

## Does God exist?

A worldview is a comprehensive philosophical position, one that provides a fundamental outlook on the world and on human existence. In this essay I'll formulate both Christian Theism (hereafter simply "Theism") and Naturalism, and then set forth a brief case for each. A critical evaluation of the arguments for these views is left up to the reader.

### I. Theism

Theism can be formulated as follows:

Theism: (1) There is exactly one Being that is (2) perfectly morally good and (3) almighty and that (4) exists of necessity.

Let me comment briefly on each of these clauses. (1) Christian Theists are monotheists, that is, they believe that there is only one God, not many gods. (2) Theists believe that God is perfectly morally good. Traditionally Christians understand this to mean that God is perfectly loving, perfectly just, and perfectly wise.

(3) "God is almighty" means roughly that God is maximally powerful; but are there any limits on the power it is possible for a being to have? According to most Christian theologians since at least the time of Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), the answer is yes, there are logical limits. Something is logically impossible if its description contains a logical contradiction (either explicitly or implicitly). For example, could God have the power to bring it about that God exists *while he doesn't exist*? Or the power to lift an un-lift-able object? Or the power to *force* a person to perform a specific act while simultaneously allowing the person to perform that act *freely*? Or the power to be perfectly good *while sinning*? It seems that even God could not have these powers. <sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Theists insist that God has the power to do quite amazing things, such as create the entire physical universe *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), bring a dead person back to life, or still a raging storm.

An almighty being would be non-physical, since an entity counts as physical only if it is governed by laws of nature (such as the law of gravity) and an almighty being is not governed by laws of nature. <sup>2</sup> (If a being were governed by laws of nature, then it would be unable to do miracles and clearly, on the traditional conception, God can do miracles.) Traditional Theists also regard God as non-physical for another reason, namely, they think of God as the Creator of physical reality. But if God were a physical being, then God could create only *part* of physical reality, specifically, the part outside of himself.

If knowledge is a form of power, then if God is almighty, God has as much knowledge as it is logically possible to have (i.e., God is all-knowing). And it is plausible to suppose that knowledge is a form of power. Imagine a truth-false exam on *all* of the knowable propositions. Among the powers an almighty being would have, surely, would be the power to answer all the items on the exam correctly and infallibly. But then, clearly, an almighty being is also an all-knowing being.

(4) Most Christian theologians have insisted that God exists of necessity. A necessary being is one that cannot fail to exist. By contrast, a contingent being is one that does exist but would not exist under different circumstances. For example, human beings exist contingently. Presumably I would never have existed if my parents had never met and had sex. Yet, it is logically possible that one of my parents died at birth—that could have happened, though it did not.

Why do Christian theologians typically claim that God exists of necessity? For at least two reasons. First, Theists generally think of God as the most perfect being possible. And many Theists believe that necessary existence is a more perfect form of existence than contingent existence. Second, God is the creator of *all* contingent beings, according to Theists, but God is uncreated. So, God must not exist contingently, but of necessity.

## II. Naturalism

Naturalism can be formulated as follows:

Naturalism: (1) There is a physical reality that is by its very nature organized (i.e., the organization is not imposed by a god or any other force or agent); (2) physical reality exists eternally or by chance; and (3) leaving aside possible special cases (such as numbers or other abstract entities), all entities are physical.

Let me briefly comment on each clause. (1) Physical reality doesn't need to be designed or organized by an intelligent being; it is *inherently* organized. Scientists can describe this organization in terms of the laws of nature, e.g., the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology.

(2) If physical reality wasn't created, how did it "get here"? Naturalists will say either that physical reality has always been in existence or that it came into existence purely by chance. Now, the idea that physical reality "popped" into existence out of nothing (and without any cause) is not very plausible. So, Naturalists typically hold that physical reality in some form or other has always been in existence. Notice: they do not say that the physical universe of our acquaintance has always existed. According to contemporary science, our physical universe has existed for 12-15 billion years. That's a long time, but it's not an infinitely long time. So, Naturalists usually claim that our universe was preceded by some other *physical* state or situation.

(3) Physical reality is the ultimate reality, according to Naturalists. There is no God (or anything like God), no angels, no demons, and so on. Now, some Naturalists allow for the existence of abstract entities, which are not physical. An abstract entity is one that cannot enter into causal relations. For example, take the number seventeen. You cannot bump into it; you cannot strike someone with the number seventeen; you cannot make it vanish. (Yes, you can erase *numerals* from a chalkboard, but that has no effect whatsoever on the *number* seventeen. And humans might conceivably destroy themselves in a nuclear holocaust, but if they did, surely there would still be some *number* of planets, stars, etc., even if there was no one around who could count them.) So, some Naturalists do allow for the existence of non-physical abstract entities, but these entities can play no causal role. *The only entities that can cause anything to happen are physical entities.*

In the discussion that follows I will make the following simplifying assumption: *Either Theism is true or Naturalism is true*. Of course there are other possibilities, such as polytheism or the belief that the physical world is just an illusion. But my simplifying assumption is needed to keep the discussion focused and relatively brief. Moreover, it seems to me that Theism and Naturalism are the two great metaphysical alternatives in the contemporary marketplace of ideas, so it makes sense to focus on them. And my purpose here is quite limited: to set forth some key arguments for Theism and for Naturalism. As mentioned previously, the evaluation of the arguments is left up to the reader.

