

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

**“SOMETIMES I THINK WE’RE ALONE.
SOMETIMES I THINK WE’RE NOT.
IN EITHER CASE, THE THOUGHT IS QUITE STAGGERING.”**

— R. Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983)

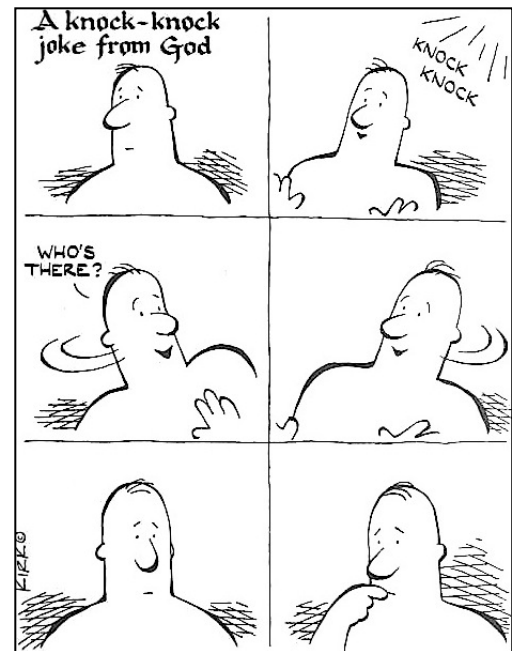
[31] WHAT DOES ‘GOD’ MEAN?

A major opinion poll of people living in the United States found that 92% of the respondents believed in “God or a universal spirit” (margin of error: $\pm 0.6\%$). When asked how certain they were that God exists, 71% said they were “absolutely certain” and another 17% “fairly certain” (with 3% “not too certain,” 1% “not at all certain,” and another 1% “not sure how certain”).¹ The source of this certainty, or lack of certainty, was not explored in the survey.

As for the meaning of the word ‘god’, the most direct question concerned God’s relationship with individual human beings. While 92% believe in “God or a universal spirit,” only 60% believe in a “personal God,” with another 25% understanding God to be an “impersonal force” (with 4% claiming God to be either both or neither, and 3% not answering this further question). Related findings: 74% believe in a life after death, but only 50% are “absolutely certain of this.” 74% believe in a heaven (where good people are rewarded), but only 59% believe in a hell.

Different qualities come to mind when considering the meaning of ‘God’. Some I often hear include the following:

- Creator of the universe/source of all being.
- Unknowable source of all that exists.
- Invisible, non-physical.
- Omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, omnibenevolent.
- Supernatural (above or outside of nature).
- Savior and comforter of human beings.
- Personal and providential.
- Source of love or human sociability.
- Wrathful judge.



THE OMNI WORDS

Omnipotent = all-powerful
Omniscient = all-knowing
Omnibenevolent = all-loving
Omnipresent = present everywhere

Another recent study of religious belief in the United States found that, despite this fairly high agreement that God exists, people in the U.S. are deeply divided on the nature of this God. Baylor sociologists Paul Froese and Christo-

¹ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey” (May 8-August 13, 2007; N=35,556). Website: <http://religions.pewforum.org/>

pher Bader found a fairly even split between four different conceptions of God, which they characterize as falling on the axes of “engagement” and “judgment”:²

- (1) The **Authoritative** God (31%) is high engagement and high judgment. God is involved in human history, rewarding the good and punishing the wicked in this world as well as in the hereafter, powerful, punishes those who disobey, and draws a clear division between the righteous and all the rest.
- (2) The **Benevolent** God (24%) is high engagement and low judgment. God is a force for good who cares for and comforts all people. God’s effects on the world are found everywhere, and while God acts in the world, these actions are not to punish humans. These believers often see happy coincidences as miraculous interventions by God to help us.
- (3) The **Critical** God (16%) is low engagement and high judgment. God watches this world but rarely intervenes in our lives, instead settling accounts in the afterlife. This is a God most readily believed in by those who suffer deprivations but receive little assistance.
- (4) The **Distant** God (24%) is low engagement and low judgment. This God created the world then left it alone; God is the source of the physical universe and its laws, and perhaps cares about humanity in a general way, but is not a personal God who might be called upon for help or consolation.

POSITIONS ON GOD’S EXISTENCE

In considering religion in this section, I will focus on belief in the existence of a *personal* God as commonly understood in the philosophical tradition of the Western monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), that is, as a perfect being who is related in some important way to human beings. Given this rough description of God, we can consider the different attitudes one might take towards the statement that “God exists.” A **theist** is one who believes that God exists, an **atheist** denies such existence, and an **agnostic** withholds judgment on God’s existence (i.e., neither believes nor disbelieves).³

There are also three corresponding “philosophical” variants of these three terms: a **philosophical theist** believes that God’s existence can be proven, a **philosophical atheist** believes that God’s non-existence can be proven, and a **philosophical agnostic** believes that God’s existence can be neither proven nor disproven.

These “philosophical” positions differ significantly from mere theism, atheism, and agnosticism. Agnostics must also be philosophical agnostics (or else appear to be horribly confused); for the same reason, philosophical theists are all theists, and philosophical atheists are all atheists. But a philosophical agnostic could be a theist or an atheist, as well as an agnostic. For instance, there are many people who believe that God exists but do not believe that we can prove this: these people are both theists and philosophical agnostics. We will now examine each of the three proofs offered by the philosophical theist to see if any of them are sound, and then we will examine an argument offered by the philosophical atheist.

OUR BOYS IN VIETNAM...

“The reactions of many Americans to the My Lai massacre in Vietnam are a good example [of group loyalty distorting one’s reasoning]. On reading about My Lai, a teletype inspector in Philadelphia is reported to have said he didn’t think it happened: ‘I can’t believe our boys’ hearts are that rotten.’ This response was typical, as was that of the person who informed the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, which had printed photos of the massacre: ‘Your paper is rotten and anti-American.’ Surveys taken after wide circulation of news about the massacre revealed that large numbers of Americans refused to believe ‘American boys’ had done such a thing. The myth of American moral superiority seems to have been a better source of truth for them than evidence at hand. They were like the clerics who refused to look through Galileo’s telescope to see the moons of Jupiter because they *knew* Jupiter could not possibly have moons.”

Howard Kahane, *Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric*, 4th ed., p. 73.

² Paul Froese and Christopher Bader, *America’s Four Gods: What we say about God — and what that says about us* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

³ All three terms are based on Greek words (*theos* for *god*, *a-* for ‘not’, and *gnostos* for ‘known’), but ‘agnosticism’ is the newest term of the three, having been coined by the biologist Thomas Henry Huxley in 1869.

ARE MY BELIEFS ABOUT GOD JUSTIFIED?

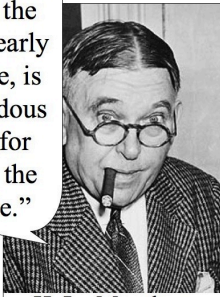
In the chapter on Descartes and epistemology, two accounts of justification were discussed: foundationalism and coherentism. With **foundationalism**, a belief is justified so long as it is supported by more basic (more clearly true) beliefs, and these all ultimately rest on a belief (or set of beliefs) that is self-justified (there's nothing supporting it, nothing that we know with greater certainty than it). This is the form of justification found in Euclidean geometry, and the sort that Descartes hoped to provide for the natural sciences.

With **coherentism**, a belief is justified to the extent that it coheres, or fits in, with one's other beliefs. In this system, the most justified beliefs are still not self-justified, they aren't "indubitably true" like Descartes' *Cogito* (I think, therefore I am). Rather, the most justified beliefs are simply those that are connected with the greatest number of other beliefs; these are the beliefs that are so "central" to our system of beliefs that denying them would unravel a great many of our other beliefs. Religious beliefs (and perhaps all or most of our beliefs) would seem to gain their justification in this coherentist fashion, as suggested in the examples below.

You might believe that God (as described above) exists, or you might believe that no such being exists. Is this belief of yours justified? That is, are there "good reasons" for believing that God does or does not exist, or that God has a certain characteristic (e.g., omnibenevolence)? Consider the following different statements about which you may have beliefs:

- "John's shirt is blue."
- "John has a heart."
- "The earth is spherical, rotates on its axis, and orbits around the sun."
- "It is wrong to torture human beings."
- "God exists."

"The curse of man, and the cause of nearly all his woe, is his stupendous capacity for believing the incredible."



H. L. Mencken
(Baltimore; 1880-1956)

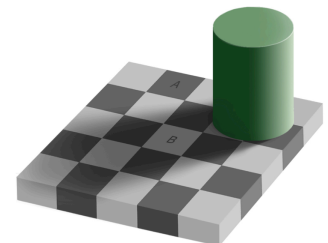
We all have a sense of what these statements mean and, if we know what or who they are about, then we may also have some opinion about their truth-value (that is, whether they are true or false). If we think the statement is true, then we believe it; if we think it false, then we disbelieve it. What justifies our beliefs about these statements?

Let's consider the first, the statement about John's shirt. We should note that this statement is understandable even if we don't know which John it refers to, or which of John's shirts, assuming he has more than one. Any competent user of the language will understand the words and the sentence-structure — will know that 'John' is a common name for male human beings, and so on. The claim appears simply to be that some fellow named 'John' has a shirt, and that this shirt is blue. Of course, if we found this sentence scrawled on the side of a building or in a toilet stall or on the backside of a discarded envelope, we might find its meaning not so

obvious, simply because of its odd location. We might wonder, for instance, whether it was some kind of coded message, or perhaps a political slogan — anything other than the straightforward claim that we intend it to have in this context.

So, once we come upon John and his shirt, then our understanding of the statement is even more complete, for now we know that *this shirt* is the shirt that is claimed to be blue; and now, finally, we are in a position to decide the statement's *truth-value*. How do we do it? Well, we look at the shirt to see if it is in fact blue. "Seeing is believing," as they say. 'Blue' is a color word and colors are perceived visually, so we use our eyes here. If the claim were about the coarseness of John's shirt, then we might also need to touch the shirt (although coarseness can often be seen as well). So sometimes it is my *immediate perception* that justifies my belief regarding the truth-value of a statement. Of course, sometimes things aren't as they appear. In the figure with the checkerboard-pattern of white and black squares, the black square marked with an 'A' is the very same shade of gray as the white square marked with a 'B', although the A-square appears to be much darker than the B-square.

Consider another example. We all know what it means to say that John has a



heart, although this really has at least two meanings, one literal (the claim that a certain organ for pumping blood is to be found somewhere inside John's chest) and one metaphorical (the claim that John is compassionate). I have in mind here the literal meaning and, once we locate John and see that he is up and breathing, walking about, and so on, all of us will believe that John does in fact have a heart. On the other hand, if John were lying death-like on the ground, we might be less certain; and if he were laid out in a coffin we would be even less certain. What justifies our belief here about John's heart? Is it immediate perception?

I believe that *I* have a heart in part because of my perception (I feel it beating, and I sometimes can hear the pulse of blood in my ears, which I believe to be caused by the beating of my heart). Similarly, this belief that I have a heart rests partially on *hearsay*: others have told me that human beings have hearts, and surgeons and anatomists have even seen and touched human hearts. But my belief in having a heart is also deeply connected with other beliefs of mine — namely, those of vertebrate physiology — and, to this extent, my belief in having a heart has a *theoretical* justification as well, that is, the belief is part of an explanation for other things that I believe, and possibly also an explanation for some things that I perceive. I believe that the various cells constituting my body need a constant supply of food and oxygen and some means for getting rid of wastes, and I believe that the continual flow of blood through my body is the means for transporting this food, oxygen, and waste, and I believe that the means for circulating this blood is my beating heart. In other words, my belief about hearts helps explain certain other things that I believe, and in general fits in with an entire system of beliefs about how certain kinds of animals function.

Theoretically justified beliefs are typically more central and imbedded for us than perceptually justified beliefs. I would not be especially troubled if it turned out that John's shirt wasn't really blue (perhaps it only *appeared* blue to me because of unusual lighting, or because my eyes were distorted, etc.). But if it turns out that I really don't have a heart, or that the earth really is flat or stands motionless in space, then I suddenly have a great deal of explaining to do, since both of these beliefs play an important role in my understanding of my body and the world around me.

<p>Theists believe God exists. Atheists disbelieve God exists. Agnostics withhold judgment about this.</p>

Indeed, we will often reject what our senses are telling us in order to preserve some theoretical belief. For instance, we believe that the earth is spherical, spinning on its axis once a day (with a surface speed of about 1000 miles-per-hour in the temperate latitudes), and hurtling around the sun at the heart-stopping pace of nearly 67 thousand miles-per-hour — even though the earth *looks* pretty flat to us and doesn't appear to be going anywhere at all. We explain away this appearance as a local distortion caused by the size of the earth with respect to us and our closeness to its surface, and by appealing to other theoretical beliefs, such as Newton's first law of motion and gravitational attraction.⁴ We are all willing to reject the evidence of our senses in favor of our theoretical belief that the earth is spherical and mobile, for this theoretical belief is central to a great many of our other beliefs about the universe and about the nature of scientific knowledge.

What justifies my belief that torturing human beings is wrong? Is it merely perceptual? (For instance, that I *feel* bad when I think of such torture, or when I perceive acts of torture.) This is a difficulty that we will explore in greater detail in a later chapter.⁵

What about belief in the existence of God? It could be *perceptual* for some people: "I have seen God in a mystical vision," or: "I see God in the

<p>The single function of religion "is to give man access to the powers which seem to control his destiny, and its single purpose is to induce those powers to be friendly to him."</p>

— H. L. Mencken (1880-1956)

⁴ **Jean Bodin** (c.1529-96) — a very bright and well-educated man of his day — wrote that "no one in his senses, or imbued with the slightest knowledge of physics, will ever think that the earth, heavy and unwieldy from its own weight and mass, staggers up and down around its own center and that of the sun; for at the slightest jar of the earth, we would see cities and fortresses, towns and mountains thrown down.... If the earth were to be moved, neither an arrow shot straight up, nor a stone dropped from the top of a tower would fall perpendicularly, but either ahead or behind" (qtd. in Thomas Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution* [Harvard U.P., 1957], p. 190).

⁵ I should note here that to claim that moral beliefs might arise through social indoctrination does not *justify* the beliefs, but rather merely *explains their origin*.

world all around me,” or: “I often feel God’s presence.” Is it *theoretical*? For many, belief in God is a theoretically core belief, and if *it* goes, many of their other beliefs will also have to go.

PERCEPTION AS “THEORY-LADEN”

A commonplace notion developed in the philosophy of science of the late 1950s and ‘60s was that all perception is theory-laden, that there is no such thing as “pure observation.” All observation, the claim goes, assumes some theory or other. What we see is partly determined by the set of expectations that we bring to the observation. Pause a moment to reflect on the following psychology experiment described in chapter six of Thomas Kuhn’s (1922-96) celebrated book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962):

Bruner and Postman asked experimental subjects to identify on short and controlled exposure a series of playing cards. Many of the cards were normal, but some were made anomalous, e.g., a red six of spades and a black four of hearts. Each experimental run was constituted by the display of a single card to a single subject in a series of gradually increased exposures. After each exposure the subject was asked what he had seen, and the run was terminated by two successive correct identifications.

Even on the shortest exposures many subjects identified most of the cards, and after a small increase all the subjects identified them all. For the normal cards these identifications were usually correct, but the anomalous cards were almost always identified, without apparent hesitation or puzzlement, as normal. The black four of hearts might, for example, be identified as the four of either spades or hearts. Without any awareness of trouble, it was immediately fitted to one of the conceptual categories prepared by prior experience. One would not even like to say that the subjects had seen something different from what they identified. With a further increase of exposure to the anomalous cards, subjects did begin to hesitate and to display awareness of anomaly. Exposed, for example, to the red six of spades, some would say: “That’s the six of spades, but there’s something wrong with it — the black has a red border.” Further increase of exposure resulted in still more hesitation and confusion until finally, and sometimes quite suddenly, most subjects would produce the correct identification without hesitation.... A few subjects, however, were never able to make the requisite adjustment of their categories.... One of them exclaimed: “I can’t make the suit out, whatever it is. It didn’t even look like a card that time. I don’t know what color it is now or whether it’s a spade or a heart. I’m not even sure now what a spade looks like. My God!”

Our observations are colored by our prior beliefs, and these beliefs often remain immune from the critical influences of what should serve as contradictory observations. The paranoid is able to read evil intentions into any human action, and his world is a radically different world from that of the non-paranoid. But paranoia is simply one of the more extreme cases. We all have our well-imbedded beliefs, and these change the way that we see the world. Thus it should not surprise us greatly if the theist’s world is radically different from the atheist’s: Both might have their eyes pointed in the same direction, but what they observe could be two wholly separate universes.

[32] WHY BELIEVE IN GOD?

If God’s existence were obviously true, then there wouldn’t be a problem of belief. We would all believe in God in the same way that we believe in the existence of our noses, or that the sky is blue, or that dogs are mammals. These beliefs still require justification, but this justification is straight-forwardly empirical. As it turns out, however, God does not appear to us as a physical object; God cannot be seen or touched, and God’s effects, if there are any, do not come with a clear stamp or sign of God as their cause. We do not directly perceive electrons or black holes or the molten core of the earth, but we do perceive effects of these things that give us good evidence not only of their existence, but also of their nature.

This is generally not the case with God, and it is quite common to speak of “the hiddenness of God.” (A Christian might note that contemporaries of Jesus would have been able to perceive him; but the question would still remain, for those people, whether this man they were perceiving was also God, and not just a man.) Atheists will of

course say that there is no God to hide in the first place; theists will need to explain why God chooses to remain hidden to us (or at least to most people).

God of the Gaps

As it turns out, we also hear various arguments as to why God's existence is doubtful. First of all, it isn't obvious that we need to believe in the existence of God to *explain* anything. Unlike the distant past, now we can understand the world and our place in it without any such appeals to religion. We have *science* now, and science does a much better job of it. In the past, when a child would fall sick and die, we would point to God or to some evil spirit as the cause, but now we know about bacteria and viruses, and thus have a much better theory of illness. In the old days, lightning was thought to be a heavenly deliverance; now we understand it to be the result of electrical discharges caused by certain atmospheric conditions. These modern scientific theories are better, too, insofar as they help us predict and control future events. The old religious theories didn't work at all in this regard, since the gods were typically inscrutable and beyond our control. In the old days, a child would develop a sore throat, and the local wise man might offer up a sacrifice or some such thing, which generally would not help the child recover, and many of them would die. Today, the local wise man or woman — we use the word 'physician' — writes out a prescription for a course of antibiotics, and the sore throat is cleared up within a few days.

Of course, ignorance of scientific explanations of the natural world is still a widespread cause of belief in God. Many people lack the opportunity to learn much science, while others are too lazy to bother learning it, and it's so much easier simply to have at hand some catch-all theory for everything, such as: "The world is thus-and-so because God made it thus-and-so." These human beings aren't quite so dead to the world that they don't care if they understand this world; they *do* care, but not quite enough to explore the matter closely. So they grasp at the easiest theory at hand — God.

Now, having said this, it should be clear that the existence of people ignorant of natural science is not good evidence for the existence of God, and while intellectual laziness might be a *cause* of believing in this sort of god, it surely is not a *good reason* for belief.⁶ Using God as a kind of "one-stop shopping" for explaining the physical world is to believe in a "**God of the Gaps**" — a God

GOD'S LIGHTNING

"When Benjamin Franklin invented the lightning-rod, the clergy, both in England and America, with the enthusiastic support of George III, condemned it as an impious attempt to defeat the will of God. For, as all right-thinking people were aware, lightning is sent by God to punish impiety or some other grave sin — the virtuous are never struck by lightning. Therefore if God wants to strike anyone, Benjamin Franklin ought not to defeat His design; indeed, to do so is helping criminals to escape. But God was equal to the occasion, if we are to believe the eminent Dr Price, one of the leading divines of Boston. Lightning having been rendered ineffectual by the 'iron points invented by the sagacious Dr Franklin', Massachusetts was shaken by earthquakes, which Dr Price perceived to be due to God's wrath at the 'iron points'. In a sermon on the subject he said: 'In Boston are more erected than elsewhere in New England, and Boston seems to be more dreadfully shaken. Oh! there is no getting out of the mighty hand of God.' Apparently, however, Providence gave up all hope of curing Boston of its wickedness, for, though lightning-rods became more and more common, earthquakes in Massachusetts have remained rare."

— Bertrand Russell, "An Outline of Intellectual Rubbish" (1943)

RELIGION AS PAINKILLER

"Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people."

— Karl Marx (1818-1883)

⁶ This is not a new observation; even the ancient Greeks were aware of the problem. The physician Hippocrates (c.460-c.377 BCE), a younger contemporary to Socrates, said that "men think [a disease] divine merely because they do not understand it. But if they called everything divine which they do not understand, why, there would be no end of divine things."

whom we invoke to make-up for our own intellectual shortcomings. This is the god that Daniel Dennett has in mind when he writes: “Science has won and religion has lost. Darwin’s idea has banished the *Book of Genesis* to the limbo of quaint mythology.”⁷ Similarly when Christopher Hitchens writes that:

Religion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important. Where once it used to be able, by its total command of a world-view, to *prevent* the emergence of rivals, it can now only impede and retard — or try to turn back — the measurable advances we have made.⁸

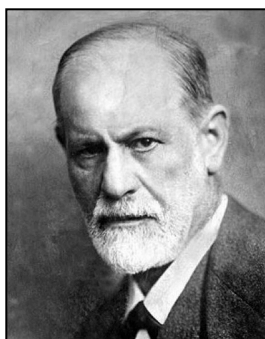
Diversity of Belief

Another common cause of believing in God is experiencing a *consensus* of opinion. If you grew up in a small rural community where everyone attended the local Lutheran church and there wasn’t much contact with the wider world, then pretty much everyone that you admired and looked up to would be a theist (a Lutheran, even). What could be more natural, then, than to be a Lutheran as well? But once you broaden your horizons, you soon discover that not everyone *is* a Lutheran; indeed, you’ll discover that a great many bright, honest, loving and sincere people do not believe that there is a God at all.

Even where a person does believe in God, it might be *the wrong one*. You will still need to find a reason for preferring one religious tradition to another. In which god should you believe, and in which revelation? Should you be a Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Methodist, Jain? The list goes on, and many of these religions are inconsistent with each other. If Jews are God’s chosen people, then Jehovah’s Witnesses are not — and so on. Believing in the wrong god will leave you in great peril, according to many of these religions — and the wrong god is, after all, simply the god of another religion.

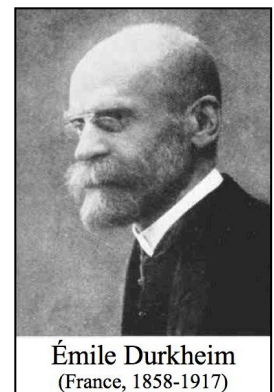
Non-Religious Explanations of Religious Belief

What is more, we now have various psychological, sociological, and economic theories that explain why some people are theists — and it’s not because there is in fact a God. The reason for their believing is because they are insecure, or because they were raised to believe in God, or because such beliefs are conducive to the managing of a society or a certain economic structure. The sociologist **Émile Durkheim** (1858-1917), for instance, argued that God and religious dogma emerged in society as a means of controlling the behavior of the individuals. The power and otherness of the social group is mystified into a supernatural power; according to Durkheim, “God is only a figurative expression of the society” (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1912). A similar point was made by the Scottish historian of religion William Robertson Smith (1846-94) in his *Religion of the Semites* (1889): “Religion did not exist for the saving of souls but for the preservation and welfare of society.”



Sigmund Freud
(Vienna, 1856-1939)

From a more psychological perspective, **Sigmund Freud** (1856-1939) argued that “religion is an illusion and it derives its strength from the fact that it falls in with our instinctual desires.” Religion is a psychological defense against the more threatening aspects of nature — not merely nature’s *violence* in the shape of storms or earthquakes, but also its *indifference* to our happiness in the playing out of its powers. We are afraid and isolated, and the animation of nature by god-like forces helps relieve us of this fear and isolation.⁹ Anthro-



Émile Durkheim
(France, 1858-1917)

⁷ Daniel Dennett, “Intuition Pumps” in John Brockman, *The Third Culture: Beyond the Scientific Revolution* (1996), p. 187.

⁸ Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2009), p. 282.

⁹ See Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1913), *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930).

logical studies have supported this general idea. For instance, **Bronislaw Malinowski** discovered that, among the Trobriand Islanders (off the coast of New Guinea), the number and complexity of superstitious rituals increased the further out to sea they ventured in search of fish (in the safe harbor of the lagoon, they performed none at all). In general, superstitious practices increase as the environment becomes more dangerous, and control over one's well being is replaced by chance:

We find magic wherever the elements of chance and accident, and the emotional play between hope and fear have a wide and extensive range. We do not find magic wherever the pursuit is certain, reliable, and well under the control of rational methods and technological processes. Further, we find magic where the element of danger is conspicuous.¹⁰

These same principles are exemplified not only among primitive fisher-folk, but also among such advanced cultures as American baseball teams.

Michael Shermer has recently noted that...

... in baseball, where players are expected to hit a small, white ball traveling at nearly 100 miles per hour, superstition leads to all sorts of bizarre behaviors on the part of fully modern, educated human beings.... Superstitions are not at all uncommon among hitters, where connecting with the baseball is so difficult and so fraught with uncertainties that the very best in the business fail a full seven out of every ten times at bat. Fielders, by contrast, typically succeed in excess of nine out of every ten times a ball is hit to them (the best succeed better than 95 percent of the time), and they have correspondingly fewer superstitions associated with fielding. But as soon as these same fielders pick up a bat, magical thinking goes into full swing.¹¹



Problem of Evil

A final point that many find troubling for religion is captured by what David Hume called the **Epicurean Dilemma**: “Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then this evil?” The existence of evil calls into question the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God. Indeed, it serves as the basis for the atheist's strongest argument against theism, and we will be considering it in much greater detail later.

IS JUSTIFICATION RELEVANT TO RELIGIOUS BELIEF?

These various considerations call us to examine our religious beliefs more closely and to attempt to justify those we may hold. As a consequence, they leave many people feeling uncomfortable, for either they don't believe in God, and thus feel that the question is uninteresting or irrelevant, or else they *do* believe in God, but don't think that they should have to justify, or give reasons, for their beliefs.

This takes us back to a discussion at the beginning of this book. Do you believe that statements like “God exists” or “God cares for the well-being of human beings” lack truth-values? If so, then discussion of their truth-value is pointless — but there is still quite a bit of work to justify this important claim about religious beliefs (i.e., that they are nei-

HEGEL ON FEELING

“Those who invoke feeling as their internal oracle are finished with anyone who does not agree: they have to admit that they have nothing further to say to anyone who does not find and feel the same in his heart — in other words, they trample under foot the roots of humanity. For it is the nature of humanity to struggle for agreement with others, and humanity exists only in the accomplished community of consciousness. The anti-human, the animalic, consists in remaining at the level of feeling and being able to communicate only through feelings.” [from the “Preface” to his *Phenomenology of Mind* (1807)]

¹⁰ Bronislaw Malinowski, “Magic, Science, and Religion” (1925). He lived with the Trobriand Islanders from 1914 to 1918.

¹¹ Michael Shermer, *How We Believe: The Search for God in an Age of Science* (NY: W. H. Freeman, 1999), p. 45.

ther true nor false). The same is to be said of the claim that these statements *do* in fact have truth-values, but that discerning this is simply beyond human powers.

If religion has nothing to do with reason — if it is based entirely on feelings and emotions, or is simply a matter of private conviction, or is based on faith alone — then perhaps religious belief should be exempted from any need of rational justification. We should consider each of these points.

Is religion based on mere feeling and emotion? It clearly has an emotional component for many people, but that doesn't mean that's *all* there is to it; and even if it were, there could still be a reasonable demand for some justification. Does this belief-system result in the kind of life, or the kind of society, that you (and others) think is best? You will want to justify it to yourself, since it's your life and, insofar as it affects them, your neighbors will demand a justification as well. For instance, racist beliefs typically involve quite a bit of emotion, but the belief that one race is inferior to another ought to be either justified or rejected, given the negative consequences for the larger society of such a belief. You can't defend it simply on the grounds that it's a "matter of feeling."

