### IAN

The label is irrelevant. 'causally independent events coincide in naturally inexplicable ways' does not lead us to any rational explanation of said event.

### HAYS

To the contrary, it leads to an explanation that falls outside the boundaries of naturalism (i.e. physicalism, causal closure).

### IAN

Nor does it get us one step closer to the ultimate cause of said event. I cannot see how a 'Coincidence miracle' has evidentiary power to prove prayer works. Therefore I do not believe we can use it as criteria for proving prayer.

### HAYS

Because it's more reasonable to explain some outcomes as the result of personal agency than dumb luck. Suppose a

hacker reprograms the lottery computer so that every ticket he buys is a winning ticket, even though the lottery is supposed to be randomized so that nearly every ticket is a losing ticket. Some outcomes are too lucky to be sheer luck.

IAN

Therefore we should discount it as evidence.

HAYS

So you seem to be conceding that you have no criterion to distinguish a random outcome from a planned or engineered outcome. But that's a reductio ad absurdum of your position.

IAN

Can you please define naturally incurable and give me an example of something that exists that is naturally incurable that standard medical science has pointed too?.

HAYS

You're not being intellectually honest.

IAN

Please give me an example of something that exists that is naturally inexplicable.

HAYS

God, miracles, possession by evil spirits. That's three.

IAN

Also can you define the supernatural for me...



HAYS

I already did that in reference to Mackie.

IAN

...and point me to one proven example of something supernatural.

HAYS

Miracles, demonic possession, and postmortem apparitions are three well-documented examples.

IAN

I did not define naturalism at all. You are the one who seems to be hung up on everything being put into little boxes.

HAYS

That's because you're intellectually evasive. You want to make your position unfalsifiable by making it as vague and noncommittal.

It's not like these are just Christian boxes. These are boxes used by major atheist philosophers.

IAN

I don't care about this definition, How does any of this help us define what criteria to use to determine that prayer works?

HAYS

Because answers to prayers require supernatural agency.

IAN

In other words imaginary.

### HAYS

i) Once again, abstract objects are a paradigm example of nonphysical objects that aren't imaginary.

ii) And there's multiple lines of evidence that causal closure is false.

### IAN

I would rely on evidence to distinguish a planned from random out come.

### HAYS

Which includes evidence for answered prayer.

### IAN

In the absence of evidence I would acknowledge that I don't know. I am not so self important as to think that I have all the answers and assert my opinion as fact.

### HAYS

You're a secular fideist. You defend atheism by taking refuge in anti-intellectualism. Pretending that this is about lack of evidence. Refusing to let yourself be pinned down on standard categories and logical alternatives. This is not a constructive dialogue.

## Gerrymandering naturalism

Ultimately, determination of the comparative theoretical virtues of theories is a global matter: what counts is which theory does better overall, on an appropriate weighting of theoretical commitment, explanation of data, predictive accuracy, fit with established knowledge, and so forth. In particular, then, when it comes to questions about data, what matters is which theory does better at explaining total data.

Roughly speaking, it seems to me that, while there are no particular theoretical commitments of naturalism that are keyed to data concerning the distribution of suffering and flourishing in our universe, there may be particular theoretical commitments of theism that are keyed to data concerning the distribution of suffering and flourishing in our universe.

On the one hand, there is no natural–non-gerrymandered–sub-theory of naturalism that prompts questions, or worries, or issues related to the distribution of suffering or flourishing in our universe. On naturalistic accounts of the origins and evolution of life on earth, there is nothing surprising about the distribution of suffering and flourishing across the surface of the earth. In particular, there are no theoretical commitments of naturalism—no ontological or ideological commitments of naturalism—that are keyed to the data about the distribution of suffering and flourishing across the surface of the earth; there are no special hypotheses that naturalists introduce to

accommodate or to explain the distribution of suffering and flourishing across the surface of the earth.

On the other hand, it is pretty much universally recognized that the same is not true for theism. In this case, there may be natural–non-gerrymandered–sub-theories that do prompt questions, or worries, or issues that are related to the distribution of suffering and flourishing in our universe, and, in particular, to the distribution of suffering and flourishing across the surface of the earth. If we suppose—as theists typically do, that, in the beginning, there was nothing but a perfect being—omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and so forth—and if everything else is the creation of that perfect being, then what explains the presence of evil in our universe? If we suppose—as theists typically do—that God exercises strong providential control over everything that happens and that God would prefer that we do not suffer, then why is it that we suffer as we do?

Furthermore, it is pretty much universally recognized that there may be theoretical commitments of theistic worldviews that are keyed to the distribution of suffering in our universe. Some theists suppose that the distribution of horrendous natural evil is a consequence of the activities of demons and other malign supernatural agents; and, for these theists, the main reason for supposing that there are demons and other malign supernatural agents is that this supposition explains the distribution of horrendous natural evil in our universe. Some theists suppose that God's permission of the distribution of horrendous moral evil that is found in our universe is, in part, due to God's recognition that there are goods beyond our

ken whose obtaining depends upon there being at least relevantly similar distribution of horrendous moral evil; and, for these theists, the main reason for supposing that there are goods beyond our ken whose obtaining depends upon there being an at least relevantly similar distribution of horrendous moral evil is that this supposition explains God's permission of the distribution of horrendous moral evil in our universe. Graham Oppy, "The Problems of Evil," N. N. Trakakis, ed. **THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: EIGHT VIEWS IN DIALOGUE** (Cambridge 2018), chap. 3.

i) Oppy's basic strategy, which he's expressed in numerous venues, is to use simplicity as a criterion to eliminate philosophical contenders. Yet he admits that while a particular position may be simpler in one respect, the final grade relies on the overall explanatory power of competing worldviews, rather than isolated cases of superior simplicity.

ii) The immediate objection is that naturalism requires no special explanation for the distribution of evil or suffering in the world. Naturalism is, in itself, an explanation. An atheist doesn't believe in naturalism in spite of suffering and evil. Rather, that phenomenon is easily accounted for given naturalism. By contrast, a Christian believes in Christian theism despite suffering and evil. A Christian is forced to posit additional hypotheses to save their religious theory from falsification. Naturalism doesn't need these epicycles. In naturalism, nothing extra is needed over and above naturalism itself to account for the distribution of suffering and evil.

**iii)** One problem with Oppy's analysis is the way he uses "suffering" and "evil" as synonyms. But "evil" has ethical and teleological connotations that "suffering" does not. For instance, suffering in the sense of "moral evil" is irreducibly ethical or teleological. Something went wrong.

**iv)** You can take naturalism or atheism as a starting-point, but move to Christian theism from that secular starting-point. Many atheists act as if the world is not the way it's supposed to be. So that's not just a point of tension generated by a Christian outlook. Many atheists are profoundly disturbed by the world as they find it.

Likewise, consider Buddhism. That's a useful frame of reference because Buddhism is pre-Christian and naturalistic. It wasn't influenced by Christianity and Judaism. Yet it reflects a fundamental disaffection with the world as it stands. Life is so irredeemably bad that we must practice radical emotional detachment.

Ironically, most atheists, even though they think this world is all there is, are alienated from the world as it is. And they often turn to utopian schemes to rectify the problem. Therefore, Oppy's contrast between Christianity and naturalism is deceptive.

**v)** Then there's the question of whether physical organisms are even capable of suffering. Eliminative materialists argue that an arrangement of particles can't generate psychological states. So naturalists like Oppy do posit something extra ("suffering") to accommodate phenomena. That's not a feature of naturalism, but a grudging concession in spite of naturalism. Hence, many naturalists are guilty of gerrymandering to accommodate recalcitrant data consistent with their physicalism.

**vi)** Which theists attribute natural evils to demonic agency? Unless I'm misremembering, Plantinga floated that in response to the logical problem of evil. But that's a question of consistency rather than plausibility. In folk theology it's common to attribute natural evils to vindictive gods or demons.

However, belief in demonic agency isn't primarily an apologetic postulate to explain the distribution of horrendous natural evil on earth. Rather, many people claim to experience the activity of malevolent spirits. Belief in evil spirits has, in the first instance, an evidential basis. Indeed, that's well-documented. Sometimes it is then pressed into service as an apologetic explanation for certain natural evils—yet theologians don't appeal to demonic agency to explain natural evils in general, but only limited range of natural evils whose specific characteristics invite that supernatural diagnosis.

**vii)** The reason for believing there are second-order goods is religious in one respect but independent of religion in another. It is dependent on religion in the sense that good and evil are normative concepts which make no sense in a naturalistic paradigm. However, the principle of nested relations isn't essentially religious, but a matter of logically inclusive paired relations, viz. you can't be somebody's grandson unless you're somebody's son.

## What if evolution bred reality out of us?

From a brief exchange I had with atheist philosopher Stephen Law on Facebook:

### **Law**

This doesn't sound like your vision of apologetics, Jonathan - which is to follow reason wherever it leads: be it towards or away from faith.

### **Hays**

Speaking for myself, I don't subscribe to following reason wherever it leads: be it towards or away from faith. Reason doesn't have the same status in naturalism that it has in Christianity. According to Christian theology, we're endowed with reason by a wise, benevolent, omniscient, omnipotent creator. According to naturalistic evolution, reason is a byproduct of a mindless process. So why suppose reason is trustworthy if it leads you away from the very basis for trusting in reason in the first place? That's a paradox of naturalism. If it's true, it can't be trusted—in which case it can't be trusted to be true.

There's a problem when atheists as well as some Christian apologists both treat reason in the abstract, as if the nature of reason is independent of your worldview. But reason isn't normative in naturalism. Reason can't be normative in naturalism. According to naturalistic evolution, human intelligence is the incidental product of an unintelligent process.



Christianity and naturalism have different backstories for reason. And that makes quite a difference for how we should regard reason. Indeed, eliminative naturalists dismiss mental states as folk psychology.

Edit or delete this

## **Law**

No that's a poor argument run by Alvin Plantinga called the Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism. It doesn't work - even many theists reject it (e.g. Michael Bergmann). BTW, reason is potentially just as much a problem for theism because theism says: your reason can be trusted, but then reason threatens to undermine theism. So that's the paradox of theism, then! Of course, you do *generally* follow wherever reason leads, except perhaps when it threatens your faith.

## **Hays**

Sure about that?

<https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2016/09/06/492779594/what-if-evolution-bred-reality-out-of-us>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/04/the-illusion-of-reality/479559/>

For a more technical analysis:

<http://cogsci.uci.edu/~ddhoff/PerceptualEvolution.pdf>

## **Law**

Yeh, I know. I have published academic papers on this stuff, particularly the versions aimed at showing naturalism is 'self-defeating' - which is your line. You can even still hear me discussing it with Plantinga in an episode of Unbelievable, I think. As I say, IMO the argument fails. And there are leading theists who agree with me.

## **Hays**

And there are non-Christians who agree with me (see above).

## **Law**

Yes we know. But don't go away with the impression you've got some sort of killer argument that deals with any atheist suggesting reason is a threat to theism, or that allows you to discount any such argument. You'd be kidding yourself.

## **Hays**

I'm quite capable of dealing with atheists who allege that reason poses a threat to theism. I do that on a regular basis.

## **Law**

BTW also don't assume atheists are naturalists - I am the former but not the latter (except on Plantinga's rather weird use of 'naturalism').

## **Hays**

Well, as Paul Draper points out,

Many writers at least implicitly identify atheism with a positive metaphysical theory like naturalism or even materialism.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/atheism-agnosticism/#DefiAthe>

Likewise:

Many ontological naturalists thus adopt a physicalist attitude to mental, biological and other such "special" subject matters. They hold that there is nothing more to the mental, biological and social realms than arrangements of physical entities.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/naturalism/#MakCauDif>

In the final twentieth-century phase, the acceptance of the causal closure of the physical led to full-fledged physicalism. The causal closure thesis implied that, if mental and other

special causes are to produce physical effects, they must themselves be physically constituted. It thus gave rise to the strong physicalist doctrine that anything that has physical effects must itself be physical.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/naturalism/#RisPhy>

## **Law**

Less than 15% of prof philosophers even lean towards theism. Yet only 50% are 'naturalists'. So that's fully a third of them that are neither. Including me. PhilPapers survey.

## **Hays**

About that:

<https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/article/does-religion-really-have-a-smart-people-problem/4610/>

## Explaining evil, part 3

Wielenberg is a secular ethicist who labors to be a moral realist.

Part of the answer...is that for something to be evil is for there to be a reason to avoid or eliminate a thing (123).

But that's indiscriminate since what people take to be something to avoid or eliminate is so variable from one person to the next.

Whether a person is happy depends on the attitude of someone—namely, the person himself—but it does not depend upon the attitudes of observers towards him (125).

As social creatures, our happiness is typically dependent on the attitudes of others.

Like Chalmers, I endorse the existence of nonphysical properties (128).

**i)** Isn't Chalmers a panpsychic? So that's an appeal to mental properties. But Wielenberg's position seems to be moral platonism rather than panpsychism.

**ii)** Assuming he's a Platonist, he must believe basic ethical facts are abstract objects They exist even if there was no universe.

**iii)** If so, what are they? They're not physical or mental properties. So they have no analogy in human experience.

**iv)** How are they instantiated? What's the mechanism? His nonphysical properties aren't agents and his evolutionary physical processes aren't agents.

**v)** Assuming these impersonal immaterial properties exist, how do they obligate human conduct? They didn't create us. They aren't intelligent entities. They are indifferent to human flourishing. Why are we duty-bound to conform our behavior to these impersonal properties?

**vi)** If human beings are merely physical organisms, how do we gain access to nonempirical moral facts? How do unintelligent evolutionary processes tap into immaterial moral facts in order to instill them in human beings? It can't be a physical causal connection if one relatum of the cause/effect relation is immaterial.

Theists typically maintain that the fact that God exists is a brute fact. As Richard Swinburne puts it, "No other agent or natural law or principle or necessity is responsible for the existence of God. His existence is an ultimate brute fact...Many such theists also maintain that God exists necessarily (129).

I call such facts basic ethical facts. Such facts are the foundation of (the rest of) objective morality and the rest rest on no foundation themselves. To ask of such facts, "Where do they come from?" or "On what foundation do they rest?" is misguided in much the way that, according to many atheists, it is misguided to ask of God, "Where does he come from?"...The answer is the same in both cases: they come from nowhere, and nothing external to themselves grounds their existence; rather, they are fundamental features of the universe that ground other truths. (130).

Such connections are part of the fundamental, bottom level of reality. It might be objected that such a view builds a suspiciously convenience (from a human perspective) degree of order and rationality into the basic structure of the universe (132).

Atheists, for their part, typically hold that there are some basic laws of nature for which there is no deeper explanation (a commitment that theistic critics often argue is problematic). These basic laws of nature are suspiciously amendable to undemanding by the human mind (133).

What is the source of evil in a godless universe? I propose that objective morality has no foundation external to itself but instead ultimately rests on a foundation of basic ethical facts—necessary ethical truths and no external explanation (138).

Apparently, Wielenberg's strategy is to justify his secular moral realism by drawing parallels with theism:

**i)** But since he's an atheist, even if there's a parallel methodology, he thinks it's mistaken for theists to posit God as a brute fact. So where does that leave his analogy?

**ii)** As an atheist, does his position have the metaphysical machinery to accommodate necessary, immaterial properties? As one reviewer observes:

Wielenberg asserts an extremely strong form of ethical realism. Ethical truths are "part of the furniture of the universe". Moreover, they are not only objectively true, but are necessarily true, constituting the "ethical background of every possible universe." (p. 52). Yet it

is not at all clear how most of the forms of naturalism currently on offer could support such universal and necessary ethical truths. Wielenberg announces at the start of the book that he is not the brash materialist kind of naturalist who believes that all facts are scientific facts or reducible to the language of physical science. But he goes on nevertheless to endorse a radically materialistic picture of the cosmos, where everything there is arises "through a combination of necessity and chance" (p. 3) from physical and chemical origins. Could such a picture of the universe allow for irreducible necessary truths of morality?