### III. Arguments for Naturalism

#### A. The Appeal to Simplicity

Suppose someone is explaining how a wristwatch works. He explains in detail how the spring connects to the gears which in turn cause the hands of the watch to move. He then adds, “Of course, each watch is inhabited by a watch-angel that makes the watch keep time. Without a watch-angel, a watch won’t work at all.” No doubt you would reject this claim regarding watch-angels. Why? Basically, for two reasons. First, there is no direct evidence for watch-angels, e.g., no one has ever seen a watch-angel. But no one has ever seen subatomic particles such as quarks either, yet scientists believe that quarks exist. So, science isn’t *necessarily* opposed to hypotheses involving unobservable entities. Why do scientists believe that quarks exist? Simply put, because, by postulating quarks, they get the best explanation of certain phenomena. But postulating watch-angels does not yield a similar benefit. The explanation in terms of springs and gears is fully adequate. We do not improve on that explanation by postulating watch-angels. The watch-angel idea unnecessarily complicates our explanation.

The general principle here is one that most people find plausible and acceptable. It is called the Principle of Simplicity: *If a hypothesis is unnecessarily complicated, it is probably false (and so, should be rejected)*. In practice, both Theists and Naturalists generally seem to presuppose a principle of this type.

From the Naturalist’s point of view, Theism may have made sense before the rise of science. Faced with mystery upon mystery in the physical world, an appeal to God (or the gods) may have been the best explanation available to humans, in many cases. But the situation has changed dramatically since the rise of science. For example, whereas lightning and thunder were seen by the ancient Greeks as the work of Zeus, nowadays we can explain such phenomena in terms of the laws of nature. And whereas the rich diversity of life forms on earth was perhaps once best explained by appeal to a Creator, this phenomenon can now be explained in terms of Darwin’s theory of evolution. And whereas human thoughts and feelings may once have been best explained by appeal to a non-physical soul, these phenomena are now best explained via neuroscience, in terms of brain-processes.

To sum up the Naturalist’s appeal to simplicity, it runs as follows: There is no direct evidence for God’s existence, e.g., no one has literally seen God. Indeed, it’s obviously impossible to see or touch a non-physical entity. Furthermore, the “God hypothesis” is not the best explanation of any phenomenon; rather, the appeal to God is like the appeal to a watch-angel. Take any phenomenon: Either science can already explain it or probably will someday,

and in any case the appeal to God seems unhelpful. For example, suppose scientists cannot *currently* explain how a certain type of bird migrates to the same location every year. Nevertheless, this seems to be the kind of thing that science will someday be able to explain and furthermore, “God makes it happen” is not an illuminating explanation. It seems, then, that the belief that God exists is no more credible than the belief that watch-angels exist.

The Naturalist’s appeal to simplicity can best be evaluated by considering a cumulative case for Theism, which draws attention to phenomena that many believe Theism explains better than Naturalism does. We will examine a cumulative case for Theism in section IV below.

### B. The Problem of Evil

We are assuming, for the sake of the argument, that either Theism or Naturalism is true. Accordingly, an argument of the following form is in the offing:

1. Either Theism or Naturalism is true.
2. Theism is not true.
3. So, Naturalism is true.

And Naturalists have a well-known argument in favor of premise (2). If God exists, then God is perfectly morally good and almighty. But given the suffering and evil in the world, it seems impossible or at least very unlikely that there exists a being who is both perfectly morally good and almighty. This, in a nutshell, is the problem of evil. Let me elaborate.

If God is perfectly morally good, God is perfectly loving and just. And if God is perfectly loving, God doesn’t want people to suffer unless there is a good (adequate) reason to let them suffer. Now, Theists have offered various reasons God might have for allowing suffering. And some of the reasons may explain *some* suffering. The problem is that the reasons don’t come close to explaining either the total amount of suffering in the world or the more intense kinds of suffering. For example, if God gives us free will, so that we can choose between good and evil, this might explain some suffering that results from the abuse of free will, e.g., one person tells a lie and someone else suffers as a result. But the appeal to free will explains none of the suffering that results from non-human causes, such as diseases, birth defects, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, droughts, floods, extreme temperatures, and animal attacks. Furthermore, even if the appeal to free will explains some suffering due to the abuse of free will, it doesn’t seem to justify the extreme suffering that results from genocide or torture. A loving parent would not allow such things to occur--he or she would interfere to stop them (if able to do so). Similarly, if God really is “our Father in heaven,” as Theists claim, God would interfere to stop such horrors. But since such horrors often occur, there can be no God who is both perfectly loving and almighty. And given our simplifying assumption, this means there is no god at all.