Is religious belief a matter of private conviction? Well, suppose the decision as to which religion one accepts is in fact a wholly private and personal affair; that still doesn't mean such a decision should be irrational. You may not need to justify it to me or to anyone else, but you surely need to justify it to yourself. For instance, marriage is normally a private affair, but most people don't think they should just jump into a marriage without some thought as to whether it's the right thing to do. Similarly, buying a car is largely a private matter, but you normally take a close look at the car, and the person selling it to you, before you agree to the purchase. Likewise with *religious belief*: if it's of any importance to you at all, you will surely want to examine it closely to make sure it's worthy of your assent.

READINGS

A CONVERSATION WITH GOD

Raymond Smullyan

Raymond Smullyan is a professor of philosophy at Indiana University (Bloomington). The following selection from his book, The Tao is Silent (1977), explores the problem of knowing whether God exists. Many people pray, and many of those who pray would describe what they are doing as "talking with (or to) God." Some describe this experience as listening to "that small, still voice" of God, or the holy spirit, etc. Can the atheist also hear that small, still voice? And if she did, would she be any more inclined to believe in God's existence? Would God's existence be any less problematic for us if God's voice were neither still nor small, but rather in plain English and quite loud? Smullyan explores this question in the following dialogue.

MORTAL: If I can't see you, how do I know you exist?

GOD: Good question! How in fact do you know I exist?

MORTAL: Well, I am talking to you, am I not?

GOD: How do you know you are talking to me? Sup-

pose you told a psychiatrist, "Yesterday I talked to God." What do you think he would say?

MORTAL: That might depend on the psychiatrist. Since most of them are atheistic, I guess most would tell me I had simply been talking to myself.

GOD: And they would be right!

MORTAL: What? You mean you don't exist?

GOD: You have the strangest faculty of drawing false conclusions! Just because you are talking to yourself, it follows that *I* don't exist?

MORTAL: Well, if I think I am talking to you, but I am really talking to myself, in what sense do you exist?

GOD: Your question is based on two fallacies plus a confusion. The question of whether or not you are now talking to me and the question of whether or not I exist are totally separate. Even if you were not now talking to me (which obviously you are), it

still would not mean that I don't exist.

MORTAL: Well, all right, of course! So instead of saying "if I am talking to myself, then you don't exist," I should rather have said, "if I am talking to myself, then I obviously am not talking to you."

GOD: A very different statement indeed, but still false.

MORTAL: Oh, come now, if I am only talking to myself, then how can I be talking to you?

GOD: Your use of the word "only" is quite misleading! I can suggest several logical possibilities under which your talking to yourself does not imply that you are not talking to me.

MORTAL: Suggest just one!

GOD: Well, obviously one such possibility is that you and I are identical.

MORTAL: Such a blasphemous thought — at least had I uttered it!

GOD: According to some religions, yes. According to others, it is the plain, simple, immediately perceived truth.

MORTAL: So the only way out of my dilemma is to believe that you and I are identical?

GOD: Not at all! This is only one way out. There are several others. For example, it may be that you are part of me, in which case you may be talking to that part of me which is you. Or I may be part of you, in which case you may be talking to that part of you which is me. Or again, you and I might partially overlap, in which case you may be talking to the intersection and hence talking both to you and to me. The only way your talking to yourself might seem to imply that you are not talking to me is if you and I were totally disjoint — and even then, you could conceivably be talking to both of us.

MORTAL: So you claim you do exist.

GOD: Not at all. Again you draw false conclusions! The question of my existence has not even come

up. All I have said is that from the fact you are talking to yourself one cannot possibly infer my nonexistence, let alone the weaker fact that you are not talking to me.

MORTAL: All right I'll grant your point! But what I really want to know is *do* you exist?

GOD: What a strange question!

MORTAL: Why? Men have been asking for countless millennia.

GOD: I know that! The question is not strange; what I mean is that it is a most strange question to ask of *me*!

MORTAL: Why?

GOD: Because I am the very one whose existence you doubt! I perfectly well understand your anxiety. You are worried that your present experience with me is a mere hallucination. But how can you possibly expect to obtain reliable information from a being about his very existence when you suspect the nonexistence of the very same being?

MORTAL: So you won't tell me whether or not you exist?

GOD: I am not being willful! I merely wish to point out that no answer I could give could possibly satisfy you. All right, suppose I said, "No, I don't exist." What would that prove? Absolutely nothing! Or if I said, "Yes, I exist." Would that convince you? Of course not!

MORTAL: Well, if you can't tell me whether or not you exist, then who possibly can?

GOD: That is something which no one can tell you. It is something which only you can find out for yourself.

MORTAL: How do I go about finding this out for myself?

GOD: That also no one can tell you. This is another thing you will have to find out for yourself.

RELIGION AND SCIENCE

Albert Einstein

Albert Einstein (1879-1955) was born and educated in Germany. While working in a patent office in Zurich, Einstein published a series of important papers

in physics, including his paper describing the special theory of relativity (1905). He was awarded the Nobel Prize for physics in 1921. Like many other German Jews, Ein-

stein emigrated to the United States in 1933, where he took a post at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton (New Jersey). He lived in Princeton the rest of life.

Einstein also wrote popular essays on matters of politics, ethics, and religion. The following essay was written for the New York Times Magazine, where it appeared November 9, 1930 (pp. 1-4); the original German text was published in the Berliner Tageblatt (November 11, 1930).

Everything that the human race has done and thought is concerned with the satisfaction of deeply felt needs and the assuagement of pain. One has to keep this constantly in mind if one wishes to understand spiritual movements and their development. Feeling and longing are the motive force behind all human endeavor and human creation, in however exalted a guise the latter may present themselves to us. Now what are the feelings and needs that have led men to religious thought and belief in the widest sense of the words? A little consideration will suffice to show us that the most varying emotions preside over the birth of religious thought and experience. With primitive man, it is above all fear that evokes religious notions — fear of hunger, wild beasts, sickness, death. Since at this stage of existence understanding of causal connections is usually poorly developed, the human mind creates illusory beings more or less analogous to itself on whose wills and actions these fearful happenings depend. Thus one tries to secure the favor of these beings by carrying out actions and offering sacrifices which, according to the tradition handed down from generation to generation, propitiate them or make them well disposed toward a mortal. In this sense I am speaking of a religion of fear. This, though not created, is in an important degree stabilized by the formation of a special priestly caste which sets itself up as a mediator between the people and the beings they fear, and erects a hegemony on this basis. In many cases a leader or ruler or a privileged class whose position rests on other factors combines priestly functions with its secular authority in order to make the latter more secure; or the political rulers and the priestly caste make common cause in their own interests.

The social impulses are another source of the crystallization of religion. Fathers and mothers and

the leaders of larger human communities are mortal and fallible. The desire for guidance, love, and support prompts men to form the social or moral conception of God. This is the God of Providence, who protects, disposes, rewards, and punishes; the God who, according to the limits of the believer's outlook, loves and cherishes the life of the tribe or of the human race, or even life itself; the comforter in sorrow and unsatisfied longing; he who preserves the souls of the dead. This is the social or moral conception of God.

The Jewish scriptures admirably illustrate the development from the religion of fear to moral religion, a development continued in the New Testament. The religions of all civilized peoples, especially the peoples of the Orient, are primarily moral religions. The development from a religion of fear to moral religion is a great step in peoples' lives. And yet, that primitive religions are based entirely on fear and the religions of civilized peoples purely on morality is a prejudice against which we must be on our guard. The truth is that all religions are a varying blend of both types, with this differentiation: that on the higher levels of social life the religion of morality predominates.

Common to all these types is the anthropomorphic character of their conception of God. In general, only individuals of exceptional endowments, and exceptionally high-minded communities, rise to any considerable extent above this level. But there is a third stage of religious experience which belongs to all of them, even though it is rarely found in a pure form: I shall call it cosmic religious feeling. It is very difficult to elucidate this feeling to anyone who is entirely without it, especially as there is no anthropomorphic conception of God corresponding to it.

The individual feels the futility of human desires and aims and the sublimity and marvelous order which reveal themselves both in nature and in the world of thought. Individual existence impresses him as a sort of prison and he wants to experience the universe as a single significant whole. The beginnings of cosmic religious feeling already appear at an early stage of development, e.g., in many of the Psalms of David and in some of the Prophets. Buddhism, as we have learned especially from the wonderful writings of Schopenhauer, contains a much stronger element of this.

The religious geniuses of all ages have been distinguished by this kind of religious feeling, which knows no dogma and no God conceived in man's image; so that

there can be no church whose central teachings are based on it. Hence it is precisely among the heretics of every age that we find men who were filled with this highest kind of religious feeling and were in many cases regarded by their contemporaries as atheists, sometimes also as saints. Looked at in this light, men like Democritus, Francis of Assisi, and Spinoza are closely akin to one another.

How can cosmic religious feeling be communicated from one person to another, if it can give rise to no definite notion of a God and no theology? In my view, it is the most important function of art and science to awaken this feeling and keep it alive in those who are receptive to it.

We thus arrive at a conception of the relation of science to religion very different from the usual one. When one views the matter historically, one is inclined to look upon science and religion as irreconcilable antagonists, and for a very obvious reason. The man who is thoroughly convinced of the universal operation of the law of causation cannot for a moment entertain the idea of a being who interferes in the course of events — provided, of course, that he takes the hypothesis of causality really seriously. He had no use for the religion of fear and equally little for social or moral religion. A God who rewards and punishes is inconceivable to him for the simple reason that a man’s actions are determined by necessity, external and internal, so that in God’s eyes he cannot be responsible, any more than an inanimate object is responsible for the motions it undergoes. Science has therefore been charged with undermining morality, but the charge is unjust. A man’s ethical behavior should be based effectually on sympathy, education, and social ties and needs; no religious basis is neces-

sary. Man would indeed be in a poor way if he had to be restrained by fear of punishment and hope of reward after death.

It is therefore easy to see why the churches have always fought science and persecuted its devotees. On the other hand, I maintain that the cosmic religious feeling is the strongest and noblest motive for scientific research. Only those who realize the immense efforts and, above all, the devotion without which pioneer work in theoretical science cannot be achieved are able to grasp the strength of the emotion out of which alone such work, remote as it is from the immediate realities of life, can issue. What a deep conviction of the rationality of the universe and what a yearning to understand, were it but a feeble reflection of the mind revealed in this world, Kepler and Newton must have had to enable them to spend years of solitary labor in disentangling the principles of celestial mechanics! Those whose acquaintance with scientific research is derived chiefly from its practical results easily develop a completely false notion of the mentality of the men who, surrounded by a skeptical world, have shown the way to kindred spirits scattered wide through the world and the centuries. Only one who has devoted his life to similar ends can have a vivid realization of what has inspired these men and given them the strength to remain true to their purpose in spite of countless failures. It is cosmic religious feeling that gives a man such strength. A contemporary has said, not unjustly, that in this materialistic age of ours the serious scientific workers are the only profoundly religious people.

“The most important decision any of us will ever make is whether or not to believe the universe is friendly.”

— Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

[33] FAITH AND REASON

If religious belief is a matter of faith rather than reason, then perhaps reason should keep silent in religious matters. To explore this possibility, we first need to determine what exactly we mean by ‘faith’, and what it means to base one’s beliefs on faith.

Faith and reason share a complicated history, and both come with several interpretations of how they are to be understood. A recent survey article¹² offers seven models of faith, and reason is similarly ambiguous: Is reason the ability to

¹² John Bishop, “Faith” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2010) [<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/faith/>].

infer from premises to a conclusion? The ability to determine the best means to some goal? The ability to choose the goal itself? From the Christian tradition, one also encounters two fundamentally different assessments of reason, namely, as an important cognitive faculty given to us by God and *supplemented* by faith (Aquinas) or as a cognitive faculty corrupted by sin, and thus in need of *correction* by faith (Augustine).

Faith as a Relation to a Proposition

Do we believe on faith everything for which we lack adequate evidence? For instance, I lack evidence that the moon is made of lime Jell-O, or that I am a direct descendent of Louis XIV — so should I believe these things on *faith*? You might point out that there exists plenty of evidence that the moon is *not* made of lime Jell-O — that, indeed, it is not made of Jell-O of any flavor. That’s all true, but it suggests a new question: Can or should we ever believe on faith something that we have good reason *not* to believe? In other words, can faith fly in the face of reason? And if it does, should we follow? Does it make sense to believe something that has all the evidence stacked against it? If such behavior *is* appropriate, then how do we determine which statements are candidates for this preferential treatment?

Perhaps faith enters only where there is no evidence for or against some possible belief, or else where the evidence is equally weighted. If that is the case, however, then it will turn out that reason does indeed have a great deal of work to do with respect to our religious beliefs, for we will need to examine carefully the evidence for and against each statement before appealing to faith.

One criterion guiding the application of faith might be the moral or existential importance of a statement. People typically make appeals to faith regarding statements that are in some way important to their lives, but for which there is little or no evidence for believing them as true. The statement that “there’s an odd number of nitrogen molecules in this room” is just as likely true as it is false — the evidence (short of an actual count) tilts the scales in neither direction — yet neither my happiness nor my well-being hinges on the truth of this statement, so deciding to believe it on faith is purely idle.

When we speak of someone’s faith, often what we have in mind is that person’s “deep commitment” to some belief or set of beliefs, where this belief is itself ungrounded (in that it lacks any evidence favoring it), yet itself grounds many other beliefs (where these other beliefs are not merely hypothetical, but instead are live, actual, present beliefs). The more beliefs that are based upon the ungrounded belief, the more important that ungrounded belief becomes, and the more difficult it is to reject. “Why do I believe P? Because if I don’t, then my whole world will collapse!” (Is *this* a good reason for belief?)

And yet it isn’t clear that faith should ever be allowed to override the evidence. We know for a fact that people occasionally believe things in the face of irrefutable evidence to the contrary — the psychiatric wards of hospitals are filled with such people. But all worries of lunacy aside, there are also strong theological grounds to avoid using faith to shore-up irrational beliefs. As **John Locke** (1632-1704) wrote in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690):

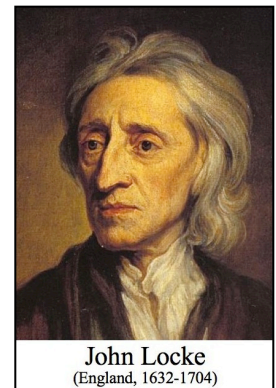
Reason is natural revelation, whereby the eternal Father of light and fountain of all knowledge communicates to mankind that portion of truth which he has laid within the reach of their natural faculties: [special] revelation is natural reason enlarged by a new set of discoveries communicated by God immediately; which reason vouches the truth of, by the testimony and proofs it gives *that they come*

THE WORLD’S RELIGIONS

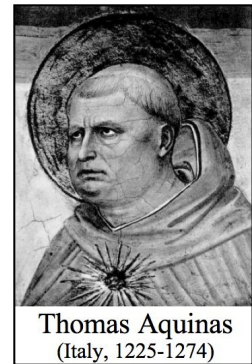
Estimates of the total numbers of adherents to the major world religions are rough at best. Few religions other than Christianity attempt to keep statistical records, and even here the methods of counting differ. Below are estimates for the top ten organized religions of the world.

Religion	Members	Percentage
Christianity	1.9 billion	33.0%
Islam	1.1 billion	20.0
Hinduism	781 million	13.0
Buddhism	324 million	6.0
Sikhism	19 million	0.4
Judaism	14 million	0.2
Baha’ism	6.1 million	0.1
Confucianism	5.3 million	0.1
Jainism	4.9 million	0.1
Shintoism	2.8 million	0.0

[Encyclopedia Britannica]



from God. So that he that takes away reason to make way for revelation puts out the light of both, and does much the same as if he would persuade a man to put out his eyes, the better to receive the remote light of an invisible star by a telescope. [Bk. 4, Ch. 19, §5]



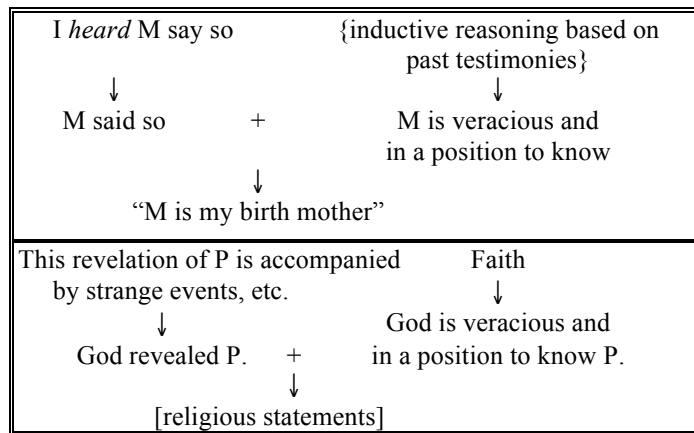
Faith as a Relation (of Trust) to a Person

The discussion so far has assumed that faith is a *relationship to a belief*, where faith serves as a substitute for good evidence. But one might also think of it as a *relationship to a person* (here the authority of the person becomes your evidence for a statement’s truth). **Thomas Aquinas** (1225-74), perhaps the greatest Christian theologian of all time, understood faith in this way.¹³ He wrote in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Bk.1, Ch. 3.2, 6.1-4) that believing something on faith means “believing it to be true because God says it is true.” God is the source of all truth; thus for any statement, P, if God says P, then P is true. So according to Aquinas, having *faith* in God is the same as trusting in the veracity and omniscience of God. This is not an unusual use of the word; for instance, we might say that we “have faith” in someone (for example, that this person won’t betray me, or lie to me, or in some manner act unreliably).

Consider the following religious statements drawn from Christianity:

- (1) Jesus is the Son of God.
- (2) The world was created in time.
- (3) The *Bible* is the word of God.
- (4) God exists.

According to Aquinas, we can believe (1)-(2) on faith so long as we know that God has revealed them to us. (This is illustrated graphically in the chart below. Recall the discussion of different justifications or warrants of our beliefs: these warrants may be perceptual or theoretical).



[Key: ‘x → y’ = ‘x justifies y’]

Statements (3) and (4), however, cannot be believed on faith, since believing something on faith requires that we already believe (3) and (4). Faith comes *after* you know that some claim comes from God. But if not on faith, then on what *do* we base these beliefs? According to Aquinas, reason and our senses are adequate for proving these two statements: the third statement is proved by the presence of miracles,¹⁴ and the fourth can be proved any of several ways (see Aquinas’ famous “Five Ways”). Consequently, in Aquinas’s account reason still has a considerable role to play in evaluating religious claims, for these two statements are central to any religious belief.

This discussion of faith suggests a distinction between two groups of statements, based on whether we can discover their truth by using reason and our senses alone, without any appeal to divine revelation, or whether we also require di-

¹³ Aquinas is widely considered the most important theologian and philosopher of the late middle ages. While controversial in his own day, he was canonized within a half-century of his death (becoming “Saint Thomas” in 1323) and in 1879 his writings were declared the official Catholic philosophy by Pope Leo VIII.

¹⁴ What sort of miracles? Aquinas places the greatest emphasis on the “miracle” of Christianity’s ability to convert non-believers:

... in the midst of the tyranny of the persecutors, an innumerable throng of people, both simple and most learned, flocked to the Christian faith. In this faith there are truths preached that surpass every human intellect; the pleasures of the flesh are curbed; it is taught that the things of the world should be spurned. Now, for the minds of mortal men to assent to these things is the greatest of miracles, just as it is a manifest work of divine inspiration that, spurning visible things, men should seek only what is invisible” (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk. 1, Ch. 6, sect. 1).

vine revelation. The former are “natural truths” and the latter “revealed truths,” and the difference between these truths is what distinguishes the two major kinds of religion — *natural* and *revealed* — that are discussed below in greater detail.

Faith as an (unwarranted) Belief that God Exists

But Aquinas’s understanding of faith is not what many people mean when they say that they believe these statements on faith, for what they “believe on faith” is that it is indeed God who has revealed these statements to us (rather than, say, some human fabricator). These people want to believe on faith what Aquinas felt we must believe only with good reasons, namely, that God does exist and did in fact reveal these things to us. For Aquinas, it is only *after* we have determined this that faith comes into play.

When faith is the means by which we believe God exists or has revealed something to us, then it is understood as a special kind of *cognitive ability*, and one that none of us can acquire on our own; such faith is granted as an act of grace by God, for reasons inscrutable to the believer. This highlights a general shift in the role of faith brought about by the “problem of historical knowledge” as discussed by **Gotthold Lessing** in the 18th century and **Søren Kierkegaard** in the 19th century. Special revelation is understood as happening in the past, as a historical fact, and as such is prone to the fallibility of all historical statements; we never can be *certain* of their truth. We thus require faith to get us past this uncertainty that God exists and that such revelations come from God. For this we need, as Kierkegaard wrote, a “leap of faith”. Or as **Blaise Pascal** wrote in the “wager argument” of his *Pensées*:

‘Either God is or he is not.’ But to which view shall we be inclined? Reason cannot decide this question. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you wager? Reason cannot make you choose, reason cannot prove either wrong.

And so we choose, each in our own way. Pascal offered advice on how to make this choice (to be discussed in a later section); Kierkegaard, writing several centuries later, was less certain of Pascal’s guidance. For Kierkegaard, we simply had to leap across that chasm of uncertainty, and we must do this without any benefit of “good reasons.”¹⁵

NATURAL AND REVEALED RELIGION

Assuming that God does exist, do you think that God reveals truths about God’s own existence and nature in the physical world?

There are many statements that we are justified in believing without relying on faith in God’s veracity and omniscience. These include all the truths about the world with which science deals. As for religious beliefs, Aquinas thought that reason could also prove that God exists — and it is this central belief that we will be examining in the following pages. Christians find some support for natural religion in their scriptures:

For what can be known about God is perfectly plain to [the pagans] since God himself has made it plain. Ever since God created the world his everlasting power and deity — however invisible — have been there for the mind to see in the things he has made. [Paul’s letter to the Romans, 1:19-20]

FIDEISM

Fideism is the view that truth in religion is ultimately based on faith rather than on reasoning or evidence. An ironic passage from Hume’s essay on miracles was cited by Hamann (1730-88) and Kierkegaard (1813-55) as a good formulation of their fideistic position: “[The] Christian Religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even to this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without them. Mere reason is not sufficient to convince us of its veracity; and whoever is moved by Faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.” [David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, §10 (1748)]

¹⁵ Faith could also be understood as an *attitude* towards the human condition, such as the attitude of perseverance or hope in the face of uncertainty (“We must have faith; although we can be certain of nothing, yet we must nonetheless proceed as best we can in this world despite our ignorance, rather than despair and refuse to act at all”).

Natural religion is the set of religious beliefs that can be known through reason alone as it reflects on the phenomena of nature. Reason, according to Aquinas and many others, can supply us with at least this minimal set of religious beliefs. Yet while natural religion considers the existence and nature of God independently of any revealed truth (such as Holy Scripture or personal inspiration), it still is often studied by theists who believe that some form of revelation is necessary, but who wish to understand the natural basis of that revelation, often for use in converting non-believers.

Some theists, however, feel that natural religion is adequate by itself for one's salvation and is not in need of any supplementation by revelation. The so-called **Deists** of the 17th and 18th centuries belong to this category (in the American colonies, this included Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine; in England, Edward Herbert (Lord Cherbury), John Toland, and Samuel Clarke; in France, Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau; and in Germany, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Immanuel Kant). The fictional character Cleanthes, in Hume's *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, also appears to be a kind of deist.

Revealed religion is the set of religious beliefs that can be known *only* through God's special revelation, either scripture or mystical insight. These revealed truths typically were thought of as supplementing the truths of reason. Aquinas, for instance, believed that reason can prove God's existence and that God created the world, but special revelation is necessary to know the additional truths that God is triune in nature (i.e., Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) or that God created the world *in time*. It was Aquinas's view that reason (as embodied in science) and revelation can never come into conflict, since truth is one, and behind this truth stands God. Special revelation is understood as complementing reason, never contradicting it. Aquinas wrote in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* that ...

There is a **twofold mode of truth** in what we profess about God. Some truths about God exceed all the ability of the human reason. Such is the truth that God is triune. But there are some truths that the natural reason also is able to reach. Such are that God exists, that He is one, and the like. In fact, such truths about God have been proved demonstratively by the philosophers, guided by the light of natural reason. [*Summa Contra Gentiles*, I. 3. §2]

Those theists who accept special revelation but who also study natural religion typically do so either to convert others who do not accept a particular revelation as a source of truth, or because of the inadequacy of special revelation in general. As we saw in the discussion of Aquinas and faith, there seem to be problems with revealed truths; how, for instance, are we to *believe* them? Most people do not personally experience such special revelations; instead, there is always one or more human beings mediating between you and God. In other words, the revelation is based on hearsay, and we know how hearsay can be corrupted through either ignorance or malice. Are we to base such important beliefs (about God and our destiny) on such a wobbly foundation? And why would God choose to reveal himself in such a defective manner? Why would he limit his revelations to just this or that time and place? This would seem highly unfair to the rest of humanity who never gets to hear from God directly. Finally, suppose God *would* make these revelations to you personally — suppose some mighty voice spoke to you from a cloud, or a burning bush, or from the mouth of a frog: How could you be sure of the source of the revelation? How could you be certain that you weren't simply losing your mind?

If our religious beliefs are to be based on historical events — particularities — then they will always suffer from imprecision and uncertainty. If, on the other hand, we can base our religious beliefs on whatever human reason is able to learn from the generalities of nature (in other words, natural religion) then we can begin to attain a level of certainty typically enjoyed only in mathematics and the sciences.

MIRACLES

David Hume (1711-1776) discusses miracles in Section Ten of his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748). Here he defines a miracle as any event satisfying two conditions: (1) it violates a law of nature, and (2) it is a

TWO KINDS OF REVELATION

- **General:** given directly to *all* people, typically through nature or reason.
- **Special:** given directly to one person or group, as found in scripture, prophecy, divine inspiration.

result of to the direct activity of God.¹⁶ Hume goes on to argue that “no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any [...] system of religion.” He has Christianity in mind here, although the argument could be equally applied to other revealed religions. To summarize, his argument is as follows:

- (1) The authority of Christianity is founded entirely on the testimony of the Apostles.
- (2) The evidence of hearsay is less than the evidence of our senses.
- (3) ∴ Our evidence for Christianity is less than the evidence of our senses.
- (4) The weaker evidence cannot destroy the stronger.
- (5) ∴ The “external evidence” for Christianity (viz., scriptural authority) is not enough to warrant the truth of Christianity.

Hume concludes, perhaps disingenuously, that this shows Christianity would be wholly without evidence, but for “the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit” on our minds.

The basic epistemic principle underlying Hume’s argument (as used in premise 4, above) is that “no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish.” In other words, when presented with some claim of a miracle, we must ask which is more likely: (1) The miracle happened (thus violating known laws of nature) or (2) The human witnesses/ reporters were either mistaken in what they saw or heard, or they willfully lied. Hume would remind us that humans have a long track record of deceit, confusion, and gullibility, and he would then suggest that it is rather more likely for someone in the chain of reporters leading back to the alleged miracle to have either lied or been confused, than that our basic understanding of the way the universe operates, an understanding that has been painstakingly developed over the centuries, is simply wrong.¹⁷

For these and other reasons, philosophers and theologians have turned to developing natural religion. Let’s move now to a consideration of natural truths, and in particular the traditional proofs of God’s existence and nature.

PROOFS OF GOD’S EXISTENCE

Before we get to the proofs themselves, we should note a few things about proofs in general. All proofs are either *a priori* or *a posteriori*. **A priori proofs** are those whose premises can all be known independently of our experience of the world. **A posteriori proofs**, on the other hand, depend on at least one premise that can be known only by means of our experience of the world. In natural religion, the primary statement to be proven is “God exists.” We will be looking at three traditional proofs for the existence of God: the ontological, the cosmological, and the teleological. The ontological argument begins with the meaning of the word ‘God’, and argues that the very meaning of the word includes God’s existence; the cosmological argument begins with the existence of the world, and argues that the world needs a creator (in other



David Hume
(Scotland, 1711-1776)

“Is it more probable that nature should go out of her course, or that a man should tell a lie? We have never seen, in our time, nature go out of her course; but we have good reason to believe that millions of lies have been told in the same time; it is, therefore, at least millions to one, that the reporter of a miracle tells a lie.”

—Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (1794)

HOMER SIMPSON ON NOT GOING TO CHURCH

“What’s the big deal about going to some building every Sunday, I mean, isn’t God everywhere? Don’t you think the almighty has better things to worry about than where one little guy spends one measly hour of his week? And what if we’ve picked the wrong religion? Every week we’re just making God madder and madder!”

¹⁶ We might also add that the event must be surprising or astounding, and that the event must serve some important and beneficial purpose — but these are better seen as helpful in **recognizing** a miracle rather than in **defining** them.

¹⁷ This is a false dichotomy. A miracle need not be understood as undermining some law, but perhaps even as affirming it, but offering an occasional and miraculous violation of the rule (the exception that “proves the rule”). Hume’s point can still be made, of course, by comparing the relative likelihood of these two statements: (1) the reported miracle is a result of human error or deceit, and (2) there is a God who providentially interfered with the laws of nature at this particular moment.

words, God is needed to explain the existence of the world); and the teleological argument begins with the design or structure of the world, and argues that such a world needs a designer (God is needed to explain the order or design in the world). Only the ontological proof is strictly *a priori*; the other two are *a posteriori*, although the cosmological is sometimes considered as an *a priori* proof (for instance, by David Hume) since it requires no knowledge of *what* is, but merely that *something* is.

READING

THE CREED OF THE PRIEST OF SAVOY

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) first gained public attention with his early prize-winning "Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts" (1750), wherein he argued that civilization has in general been harmful to human well-being. His "Discourse on Inequality" (1755) argued that private property has led to various social disorders, and in 1761 he published what was to become the most widely-read novel of the century: The New Heloise, a story of love and virtue. In 1762 appeared both The Social Contract and the novel Émile — the former was an important contribution to political philosophy, while the latter helped spur the pedagogical reforms of 18th and 19th century Europe.

Émile chronicles the education of the young boy Émile, and a small portion of this novel is "The Creed of the Priest of Savoy," which appears to be Rousseau's own opinion on religion. This creed was presented as part of the 15-year-old Émile's religious education and, as a statement of deism, it hit Europe like a storm. It was bitterly attacked on all sides: by the French atheists centered around Diderot (who wished to dispense with religion altogether, at least in their private lives) as well as by orthodox Christians. The Catholic Church had the novel burned in Paris, and a warrant was issued for Rousseau's arrest, causing him to flee to Geneva, his birthplace, which was controlled by the protestant Calvinists. Geneva was no more hospitable to his views, however, and Rousseau was forced to flee once more.

The following is an excerpt from "The Creed of a Priest of Savoy," translated (with a few slight modifications) by Arthur H. Beattie.

[ÉMILE ASKS THE PRIEST ABOUT HIS VIEWS OF THE CHRISTIAN DOGMA AND SPECIAL REVELATION]

[...] Tell me about revelation, about the Scriptures, about those obscure dogmas which have left me in perplexity since my childhood, without my being able to understand them clearly or to believe them, and without my knowing whether to accept them or to reject them.

[THE PRIEST DOUBTS THE NECESSITY OF ANY DOGMA OVER AND BEYOND THE TEACHINGS OF NATURAL RELIGION]

Yes, my child, he said, embracing me, I shall complete telling you what I believe. I have no wish to open my heart to you only in part, but the desire which you now express to me was necessary to authorize me to keep nothing back from you. Up to this point I have told you nothing except what I thought might be useful to you, and what is for me a matter of firm conviction. The considerations that are now left for me to examine are quite different. I see in them only difficulties, mystery, obscurity; I bring to them only uncertainty and distrust. It is with trembling that I come to a conclusion concerning them, and I tell you my doubts rather than my conviction. If your opinions were more stable, I should hesitate to set forth mine before you; but, in the state in which you find yourself, you will gain by thinking as I do. Moreover, accept what I shall say only if reason prompts you; I do not know whether I am in error. It is difficult, when one takes part in a discussion, not to assume sometimes an affirmative tone; but

remember that here all my affirmations are only reasons for doubting. Seek the truth yourself; personally, I promise you only good faith.

You see in what I have set forth only natural religion. It is very strange that any other should be necessary! How can I know the necessity for it? How can I be guilty of wrong in serving God according to the light that he gives to my mind, and according to the sentiments that he inspires in my heart? What purity of morals, what teaching useful to man and honorable to his creator, can I draw from a positive doctrine that I cannot draw without it from the proper use of my faculties? Show me what can be added, for the glory of God, for the good of society, and for my own well-being, to the duties of the natural law, and show me, too, what virtue you will derive from a new mode of worship which is not a consequence of mine. The greatest ideas of the Divinity come to us through reason alone. Observe the spectacle of nature; listen to the inner voice. Has God not told everything to our eyes, to our conscience, to our judgment? What more will men tell you? Their revelations only belittle God by ascribing to him human passions. Far from illuminating the notions we have of the great Being, I see that specific dogmas confuse them; that far from making them nobler, they cheapen them; that to the inconceivable mysteries which surround those ideas, they add absurd contradictions; that they make men proud, intolerant, cruel; that instead of establishing peace on earth, they bring to it fire and the sword. I wonder what is the use of all that, but I am unable to furnish an answer. I see in it only the crimes of men and the miseries of the human race.

**[THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST REVELATION AND
AGAINST ANY DOGMA BASED SOLELY ON SPECIAL
REVELATION]**

They tell me that a revelation was necessary to teach men the way God wished them to serve him. They cite as a proof the diversity of the strange cults that have been instituted, and they do not see that that very diversity derives from the fanciful nature of the revelations. As soon as peoples have taken it into their heads to make God speak, each has made him speak in its way, and has made him say what it wished. If they had listened only to what God says to the heart of man, there would never have been more than one religion on earth.

There had to be a uniform belief and mode of worship. Let us accept that, but was this point then so important that all the machinery of divine power was necessary to establish it? Let us not confuse the ceremony of religion with religion itself. The worship that God demands of us is that of the heart; and, when it is sincere, such worship is always uniform. It is a very foolish vanity to imagine that God takes such a great interest in the form of the priest's costume, in the order of the words he pronounces, in the gestures he makes at the altar, and in all his genuflexions. O my friend, remain standing fully erect, and you will still be close enough to the earth. God wishes to be worshipped in spirit and in truth; that duty is incumbent upon all religions, all countries, all men. As for the outward mode of worship, if it must be uniform for reasons of good order, that is purely a matter of public policy; no revelation is necessary for that.

I did not think this way in the beginning. Influenced by the prejudices of education and by that dangerous self-pride that always tends to carry man above his proper sphere, unable to raise my feeble ideas to the point of conceiving the great Being, I strove to reduce him to my plane. I sought to lessen the infinite distance that marks the relationships between his nature and mine. I demanded more immediate communications, more individual instructions; and, not satisfied with making God resemble man, I sought supernatural enlightenment in order to occupy a privileged position among my fellows. I wanted an exclusive worship; I wished that God had told me what he had not told others or what others would not have understood as well as I would.

Regarding the situation that I had reached as the common point of departure for all believers striving to attain a more enlightened worship, I found in the dogmas of natural religion only the elements of all religion. I considered that diversity of sects that prevails on earth, of sects that mutually accuse one another of falsehood and error. I kept asking, Which is the right one? Everyone answered me, "Mine is"; everyone said, "I alone and my fellows think correctly; all the others are in error." —And how do you know that your sect is the true one? —"Because God has said so." —And who tells you that God has said so? —"My pastor, who knows it well. My pastor tells me to believe thus, and

thus I believe; he assures me that all those who do not say what he says are lying, and I do not listen to them."

What! I said to myself, is truth not one? And what is true where I live, can it be false where you live? If the method of him who follows the right road is the same as the method of him who loses his way, what merit or what blame does the one deserve more than the other? Their choice is a matter of chance; to hold them responsible for it is unfair, for it means rewarding or punishing a man being born in such or such a place. To dare say that God judges us in that way is to insult his justice.

Either all religions are good and pleasing to God or, if he does prescribe one for men and punishes them for not observing it, he has marked it with sure and manifest signs so that it may be distinguished and known as the only true one; these signs are at all times and all places equally perceptible by all men great and small, learned and ignorant, Europeans, Asiatics, Africans, savages. If there were one religion on earth outside of which there would be only eternal torment, and if in some part of the globe a single mortal of good faith would not have been impressed by its obvious truth, the God of that religion would be the most unfair and the most cruel of tyrants.

Do we then seek the truth sincerely? Let us attribute nothing to the right of birth and the authority of parents and pastors, but let us subject to the examination of conscience and reason all that they have taught us from our childhood. It is useless for them to cry to me, "Make your reason yield." He who deceives me can say as much to me; I must have reasons if my reason is to give assent.

All the theology that I can acquire by myself, through the examination of the universe and the proper employment of my faculties, is limited to what I have already explained to you. To know more, I must have recourse to extraordinary means. Those means cannot include the authority of men, for, no man being of another nature than I, all that a man can know naturally I can know also, and another man can be mistaken just as readily as I. When I believe what a man says, it is not because he says it, but because he proves it. The testimony of men is, then, in the last analysis only that of my reason itself, and adds nothing to the natural means that God has given me to know the truth.

Apostle of truth, what have you then to tell me of such a nature that I may not use my reason to judge it? "God himself has spoken; listen to his revelation." That's another matter. God has spoken! that's certainly impressive. And to whom has he spoken? "He has spoken to men." Why then have I heard nothing of this revelation? "He has instructed other men to repeat his word to you." I understand: it is men who are going to tell me what God has said. I should have preferred to hear God himself. That would have been no more difficult for him, and I should have been protected against being led astray. "He protects you against it by making manifest the mission of his envoys." In what way? "By miracles." And where are these miracles? "In books." And who made these books? "Men." And who saw the miracles? "Men who attest to them." What! Still more testimony of men! Still more men who report to me what other men have reported! How many men between God and me! Nevertheless, let us have a look; let us examine, compare, verify. Oh! if God had deigned to free me from all this effort, would I have served him less willingly?

Consider, my friend, in what a horrible discussion you now see me engaged; consider what immense erudition I need to go back to the remotest antiquity, to examine, weigh, compare prophecies, revelations, facts, all the monuments of faith proposed in all the countries of the globe, in order to assign to them their dates, places, authors, occasions! What precision of critical judgment I need to distinguish the authentic documents from spurious ones; to compare the objections with the answers, the translations with the originals; to judge the impartiality of witnesses, their good sense, their understanding; to know whether or not anything has been suppressed, added, transposed, changed, falsified; to solve the contradictions that remain; to judge what weight should be attributed to the failure of the opponents to answer the facts alleged against them; to determine whether or not these allegations were known to them, whether they considered them serious enough to warrant their deigning an answer, whether books were common enough so that those we have might have come also to their attention; whether we have had sufficient good faith to let theirs circulate freely among us, and to leave in them their most forceful objections just as they had formulated them!

Once we have recognized as authentic all these documents, we must then pass on to the proofs of the

mission of their authors; we must know well the laws of chance, the probabilities applicable to events, in order to judge what prediction cannot be fulfilled without a miracle. We must know well the spirit of oriental languages to distinguish what is prediction in those languages and what is only an oratorical figure. We must know well what facts are in the order of nature, and what facts are not, in order to declare just how far a clever man can fool the eyes of simple people, and can even astonish the well-informed. We must seek what the nature of a miracle must be and what authenticity it must possess, not only to be believed, but so that it may be regarded as a punishable crime to doubt it. We must compare the proofs of real and of false marvels, and find sure rules to differentiate between them. We must say finally why God chooses, in order to attest his word, means which have themselves such great need of attestation, as if he were making sport of man's credulity and were avoiding deliberately the real ways of convincing him.

Let us suppose that divine majesty deigns to demean itself sufficiently to make a man the instrument for expressing its sacred will; is it reasonable, is it just to demand that the whole human race obey the voice of that minister without making them recognize him clearly as a divine minister? Is there justice in giving mankind, as the only credentials offered, nothing but a few special signs made before very few obscure persons, and concerning which all the rest of men will never know anything except by hearsay? Throughout all the countries of the world, if one accepted as true all the marvels that the masses and the simple people say they have seen, each sect would be the true one; there would be more supernatural than natural events; and the greatest miracle of all would be that where there are fanatics persecuted, there should be no miracles to save them. It is the inalterable order of nature that reveals best the wise hand that governs it; if many exceptions happened, I should no longer know what to think of it; and, so far as I am concerned, I believe too firmly in God to believe in so many miracles unworthy of him.

Let us suppose that a man comes to speak to us in this way: Mortals, I announce to you the will of the Almighty; recognize by my voice the one who sends me; I order the sun to change its course, the stars to rearrange themselves in new constellations, the mountains to be flattened out, the waters to rise, the earth to

take on a different aspect. At these marvels, who will not recognize immediately the master of nature? It does not obey impostors; their "miracles" are performed at crossroads, in solitudes, within walls, and it is there that they readily deceive a handful of spectators already inclined to believe anything. Who will dare tell me how many eyewitnesses it takes to make a marvel worthy of belief? If your miracles, performed in order to prove your doctrine, need to be proved themselves, of what use are they? It would be just as good not to perform any.

There still remains the most important probing into the announced doctrine for, since those who say that God performs miracles here below claim that the devil sometimes imitates them, with the best attested marvels we cannot be more sure than before; and, since Pharaoh's magicians dared, in the very presence of Moses, to make the same signs that Moses was making at the express order of God, why, in his absence, would they not, with equal reason to be believed, claim the same authority? Thus, after proving the doctrine by the miracle, it is necessary to prove the miracle by the doctrine, for fear of taking the work of the devil for the work of God. What do you think of that as a twofold begging of the question?

This doctrine, coming from God, must bear the sacred character of the Divinity; not only must it illumine for us the confused ideas that reasoning traces in our mind concerning the Deity, but it must also propose to us a mode of worship, a moral code, and maxims befitting the attributes by which alone we conceive his essence. If, then, it taught us only absurd and reasonless things, if it inspired in us only feelings of aversion for our fellows and of fear for ourselves, if it painted for us only a God wrathful, jealous, vengeful, partial, hating man, a God of war and combats, always ready to destroy and to strike down, always talking of torments and penalties, and boasting of punishing even the innocent, my heart would not be drawn toward that terrible God, and I should take good care not to abandon natural religion in order to embrace that one, for you see indeed that one would necessarily have to make a choice. Your God is not ours, I should say to his followers. He who begins by choosing for himself a single people and outlawing the rest of the human race is not the common father of men; he who destines to eternal torment the

majority of his creatures is not the clement and good God whom my reason has shown to me.

Concerning dogmas, my reason tells me that they must be clear, luminous, inspiring conviction by their obvious truth. If natural religion is insufficient, it is by the obscurity that it leaves in the great truths that it teaches to us: it is up to revelation to teach us those truths in such a way that the human mind may grasp them, to bring them within its reach, to make it understand them so that it may believe them. Faith is made sure and firm by understanding; the best of all religions is necessarily the clearest. He who burdens with mysteries and contradictions the religion that he preaches to me, teaches me, in so doing, to be distrustful of it. The God whom I worship is not a God of darkness; he has not endowed me with an understanding in order to forbid me to use it. To tell me to make my reason submit is to insult its creator. The minister of truth does not exercise a tyranny over my reason, but rather he enlightens it. [...]

[EVEN IF THERE WERE ONLY ONE TRUE RELIGION, IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE TO RECOGNIZE IT]

Those are many difficulties, my child, and they are not all. Among so many religions that mutually outlaw and exclude one another, a single one is the right one, if indeed there is a right one. In order to recognize it, it is not sufficient to examine one religion; one must examine them all. [...]

We have three principal religions in Europe. One admits a single revelation, the second two, and the third three.¹⁸ Each detests, curses the other two, accuses them of blindness, callousness, stubbornness, falsehood. What impartial man will dare judge among them if he has not first carefully weighed the proofs, carefully listened to their arguments? The one that admits only one revelation is the most ancient, and seems the most certain. The one that admits three is the most modern, and seems the most consistent. The one that admits two revelations and rejects the third may well be the best, but on the face of things it surely seems the least reasonable; its inconsistency is obvious.

In the three revelations, the sacred books are written in languages unknown to the peoples who follow them.

The Jews no longer understand Hebrew; the Christians understand neither Hebrew nor Greek; the Turks and the Persians do not understand Arabic at all, and the modern Arabs themselves no longer speak the language of Mohammed. Now isn't that a very simple way to teach men — to speak to them always in a language that they do not understand? They will tell you that these books are translated. What a fine answer! Who will assure me that these books are faithfully translated, that it is even possible for them to be so translated? And when God goes so far as to speak to men, why must he need an interpreter?

I shall never understand that what every man is obliged to know should be enclosed in books, and that he who does not have at hand these books or people who understand them should be punished for a purely involuntary ignorance. Always books! What a mania! Because Europe is full of books, Europeans regard them as indispensable, without considering that over three-quarters of the earth's surface no book has ever been seen. Have not all books been written by men? How could it be, then, that man needs books in order to know his duties? And what ways had he of knowing them before books were made? Either he will learn his duties by himself, or he is not obliged to know them.

Our Catholics make much of the authority of the Church — but what do they gain by that if they need as full an array of proofs to establish that authority as other sects need to establish directly their doctrine? The Church decides that the Church has the right to decide. What do you think of that as a well proved authority? And yet if you do not accept it, you are back in the midst of all our discussions.

Do you know many Christians who have taken the trouble to examine carefully what Judaism puts forward against them? If a few Christians have seen something of it, it is in the books of Christians. A fine way to learn the arguments of their adversaries! But what can be done? If someone dared publish among us books in which it would be affirmed that Christ is not the Messiah, and an effort made to prove it, we should punish the author, the publisher, and the bookseller. That control is convenient and sure when you want your opinion always to prevail. It is a pleasure to refute people who dare not speak.

Those of us who are in a position to converse with Jews are scarcely better informed. The unfortunate

¹⁸ [Rousseau is referring here to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.]

Jews feel themselves at our mercy. The tyranny practiced against them makes them timid; they know how readily Christian charity gives way to injustice and cruelty; what will they dare say without risking our denouncing them for blasphemy? Greed gives us zeal, and they are too rich not to be in the wrong. The most learned, the most enlightened, are always the most circumspect. You will convert some wretch paid to slander his former sect; you will get a few miserable dealers in old clothes to talk; they will yield in order to flatter you; you will triumph over their ignorance or their cowardice, while their scholars will smile in silence at you and your ineptness. But do you believe that in places where they would feel safe you would so readily prevail over them? In the Sorbonne, it is as clear as day that the predictions of the Messiah refer to Jesus Christ. Among the rabbis of Amsterdam, it is just as clear that they do not have the slightest connection with him. I shall never believe that I have indeed heard the Jews' own case until they have a free state, schools, universities, where they may talk and dispute without risk. Then only shall we be able to know what they have to say.

At Constantinople, the Turks give their arguments, but we do not dare give ours; there it is our turn to grovel. If the Turks demand of us for Mohammed, in whom we do not believe, the same respect that we demand for Jesus Christ from the Jews, who do not believe in him either, are the Turks wrong? Are we right? According to what equitable principle shall we solve this question?

Two-thirds of mankind are neither Jews, nor Mohammedans, nor Christians. How many millions of men have never heard of Moses, of Jesus Christ, nor of Mohammed! It is denied; it is claimed that our missionaries go everywhere. That is easily said. But do they go into the heart of Africa, still unknown, and where never a European has penetrated up to now? Do they go into remote Tartary to follow on horseback the roving hordes, whom no stranger ever approaches, and who, far from having heard of the Pope, scarcely know the great Lama? Do they go into the immense continents of America, where whole nations know not yet that men of another world have set foot in theirs! Do they go to Japan, from where their maneuvers have had them driven out for ever, and where their predecessors are known to the new generations only as crafty masters

of intrigue, come with a hypocritical zeal to slyly seize the empire? Do they go into the harems of the princes of Asia to announce the gospel to thousands of poor slaves? What have the women of that part of the world done that no missionary may preach the faith to them? Will they all go to hell for having been shut up in their harems?

Even if it were true that the gospel is announced throughout the world, what would be gained by that? The day before the arrival of the first missionary in a country, there surely died there someone who couldn't hear him. Now, tell me what we shall do with that someone? Were there only in the whole universe a single man to whom Jesus Christ had never been preached, the objection would be as strong for that single man as for a quarter of mankind.

When the ministers of the gospel brought their message to remote peoples, what did they say to them that could reasonably be accepted on their word and that did not require the most exact verification? — You announce to me a God who was born and who died two thousand years ago on the far side of the world in I know not what small town, and you tell me that all those who will not have believed in this mystery will be damned. Are those not very strange things to be believed so quickly on the mere authority of a man whom I do not know? Why did your God bring about so far away from me events that he willed that I must know? Is it a crime not to know what happens in the Antipodes? Can I guess that there was in another hemisphere a Hebrew people and a city of Jerusalem? You might as well hold me responsible for knowing what goes on on the moon. You have come, you tell me, to teach me of it; but why did you not come to teach my father? Or why do you damn that good old man for never having known anything about it? Must he be punished throughout eternity for your idleness, he who was so kind, so charitable, and who sought only the truth? Be of good faith and put yourself in my place: see if I must, merely on your word, believe all the unbelievable things that you tell me and reconcile so many injustices with the concept of the just God whom you announce to me. Let me, please, go see this marvelous country where virgins give birth, where Gods are born, eat, suffer and die; let me go find out why the people of that Jerusalem treated God like a thief. They did not recognize him, you say, as God. What shall I do then, I who have never heard of him

except through you? You add that they have been punished, scattered, oppressed, enslaved; that none of them any longer goes near the same city. Certainly they well deserved all that; but those who dwell there today, what do they say about the deicide of their predecessors? They deny it; they too fail to recognize God as God. It would have been just as good, then, to leave there the children of the others.

What! In that very city where God died, neither the old inhabitants nor the new inhabitants recognize him; and you expect me, born two thousand years after him and two thousand leagues away, to recognize him! Do you not see that before I believe in that book that you call sacred, and in which I understand nothing, I must know through others than you when and by whom it was made, how it has been preserved, how it came down to you, what those who reject it in your part of the world give as their reasons, although they know as well as you do everything you tell me? You realize indeed that I must necessarily go to Europe, to Asia, to Palestine, to examine everything for myself; I should have to be crazy to listen to you before that time.

Not only does this way of speaking seem reasonable to me, but I maintain that any reasonable man must in such a situation speak thus, and send far away the missionary who, before the verification of proofs, wishes to hasten to instruct him and to baptize him. Now I maintain that there is no revelation against which the same objections do not have just as much force as against Christianity, and even more. Whence it follows that if there is only one true religion, and if every man is obliged to accept it under penalty of damnation, one must devote one's entire life to the study of all religions, probing them, comparing them, visiting the lands where they are established. [...]

[THERE SEEMS TO BE ONLY ONE SOLUTION: TO ACCEPT THE TEACHINGS OF NATURAL RELIGION]

Do you wish to reduce the rigors of this method, and give even the slightest place to the authority of men? Immediately you open the door to it completely. And if the son of a Christian does well to follow, without a penetrating and impartial examination, the religion of his father, why should the son of a Turk be wrong in

following similarly the religion of his parents? How many men are very good Catholics in Rome who, for the same reason, would be very good Moslems if they had been born in Mecca! And on the other hand how many honorable people are very good Turks in Asia who would be very good Christians among us! I challenge all the intolerant people of the world to answer that with anything that will satisfy a reasonable man.

Unable to escape these considerations, some prefer to make God unjust, and to punish the innocent for their father's sin, rather than to renounce their barbarous doctrine. Others get out of the difficulty by kindly sending an angel to instruct whoever, in an invincible ignorance, may have led a morally good life. What a fine invention that angel is! Not satisfied with enslaving us to their artificial devices, they place God himself in the necessity of using them.

See, my son, to what absurdity pride and intolerance lead when each seeks to cling completely to his ideas and to claim that he alone is right among all mankind. I call to witness that God of peace whom I worship and whom I announce to you that all my seeking has been sincere; but recognizing that it was and would always be without success, and that I was losing myself in a boundless ocean, I turned back, and I found a firm foundation for my faith by restricting myself to the simple notions I had held at the outset. I have never been able to believe that God should order me, under penalty of eternal torment, to be so learned. I therefore closed up all my books. There is a single book open to all eyes, and that is the book of nature. It is in that great and sublime book that I learn to serve and worship its divine author. None can be excused for not reading in it, because it speaks to all men a language intelligible to all minds. Though I were born on a lonely isle, though I might have seen no other man than myself, though I might never have learned what took place long ago in some remote corner of the globe, still if I make use of my reason, if I develop it, if I use rightly the immediate faculties that God gives me, I shall learn by myself to know him, to love him, to love his works, to will the good that he wills, and to fulfill in order to please him all my duties on earth. What more will all the lore of men teach me?

Reply to Objection 1. As Augustine says (*Enchiridion*, xi): “Since God is the highest good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works, unless His omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil.” This is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good.

Reply to Objection 2. Since nature works for a determinate end under the direction of a higher agent,

whatever is done by nature must needs be traced back to God, as to its first cause. So also whatever is done voluntarily must also be traced back to some higher cause other than human reason or will, since these can change or fail; for all things that are changeable and capable of defect must be traced back to an immovable and self-necessary first principle, as was shown in the body of the Article

[36] THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN

AQUINAS’ FIFTH WAY: THE TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) gave a teleological argument for God’s existence in his “Fifth Way.” ‘Teleological’ means purposive (from the Greek word *telos*, meaning end, goal, or purpose). This fifth way explains the world’s “governance” or ordering by appealing to God as the world’s governor or organizer. We see objects acting toward some end or goal, and so these movements must be the result of some *intention*. But many of these objects lack minds, and thus lack the ability to orient themselves towards a goal. Therefore, there must be some intender guiding the motions of these non-mental objects, and this intender we commonly call God.

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------|
| (1) All things act for a purpose. | [Aristotelian view of nature] |
| (2) Acting for a purpose requires a mind. | |
| (3) ∴ Some mind is behind the action of each thing. | [1, 2] |
| (4) Inanimate objects (rocks, planets, etc.) act for a purpose, but (by definition) lack minds. | |
| (5) ∴ Some powerful external mind (i.e., God) guides the actions of inanimate objects. | [3, 4] |

THE ARISTOTELIAN VIEW OF NATURE

The teleological argument explains the world’s governance — the seeming purposiveness of all of nature — by appealing to God as the governor. The success of this argument depends upon an Aristotelian view of nature, as based on the philosophical and scientific writings of **Aristotle** (Athens, 4th century BCE). Not only do we find these teleological explanations often helpful, they are *true accounts* on the Aristotelian view. So, for instance, animals seek food, chess players seek to checkmate their opponents, and stones seek their natural resting places (which is why they move downwards, towards the center of the universe). In his *Physics*, Aristotle compares the products of craft (e.g., houses and ships) and the products of nature (e.g., plants and animals):

**TWO SCRIPTURAL TEXTS FOR
CONDEMNING GALILEO**

Psalm 93, v.1: “You have made the world firm, unshakeable.”

Psalm 104, v.5: “You fixed the earth on its foundations, unshakeable for ever and ever.”

In general, craft either completes the work that nature is unable to complete, or imitates nature. If, then, the products of a craft are for something, clearly the products of nature are also for something; for there is the same relation of later stages to earlier in productions of a craft and in productions of nature.