<https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/value-and-virtue-in-a-godless-universe/>

**iii)** If you already have a good prior reason to believe in necessary moral facts, then that might justify the postulation of whatever is necessary to underwrite them, but isn't Wielenberg's basic position that reality is a bottom-up process, beginning with matter, energy, and physical processes? On that view, what reason is there to think necessary moral facts exist? Even if evolutionary psychology could explain moral instincts, yet upon reflection we come to realize that our moral instincts are an illusion fostered by evolutionary conditioning.

**iv)** Apropos (iii), his program is not justifiably analogous to the brute factuality of God, for that appeals to a topdown principle, where mind is prior to matter and energy.

**v)** His position seems to be an opportunistic amalgam of moral platonism and evolutionary ethics. But those are two very different paradigms.



**vi)** Is it possible for there to be absolutely nothing? If there was nothing at all, would it be true that there was nothing at all? But if there was nothing at all, there'd be no logic, no propositions, no minds with true beliefs. So that's a per impossibile counterfactual. Hence, there can't be absolutely nothing. Rather, there must be something, and that something must include logic and propositions. And arguably, that requires a mind.

Why does God strongly willing p robustly cause the obtaining of p rather than, say, not-p? Why does God strongly willing p robustly cause anything at all?...It might be suggested that God's essential omnipotence explains the existence of these robust causal connections. But that proposal fails because the existence of robust causal connection is itself a component of divine omnipotence. It appears, then, that my view and the theistic view both require the existence of robust causal connections that are rational and make sense (from a human perspective) and yet for which there is no explanation (133).

I don't know what he means. God merely willing something doesn't cause it to be. Rather, God creatively and providentially implements his will. Is Wielenberg's objection that we don't know how that happens?

To take a comparison, if there's evidence that Cartesian dualism is true, then we don't need to know how the mind and body interact to know that they do. But the comparison breaks down with Wielenberg in part because there's no reason, given atheism, to suppose necessary moral facts exist or that evolution is their conduit.

The operations of the adaptive unconscious are fast, automatic, and effortless, whereas the operations of

the conscious mind are slow and effortful..."You round a corner and see a group of young hoodlums pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it...you do not need to conclude that what they are doing is wrong; you do not need to figure anything out; you can see that it is wrong...You do not consciously form the belief: "Those hoodlums are torturing a cat just for fun!" This classification triggers feelings of disgust and outrage in you, and those feelings in turn produce the conscious belief that what the hoodlums are doing is evil...I take it that evolutionary processes have instilled certain moral principles into most human beings (155-57).

**i)** That's confused. It's true that we don't infer that what they are doing is evil. It's a spontaneous reaction. But that doesn't mean we literally see it. Moral properties are unempirical. Rather, we interpret the action as evil. We have a moral framework to evaluate the action.

**ii)** Furthermore, the thugs don't think what they are doing is evil. So what is Wielenberg's standard of comparison? He can't appeal to necessary moral facts, for who's to say the action of the thugs may not correspond to a necessary moral fact? Indeed, cruelty is commonplace in human behavior. Evolutionary processes have instilled sadism in human nature.

In fact, psychopaths figure prominently in his moral analysis. But how does he know that psychopaths don't instantiate necessary moral truths? Is he just taking a headcount?

## Is Paul begging the question?

I'll make a few comments about this post:

[https://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick\\_philosopher/2019/01/reading-now-cornelius-van-til-the-defense-of-the-faith.html](https://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2019/01/reading-now-cornelius-van-til-the-defense-of-the-faith.html)

**1.** It's anachronistic to read Paul through the prism of Hume. Viewed from a post-Enlightenment context, it may seem like Paul is begging the question, but the thought-world of the 1C Roman Empire was generally very different from the Enlightenment and its secular progeny. (There was, to be sure, the occasional skeptic or atheist.)

**2.** In addition, Paul is writing to and for Christians. Jewish and Gentile converts to Christianity. The argument from authority is not fallacious if your target audience shares the same paradigm. The implied reader of Paul's letter acknowledged the dim view of pagan idolatry and immorality in OT Judaism.

**3.** There's a circular quality to Vallicella's complaint. He doesn't identify as a Christian. He's merely a theist who's "sympathetic" to Christianity. Given his outlook, he naturally rejects Paul's classically Jewish characterization of pagan infidelity. In part, Vallicella is giving us his autobiographical reaction. He doesn't see it the same way as Paul because he's on the other side of the issue. But that carries no presumption that Paul is wrong. Whatever your position, by definition you will disagree with the opposing position.

Needless to say, Paul's indictment will be unconvincing to someone who doesn't share that outlook. It wasn't meant to be independently persuasive. Rather, it plays an explanatory role in Paul's overall presentation. There's an inner logic to the argument in Romans. So the hermeneutical issue is the role that Rom 1 plays in the larger flow of argument. If God is just but humans are unjust, then that has implications for the nature of salvation. The hermeneutical question is the logical relationship between Rom 1 and the remainder of Romans. How Rom 1 functions in Paul's argumentative strategy, given the task he set for himself. Given the target audience.

**4.** Of course Paul didn't present a scientific or philosophical defense of God's existence. He doesn't use modal logic or Bayesian probability theory. He doesn't mount a fine-tuning argument based on modern astronomy. That would be anachronistic and unintelligible to his readers. Indeed, that would still be incomprehensible for most modern readers. He isn't writing with a view to modern philosophers and scientists.

As Vallicella knows, theistic proofs are becoming increasingly technical. And critiques of theistic proofs are becoming increasingly technical. Romans does not and cannot operate at that level.

Suppose there are conjectures and hypotheses in math that require superhuman intelligence to solve. In principle, there are apodictic proofs or disproofs, but they require superhuman intelligence to understand. Indeed, that's likely the case. The paradox is that we're smart enough to ask questions we're too dumb to answer.

By the same token, what would a sound argument for God's existence look like? What if an apodictic proof for God's existence would be so technical, so daunting, that it's out of reach of human reason?

Indeed, that's plausible. Even the smartest human beings have limited intelligence and hit a wall when pushing the boundaries. Although their mind takes them further than average thinkers, they still hit a wall. It's just lies a little further out for them.

**5.** However, all of us know many things we don't bother to prove. We know many things it might be impossible to prove.

**6.** Van Til doesn't simply accuse the unbeliever of suppressing his natural knowledge of God. Elsewhere, Van Til attempts to mount a transcendental argument for God's existence. His argument is underdeveloped, but he doesn't rest the whole case on appeal to Rom 1.

**7.** Vallicella says:

But *is* the world a divine creation? This is the question, and the answer is not obvious. That the natural world is a divine artifact is not evident to the senses, or to the heart, or to reason. Of course, one can argue for the existence of God from the existence and order of the natural world. I have done it myself. But those who reject theistic arguments, and construct anti-theistic arguments, have their reasons too, and it cannot fairly be said that what animates the best of them is a stubborn and prideful refusal to submit to a truth that is evident. It is simply not objectively evident to the senses or the intellect or the heart that the natural world is a divine artifact. If it were objectively evident,

then there would be no explanation of the existence of so many intellectually penetrating, morally upright, and sincere atheists. Even if the atheisms of Nietzsche, Russell, Sartre, and Hitchens could be dismissed as originating in pride, stubbornness, and a willful refusal to recognize any power or authority beyond oneself, or beyond the human, as may well be the case with the foregoing luminaries, it does not follow that the atheism of all has this origin.

There's a lot there to sort out:

**i)** Are there morally upright atheists? One issue is whether naturalism can justify moral realism. Some atheists are dutiful despite the nihilistic implications of their position. The question is whether their scrupulosity is consistent with the naturalism they espouse.

**ii)** In addition, what is moral for an atheist may be immoral for a Christian. Take Peter Singer. He's very moralistic, but his ethical positions are often evil by Christian standards.

**iii)** It's not evident to the senses (alone) that a Ferrari is an artifact. We recognize that a Ferrari is an artifact because we place what we see in a larger conceptual framework.

**iv)** Philosophy has a long history of saying that what is evidently the case is not the case when we scrutinize it. So I'm unclear on why Vallicella makes what is "evident" the criterion.

**v)** Ironically, the most obvious, fundamental truths may be hardest to prove. How do you prove an obvious truth without recourse to something even more obvious? But what if there's nothing more obvious? How do you prove a fundamental truth without recourse to something even

more fundamental? But what if there's nothing more fundamental?

Take debates over the nature of time. The A-theory and the B-theory. Metrical conventionalism and metrical objectivism (e.g. Poincaré). Consider subtle arguments by McTaggart and Gödel that time is illusory. Yet nothing is more fundamental or evident in human experience than time. Yet the very fact that we're so conditioned by time makes it difficult to achieve the critical detachment necessary to study time in itself. We must always study time in relation to ourselves.

By the same token, if God exists, then he's bedrock reality. But that means we shouldn't expect him to be directly evident—precisely because he lies *behind* everything else.

Which is not to deny that God may condescend to our level by providing some people with intellectual shortcuts (e.g. the argument from miracles, answered prayer).

**vi)** What is evident to one person may be inevident to another person. After doing a physical exam, it may be evident to a medical specialist that a patient has a particular disease. That's not evident to a nonspecialist. Even though the nature of the patient's condition may be inevident to most observers, the medical specialist is right.

**vii)** There can, moreover, be moral or intellectual impediments to the recognition of what is or ought to be evident. Consider atrocities that humans commit against other human beings. They treat the victims as subhuman, but is it not evident that the victims are just as human as the perps? Failure to recognize what is or ought to be evident can be culpable.

**viii)** In modern western atheism, the foil isn't generally theism in the abstract but some version of Christianity. Christianity isn't based on what's naturally evident, but historical knowledge. How many atheists seriously investigate the evidence for Christianity?

In my observation, nearly all the most brilliant atheists (e.g. great mathematicians and physicists) assume that Christianity or theism has already been disproven, so they don't even bother to study the evidence. They think that's a settled issue. They make the preliminary snap judgment that there's nothing there to look into.



## Are specific claims improbable?

One atheist objection I've run across goes like this: the more specific a claim, the more antecedently improbable the claim. There's an inverse relation between specificity and probability. So, for instance, Christian theism is more antecedently improbable than mere theism.

To which I'd respond:

**i)** For anything to exist, there must be a minimum threshold of complexity. So it's artificial to speak in the abstract about the prior probability of specific claims, as if something simpler is more likely to exist or occur than something more complex. Reality isn't incrementally reducible to zero.

By that logic, it's more antecedently probable that nothing whatsoever exists. But if nonexistence is the default assumption, why does anything exist? For that matter, probability theory is quite complex. Does that make it antecedently improbable that probability theory exists? But it takes probability theory to probabilify anything. So it can't be self-referential.

**ii)** Even assuming for argument's sake that the principle is true, it's misleading inasmuch as a more specific claim may have more specific evidence than a less specific claim. Christian theism may have a lot more evidence than mere theism.

## Secular neutrality

On Twitter, Jeff Lowder attempted to respond to my post (unless his tweets are sheer coincidence):

Did you know that "I (the speaker) exist" and "It's hot on the surface of the sun" are both consistent with nihilism? No one worries about that, so why do some apologists think it's a big deal that atheism is consistent with nihilism?

For the glaringly obvious reason that logical consistency with the surface temperature of the sun has no bearing on whether human life is important or worthwhile—which is hardly analogous to the logical consistency of atheism with nihilism.

To take a comparison, suppose I'm a churchgoing member of the Khmer Rouge. Suppose I defend my behavior by saying Christianity is neutral on the Khmer Rouge. It's theologically consistent for a Christian to support or oppose the Khmer Rouge.

Or suppose I'm a churchgoing Stalinist. I helped Stalin plan the forced famines. Suppose I defend my behavior by saying Christianity is neutral on Stalinism, It's theologically consistent for a Christian to support or oppose policies that starve millions of men, women, and children.

Would that be "uninteresting"? To the contrary, it would be extremely discrediting.

While atheism is consistent with nihilism, that fact is uninteresting because an atheist can consistently hold

other beliefs which entail that nihilism is false. (Again, atheism doesn't entail nihilism.)

Aside from the fact that Jeff is begging the question (since it's arguable that atheism does entail nihilism), his response illustrates his persistent blindspot. Is it really uninteresting to say a consistent atheist can be or not be a moral and existential nihilist?

Suppose we said Buddhism is neutral on nihilism, so that a consistent Buddhist may rape little girls and torture elderly women while other Buddhists may, with equal consistency, disapprove of that behavior. Buddhism is indifferent about raping little girls and torturing elderly women.

Would that be an uninteresting fact about Buddhism? Or would that be a revealing and disreputable fact about Buddhism?

## Why not commit apostasy?

The primary reason I wouldn't commit apostasy is because the case for Christianity is overwhelming, based on multiple lines of evidence, direct and indirect, public and private. But there are additional considerations:

**i)** It would be a betrayal of my own generation, as well as younger generations in the pipeline. I care what happens to them. It would be as if I know the way out of the cave, but I keep that to myself. I refuse to show lost men, women, and children the way out of the cave. I leave them there to die in the dark, leave them there to die of thirst. Even if I personally wanted to commit suicide in the cave, I have a duty to show the lost the way out of the cave, and go back for more.

**ii)** As a Christian blogger, I've had enormous exposure to apostates and atheists. I find them repellent. Even if I lost my faith, I'd far rather continue attending church than spend my time in the social company of apostates and atheists. They'd make dreadful company. People who think this life is enough are unbearably shallow, and willfully superficial.

And how many would take a bullet for a friend. In fairness, there's the occasional atheist who will take a bullet for a friend, but nothing is dumber than idealistic atheists. That's not an attitude I respect or admire.

I'm not talking about friendship evangelism or outreach to unbelievers. I'm talking about the notion that the company of apostates and atheists would ever be an appealing alternative to Christian friendship and fellowship.

I'd add that some people who lose their faith regain their faith. So maintaining Christian fellowship wouldn't just be a palliative.

## Is there no evidence for God's existence?

Recently, there was a dialogue between Christian philosopher Josh Rasmussen and atheist Tom Jump:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8LfwMqFImc>

It's a long slog. For the philosophically-inclined. It illustrates the ultimately presuppositional nature of debate between naturalism and Christian theism:

- 1.** Jump often defaults to a kind of linguistic positivism (a la Carnap, Quine, protocol sentences) in which logic and reason are reducible to language and linguistic tokens.
- 2.** It's ironic how Jump dismisses Josh's position as ad hoc while, in the same breath, he demotes value, mind, and logic to emergent properties or projections. It doesn't occur to him that his own position is ad hoc because it forces him to relegate things like value, mind, and logic to the realm of secondary effects or imaginary things we project onto the world.
- 3.** He defines simplicity, or a parsimonious explanation, as a finite thing causing another finite thing. He thinks inferring God is a more complicated explanation because God is more complex. He fails to appreciate how God can be a unifying principle.

To take a comparison, consider the explanatory power of abstract objects like the Mandelbrot set. Even though it's infinitely internally complex, yet just one abstract object (Mandelbrot set) can ground an indefinite number of finite simulations of the Mandelbrot set. That's simpler than an

atomistic explanation where every simulation of the Mandelbrot set is caused by another concrete particular (whatever that would be). It's more economical to explain how one complex thing grounds many individual instances rather than requiring a separate explanation for each and every particular.

**4.** On a related note, he fails to distinguish between a one-to-one explanation and a one-to-many explanation. The indefinite multiplication of one-to-one explanations is far more cumbersome and inefficient than a one-to-many explanation. If one thing can be the ultimate source of many things, even if the source is complex, that's a more elegant explanation than individual things causing other individual things ad infinitum.

**5.** In the same vein, he defines simplicity as the least thing required to account for the result ("most simple...exactly what is required"). But that's very nearsighted. Take artistic creativity. Take da Vinci's Adoration of the Magi (or Handel's Messiah). No doubt a painting requires a painter at least as complex as the painting. But the Adoration of the Magi is just a sample of da Vinci's creative abilities. It's not a one-to-one match where that's all da Vinci is capable of doing. Da Vinci had a lot more in reserve. In general, a creator is greater than what he creates. He can't be less than what he creates. He must have enough imagination and skill to do it. But a creator brings more to the task than the task requires. That's typically the case even for human agents.