Of course, we could consider other *theodicies*, i.e., attempts to state God’s reasons (actual or possible) for permitting suffering and evil. For example, it has been suggested that God allows evil and suffering so we can understand and appreciate goodness. But it is very implausible to suggest that we could not understand and appreciate goodness unless genocide occurs from time to time! The proposed theodicies all become implausible when we consider a full range of the horrible suffering and evil that goes on in the world. So, it’s extremely unlikely that Theism is true. And we are left with Naturalism, given our simplifying assumption. <sup>3</sup>

### C. The Problem of Divine Hiddenness

John Schellenberg's "Hiddenness Argument" provides Naturalists with additional support for the claim that Theism is not true: <sup>4</sup>

1. There are people who are capable of relating personally to God but who, through no fault of their own, fail to believe that God exists.
2. If there is a personal God who loves everyone, then there are no such people.
3. So, there is no such God.

The support for premise 1 would include claims such as the following: Some people are brought up in non-theistic religions, such as Buddhism or Advaita Vedanta (a non-theistic form of Hinduism). And historically speaking, many cultures have believed in gods of a sort that do not engage in personal relationships with humans—e.g., gods who are not loving and who keep their distance from humans. Furthermore, some people are brought up by parents who teach them that theology is simply superstition. Finally, some people are brought up to believe in God, but as adults, when they examine the evidence for God's existence, they honestly find it lacking, and—in spite of being predisposed to believe, their belief fades away. It is plausible to suppose that people in these types of situations are not at fault for lacking the belief that God exists.

The support for premise 2 runs as follows: A loving God would want a personal relationship with every human, for such a relationship would be a blessing for each human. But humans cannot have a personal relationship with God if they do not believe that God exists. Hence, God would make his existence known to each human--except perhaps in the case of humans whose free choices have in some way blinded them spiritually or rendered them unsuited to the knowledge of God's existence.

Someone might ask, "But do the people who don't believe that God exists *try hard enough* to seek God out? Maybe the problem is that they just don't try hard enough." Several questions need to be considered here. First, if God really wants a personal relationship with everyone, why would God make it hard to know that he exists? Second, is it really plausible to think that non-believers in general don't try hard enough to seek God out? What's the standard for trying hard enough? (Do believers in general try harder than non-believers?) Third, if you believe that God exists, do you honestly think you would have that belief if you had been brought up in a religion that does not include it, such as Buddhism? Finally, consider your attitude toward religions or philosophies of life other than your own. Have you made it a priority to seek out the truth about each of them? If not, can you reasonably blame those having non-theistic world views if they don't make it a priority to seek out the truth about Theism?

To sum up, an almighty God would be able to make his presence known to human beings. A loving God would want to make his presence known to them. Yet, a great many people, past and present, do not believe that a loving God exists. And it is implausible to suppose that this lack of belief is always the fault of the human individuals. So, there is no God who loves all humans. But, again, if Theism is not true, then, given our simplifying assumption, Naturalism is true.

Theists have tried to respond to the problem of divine hiddenness in many ways. Ten responses are summarized here, without any attempt to evaluate them. The first four responses challenge the first premise of the hiddenness argument: “There are people who are capable of relating personally to God but who, through no fault of their own, fail to believe that God exists.”

1. **Wickedness.** Not believing that God exists is always due to wickedness. “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them” (Romans 1: 18-19).
2. **Enough Evidence.** There is enough evidence to establish the belief that God exists; so if a person does not believe, it is through some rational fault of his or her own, e.g., careless reasoning or failure to pay attention to the evidence.
3. **The Incarnation.** The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, became a human being and “dwelt among us” (John 1:14). And Jesus reportedly said, “He that has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14: 9). Thus, the incarnation provides enough light for those who seek God.
4. **Unconscious Belief.** Since “God *is* the Good (or God’s moral goodness is His most salient feature), pursuit of the Good is, in fact, pursuit of God, even if one does not *consciously* recognize it as such.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, one is a non-believer only if one fails to seek the good--a failure for which one would be at fault. In short, pursuit of the Good indicates an *unconscious belief* that God exists. “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee . . .? When did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee . . .? When did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee? And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me’” (Matthew 25: 37-40).

The remaining responses are meant to challenge the second premise of the hiddenness argument: “If there is a personal God who loves everyone, then there are no people who (a) are capable of relating personally to God but who (b) fail to believe that God exists through no fault of their own.”

5. **Learning through Deprivation.** God remains hidden because we need to understand what our situation is *if there is no God*; only then can we appreciate what it is that God means to us.
6. **Hope is Enough.** One can act on the assumption that God exists (e.g., worship, pray, and obey divine commands) without *believing* that God exists: *believing* involves being *confident* that God exists. But in fact, it is enough to hope that God exists and to act on the assumption that God exists. So, contrary to the hiddenness argument, we don’t have to *believe* that God exists in order to have a personal relationship with God. God remains hidden because the belief that God exists is not necessary in order to have an appropriate relationship with God.
7. **Afterlife.** Everyone will have sufficient evidence for God’s existence eventually, in the life after death. So, divine hiddenness is only temporary. At the appropriate time, God will fully reveal God’s self.
8. **Love Allows Rational Unbelief.** We live in a world that is ambiguous in regard to God’s existence. There is significant evidence for God’s existence but also significant evidence against God’s existence. In this setting, it is rational to believe that God exists but also rational to believe that God does not exist; this is the sense in which God is hidden. If God were not hidden, the existence of God would be