This is most evident in the case of animals other than man, since they use neither craft nor inquiry nor deliberation in producing things — indeed this is why some people are puzzled about whether spiders, ants, and other such things operate by understanding or in some other way. If we advance little by little along the same lines, it is evident that even in plants things come to be that promote the end — leaves, for instance, grow for the protection of the fruit. If, then, a swallow makes its nest

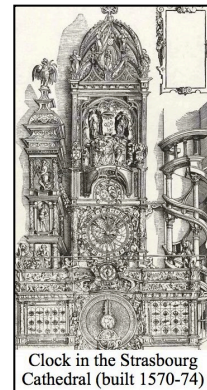
and a spider its web both naturally and for some end, and if plants grow leaves for the sake of the fruit, and send roots down rather than up for the sake of nourishment, it evidently follows that this sort of cause is among things that come to be and are by nature. [*Physics*, Bk. II, Ch. 8, 199a16-30; Irwin and Fine translation]

Given this view of nature, Aquinas' argument is rather compelling, for some explanation needs to be given of how non-conscious beings are capable of goal-oriented behavior. The teleological argument is seldom advanced as a proof of God's existence today, however, because many or most natural phenomena are now understood "mechanistically" (that is, where all motions are the result of previous motions; here we have only efficient causes, and no final causes). A more modern version of the argument, what we call the **argument from design**, is given by the fictional character Cleanthes in David Hume's *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, Pt. II (1779), as well as by William Paley in his *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (London, 1802). This was the argument of choice among the deists of early modern Europe.

THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN

Reason and Nature were inseparable concepts during the European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries.³⁴ Important scientific advances impressed upon that age just how rational — that is, how understandable — nature really was. What before had struck humans as unfathomable mystery or confusion was slowly yielding to scientific explanation. Nor did this unlocking of nature's mysteries lead scientists away from religion; rather, most scientists viewed it as lending support to the notion that God must have created this world — for how else were we to explain the rational ordering found in nature? Only a rational mind could bring about such a rational world. The very fact that nature was understandable was proof that it came from God, the very source of reason. **John Locke** wrote that "the works of Nature everywhere sufficiently evidence a Deity," and his chemist friend at Oxford, **Robert Boyle**, claimed that "there is incomparably more art expressed in the structure of a dog's foot than in that of the famous clock at Strasbourg."

Boyle's point is clear: the clock in the Strasbourg Cathedral was the most complicated piece of machinery of its day, with people traveling from all over Europe just to wonder at it — and yet this greatest of human inventions paled in comparison with the meanest of natural structures (such as a dog's foot). Just as the human mind is the source of the rational ordering found in a clock, the divine mind must be the source of the rational ordering found in nature, whether it be the foot of a dog, the motion of the planets, or human beings themselves and their powerful minds. So it was the rise of modern science that eclipsed the ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments for God's existence, and moved to center stage a new proof: the argument from design. This proof argues from the design or order of the universe to the need for a rational creator. Given the *apparent* design in the world (how everything seems to fit together, like an intricate machine), it would seem that the world was *in fact* designed. Such order could not have come about simply by chance. And given the *complexity* of the design, only God could have been the designer.³⁵



Clock in the Strasbourg Cathedral (built 1570-74)



William Paley
(England, 1743-1805)

³⁴ For a fuller discussion of the Enlightenment, see Section 14 on "The Rise of Modernism," above. See also Thomas L. Hankins's excellent survey in his *Science and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

³⁵ The argument from design as presented by Paley and various others takes the form of an analogical argument. For instance: (1) A watch is a machine-like structure, (2) The world is a machine-like structure, (3) A watch has a designer, therefore (4) The world also has a designer. As far as I can tell, however, the strengths and weaknesses of this argument are preserved in the form offered here.

- | | |
|---|--------|
| (1) Every machine-like structure is the product of a designing intelligence. | |
| (2) The world is a machine-like structure. | |
| (3) ∴ The world is the product of a designing intelligence. | [1, 2] |
| (4) The world's structure is so well-arranged and perfect that only God could have designed it. | |
| (5) ∴ God designed the world. | [3, 4] |

EVALUATING THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN

This argument appears valid, but are the premises true? Each of them deserves comment, and lines (2) and (4) are open to considerable objections, many of which were first put forth by **David Hume** (1711-76), through the mouth-piece of Philo in his *Dialogues on Natural Religion*.

Premise 1

Insofar as a machine-like structure is a human artifact, then of course it has a designer. But in order to decide the truth-value of premise two, we need to be quite clear as to what properties a thing needs before we can call it a “machine-like structure.”

Machine-like structures typically involve three properties: (1) multiple parts (2) that interact as a whole, (3) in order to bring about some purposeful action. The first two properties can be seen, more or less, in the thing itself. But the purpose of a thing is not a property intrinsic to it (the way that its weight or color might be); rather, it *super-venes* on the person who designed it or the person using it. We might distinguish these as the **intended purpose** and an **ad hoc purpose**.

Purpose is important here, because it clearly points to a mind: intended purpose points to the mind of the designer, while *ad hoc* purposes point to the mind of the person using the object. Purpose doesn't exist in the thing itself; it's not a property of things. For instance, you might use a chair to stand on (to reach a high cupboard, or to escape floodwaters, or mice) or you might use a chair to hold a door shut (or open) or to fight off wild dogs, or any number of other things. These are all purposes that a person might put to the chair, but these are all *ad hoc* purposes; the intended purpose is for the chair to be sat upon.

With machine-like structures designed and built by humans, we are normally able to distinguish *ad hoc* from intended purposes. Consider the toaster, whose intended purpose is to toast slices of bread — this is discoverable by considering the size and nature of the slots, noting the heating filaments, understanding the cultural role of sliced bread, and so on. We might use toasters to do other things, as well. For instance, you might dry out your wet socks on a toaster; or you might hang a toaster from its cord on the inside of your front door to use as a door chime; or you might knot several toasters together at the end of their cords, and use them bolas-style to hunt white tailed deer. But these are all clearly *ad hoc* purposes for the toasters, since none of them make use of the design of the toaster as such. The slot-mechanism is not well suited to drying wet socks, and the heating elements (as well as all the other interacting parts) are neglected in the toaster's use as a door chime or hunting device. It is in the complexity of the toaster — the “multiple parts” that “interact as a whole” — that we are able to discern an *intended* purpose that clearly points to some designing mind. There must be purposiveness to indicate the need for a mind, and there must be complexity to show that this purposiveness was designed into the object, and thus isn't simply *ad hoc*.

So, it appears that a machine-like structure does indeed require a designing intelligence to account for its existence, and so the first premise appears to be adequate.

Premise 2

If the world is a machine-like structure, then it is reasonable to wonder what its purpose might be. Discovering this is not so easy. We can't get outside the structure to view it as a whole — the way we can a toaster — and so we can't see if the whole really does act towards some end or combined effect (its purpose); nor can we even see if all the parts work together in harmony. So it isn't obvious that the world is a machine-like structure. Nor have we seen it put together as a machine. Theists tend to accept premise two while atheists reject it, for the theists will assume that God has given some purpose or other to the world as a whole — but, of course, this assumption can not be used to prove God's existence, since it would make the argument circular.

Revising premise 2

The problem with premise two is that the world cannot be said to be machine-like unless it has some purpose, and it is not at all clear what that purpose might be. But for the argument to work, we do not actually need the premise that “the world is a machine-like structure”; rather, it would be quite enough to show that at least some natural structures are machine-like (i.e., exhibit some purpose), for since that purpose could not have come from humans (the structure being natural, and not of human origin), then the purpose had to have a non-human origin, which would likely be God. By changing premise two, and modifying the subsequent lines accordingly, we arrive at a new proof:

- (1) Every machine-like structure is the product of a designing intelligence.
- (2) There are natural objects — e.g., the human eye — with machine-like structures.
- (3) ∴ These natural objects are the product of a designing intelligence.
- (4) These natural objects are so well-arranged and perfect that only God could have designed them.
- (5) ∴ God designed these natural objects.

There are indeed many natural structures that would seem to be machine-like: the eye, a pair of wings, the heart, and various other organs that appear to have the purpose of performing some vital function for an organism, thus allowing that organism to survive. Indeed every living cell would seem to count as a purposeful structure.

Purposiveness without purpose

It seems easy to suppose that natural structures exhibit some purpose. Even aspects of the non-organic world appear to be purposive — for example, the atmosphere contains a layer of ozone, thus making much of animal life possible. But this is all deeply undermined by **Charles Darwin** (1809-82) and his theory of natural selection, as developed in *The Origin of Species* (published in 1859).

This theory offers an explanation of the design found in the *natural world* without recourse to purpose or intended design — and as such undermines the first premise.³⁶

As for the natural structures that fall outside the scope of Darwinian theory, such as the amazing structure of the planets, or of molecules and atoms, we should note that we haven’t much of a clue as to what *their* purpose might be. Is it to make possible the emergence and support of life and thought? Well, we can imagine that there are plenty of planets where life and thought do not exist because the structure happened not to be conducive. Life and thought will emerge wherever the natural environment is conducive for life and thought — a tautology, of sorts.³⁷

³⁶ This argument was anticipated by Hume, *Dialogues*, Pt. VIII, with the “Epicurean hypothesis” of matter in motion.

³⁷ A standard, and what I take to be the appropriate, theistic response to Darwin is to embrace biological evolution as part of God’s tool-kit for creating the diversity found in the biological world. This is the position of many edu-

IT’S A MIRACLE!

It is often claimed that people long ago lived fairly abbreviated lives: medical care was primitive, the food poor, and public hygiene non-existent. The average life span was indeed short — about half that currently enjoyed in the industrialized world — but this was primarily due to a much higher death rate among children and young adults. Once you reached the age of 40, for instance, your chances were excellent of living into your 80s.

Now consider all the ancestors you’ve had over the last twenty generations — two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, and so on. Add them all up and you’ll find you have over two-million (although in reality many of these likely played multiple roles in your family tree).

If child mortality was around 50 percent, then the odds that all of those people would survive into their child-bearing years (much less meet the right partner and bear the appropriate child that, eventually, would lead to you instead of to someone else) is *vanishingly* small (about 1 in 4 million). And when you realize that the same is true for the other seven billion human beings now living, the odds against all of this actually falling into place is simply astounding. How else, but through God’s help, could we have beaten such unbeatable odds? A miracle!

Perhaps you have already sniffed-out the fallacy here — what I call the *survivor’s fallacy*. This psychological illusion loses some of its power when you consider that you didn’t have to exist, and that no matter who was born, they would always “beat” the same odds. Because no non-survivors clutter our view, we are impressed by our own existence. This is exactly like rolling a die a hundred times, but recording only the fives that are rolled. If it’s a normal die, then you’ll typically roll 16 or 17 fives; if you then asked yourself what the odds were for getting just these 16 fives in 16 rolls of the die, you’d find them at about 1 in 3 million. Another miracle!

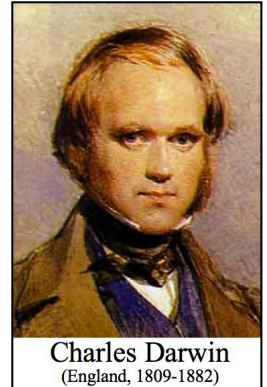
Premise 4

Darwin was worried by the human eye. It seemed to him to be so perfectly crafted that it wasn't clear how it might have evolved. There didn't seem to be any obvious evolutionary paths that would lead to an eye — what good, after all, is half an eye? Today we know a great deal more about the human eye, however, as well as the various other kinds of eyes found in nature, and it is now apparent that eyes evolved numerous times, and that it does not even take that many steps to arrive at a lensed eye (where each step taken confers, as it must, some benefit to the organism). But what is perhaps most striking — and here we raise the objection against premise four — the human eye appears to be *poorly designed*! The retina consists of three layers, with the rods and cones at the very bottom, facing away from the light, and buried underneath nerves and blood vessels. The whole thing is constructed backwards, and it's a bit of a wonder that it works as well as it does. It is certainly not what we would expect from an intelligent designer. When we view the eye in terms of our evolutionary history, however, its construction is wholly understandable, and we can map out the steps that it must have taken. We don't expect perfection, or even sensible design, from natural selection; what shows up simply needs to be “good enough,” offering some benefit, however small, to that kind of organism at that moment in its natural history.³⁸

A second sort of objection was raised by David Hume, and it centers on the argument's analogy between human machines and the universe as a divinely-crafted machine. Even if premise two can be saved, the argument still gets into trouble, since all we know is that *something* designed the world: There isn't any trademark or signature that assures us that *God* designed it rather than some devil or crazed deity. The world, after all, doesn't seem to be such a great machine (considering all the natural evils), so either the blueprint was faulty or the builder was, or both. Perhaps the world was created by an infant deity, or a mentally-challenged deity, or a senile deity.

Also, is there any indication that there would be only *one* god? With ships and large buildings, we find not a single builder but a whole multitude; by analogy, we would expect the same with whatever built the world — and in multiplying Gods, the power of each is diminished. Given the analogy, God need be neither infinite, nor perfect, nor singular.

Finally, is there any reason to believe that this God still intervenes in, or involves itself with, the world and human affairs? Or that God still exists? Even if the argument is sound, all it shows is that something designed the world, not that this something still exists. A watch may need a watchmaker, but it can nonetheless outlive its maker.



Charles Darwin
(England, 1809-1882)

A TYPOLOGY OF ARGUMENTS (FROM DESIGN)

The Oxford mathematician and philosopher **John Lennox** has developed a useful typology of design-arguments — three types that work at two different levels. These raise additional, but closely related, issues.

Type I: From the Possibility of Science Itself

The very existence of science would require that nature be rational, and this would seem to require a rational creator. Thus, one argument for God's existence would be the great success of the natural sciences. Given the historical antagonism between science and religion, this might seem a bit paradoxical. But it's a fair question to ask why the universe is intelligible to us at all. How do we explain the close fit that the universe has to our mind? Biological

cated theists, and also the position that Pope John Paul II adopted in his 1996 address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. Although a recent survey found that 45 percent of Americans rejected biological evolution and accepted (what they take to be) a literal interpretation of the creation stories in Genesis, only 7 percent of those surveyed in Great Britain do and fewer still in the remaining industrial nations. The belief that the findings of science (God's general revelation, as interpreted by human beings) can ultimately contradict God's special revelation (again, as interpreted by human beings) is primarily a phenomenon found in the United States.

³⁸ A useful discussion of the evolution of light-sensitive organs is found in ch. 5 of Richard Dawkins, *Climbing Mount Improbable* (W. W. Norton, 1996). More current research is presented in Trevor D. Lamb, “Evolution of the Eye” (*Scientific American*, July 2011, pp. 64-69).

evolution will create organisms able to understand their environment well enough to survive and reproduce. But none of this requires a knowledge of quantum mechanics or quasars or even digestion, for that matter. The theist might well argue that the sorts of knowledge that we have of the universe are different in kind from any that we would need to survive, and thus would require more than evolutionary forces to explain them.

A skeptic might question the initial premise of this argument, of course: Perhaps the world — reality as such — is fundamentally non-rational, and our sciences will never be more than rough approximations of how things are.

Type IIA: The Anthropic Principle

Type II arguments function at the level of science itself, of which there are two sorts: IIA arguments accept mainstream science and argue that God must have had a hand in the structure of nature, while IIB arguments reject or challenge mainstream science, arguing that science cannot explain certain phenomena.

The former argument is captured with what has been called “the anthropic principle,” first discussed in the 1980s. Sharon Begley notes that...

Physicists have stumbled on signs that the cosmos is custom-made for life and consciousness. It turns out that if the constants of nature — unchanging numbers like the strength of gravity, the charge of an electron and the mass of a proton — were the tiniest bit different, then atoms would not hold together, stars would not burn and life would never have made an appearance. “When you realize that the laws of nature must be incredibly finely tuned to produce the universe we see,” says John Polkinghorne, who had a distinguished career as a physicist at Cambridge University before becoming an Anglican priest in 1982, “that conspires to plant the idea that the universe did not just happen, but that there must be a purpose behind it.” Charles Townes, who shared the 1964 Nobel Prize in Physics for discovering the principles of the laser, goes further: “Many have a feeling that somehow intelligence must have been involved in the laws of the universe.”³⁹

A skeptic might point out that it would be rather more surprising if we discovered that the world did *not* include the necessary conditions for life and human consciousness. After all, because we exist, our necessary conditions must also exist. Or as Steven Weinberg points out, “any living beings who evolve to the point where they can measure the constants of nature will always find that these constants have values that allow life to exist. The constants have other values in other parts of the universe, but there is no one there to measure them.”⁴⁰

Type IIB: The Argument from “Irreducible Complexity”

Michael Behe (b. 1952), a biochemist at Lehigh University, was an early proponent of the argument from irreducible complexity, citing the flagellum of certain bacteria and the clotting factor in blood as involving biochemical structures whose complexity cannot be explained by the step-wise fashion of natural selection. Behe explains this point using an analogy with a standard mousetrap, which consists of a small wooden platform and a coiled spring connected to a bar that will spring shut, once a baited lever is touched (where the spring, bar, and lever are all nailed to the wooden base). The argument here is that if any one of these pieces are removed (the board, spring, nail, bar, or lever) then the mousetrap will lose all of its functionality; consequently, its emergence cannot be understood as a gradual, step-wise process as required by natural selection. Evolution requires that certain random changes will confer some advantage, however small, over the version without that change; but with the mousetrap, moving from a wooden base, to a wooden base with a screw (or one of the other necessary parts) would add no advantage at all. What we need is an intelligent designer (aka God) to create the entire mousetrap all at once.

There have been humorous rebuttals to the mousetrap analogy but, more importantly, many scientists have weighed in on his examples of the flagellum and the blood-clotting, and the consensus appears to be that such biochemical structures can indeed result from simpler structures, and that possible evolutionary pathways for the emergence of such structures are not that difficult to construct (this is the same issue as Darwin’s eye, discussed above).

³⁹ Begley, “Science finds Religion” in *Newsweek* (July 20, 1998).

⁴⁰ *Scientific American*, Oct. 1994, p. 49.

More importantly, one needs to see that these appeals to “irreducible complexity” are appealing to a God of the Gaps, invoking God to explain some natural phenomenon that is, at the moment, inexplicable. As history has shown, time and time again, such inexplicable phenomena are eventually explained. This is precisely how science works, and is supposed to work. A scientist will not sit idly by, shrug her shoulders, and say “I give up! No idea how X came about; I guess God caused it!” Instead, she will keep developing hypotheses and testing them. In science, unsolved questions are not normally written off as unsolvable in principle. And even if we in fact came across a true case of irreducible complexity, there would be no way that we could ever know this.

TWO MORE PROBLEMS FOR THESE THEISTIC PROOFS

Two additional problems plague both the cosmological argument and the argument from design. It has been pointed out on numerous occasions that neither argument proves enough about God that one might actually want to worship such a being. Even if the cosmological argument is successful, the most it has proved is that there is *some* necessary being. As **Blaise Pascal** (1623-1662) noted, these arguments for theism give us only a *philosopher’s* God, not “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” — that is to say, neither proof gives us a personal, caring God. Indeed, the God of the Bible does not seem to be at issue here at all, since *that* god is often depicted as being neither all-knowing, nor all-powerful, nor even as singular.

A second problem is that the strength of these arguments rests on our desire to explain the universe, but the appeal to God only undermines this explanation. If God’s own existence cannot be explained, how does theism aid in our making sense of the existence of the universe? We might as well believe that the universe always existed (as an infinite series of causes).

Theism is not “the best explanation”

- | | |
|---|--------|
| (1) If God exists, and then created the universe out of nothing, we have two ultimate mysteries: (a) God’s existence, and (b) the creation of something from nothing. | |
| (2) If only matter has existed, then we have only one mystery: the existence of matter. | |
| (3) ∴ Theism only multiplies the unexplained. | [1, 2] |
| (4) Whatever multiplies the unexplained should not be invoked as an explanatory device. | |
| (5) ∴ Theism should not be invoked as an explanatory device. | [3, 4] |

This argument can be altered to include the explanation of design in the world (David Hume also noted this need to explain design found in mind as well as in matter; see his *Dialogues*, Part. IV):

- | | |
|--|--------|
| (1) If God exists alongside matter, and then designed the matter into the universe, we have three mysteries: (a) God’s existence, (b) the origin of design in God’s mind, and (c) the existence of matter. | |
| (2) If only matter existed, then we have only two mysteries: (a) the existence of matter, and (b) the origin of design in the matter. | |
| (3) ∴ Theism only multiplies the unexplained. | [1, 2] |
| (4) (etc.) | |

One might disagree with how we enumerate our mysteries here, and argue that the only mystery at hand for theism is the existence of God (who is omnipotent, omniscient, and so on); once such a god exists, then creating matter from nothing, or designing the matter, follows directly from God’s nature and so is not a mystery. This sort of move, however, has the same feel of illicitness as when a person granted one wish uses it to wish for more wishes. The point here is that there is still a fundamental mystery of mere existence (be it God’s existence, or matter’s), after which there is the further mystery of various features or properties of God or matter. God’s omnipotence is no less a mystery than are the basic forces governing matter in the universe.

READINGS

NATURAL THEOLOGY (SELECTION)

William Paley

William Paley (1743-1805) was an English theologian and moral philosopher of the utilitarian school. He is best remembered for the opening paragraphs of his Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature (London, 1802), reprinted below, wherein he develops an analogy between a watch and the universe.

In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a stone, and were asked how the stone came to be there, I might possibly answer, that for any thing I knew to the contrary it had lain there for ever; nor would it, perhaps, be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I had found a watch upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place, I should hardly think of the answer which I had before given, that for any thing I knew the watch might have always been there. Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch as well as for the stone; why is it not as admissible in the second case as in the first? For this reason, and for no other, namely, that when we come to inspect the watch, we perceive — what we could not discover in the stone — that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose, e.g., that they are so formed and adjusted as to produce motion, and that motion so regulated as to point out the hour of the day; that if the different parts had been differently shaped from what they are, or place after any other manner or in any other order than

that in which they are placed, either no motion at all would have been carried on in the machine, or none which would have answered the use that is now served by it. [...] This mechanism being observed — it requires indeed an examination of the instrument, and perhaps some previous knowledge of the subject, to perceive and understand it; but being once, as we have said, observed and understood, the inference we think is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker — that there must have existed, at some time and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer, who comprehended its construction and designed its use. [...]

Every indication of contrivance, every manifestation of design which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature, with the difference on the side of nature of being greater and more, and that in a degree which exceeds all computation. I mean, that the contrivances of nature surpass the contrivances of art, in the complexity, subtlety, and curiosity of the mechanism; and still more, if possible do they go beyond them in number and variety; yet in a multitude of cases, are not less evidently mechanical, not less evidently contrivances, not less evidently accommodated to their end or suited to their office, than are the most perfect productions of human ingenuity. [...]

SCIENCE FINDS RELIGION

Sharon Begley

Sharon Begley is an award-winning science writer and currently a senior editor for Newsweek magazine, having previously written the science column for the Wall Street Journal. This essay first appeared in Newsweek

(July 20, 1998).

The more deeply scientists see into the secrets of the universe, you'd expect, the more God would fade away from their hearts and minds. But that's not how it went for Allan Sandage. Now slightly stooped and white-haired at 72, Sandage has spent a professional lifetime coaxing secrets out of the stars, peering through telescopes from Chile to California in the hope of spying nothing less than the origins and destiny of the universe. As much as any other 20th-century astronomer, Sandage actually figured it out: his observations of distant stars showed how fast the universe is expanding and how old it is (15 billion years or so). But through it all Sandage, who says he was "almost a practicing atheist as a boy," was nagged by mysteries whose answers were not to be found in the glittering panoply of supernovas. Among them: Why is there something rather than nothing? Sandage began to despair of answering such questions through reason alone, and so, at 50, he willed himself to accept God. "It was my science that drove me to the conclusion that the world is much more complicated than can be explained by science," he says. "It is only through the supernatural that I can understand the mystery of existence."

Something surprising is happening between those two old war-horses science and religion.

Historically, they have alternated between mutual support and bitter enmity. Although religious doctrine midwived the birth of the experimental method centuries ago, faith and reason soon parted ways. Galileo, Darwin and others whose research challenged church dogma were branded heretics, and the polite way to reconcile science and theology was to simply agree that each would keep to its own realm: science would ask, and answer, empirical questions like "what" and "how"; religion would confront the spiritual, wondering "why." But as science grew in authority and power beginning with the Enlightenment, this détente broke down. Some of its greatest minds dismissed God as an unnecessary hypothesis, one they didn't need to explain how galaxies came to shine or how life grew so complex. Since the birth of the universe could now be explained by the laws of physics alone, the late astronomer and atheist Carl Sagan concluded, there was "nothing for a Creator to do," and every thinking person was therefore forced to admit "the absence of God." Today the scientific community so scorns faith, says Sandage, that "there is

a reluctance to reveal yourself as a believer, the opprobrium is so severe."

Some clergy are no more tolerant of scientists. A fellow researcher and friend of Sandage's was told by a pastor, "Unless you accept and believe that the Earth and universe are only 6,000 years old [as a literal reading of the Bible implies], you cannot be a Christian." It is little wonder that people of faith resent science: by reducing the miracle of life to a series of biochemical reactions, by explaining Creation as a hiccup in space-time, science seems to undermine belief, render existence meaningless and rob the world of spiritual wonder.

But now "theology and science are entering into a new relationship," says physicist turned theologian Robert John Russell, who in 1981 founded the *Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences* at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. Rather than undercutting faith and a sense of the spiritual, scientific discoveries are offering support for them, at least in the minds of people of faith. Big-bang cosmology, for instance, once read as leaving no room for a Creator, now implies to some scientists that there is a design and purpose behind the universe. Evolution, say some scientist-theologians, provides clues to the very nature of God. And chaos theory, which describes such mundane processes as the patterns of weather and the dripping of faucets, is being interpreted as opening a door for God to act in the world.

From Georgetown to Berkeley, theologians who embrace science, and scientists who cannot abide the spiritual emptiness of empiricism, are establishing institutes integrating the two. Books like *Science and Theology: The New Consonance* and *Belief in God in an Age of Science* are streaming off the presses. [...]

In 1977 Nobel physicist Steven Weinberg of the University of Texas sounded a famous note of despair: the more the universe has become comprehensible through cosmology, he wrote, the more it seems pointless. But now the very science that "killed" God is, in the eyes of believers, restoring faith. Physicists have stumbled on signs that the cosmos is custom-made for life and consciousness. It turns out that if the constants of nature — unchanging numbers like the strength of gravity, the charge of an electron and the mass of a proton — were the tiniest bit different, then atoms would not hold together, stars would not burn and life would

never have made an appearance. “When you realize that the laws of nature must be incredibly finely tuned to produce the universe we see,” says John Polkinghorne, who had a distinguished career as a physicist at Cambridge University before becoming an Anglican priest in 1982, “that conspires to plant the idea that the universe did not just happen, but that there must be a purpose behind it.” Charles Townes, who shared the 1964 Nobel Prize in Physics for discovering the principles of the laser, goes further: “Many have a feeling that somehow intelligence must have been involved in the laws of the universe.”

Although the very rationality of science often feels like an enemy of the spiritual, here, too, a new reading can sustain rather than snuff out belief. Ever since Isaac Newton, science has blared a clear message: the world follows rules, rules that are fundamentally mathematical, rules that humans can figure out. Humans invent abstract mathematics, basically making it up out of their imaginations, yet math magically turns out to describe the world. Greek mathematicians divided the circumference of a circle by its diameter, for example, and got the number pi, 3.14159... . Pi turns up in equations that describe subatomic particles, light and other quantities that have no obvious connections to circles. This points, says Polkinghorne, “to a very deep fact about the nature of the universe,” namely, that our minds, which invent mathematics, conform to the reality of the cosmos. We are somehow tuned in to its truths. Since pure thought can penetrate the universe’s mysteries, “this seems to be telling us that something about human consciousness is harmonious with the mind of God,” says Carl Feit, a cancer biologist at Yeshiva University in New York and Talmudic scholar.