**6.** To take another example: suppose a guy plays roulette once a month at the local casino. Nothing flashy, yet he consistently performs just a little better than the odds. As a result, he wins more often than he loses. Coincidentally, he makes enough each time to cover his monthly living expenses.

By Jump's criterion, the gambler got lucky. We assess each dice throw in isolation, since that's the simplest explanation, if by simple we mean "exactly what is required" to explain each throw of the dice.

The other explanation is that he has a subtle way of cheating. Although there's no direct evidence of cheating, the fact that he consistently beats the odds, albeit by a small margin, is indirect evidence. We're not restricting ourselves to "exactly what is required" to explain each individual throw of the dice, but how to explain the overall pattern.



## Life in the compound

A stock objection to Christianity is that it's unreasonable for God to punish people simply because they refuse to believe in him. Indeed, the accusation is often harsher: God must be an emotionally insecure, egotistical bully if he cares that much what humans think of him.

As a matter of fact, I don't think God's self-esteem is indexed to what humans think of him—although freewill theists often act like that's the case. Rather, the problem is what it says about us.

The problem runs much deeper than belief. To revisit an illustration I've used in the past, it's like people are born in a concentration camp. It's not a question of losing their freedom. Rather, captivity is their situation from the outset. The question is what, if anything, they will do to get out.

The camp is rumored to have a hidden tunnel which some prisoners use as an escape route. However, most prisoners make no effort to confirm the existence of the tunnel. They are content to live out their days in the concentration camp.

Indeed, they are very protective about their captivity. If they overhear a prisoner plotting to escape, they rat him out to the prison guards. They cheer when he's shot.

Many unbelievers don't make any serious effort to find out if Christianity is true. They know that death is inevitable. Although they may not believe in the afterlife, they haven't seriously investigated the question. Instead, they piss away their life in utter indifference. There might be a tunnel right under their feet, but they don't bother to look for the

entrance. They plant flowers in the graveyard. Decorate the barracks. Compose patriotic songs about the concentration camp. Snitch on disloyal prisoners.

## The problem with TAG

I was asked to comment on this post:

<https://useofreason.wordpress.com/2015/11/07/the-problem-with-tag/>

I believe Alex Malpass is an atheist with a doctorate in philosophy. He's critiquing a version of presuppositionalism represented by Bahnsen and Butler. Certainly Michael Butler is several notches above the Syeclones. However, I think that's a fairly retro version of presuppositionalism. There are more promising versions. So that's not the version I'd defend.

Talk of 'the Christian worldview' and 'the non-Christian worldview' is to be taken with a pinch of salt (although this will prove controversial later). Obviously, there are lots of different denominations of Christianity, including reformed Presbyterian, Lutheran, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, etc. Equally, there are many distinct non-Christian positions, including every denomination of every other religious worldview, plus every variation of atheist worldview, etc.

In context, "the Christian worldview" is shorthand for Calvinism. Van Til was a Calvinist and his successors are Calvinists. And his Calvinism is not incidental to his position. In virtue of predestination and meticulous providence, everything happens for a reason. That's an essential component of presuppositionalism, in contrast to freewill theism or non-Christian worldviews where many events are pointless. This doesn't mean presuppositionalism requires Calvinism, per se, but it does require predestination and meticulous providence. In addition to Calvinism, other

examples include the Augustinian tradition, classical Thomism, and Jansenism. Anything along those lines could lay a foundation for presuppositionalism.

Here is my argument in a nutshell:

1. TAG is successful only if every non-Christian worldview necessarily entails a contradiction (or is 'internally incoherent').
2. There is a potentially infinite number of non-Christian worldviews.
3. Either:
4. a) There is one way to establish that all the non-Christian worldviews are internally incoherent, or b) One proof is not enough but there is a finite number of ways to establish that they are all incoherent, or c) There is an infinite number of ways required to establish that they are all incoherent.
5. No proponent of TAG has established a); and it seems easy to prove that b) cannot be established (given a plausible formalization of 'worldview' as a set of beliefs); and if c) then it is not possible for a finite being to prove TAG.
6. Therefore, TAG has not been established, and is likely to be unprovable.

That raises a raft of issues:

**i)** I don't see why TAG requires non-Christian alternatives to be self-contradictory. Why would it not suffice if non-Christian alternatives lack the explanatory power necessary to account for various things which a worldview should be able to ground?

**ii)** Even assuming there's a potentially infinite number of alternatives, if many of these share a common flaw, than it's not necessary to disprove them individually. An argument that successfully targets a common flaw will automatically and simultaneously falsify every position that exemplifies that flaw at one stroke. That doesn't necessarily mean all the non-Christian alternatives share a common flaw. There might be sets of non-Christian alternatives that share common flaw, although one set exemplifies a different flaw than another.

**iii)** The sweeping claim is not as brazen as it might appear to be. If a particular position is true, then all contrary positions are rendered false insofar as they conflict with the true position—although they may be true in other respects, or one contrary position might be true in a certain respect while another contrary position might be true in a different respect. For instance, metaphysics and epistemology in some Indian traditions might have different common flaws than conventional Western naturalism.

**iv)** We could also recast the claim in hypothetical terms. It isn't necessary to dispatch every potential rival. Rather, show us what you've got. We're prepared to take on every comer.

**v)** However, a nagging reservation remains. Since the proponent of TAG hasn't *actually* eliminated all the competition, how can he be justified in believing ahead of time that every non-Christian worldview will be self-contradictory or lack adequate explanatory power? TAG itself can't be the basis for his confidence inasmuch as TAG is untested against much or most of the competition. How does he know TAG is successful? He can't know TAG is successful in advance of using it to eliminate the alternatives, if the success of TAG relies on its proven ability

to eliminate the alternatives. If you don't prove it in the field, what's the basis for your assurance that it will rout all the competition? So the proponent of TAG seems to need some other reason or reasons, independent of TAG, for believing the Christian faith is true, to warrant his prediction that TAG will be invincible against every contender. But in that event, TAG is a supplementary or confirmatory argument for Christianity, which takes its place alongside other arguments or prereflective evidence. I don't think that's a problem. But if that's the case, then TAG won't be able to replace other kinds of arguments or evidence for Christianity.

One could put the point even more simply, as follows. The claim is that every non-Christian worldview is internally incoherent. If by 'worldview' we understand a set of propositions believed to be true by an agent, and by 'internally incoherent' we mean that the set is inconsistent (i.e. contains a proposition and its negation), then consider the non-Christian worldview that contains only one belief, i.e.  $\{p\}$ . This set is plainly not inconsistent.

But that's artificial nonsense. There can be no worldview that contains only one belief.

The retort will likely be that this ultra-simple worldview cannot 'account for the intelligibility of human experience'. If so, what are the minimal conditions under which a set of beliefs could achieve this? It is not on the opponent of TAG to provide this analysis; all she has to do is point out that without this analysis the proof cannot be claimed to be established. The proponent of TAG needs to provide this analysis as part of the proof itself.

I agree with him that presuppositionalism can't shift the onus onto the unbeliever. Both sides have a burden of proof.

In fact, it seems easy to prove that there cannot be one method which disproves every non-Christian worldview, because there cannot be one contradiction that they all share.

That claim is far from self-evident. What reason is there to accept Malpass's assertion? Admittedly, I'd reframe the criterion in terms of explanatory inadequacy rather than self-contradiction.

One natural way of understanding worldviews is that a worldview is just a list of propositions that an agent believes to be true.

There's a sense in which that's true. However, most folks aren't philosophers. Most folks aren't intellectuals. Most folks are pretty thoughtless when it comes to metaphysics, epistemology, and metaethics. Christian apologetics usually targets notable thinkers or schools of thought that make a concerted effort to think through their worldview, and not just what an unreflective individual happens to believe.

[2]There are two objections here: 1) autonomy with respect to reasoning is not unique to the Christian worldview (what prevents other monotheisms from claiming that they also subordinate their reasoning to their god?),

The question at issue is not what they claim but whether that's a *demonstrable* claim.

and 2) there are Christian worldviews where the intellect is not subordinated to the word of God (there are autonomous Christian worldviews; in fact, almost all conceptions of Christianity apart from the Van Tilian presuppositionalist account do not explicitly subordinate the intellect to the word of God). So the equivalence of Christian worldview with non-autonomous reasoning fails in both directions.

**i)** That's hard to respond to because it's so vague. What does it mean to subordinate the intellect to the word of God? If Christian theism is true, then human reason is subordinate to divine reason, in part because divine reason is vastly superior to human reason, and because God is the cause of human reason. And the word of God exemplifies divine reason, making it the standard of comparison.

Perhaps what Malpass is gesturing at is the use of human reason to verify or eliminate revelatory claimants. Doesn't that subordinate the claimants to human reason?

**ii)** To begin with, if a revelatory claimant is not, in fact, the word of God, then evaluating a spurious revelatory claimant hardly subordinates the word of God to human reason.

**iii)** But suppose the revelatory claimant *is* the word of God? In that case, assessing the revelatory claimant doesn't *necessarily* subordinate the word of God to human reason inasmuch as God designed our minds, as well as the world we use as a frame of reference. To take a comparison, if the same locksmith designed the lock and the key, and I use the key to open the lock, I'm not subordinating the locksmith to the keyholder. Rather, I'm using what he handed me. I'm working within the framework I was given.



**iv)** But that's complicated by the choice of criteria used to assess revelatory claimants. If truth is the criterion, then that doesn't subordinate the word of God to human reason, for human reason isn't the source of truth. Truth stands above human reason.

Yet there's often a hiatus between truth and the *perception* of truth. The chosen criteria frequently degenerate into popular prejudice, tendentious standards, and glorified opinion rather than truth. The distinction or dichotomy between fact and what is deemed to be fact or allowed to be fact.

**v)** In addition, the word of God has the authority to challenge and correct our preconceptions about reality and morality. So there's the tricky issue of how to make the transition from the standpoint of an outside observer sifting candidates to someone viewing the truth from the inside out. Perhaps there's no theoretical solution to this conundrum. It is up to God to place individuals far enough into the truth that they can see their way to the destination.

## Is open-mindedness a virtue?

@SecularOutpost

Theists: when you read something by an atheist (about God's non-existence), do you genuinely try to read with an open mind, or do you read it with an intention of finding ways to refute it?

John Mark N Reynolds

I don't think one can read any text or adequately without first trying to agree with it or see/feel the perspective of the writer as charitably as possible.

@SecularOutpost

Fellow atheists: when you read something by a theist (about God's existence), do you genuinely try to read with an open mind, or do you read it with an intention of finding ways to refute it?

Martin Gentles

I look to refute it. But I do the same with naturalistic arguments.

@SecularOutpost

I applaud your consistency.

**1.** The problem with this comment thread is how it takes a principle with some legitimacy, then overextends it. Open-mindedness can be, and often is, an epistemic virtue, but elevating this to a universal absolute is far too abstract. Part of rationality is having a filter to screen out certain ideas. Is it incumbent on me to read about Ramtha, Raëlians, Dianetics, Tarot cards, Hare Krishnas, or Aleister Crowley

with an open mind? Can I not read it adequately unless I try to agree with those examples?

Consistency is a virtue when treating like things alike. But every idea doesn't merit the same consideration. It's rationally and morally subversive to be in a chronic state of open-mindedness. That's a euphemism for indecision.

**2.** Open-mindedness can be a virtue when you study an issue for the first time. But it's not a virtue to be perpetually open-minded. There ought to be a process of elimination.

**3.** There's the danger of being prematurely closed-minded. However, even closed-minded people can change their mind. There are people who read the opposing position with the intention of finding ways to refute it, but end up being convinced by what they read.

**4.** Suppose, for argument's sake, that atheism appears to be true. But even on that hypothetical, my impression might be mistaken. And if, in addition, I conclude that atheism leads to moral, existential, and/or epistemic nihilism, then I'd be justified in discounting atheism. Although I perceive it to be true, open-mindedness includes the possibility that I might be wrong. And when you combine that with the radically skeptical consequences of atheism for meaning, morality, and reason, a closed-minded attitude towards atheism is not only warranted but necessary.

**5.** A Christian can be critical of bad arguments for Christianity. We can be open-minded in that respect.

## Is God malevolent?

Atheist philosopher Stephen Law has been hawking this argument for years:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WiufsmxiUiU>

- i)** There's empirical evidence for angels, demons, and ghosts.
  
- ii)** Is good the price a malevolent deity pays for evil? Why would a malevolent deity give human beings freewill? To make them morally responsible? But why would he care if humans are morally responsible? He just likes to see people suffer for his sadistic pleasure. It isn't necessary that they deserve to suffer. In fact, being evil, he'd take greater pleasure if they suffer for no good reason. If they suffer unfairly.
  
- iii)** Law's basic argument, from what I can tell, is that the mix of good and evil in our world is equally consistent with a benevolent God or malevolent God.

One problem with that argument is that moral good and evil are asymmetrical. It's arguable that moral good cannot exist unless it's grounded in a benevolent God. And it's arguable that moral evil can coexist with a benevolent God.

But if that's the case, then moral good cannot exist if God is evil. By the same token, God can't be morally evil if moral evil can't exist without moral good as the standard of comparison.

So Law's argument can't include moral good and evil. At best, he means good and evil in terms of pain and pleasure, happiness, misery, and cruelty.

**v)** Suppose we try to improve on his argument. Just as certain goods are contingent on certain evils, certain evils are contingent on certain goods. For instance, much suffering is the result of losing something you care about. It maybe something you used to have, or it may be a lost opportunity. Suppose we rehabilitate his argument by saying the malevolent deity gives humans experiences of happiness to make them miserable by when he deprives them of what made them happy? Does the argument go through on those terms?

A problem with that argument is that some human lives are much happier than others. In their case, the pleasant experiences greatly outweigh the unpleasant experiences.

**vi)** Suppose we grant for discussion purposes that the mix of good and evil is equally consistent with the existence of a benevolent God or a malevolent God. It doesn't follow that if we can't rule out one, that rules out both candidates. Law's conclusion is fallacious.

**vii)** There's also the question of why a malevolent God would take any interest in human beings. We're so inferior to him, why would he find it enjoyable to torment us? By contrast, it's not mysterious why a benevolent God would take an interest in human beings.

## Cosmic deceiver?

My answer to a question:

**1.** We can't extrapolate from examples of God deceiving the wicked in Scripture because they carry no presumption that God deceives humans in general. Those passages are confined to a subset of humans, and not a random sample, but humans who are punished for impiety. So not every human being meets the necessary condition. As such, Scripture provides no justification for belief in universal divine deception.

**2.** Of course, even apart from such passages, it's possible to entertain the idea of universal divine deception. If Scripture never spoke to the issue of divine deception, even in that limited context, we could still toy with the idea.

**3.** Seems to me that fallibilism is self-refuting. Some beliefs are only properly doubtful if other beliefs provide a benchmark. We find a claim dubious or unbelievable because it conflicts with a belief we find persuasive or compelling. Of course, we can still be mistaken, but I don't see how we can be universally mistaken, since erroneous beliefs presume some true beliefs as a point of contrast to provide a necessary standard of comparison.

Put another way, how is it possible to coherently argue for fallibilism? You have to provide reasons. But if all the reasons for fallibilism are fallible reasons, isn't that self-referentially incoherent?

**4.** Mind you, rejecting fallibilism tout court doesn't indicate where to draw the line. In principle, there's a spectrum ranging from mostly false beliefs to mostly true beliefs.

**5.** A problem with variations on the Cartesian demon is why a being that's omniscient/omnipotent or nearly omniscient/omnipotent would take any interest and find any satisfaction in toying with and fooling creatures so vastly inferior to itself. Even if he's malevolent, what's the fun in outwitting creatures who are so incomparable below his own level of intelligence? What's the point of making creatures he can effortlessly outsmart? It's like a chess genius inventing a stupid chess computer to play with. He always beats the computer. It isn't hard. There's no challenge, no surprise, no risk of defeat. Even if the being is malicious, what does he get out of that exercise? How is that entertaining?