absolutely clear, i.e., there would be *decisive* evidence in favor of God's existence and it would be positively *irrational* not to believe that God exists. (Not believing that God exists would be like not believing the earth is round.) Now, God wants to give us space to choose to be the kind of persons we will be; God does not want to overwhelm us, manipulate us, or constantly play the role of an unwelcome chaperon. (God is like the king in Kierkegaard's story of the king and the beautiful peasant maiden. The king falls in love with the maiden, but because of his exalted status, power, and wealth, he must, at least for a time, relate to her in disguise; otherwise she will be overwhelmed, unable to be herself, and unable to return his love authentically. <sup>6</sup>) God's hiddenness gives human beings the option of *rationally* adopting a way of life that does not involve trusting God. And in fact it is apparent that many people *choose* not to live a life focused on love, as God requires; that's why we have to lock our doors, use passwords, fear taking a walk late at night, and so on. On the other hand, many people interpret the evidence differently, and form the belief in God and try to follow the way of holy love. Still others, of course, seek goodness but cannot see their way to belief in God; assuming they fail to believe through no fault of their own, God will not judge them negatively for their non-belief.

9. **Purifying the Motives of the Favorable.** People who are favorable to religion but do not believe that God exists *through no fault of their own* are in various spiritual states: (a) Some are favorable to religion but mostly because of how and where they were brought up. It would be good for them to make their favorable attitude more "their own" by having to seek God. (b) Some may be favorable to religion but for less-than-ideal motives, e.g., to get "earthly" blessings, to gain power or influence, or to avoid divine punishment. Having to seek God may help these to purify their motives--to love God because of God's moral beauty. <sup>7</sup>
10. **Skeptical Theism.** Divine hiddenness is a problem only on the assumption that we would be likely to know God's reasons for remaining hidden if an *omniscient* God exists; but this assumption is not warranted. We stand to God as a little child stands to its parents: just as a little child is often unable to conceive of or grasp its parents' motives, we often cannot conceive of or grasp the divine motives. God remains hidden for reasons we humans cannot possibly fathom.

Which, if any, of the above responses to the hiddenness argument seem most promising to you? Which, if any, seem least promising?

#### IV. A Cumulative Case for Theism

It is widely agreed that the best case for Theism involves a combination of different arguments. This might be compared to the combination of lines of evidence in a murder trial, for instance, eyewitness testimony, forensic evidence (e.g., fingerprints on the murder weapon), and the defendant's confession. While none of these lines of evidence may be adequate all by itself, together they may form a strong body of evidence.

##### A. Religious Experience

The phrase "religious experience" can refer to many different types of experience, e.g., the experience of prayer, a feeling of peace while meditating, a conviction of guilt over sin, or an emotional "high" while singing a hymn. But for the present let's focus on *theistic mystical experience*, the apparent direct awareness of the presence of God. The prophetic literature in the Bible contains many descriptions of such experiences. But here are two modern examples:

I was in perfect health: We were on our sixth day of tramping, and in good training . . . I can best describe the condition in which I was by calling it a state of equilibrium. When all at once I experienced a feeling of being raised above myself. I felt the presence of God—I tell of the thing just as I was conscious of it—as if his goodness and his power were penetrating me altogether. The throb of emotion was so violent that I could barely tell the boys to pass on and not wait for me. I then sat down on a stone . . . I thanked God that in the course of my life he had taught me to know him . . . Then, slowly, the ecstasy left my heart; that is, I felt that God had withdrawn the communion which he had granted, and I was able to walk on, but slowly, so strongly was I still possessed by the interior emotion. <sup>8</sup>

Then, just as I was exhausted and despairing—I had the most wonderful sense of the presence of God. He was in a particular place in the room about five feet from me—I didn't look up, but kept my head in my hands and my eyes shut. It was a feeling of an all-embracing love which called forth every ounce of love I had in me. It was the tenderest love I have every encountered. <sup>9</sup>

The appeal to religious experience can be formulated as an argument:

1. Any apparent experience of something is to be regarded as veridical unless we have sufficient reasons to the contrary. <sup>10</sup> (The Principle of Credulity)
2. Experiences occur which seem to their subjects to be experiences of God.
3. There are no good reasons for thinking that all or most experiences which seem to their subjects to be of God are non-veridical (delusive).
4. So, some experiences of God should be regarded as veridical.

Let me comment briefly on the premises of this argument. A *veridical* experience is one that is really of the object it appears to be of—as opposed to, say, an hallucination or a mirage. The first premise is called the Principle of Credulity. It says, in effect, that any experience should be given the benefit of the doubt. In other words, in general, we don't have to prove that an experience is veridical; on the contrary, we need good reasons to *deny* that an experience is veridical before rejecting it. The Principle of Credulity is defended by claiming that, unless we accept it, we will fall into radical skepticism. For example, we have no way of proving that our sense experiences are veridical. <sup>11</sup> We have to proceed by assuming that our sense experiences are veridical, rejecting only experiences that are problematic in some specific way. To illustrate: a pencil placed in a glass of water looks bent, but feels straight. This conflict between visual experience and tactile experience forces us to discount one or the other experience *in these circumstances*.