To most worshippers, a sense of the divine as an unseen presence behind the visible world is all well and good, but what they really yearn for is a God who acts in the world. Some scientists see an opening for this sort of God at the level of quantum or subatomic events. In this spooky realm, the behavior of particles is unpredictable. In perhaps the most famous example, a radioactive element might have a half-life of, say, one hour. Half-life means that half of the atoms in a sample will decay in that time; half will not. But what if you have only a single atom? Then, in an hour, it has a 50-50 chance of decaying. And what if the experiment is arranged so that if the atom does decay, it releases poi-

son gas? If you have a cat in the lab, will the cat be alive or dead after the hour is up? Physicists have discovered that there is no way to determine, even in principle, what the atom would do. Some theologian-scientists see that decision point — will the atom decay or not? will the cat live or die? — as one where God can act. “Quantum mechanics allows us to think of special divine action,” says Russell. Even better, since few scientists abide miracles, God can act without violating the laws of physics.

An even newer science, chaos theory, describes phenomena like the weather and some chemical reactions whose exact outcomes cannot be predicted. It could be, says Polkinghorne, that God selects which possibility becomes reality. This divine action would not violate physical laws either.

Most scientists still park their faith, if they have it, at the laboratory door. But just as belief can find inspiration in science, so scientists can find inspiration in belief. Physicist Mehdi Golshani of Sharif University of Technology in Tehran, drawing from the *Koran*, believes that natural phenomena are “God’s signs in the universe,” and that studying them is almost a religious obligation. The *Koran* asks humans to “travel in the earth, then see how He initiated the creation.” Research, Golshani says, “is a worship act, in that it reveals more of the wonders of God’s creation.” The same strain runs through Judaism. Carl Feit cites Maimonides, “who said that the only pathway to achieve a love of God is by understanding the works of his hand, which is the natural universe. Knowing how the universe functions is crucial to a religious person because this is the world He created.” Feit is hardly alone. According to a study released last year, 40 percent of American scientists believe in a personal God — not merely an ineffable power and presence in the world, but a deity to whom they can pray.

To Joel Primack, an astrophysicist at the University of California, Santa Cruz, “practicing science [even] has a spiritual goal” — namely, providing inspiration. It turns out, explains Primack, that the largest size imaginable, the entire universe, is 10 with 29 zeros after it (in centimeters). The smallest size describes the subatomic world, and is 10 with 24 zeros (and a decimal) in front of it. Humans are right in the middle. Does this return us to a privileged place? Primack

doesn't know, but he describes this as a "soul-satisfying cosmology."

Although skeptical scientists grumble that science has no need of religion, forward-looking theologians think religion needs science. Religion "is incapable of making its moral claims persuasive or its spiritual comfort effective [unless] its cognitive claims" are credible, argues physicist-theologian Russell. Although upwards of 90 percent of Americans believe in a personal God, fewer believe in a God who parts seas, or creates species one by one. To make religions forged millennia ago relevant in an age of atoms and DNA, some theologians are "incorporating knowledge gained from natural science into the formation of doctrinal beliefs," says Ted Peters of Pacific Lutheran Seminary. Otherwise, says astronomer and Jesuit priest William Stoeger, religion is in danger of being seen, by people even minimally acquainted with science, "as an anachronism."

Science cannot prove the existence of God, let alone spy him at the end of a telescope. But to some believers, learning about the universe offers clues about what God might be like. As W. Mark Richardson of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences says, "Science may not serve as an eyewitness of God the creator, but it can serve as a character witness." One place to get a glimpse of God's character, ironically, is in the workings of evolution. Arthur Peacocke, a biochemist who became a priest in the Church of England in 1971, has no quarrel with evolution. To the contrary: he finds in it signs of God's nature. He infers, from evolution, that God has chosen to limit his omnipotence and omniscience. In other words, it is the appearance of chance mutations, and the Darwinian laws of natural selection acting on this "variation," that bring about the diversity of life on Earth. This process suggests a divine humility, a God who acts selflessly for the good of creation, says theologian John Haught, who founded the Georgetown (University) Center for the Study of Science and Religion. He calls this a "humble retreat on God's part": much as a loving parent lets a child be, and become, freely and without interference, so does God let creation make itself.

It would be an exaggeration to say that such sophisticated theological thinking is remaking religion at the level of the local parish, mosque or synagogue. But some of these ideas do resonate with ordinary worshippers and clergy. For Billy Crockett, president of Walk-

ing Angel Records in Dallas, the discoveries of quantum mechanics that he reads about in the paper reinforce his faith that "there is a lot of mystery in the nature of things." For other believers, an appreciation of science deepens faith. "Science produces in me a tremendous awe," says Sister Mary White of the Benedictine Meditation Center in St. Paul, Minn. "Science and spirituality have a common quest, which is a quest for truth." And if science has not yet influenced religious thought and practice at the grass-roots level very much, just wait, says Ted Peters of CTNS. Much as feminism sneaked up on churches and is now shaping the liturgy, he predicts, "in ten years science will be a major factor in how many ordinary religious people think."

Not everyone believes that's such a hot idea. "Science is a method, not a body of knowledge," says Michael Shermer, a director of the Skeptics Society, which debunks claims of the paranormal. "It can have nothing to say either way about whether there is a God. These are two such different things, it would be like using baseball stats to prove a point in football." Another red flag is that adherents of different faiths — like the Orthodox Jews, Anglicans, Quakers, Catholics and Muslims who spoke at the June conference in Berkeley — tend to find, in science, confirmation of what their particular religion has already taught them.

Take the difficult Christian concept of Jesus as both fully divine and fully human. It turns out that this duality has a parallel in quantum physics. In the early years of this century, physicists discovered that entities thought of as particles, like electrons, can also act as waves. And light, considered a wave, can in some experiments act like a barrage of particles. The orthodox interpretation of this strange situation is that light is, simultaneously, wave and particle. Electrons are, simultaneously, waves and particles. Which aspect of light one sees, which face an electron turns to a human observer, varies with the circumstances. So, too, with Jesus, suggests physicist F. Russell Stannard of England's Open University. Jesus is not to be seen as really God in human guise, or as really human but acting divine, says Stannard: "He was fully both." Finding these parallels may make some people feel, says Polkinghorne, "that this is not just some deeply weird Christian idea."

Jews aren't likely to make the same leap. And someone who is not already a believer will not join the faithful because of quantum mechanics; conversely, someone in whom science raises no doubts about faith probably isn't even listening. But to people in the middle, for whom science raises questions about religion, these new concordances can deepen a faith already present. As Feit says, “I don't think that by studying science you will be forced to conclude that there must be a God. But if you have already found God, then you can say, from understanding science, ‘Ah, I see what God has done in the world’.”

In one sense, science and religion will never be truly reconciled. Perhaps they shouldn't be. The default setting of science is eternal doubt; the core of religion is faith. Yet profoundly religious people and great scientists are both driven to understand the world. Once, science and religion were viewed as two fundamentally different, even antagonistic, ways of pursuing that quest, and science stood accused of smothering faith and killing God. Now, it may strengthen belief. And although it cannot prove God's existence, science might whisper to believers where to seek the divine

[37] THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

THIS JUST IN ...

MUDENDE, Rwanda (Reuters) - Survivors of an attack on a camp in northwestern Rwanda in which 271 people were killed said Hutu rebels came at night and started chopping up their victims. [December 12, 1998]

CONYERS, Ga. (Reuters) - A 15-year-old described as a Boy Scout with a broken heart wounded six students at his Georgia high school Thursday in the latest of a spate of U.S. school shootings. [May 21, 1999]

TYLER, Texas (Reuters) - A Texas woman who beat two of her sons to death with a rock and badly injured another because she believed God told her to do it was found not guilty by reason of insanity on Saturday. [April 4, 2004]

PLANO, Texas (AP) - With a calm, dispassionate voice and a hymn playing in the background, Dena Schlosser confessed to the unthinkable, telling a 911 operator she'd cut off the arms of her baby girl. The woman was sitting in her living room covered with blood when police arrived Monday. Her nearly 11-month-old daughter lay fatally injured in a crib in a bedroom of the family's apartment in Plano. The child died shortly afterward at a hospital. [November 23, 2004]

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (Guardian) - Mourners in Sri Lanka buried their dead with bare hands today while rescue services struggled to reach areas of Indonesia still cut off from the rest of the world, two days after a tsunami devastated Indian Ocean coastlines and killed more than 55,000 people. [December 28, 2004]

TANACU, Romania (AFP) - A Romanian Orthodox priest, facing charges for ordering the crucifixion of a young nun because she was “possessed by the devil,” was unrepentant as he celebrated a funeral ceremony for his alleged victim. [June 18, 2005]

JAKARTA, Indonesia (CNN) - The death toll from an earthquake and resulting tsunami that smashed into fishing villages and resorts on Indonesia's Java island has reached 340 with more than 200 people missing, officials say. [July 18, 2006]

Evil is a *practical* problem for all who encounter it, but it is a *theoretical* problem only for certain theists. Non-theists will expect there to be evil or human suffering in the world from time to time. But theists — at least those believing in Anselm's God — will have a problem, for they believe there exists an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God and it is not at all obvious why such a God would allow — much less create — a world with evil in it.

THEODICY

The term **theodicy** comes from the Greek words *theos* (God) and *dike* (justice), and was coined by Gottfried Wilhelm **Leibniz** (1646-1716) in his book by the same name (*Theodicee*, 1710). It refers to the attempt to reconcile the existence of a perfect God with the existence of evil in the world. Anyone who surveys the literature of the late 18th century Europe is struck by how many books and pamphlets were written about this problem of God and evil. The cause for such a general interest in the topic occurred on November 1st, 1755. November 1st is All Saint's Day, an important church holiday in Catholic countries; and in Lisbon, the magnificent capital of Portugal, good Catholics were in church worshipping their God when an earthquake devastated that city, collapsing the churches and killing an enormous number of people (about 60,000 deaths have been estimated). This earthquake shook all of Europe, both literally and intellectually, for it didn't take long for observers and survivors to realize that far fewer people would have died had they been at home, or at work in the fields, where the danger from falling debris was less. God seemed to kill precisely those who believed in him most. After Lisbon, writing theodicies became a pastime for religious intellectuals.⁴¹

The Epicurean Dilemma

Epicurus (341-270 BCE) was a Greek philosopher about 40 years younger than Aristotle, and he posed what has become the classic atheistic dilemma for the theist: "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then this evil?"⁴² In other words, the atheist poses the following two statements, and argues that one of them must be false:

- (1) There exists a God who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good.
- (2) There is evil (i.e., bad events or things exist in the world).

Sometimes the second statement is refined, so that the emphasis is placed not on evil as such (for perhaps a little evil is thought to be compatible with God's existence), but on evil of a certain kind — for instance, pointless evil that fails to bring about any greater good. Or the sheer amount of evil might be emphasized — for instance, a survivor of Auschwitz might have entered a theist and left an atheist, overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of evil he experienced. Either evil itself, or a certain kind of evil, or a certain quantity or level of evil is seen as inconsistent with God's existence; and insofar as the presence of such evil is obvious, the absence of God is equally obvious.

What is Evil?

One problem for this argument (at least formally) is to arrive at an adequate definition of evil. Is the notion of evil unavoidably subjective? Can we provide objective criteria? Perhaps evil is whatever harms sentient beings. Or is it the violation of a being's interests? Or the violation of a common interest (what most people view as a legitimate interest)? Or perhaps the violation of one's natural interests? Or is evil only the property of moral agents (in particular, one who acts maliciously)?

"In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference."

— Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden* (1995)

⁴¹ This isn't entirely correct, of course, history being what it is. The Berlin Academy of Sciences, for instance, had already announced an essay contest on this general question of theodicy two years before the Lisbon earthquake.

⁴² As recounted in Hume's *Dialogues*, Pt. X.

TWO ARGUMENTS

We will consider two closely related arguments for God’s non-existence. In the first (directly below), it is argued that the obvious presence of evil in the world makes plain the non-existence of God. Specifically, it argues that God’s existence is inconsistent with the existence of evil.

The Logical Argument from Evil

- (1) An omniscient being *knows how* to produce a world with no evil in it.
- (2) An omnipotent being *is able* to produce a world with no evil in it.
- (3) An omnibenevolent being *wants* to produce a world with no evil in it.
- (4) Knowledge, ability, and desire suffice to attain a goal.
- (5) ∴ If there is a being with these three properties, then there is no evil in the world. [1-4]
- (6) God is a being with these three properties. [by definition]
- (7) ∴ If God exists, then there is no evil in the world. [5, 6]
- (8) There *is* evil in the world.
- (9) ∴ God does not exist. [7, 8 - MT]

RESPONSES TO THIS ARGUMENT

A common but misguided response to the argument from evil is to claim that the evil in the world is far outweighed by the good. This response misses the argument’s point, which is that the existence of God is incompatible with the existence of *any* evil at all (as stated in premise 8). Responses to the various premises include the following.

Premise 6

One might reject premise six. In doing so, one is rejecting the Anselmian definition of God as an infinitely perfect being. All three parties in Hume’s *Dialogues* (Demea, Philo, and Cleanthes) eventually agreed to the validity of the above argument, and they all avoided the conclusion by rejecting this premise, although in different ways. First, one might contend that God’s nature is unknowable. Evil is a problem only for those theists who believe that God’s justice in some way resembles our own. Demea and Philo (for different reasons) reject the definition of God in part because they both believe that we cannot have any knowledge of God’s nature. Demea’s “mysticism” insures for him the existence of God, and Demea is likewise convinced of the existence of evil.

The co-existence of God and evil is thus a fact of life, although the reconciliation itself remains a mystery.

[Poem]

MUSÉE DES BEAUX ARTS

About suffering they were never wrong,
 The Old Masters: how well they understood
 Its human position; how it takes place
 While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking
 dully along;
 How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
 For the miraculous birth, there always must be
 Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
 On a pond at the edge of the wood:
 They never forgot
 That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
 Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
 Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse
 Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel’s *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
 Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
 Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
 But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
 As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
 Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
 Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
 Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

— W. H. Auden, 1940 (1907-1973)

A second strategy would be to view God as in some manner finite. Cleanthes, for instance, eventually agrees that the co-existence of an infinitely perfect God and evil is not possible, and therefore decides that God must be finite.⁴³ Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his best-selling book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1983), takes this approach: God wants what is best for us, but God can't do everything.

Premise 8

Some have disputed the very existence of evil, claiming that the so-called evil in the world is only *apparent*. Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910), the founder of the Christian Scientist movement, argued that viewing certain events as evil is a misinterpretation of them, and this is a central tenet of that religion. One could argue that what we call evil is simply something that is not to our liking — and who are we to say what is good and what is evil?

Yet this is a bitter pill to swallow for many, given the scope and depth of human misery. To believe that a child dying of bone cancer is good, or that the Nazi gas chambers were good, and only appear evil to our finite minds, is very nearly impossible for most to accept.

It should also be noted here that rejecting premise eight is *not* the same as accepting the evil as real, but claiming that God allows this evil in order to obtain some greater good. This latter strategy is ambiguous between two positions: (i) where a good is obtained *by way of the evil* (evil as an instrumental good) and (ii) where evil is simply a possible by-product of the good (as in the free will defense, discussed below). Viewing evil as an instrumental good may be unacceptable (insofar as it might involve harming one person so as to benefit another), but viewing evil as an occasional but unintended by-product of the good may be a reasonable answer to the problem of evil. This strategy focuses not on premise eight, but rather premise three.

Premise 3

What would a benevolent God want to do? Minimize evil? Maximize good? Or maximize the balance of good over evil? Perhaps a perfect God *would* create a world with evil. This generally involves a rejection of premise three, with the claim that an omnibenevolent God desires not an absence of evil but rather the creation of the most good, or alternatively, the greatest balance of good over evil.

There are several variations on this, but the classic formulation comes to us from Leibniz, who argued that God chose the best possible world of all the worlds available from which to choose. Every other possible world than our own (in other words: any other way that the world might have been) has more evil in it than this one. The gist of Leibniz's claim is that *there is no pointless evil* (i.e., all evil exists for a reason, namely, to prevent some greater evil).

Leibniz begins with the belief in God, and from there concludes that this must in fact be “the best of all possible worlds” — despite any appearances to the contrary. But it is precisely these many “appearances to the contrary” that have led many people to atheism. Surely God could have created a better world than this, they reason. It seems

VOLTAIRE'S *CANDIDE*

François-Marie Arouet (1694-1778), who later took the name Voltaire, emerged as a leading intellectual force in 18th century France. He was a friend of English ways (among other things, he helped introduce Shakespeare and Newton to the French), and was a trenchant and humorous critic of human stupidity in all its forms. One of his best-known satires is *Candide* (1758), the story of a young man of the same name who, along with his various companions, undergoes any number of misfortunes, only to be reminded by his old teacher, Dr. Pangloss, that “this is the best of all possible worlds.” What follows is a brief excerpt:

“‘Now my dear Pangloss,’ said Candide, ‘tell me this. When you had been hanged, dissected, and beaten unmercifully, and while you were rowing at your bench, did you still think that everything in this world is for the best?’

‘I still hold my original views,’ replied Pangloss, ‘for I am still a philosopher. It would not be proper for me to recant, especially as Leibniz cannot be wrong; and besides, the pre-established harmony, together with the *plenum* and the *materia subtilis*, is the most beautiful thing in the world.’”

⁴³ Philo agrees with Cleanthes that a finite God's existence is compatible with the existence of evil, but goes on to argue that, given the extent of evil, we would never be led to believe in such a God merely from inspecting the world.

trivially easy to find or imagine cases where suffering in the world appears to be utterly without connection to any aspect of well-being. These worries are best considered in the context of the second argument from evil (discussed further below).

Defenders of Leibniz have tried to shore up his position by highlighting instances of evil that do in fact seem to bring with them an even greater good. For instance, perhaps *evil makes possible our awareness of the good*. Were there no evil in the world, then we would not recognize the good as being good, or we would not appreciate the good as much. But the atheist will respond that even still we don't need *so much* pain for the contrast. Of what use is an infant dying from Tay-Sachs disease? With what pleasure is such pain to be contrasted? A common conception of heaven is that it is an existence free of suffering; yet if there is no suffering in heaven, will there also be no awareness of the good? And if the good *is* appreciated in heaven, then why not also, and in the same way, here on earth?

Another possible defense is that *we sin and therefore deserve the evil we suffer*. This is a traditional response to the presence of evil in the world. God, a perfect being, visits evil upon the world in order to punish us here for our misbehavior. The atheist, however, will point to the apparent disparity between sinning and suffering. The virtuous often suffer terribly while the vicious prosper. A typical response to this disparity is to claim that the vicious will indeed suffer a proper amount, at least in the long run (*viz.*, *after* this life, if not in it) — but that response explains only why there is evil in hell; it still doesn't explain the God-sent evil here in this life. If it is not in proportion to one's viciousness, then God must not have sent it as punishment for our sins.

We might also view evil as *an instrumental good*. This is how Leibniz and others have typically understood evil that occurs in the world (see also Aquinas' "Response" after his "Five Ways"). It is argued that sometimes evil is necessary to bring about a greater good.⁴⁴

Similarly, many virtues are not possible in the absence of evil: without suffering and poverty, for instance, there would be no occasion for the virtues of sympathy, compassion, or generosity. Without dangers and risk, there is no occasion for bravery and courage. Thomas Aquinas writes:

If there were no death of other animals, there would not be life for the lion; if there were no persecution from tyrants, there would be no occasion for the heroic suffering of the martyrs. [*Summa Theol.*, I.22, 2, ad2]

Evil also goads us into improving our situation through industry: disease and natural discomforts spur our studies of the practical arts, just as our need for social existence combined with our disagreeable and unsociable nature spurs us into perfecting our social orders. In short, without evil there would be no civilization as we know it, for we would have had no reason to move beyond the creature comforts of the primeval forest. Evil seems necessary for virtue, civilization, even life itself.

But this defense has some problems. First, there seems to be a gross *disproportion* between suffering and the few virtues that such suffering makes possible. Second, *vices* often result from suffering as well (consider here the criminal behavior typically born in poverty). Finally, and most importantly, it is *unjust*, at least for human beings, to cause some to suffer for the benefit of others. Suppose that I saved two people dying from various organ failures by killing a third and harvesting his organs; the two that I saved might thank me, but they might just as likely rebuke me for having involved them in such a morally contemptible act.

[Poem]

ALEXANDER POPE ON EVIL

All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;
All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see;
All Discord, Harmony, not understood;
All partial Evil, universal Good:
And, spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,
One truth is clear, "Whatever is, is right."

[from *An Essay on Man* (1733), Epistle I, 289-293]

⁴⁴ Leibniz points to the army general preferring a small wound and a great victory over no wound and no victory, but this is an example of an evil as an unintended by-product of something good in itself; see Leibniz, *Theodicy* (Open Court Press, 1985), p. 378.

Now suppose some young child, some beautiful toddler with dimples in his knees and elbows and cheeks, starts complaining of a certain leg pain, and is eventually diagnosed with bone cancer, and for the next six months suffers a painful and torturous death. What gives here? What's going on? The child's earthly parents did all they could to try to save that baby from its miserable suffering and eventual demise; the child's heavenly father, on the other hand, appeared to have done nothing.

We are typically informed in such cases that "God has his ways," however mysterious they might be to us mortals, that some good will come of this ordeal: Perhaps the parents were having marital problems, perhaps they were drifting emotionally apart, and this tragedy brought them back together; perhaps the father was battling alcoholism, but now is able to climb on the wagon of recovery; perhaps cancer researchers learned a bit more in treating that particular kind of bone cancer so that future sufferers will find some relief; and so on. The skeptic would, however, point out that these sorts of ordeals are as likely to destroy a marriage as to save one, and as likely to turn a parent to alcohol abuse as away from it. And then she would note that while a salvaged marriage or the recovery from alcohol abuse might be good things, their goodness surely cannot outweigh the suffering involved. And finally, the skeptic will point out that, at least in human terms, it is the very height of immorality to torture and kill a young child just so that some other person might benefit.

Some theists will have other beliefs that help mollify these situations: The child is now in "a far better place," having won entrance to the gates of heaven, and is now with God enjoying eternal bliss, etc. etc. But the skeptic can still reply that, if it was God's intention to extend such an early invitation to that baby, he might have done so less painfully and cruelly. God surely has his ways, if only he would use them. Sure, we hear, Job came out ahead in the end — had his cattle restored, and so on — but was all that suffering necessary? And what about Job's children, mere innocent bystanders killed in God's and Satan's game? And so the argument goes, back and forth.

THE FREE WILL DEFENSE

The so-called "Free Will Defense" found its classic formulation in the writings of **Augustine** (354-430 CE), the bishop of Hippo. It works along the same lines as the previous arguments: that God allows for some evil in order to make possible a much greater good and here the greater good is human free will. Here the evil is not seen as an instrumental good, but rather as an unfortunate by-product of the good of free will. This is by far the most prominent defense against the argument from evil, and so it is treated separately here.

The virtue of this defense is that it absolves God of any immediate responsibility for evil that occurs in the world. Because God is omnipotent and omniscient, he is ultimately responsible for everything that happens: he can control anything that he chooses, and he understands the consequences of all his choices. But because God is omnibenevolent, he will choose a world which has the greatest amount of net good, realizing that such a choice might still allow (indeed, might require) a certain amount of evil. Now we can imagine a world in which human-like beings walked the earth, always doing good and never harming others because God programmed them to act in such a way. These beings would be "like robots," we would say, without the ability to choose their own course of action. It is not too implausible to think that God would find it a great good for human beings to be able to choose freely, and that this great good would even outweigh any evil actions that these human beings with their freedom might perform. Given this, human beings are ultimately responsible for the evil that they bring about.

This takes care of so-called *human evil* (evil that humans cause), but there is still quite a bit of other evil, so-called *natural evil*, that occurs independently of human agency. Earthquakes, tornadoes, diseases, and other such natural disasters would seem to be coming directly from the hand of God (who is, after all, in control). Even if God is not controlling the motion of every molecule, he at least *could* if he so chose (in other words, he could intervene providentially in the world), and in any event he set up the natural laws that those molecules follow, and he foresaw (in establishing those laws) the outcome of their various motions.

The Free Will theorist is able to absolve God of any immediate responsibility for natural evil as well, however, by postulating the existence of Satan, a fallen angel, who causes all the so-called natural evil. Satan is behind the

various tempests and plagues, and the free will of this fallen angel is of a greater good than whatever evil he brings about. So now all the evil in the world is accounted for, and is caused by the free will of either humans or Satan.

The Free Will Defense

- (1) The good of human free will outweighs all human evil.
- (2) The good of Satan's free will outweighs all natural evil.
- (3) All evil is either human or natural.
- (4) ∴ Good outweighs evil. [1-3]
- (5) If God exists, then good outweighs evil. [suggested by the definition of God]
- (6) ∴ God's existence is *compatible* with the existence of evil. [4, 5]

Note that the pattern of the last inference in this argument (from premises 4 and 5, to 6) does not show that God exists, but only that God *might* exist, that is, that the existence of evil does not make God's existence impossible. This is the position that Hume took in his *Dialogues* (pt. 11) while discussing "four circumstances" that he believes lie behind most or all evil suffered by human beings, and his point made there still holds: we have no reason, merely by viewing the world, for believing in God.

RESPONSE TO THE FREE WILL DEFENSE

The various reasons for rejecting premise three are normally thought to be adequate for undermining the soundness of our initial argument from evil: God and the presence of evil in the world do not appear to be inconsistent. A second argument from evil avoids this problem by granting that God and evil are compatible, but claiming that God's existence *is* incompatible with the amount or degree of evil in the world.

The Evidential Argument from Evil

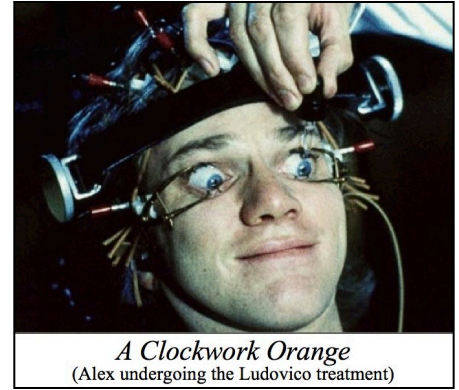
- (1) An omniscient being knows how to produce the best of all possible worlds.
- (2) An omnipotent being *is able* to produce the best of all possible worlds.
- (3) An omnibenevolent being *wants* to produce the best of all possible worlds.
- (4) Knowledge, ability, and desire suffice to attain a goal.
- (5) ∴ If there is a being with these three properties, then this is the best of all possible worlds. [1-4]
- (6) God is a being with these three properties. [by definition]
- (7) ∴ If God exists, then this is the best of all possible worlds. [5, 6]
- (8) This is not the best of all possible worlds.
- (9) ∴ God does not exist. [7, 8 - MT]

In addition to the considerations given above in support of the first argument, we need also to consider the nature of free will and divine intervention.

First, it could well be that humans don't have free will, in which case the argument falls apart. In any event, it appears unknowable whether or not humans *do* have free will, so that your life might not be different one way or the other. That being the case, how could free will be so valuable to justify all the suffering?

Second, couldn't God intervene *occasionally*? God surely is not limited to either giving everyone free will all the time or else giving no one free will at all. Why not, just as a madman is about to begin shooting up a playground full of Kindergartner's, God might interfere with that person's free will? (For that matter, isn't it plausible that such a madman isn't operating from his free will at that point anyway?) And is Satan's free will worth more than all the death and misery suffered at the hands of natural evil? If a *human* had the chance to stop a great harm, and to do this all he had to do was to momentarily restrain some culprit (lock him up, etc.), but he refused to do so on the grounds that it was the culprit's right to exercise his free will, we would think the person crazy or malicious. But then how can we consider God all-loving if he fails to intervene in this fashion? This is a hard question, but one response a theist could make is this: God's occasional interference *is* incompatible with anyone having free will at all. If God were to stop us before we committed some evil action (choose whatever level of evil you want), then we would no longer need to choose not to behave in this way, knowing that God would always stop us in time.

Finally, couldn't God have given us a *limited free will*, making certain moral actions impossible for us, while still allowing us to go "beyond the call of duty" should we so choose? This objection trades on the distinction between three different moral categories of actions: actions that are morally *required* or morally *prohibited*, actions that are *supererogatory* (these are not required, but are morally good to perform), and actions that are morally *irrelevant* (actions that are neither required, prohibited, nor supererogatory). Now, humans are not free to move objects simply by thinking of them, or to fly by flapping their arms, or to disappear and reappear at will. We are physically unfree to do any of these things. Likewise, God might have made it physically impossible for us to do what was morally prohibited (or to refrain from doing what was morally required), and still leave us free to choose whether or not to perform morally irrelevant and supererogatory actions. (Imagine everyone born with the same aversions that the character Alex, in *A Clockwork Orange*, acquired artificially.)