**6.** There's also the question of whether good and evil are asymmetrical. When we hypothesize an evil godlike figure, evil is a comparative judgment. It presumes some concept of the good. It presumes an ideal from which the evil deviates.

## Cartesian demons and evolutionary psychology

Responding to some questions I was asked.

Broadly, I'm a presuppositionalist (though I make adjustments, as does everyone).

That's intelligent. Good to be discriminating.

Often I have read modern proponents like Anderson and Oliphint defend the essentially Christian nature of God that must be in place for knowledge to even be possible against other theisms like Islam by pointing to problems in those worldviews. For example, in Islamic sources Allah is capricious.

That's ambiguous. In presuppositionalism, knowledge is possible without belief in God, but the justification of knowledge is impossible without the Christian God. My questioner may intend that, but was speaking laconically.

1) Can a skeptic assert that the Christian is in no better epistemic place than a Muslim as in the Bible God allows people to be deceived (indeed sends deceiving spirits) and, in the case of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel, robs a man of his reasoning? Can the skeptic take this further and argue the Christian is no better place than he is because just as we assert he can't trust his reasoning faculties because they were formed by random, unthinking processes, we can't trust our because it's always possible we're deceived?



**i)** The thought-experiment is incoherent. The appeal to biblical passages about divine deception presumes that Scripture is true and we know what it means (at least the passages under consideration). If, however, God deceives the reader, then that nullifies the appeal to biblical passages about divine deception, which the thought-experiment requires. If God deceives the reader, then he can't trust what the text appears to say about divine deception. So the argument never gets started. It can't be delusion all the way down.

**ii)** Biblical passages about divine deception refer to a subset of wicked human beings rather than human beings generally. They don't refer to the epistemic situation of Christians.

**iii)** The comparison is disanalogous. The allegation is not the abstract possibility that reasoning faculties formed by random thinking processes may render reason untrustworthy. Rather, that's taken to be an implication of naturalistic evolution. An actual defeater rather than a hypothetical defeater.

2) What if someone decided that all they need is a God who is trustworthy, but not necessarily the Biblical God. I would say those attributes can't be separated from the Biblical God, but what if they countered that perhaps Christianity is the best we have right now, but we might have a better candidate in the future?

Is a God trustworthy who hasn't revealed himself in any recognizable religion, who hides in the shadows while false religions proliferate with no corrective?

## The many-gods objection to Pascal's wager

A stock objection to Pascal's wager is the many-gods objection. Pascal's wager is said to be a false antithesis because he made Christianity the standard of comparison. But that ignores a range of religious options.

And it's true that Pascal's wager all by itself can't be used to leverage one religious claimant over another. But whether that's a weakness in the wager depends on the opponents. If it's a debate between a Christian and a Muslim (for instance), then the wager is inadequate.

If, however, it's a debate between a Christian and an atheist, it would be nonsensical for the atheist to complain that the Christian hasn't eliminated all the religious rivals. After all, the atheist doesn't believe that any of the religious alternatives to Christianity is true. So why does an atheist suppose a Christian philosopher or apologist must first rule them out before an atheist can evaluate the choice between Christianity and atheism? If an atheist is debating a Christian who deploys the wager, the atheist has already eliminated the other religious alternatives as live options to his own satisfaction, so the atheist has, in a sense, cleared the field for the Christian.

To be sure, the atheist has also eliminated Christianity to his own satisfaction, but that just means the Christian apologist must make a case for Christianity, in response to the atheist. And, of course, the atheist has his own burden of proof.

To take a comparison, if a naturalistic evolutionist is debating an old-earth or young-earth creationist, it would

be illegitimate of him say that his opponent can't make his case until he eliminates theistic evolution, for both sides in that debate think theistic evolution is mistaken (although they may have different reasons for their assessment). In most debates between two adherents of opposing positions, both sides act as if their side is the right side. By the same token, when two adherents of opposing positions debate the same issue, they act as if there are just two alternatives: the ones under review. That's generally the nature of a debate between two disputants.

Now, a young-earth creationist could debate an old-earth creationist, a theistic evolutionist, or a naturalistic evolutionist. And a naturalistic evolutionist could do the same thing in reverse. But debate topics are typically restricted to keep things manageable. You try to debate one position at a time. Suppose a naturalistic evolutionist bested a young-earth creationist in a debate. It would hardly be fair to say that's a false dichotomy because he failed to disprove old-earth creationism or theistic evolution in the course of the debate. That's another argument for another time. He still won *that* debate.

## **The difference a miracle makes**

One of the striking things about the difference between Christians and atheists regarding the Resurrection is the difference, in principle, a single miracle would make to the outlook of an atheist. Atheists think defending the Resurrection is an extended exercise in special pleading, yet that's all predicated on their naturalism. It would only take a single miracle to revolutionize their plausibility structure (assuming they were consistent). A single miracle, any miracle, ancient or modern, would suddenly make the Resurrection credible. So their position is extremely fragile.

## Does math point to God?

Today there was a brainiac debate between Graham Oppy and William Lane Craig:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WE1y00bwCU>

I may or may not comment on other parts of the debate in a future post, but of now I'd like to zero in on a dilemma posed by Oppy:

Could God have freely chosen to make a physical world in which it was not the case that mathematical theories apply to the physical world because the structure of the physical world is an instantiation of mathematical structures described by those mathematical theories? There are two options: if not, then it seems that what you're going to end up saying is that it's necessary, that if there's a physical world, mathematical theories apply—which means you just end up with what the naturalist says. That will be the explanation. On the other hand, if it's as though it's just a brute contingency that mathematical theories apply to the physical world...because it's brutally contingent that God chose to make this world rather than other worlds that he could have made instead. When you get to free choice and you think why this rather than that, there's no explanation to be given why you ended up with one rather than the other. So it looks as though either you're going to accept the necessity or you're going to end up with ultimately it's a brute contingency.

The answer depends on how we answer either one of two prior questions:

**i)** Are mathematical structures grounded in the structure/substructure of God's mind? Does the existence of mathematical structures depend on God's existence?

**ii)** Is there a naturalistic mechanism to explain how the physical structure of the universe is an instantiation of mathematical structures?

## Handicapping the Craig/Oppy debate

I already did one brief post on the Craig/Oppy debate:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2020/05/does-math-point-to-god.html>

I subsequently added a sentence to the first part of my two-part response.

Now I'm going to comment on the rest of the debate. A few preliminary observations:

**1.** For a 70-year-old, Craig is remarkably quick on his feet, especially considering the highly abstract, technical subject-matter of the debate.

**2.** Oppy is a superior mind wasted on atheism. Even if atheism were true—*especially* if atheism were true—what's the point of mounting such a sophisticated defense of atheism? What's the point of defending atheism at all? What's the point of anything? If atheism is true, then human life is worthless, so why devote so much effort and intelligence to defending a position that renders human life worthless? Maybe Oppy doesn't view it that way, but a number of candid atheists do.

Consider defending a worldview in which it's okay to take a butcher knife and carve your mother up alive. Consider developing sophisticated arguments to defend that proposition.

**3.** Moving to the meat of the debate, I think there was some miscommunication regarding Craig's statement that atheists have no explanation for the phenomena he adduces in his argument. I'm sure that's shorthand for the claim, not that atheists have no naturalistic explanations to offer, but that their naturalistic alternatives are explanatory failures.

**4.** Due to time-constraints, the debate didn't have a clear-cut winner or loser, because both sides had insufficient time to expound their positions and respond to objections. Sometimes Craig had the better of the exchange, sometimes Oppy had the better of the exchange, but in some cases that's because of how the exchange abruptly ended. If each side had more time to explain their position and develop their replies, they might have a better comeback. That said, I think Craig did better overall.

**5.** In the first round they got bogged down on the question of what motivates mathematicians. Here I think Craig commits an unforced error in how he formulates the first premise of his argument. That's because his formulation is overly-reliant at this point on Wigner's essay. But his argument doesn't require him to take a position on what motivates mathematicians. The issue is what's been discovered as a result of their work, regardless of their motivations. Pure math with practical applications they've developed as a result of their work, regardless of their motivations. Craig's fundamental argument is the unreasonable effectiveness of math, however mathematicians were motivated to stumble upon that insight. So Craig could rehabilitate his argument by reformulating the first premise.

**6.** Initially, Craig's argument seems to hinge on scientific realism. Oppy gave examples which might support scientific anti-realism. I think Oppy had the better of that exchange.



Craig needs to be able to do one of two things: (i) defend scientific realism or (ii) reformulate his argument so that it works on scientific realism and antirealism alike.

Later in the debate Craig says the argument is about how the world appears to us. The mathematical equations allow us to describe with amazing accuracy in an uncanny number of cases the physical phenomena. Yet that seems inconsistent with earlier argument Craig and Oppy were having. But perhaps we can treat this as a clarification of the argument.

**7.** On a related note, Oppy appealed to many failed theories, where the math didn't prove to be uncannily effective. Craig responded by saying the realm of math infinite while the physical world finite, so it's to be expected that in many cases the math fails to match up. I think Craig had the better of that exchange.

**8.** Apropos (7), I'd make an additional point. The failures that Oppy cited don't disprove the unexpected effectiveness of math (unexpected if atheism is true). Rather, they simply illustrate the fallibility of physicists.

**9.** Craig appealed to the causal inertness of mathematic objects. I think Craig had the better of that exchange.

**10.** Because Craig's argument appeals to laws of nature, Oppy challenged his argument on that score inasmuch as the concept or status of such laws is contested in the philosophy of science. However, when outlining his alternative to Craig's position, Oppy posting the necessity of the laws of nature. So he's faulting Craig's theistic position for a commitment which his own naturalistic alternative shares in common. Indeed, he stakes out a more ambitious claim than Craig since he regards the laws of nature as

necessary whereas Craig regards the laws of nature as contingent. So that objection seems to be contradictory and self-defeating on Oppy's part.

**11.** Apropos (10), while Oppy's objection was inconsistent, the lingering issue remains of whether Craig's argument is committed to some version of the laws of nature. If so, that makes his argument vulnerable at that point to disputes in the philosophy of science regarding the concept and status of such laws. It would be better if Craig could reformulate his argument so that it's not dependent on that assumption.

Offhand, I don't see that it requires that commitment. The basic argument is that pure math has surprising empirical applications. That makes sense if the universe was "constructed on God's mathematical blueprint" (as Craig put it). It doesn't make sense if atheism is true. This might also be a way for Craig to sidestep the scientific realist/antirealist debate.

**12.** Oppy outlined his alternative:

A theory of modality. Every possible world shares some initial history with the actual world. Diverges from it only because chances play out differently. Those are the only possibilities that there are. The laws are necessary, the boundary conditions are necessary. Doesn't matter if you're thinking about one universe or many universe model. Where contingency comes in is the outplaying of chances. Couldn't possibly have failed not to be the case. No explaining why something is necessary.

**i)** It's hard to evaluate his alternative since his presentation was so sketchy. But an acute failing of his alternative (at

least as stated in the debate) is the failure to explain where the math comes from. What is Oppy's ontology of mathematics?

**ii)** His commitment to nomological necessity shoulders a high burden of proof.

**iii)** While it's true that once we reach necessity, that terminates further explanation, that doesn't sidestep the question of whether we rightly identified what's necessary, or what makes it necessary—in contrast to what's contingent.

**iv)** What does he mean by chance? Is he alluding to quantum indeterminism? If so, there are deterministic versions of quantum theory, so he must defend his particular interpretation.

**v)** Then there's his concept of the possible world. However, as commonly understood, the actual world used to be a possible world. So possible worlds don't derive from the actual world.

In addition, from a Christian perspective, both possible worlds and the actual world derive from God. God stands behind both as their common source.

## Approaching the ontological argument

Anselm proposed a famous, fascinating, controversial theistic proof. Some scholars contend that he presented two different versions of the ontological argument or two different ontological arguments. Other thinkers like Scotus, Descartes, Leibniz, Gödel, and Plantinga proposed their own versions.

I don't have an opinion about whether or not Anselm's argument, as it stands, is successful. That's because I don't know what he means, and interpretation is prior to evaluation. I can't assess it before I understand it.

I doubt even he knows what it means. His argument is intuitive and compressed. He had a flash of insight which he labors to sharpen. He may be onto something, but he's fumbling to articulate his insight.

Here's one thing I will say about his argument. It raises the question: is our imagination greater or lesser than reality? Does reality exceed imagination or imagination exceed reality?

For Anselm, God is the greatest conceivable being, and that's a good definition. For Anselm, the idea of a greatest conceivable being must have a counterpart in reality.

Human intelligence is quite limited. A paradox of human intelligence is that we're just smart enough to be aware of our intellectual limitations. Even the very smartest human beings hit a wall, and the distance between their understanding and wall of reality is very short. The distance between a human with Down Syndrome and the smartest

man who ever lived is incomparably shorter than the distance between the smartest man who ever lived and reality.

It's quite counterintuitive to suppose our imagination is greater than reality. To the contrary, not only is reality the equal of anything we can imagine, but infinitely beyond what we can imagine.

Therein lies the truth of the ontological argument. Is reality greater or lesser than what we can conceive? Surely reality is much bigger than the human mind.

I'd add a caveat. Not everything conceivable is possible because an isolated idea needn't be consistent with every necessity and truth. We imagine little pieces of things that might not be possible or realistic if developed to their logical conclusion.

But so long as the idea of God, as the greatest conceivable being, is coherent, then the basic insight of the ontological argument must be true, however successful or unsuccessful the precise formulations.

It might be objected that we're talking about a human idea of God. Yes, Anselm has a limited grasp of what it means to be the greatest conceivable being. But in that respect, the reality is inconceivably greater than our idea of a greatest conceivable being.

So it comes down to the question of whether human imagination surpasses reality or reality surpasses human imagination. I think the only reasonable position to take is that human imagination is just a sample of an illimitable,

superhuman reality that exceeds the reach of the human mind in all directions.

## The bell curve of atheism

Atheists range up and down the bell curve. Let's attempt a classification.

Before plunging in, how we rank intelligence is tricky. For instance, some people are freakishly brilliant at one particular thing, but not equally brilliant outside their narrow talent.

Some philosophers are smarter than some scientists, because, to be a good philosopher requires an ability for abstract analysis, whereas many sciences are more concrete, hands-on. However, it takes great ability in abstract analysis to excel as a theoretical physicist. Same thing with mathematicians—or mathematical physicists.

It's also the case that physicists, mathematicians, and philosophers range along a continuum.

On the other hand, the complexity of biology may select for a different kind of intelligence. An ability to zero in on something crucial. Ignore the distracting welter of detail. An ability to form a reliable generalization over vast and varied phenomena.

**1.** At the very tippy top of the secular bell curve you have some atheists of genius. I have in mind some great scientists, mathematicians, and chess players, viz. Dirac, Feynman, Gell-Mann, Mandelbrot, Pauli, Pauling, Penrose, Poincaré, Shannon, Turing, von Neumann, and Witten.

I'm not suggesting that all the greatest scientists, mathematicians, and chess players are atheists. But those

are stereotypical paradigms of high IQ.

The people I named, and that's just a sample, are about as smart as humans get. However, there's a catch: the smartest atheists are geniuses who happen to be atheists. It's not central to their self-identity. They don't define themselves by atheism. They don't devote their life to disproving religion and promoting atheism. That's not where they invest their intellectual energies. That's not their area of interest.

**2.** A little lower down on the bell curve are some very brilliant secular philosophers, viz. Frege, David Lewis, Héctor-Neri Castañeda, However, like the first group, these are philosophers who happen to be atheists, rather than secular philosophers of religion.

I'm not quite sure where to put Hillary Putman. A super-smart philosopher. Later in life he became an "observant Jew," but from what I can tell, that was about practice rather than faith.

Similarly, but not in quite the same intellectual league, are Fodor and Chalmers.

**3.** Bertrand Russell was both very brilliant and a popularizer of atheism. He could do sustained, probing analysis in philosophy when he put his mind to it. But when it came to religion, he contented himself with witty, moralistic potboilers.