Notice that any appeal to experience seems to depend on the Principle of Credulity. Consider, for example, our experience of trees:

- a. Any apparent experience of something is to be regarded as veridical unless we have sufficient reasons to the contrary. (The Principle of Credulity)
- b. Experiences occur which seem to their subjects to be experiences of trees.
- c. There are no good reasons for thinking that all or most experiences which seem to their subjects to be of trees are non-veridical.
- d. So, some experiences of trees should be regarded as veridical.

Now, if our belief in trees is justified by this argument, why can't the belief in God be justified by a similar argument? That's the question.

The most controversial premise in the appeal to religious experience is premise (3). Various reasons have been proposed for thinking that all theistic mystical experiences are non-veridical, including:

- A. It is impossible for a merely finite human to experience the presence of a being that is infinite in power and knowledge.
- B. Most people have never had experiences (in the sense of a direct awareness) of the presence of God.
- C. People interpret experiences in terms of their prior beliefs. For example, while Roman Catholics occasionally have visions of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Protestants do not.
- D. Religious experience cannot be tested as sense experience can. For example, I can confirm my visual experience of some object by asking you if you see it. Or I can confirm my visual experience of, say, a table or chair, by reaching out and touching it.
- E. Religious experience can be caused by factors other than God, e.g., psychological or neurological factors. For example, some have suggested that religious experience may be caused by a brain abnormality.
- F. People in different religions have different experiences. For example, while Christians, Jews, and Muslims may have experiences of the presence of a personal God, for Buddhists and Hindus the object of religious experience may be "some fact or feature of reality, rather than some entity separate from the universe."<sup>12</sup> Thus, a Hindu may have an experience of "Brahman [ultimate reality], and its identity with the self"; a Zen Buddhist may have an experience revealing that "reality contains no distinctions or dualities."<sup>13</sup>

Defenders of religious experience reply in various ways. For example, regarding (A), the issue of what can be experienced cannot be settled simply by armchair theorizing. And many people claim to have experienced the presence of a being that is all-powerful and perfectly good. Think about it like this. How do we experience the presence of other people? We see their bodies, of course, but when we say we see a person, we are claiming that we see something that has mental states--feelings, thoughts, beliefs, desires, intentions, and so on. And we cannot literally see such mental states. Nevertheless, we can rightly claim to experience the presence of other people. We simply seem to be "wired" to believe that a person is present when we detect the presence of a living human body. Similarly, perhaps we—or at least many people--are "wired" to believe that God is present under certain circumstances, e.g., when having a profound sense of awe, or when feeling guilty about something we've done wrong.

Regarding (B), bear in mind that relatively few people can hear the subtle harmonies and disharmonies that the conductor of an orchestra can hear. And this is not a good reason to regard the conductor's auditory experiences as delusory. Similarly, a skilled tracker may be able to detect signs that the vast majority of people would overlook.<sup>14</sup>

Regarding (C), it is probably true that most religious experiences conform to the subject's prior beliefs. But this is not always so. Many conversions result from religious experiences. A famous case is that of Saul of Tarsus. Saul was not a Christian when he set out for Damascus; in fact, he was a persecutor of Christians, whom he regarded as deeply misguided.

Thus, Saul was certainly not expecting an experience of the risen Lord but his experience of the Lord on the road to Damascus convinced him that Jesus was Lord and Christ (Acts 9: 1-19). Another example is that of the French philosopher Simone Weil (1909-43), who had never believed in God and found the standard arguments for God's existence unconvincing. One day while she was reciting a poem, she had an experience of the presence of God, and as a result she became a believer. Commenting on her numerous experiences of this type, Weil later remarked, "In my arguments about the insolubility of the problem of God I had never foreseen the possibility of that, of a real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God. I had vaguely heard tell of things of this kind, but I had never believed in them."<sup>15</sup>

Regarding (D), the defenders of religious experience may suggest that it is wrong to assume that every veridical experience can be tested in the way sense experience can be tested. For example, through introspection I may know that I'm feeling a bit sad today, but if someone is skeptical about my introspective experience, what test can be applied? There doesn't seem to be any test, at least nothing similar to the way in which a visual experience (say, seeing a tree) can be tested by a tactile experience (touching the tree), or by asking someone else if they see the tree. And if we can trust introspection without having tests for it, perhaps it is reasonable to trust religious experience without tests.

As for (E), defenders of religious experience will remind us of the need to distinguish between proximate causes and more remote causes. For example, the proximate cause of my visual experience of a tree may be a brain process; it doesn't follow that the tree itself is not a link in the causal chain that produced my experience. Similarly, even if the proximate cause of a religious experience is a brain process or a psychological factor, God could still be a more remote cause of the experience.