THE G. E. MOORE SHIFT

Let's take one more look at Leibniz's response. The way you decide this second argument will rest on your intuitions regarding certain premises. The atheist will find one premise more plausible, the theist the other. Both will probably accept the hypothetical claim that "if God exists, then this is the best of all possible worlds"; where they differ is how they view each half of this claim. If we let 'P' stand for "God exists," and 'Q' stand for "This is the best of all possible worlds," then the theist accepts " $P \rightarrow Q$ " as well as "P", therefore also "Q" (by modus ponens), while the atheist accepts " $P \rightarrow Q$ " as well as "not-Q", therefore also "not-P" (by modus tollens).

The question boils down to whichever premise seems more plausible to you: P or not-Q? **G. E. Moore** (1873-1958), an important Cambridge philosopher of the 20th century, developed a strategy whereby an argument is reversed by shifting plausibility from one premise to the denial of another (this is the so-called "G. E. Moore Shift"). The theist can, in the end, always respond to the atheist's argument by claiming that God's existence is more plausible than the claim that this world could really be improved.

David Hume (1711-1776), in anticipation of this sort of strategy, has Philo offer the following response in Part XI of his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*:

Did I show you a house or palace where there was not one apartment convenient or agreeable; where the windows, doors, fires, passages, stairs, and the whole economy of the building were the source of noise, confusion, fatigue, darkness, and the extremes of heat and cold, you would certainly blame the contrivance, without any further examination. The architect would in vain display his subtlety, and prove to you that, if this door or that window were altered, greater ills would ensue. What he says may be strictly true: The alteration of one particular, while the other parts of the building remain, may only augment the inconveniences. But still you would assert in general that, if the architect had had skill and good intentions, he might have formed such a plan of the whole, and might have adjusted the parts in such a manner as would have remedied all or most of these inconveniences. His ignorance, or even your own ignorance of such a plan, will never convince you of the impossibility of it. If you find any inconveniences and deformities in the building, you will always, without entering into any detail, condemn the architect.



ONE LAST THOUGHT: IVAN KARAMAZOV'S REBELLION

The writing of theodicies has not abated since Leibniz first coined the term in the early 18th century. Many, perhaps most, atheists are not convinced by them, but they also have their share of critics among theists, primarily because they seem to take the wrong approach to the problem of evil. As presented above, the problem of evil could

almost be seen as an “accounting problem”: if we can simply get the amount of good in the world to outweigh the amount of evil in the world, then it will all make sense, and belief in a loving God can once more be seen as compatible with the world’s condition. But viewing evil at this abstract global level is only half the problem, if even that. The real problem is encountered at the level of each individual whose life is so shattered by evil that they would prefer to have never been born. This is the problem that must be addressed, and it is ignored by adding up sums on the good-and-evil balance sheet.

What does it matter to me if I live in “the best of all possible worlds” when I have just lost my children at the hands of some killer — be that killer a human with a gun, or a drunk driver, or a tornado, or a flood, or cancer? In what sense is this “best of all possible worlds” *good for me*? These “book-keeping” explanations rarely seem adequate to us, at the existential level where we live our lives. And so in Dostoevsky’s great and last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), Ivan Karamazov chooses to give back his ticket to God’s wretched show. Having recounted to his younger brother Alyosha a litany of horrendous evil visited upon children — stories he had collected from the newspapers — Ivan concludes:

I understand what an upheaval of the universe it will be when everything in heaven and earth blends in one hymn of praise and everything that lives and has lived cries aloud: ‘Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed.’ When the mother embraces the fiend who threw her child to the dogs, and all three cry aloud with tears, ‘Thou art just, O Lord!’ then, of course, the crown of knowledge will be reached and all will be made clear. But what pulls me up here is that I can’t accept that harmony. [...] It’s not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat herself on the breast with her little fist and prayed in her stinking outhouse, with her unexpiated tears to ‘dear, kind God!’ It’s not worth it, because those tears are unatoned for. They must be atoned for, or there can be no harmony. But how? How are you going to atone for them? Is it possible? By their being avenged? But what do I care for avenging them? What do I care for a hell for oppressors? What good can hell do, since those children have already been tortured? [...] And if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price. [...] I don’t want harmony. From love for humanity I don’t want it. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it’s beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It’s not God that I don’t accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket.

How might a theist respond to this challenge? **Marilyn McCord Adams** (b. 1943), a philosopher of religion at UNC/Chapel Hill and an ordained priest in the Episcopal Church, agrees with Dostoyevsky’s rejection of theodicies and she accepts Ivan’s challenge. If there is to be justice, if this world and each existence can be viewed as good, and thus if God can be seen as good, then each individual must be able to say at the end: “My life was worth living.” Given the amount and kind of evil that many individuals suffer, however, she believes that this is possible only if we posit an afterlife offering special goods for each individual. Nor can these goods be familiar to our present world, since such goods are not great enough to redeem the evil. Instead, the theist will need to appeal to so-called “transcendent goods” that are available only in the afterlife — something on the order of Dante’s “beatific vision.”

Finally, Adams admits that God’s reasons for allowing these horrendous evils to befall us are certainly hidden from us, but she also notes that this opacity might be of three different kinds, based on our own abilities. Reasons might be hidden from us which we would easily understand once informed of them (for instance, a mother allowing surgery on a child in order to save the child’s life). Or the reason might be one that we *could* understand if only we had better memories or a longer attention span (for instance, in following a long and complex proof or argument). Finally, the reason might be one that we are cognitively, emotionally, or spiritually too immature to understand, much as the child is unable to grasp the necessity of the surgery, while nonetheless remaining certain of the mother’s love.

Adams believes that God’s reasons for allowing horrendous evils are hidden from us in this third way.

READINGS

The BROTHERS KARAMAZOV (SELECTION)

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) was a Moscow-born Russian novelist. After completing his education in engineering, he published his first novel, Poor Folk (1846), which was well-received. That same year he joined a group of utopian socialists, and in 1849 the entire group was arrested for operating an illegal printing press. Dostoyevsky was held in prison for eight months and then sentenced to be shot; he was given a reprieve at the very last moment, and was sentenced to four years of hard labor in Siberia (1849-54), after which he served for five years as a soldier. These wretched experiences (as recorded in his novel The House of the Dead, 1862) transformed his youthful idealism into religious orthodoxy.

Returning to St. Petersburg, Dostoyevsky commenced to write some of the greatest literature of the nineteenth-century: the existentialist Notes from Underground (1864), Crime and Punishment (1866), The Idiot (1868), The Possessed (1871-72), Raw Youth (1875) and The Brothers Karamazov (1880). This last novel is by most accounts his finest — a deeply philosophical and psychological work in which he plumbs the many depths of the human soul.

The selection that follows comes from Book Five (“Pro and Contra”), chapters three through five. It contains an extended dialogue between two of the brothers, Ivan, the older brother, and Alyosha, who has just joined a monastery with the thoughts of becoming a monk. (Translation from the Russian is by Constance Garnett, with a few slight changes.)

CHAPTER THREE

THE BROTHERS GET ACQUAINTED

[Ivan is speaking to Alyosha] “... It’s different for other people; but we in our green youth have to settle the eternal questions first of all. That’s what we care about. Young Russia is talking about nothing but the eternal questions now, just when the old folks are all taken up with practical questions. Why have you been looking at me in expectation for the last three months? To ask me, ‘What do you believe, or don’t you believe at all?’ That’s what your eyes have been meaning for these three months, haven’t they?”

“Perhaps so,” smiled Alyosha. “You are not laughing at me, now, Ivan?”

“Me laughing! I don’t want to wound my little brother who has been watching me with such expectation for three months. Alyosha, look straight at me! Of course, I am just such a little boy as you are, only not a novice. And what have Russian boys been doing up till now, some of them, I mean? In this stinking tavern, for instance, here, they meet and sit down in a corner.

They’ve never met in their lives before and, when they go out of the tavern, they won’t meet again for forty years. And what do they talk about in that momentary halt in the tavern? Of the eternal questions, of the existence of God and immortality. And those who do not believe in God talk of socialism or anarchism, of the transformation of all humanity on a new pattern, so that it all comes to the same, they’re the same questions turned inside out. And masses, masses of the most original Russian boys do nothing but talk of the eternal questions! Isn’t it so?”

“Yes, for real Russians the questions of God’s existence and of immortality, or, as you say, the same questions turned inside out, come first and foremost, of course, and so they should,” said Alyosha, still watching his brother with the same gentle and inquiring smile.

“Well, Alyosha, it’s sometimes very unwise to be a Russian at all, but anything stupider than the way Russian boys spend their time one can hardly imagine. But there’s one Russian boy called Alyosha I am awfully fond of.”

“How nicely you put that in!” Alyosha laughed suddenly.

“Well, tell me where to begin, give your orders. The existence of God, eh?”

“Begin where you like. You declared yesterday at father’s that there was no God.” Alyosha looked searchingly at his brother.

“I said that yesterday at dinner on purpose to tease you and I saw your eyes glow. But now I’ve no ob-

jection to discussing with you, and I say so very seriously. I want to be friends with you, Alyosha, for I have no friends and I want to try it. Well, only fancy, perhaps I too accept God,” laughed Ivan. “That’s a surprise for you, isn’t it?”

“Yes of course, if you are not joking now.”

“Joking? I was told at the elder’s yesterday that I was joking. You know, dear boy, there was an old sinner in the eighteenth century who declared that, if there were no God, he would have to be invented. *S’il n’existait pas Dieu, il faudrait l’inventer*.⁴⁵ And man has actually invented God. And what’s strange, what would be marvelous, is not that God should really exist; the marvel is that such an idea, the idea of the necessity of God, could enter the head of such a savage, vicious beast as man. So holy it is, so touching, so wise and so great a credit it does to man. As for me, I’ve long resolved not to think whether man created God or God man. And I won’t go through all the axioms laid down by Russian boys on that subject, all derived from European hypotheses; for what’s a hypothesis there is an axiom with the Russian boy, and not only with the boys but with their teachers too, for our Russian professors are often just the same boys themselves. And so I omit all the hypotheses. For what are we aiming at now? I am trying to explain as quickly as possible my essential nature, that is what manner of man I am, what I believe in, and for what I hope, that’s it, isn’t it? And therefore I tell you that I accept God simply. But you must note this: if God exists and if He really did create the world, then, as we all know, He created it according to the geometry of Euclid and the human mind with the conception of only three dimensions in space. Yet there have been and still are geometricians and philosophers, and even some of the most distinguished, who doubt whether the whole universe, or to speak more widely, the whole of being, was only created in Euclid’s geometry; they even dare to dream that two parallel lines, which according to Euclid can never meet on earth, may meet somewhere in infinity.⁴⁶ I have come to the conclusion that, since I can’t understand even that, I can’t expect to understand about

God. I acknowledge humbly that I have no faculty for settling such questions, I have a Euclidian earthly mind, and how could I solve problems that are not of this world? And I advise you never to think about it either, my dear Alyosha, especially about God, whether He exists or not. All such questions are utterly inappropriate for a mind created with an idea of only three dimensions. And so I accept God and am glad to, and what’s more, I accept His wisdom, His purposes which are utterly beyond our ken; I believe in the underlying order and the meaning of life; I believe in the eternal harmony in which they say we shall one day be blended. I believe in the Word to Which the universe is striving, and Which Itself was ‘with God,’ and Which Itself is God and so on, and so on, to infinity. There are all sorts of phrases for it. I seem to be on the right path, don’t I? Yet would you believe it, in the final result I don’t accept this world of God’s, and, although I know it exists, I don’t accept it at all. It’s not that I don’t accept God; you must understand, it’s the world created by Him I don’t and cannot accept. Let me make it plain. I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidian mind of man, that in the world’s finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood they’ve shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened with men — but though all that may come to pass, I don’t accept it. I won’t accept it. Even if parallel lines do meet and I see it myself, I shall see it and say that they’ve met, but still I won’t accept it. That’s what’s at the root of me, Alyosha; that’s my creed. I am in earnest in what I say. I began our talk as stupidly as I could on purpose, but I’ve led up to my confession, for that’s all you want. You didn’t want to hear about God, but only to know what the brother you love lives by. And so I’ve told you.”

Ivan concluded his long tirade with marked and unexpected feeling. “And why did you begin ‘as stupidly as you could?’” asked Alyosha, looking thoughtfully at him.

“To begin with, for the sake of being Russian. Russian conversations on such subjects are always carried

⁴⁵ [This quotation comes from Voltaire’s “Épître à l’auteur de Livre des trois imposteurs,” a letter written on November 10, 1770.]

⁴⁶ [A non-Euclidean geometry had recently been developed by the Russian mathematician N. I. Lobachevsky (1792-1856).]

on inconceivably stupidly. And secondly, the stupider one is, the closer one is to reality. The stupider one is, the clearer one is. Stupidity is brief and artless, while intelligence wriggles and hides itself. Intelligence is a knave, but stupidity is honest and straight forward. I've led the conversation to my despair, and the more stupidly I have presented it, the better for me."

"You will explain why you don't accept the world?" said Alyosha.

"To be sure I will, it's not a secret, that's what I've been leading up to. Dear little brother, I don't want to corrupt you or to turn you from your stronghold; perhaps I want to be healed by you." Ivan smiled suddenly quite like a little gentle child. Alyosha had never seen such a smile on his face before.

CHAPTER FOUR REBELLION

"I must make one confession," Ivan began. "I could never understand how one can love one's neighbors. It's just one's neighbors, to my mind, that one can't love, though one might love those at a distance. I once read somewhere of John the Merciful, a saint, that when a hungry, frozen beggar came to him, he took him into his bed, held him in his arms, and began breathing into his mouth, which was putrid and loathsome from some awful disease. I am convinced that he did that from 'self-laceration,' from the self-laceration of falsity, for the sake of the charity imposed by duty, as a penance laid on him. For anyone to love a man, he must be hidden, for as soon as he shows his face, love is gone."

"Father Zossima has talked of that more than once," observed Alyosha; "he, too, said that the face of a man often hinders many people not practiced in love, from loving him. But yet there's a great deal of love in mankind, and almost Christ-like love. I know that myself, Ivan."

"Well, I know nothing of it so far, and can't understand it, and the innumerable mass of mankind are with me there. The question is, whether that's due to men's bad qualities or whether it's inherent in their nature. To my thinking, Christ-like love for men is a miracle impossible on earth. He was God. But we are not gods. Suppose I, for instance, suffer intensely. Another can never know how much I suffer, because he is another and not I. And what's more, a man is rarely ready to admit another's suffering (as though it were a distinc-

tion). Why won't he admit it, do you think? Because I smell unpleasant, because I have a stupid face, because I once trod on his foot. Besides, there is suffering and suffering; degrading, humiliating suffering such as humbles me — hunger, for instance — my benefactor will perhaps allow me; but when you come to higher suffering — for an idea, for instance — he will very rarely admit that, perhaps because my face strikes him as not at all what he fancies a man should have who suffers for an idea. And so he deprives me instantly of his favor, and not at all from badness of heart. Beggars, especially genteel beggars, ought never to show themselves, but to ask for charity through the newspapers. One can love one's neighbors in the abstract, or even at a distance, but at close quarters it's almost impossible. If it were as on the stage, in the ballet, where if beggars come in, they wear silken rags and tattered lace and beg for alms dancing gracefully, then one might like looking at them. But even then we should not love them. But enough of that. I simply wanted to show you my point of view. I meant to speak of the suffering of mankind generally, but we had better confine ourselves to the sufferings of the children. That reduces the scope of my argument to a tenth of what it would be. Still we'd better keep to the children, though it does weaken my case. But, in the first place, children can be loved even at close quarters, even when they are dirty, even when they are ugly (I fancy, though, children never are ugly). The second reason why I won't speak of grown-up people is that, besides being disgusting and unworthy of love, they have a compensation — they've eaten the apple and know good and evil, and they have become 'like gods.' They go on eating it still. But the children haven't eaten anything, and are so far innocent. Are you fond of children, Alyosha? I know you are, and you will understand why I prefer to speak of them. If they, too, suffer horribly on earth, they must suffer for their fathers' sins, they must be punished for their fathers, who have eaten the apple; but that reasoning is of the other world and is incomprehensible for the heart of man here on earth. The innocent must not suffer for another's sins, and especially such innocents! You may be surprised at me, Alyosha, but I am awfully fond of children, too. And observe, cruel people, the violent, the rapacious, the Karamazovs are sometimes very fond of children. Children, while they are quite little — up to seven, for instance — are so remote from grown-up

people they are different creatures, as it were, of a different species. I knew a criminal in prison who had, in the course of his career as a burglar, murdered whole families, including several children. But when he was in prison, he had a strange affection for them. He spent all his time at his window, watching the children playing in the prison yard. He trained one little boy to come up to his window and made great friends with him.... You don't know why I am telling you all this, Alyosha? My head aches and I am sad."

"You speak with a strange air," observed Alyosha uneasily, "as though you were not quite yourself."

"By the way, a Bulgarian I met lately in Moscow," Ivan went on, seeming not to hear his brother's words, "told me about the crimes being committed by Turks and Circassians in all parts of Bulgaria through fear of a general rising of the Slavs. They burn villages, murder, rape women and children, they nail their prisoners by the ears to the fences, leave them so till morning, and in the morning they hang them — all sorts of things you can't imagine. People talk sometimes of bestial cruelty, but that's a great injustice and insult to the beasts; a beast can never be so cruel as a man, so artistically cruel. The tiger only tears and gnaws, that's all he can do. He would never think of nailing people by the ears, even if he were able to do it. These Turks took a pleasure in torturing children, too; cutting the unborn child from the mother's womb, and tossing babies up in the air and catching them on the points of their bayonets before their mothers' eyes. Doing it before the mothers' eyes was what gave zest to the amusement. Here is another scene that I thought very interesting. Imagine a trembling mother with her baby in her arms, a circle of invading Turks around her. They've planned a diversion: they pet the baby, laugh to make it laugh. They succeed, the baby laughs. At that moment a Turk points a pistol four inches from the baby's face. The baby laughs with glee, holds out its little hands to the pistol, and he pulls the trigger in the baby's face and blows out its brains. Artistic, wasn't it? By the way, Turks are particularly fond of sweet things, they say."

"Brother, what are you driving at?" asked Alyosha.

"I think if the devil doesn't exist, but man has created him, he has created him in his own image and likeness."

"Just as he did God, then?" observed Alyosha.

"'It's wonderful how you can turn words,' as Polonius says in *Hamlet*," laughed Ivan.⁴⁷ "You turn my words against me. Well, I am glad. Yours must be a fine God, if man created Him in his image and likeness. You asked just now what I was driving at. You see, I am fond of collecting certain facts, and, would you believe, I even copy anecdotes of a certain sort from newspapers and books, and I've already got a fine collection. The Turks, of course, have gone into it, but they are foreigners. I have specimens from home that are even better than the Turks. You know we prefer beating-rods and scourges — that's our national institution. Nailing ears is unthinkable for us, for we are, after all, Europeans. But the rod and the scourge we have always with us and they cannot be taken from us. Abroad now they scarcely do any beating. Manners are more humane, or laws have been passed, so that they don't dare to flog men now. But they make up for it in another way just as national as ours. And so national that it would be practically impossible among us, though I believe we are being inoculated with it, since the religious movement began in our aristocracy. I have a charming pamphlet, translated from the French, describing how, quite recently, five years ago, a murderer, Richard, was executed — a young man, I believe, of three and twenty, who repented and was converted to the Christian faith at the very scaffold. This Richard was an illegitimate child who was given as a child of six by his parents to some shepherds on the Swiss mountains. They brought him up to work for them. He grew up like a little wild beast among them. The shepherds taught him nothing, and scarcely fed or clothed him, but sent him out at seven to herd the flock in cold and wet, and no one hesitated or scrupled to treat him so. Quite the contrary, they thought they had every right, for Richard had been given to them as a chattel, and they did not even see the necessity of feeding him. Richard himself describes how in those years, like the Prodigal Son in the Gospel, he longed to eat of the mash given to the pigs, which were fattened for sale. But they wouldn't even give that, and beat him when he stole from the pigs. And that was how he spent all his childhood and his youth, till he grew up and was strong enough to go away and be a thief. The savage began to earn his living as a day laborer in Geneva. He drank

⁴⁷ [See Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act. I, Scene 3.]

what he earned, he lived like a brute, and finished by killing and robbing an old man. He was caught, tried, and condemned to death. They are not sentimentalists there. And in prison he was immediately surrounded by pastors, members of Christian brotherhoods, philanthropic ladies, and the like. They taught him to read and write in prison, and expounded the Gospel to him. They exhorted him, worked upon him, drummed at him incessantly, till at last he solemnly confessed his crime. He was converted. He wrote to the court himself that he was a monster, but that in the end God had vouchsafed him light and shown grace. All Geneva was in excitement about him — all philanthropic and religious Geneva. All the aristocratic and well-bred society of the town rushed to the prison, kissed Richard and embraced him: ‘You are our brother, you have found grace.’ And Richard does nothing but weep with emotion, ‘Yes, I’ve found grace! All my youth and childhood I was glad of pigs’ food, but now even I have found grace. I am dying in the Lord.’ ‘Yes, Richard, die in the Lord; you have shed blood and must die. Though it’s not your fault that you knew not the Lord, when you coveted the pigs’ food and were beaten for stealing it (which was very wrong of you, for stealing is forbidden); but you’ve shed blood and you must die.’ And on the last day, Richard, perfectly limp, did nothing but cry and repeat every minute: ‘This is my happiest day. I am going to the Lord.’ ‘Yes,’ cry the pastors and the judges and philanthropic ladies. ‘This is the happiest day of your life, for you are going to the Lord!’ They all walk or drive to the scaffold in procession behind the prison van. At the scaffold they call to Richard: ‘Die, brother, die in the Lord, for even thou hast found grace!’ And so, covered with his brothers’ kisses, Richard is dragged on to the scaffold, and led to the guillotine. And they chopped off his head in brotherly fashion, because he had found grace. Yes, that’s characteristic. That pamphlet is translated into Russian by some Russian philanthropists of aristocratic rank and evangelical aspirations, and has been distributed gratis for the enlightenment of the people. The case of Richard is interesting because it’s national. Though to us it’s absurd to cut off a man’s head, because he has become our brother and has found grace, yet we have our own specialty, which is all but worse. Our historical pastime is the direct satisfaction of inflicting pain. There are lines in Nekrassov describing how a peasant lashes a horse on the eyes, ‘on its

meek eyes,’ everyone must have seen it. It’s peculiarly Russian. He describes how a feeble little nag has foundered under too heavy a load and cannot move. The peasant beats it, beats it savagely, beats it at last not knowing what he is doing in the intoxication of cruelty, thrashes it mercilessly over and over again. ‘However weak you are, you must pull, if you die for it.’ The nag strains, and then he begins lashing the poor defenseless creature on its weeping, on its ‘meek eyes.’ The frantic beast tugs and draws the load, trembling all over, gasping for breath, moving sideways, with a sort of unnatural spasmodic action — it’s awful in Nekrassov. But that’s only a horse, and God has horses to be beaten. So the Tatars have taught us, and they left us the knout as a remembrance of it. But men, too, can be beaten. A well-educated, cultured gentleman and his wife beat their own child with a birch-rod, a girl of seven. I have an exact account of it. The papa was glad that the birch was covered with twigs. ‘It stings more,’ said he, and so he began stinging his daughter. I know for a fact there are people who at every blow are worked up to sensuality, to literal sensuality, which increases progressively at every blow they inflict. They beat for a minute, for five minutes, for ten minutes, more often and more savagely. The child screams. At last the child cannot scream, it gasps, ‘Daddy daddy!’ By some diabolical unseemly chance the case was brought into court. A counsel is engaged. The Russian people have long called a barrister ‘a conscience for hire.’ The counsel protests in his client’s defense. ‘It’s such a simple thing,’ he says, ‘an everyday domestic event. A father corrects his child and, to the shame of our times, it is brought into court!’ The jury, convinced by him, gives a favorable verdict. The public roars with delight that the torturer is acquitted. Ah, pity I wasn’t there! I would have proposed to raise a subscription in his honor! Charming pictures.

“But I’ve still better things about children. I’ve collected a great, great deal about Russian children, Alyosha. There was a little girl of five who was hated by her father and mother, ‘most worthy and respectable people, of good education and breeding.’ You see, I must repeat again, it is a peculiar characteristic of many people, this love of torturing children, and children only. To all other types of humanity these torturers behave mildly and benevolently, like cultivated and humane Europeans; but they are very fond of tormenting children, even

fond of children themselves in that sense. It's just their defenselessness that tempts the tormentor, just the angelic confidence of the child who has no refuge and no appeal, that sets his vile blood on fire. In every man, of course, a demon lies hidden — the demon of rage, the demon of lustful heat at the screams of the tortured victim, the demon of lawlessness let off the chain, the demon of diseases that follow on vice, gout, kidney disease, and so on.

“This poor child of five was subjected to every possible torture by those cultivated parents. They beat her, thrashed her, kicked her for no reason till her body was one bruise. Then, they went to greater refinements of cruelty — shut her up all night in the cold and frost in a privy, and because she didn't ask to be taken up at night (as though a child of five sleeping its angelic, sound sleep could be trained to wake and ask), they smeared her face and filled her mouth with excrement, and it was her mother, her mother who did this. And that mother could sleep, hearing the poor child's groans! Can you understand why a little creature, who can't even understand what's done to her, should beat her little aching heart with her tiny fist in the dark and the cold, and weep her meek unresentful tears to dear, kind God to protect her? Do you understand that, friend and brother, you pious and humble novice? Do you understand why this infamy must be and is permitted? Without it, I am told, man could not have existed on earth, for he could not have known good and evil. Why should he know that diabolical good and evil when it costs so much? Why, the whole world of knowledge is not worth that child's prayer to 'dear, kind God'! I say nothing of the sufferings of grown-up people, they have eaten the apple, damn them, and the devil take them all! But these little ones! I am making you suffer, Alyosha, you are not yourself. I'll leave off if you like.”

“Never mind. I want to suffer too,” muttered Alyosha.

“One picture, only one more, because it's so curious, so characteristic, and I have only just read it in some collection of Russian antiquities. I've forgotten the name. I must look it up. It was in the darkest days of serfdom at the beginning of the century, and long live the Liberator of the People! There was in those days a general of aristocratic connections, the owner of great estates, one of those men — somewhat exceptional, I believe, even then — who, retiring from the service into a life of leisure, are convinced that they've earned abso-

lute power over the lives of their subjects. There were such men then. So our general, settled on his property of two thousand souls, lives in pomp, and domineers over his poor neighbors as though they were dependents and buffoons. He has kennels of hundreds of hounds and nearly a hundred dog-boys — all mounted, and in uniform. One day a serf-boy, a little child of eight, threw a stone in play and hurt the paw of the general's favorite hound. ‘Why is my favorite dog lame?’ He is told that the boy threw a stone that hurt the dog's paw. ‘So you did it.’ The general looked the child up and down. ‘Take him.’ He was taken — taken from his mother and kept shut up all night. Early that morning the general comes out on horseback, with the hounds, his dependents, dog-boys, and huntsmen, all mounted around him in full hunting parade. The servants are summoned for their edification, and in front of them all stands the mother of the child. The child is brought from the lock-up. It's a gloomy, cold, foggy, autumn day, a capital day for hunting. The general orders the child to be undressed; the child is stripped naked. He shivers, numb with terror, not daring to cry... ‘Make him run,’ commands the general. ‘Run! run!’ shout the dog-boys. The boy runs... ‘At him!’ yells the general, and he sets the whole pack of hounds on the child. The hounds catch him, and tear him to pieces before his mother's eyes!... I believe the general was afterwards declared incapable of administering his estates. Well — what did he deserve? To be shot? To be shot for the satisfaction of our moral feelings? Speak, Alyosha!”