**4.** Compared to (1), W. V. Quine is a little lower on the bell curve. Although he rarely if ever directly attacks religion or Christianity, he labored to develop a systematically naturalistic ontology and epistemology. A thoroughgoing



alternative to theism. An indirect attack, by attempting to supplant it.

**5.** Oppy, Sobel, McTaggart, and Mill may be the most brilliant thinkers who write sustained attacks on religion.

**6.** Further down the bell curve than (3-5) are atheists like Antony Flew, Mackie, Rowe. They lack the quicksilver brilliance and rhetorical panache of Russell, but compensate by attempting serious, methodical attacks on religion. And unlike Quine, they explicitly attack Christian theism.

**7.** In a niche of his own making is Thomas Nagel, whose intellectual independence sets him apart.

**8.** You also have a slew of competent but not outstanding academic atheists, viz. Schellenberg, Gale, Grünbaum, Drange, Draper, Dennett, Smart, Parsons, Pigliucci, Wielenberg, Nielsen, and Quentin Smith.

In-between (8) and (9) I'd place Michael Martin.

**9.** Further down the bell curve are academic hacks like Stephen Law, Boghossian, and Paul Kurtz. These are academic popularizers.

**10.** Apropos (9) are affirmative action atheists. Token female philosophers who lack any particular intellectual distinction, but exist to fill a quota, viz. Andrea Weisberger, Louise Antony.

(I don't deny that there are some very brilliant women.)

**11.** Perhaps even further down the bell curve are the pulp popularizers. From an older generation you have Thomas

Paine, Robert Ingersoll, Andrew Dickson White, Mencken. A more recent example is Christopher Hitchens.

12. Then you have a special category of popularizers who are science writers or washed up scientists, viz. Carroll, Coyne, Dawkins, Harris, Hawking, Kitcher, Krauss, Ruse, Sagan, Shermer, Susskind, Stenger, Weinberg, Neil deGrasse Tyson, PZ Myers. In some cases they lack the brilliance to make an original and notable contribution to scientific knowledge. In other cases their best work is behind them. Unsurprisingly, they are massively ignorant of philosophy and theology (although Ruse is a cut above).

13. Then there's the category of the celebrity apostate. Bart Ehrman is the current darling, while John Loftus is a wannabe.

14. You also have secular ethicists and policy wonks like Richard Posner, Peter Singer, and John Rawls.

15. Near the bottom of the heap is Richard Carrier. Intellectually, he's above average. In high school I'd expect him to be a member of the honor society. If, however, you dropped him into the student body of CalTech or MIT, he'd disappear without a trace. A smart dilettante who doesn't know his limitations.

16. At the nadir of the bell curve are the proudly, hopelessly dumb and ignorant Internet atheists who swarm Reddit, YouTube, and Debunking Christianity, &c.

17. I should add that there's a bell curve for believers which parallels the bell curve for unbelievers. Christians and theists range along the bell curve, and some occupy the tippy top.



## "Death is what gives life meaning"

@SecularOutpost

Death is what gives life meaning.

The fact that life can be lost is what makes life meaningful.

It's the risk of loss of one's own life that gives the other things meaning.

<https://twitter.com/SecularOutpost/status/1236376219597168640>

**1.** You can file this under: if you want a shallow answer to an existential question, ask an atheist.

Atheists face a dilemma of their own making. How do they play the losing hand they dealt themselves? Some of them are more forthright about the consequences. By contrast, Jeff's strategy is to make a virtue of necessity.

**2.** Jeff's statement would make a swell motto for a suicide cult.

**3.** Would you hire a lifeguard with Jeff's philosophy?

**4.** It's an easy thing for Jeff to say because he's 40ish with a son living at home. A while back I watched an interview between Stephen Braude and Robert Lawrence Kuhn in which Kuhn admitted that as his own death becomes more imminent, he's terrified by the prospect of oblivion. And Braude made a sympathetic comment. But for Jeff, death is still too much of a personal abstraction for that to hit home.

**5.** It's good that Jeff is asking one of the ultimate questions, but his commitment to atheism forces him to look for answers in the wrong places, so he can only offer a wrong answer.

**6.** Jeff's answer is a half-truth, which lends it some specious plausibility. Losing something you value is a painful way of making you appreciate how valuable it was to you, especially if you took it for granted or neglected it. We may need to lose something to realize just how much it meant to us or how we failed to take advantage of unrepeatably missed opportunities.

**7.** That, however, is quite different from saying that loss or temporary experience is what constitutes the value, significance, or importance of something.

**8.** One crucial ambiguity in Jeff's statement is whether death is what makes life intrinsically meaningful to the decedent or else meaningful to the living. Death is a loss, both to the decedent and to those who miss him. So, according to Jeff, is death what makes life meaningful a *relation*: what *other's* valued in the decedent? Or the decedent's *own* loss?

**9.** If death is what makes life meaningful, is there a best time to die? Is life more meaningful if you die young or old?

**10.** Suppose I had a time machine that enables me to revisit the happiest moments of my life. If the happiest moments are repeatable, does that render them meaningless? If it became too repetitious, they might lose their nostalgia, but I just mean every so often.

For instance, if I could step into the time machine and see my late grandmother again, would that make her life meaningless? For instance, I have fond boyhood memories of when we used to visit her at her house. Likewise, I have fond memories of her when she used to visit us on Christmas Eve. If I could go back in time to one of those days, would her life cease to be meaningful?

Likewise, I had a dog I was very fond of when I was a boy. After she died I never got another dog. She was the right dog at the right time and the right place. I can't reproduce those circumstances. But suppose I could use the time machine to see her back then. Would my renewed access render her life meaningless?

And, again, meaningless to whom? Meaningless to me? Meaningless to her? She'd be happy to see me again. And we gave her a good life.

By the same token, I have many other fond childhood memories. Summer days at the waterfront home of my parents. The play of sunlight on the western waves. The play of moonlight on the waves at night. Mountain views. A particular night with a glowing ruby lunar eclipse. Other nights with a lunar halo. Or, come winter, watching the snow come down our through the branches of our long wooded driveway. If those days weren't lost forever, if the time machine enabled me to reexperience them, would that make them worthless?

**11.** The hypothetical time machine is, among other things, a way of cheating death by having access to the past. Not only access to loved ones before they died, but access to otherwise unrepeatable experiences in general. In this life we lose things we cherish that we can't get back. But is that what confers value on them?

**12.** Suppose you have a younger teenage brother with cancer. The cancer is curable. But if the loss of life is what makes life meaningful, is it more meaningful for him to forego cancer treatment and die at 15?

**13.** In fairness, Jeff said "The fact that life *can* be lost is what makes life meaningful"—not *will* be or *must* be. Yet his position commits him to something stronger than the bare possibility of ultimate loss. Isn't he saying the inevitability and finality of that loss is what makes life precious?

**14.** Hovering in the background of Jeff's statement is the implied contrast with the world to come in Christian eschatology. In some ways that's like a time machine but superior: where the best of the past comes back around, only better than ever.

## 12 hard questions

Here's a list of questions from a recent book, **CONFRONTING CHRISTIANITY: 12 HARD QUESTIONS FOR THE WORLD'S LARGEST RELIGION**

I haven't read it, but it's supposed to reflect up-to-date sociological data regarding how many younger-generation unbelievers view Christianity. So I'll take my own stab at answering the questions:

### CHAPTER 1: AREN'T WE BETTER OFF WITHOUT RELIGION?

**i)** Because many unbelievers regard religion as false in general, they dump all religions into the same basket. So Christianity gets blamed for the atrocities of Islam, evangelicalism gets blamed for Catholic scandals and massacres. Therefore, one corrective step that Christian apologists need to take is to distinguish between different religions and different sects. Humans are better off without certain religions, which doesn't mean they're better off with atheism.

**ii)** To say we're better off without religion assumes that atheism (or naturalism, to be pedantic) offers a superior alternative. Yet many atheist thinkers admit that atheism logically leads to moral and existential nihilism. And it's not coincidental that as the pop culture becomes more secularized, it becomes more inhumane. Take movements like antinatalism and human extinction.



## CHAPTER 2: DOESN'T CHRISTIANITY CRUSH DIVERSITY?

Diversity can be good or bad. But when a people-group is evangelized and disciplined, that fosters a creative stimulus to examine traditional culture in light of Christianity and Christianity in light to traditional culture. The results in an intellectual and artistic revolution by infusing fresh blood into the status quo.

## CHAPTER 3: HOW CAN YOU SAY THERE IS ONLY ONE TRUE FAITH?

If God exists, how can there be more than one true faith? One God, one revelation. The one God acting in history.

Chapter 4: Doesn't religion hinder morality?

False religions (e.g. Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Catholicism, witchcraft) hinder morality. True religion fosters morality. Atheism subverts morality.

## CHAPTER 5: DOESN'T RELIGION CAUSE VIOLENCE?

**i)** Violence, per se, isn't wrong. Sometimes violence is necessary to protect the innocent and uphold or restore justice.

**ii)** Atheism has a long track record of causing wanton violence on a massive scale.

**iii)** False religions (e.g. Islam, medieval Catholicism) may foster gratuitous violence because they aim for outward conformity rather than personal conviction, so they resort to coercion to achieve mass conversion and nominal consensus.

## CHAPTER 6: HOW CAN YOU TAKE THE BIBLE LITERALLY?

"Literal" is a slippery term. The basic principle is to understand the Bible the way the original audience would construe it.

## CHAPTER 7: HASN'T SCIENCE DISPROVED CHRISTIANITY?

**i)** Sometimes the conflict is not between science and the Bible, but between methodological atheism and the Bible. If you define a scientific worldview in terms of physicalism and causal closure, then that's incompatible with biblical dualism and supernaturalism. That, however, isn't based on scientific evidence but secular philosophical presuppositions.

**ii)** It can be a good and necessary thing when secular scientists are challenged by Christianity. There's a dominant scientific narrative according to which we exist in an accidental universe. There is no afterlife. Humans have no immortal soul. Necrosis is irreversible. We're just temporary, replaceable, interchangeable organisms.

Everything we value is a product of evolutionary brainwashing. Our brains were wired by a mindless, amoral process to value certain things. But that's arbitrary. Our brains could be rewired to value the opposite. Nothing is inherently right or good.

## CHAPTER 8: DOESN'T CHRISTIANITY DENIGRATE WOMEN?

**i)** According to Christianity, there are innate stereotypical physical and psychological differences between men and women. Distinctive male virtues and distinctive female virtues.

**ii)** According to atheism, women simply exist to produce human replacements. Women have no inherent value. They're only a means to an end. Once they pass the childbearing years they outlive their usefulness. In atheism, women have no independent worth.

**iii)** In addition, feminine instincts are just programmed into them by evolutionary conditioning. There's nothing inherently good or true about feminine instincts. They're just slaves to their brain chemistry and hormones.

### **CHAPTER 9: ISN'T CHRISTIANITY HOMOPHOBIC?**

If homosexuality is physically and psychologically harmful, then it ought to be discouraged—in the same way that socially and self-destructive addictive behavior ought to be discouraged.

### **CHAPTER 10: DOESN'T THE BIBLE CONDONE SLAVERY?**

The Bible regulates what it cannot abolish. Where feasible, it mitigates evil. Rev 18 is an attack on the economic system of slavery.

### **CHAPTER 11: HOW COULD A LOVING GOD ALLOW SO MUCH SUFFERING?**

Paradoxically, suffering can be a source of second-order goods. Unique goods unobtainable apart from suffering. To eliminate all suffering eliminates all the embedded goods.

### **CHAPTER 12: HOW COULD A LOVING GOD SEND PEOPLE TO HELL?**

God isn't reducible to love. God is not a love machine that robotically treats the just and wicked alike. Love without justice isn't good.

# Evidence for God

I'm going to list and summarize what I deem to be the best arguments for God, as well as the major objections (such as they are) to God.

## I. FRAMING THE ISSUE

It's important to have reasonable expectations regarding evidence for God. If the God of classical theism exists, then he's not directly detectable. God is not an empirical object. God is imperceptible to the five senses. The public evidence for God involves inferring God's existence from his effects and or his explanatory power.

That's not an unusual concept. For instance, the past is not directly detectable. At present, the past is imperceptible to the five senses. In some cases we have audio and visual records of the past. Even that's one step removed from the object. In most other cases, we infer the past from trace evidence. We infer the past from the residual effect of the past on the present. Likewise, we may infer abstract objects (e.g. numbers, possible worlds) based on their indispensable explanatory value. So the kinds of evidence for God are not unique to classical theism. There are analogous topics where we resort to the same kinds of evidence.

To take a specific example, interpreting a murder scene is an exercise in historical reconstruction. A homicide detective may have to determine the cause of death. Was it natural causes? Was it accidental? Or was it murder? A clever killer will attempt to conceal the true cause. A

homicide detective must be alert to subtle clues of intelligent agency.

Of course, God is able to make his existence more explicit via an audible voice or miracles. Indeed, many people say they've witnessed that. But that's by no means a universal experience.

## II. PHILOSOPHICAL/SCIENTIFIC ARGUMENTS

These tend to be technical arguments that may be inaccessible to people without the aptitude or training. But that's not unique to theistic proofs. Presenting a formal argument for the existence of just about anything, including things we take for granted, may get us into deep waters. Even obvious truths can be hard to prove. Take proving the existence of an external world, or the reality of time.

### **1. Transcendental argument**

Definition: Transcendental arguments are partly non-empirical, often anti-skeptical arguments focusing on necessary enabling conditions either of coherent experience or the possession or employment of some kind of knowledge or cognitive ability, where the opponent is not in a position to question the fact of this experience, knowledge, or cognitive ability, and where the revealed preconditions include what the opponent questions. Such arguments take as a premise some obvious fact about our mental life—such as some aspect of our knowledge, our experience, our beliefs, or our cognitive abilities—and add a claim that some other state of affairs is a necessary condition of the first one. Transcendental arguments most commonly have been deployed against a position denying the

knowability of some extra-mental proposition, such as the existence of other minds or a material world. Thus these arguments characteristically center on a claim that, for some extra-mental proposition P, the indisputable truth of some general proposition Q about our mental life requires that P.

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/trans-ar/>

Definition: As standardly conceived, transcendental arguments are taken to be distinctive in involving a certain sort of claim, namely that X is a necessary condition for the possibility of Y—where then, given that Y is the case, it logically follows that X must be the case too. Moreover, because these arguments are generally used to respond to skeptics who take our knowledge claims to be problematic, the Y in question is then normally taken to be some fact about us or our mental life which the skeptic can be expected to accept without question (e.g., that we have experiences, or make certain judgements, or perform certain actions, or have certain capacities, and so on), where X is then something the skeptic doubts or denies (e.g., the existence of the external world, or of the necessary causal relation between events, or of other minds, or the force of moral reasons).

<http://stanford.library.sydney.edu.au/entries/transcendental-arguments/>

Here's a limitation:

Because of their anti-skeptical ambitions, transcendental arguments must begin from a starting

point that the skeptic can be expected to accept, the necessary condition of which is then said to be something that the skeptic doubts or denies. This will then mean that such arguments are ineffective against very radical forms of skepticism, which doubt the laws of logic, and/or which refuse to accept any starting point as uncontentious; and it will also mean that they may be effective against a skeptic who is prepared to accept some starting point, but then ineffective against another skeptic who is not.

<http://stanford.library.sydney.edu.au/entries/transcendental-arguments/#KeyFeaTraArg>

However, that's not necessarily a weakness of transcendental arguments. Rather, it may expose how unreasonable the skeptic is.