Regarding (F), defenders of religious experience may make several observations. First, all experience is interpreted and reports of sense experience often conflict--think of two eyewitnesses disagreeing in a court of law. We do not for these reasons conclude that sense experience in general is delusory. It is true, of course, that if experience-reports conflict logically, we need some reason to accept one report over another, or else we can only suspend judgment. But we need to make sure that the reports really do conflict logically and in the case of religious experience, this is not always easy to discern. Second, many religious doctrines are not based on religious experience. For instance, the Christian belief that Jesus died on a cross is not based on religious experience; Christians take it to be based ultimately on eyewitness reports of his crucifixion. So, we should not automatically assume that, if the doctrines of two religions conflict, those doctrines are based on conflicting religious experience-reports. Third, in many cases the content of the experience-report is itself problematic. For example, some religious believers claim that God has told them to perform immoral acts.<sup>16</sup> Such alleged revelations seem highly dubious assuming that God is loving and just. And consider the experience of some Hindu and Buddhist mystics that all apparent distinctions or differences are unreal. This experience directly contradicts the deliverances of our sense experience, which tell us that there are many distinct objects in the world and many distinct persons. And if the report of a religious experience conflicts with what sense experience tells us, doesn't that mean the report is highly problematic? It would seem so. Or consider that, within Hinduism, "a great many kinds of experiences are of Brahman [Ultimate Reality], and its identity with the self."<sup>17</sup> Can a human self be identical with Ultimate Reality? And if so, would that mean that all human selves are in

the end identical with each other? If not, is the meaning of the experience-report sufficiently clear to base any conclusion on? Finally, consider an experience, common among Buddhists, in which the meditator “sheds various delusions and attachments. The last one to go is the delusion that he or she is a self.”<sup>18</sup> There is no abiding self--“all of reality is made up of sequences of momentary events.”<sup>19</sup> But in order to have an experience, doesn’t there have to be an “experiencer,” a self, a subject, a thing that has the experience? If so, then, again, the very content of the experience-report seems problematic.

People react to the appeal to religious experience in various ways. Some dismiss it completely. Others enthusiastically endorse it. Still others steer a middle course: These people find religious experience intriguing but feel that it leaves us with only a “maybe”--more precisely, religious experience can rightly lead us to take the possibility that God exists more seriously than we otherwise would, but by itself religious experience provides rather weak evidence for God’s existence; however, we *can* at least say that given theistic mystical experience, “God exists” is in a very different category than, say, “Santa Claus exists” or “Watch-angels exist,” for there is a long tradition of apparently sincere reports of the experience of the presence of God, and nothing similar in the case of Santa and watch-angels.

#### B. Cosmological Argument

Roughly speaking, cosmological arguments move from the existence of the world (cosmos) to the existence of a Being who causes (or caused) the world to exist. There are a variety of cosmological arguments, but we will consider just one here. This version depends on the distinction between contingent beings and necessary beings.

Recall that a necessary being is one that cannot fail to exist under any circumstances, while a contingent being is one that exists but could fail to exist under different circumstances. Most of the beings of our acquaintance seem to be contingent. Animals are born, they die, and cease to exist. Plants also come into being, then die and cease to exist. According to physicists, even subatomic particles did not always exist, but came into being at an early stage in the expansion of the universe. So, all of these beings are apparently contingent.

Are there any necessary beings? This is a matter of controversy. But numbers are arguably necessary beings. Some people deny this because they think of numbers as existing in our minds. But suppose all human beings were annihilated in a nuclear war. Wouldn’t there still be some number of planets and stars? Furthermore, there is no reason to think that one can destroy numbers by destroying physical objects. (If there were no physical objects, the number of physical objects would be zero, and not one, not two, and so on.) So, it is plausible to suppose that numbers exist of necessity; they cannot fail to exist under any circumstances. Now, Theists think of God as the greatest being possible, so they think of God as having the greatest possible mode of existence. And necessary existence seems greater than merely contingent existence. So, if God exists, then God exists of necessity. (Surely numbers do not have a greater mode of existence than God!) Furthermore, Theists think of God as the creator of *all* contingent beings but not the creator of himself. So, again, from the perspective of traditional theism, if God exists, then God must exist of necessity.

Consider all of the contingent beings—a vast number of entities. What explains their existence? Let’s start with the *currently* living animals and plants. Naturally, we can explain their

existence by appealing to biological reproduction. But the currently living animals and plants are preceded by a very long chain of causes. That chain of causes goes back beyond the time when life was first present on earth (roughly 3.5 billion years ago, according to contemporary science). Indeed, that chain of causes presumably goes all the way back to the so-called Big Bang (12-15 billion years ago). And the chain of causes may go back even further than that, since no one knows what preceded the Big Bang. Furthermore, as far as we can tell, all the entities in this chain of physical causes are contingent beings.

How does Naturalism explain the presence of contingent beings—not this or that contingent being, but the very presence of contingent beings? In fact, Naturalists typically offer no explanation. They typically claim that the existence of physical reality (and hence the existence of contingent beings) is a *brute fact*, i.e., a fact that cannot be explained. They simply take the existence of physical reality for granted—they do not explain its presence. And notice that nothing would be gained by postulating (hypothesizing) the existence of additional contingent beings. We cannot explain the presence of a type of being by *postulating* that there are more beings of that type!