“To be shot,” murmured Alyosha, lifting his eyes to Ivan with a pale, twisted smile.

“Bravo!” cried Ivan delighted. “If even you say so, then.... You're a pretty monk! So there is a little devil sitting in your heart, Alyosha Karamazov!”

“What I said was absurd, but — ”

“That's just the point, that ‘but’!” cried Ivan. “Let me tell you, novice, that the absurd is only too necessary on earth. The world stands on absurdities, and perhaps nothing would have come to pass in it without them. We know what we know!”

“What do you know?”

“I understand nothing,” Ivan went on, as though in delirium. “I don't want to understand anything now. I want to stick to the fact. I made up my mind long ago not to understand. If I try to understand anything, I

shall be false to the fact, and I have determined to stick to the fact.”

“Why are you testing me?” Alyosha cried, with sudden distress. “Will you say what you mean at last?”

“Of course, I will; that’s what I’ve been leading up to. You are dear to me, I don’t want to let you go, and I won’t give you up to your Zossima.”

Ivan for a minute was silent, his face became all at once very sad.

“Listen! I took the case of children only to make my case clearer. Of the other tears of humanity with which the earth is soaked from its crust to its centre, I will say nothing. I have narrowed my subject on purpose. I am a bug, and I recognise in all humility that I cannot understand why the world is arranged as it is. Men are themselves to blame, I suppose; they were given paradise, they wanted freedom, and stole fire from heaven, though they knew they would become unhappy, so there is no need to pity them. With my pitiful, earthly, Euclidian understanding, all I know is that there is suffering and that there are none guilty; that cause follows effect, simply and directly; that everything flows and finds its level — but that’s only Euclidian nonsense, I know that, and I can’t consent to live by it! What comfort is it to me that there are none guilty and that cause follows effect simply and directly, and that I know it? — I must have justice, or I will destroy myself. And not justice in some remote infinite time and space, but here on earth, and that I could see myself. I have believed in it. I want to see it, and if I am dead by then, let me rise again, for if it all happens without me, it will be too unfair. Surely I haven’t suffered simply that I, my crimes and my sufferings, may manure the soil of the future harmony for somebody else. I want to see with my own eyes the hind lie down with the lion and the victim rise up and embrace his murderer. I want to be there when everyone suddenly understands what it has all been for. All the religions of the world are built on this longing, and I am a believer. But then there are the children, and what am I to do about them? That’s a question I can’t answer. For the hundredth time I repeat, there are numbers of questions, but I’ve only taken the children, because in their case what I mean is so unanswerably clear. Listen! If all must suffer to pay for the eternal harmony, what have children to do with it, tell me, please? It’s beyond all comprehension why they should suffer, and why they should pay for the har-

mony. Why should they, too, furnish material to enrich the soil for the harmony of the future? I understand solidarity in sin among men. I understand solidarity in retribution, too; but there can be no such solidarity with children. And if it is really true that they must share responsibility for all their fathers’ crimes, such a truth is not of this world and is beyond my comprehension. Some jester will say, perhaps, that the child would have grown up and have sinned, but you see he didn’t grow up, he was torn to pieces by the dogs, at eight years old. Oh, Alyosha, I am not blaspheming! I understand, of course, what an upheaval of the universe it will be when everything in heaven and earth blends in one hymn of praise and everything that lives and has lived cries aloud: ‘Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed.’ When the mother embraces the fiend who threw her child to the dogs, and all three cry aloud with tears, ‘Thou art just, O Lord!’ then, of course, the crown of knowledge will be reached and all will be made clear. But what pulls me up here is that I can’t accept that harmony. And while I am on earth, I make haste to take my own measures. You see, Alyosha, perhaps it really may happen that if I live to that moment, or rise again to see it, I, too, perhaps, may cry aloud with the rest, looking at the mother embracing the child’s torturer, ‘Thou art just, O Lord!’ but I don’t want to cry aloud then. While there is still time, I hasten to protect myself, and so I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It’s not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat herself on the breast with her little fist and prayed in her stinking outhouse, with her unexpiated tears to ‘dear, kind God’! It’s not worth it, because those tears are unatoned for. They must be atoned for, or there can be no harmony. But how? How are you going to atone for them? Is it possible? By their being avenged? But what do I care for avenging them? What do I care for a hell for oppressors? What good can hell do, since those children have already been tortured? And what becomes of harmony, if there is hell? I want to forgive. I want to embrace. I don’t want more suffering. And if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price. I don’t want the mother to embrace the oppressor who threw her son to the dogs! She dare not forgive him! Let her forgive him for herself, if she will, let her forgive the torturer for the immeasurable suffering of her mother’s heart.

But the sufferings of her tortured child she has no right to forgive; she dare not forgive the torturer, even if the child were to forgive him! And if that is so, if they dare not forgive, what becomes of harmony? Is there in the whole world a being who would have the right to forgive and could forgive? I don't want harmony. From love for humanity I don't want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it's beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket."

"That's rebellion," murmured Alyosha, looking down.

"Rebellion? I am sorry you call it that," said Ivan earnestly. "One can hardly live in rebellion, and I want to live. Tell me yourself, I challenge your answer. Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature — that same child beating her breast with her fist, for instance — and to found that edifice on her unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me, and tell the truth."

"No, I wouldn't consent," said Alyosha softly.

"And can you admit the idea that men for whom you are building it would agree to accept their happiness on the foundation of the unexpiated blood of a little victim? And accepting it would remain happy for ever?"

"No, I can't admit it." [...]

WHY I AM NOT A CHRISTIAN

Bertrand Russell

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) was born into a line of progressive British politicians, and from an early age felt that he too must be engaged in the betterment of society. Thus, far from being an ivory tower intellectual, Russell followed much in the steps of John Stuart Mill (who was his godfather) in working for social reform.

Russell's most important philosophical work was in the philosophy of logic and mathematics, but he also published many popular works on the philosophy of education, love, sex, and morality. He was a devoted pacifist, and spent two stints in jail: once for six months in 1918 during the first world war for criticizing the United States (during which time he wrote his Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy), and once for a week in 1961 (at the age of 89) for protesting the production of nuclear weapons. Russell was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950.

The reading that follows was delivered as a lecture on March 6, 1927, to the National Secular Society, South London Branch, at Battersea Town Hall. Published in pamphlet form in that same year, the essay subsequently achieved new fame with Paul Edwards' edition of Russell's book, Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays (1957).

As your Chairman has told you, the subject about which I am going to speak to you tonight is "Why I Am Not a Christian." Perhaps it would be as well, first of all, to try to make out what one means by the word *Christian*. It is used these days in a very loose sense by a great many people. Some people mean no more by it than a person who attempts to live a good life. In that sense I suppose there would be Christians in all sects and creeds; but I do not think that that is the proper sense of the word, if only because it would imply that all the people who are not Christians — all the Buddhists, Confucians, Mohammedans, and so on — are not trying to live a good life. I do not mean by a Christian any person who tries to live decently according to his lights. I think that you must have a certain amount of definite belief before you have a right to call yourself a Christian. The word does not have quite such a full-blooded meaning now as it had in the times of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. In those days, if a man said that he was a Christian, it was known what he meant. You

accepted a whole collection of creeds which were set out with great precision, and every single syllable of those creeds you believed with the whole strength of your convictions.

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

Nowadays it is not quite that. We have to be a little more vague in our meaning of Christianity. I think, however, that there are two different items which are quite essential to anybody calling himself a Christian. The first is one of a dogmatic nature — namely, that you must believe in God and immortality. If you do not believe in those two things, I do not think that you can properly call yourself a Christian. Then, further than that, as the name implies, you must have some kind of belief about Christ. The Mohammedans, for instance, also believe in God and in immortality, and yet they would not call themselves Christians. I think you must have at the very lowest the belief that Christ was, if not divine, at least the best and wisest of men. If you are not going to believe that much about Christ, I do not think you have any right to call yourself a Christian. Of course, there is another sense, which you find in *Whittaker's Almanack* and in geography books, where the population of the world is said to be divided into Christians, Mohammedans, Buddhists, fetish worshipers, and so on; and in that sense we are all Christians. The geography books count us all in, but that is a purely geographical sense, which I suppose we can ignore. Therefore, I take it that when I tell you why I am not a Christian, I have to tell you two different things: first, why I do not believe in God and in immortality; and, secondly, why I do not think that Christ was the best and wisest of men, although I grant him a very high degree of moral goodness.

But for the successful efforts of unbelievers in the past, I could not take so elastic a definition of Christianity as that. As I said before, in olden days it had a much more full-blooded sense. For instance, it included the belief in hell. Belief in eternal hell-fire was an essential item of Christian belief until pretty recent times. In this country, as you know, it ceased to be an essential item because of a decision of the Privy Council, and from that decision the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Archbishop of York dissented; but in this country our religion is settled by Act of Parliament, and therefore the Privy Council was able to override their Graces and

hell was no longer necessary to a Christian. Consequently I shall not insist that a Christian must believe in hell.

THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

To come to this question of the existence of God: it is a large and serious question, and if I were to attempt to deal with it in any adequate manner, I should have to keep you here until Kingdom Come, so that you will have to excuse me if I deal with it in a somewhat summary fashion. You know, of course, that the Catholic Church has laid it down as a dogma that the existence of God can be proved by the unaided reason. That is a somewhat curious dogma, but it is one of their dogmas. They had to introduce it because at one time the free-thinkers adopted the habit of saying that there were such and such arguments which mere reason might urge against the existence of God, but of course they knew as a matter of faith that God did exist. The arguments and the reasons were set out at great length, and the Catholic Church felt that they must stop it. Therefore they laid it down that the existence of God can be proved by the unaided reason and they had to set up what they considered were arguments to prove it. There are, of course, a number of them, but I shall take only a few.

THE FIRST-CAUSE ARGUMENT

Perhaps the simplest and easiest to understand is the argument of the First Cause. It is maintained that everything we see in this world has a cause, and as you go back in the chain of causes further and further you must come to a First Cause, and to that First Cause you give the name of God. That argument, I suppose, does not carry very much weight nowadays, because, in the first place, cause is not quite what it used to be. The philosophers and the men of science have got going on cause, and it has not anything like the vitality it used to have; but, apart from that, you can see that the argument that there must be a First Cause is one that cannot have any validity. I may say that when I was a young man and was debating these questions very seriously in my mind, I for a long time accepted the argument of the First Cause, until one day, at the age of eighteen, I read John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography*, and I there found this sentence: "My father taught me that the question 'Who made me?' cannot be answered, since it immediately suggests the further question 'Who made god?'" That very simple

sentence showed me, as I still think, the fallacy in the argument of the First Cause. If everything must have a cause, then God must have a cause. If there can be anything without a cause, it may just as well be the world as God, so that there cannot be any validity in that argument. It is exactly of the same nature as the Hindu's view, that the world rested upon an elephant and the elephant rested upon a tortoise; and when they said, "How about the tortoise?" the Indian said, "Suppose we change the subject." The argument is really no better than that. There is no reason why the world could not have come into being without a cause; nor, on the other hand, is there any reason why it should not have always existed. There is no reason to suppose that the world had a beginning at all. The idea that things must have a beginning is really due to the poverty of our imagination. Therefore, perhaps, I need not waste any more time upon the argument about the First Cause.

THE NATURAL-LAW ARGUMENT

Then there is a very common argument from natural law. That was a favorite argument all through the eighteenth century, especially under the influence of Sir Isaac Newton and his cosmogony. People observed the planets going around the sun according to the law of gravitation, and they thought that God had given a behest to these planets to move in that particular fashion, and that was why they did so. That was, of course, a convenient and simple explanation that saved them the trouble of looking any further for explanations of the law of gravitation. Nowadays we explain the law of gravitation in a somewhat complicated fashion that Einstein has introduced. I do not propose to give you a lecture on the law of gravitation, as interpreted by Einstein, because that again would take some time; at any rate, you no longer have the sort of natural law that you had in the Newtonian system, where, for some reason that nobody could understand, nature behaved in a uniform fashion. We now find that a great many things we thought were natural laws are really human conventions. You know that even in the remotest depths of stellar space there are still three feet to a yard. That is, no doubt, a very remarkable fact, but you would hardly call it a law of nature. And a great many things that have been regarded as laws of nature are of that kind. On the other hand, where you can get down to any knowledge of what atoms actually do, you will find they are much less subject to law than people thought, and that the laws at which you

arrive are statistical averages of just the sort that would emerge from chance. There is, as we all know, a law that if you throw dice you will get double sixes only about once in thirty-six times, and we do not regard that as evidence that the fall of the dice is regulated by design; on the contrary, if the double sixes came every time we should think that there was design. The laws of nature are of that sort as regards a great many of them. They are statistical averages such as would emerge from the laws of chance; and that makes this whole business of natural law much less impressive than it formerly was. Quite apart from that, which represents the momentary state of science that may change tomorrow, the whole idea that natural laws imply a law-giver is due to a confusion between natural and human laws. Human laws are behests commanding you to behave a certain way, in which you may choose to behave, or you may choose not to behave; but natural laws are a description of how things do in fact behave, and being a mere description of what they in fact do, you cannot argue that there must be somebody who told them to do that, because even supposing that there were, you are then faced with the question "Why did God issue just those natural laws and no others?" If you say that he did it simply from his own good pleasure, and without any reason, you then find that there is something which is not subject to law, and so your train of natural law is interrupted. If you say, as more orthodox theologians do, that in all the laws which God issues he had a reason for giving those laws rather than others — the reason, of course, being to create the best universe, although you would never think it to look at it — if there were a reason for the laws which God gave, then God himself was subject to law, and therefore you do not get any advantage by introducing God as an intermediary. You really have a law outside and anterior to the divine edicts, and God does not serve your purpose, because he is not the ultimate lawgiver. In short, this whole argument about natural law no longer has anything like the strength that it used to have. I am traveling on in time in my review of the arguments. The arguments that are used for the existence of God change their character as time goes on. They were at first hard intellectual arguments embodying certain quite definite fallacies. As we come to modern times they become less respectable intellectually and more and more affected by a kind of moralizing vagueness.

THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN

The next step in the process brings us to the argument from design. You all know the argument from design: everything in the world is made just so that we can manage to live in the world, and if the world was ever so little different, we could not manage to live in it. That is the argument from design. It sometimes takes a rather curious form; for instance, it is argued that rabbits have white tails in order to be easy to shoot. I do not know how rabbits would view that application. It is an easy argument to parody. You all know Voltaire's remark, that obviously the nose was designed to be such as to fit spectacles. That sort of parody has turned out to be not nearly so wide of the mark as it might have seemed in the eighteenth century, because since the time of Darwin we understand much better why living creatures are adapted to their environment. It is not that their environment was made to be suitable to them but that they grew to be suitable to it, and that is the basis of adaptation. There is no evidence of design about it.

When you come to look into this argument from design, it is a most astonishing thing that people can believe that this world, with all the things that are in it, with all its defects, should be the best that omnipotence and omniscience have been able to produce in millions of years. I really cannot believe it. Do you think that, if you were granted omnipotence and omniscience and millions of years in which to perfect your world, you could produce nothing better than the Ku Klux Klan or the Fascists? Moreover, if you accept the ordinary laws of science, you have to suppose that human life and life in general on this planet will die out in due course: it is a stage in the decay of the solar system; at a certain stage of decay you get the sort of conditions of temperature and so forth which are suitable to protoplasm, and there is life for a short time in the life of the whole solar system. You see in the moon the sort of thing to which the earth is tending — something dead, cold, and lifeless.

I am told that that sort of view is depressing, and people will sometimes tell you that if they believed that, they would not be able to go on living. Do not believe it; it is all nonsense. Nobody really worries much about what is going to happen millions of years hence. Even if they think they are worrying much about that, they are really deceiving themselves. They are worried about something much more mundane, or it may merely be a bad digestion; but nobody is really seriously rendered

unhappy by the thought of something that is going to happen to this world millions and millions of years hence. Therefore, although it is of course a gloomy view to suppose that life will die out — at least I suppose we may say so, although sometimes when I contemplate the things that people do with their lives, I think it is almost a consolation — it is not such as to render life miserable. It merely makes you turn your attention to other things.

THE MORAL ARGUMENTS FOR DEITY

Now we reach one stage further in what I shall call the intellectual descent that the Theists have made in their argumentations, and we come to what are called the moral arguments for the existence of God. You all know, of course, that there used to be in the old days three intellectual arguments for the existence of God, all of which were disposed of by Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*; but no sooner had he disposed of those arguments than he invented a new one, a moral argument, and that quite convinced him. He was like many people: in intellectual matters he was skeptical, but in moral matters he believed implicitly in the maxims that he had imbibed at his mother's knee. That illustrates what the psychoanalysts so much emphasize — the immensely stronger hold upon us that our very early associations have than those of later times.

Kant, as I say, invented a new moral argument for the existence of God, and that in varying forms was extremely popular during the nineteenth century. It has all sorts of forms. One form is to say there would be no right or wrong unless God existed. I am not for the moment concerned with whether there is a difference between right and wrong, or whether there is not: that is another question. The point I am concerned with is that, if you are quite sure there is a difference between right and wrong, then you are in this situation: Is that difference due to God's fiat or is it not? If it is due to God's fiat, then for God himself there is no difference between right and wrong, and it is no longer a significant statement to say that God is good. If you are going to say, as theologians do, that God is good, you must then say that right and wrong have some meaning which is independent of God's fiat, because God's fiats are good and not bad independently of the mere fact that he made them. If you are going to say that, you will then have to say that it is not only through God that right and wrong

came into being, but that they are in their essence logically anterior to God. You could, of course, if you liked, say that there was a superior deity who gave orders to the God that made this world, or could take up the line that some of the gnostics took up — a line which I often thought was a very plausible one — that as a matter of fact this world that we know was made by the devil at a moment when God was not looking. There is a good deal to be said for that, and I am not concerned to refute it.

THE ARGUMENT FOR THE REMEDYING OF INJUSTICE

Then there is another very curious form of moral argument, which is this: they say that the existence of God is required in order to bring justice into the world. In the part of this universe that we know there is great injustice, and often the good suffer, and often the wicked prosper, and one hardly knows which of those is the more annoying; but if you are going to have justice in the universe as a whole you have to suppose a future life to redress the balance of life here on earth. So they say that there must be a God, and there must be Heaven and Hell in order that in the long run there may be justice. That is a very curious argument. If you looked at the matter from a scientific point of view, you would say, "After all, I only know this world. I do not know about the rest of the universe, but so far as one can argue at all on probabilities one would say that probably this world is a fair sample, and if there is injustice here the odds are that there is injustice elsewhere also." Supposing you got a crate of oranges that you opened, and you found all the top layer of oranges bad, you would not argue, "The underneath ones must be good, so as to redress the balance." You would say, "Probably the whole lot is a bad consignment"; and that is really what a scientific person would argue about the universe. He would say, "Here we find in this world a great deal of injustice, and so far as that goes that is a reason for supposing that justice does not rule in the world; and therefore, so far as it goes, it affords a moral argument against deity and not in favor of one." Of course I know that the sort of intellectual arguments that I have been talking to you about are not what really moves people. What really moves people to believe in God is not any intellectual argument at all. Most people believe in God because they have been taught from early infancy to do it, and that is the main reason.

Then I think that the next most powerful reason is the wish for safety, a sort of feeling that there is a big brother who will look after you. That plays a very profound part in influencing people's desire for a belief in God.

THE CHARACTER OF CHRIST

I now want to say a few words upon a topic which I often think is not quite sufficiently dealt with by Rationalists, and that is the question whether Christ was the best and the wisest of men. It is generally taken for granted that we should all agree that that was so. I do not myself. I think that there are a good many points upon which I agree with Christ a great deal more than the professing Christians do. I do not know that I could go with Him all the way, but I could go with Him much further than most professing Christians can. You will remember that He said, "Resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." [Matt. 5:39] That is not a new precept or a new principle. It was used by Lao-tse and Buddha some 500 or 600 years before Christ, but it is not a principle which as a matter of fact Christians accept. I have no doubt that the present prime minister [Stanley Baldwin], for instance, is a most sincere Christian, but I should not advise any of you to go and smite him on one cheek. I think you might find that he thought this text was intended in a figurative sense.

Then there is another point which I consider excellent. You will remember that Christ said, "Judge not lest ye be judged." [Matt. 7:1] That principle I do not think you would find was popular in the law courts of Christian countries. I have known in my time quite a number of judges who were very earnest Christians, and none of them felt that they were acting contrary to Christian principles in what they did. Then Christ says, "Give to him that asketh of thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away." [Matt. 5:42] That is a very good principle. Your Chairman has reminded you that we are not here to talk politics, but I cannot help observing that the last general election was fought on the question of how desirable it was to turn away from him that would borrow of thee, so that one must assume that the Liberals and Conservatives of this country are composed of people who do not agree with the teaching of Christ, because they certainly did very emphatically turn away on that occasion.

Then there is one other maxim of Christ which I think has a great deal in it, but I do not find that it is very popular among some of our Christian friends. He says, "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that which thou hast, and give to the poor." [Matt. 19:21] That is a very excellent maxim, but, as I say, it is not much practiced. All these, I think, are good maxims, although they are a little difficult to live up to. I do not profess to live up to them myself; but then, after all, it is not quite the same thing as for a Christian.

DEFECTS IN CHRIST'S TEACHING

Having granted the excellence of these maxims, I come to certain points in which I do not believe that one can grant either the superlative wisdom or the superlative goodness of Christ as depicted in the Gospels; and here I may say that one is not concerned with the historical question. Historically, it is quite doubtful whether Christ ever existed at all, and if He did we do not know anything about him, so that I am not concerned with the historical question, which is a very difficult one. I am concerned with Christ as He appears in the Gospels, taking the Gospel narrative as it stands, and there one does find some things that do not seem to be very wise. For one thing, he certainly thought that His second coming would occur in clouds of glory before the death of all the people who were living at that time. There are a great many texts that prove that. He says, for instance, "Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of Man be come." [Matt. 10:23] Then he says, "There are some standing here which shall not taste death till the Son of Man comes into His kingdom" [Matt. 16:28, Mark 9:1, Luke 9:27]; and there are a lot of places where it is quite clear that He believed that His second coming would happen during the lifetime of many then living. That was the belief of His earlier followers, and it was the basis of a good deal of His moral teaching. When He said, "Take no thought for the morrow," [Matt. 6:34] and things of that sort, it was very largely because He thought that the second coming was going to be very soon, and that all ordinary mundane affairs did not count. I have, as a matter of fact, known some Christians who did believe that the second coming was imminent. I knew a parson who frightened his congregation terribly by telling them that the second coming was very imminent indeed, but they were much consoled when they found that he was planting trees in his garden. The early Christians did really believe it, and they did abstain from such things as planting trees in their gardens, because they did accept from

Christ the belief that the second coming was imminent. In that respect, clearly, He was not so wise as some other people have been, and He was certainly not superlatively wise.

THE MORAL PROBLEM

Then you come to moral questions. There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment. Christ, as depicted in the Gospels, certainly did believe in everlasting punishment, and one does find repeatedly a vindictive fury against those people who would not listen to His preaching — an attitude which is not uncommon with preachers, but which does somewhat detract from superlative excellence. You do not, for instance, find that attitude in Socrates. You find him quite bland and urbane toward the people who would not listen to him; and it is, to my mind, far more worthy of a sage to take that line than to take the line of indignation. You probably all remember the sorts of things that Socrates was saying when he was dying, and the sort of things that he generally did say to people who did not agree with him.

You will find that in the Gospels Christ said, "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of Hell." [Matt. 23:33] That was said to people who did not like His preaching. It is not really to my mind quite the best tone, and there are a great many of these things about Hell. There is, of course, the familiar text about the sin against the Holy Ghost: "Whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost it shall not be forgiven him neither in this World nor in the world to come." [Matt. 12:32] That text has caused an unspeakable amount of misery in the world, for all sorts of people have imagined that they have committed the sin against the Holy Ghost, and thought that it would not be forgiven them either in this world or in the world to come. I really do not think that a person with a proper degree of kindness in his nature would have put fears and terrors of that sort into the world.

Then Christ says, "The Son of Man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity, and shall cast them into a furnace of fire; there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth" [Matt. 13:41-42]; and He goes on about the wailing and gnashing of teeth. It comes in one

verse after another, and it is quite manifest to the reader that there is a certain pleasure in contemplating wailing and gnashing of teeth, or else it would not occur so often. Then you all, of course, remember about the sheep and the goats; how at the second coming He is going to divide the sheep from the goats, and He is going to say to the goats, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire." [Matt. 25:41] He continues, "And these shall go away into everlasting fire." Then He says again, "If thy hand offend thee, cut it off; it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into Hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched; where the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched." [Mark 9:43-44] He repeats that again and again also. I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hell-fire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty. It is a doctrine that put cruelty into the world and gave the world generations of cruel torture; and the Christ of the Gospels, if you could take Him as His chroniclers represent Him, would certainly have to be considered partly responsible for that.

There are other things of less importance. There is the instance of the Gadarene swine, where it certainly was not very kind to the pigs to put the devils into them and make them rush down the hill into the sea. You must remember that He was omnipotent, and He could have made the devils simply go away; but He chose to send them into the pigs. Then there is the curious story of the fig tree, which always rather puzzled me. You remember what happened about the fig tree. "He was hungry; and seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, He came if haply He might find anything thereon; and when He came to it He found nothing but leaves, for the time of figs was not yet. And Jesus answered and said unto it: 'No man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever'...and Peter...saith unto Him: 'Master, behold the fig tree which thou cursedst is withered away.'" [Mark 11:13-21] This is a very curious story, because it was not the right time of year for figs, and you really could not blame the tree. I cannot myself feel that either in the matter of wisdom or in the matter of virtue Christ stands quite as high as some other people known to history. I think I should put Buddha and Socrates above Him in those respects.

THE EMOTIONAL FACTOR

As I said before, I do not think that the real reason why people accept religion has anything to do with argumentation. They accept religion on emotional grounds. One is often told that it is a very wrong thing to attack religion, because religion makes men virtuous. So I am told; I have not noticed it. You know, of course, the parody of that argument in Samuel Butler's book, *Erewhon Revisited*. You will remember that in *Erewhon* there is a certain Higgs who arrives in a remote country, and after spending some time there he escapes from that country in a balloon. Twenty years later he comes back to that country and finds a new religion in which he is worshiped under the name of the "Sun Child," and it is said that he ascended into heaven. He finds that the Feast of the Ascension is about to be celebrated, and he hears Professors Hanky and Panky say to each other that they never set eyes on the man Higgs, and they hope they never will; but they are the high priests of the religion of the Sun Child. He is very indignant, and he comes up to them, and he says, "I am going to expose all this humbug and tell the people of Erewhon that it was only I, the man Higgs, and I went up in a balloon." He was told, "You must not do that, because all the morals of this country are bound round this myth, and if they once know that you did not ascend into Heaven they will all become wicked"; and so he is persuaded of that and he goes quietly away.

That is the idea — that we should all be wicked if we did not hold to the Christian religion. It seems to me that the people who have held to it have been for the most part extremely wicked. You find this curious fact, that the more intense has been the religion of any period and the more profound has been the dogmatic belief, the greater has been the cruelty and the worse has been the state of affairs. In the so-called ages of faith, when men really did believe the Christian religion in all its completeness, there was the Inquisition, with all its tortures; there were millions of unfortunate women burned as witches; and there was every kind of cruelty practiced upon all sorts of people in the name of religion.

You find as you look around the world that every single bit of progress in humane feeling, every improvement in the criminal law, every step toward the diminution of war, every step toward better treatment of the colored races, or every mitigation of slavery, every moral progress that there has been in the world, has

been consistently opposed by the organized churches of the world. I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion, as organized in its churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world.

HOW THE CHURCHES HAVE RETARDED PROGRESS

You may think that I am going too far when I say that that is still so. I do not think that I am. Take one fact. You will bear with me if I mention it. It is not a pleasant fact, but the churches compel one to mention facts that are not pleasant. Supposing that in this world that we live in today an inexperienced girl is married to a syphilitic man; in that case the Catholic Church says, "This is an indissoluble sacrament. You must endure celibacy or stay together. And if you stay together, you must not use birth control to prevent the birth of syphilitic children." Nobody whose natural sympathies have not been warped by dogma, or whose moral nature was not absolutely dead to all sense of suffering, could maintain that it is right and proper that that state of things should continue.