Here are some examples of what I'd classify as theistic transcendental arguments:

**i) Argument from abstract objects:**

[http://www.proginosko.com/docs/The\\_Lord\\_of\\_Non-Contradiction.pdf](http://www.proginosko.com/docs/The_Lord_of_Non-Contradiction.pdf)

[http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Anderson-Welty%20\(In%20Defense%20of%20the%20Argument%20for%20God%20from%20Logic\).pdf](http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Anderson-Welty%20(In%20Defense%20of%20the%20Argument%20for%20God%20from%20Logic).pdf)

**ii) Argument from knowledge**



[http://www.proginosko.com/docs/If\\_Knowledge\\_Then\\_God.pdf](http://www.proginosko.com/docs/If_Knowledge_Then_God.pdf)

[http://www.proginosko.com/docs/knowledge\\_and\\_theism.html](http://www.proginosko.com/docs/knowledge_and_theism.html)

<http://www.proginosko.com/2011/12/antitheism-presupposes-theism-and-so-does-every-other-ism/>

### **iii) Evolutionary argument against naturalism**

<https://appearedtoblogly.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/plantinga-alvin-content-and-natural-selection.pdf>

[http://www.andrewmbailey.com/ap/Probability\\_Defeaters.pdf](http://www.andrewmbailey.com/ap/Probability_Defeaters.pdf)

[http://infidels.org/library/modern/alvin\\_plantinga/conflict.html](http://infidels.org/library/modern/alvin_plantinga/conflict.html)

### **iv) Argument from truth**

I think this is a promising, and potentially powerful argument, but it's underdeveloped. Here's the seminal argument:

Even if there were no human intellects, there could be truths because of their relation to the divine intellectual. But if, per impossible, there were no intellects at all, but things continued to exist, then

there would be no such reality as truth. Aquinas, **DE VERITATE**.

One way to unpack this is to show that truths are true beliefs or concepts. Beliefs and concepts are mental entities. If so, truth can't exist apart from minds.

According to atheism, this would mean there were no truths before there were minds to think them. That, however, seems to be profoundly counterintuitive. On that view, it wasn't true that the moon orbits the earth until humans evolved to the point where they could entertain that belief.

## **2. Teleological argument**

These include:

### **i) The fine-tuning argument**

Summary: These are the fundamental constants and quantities of the universe. Each of these numbers have been carefully dialed to an astonishingly precise value - a value that falls within an exceedingly narrow, life-permitting range. If any one of these numbers were altered by even a hair's breadth, no physical, interactive life of any kind could exist anywhere. There'd be no stars, no life, no planets, no chemistry... The fact is our universe permits physical, interactive life only because these, and many other numbers, have been independently and exquisitely balanced on a razor's edge...The probabilities involved are so ridiculously remote as to put the fine-tuning well beyond the reach of chance.

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/transcript-fine-tuning-argument>

Exposition:

<http://www.privilegedplanet.com/QandA.php>

Guillermo Gonzalez & Jay W. Richards. **THE PRIVILEGED PLANET: HOW OUR PLACE IN THE COSMOS IS DESIGNED FOR DISCOVERY** (Regnery, 2004).

<https://appearedtoblogly.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/final-blackwell-fine-tuning-proof-1-16-09-copy1.pdf>

<https://appearedtoblogly.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/collins-rob-22the-case-for-cosmic-design22.pdf>

A potential weakness of the fine-tuning argument is its relative dependence on the shifting sands of modern physics and cosmology. However, some of the data feeding into the fine-tuning argument are well-established.

## **ii) Argument from irreducible complexity**

Definition: A functional system is irreducibly complex if it contains a multipart subsystem (i.e., a set of two or more interrelated parts) that cannot be simplified without destroying the system's basic function. I refer to this multipart subsystem as the system's irreducible core.<sup>3</sup> This definition is more subtle than it might first

appear, so let's consider it closely. Irreducibly complex systems belong to the broader class of functionally integrated systems. A functionally integrated system consists of parts that are tightly adapted to each other and thus render the system's function highly sensitive to isolated changes of those parts. For an integrated system, a change in one place often shuts down the system entirely or else requires multiple changes elsewhere for the system to continue to function. We can therefore define the core of a functionally integrated system as those parts that are indispensable to the system's basic function: remove parts of the core, and you can't recover the system's basic function from the other remaining parts. To say that a core is irreducible is then to say that no other systems with substantially simpler cores can perform the system's basic function.

[https://billdembski.com/documents/2004.01.Irreducible\\_Compl\\_Revisited.pdf](https://billdembski.com/documents/2004.01.Irreducible_Compl_Revisited.pdf)

Exposition:

<http://www.discovery.org/a/54>

### **iii) Argument from specified complexity**

Definition/summary: What is specified complexity? Recall the novel *Contact* by Carl Sagan (1985). In that novel, radio astronomers discover a long sequence of prime numbers from outer space. Because the sequence is long, it is complex. Moreover, because the sequence is mathematically significant, it can be characterized independently of the physical processes

that bring it about. As a consequence, it is also specified. Thus, when the radio astronomers in Contact observe specified complexity in this sequence of numbers, they have convincing evidence of extraterrestrial intelligence. Granted, real-life SETI researchers have thus far failed to detect designed signals from outer space. The point to note, however, is that Sagan based the SETI researchers' methods of design detection on actual scientific practice. To employ specified complexity to detect design is to engage in effect-to-cause reasoning. As a matter of basic human rationality, we reason from causes to effects as well as from effects back to causes. Scientific experimentation, for instance, requires observation and the control of variables, and thus typically employs cause-to-effect reasoning: the experimenter, in setting up certain causal processes in an experiment, constrains the outcome of those processes (the effect). But, in many cases, we do not have control of the relevant causal processes. Rather, we are confronted with an effect and must reconstruct its cause. Thus, an alien visiting Earth and confronted with Mt. Rushmore would need to figure out whether wind and erosion could produce it or whether some additional factors might be required. To sum up, many special sciences already employ specified complexity as a sign of intelligence—notably forensic science, cryptography, random number generation, archeology, and the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (Dembski 1998, chs. 1 and 2). Design theorists take these methods and apply them to naturally occurring systems (see Dembski and Ruse 2004, pt IV). When they do, these same methods for identifying intelligence indicate that the delicate balance of cosmological constants (known as cosmological fine-tuning) and the machine-like qualities of certain tightly integrated biochemical

systems (known as irreducibly complex molecular machines) are the result of intelligence and highly unlikely to have come about by purely material forces (like the Darwinian mechanism of natural selection and random variation). For such design-theoretic arguments at the level of cosmology, see Gonzalez and Richards (2004); for such design-theoretic arguments at the level of biology, see Behe (1996). In any event, it is very much a live possibility that design in cosmology and biology is scientifically detectable, thus placing intelligent design squarely within the realm of science.

[https://billdembski.com/documents/2005.06.Defense\\_of\\_ID.pdf](https://billdembski.com/documents/2005.06.Defense_of_ID.pdf)

Exposition:

<http://www.discovery.org/a/118>

[http://robertmarks.org/REPRINTS/2013\\_OnTheImprobabilityOfAlgorithmicSpecifiedComplexity.pdf](http://robertmarks.org/REPRINTS/2013_OnTheImprobabilityOfAlgorithmicSpecifiedComplexity.pdf)

[http://robertmarks.org/REPRINTS/2015\\_AlgorithmicSpecifiedComplexityInTheGameOfLife.pdf](http://robertmarks.org/REPRINTS/2015_AlgorithmicSpecifiedComplexityInTheGameOfLife.pdf)

<http://robertmarks.org/REPRINTS/2015%20Measuring%20meaningful%20information%20in%20images.pdf>

<https://appearedtoblogly.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/dembski-william-22the-logical-underpinnings-of-intelligent-design22.pdf>

### **3. Cosmological argument**

**i)** I think the best cosmological argument is a version of the Leibnizian cosmological argument. That argument is partly a posteriori, inasmuch as it appeals to the universe—and partly a priori, inasmuch as it appeals to a metaphysical principle (i.e. the distinction between contingency and necessity). A potential advantage it has over some scientific theistic proofs is that it's less wedded to the particulars of modern physics and cosmology. It operates at a more general level. Even if the universe had no beginning, in principle you could still mount a successful Leibnizian cosmological argument. Even if current theories in modern physics and cosmology undergo radical revision, that doesn't affect the Leibnizian cosmological argument. Here's a sophisticated example:

<http://alexanderpruss.com/papers/LCA.html>

**ii)** William Lane Craig has popularized the kalam cosmological argument. That argument is partly a posteriori, inasmuch as it appeals to the temporality of the universe—and partly a priori inasmuch as it appeals to a metaphysical principle (the alleged impossibility of an actual temporal infinite or the impossibility of traversing an actual temporal infinite). If successful, an advantage of this argument is that it's not dependent on the particulars and vicissitudes of modern physics and cosmology. It's an essentially metaphysical argument, based on the alleged impossibility of an actual commutative temporal infinite. A

potential vulnerability of the argument is dependence on the A-theory of time. So the proponent of this argument must first defend the A-theory of time, as a necessary presupposition of his argument, before he can turn to the cosmological argument proper.

**iii)** Two more philosophical arguments for God:

<https://appearedtoblogly.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/pruss-alexander-and-gale-richard-22a-new-cosmological-argument22.pdf>

<https://appearedtoblogly.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/rasmussen-joshua-22a-new-argument-for-a-necessary-being22.pdf> ;

#### **4. Modal ontological argument**

Summary: If it's possible that a necessary being exists, then he exists in at least one possible world. But if he's a necessary Being, then he exists in every possible world (since that's how necessity is defined in modal metaphysics). If he necessarily exists in any world, then he necessarily exists in every world.

Outline:

- i)** If it's possible for God to exist, then necessarily, God exists
- ii)** It's possible for God to exist.
- iii)** Therefore, necessarily, God exists



The challenge is to demonstrate the possibility of a necessary Being. That depends in part on the burden of proof. A critic needs to explain what is there about the concept of a necessary being that's impossible.

I think modal ontological arguments are promising. But a rigorous formulation can devolve into daunting technicalities and fine-grained modal intuitions.

Exposition:

<https://appearedtoblogly.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/pruss-alexander-a-goedlian-ontological-argument-improved.pdf>

<https://appearedtoblogly.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/pruss-alexander-the-ontological-argument-and-the-motivational-center-of-our-lives.pdf>

<https://appearedtoblogly.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/maydole-robert-22the-ontological-argument22.pdf>

## **5. Argument from reason**

Summary: The necessary conditions of logical and mathematical reasoning, which undergird the human practice of science, require the rejection of all broadly materialistic worldviews.

Exposition:

<https://appearedtoblogly.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/the-argument-from-reason.pdf>

## **6. Argument from consciousness**

Summary: The existence of finite, irreducible consciousness (or its regular, lawlike correlation with physical states) provides evidence (with a strength I characterize) for the existence of God. The proponent must first argue for the irreducibility of consciousness, as a necessary presupposition of his argument. If he acquits that preliminary move, he then argues that "If irreducible consciousness exists (or is regularly correlated with physical states), then this provides evidence (to a degree specified in chapter two) for God's existence."

Exposition:

<https://appearedtoblogly.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/the-argument-from-consciousness.pdf>

J. P. Moreland, **CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE EXISTENCE OF GOD: A THEISTIC ARGUMENT** (Routledge, 2008).

## **III. POPULAR ARGUMENTS**

By popular, I mean arguments or evidence more accessible to nonspecialists. But that doesn't mean these are inferior to philosophical/scientific theistic proofs.

### **1. Argument from religious experience**

There are specific examples. For instance:

### **i) Argument from answered prayer (or special providence):**

That's something many Christians experience firsthand. It is, of course, important to distinguish between coincidence and divine intercession. Many examples of answered prayer (or special providence) should be classified as coincidence miracles. Although they may be the end-result of a natural chain of events, the outcome is too discriminating, opportune, timely, and unlikely to be a matter of chance.

### **ii) Argument from miracles**

Except for the Resurrection, the argument from miracles is neglected in modern apologetics. Although Christian philosophers devote great attention to the subject of miracles, they typically defend the concept, possibility, and the credibility of miracles, rather than presenting evidence for actual miracles.

Philosophical defenses:

John Earman, **HUME'S ABJECT FAILURE: THE ARGUMENT AGAINST MIRACLES** (Oxford, 2000)

D. Geivett & G. Habermas, eds., **IN DEFENSE OF MIRACLES: A COMPREHENSIVE CASE FOR GOD'S ACTION IN HISTORY** (IVP, 1997)

Joseph Houston, **REPORTED MIRACLES: A CRITIQUE OF HUME** (Cambridge, 1994)

David Johnson, **HUME, HOLISM, AND MIRACLES** (Cornell, 2002)

Peter

vanInwagen: [http://andrewmbailey.com/pvi/Of\\_Of\\_Miracles.pdf](http://andrewmbailey.com/pvi/Of_Of_Miracles.pdf)

Case studies:

Craig Keener, **MIRACLES: THE CREDIBILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT ACCOUNTS, 2 VOLS.** (Baker, 2011)

Rex Gardner, **HEALING MIRACLES: A DOCTOR INVESTIGATES** (Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1986)

<http://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/Derren-Brown-wants-to-see-objective-evidence-for-miracles-Challenge-accepted>

Keener also has a number of YouTube presentations on miracles.

Two monographs combining a philosophical defense with case studies:

Robert Larmer, **THE LEGITIMACY OF MIRACLE** (Lexington Books, 2013)

Robert Larmer, **DIALOGUES ON MIRACLE** (Wipf & Stock, 2015)

## **2. Argument from prophecy**

T. D. Alexander, **THE SERVANT KING: THE BIBLE'S PORTRAIT OF THE MESSIAH** (Regent College Publishing, 2003)

Herbert Bateman et al. **JESUS THE MESSIAH: TRACING THE PROMISES, EXPECTATIONS, AND COMING OF ISRAEL'S KING** (Kregel, 2012)

J. Alec Motyer, **LOOK TO THE ROCK: AN OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF CHRIST** (Kregel Academic & Professional; 1st ed., 2004)

O. Palmer Robertson, **THE CHRIST OF THE PROPHETS** (P & R Publishing, 2008)

Michael Rydelnik's **THE MESSIANIC HOPE: IS THE HEBREW BIBLE REALLY MESSIANIC?** (B& H 2010)

John H. Sailhamer, **THE MEANING OF THE PENTATEUCH: REVELATION, COMPOSITION AND INTERPRETATION** (IVP, 2009)

### **3. Moral argument**

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-arguments-god/>

<https://appearedtoblogly.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/linville-mark-22the-moral-argument22.pdf>

### **4. Existential argument**

This goes to the question of whether atheism entails moral and/or existential nihilism. For instance:

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/the-absurdity-of-life-without-god>

## **5. The Bible**

If the Bible is even approximately true, then that not only proves mere theism, but is one-stop shopping for Christian theism. There are many books expounding the general historical reliability of Scripture, as well as the historical Jesus in particular. For instance:

Paul Barnett, **FINDING THE HISTORICAL JESUS** (Eerdmans, 2009)

Richard Bauckham, **JESUS AND THE EYEWITNESSES** (Eerdmans, 2nd ed., 2017)

Daniel Block, et al. eds. **ISRAEL: ANCIENT KINGDOM OR LATE INVENTION?** (B&H Academic, 2008)

Craig Blomberg, **THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT** (B&H Academic, 2016)

D. Bock & R. Webb, eds., **KEY EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS: A COLLABORATIVE EXPLORATION OF CONTEXT AND COHERENCE** (Eerdmans, 2010).