How does Theism explain the presence of contingent beings? Theism explains their presence as ultimately due to God's choice. But to understand this explanation, we must think about a more fundamental issue: *Why would God create anything?* Here we must recall the content of the Theistic hypothesis under consideration, which includes the idea that God is perfectly good—an idea with far-reaching implications. If God is perfectly good, then God is perfectly loving. And a loving being is generous. A generous being wants to share good things with many others. And a powerful God could share many wonderful things, such as the experience of beauty, the delight in creative activity, the satisfaction of loving personal relationships, the joy of acquiring knowledge, and pleasures—both physical and mental. But of course, to share these good things with many others, God must create many others. Thus, a loving, generous God would have good reason to create many intelligent conscious beings with whom to share good things, beings such as humans. Of course, God would also have reason to create non-physical intelligent beings, such as angels. But embodied intelligent beings would plausibly be the most remarkable feature of a physical universe, its crowning feature. And God would have multiple reasons to create the physical universe. First, the universe is spectacularly beautiful. Second, the stability of the universe makes it a suitable theatre for the action of free agents. (Just consider how our actions presuppose the stability or regularity of our environment. For example, in a simple act such as handing someone a loaf of bread, we must take it for granted that the bread won't suddenly evaporate and that our arms and hands will do what we want them to do.) Third, the universe is, so to speak, an engineering marvel, fascinating to observe and to explore. To sum up, *Theists can explain the presence of contingent beings in terms of reasons a generous God would have to create a physical reality that includes intelligent conscious creatures.*

Here's an outline of the Cosmological Argument:

1. There are contingent beings.
2. Theism explains the presence of contingent beings better than Naturalism does. (The last two paragraphs provide the support for this premise.)

3. In general, if hypothesis H1 explains the presence of X (some phenomenon) better than a rival hypothesis H2 does, we have a reason to accept H1 over H2.
4. So, the presence of contingent beings gives us a reason to accept Theism over Naturalism.

Notice that the conclusion is not that God exists. Rather, the point of the argument is that the presence of contingent beings gives us some reason to believe that God exists. (Recall that we are examining a *cumulative* case for God's existence. So, this argument is meant to be combined with others.)

Now, you might be thinking: If Naturalism can't explain the presence of contingent beings, Theism can't explain the existence of God; so these hypotheses have a similar deficiency. But remember, according to our Theistic hypothesis, if God exists, then God is a necessary being. And a necessary being simply cannot fail to exist under any circumstances. So, there is no need to find a cause or further explanation of the existence of a necessary being. By its very nature it cannot fail to exist. Asking, "Why does God exist?" is like asking, "Why does  $1 + 1 = 2$ ? Or why is every object identical with itself? Answer: It can't be otherwise.

One of the all-time great philosophical questions is, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" Theism suggests, in effect, that we get the best answer to that question if we postulate a Creator who exists of necessity. And notice that it's important to the Theistic argument that God is loving, for it is God's love (and hence God's generosity) that explains why God would want to create intelligent conscious beings and share good things with them. It is God's free decision to create that explains the presence of contingent beings.

But couldn't Naturalists postulate that some part or aspect of physical reality is a necessary being? In principle they could, though they seldom do. First, since necessity is not testable in a scientific way, many Naturalists reject the idea of a necessary being entirely. Second, if Naturalists attempt to explain the presence of contingent beings by postulating a necessary entity of some sort, then they complicate their hypothesis in two very significant ways;

1. Many physical entities are plainly contingent, so Naturalists who claim that some physical entities are necessary would be committed to a dualism of physical entities, i.e., there are two radically different kinds of physical entities, the contingent ones and the necessary ones. Such a dualism would be mysterious.
2. Naturalists would need to explain how the necessary part of physical reality generates contingent beings. Of course, Naturalists are free to speculate, but they cannot do so without complicating their hypothesis.

In short, Naturalism faces a dilemma. Either it cannot explain the presence of contingent beings or it must take on significant complications that sharply qualify its original "appeal to simplicity."

Some Naturalists might reply that they simply accept the presence of contingent beings as a brute (inexplicable) fact. Why not? But consider how Naturalists would be apt to respond to a Theist who said, "I simply accept the presence of suffering as a brute fact. I feel no need to explain it." While no worldview can explain everything, the failure to explain some salient



(3) “Fine-tuned” does not mean “fine-tuned by God.” Non-theists can and do accept the facts about fine-tuning; and there is no inconsistency whatsoever in their doing so.

To the best of our knowledge, each of the physical parameters (force of gravity, strong nuclear force, mass of the electron, and so on) could have been different from what it is. So, the question naturally arises, what explains the fact that these parameters have values that support life?

Now scientists may discover that some or even all of these apparently independent parameters are linked by some underlying physical structures, as yet unknown. But in the nature of the case, science cannot explain the ultimate (most basic) structures of the physical universe. *Once we get to the most basic structures, we can describe them, but there is nothing more basic to revert to.* With this in mind, the phenomenon the design argument attempts to explain is as follows:

*Phenomenon:* The ultimate (most basic) structures of the physical universe support life—intelligent, conscious life; and given that slight changes in the most basic structures would alter the facts about fine-tuning, slight changes in these structures would destroy their capacity to support life.

The current scientific descriptions of fine-tuning are presumably not descriptions of the most basic structures of the universe. Physicists haven’t finished their work, and perhaps they never will. But whatever the most basic structures of our universe are, they plainly support intelligent life. And in the nature of the case, science cannot explain these most basic structures, science can only describe them. *So, explanations at this level (if there are any) must be philosophical in nature.*

In outline form, the Design Argument looks like this:

1. The physical universe is fine-tuned (i.e., the most basic structures of the physical universe support life and slight changes in these structures would destroy their capacity to support life).
2. Theism explains the presence of a fine-tuned universe better than Naturalism does.
3. In general, if hypothesis H1 explains the presence of X (some phenomenon) better than a rival hypothesis H2 does, we have a reason to accept H1 over H2.
4. So, the presence of a fine-tuned universe gives us a reason to accept Theism over Naturalism.