That is only an example. There are a great many ways in which, at the present moment, the church, by its insistence upon what it chooses to call morality, inflicts upon all sorts of people undeserved and unnecessary suffering. And of course, as we know, it is in its major part an opponent still of progress and improvement in all the ways that diminish suffering in the world, because it has chosen to label as morality a certain narrow set of rules of conduct which have nothing to do with human happiness; and when you say that this or that ought to be done because it would make for human happiness, they think that has nothing to do with the matter at all. "What has human happiness to do with morals? The object of morals is not to make people happy."

FEAR, THE FOUNDATION OF RELIGION

Religion is based, I think, primarily and mainly upon fear. It is partly the terror of the unknown and partly, as I have said, the wish to feel that you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes. Fear is the basis of the whole thing — fear of

the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death. Fear is the parent of cruelty, and therefore it is no wonder if cruelty and religion have gone hand in hand. It is because fear is at the basis of those two things. In this world we can now begin a little to understand things, and a little to master them by help of science, which has forced its way step by step against the Christian religion, against the churches, and against the opposition of all the old precepts. Science can help us to get over this craven fear in which mankind has lived for so many generations. Science can teach us, and I think our own hearts can teach us, no longer to look around for imaginary supports, no longer to invent allies in the sky, but rather to look to our own efforts here below to make this world a better place to live in, instead of the sort of place that the churches in all these centuries have made it.

WHAT WE MUST DO

We want to stand upon our own feet and look fair and square at the world — its good facts, its bad facts, its beauties, and its ugliness; see the world as it is and be not afraid of it. Conquer the world by intelligence and not merely by being slavishly subdued by the terror that comes from it. The whole conception of God is a conception derived from the ancient Oriental despotisms. It is a conception quite unworthy of free men. When you hear people in church debasing themselves and saying that they are miserable sinners, and all the rest of it, it seems contemptible and not worthy of self-respecting human beings. We ought to stand up and look the world frankly in the face. We ought to make the best we can of the world, and if it is not so good as we wish, after all it will still be better than what these others have made of it in all these ages. A good world needs knowledge, kindness, and courage; it does not need a regretful hankering after the past or a fettering of the free intelligence by the words uttered long ago by ignorant men. It needs a fearless outlook and a free intelligence. It needs hope for the future, not looking back all the time toward a past that is dead, which we trust will be far surpassed by the future that our intelligence can create.

[38] PASCAL'S WAGER

Blaise Pascal (1623-62) was a French scientist and mathematician. His mother died when he was three, and he was raised and educated by his father. As a child, he re-discovered the Pythagorean theorem, and in later life advanced the sciences of probability and physics — such as his development of an experiment corroborating Torricelli's theory of barometric pressure (namely, that the earth is surrounded by “a sea of air”).

As a young man, Pascal was a member of the French intellectual fast crowd, idling at gambling casinos and living the life of the dandy. At the age of 31, however, during the night of November 23rd, 1654, he suffered a life-shaking conversion experience; and in the course of that night, Pascal the gambling socialite turned into Pascal the religious ascetic. He recorded this experience on a parchment that he kept sewn into the breast of his jacket; it begins: “Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the scholars....”

Pascal's family had already converted to Jansenism — a rigorous form of Catholicism — and after his conversion he joined this movement with his entire being, devoting all his intellectual energies to the defense of Christianity, and of Jansenism in particular.



Blaise Pascal
(Paris, 1623-1662)

PHILOSOPHICAL THEISM VS. BELIEVING IN GOD

“Believing in God” need not involve believing that God's existence can be proved, but only believing that God exists. According to Pascal, however, it involves more than simply believing that God exists; it also involves a way of life that follows certain moral principles and religious rituals. Furthermore, in many theistic religions it involves a personal survival in heaven, a life after death where believers enjoy happiness in heaven and unbelievers an endless misery in hell, or some equivalent. This suggests that there are both costs and benefits attached to one's beliefs about the existence of God.

Should you change your belief given these practical considerations? Pascal argues that reason cannot decide if God exists or not, but he also claims that agnosticism is not an option: you must choose between theism and atheism. Why? Because you must live in some way or other, and that way will either be as one who believes in God or as one who does not. In the realm of life and action, according to Pascal, fence sitting is not possible. We all must choose and declare ourselves; the only question left is: Which way shall we choose?

A SKEPTIC'S PRAYER

“O Seigneur, s'il y a un Seigneur,
savez mon âme, si j'ai une âme.”
 (“O Lord, if there is a Lord, save my
soul, if I have a soul.”)

— Ernest Renan (1823-1892)

THE WAGER

Pascal had his old gambling friends in mind when he formulated this argument for believing in God. He wanted to argue in terms they would understand, so he cast it in terms of a wager.

Now in any sort of wagering situation, there are at least two factors to keep in mind: (1) the *values* of the two (or more) alternatives, and (2) the *probability* of each alternative. When wagering on the existence of God, Pascal figured the values of the alternatives to range from infinite gain (if God exists and we believe in him) to infinite loss (if God exists but we do not believe in him). Pascal sets the probability of God existing at one in two, since there are two possible outcomes — (1) God exists, (2) God does not exist — and each has the same chance of being true (just as with flipping a coin). To write this in a standard notation: $\text{Pr}(\text{God}) = 1/2$ [read: “the probability of God existing equals one-half”] and $\text{Pr}(\text{not-God}) = 1/2$ [read: “the probability of God not existing equals one-half”].⁴⁸ There are four possible outcomes of this wager, since God may or may not exist, and I may or may not believe in God. We can express these

⁴⁸ This follows the standard formula: $P(A) = f/n$ [read: “the probability of A equals the number of favorable outcomes (f) divided by the number of possible outcomes (n)”].

four outcomes and their values in the following table:

	God Exists	God does not Exist
I believe in God	(1) Infinite bliss	(2) I'm still a better person
I don't believe	(3) Infinite misery	(4) No reward, no punishment

Pascal assumes that if God exists, then the alternatives are eternal bliss in Heaven (for those who believe in God) and eternal damnation in Hell (for those who disbelieve in God). As for the alternatives where God does not exist, he thought that we were neither better nor worse off if we didn't believe in God, whereas if we did believe, then we would have still gained something. As he puts it in his *Pensées*:

Now what harm will come to you from choosing this course? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, full of good works, a sincere and true friend.... It is true you will not enjoy noxious pleasures, glory and good living, but will you not have others?

Clearly the *best outcome* is (1), while the worst is (3). Pascal would argue that (1) is infinitely better than any of the others, and that (3) is infinitely worse than any of the others. So according to Pascal, it's always to your advantage to believe in the existence of God and to adopt the corresponding life-style.

“A little philosophy inclineth men's mind to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion.”

— Francis Bacon (1561-1626)

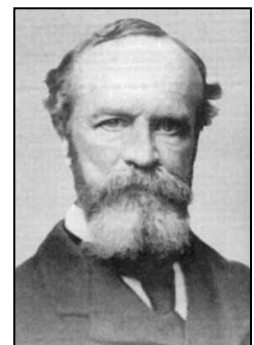
This wager of Pascal's might be compared to a simple game of tossing a coin, whereby if you choose heads and the coin comes up heads then I give you \$100 (if you lose and it comes up tails, then I still give you \$2), and if you choose tails and it comes up heads you give me \$100 (while if it comes up tails and you win, then no money exchanges hands):

	Heads	Tails
Choose heads	(1) win \$100	(2) win \$2
Choose tails	(3) lose \$100	(4) no win, no loss

It doesn't take long to realize that this hardly counts as a game at all, since there's every reason to choose heads, and no reason to choose tails. Similarly, there's every reason to believe in God, and none to disbelieve.

CRITICISM'S OF THE WAGER

William James (1842-1910), the famous Harvard psychologist, philosopher, and brother to the equally famous novelist Henry James, noted that if *he* were God, the first people he would send packing off to Hell would be those who believed in Him simply out of a calculated self-interest like Pascal's wagerer. Isn't it just as likely, James continued, that God might place more value on people who honestly and sincerely seek the truth, but who nevertheless die as atheists, than these hypocritical, yet orthodox, believers — people who believe “for the wrong reasons”?



William James
(Cambridge, Mass.; 1842-1910)

Closely related to James's objection is the claim that even if I believe that I'm better off believing in God, it's not the same as actually *believing* in God. Can I *make* myself believe something? How does that come about?

Pascal writes that sincere belief will come with time and constant observance of the religious lifestyle:

If you are unable to believe, it is because of your passions, since reason impels you to believe and yet you cannot do so. Concentrate then not on convincing yourself by multiplying proofs of God's existence but by diminishing your passions. You want to find faith and you do not know the road. You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have. These are people who know the road you wish to follow, who have been cured of the affliction of which you wish to be cured: follow the way by which they began. They behaved just as if they did believe, taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. That will make you believe quite naturally.

And in defending Pascal against James's criticisms, one might suggest that, once a person truly does believe that God exists, then it is irrelevant *how* he came to such a belief. The believer himself would be the first to despise his earlier self-interest, yet also would be grateful that it allowed him to find his way to the truth. Even those who left the marked and well-trod paths and in this way become lost in the woods for a time — as long as they eventually make their way home, they will be no more lost in the end than those who never left the trails at all.

But: could you train yourself to believe anything at all, given sufficient motivation? Could you cause yourself to believe that little ghosts are responsible for turning the hands of a clock, or that $3 + 2 = 11$ (in base 10)?

There are several other objections to the wager related to the *probability* involved. The first considers the extra hypotheses necessary for a good outcome (namely, heavenly reward) to occur. The odds in our favor are lowered considerably once we see there is more than one hypothesis upon which we are betting. Remember that when adding the probability of several events occurring (or different hypotheses being true) one *multiplies* the individual probabilities. For example, the probability of a fair coin turning up heads in a single toss is $1/2$. The probability of it doing this twice in a row is $1/2 \times 1/2$, or $1/4$.

Now, apart from the hypothesis that God exists, there is the hypothesis that God rewards believers with infinite bliss (i.e., that there *is* such a bliss), and so on: $\text{Pr}(\text{God's existence}) \times \text{Pr}(\text{God rewarding believers with infinite bliss}) \times \text{Pr}(\text{God rewarding only believers with bliss}) \times \text{Pr}(\text{God not caring how believers came to their belief}) \times \dots$. After you multiply a few of these together, your odds begin to shrink considerably.

In Pascal's defense, we should note that the wager is still reasonable as long as the reward is *infinite*, since infinity times anything greater than zero is still infinity. A problem here, however, is that it is not obvious that humans can enjoy an infinite amount of utility (happiness or pleasure, etc). If the amount of happiness that a human can enjoy is only finite, then the value of believing in God would only be a *finite* number, and so there could be some non-zero probability of the truth of the hypothesis where it would no longer be rational to believe. But perhaps this can be rescued by considering that all one needs is an infinite amount of time in heaven. Then the amount of happiness experienced at any one time can be quite small, but multiplying this by an infinite span of time will give you an infinite amount of happiness. These are all complicated considerations, and they detract considerably from what *prima facie* is a straightforward and simple calculation.

Another objection to Pascal: even if we grant the possibility of infinite value, can we assume a *non-zero* probability for God's existence? Pascal assumes that the hypothesis that God exists has some probability greater than zero (in fact, he thinks it is 50%). But what grounds do we have for assuming this? Is there a 50:50 chance that *Santa Claus* exists? Is there a 50:50 chance that *square-circles* exist? Yet many atheists will put God in the same category as Santa Claus or square-circles.

Another problem is that there are lots of different religions to decide upon, not just Christianity, and they all have their various promises and threats. How do I choose which one to follow, especially where they have exactly the same rewards and punishments? Pascal advises to choose the one that is most familiar to you, as you will benefit the most from its practices. But does this take the religious claims seriously? Many of them make claims about the afterlife and, if these claims are true, they are far more important than any perceivable benefits enjoyed in this world. Thus we must determine which of the religions is the correct one so as to win eternal bliss and avoid eternal damnation. That may not be the religion of your parents — why think that it *would* be? This problem differs from, and is more disastrous than, the problem of multiplying hypotheses, since some of these hypotheses will contradict each other (rival religions), such that you risk eternal damnation for believing in the wrong God.

BELIEVING FOR THE WRONG REASONS

“We feel that a faith in masses and holy water adopted willfully after such a mechanical calculation would lack the inner soul of faith's reality; and if we were ourselves in the place of the Deity, we should probably take particular pleasure in cutting off believers of this pattern from their infinite reward. It is evident that unless there be some pre-existing tendency to believe in masses and holy water, the option offered to the will by Pascal is not a living option.”

— William James, “The Will to Believe” (1896)

A final objection to Pascalian wagering is that we get to play only once in this game (unlike most wagers). Imagine the following game: I will toss a fair coin, and if it comes up heads then you give me \$1 million, which is non-refundable. Or lacking the money, you can give me an agreement to twenty-years of hard labor, redeemable immediately after the game. If it comes up tails, then I will give you \$10 million. Now, if you were allowed to play multiple times, then you obviously should play the game, since you have a 50% chance of winning, and the potential loss is only 10% of the potential gain. But if you only get to play *once*, is it rational to play at all, given the possible losses? Of course, Pascal will say that we *must* wager, and our only choice is in *how* we wager.

READING

THE WAGER

Blaise Pascal

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was a French scientist and mathematician who experienced a religious conversion during the night of November 23rd, 1654 (at the age of 31), at which time he began work on a defense of Christianity. When he died, this work was still a pile of notes, but was assembled and published posthumously as his Pensées, and it is from this that the following selection is taken. Translated by A. J. Krailsheimer.

§418 *Infinity — nothing.* Our soul is cast into the body where it finds number, time, dimensions; it reasons about these things and calls them natural, or necessary, and can believe nothing else.

Unity added to infinity does not increase it at all, any more than a foot added to an infinite measurement: the finite is annihilated in the presence of the infinite and becomes pure nothingness. So it is with our mind before God, with our justice before divine justice. There is not so great a disproportion between our justice and God's as between unity and infinity.

God's justice must be as vast as his mercy. Now his justice towards the damned is less vast and ought to be less startling to us than his mercy towards the elect.

We know that the infinite exists without knowing its nature, just as we know that it is untrue that numbers are finite. Thus it is true that there is an infinite number, but we do not know what it is. It is untrue that it is even, untrue that it is odd, for by adding a unit it does not change its nature. Yet it is a number, and every number is even or odd. (It is true that this applies to every finite number.)

Therefore we may well know that God exists without knowing what he is.

Is there no substantial truth, seeing that there are so many true things which are not truth itself?

Thus we know the existence and nature of the finite because we too are finite and extended in space.

We know the existence of the infinite without knowing its nature, because it too has extension but unlike us no limits.

But we do not know either the existence or the nature of God, because he has neither extension nor limits.

But by faith we know his existence, through glory we shall know his nature.

Now I have already proved that it is quite possible to know that something exists without knowing its nature.

Let us now speak according to our natural lights.

If there is a God, he is infinitely beyond our comprehension, since, being indivisible and without limits, he bears no relation to us. We are therefore incapable of knowing either what he is or whether he is. That being so, who would dare to attempt an answer to the question? Certainly not we, who bear no relation to him.

Who then will condemn Christians for being unable to give rational grounds for their belief, professing as they do a religion for which they cannot give rational grounds? They declare that it is a folly, *stultitiam*, in expounding it to the world, and then you complain that they do not prove it. If they did prove it they would not be keeping their word. It is by being without proof that

they show they are not without sense. 'Yes, but although that excuses those who offer their religion as such, and absolves them from the criticism of producing it without rational grounds it does not absolve those who accept it.' Let us then examine this point, and let us say: 'Either God is or he is not.' But to which view shall we be inclined? Reason cannot decide this question. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you wager? Reason cannot make you choose either, reason cannot prove either wrong.

Do not then condemn as wrong those who have made a choice, for you know nothing about it. 'No, but I will condemn them not for having made this particular choice, but any choice, for, although the one who calls heads and the other one are equally at fault, the fact is that they are both at fault: the right thing is not to wager at all.'

Yes, but you must wager. There is no choice; you are already committed. Which will you choose then? Let us see: since a choice must be made, let us see which offers you the least interest. You have two things to lose: the true and the good; and two things to stake: your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to avoid: error and wretchedness. Since you must necessarily choose, your reason is no more affronted by choosing one rather than the other. That is one point cleared up. But your happiness? Let us weigh up the gain and the loss involved in calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win you win everything, if you lose you lose nothing. Do not hesitate then; wager that he does exist. 'That is wonderful. Yes, I must wager, but perhaps I am wagering too much.' Let us see: since there is an equal chance of gain and loss, if you stood to win only two lives for one you could still wager, but supposing you stood to win three?

You would have to play (since you must necessarily play) and it would be unwise of you, once you are obliged to play, not to risk your life in order to win three lives at a game in which there is an equal chance of losing and winning. But there is an eternity of life and happiness. That being so, even though there were an infinite number of chances, of which only one were in your favor, you would still be right to wager one in order to win two; and you would be acting wrongly,

being obliged to play, in refusing to stake one life against three in a game, where out of an infinite number of chances there is one in your favor, if there were an infinity of infinitely happy life to be won. But here there is an infinity of infinitely happy life to be won, one chance of winning against a finite number of chances of losing, and what you are staking is finite. That leaves no choice; wherever there is infinity, and where there are not infinite chances of losing against that of winning, there is no room for hesitation, you must give everything. And thus, since you are obliged to play, you must be renouncing reason if you hoard your life rather than risk it for an infinite gain, just as likely to occur as a loss amounting to nothing.

For it is no good saying that it is uncertain whether you will win, that it is certain that you are taking a risk, and that the infinite distance between the certainty of what you are risking and the uncertainty of what you may gain makes the finite good you are certainly risking equal to the infinite good that you are not certain to gain. This is not the case. Every gambler takes a certain risk for an uncertain gain, and yet he is taking a certain finite risk for an uncertain finite gain without sinning against reason. Here there is no infinite distance between the certain risk and the uncertain gain: that is not true. There is, indeed, an infinite distance between the certainty of winning and the certainty of losing, but the proportion between the certainty of winning and the certainty of what is being risked is in proportion to the chances of winning or losing. And hence if there are as many chances on one side as on the other you are playing for even odds. And in that case the certainty of what you are risking is equal to the uncertainty of what you may win; it is by no means infinitely distant from it. Thus our argument carries infinite weight, when the stakes are finite in a game where there are even chances of winning and losing and an infinite prize to be won.

This is conclusive, and if men are capable of any truth, this is it.

'I confess, I admit it, but is there really no way of seeing what the cards are?' — 'Yes. Scripture and the rest, etc.' — 'Yes, but my hands are tied and my lips are sealed; I am being forced to wager and I am not free; I am being held fast and I am so made that I cannot believe. What do you want me to do then?' — 'That is true, but at least get it into your head that, if

you are unable to believe, it is because of your passions, since reason impels you to believe and yet you cannot do so. Concentrate then not on convincing yourself by multiplying proofs of God's existence but by diminishing your passions. You want to find faith and you do not know the road. You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have. These are people who know the road you wish to follow, who have been cured of the affliction of which you wish to be cured: follow the way by which they began. They behaved just as if they did believe, taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. That will make you believe quite naturally, and will make you more docile.' — 'But that is of what I am afraid.' — 'But why? What have you to lose? But to show you that this is the way, the fact is that this diminishes the passions which are your great obstacles....'

End of this address.

'Now what harm will come to you from choosing this course? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, full of good works, a sincere, true friend.... It is true you will not enjoy noxious pleasures, glory and good living, but will you not have others?

'I tell you that you will gain even in this life, and that at every step you take along this road you will see that your gain is so certain and your risk so negligible that in the end you will realize that you have wagered on something certain and infinite for which you have paid nothing.'

'How these words fill me with rapture and delight! —'

'If my words please you and seem cogent, you must know that they come from a man who went down upon his knees before and after to pray this infinite and indivisible being, to whom he submits his own, that he might bring your being also to submit to him for your own good and for his glory: and that strength might thus be reconciled with lowliness.'

[39] WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

“MATTERS OF TASTE” AND “MATTERS OF JUDGMENT”

I made a distinction near the beginning of this book between “matters of taste” and “matters of judgment.” Relativism is the belief that all truth-claims (about some topic or other) are simply matters of taste. Perhaps you began the philosophical study of religion as a relativist — and if you didn’t, you might be one now. After all, it doesn’t look like reason is much help here. Belief or disbelief in God begins to look like a matter of irrational choosing. Yet many, myself included, don’t find relativism especially plausible with respect to most areas of belief, including the area of religion. So how might we view these many arguments for and against the existence of God? They seem to take us in various directions and none of them conclusively. Doesn’t this suggest that our beliefs about God’s existence and nature are simply a “matter of taste” — no different than the preference one might have for wearing a solid tie with a certain shirt instead of striped? They are not merely unjustified beliefs; they appear to be *unjustifiable*, in principle.

But the fact that there is *so much to say* about these religious beliefs suggests that they might involve more than mere matters of taste. Believing certain things about God and the world implies certain other things about God and the world. For example, if you believe that God is all-loving, all-powerful, and all-knowing, then you will likely believe that we live in the best of all possible worlds. We can make this point more general: Nearly all of our beliefs are connected together in various ways and to varying degrees. This suggests that once you believe anything at all, then certain other beliefs are not going to be available to you, for the simple reason that they are inconsistent with your initial belief. Here’s a trivial example: If you believe that your car keys are on the table, then you won’t believe that they are hanging on the wall. These two beliefs are logically connected in that they are inconsistent with each other, so believing one precludes your believing the other. We might be able to imagine someone foolishly believing both, but then nearly everyone will acknowledge that such belief *is* foolish. It isn’t simply a “matter of taste” as to whether one believes either, neither, or both. So we can say this much about relativism: it simply isn’t true once we’ve made certain belief-commitments. And once you add further beliefs to your initial belief, these will constrain future beliefs even further. The more beliefs in your belief-system, the more constraints there will be.

WHAT DIVIDES US?

Rousseau’s arguments against special revelation are fairly strong: religious revelations *do* seem highly arbitrary, contradictory, prejudiced by human interpreters — in a word, *unreliable*. But natural religion would seem to be wholly bankrupt. Reason can’t prove that God exists; it can’t even offer what everyone would accept as evidence that God exists (or does not); and so reason has trouble getting much of a foothold in religion.

How, then, does someone become a theist or an atheist? What separates these two kinds of people? Is it something wholly arbitrary, an accident of one’s social environment? For a matter of such importance to rest on such flimsy grounds is indeed unsettling; but what’s the alternative? Can I *choose* to believe in God? Or does this simply happen to me? And if I *can* choose, can I find *good reasons* upon which I can base such a choice?

Human beings differ in their beliefs on any number of topics. These differences may be triv-

[Poem]

GOD’S GRANDEUR

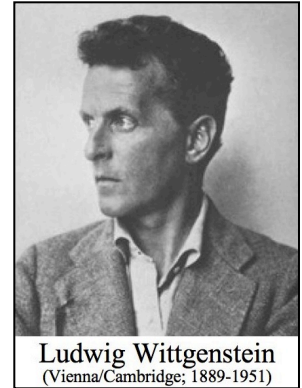
The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

— Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)

ial, or interesting, or peculiar, but some are so profound that we feel our fellow humans come from some other planet — or at least belong on one! Few differences are so divisive as those grounded in religious beliefs. Of the various problems Rousseau found with revealed religion, perhaps the most damning is that it leads to religious schisms, followed all too often by intolerance and bloodshed.

But perhaps, in the end, it is not our *beliefs* that divide us as it is the ways that we live our lives, determining what **Ludwig Wittgenstein** (1889-1951) called our “form of life” (in German: our *Lebensform*).⁴⁹ I am particularly struck, for instance, by the difference between those persons who see the world around them as only so much plunder and spoil, as opposed to those who see the world as possessing a worth and integrity all its own. This is a division that cuts across religious labels, and I certainly see in Christians (the religious community that I know best). Here we find some Christians whose eyes are so keenly set on the *next* world that they feel little more than contempt for the physical world, while other Christians take to heart God’s judgment in Genesis that the created world is *good* and therefore focus their energies on its preservation and well-being.



Ludwig Wittgenstein
(Vienna/Cambridge; 1889-1951)

Wittgenstein and others have argued that religion is essentially *non-cognitive*, which is to say that religious claims are neither true nor false. Religious beliefs, faith utterances, and other theoretical trappings are really just spin-offs of religious practice, or ways of living out a certain *Lebensform*. What it means to be religious, on the Wittgensteinian account, is not to assent to various beliefs as such, but rather to engage in certain practices and to assume a certain posture towards the world (see, for instance, William Stafford’s poem on “Being a Person”). Denying a religious belief is not to contradict anything, since the essence of such beliefs has nothing to do with how the world is, but rather concerns the way we are to live our lives. Religion is not about metaphysics, but about life; it is not about proving God’s existence, but about manifesting God’s existence in one’s own life. The assertions, the dogma, the metaphysics — all are latecomers to religion. They are the by-products of intellectuals, mere after-thoughts of the religious life.

Somewhere apart from the cant and dogma and proofs is this sense of the holy and the sacred, a sense of the deep mystery of our existence. A close study of the proofs for God’s existence is important, and also highly interesting — but for most people it doesn’t get very close to religious experience. And whatever else we say about human beings, we must acknowledge this experience that is found in so many of us — this sense of mystery and this susceptibility of our souls to beauty.

Perhaps the chief and guiding hope behind natural religion is *ecumenicism*: That all people might be able to find some common religious ground. Unlike particular revelations, which are by their very nature confrontational and unyielding (insofar as they are given to us to believe, not to consider or investigate), natural religion is based on reason, and reason’s lifeblood is a free and open dialogue between thoughtful individuals. Difference of opinion is not to be eliminated with the stake or the end of a sword, but rather it is to be understood and overcome in a manner agreeable to all parties — insofar as those parties agree to the project of reason in general.

DEATH AND KNOWLEDGE

Here’s one last problem to consider before we move on to other matters. People often say — partly as a way of ending or dismissing these discussions about God’s existence and nature — that “we’ll have all this answered once

⁴⁹ Wittgenstein was the son of a wealthy Viennese industrialist. He studied philosophy under Bertrand Russell at Cambridge, and later taught there. He is generally considered to have been one of the most gifted philosophers of the 20th century. While serving as a soldier in the Austrian army during World War One, Wittgenstein drafted his highly influential *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and then several decades later went on to develop what in many ways was an entirely different method of doing philosophy (as embodied in his *Philosophical Investigations* and other posthumously published writings). I should add that not all scholars of Wittgenstein’s writings agree that he held the views on religion presented here.

we die and go to heaven” (with the implication that “there isn’t much point in troubling our heads about it now”). An obvious response to such a comment, of course, is that it simply assumes the existence (and a particular nature) of God — but for the sake of discussion let’s grant all that. There still remains a puzzle. For even if there *is* an afterlife (heaven, or whatever), won’t we find ourselves in the same epistemic position with respect to God? Won’t God’s existence still remain a question for us? Suppose God shows himself to us — the heavenly choir is belting out “Hosannas” to beat the band, and along sweeps God-In-All-His-Glory — couldn’t he do that now, in this world, if he chose, and couldn’t we be just as misled and deceived in our beliefs? Won’t we still need to distinguish between hallucinations and “the real thing”? Or won’t there be any hallucinations or mistakes in heaven? (And how could we be sure of this?) Once in heaven, can you trust as true all that you believe? Once in heaven, is there no difference between knowledge and belief?

Why should we think that all of our questions will be answered when we die? Why should we think that *any* of them will be answered with any certainty?

“Either God is a mystery or He is nothing at all. To ask for a proof of the existence of God is on a par with asking for a proof of the existence of beauty. If God does not lie at the end of any telescope, neither does he lie at the end of any syllogism. . . .”
—W. T. Stace (1886-1967)