D. A. Carson, ed. **THE ENDURING AUTHORITY OF THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES** (Eerdmans, 2016)

C. John Collins, **READING GENESIS WELL** (Zondervan 2018)

S. Cowan & T. Wilder. **IN DEFENSE OF THE BIBLE: A COMPREHENSIVE APOLOGETIC FOR THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE** (B&H, 2013)

Paul Rhodes Eddy & Gregory Boyd, **THE JESUS LEGEND: A CASE FOR THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF THE SYNOPTIC JESUS TRADITION** (Baker, 2007)

Craig A. Evans, **JESUS AND HIS WORLD: THE ARCHEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE** (WJK, 2012)

Colin Hemer, **THE BOOK OF ACTS IN THE SETTING OF HELLENISTIC HISTORY** (Eisenbrauns, 1990)

R. Hess, et al. eds. **CRITICAL ISSUES IN EARLY ISRAELITE HISTORY** (Eisenbrauns, 2008)

James Hoffmeier. **THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE BIBLE** (Lion Hudson, 2008)

James Hoffmeier, **ISRAEL IN EGYPT: EVIDENCE FOR THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE EXODUS TRADITION** (Oxford, 1997)

James Hoffmeier, **ANCIENT ISRAEL IN SINAI: THE EVIDENCE FOR THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE WILDERNESS TRADITION** (Oxford, 2005)

James Hoffmeier & Dennis MaGary, eds., **DO HISTORICAL MATTERS MATTER TO FAITH?** (Crossway, 2012)

James Hoffmeier & Alan Millard, eds. **THE FUTURE OF BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY: REASSESSING METHODOLOGIES AND ASSUMPTIONS** (Eerdmans, 2004)

V. Philips Long et al. eds. **WINDOWS INTO OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY: EVIDENCE, ARGUMENT, AND THE CRISIS OF "BIBLICAL ISRAEL"** (Eerdmans, 2002)

Craig Keener, **ACTS: A EXEGETICAL COMMENTARY, 4 VOLS.** (Baker Academic, 2012-2015)

Craig Keener, **THE HISTORICAL JESUS OF THE GOSPELS** (Eerdmans, 2009)

Kenneth Kitchen, **ON THE RELIABILITY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT** (Eerdmans 2003)

Lydia McGrew, **HIDDEN IN PLAIN VIEW: UNDESIGNED COINCIDENCES IN THE GOSPELS AND ACTS** (DeWard, 2017)



Alan Millard et al. eds. **FAITH, TRADITION, AND HISTORY: OLD TESTAMENT HISTORIOGRAPHY IN ITS NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT** (Eisenbrauns, 1994)

Stanley Porter, John, **HIS GOSPEL, AND JESUS** (Eerdmans, 2016)

Vern Poythress, **INERRANCY AND THE GOSPELS** (Crossway 2012)

I. Provan, et al. **A BIBLICAL HISTORY OF ISRAEL** (WJK, 2nd ed., 2015)

Andrew Steinmann. **FROM ABRAHAM TO PAUL: A BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY** (Concordia, 2011)

Peter Williams, **CAN WE TRUST THE GOSPELS?** (Crossway 2018)

Bruce. W. Winter, **THE BOOK OF ACTS IN ITS FIRST CENTURY SETTING, VOLS. 1-4** (Eerdmans)

## **IV. ATHEOLOGY**

### **1. Critiquing theistic proofs**

Atheists spend lots of time attacking theistic proofs. I don't have much to say about that in this post. For one reason, Christians who formulate arguments for God generally take atheist objections into account.

## 2. God of the gaps

Atheists routinely attack scientific arguments for God as an argument from ignorance. But we should operate with presumptive naturalism because methodological atheism has a great track record of filling gaps.

There are, however, multiple problems with that objection:

**i)** It substitutes naturalism of the gaps for God of the gaps.

**ii)** It misconceives Christian theology. God doesn't directly cause every event—or even most events. Rather, there's a doctrine of general providence, where natural events are normally the result of physical causes. Therefore, the fact that science discovers natural mechanisms doesn't fill gaps that were previously the provenance of God's immediate fiat. Folk religion may be guilty of that, but not Christian theology.

**iii)** In addition, the objection sometimes begs the question. For instance, an atheist will say people used to attribute mental illness to demonic possession, but we now know mental illness has natural causes.

However, to assert that demonic possession is inherently superstitious and unscientific not only begs the question, but ignores evidence to the contrary. For instance:

<http://www.craigkeener.com/exorcism-stories/>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/07/01/as-a-psychiatrist-i-diagnose-mental-illness-and-sometimes-demonic-possession/>

M. Scott Peck, **GLIMPSES OF THE DEVIL A PSYCHIATRIST'S PERSONAL ACCOUNTS OF POSSESSION, EXORCISM , AND REDEMPTION** (Free Press, 2009)

**iv)** Design arguments are arguments from knowledge. Indications of rational agency. To take a comparison, a detective may have to determine whether a death was accidental or homicidal. A clever killer will stage a murder to make it appear to be accidental death, or death by natural causes. Yet there may be subtle indications that it was murder. Imagine an atheist objecting on the grounds that we should always be patient and assume death was accidental or due to natural causes. Even if we can't explain it that way, we should wait until we develop a theory to do so. To invoke a personal agent (murderer) is homicide of the gaps.

**v)** Some issues, like the hard problem of consciousness, arguably belong to a different domain than physicalism. Arguments for the irreducibility of consciousness are metaphysical rather than scientific.

### **3. God-talk is meaningless**

Although it has few followers today, there was a time when some atheists (e.g. Antony Flew, Kai Nielsen) said God-talk is meaningless. Sometimes dubbed theological noncognitivism.

Nielsen argued that anthropomorphic descriptions of God are meaningful, but false. By contrast, classical theism is meaningless. That, however, assumes that certain divine attributes like timelessness and spacelessness lack positive content. But if the notion of a timeless and/or spaceless

entity is meaningless, then the notion of abstract objects (e.g. numbers, possible worlds) is meaningless. Yet that's a radical claim. Even philosophers who deny the existence of abstract objects don't necessarily contend that the notion is meaningless, just unnecessary. Likewise, it's arguable that mental entities are spaceless. But we have direct experience of what mental entities are.

#### **4. Presumption of atheism**

Some atheists (e.g. Antony Flew) contend that the onus is on the person making the assertion—in this case, the theist. That, however, is deceptive. For a denial is no less a truth claim than an affirmation. To say there's no evidence for God, or insufficient evidence for God is itself an assertion. So both sides of the debate have a burden of proof.

#### **5. Argument from evil**

This is different from some atheistic arguments because it claims to be positive evidence for God's nonexistence, and not merely lack of evidence. However, the argument is beset by problems:

**i)** As William Dembski noted in his debate with Christopher Hitchens:

In establishing God's goodness, let's therefore first level the playing field. The sixth century Christian philosopher Boethius helps us here. In his *Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius states the following paradox: "If God exists, whence evil? But whence good, if God does not exist?" Boethius contrasts the problem that evil poses for theism with the problem that good poses for atheism. The problem of good does not receive nearly as much attention as the problem evil, but it is

the more basic problem. That's because evil always presupposes a good that has been subverted.

<https://billdembski.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Does-a-Good-God-Exist-debate-with-Christopher-Hitchens.pdf>

Evil presumes a deviation from an ideal. But in a godless cosmos, devoid of teleology, how can anything be dysteleological?

**ii)** In principle, an atheist can reject moral realism but still claim that the problem of evil generates an inconsistent triad for Christian theism: If God is omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent, how come evil occurs? You can either deny God's existence or relieve the dilemma by denying one of the conflicting attributes.

However, a problem with that formulation is that it's too abstract. Indeed, it's in tension with another atheist argument. Atheists routinely assert that the Biblical God is morally reprehensible, because he permits, commits, or commands evil. That, however, has the ironic consequence of disabling the argument from evil, for by their own admission, Yahweh's existence is consistent with evil. So Bible writers don't regard God's benevolence in the same atheists do.

## **6. The Euthyphro dilemma**

Some atheists appeal to the Euthyphro dilemma to negate the possibility of Christian ethics. But there are problems with that move:

i) Secular ethicist Richard Joyce has argued that the so-called Euthyphro dilemma is a false dilemma:

[http://personal.victoria.ac.nz/richard\\_joyce/acrobat/joyce\\_2002\\_euthyphro.dilemma.pdf](http://personal.victoria.ac.nz/richard_joyce/acrobat/joyce_2002_euthyphro.dilemma.pdf)

Divine command theory may still be problematic, but not for *that* reason.

ii) Even if an atheist succeeded in showing that Christian ethics can't undergird moral realism, he hasn't shown that secular ethics is any more successful at undergirding moral realism. It may merely deflect attention away from intractable problems with secular ethics. Punting to real or alleged problems with Christian ethics doesn't mean you have a viable secular alternative.

If, moreover, an atheist concedes the futility of moral realism, then his attack on Christianity is a pyrrhic victory. What does that really accomplish? Like a sniper with terminal cancer: If I can't live, then I'll take everyone down with me!

If an atheist rejects moral realism, what's his rational incentive for attacking Christianity? Even if he thinks Christianity is false, he doesn't think it's morally wrong for people to be Christian.

iii) Even if the Euthyphro dilemma had bite, it only cuts into divine command theory. It doesn't cut into natural law theory.

## **7. Paradoxes of omniscience**

Some atheists claim the notion of divine omniscience is paradoxical. However, Graham Oppy, who's the top atheist philosopher of his generation, is critical of the arguments deployed against omniscience:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/09/philosophical-objections-to-omniscience.html>

## **8. Paradoxes of omnipotence**

Some atheists claim the notion of divine omnipotence is paradoxical, viz. the stone paradox. However, these are specious antinomies, generated by wooden, arbitrary, a priori definitions of omnipotence. For instance:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/12/the-stone-paradox.html>

**9.** You have other objections concerning divine hiddenness, divine freedom (William Rowe), mass extinction, and the argument from scale. Since I myself have addressed these objections on various occasions, I don't have anything new to say.

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Likewise see "[Making a case for Christianity](#)" and "[Required reading list for atheists](#)".

## Required reading for atheists

This is a complement to an earlier post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/12/im-going-to-list-and-summarize-what-i.html>

The two posts overlap. The earlier post is more technical and detailed. This post is deliberately simplified. But it adds some new arguments and some new titles.

Many atheists think Christians are supposed to start from scratch every time they meet a new atheist. As if every time we meet an atheist, we're expected to repeat all the arguments and evidence. It's like requiring every teacher to instruct each student individually rather than classroom instruction.

The typecast atheist who has a checklist of argumentative questions, who acts like these questions have never been answered before, and is too lazy to study the preexisting answers. Too lazy to ask where to find good answers to his questions. Instead, he's like a college student who tells the professor, "I don't read textbooks, and I won't sit in class with other students. No, you must individually tutor me".

If an atheist is not prepared to read up on answers to the stock questions/objections, then he's not intellectually



serious or curious. Due to the brevity of the human lifespan, we have to make choices about where to put our time. We can spend more time on fewer people or less time on more people. We can be more intensive at the expense of being less extensive or more extensive at the expense of being less intensive. Those are necessary tradeoffs. Wise Christians strike a balance. We sink extra time into a smaller circle, while we also try to do things for a larger group.

My recommendation is to give the atheist a reading list of arguments for Christianity. To acquaint him with the range of evidence for Christianity. If he's unwilling to read the material, then he's not a sincere truth-seeker, he's not asking questions or raising objections to find out what the answers are, so invest your time in someone else.

The case for Christianity takes the form of a cumulative case argument. There's no one piece of evidence.

An atheist might complain that my list is one-sided. In fact, I'm deeply read in the atheist literature. I've gone out of my way to read high-level atheists. So I know both sides of the argument. Indeed, I daresay that I'm better versed in atheism than most atheists.

However, all you need to know about atheism is whether naturalism commits the consistent adherent to moral and/or existential nihilism. If that's the case, then you can scratch it off the list.

The list below is just a sample. But it will be a real eyeopener for the sincere truth-seeker who has no inkling with regard to multiple lines of evidence for Christianity.

## **Philosophical arguments**

W. L. Craig, ed. *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (2012)

Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* (2017)

Joshua Rasmussen, *The Bridge of Reason: Ten Steps to See God* (2018)

Joshua Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God* (2019)

Colin Ruloff (ed.), *Contemporary Arguments in Natural Theology* (Bloomsbury Press, forthcoming)

Jerry Walls, ed. *Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God* (2018)

<https://www.theology.ox.ac.uk/files/lecture5mp4>

<http://alexanderpruss.com/papers/finite.pdf>

[http://www.proginosko.com/docs/The Lord of Non-Contradiction.pdf](http://www.proginosko.com/docs/The_Lord_of_Non-Contradiction.pdf)

[http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Anderson-Welty%20\(In%20Defense%20of%20the%20Argument%20for%20God%20from%20Logic\).pdf](http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Anderson-Welty%20(In%20Defense%20of%20the%20Argument%20for%20God%20from%20Logic).pdf)

## **Scientific arguments**

Douglas Axe, Robin Collins, William Dembski, Jonathan McLatchie, Stephen Meyer.

## **Argument from miracles**

Craig Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 vols. (2011)

<http://www.craigkeener.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Crooked-Spirits-from-Journal-of-Mind-and-Behavior-39-4-2018-complete.pdf>

Robert Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle* (2012), appendix.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Dialogues on Miracle* (2015), appendix.

<https://epistleofdude.wordpress.com/2017/11/07/visions-of-jesus/>

## **Argument from prophecy**

Michael Rydelnik, ed. *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy* (2019).

## **Argument from archeology**

Peter Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (2018)

## **Argument from undesigned coincidences**

Lydia McGrew, *Hidden in Plain View* (2017)

## **Argument from unnecessary details**

Lydia McGrew, *The Mirror or the Mask* (2019)

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Eye of the Beholder* (forthcoming)

## **Argument from nihilism**

Some Christian apologists argue that naturalism commits the consistent naturalist to moral and/or existential nihilism.

However, it isn't necessary to read Christian apologists argue for that position. It's not just a Christian interpretation of naturalism. You can read many candid atheists who admit that:

<https://thequietus.com/articles/25509-eugene-thacker-infinite-resignation-interview>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/02/sisyphus.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/02/hampster-on-wheel.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/09/a-pig-satisfied.html>

<https://www.proginosko.com/2013/08/the-atheists-guide-to-reality/>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/12/ultimate-questions.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2006/02/from-atheism-to-nihilism.html>

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2008/03/go-with-your-evolved-sense-of-right-and.html>

<https://isi.org/modern-age/john-gray-a-spinoza-for-today/>

## **Argument from demonology**

<http://www.drroberthbennettphd.com/Radio.html>

<http://wscal.edu/blog/a-pastors-reflections-demon-possession-and-mental-illness>

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/01/devil-may-care.html>

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/11/jesus-and-psychiatrists.html>

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/11/pandemonium.html>

<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/04/health/exorcism-doctor/index.html>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/07/01/as-a-psychiatrist-i-diagnose-mental-illness-and-sometimes-demonic-possession/>

<http://www.craigkeener.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Crooked-Spirits-from-Journal-of-Mind-and-Behavior-39-4-2018-complete.pdf>

M. Scott Peck, *Glimpses of the Devil: A Psychiatrist's Personal Accounts of Possession* (2009)

## **Argument from angelic apparitions**

Emma Heathcote-James, *Seeing Angels: True Contemporary Accounts of Hundreds of Angelic Experiences* (2001)

## **Argument from postmortem apparitions**

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/10/communion-of-saints.html>

## **Transcendental theism**

James Anderson, *Why Should I Believe Christianity?* (2016)

## **"Contradictions"**

<https://frame-poythress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/PoythressVernInerrancyAndTheGospels.pdf>

## **Pascal's Wager**

It's not a direct argument for Christianity, but a catalyst to shake the indifferent out of their complacency. It needs to be supplemented

## **Worshiping a Bronze Age sky fairy**

**1.** I'd like to comment on two contradictory objections to Christianity. Before I do that, a preliminary observation: There's a certain dilemma in Christian apologetics. Do we respond to the sophisticated atheists or the village atheists? Normally, you want to take on the toughest opponents of your position. If you focus on the most naive objections to Christianity, that's too easy. It looks like you're ducking the more formidable objections. However, village atheists outnumber sophisticated atheists by a million to one, so there's a problem with ignoring all the dumb objections, if that's the level at which most atheists operate. If we're too elitist, we're ignoring most atheists. Mind you, when atheists start talking about sky fairies and invisible pink unicorns, intelligent dialogue is futile.

**2.** Back to the main point: on the one hand, Christopher Hitchens used to recycle an argument as part of his stump speech when debating Christians. It went something like this: modern man is said to be about 100,000-200,000 years old. Yet according to the Bible, God only revealed himself to Abraham 4,000 years ago and Moses 3200 years ago, while the climax of redemption occurred 2000 ago. For 99% of human history, God said and did nothing.

So his argument is that Biblical theism is too late. If God existed, we'd expect him to intervene far earlier in human history. He wouldn't let humans suffer in darkness for such a long time.

**3.** However, it's more common for atheists to raise this objection: why should we believe the stories of Bronze Age goatherds?



That argument, if you can call it an argument, is just the opposite. The objection is that Biblical theism is too early. Too primitive. Too archaic. If God existed, he'd wait until the era of modern science to reveal himself.

Of course, both these arguments can't be true. It can't be the case that biblical theism lacks credibility both because it's too early and too late.

**4.** In addition to the contradiction, we might assess the objections individually, on their own terms. Genesis is a very truncated history. It skips over many intervening events and periods. We need to be cautious about inferring what God didn't say or do from what he's recorded as having said and done. The fact that Genesis is silent on many fronts doesn't mean God was silent. The fact that most things go unreported doesn't mean God was in absentia.

**5.** Is there any antecedent reason to presume God wouldn't reveal himself to Bronze Age goatherds? Does the message of salvation require a grasp of modern physics, set theory, and fractal geometry? Does redemption require a space-age setting?

How future is modern enough? Suppose the Incarnation took place in the 20C, and the Second Coming takes place in the 26C. Imagine a 25C atheist complaining about those primitive people back in 20C Europe and North America.

## Questions for theists

Jeff Lowder recently reposted his questions for theists:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2012/06/06/20-questions-for-theists/>

I'll respond:

**1. The question "Why is there something rather than nothing" presupposes "nothing" as being the normal state of affairs. Why believe that? Why can't we flip the question on its head? In other words, why can't it be the case that the normal state of affairs is for things to actually exist and nothingness itself would be weird? (HT: Thy Kingdom Come (Undone))**

Well, for one thing, science itself is predicated on the operating assumption that contingent entities require causes. If we flip the question on its head, then we can dispense with cosmology, geology, pathology, &c. We can dispense with a science of origins. No need to explain why things happen.

**2. Given that the universe has a finite age, why did the universe begin with time rather than in time?**

That depends on your theory of time. If you have a Newtonian conception of absolute time, then time could preexist the universe. That's a container view of time, where time is like an empty container that's independent of what, if anything, might fill it. If, however, you view time as a mode of existence, then you can't have time apart from

concrete entities, for on that view, time is an ordered relation between concrete entities (a la Leibniz, Einstein). Doesn't Jeff know that?

**3. Why is so much of our universe intelligible without any appeal to supernatural agency? Why does the history of science contains numerous examples of naturalistic explanations replacing supernatural ones and no examples of supernatural explanations replacing naturalistic ones?**

A loaded question. This involves a stereotypical misconception of divine agency, where natural and supernatural explanations are mutually exclusive. Yet that's like saying, if robots can build a car, you don't need humans. Well, you may not need humans to build the car, but you need humans to build the robot. So there's a distinction between direct and indirect agency. Natural causes don't eliminate the need for supernatural agency if supernatural agency is required to establish natural processes in the first place.

**4. Why is the physical universe so unimaginably large?**

**i)** Vast in relation to whom? To God? The universe isn't vast in relation to *God*. Indeed, the scale of the universe isn't even meaningful in comparison to a God who has no spatial dimensions. If it were bigger or smaller, what difference would that make to God?

**ii)** One scientific argument is that a universe requires a certain amount of raw mass to produce the elements necessary for life.

**5. If you believe that visual beauty is evidence of God, why isn't the universe saturated with auditory, tactile, or other non-visual types of sensory beauty?**

i) I don't really think of visual beauty as evidence for God, but even if I did, why must the universe be "saturated" with types of sensory beauty?

ii) The question also depends on whether we classify different types of sensory experience as "beautiful". Something can taste good without tasting "beautiful" (whatever that means). A massage feels good without feeling "beautiful" (whatever that means). Suppose we recast the question in terms of various kinds of sensory *goodness* as evidence for God.

**6. If you believe the universe is fine-tuned for intelligent life, why isn't our universe teeming with life, including life much more impressive than human life?**

i) A loaded question. How would we be in any position to know that our universe isn't teeming with life, including life that's much more impressive than human life? We can barely explore our own solar system.

ii) For a planet to be in the Goldilocks zone, other celestial bodies in the solar system must be outside the Goldilocks zone. Due to gravity, some celestial bodies will be at a certain distance from others, depending on their mass. Moreover, it all has to balance out at every larger scale. A cosmic butterfly effect. So that limits the number of habitable planets, even in principle.

iii) There's an equivocation in saying the "universe is fine-tuned for life". That doesn't mean the universe is generally

hospitable to life, but that, in order for life to exist at all, many conditions must be met, interlocking conditions, and the tolerance is exceedingly narrow. There's almost no margin for variation. Jeff's question seems to draw a false inference from the phrase.

**7. Why would God use biological evolution as a method for creation? Do you have any answer that is independent of the scientific evidence for evolution?**

A loaded question. I reject macroevolution/universal common descent.

**8. Why would God desire to create embodied moral agents, as opposed to unembodied minds (such as souls, spirits, or ghosts)? Why is the human mind dependent on the physical brain?**

i) God has created discarnate minds. They're called angels.

ii) Embodied souls naturally have types of experience that discarnate minds cannot.

iii) Is the human mind dependent on the brain? That's ambiguous. If, according to interactionist dualism, a soul is coupled with a brain, then, in a sense, the soul is dependent on the brain so long as the two are coupled. If, however, the soul is decoupled from the brain, it can exist and function apart from the brain.

Take night vision goggles. If you are wearing night vision goggles, then the only way you can see anything is via the goggles. And they enhance your natural visual acuity in one respect. You can see as well at night without them. Conversely, if you wear them in daylight, you can't see at all. The brightness is blinding. In that respect, someone who

wears them is dependent on the goggles to see. But, of course, he can see without them if he removes them.

**iv)** There's various lines of evidence that the human mind is not inherently dependent on the brain, viz. crisis apparitions, terminal lucidity, the hard problem of consciousness.

**9. Did Australopithecus have a soul? What about homo habilis? Homo erectus? Neanderthals? Why or why not? (HT: Keith Parsons)**

**i)** One question is the point at which "hominids" are human. What's the cut off? Hard to say from fossil remains.

**ii)** I think higher animals may well have souls. Animal souls. Souls proper to the nature of a given species.

**10. How do souls interact with physical matter? Do you have any answer that is not tantamount to "I don't know?" (HT: Keith Parsons)**

A loaded question. How does physical matter interact? Unless you think physical interactions are infinitely divisible, there's comes a point where one thing just does cause another thing. It has to bottom out at direct causation, where there's no intervening medium. So that's no more of a problem for dualism than physicalism.

**11. If you believe humans have free will, why would humans have free will if God exists? Why are we able to exercise free will in some situations but not others?**

I don't think humans have libertarian freewill.

**12. Why are pain and pleasure so connected to the biological goals of survival and reproduction, but morally random? Is there some greater good that logically requires (or logically requires risking) that suffering be used to motivate animals to pursue the biological goal of self-preservation? Does some moral end make it desirable for suffering to continue even when it serves no biological purpose? For example, why do sentient beings, including animals which are not moral agents, experience pain or pleasure that we do not know to be biologically useful?**

i) This makes unargued assumptions about animal suffering. How does Jeff know that animals suffer? What does he know about the pain threshold of animals?

ii) What does he have in mind when he refers to animal suffering that continues when it no longer serves any biological purpose? In the linked post, he cites a painful terminal illness. If so, that's a level-confusion. In that context, the question isn't whether pain, in itself, is purposeful, but whether disease is purposeful. On a related note, whether mortality is purposeful. In the animal kingdom, mortality maintains the natural balance. And in human affairs, mortality is partly punitive. Death is a punishment for sin. But for Christians, death is a portal to heaven.

**13. Why do only a fraction of living things, including the majority of sentient beings, thrive? In other words, why do very few living things have an adequate supply of food and water, are able to reproduce, avoid predators, and remain healthy? Why would God create a world in which all sentient beings savagely compete with one another for survival? Why do an even smaller fraction of organisms thrive for**

## **most of their lives? Why do almost no organisms thrive for all of their lives?**

**i)** Well, there's an obvious sense in which prey species weren't designed to successfully elude predators every time. That would defeat their function as prey. They must only "thrive" to the degree that they must maintain a replacement rate.

**ii)** What makes Jeff assume most organisms lack an adequate supply of food and water?

**iii)** To say animals "savagely" compete with one another for survival is an anthropomorphic projection. Animals don't share that human viewpoint. Do animals seem to be unhappy with their lot in life? Not that I can see.

## **14. Why is there social evil, i.e., instances of pain or suffering that results from the game-theoretic interactions of many individuals?**

**i)** I guess Jeff is alluding to something like moral dilemmas (e.g. lifeboat ethics), where there's a conflict between the common good and self-interest. If so, why should we expect God to protect sinners from moral dilemmas?

**ii)** In addition, moral dilemmas are a test of altruism. Will I sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of others? That's a virtue. In particular, a second-order good that's contingent on social evils.

## **15. Why does God allow horrific suffering (and relatively little glorious pleasure)?**

There's infinite "glorious pleasure" for saints in the world to come.



**16. Why does horrific suffering often destroy a person, at least psychologically, and prevent them from growing morally, spiritually, and intellectually?**

What a strange question. Why *wouldn't* horrific suffering be psychologically destructive?

Perhaps this is Jeff's clumsy way of asking what God would allow that to happen? Or maybe he's shadowboxing with the soul-making theodicy. If so, that's only inconsistent with God's existence if God intends for everyone to "grow morally, spiritually, or intellectually". Conversely, some cases of horrific suffering are divine punishment for sin.

**17. Why is there nonculpable (reasonable) nonbelief in God? Why are there former believers, i.e., people who, from the perspective of theism, were on the right path when they lost belief? Why are there so many people who gave their lives to God only to discover there is no God? Why are there lifelong seekers? Why are there converts to nontheistic religions and especially nonresistant believers who arrive as a result of honest inquiry at nontheistic experiences and beliefs? Why are there isolated nontheists, i.e., people who have never so much as had the idea of God?**

Begs the question.

**18. Why do some believers feel there is evidence for God's existence on which they may rely, but in which God is not felt as directly present to her experience, and may indeed feel absent?**

Because both are true.

**19. Why are there such striking geographic differences in the incidence of theistic belief? Why does theistic belief vary dramatically with cultural and national boundaries? For example, why does a population of millions of non-theists persist in Thailand but not in Saudi Arabia? And why has the global incidence of theistic belief varied dramatically over time, i.e., during the existence of the human species?**

Because specific theistic beliefs aren't merely based on natural revelation, but special revelation and/or social conditioning.

**20. Why do only some people have religious experiences?**

Depends on how you define religious experience. For instance, I can have a Bunyanesque experience by meeting John Bunyan in person. But I can also have a Bunyanesque experience by reading **PILGRIM'S PROGRESS**. If I read his novel, I experience his imagination, talent, and Christian values. I can have a Wrightist experience by meeting Frank Lloyd Wright in person. But I can also have a Wrightist experience by living in Falling Water. If I live in a house he designed, I experience his imagination, talent, and aesthetic values.

Likewise, if God made the world, then living in the world is a religious experience. If God made the human body, then having a body is a religious experience. If God designed human nature, then being human is a religious experience. If the Bible is the word of God, then reading the Bible is a religious experience.

Perhaps Jeff means something more direct or distinctive, like a divine dream or answered prayer. On that narrow definition, a reason only some people might have religious experience is because God doesn't intend everyone to be religious.

**21. In particular, why is it that most of the people who do have religious experiences almost always have a prior belief in God or extensive exposure to a theistic religion?**

Begs the question.

**22. For those people who do have religious experiences, why do they pursue a variety of radically different religious paths, none of which bears abundantly more moral fruit than all of the others?**

Once again, depends on how you define religious experience (see above). A religious experience can be quite generic.

**23. Why do so many people report not experiencing God's comforting presence in the face of tragedies?**

i) Short answer: because they *don't* experience his comforting presence in the face of tragedies.

ii) Perhaps, in his clumsy way, Jeff is asking why, if God exists, he doesn't give everyone a sense of his comforting presence in the face of tragedies? Well, if everyone is a sinner, living in religious rebellion, then they don't deserve a sense of his comforting presence in the face of tragedies.

iii) Now, it's true that many Christians may not feel a sense of God's comforting presence in the face of tragedies. Why

that's the case, God only knows. I will say that it's hardly unexpected. The Bible contains many passages in which believers lament their feeling of divine abandonment in time of need. So that's not contrary to Biblical theism. It can be puzzling and aggravating, but that's not evidence against God's existence.

**24. Why does the relatively new discipline of cognitive science of religion support the claim that we have a Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD), which causes human beings to naturally form beliefs about invisible agents? Considering HADD's poor track record of producing true beliefs about invisible agents in general, why should we trust it when it produces a belief about one invisible agent, the God of theism?**

**i)** To begin with, that's just a hypothesis. And it's in tension with Jeff's claim that many people don't have religious experiences. For if the human brain is hardwired to naturally form beliefs in the existence of godlike agents, then we'd expect religious experience to be universal.

**ii)** Moreover, if God exists, it would not be surprising if he built a God-detector into our psychological makeup.

**iii)** Finally, many kinds of experience cause us to form a variety of spontaneous beliefs. Whether or not the belief is warranted depends on confirmatory evidence.

**25. Why does God allow such confusion or disagreement among people, including theists, about what is morally good or bad and morally right or wrong?**

Because a world in which people disagree is a different kind of world than a world in which everyone agrees. Although disagreement can be a source of evil, it can also be a source of second-order goods. Goods that are unobtainable in a world without disagreements.

**26. Why should we believe that, of the innumerable deities worshipped by human beings over the ages, yours is the one that really exists? Why believe in Yahweh rather than Zeus, Odin, Marduk, Ishtar, Osiris, Quetzalcoatl, Madame Pele, Ahura-Mazda, etc., etc., etc.? (HT: Keith Parsons)**

Because we have evidence for Yahweh's existence, but we don't have evidence for the others. According to the NT, Jesus is Yahweh Incarnate, and there's evidence for Jesus.

## Has presuppositionalism evolved?

Has presuppositionalism evolved? By presuppositionalism I mean the Van Tilian tradition, not the Clarkian tradition—which is a different animal.

Van Til championed the transcendental argument. And I think that's due in large part to his eccentric view of divine incomprehensibility (which builds paradox into his definition of divine incomprehensibility). If God is incomprehensible in Van Til's sense, then you can't argue directly for his existence. Rather, you argue that God's existence is a necessary condition for everything else. Van Til's view is similar in that respect to transcendental Thomism.

So Van Til's argument was essentially an epistemological argument for God's existence. Transcendental arguments are epistemological arguments, to refute skepticism.

However, in the hands of Greg Welty and James Anderson, the argument has shifted to modal metaphysics. So there's been some evolution and reorientation in the argument.

It may be the case that Kant's argument is more epistemological, in part because he doesn't have a robust theology to ground it. Kant might even be a closet atheist. And he's skeptical regarding our knowledge of the external world. So he can't say much of anything to back it up in terms of bedrock ontology.

Although Van Til's version is partly epistemological, he tries to ground it in the metaphysics of Reformed theism. Greg Welty and James Anderson develop that neglected potential in more detail. This is also because there's been a lot of

work done on modal metaphysics which wasn't on the horizon in Van Til's time. In addition, Welty was never a champion of theological paradox. And that's conspicuously missing from Bahnsen as well.

## Atheism at an impasse

Here's a striking admission by a rabid atheist, regarding the stalemate between theism and atheism:

The prospects for a simple, confined argument for atheism (or theism) that achieves widespread support or that settles the question are dim. That is because, in part, the prospects for any argument that decisively settles a philosophical question where a great deal seems to be at stake are dim.

The existence or non-existence of any non-observable entity in the world is not settled by any single argument or consideration. Every premise will be based upon other concepts and principles that themselves must be justified...The question of whether or not there is a God sprawls onto related issues and positions about biology, physics, metaphysics, explanation, philosophy of science, ethics, philosophy of language, and epistemology.

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/atheism/#H6>