Notice that the conclusion is not “God exists.” Rather, the point of the argument is that our fine-tuned universe gives us some reason to believe that God exists. So, this argument is meant to be combined with others to form a cumulative case for Theism. There is little debate about premises (1) and (3), but much discussion about premise (2). To evaluate premise (2), we must compare the Naturalistic and Theistic explanations of fine-tuning.

Naturalists offer a variety of explanations of fine-tuning. Here we can only consider three. First, Naturalists point out that improbable things do happen. For example, suppose we take a well-shuffled deck of playing cards, draw cards at random, one by one, and lay them face up in the exact order in which they are drawn. What are the chances of obtaining just *that*

sequence of cards, say, ten of diamonds, jack of hearts, five of spades, ace of clubs, nine of hearts, . . . (a typical random sequence)? The answer is: One chance out of  $52 \times 51 \times 50 \times \dots \times 1$ . In other words, one chance out of:

80,658,175,170,943,878,571,660,636,856,403,766,975,289,505,440,883,277,824,000,000,000,000

That's an astronomically small chance, but still "improbable things occur" seems the best explanation of the sequence.

Suppose, however, that the sequence of cards turned out to be diamonds in perfect descending order (ace, king, queen, jack, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, and so on), followed by hearts in perfect descending order, followed by spades in perfect descending order, followed by clubs in perfect descending order. How likely is that sequence? *The numerical answer is the same.* But "improbable things occur" seems inadequate to explain this sequence. Why? Because the sequence is one of special interest to card-players and so we suspect the sequence has been rigged.

Theists typically find the "improbable things happen" explanation of our fine-tuned universe hard to swallow. After all, we have *some* reason to suppose that God exists. And we have seen that a good--hence, loving and generous--God would have strong reasons to create intelligent, embodied, conscious beings, in order to share good things with them—things such as beauty, physical pleasure, the delight in acquiring knowledge, the joy of personal relationships, and the satisfactions of creative activity. Such beings would be the crowning feature of a physical world. And a fine-tuned universe would make it possible for such beings to live. Accordingly, we reasonably find our fine-tuned universe "suspicious." From this perspective, the appeal to mere chance seems a good bit less than satisfying.

Faced with any puzzling phenomenon, we can always use the "improbable things happen" explanation. But unless we know the underlying structures and causes, as we do in the case of card-shuffling, lotteries, and dice-throwing, this type of explanation seems weak. And, indeed, many Naturalists share the feeling that "improbable things happen" is not an adequate explanation of the fine-tuned universe. Some of them have made the following proposal:

Physical reality can take only one form, precisely the form we find our universe to have.

We might call this the *Single-Universe hypothesis*. This hypothesis is arguably flawed for multiple reasons. First, what is "the form we find our universe to have"? The form is summed up in the terms "fine-tuned" or "life-supporting." But there simply is no logical connection between "Physical reality can have only one form" and "Physical reality is life-supporting." Thus, the Single-Universe hypothesis does not explain fine-tuning, it simply presupposes fine-tuning. Accordingly, the Single-Universe hypothesis is an explanatory failure. Second, most physicists assume the universe could be structured in various ways. So, the assumption that physical reality can have just one form is very much open to doubt. Third, the claim that physical reality *can* have only one form is a large-scale *metaphysical* claim, not an empirical or scientific claim. Thus, if we add the Single-Universe hypothesis to Naturalism we significantly complicate Naturalism, thus undermining the Naturalist's claim to have a simpler view than Theism.

Perhaps the current, front-running naturalistic proposal is the *multiverse hypothesis*. The basic idea of this hypothesis is that our universe is merely one among many actual universes.

There are lots of *actual* universes with their basic physical structures varying at random. They are regarded as distinct universes because they are distinct space-times, having different initial conditions (such as the total amount of energy), different laws of nature (such as the law of gravity), and/or different constants (such as the speed of light); in addition, there is no possibility of an object moving from one universe to another. *The central idea of the multiverse hypothesis is this: given that there are many actual universes differing randomly in regard to their basic physical structures, it is not surprising that at least one universe is life-supporting.*

To understand the multiverse hypothesis, think about playing poker. One cannot reasonably expect to be dealt a royal flush very often, but if one spends lots of time playing poker, one will probably eventually be dealt a royal flush. Similarly, if there are lots of actual universes whose basic physical features (e.g., laws, constants, and initial conditions) differ randomly, it is not surprising that at least one universe is fine-tuned.

Of course, no one has observed other universes. But Naturalists are free to speculate. And many physicists take the idea of a multiverse quite seriously, though, as physicist-turned-theologian John Polkinghorne observes:

The many-universes account is sometimes presented as if it were purely scientific, but in fact a sufficient portfolio of different universes could only be generated by speculative processes that go well beyond what sober science can honestly endorse. An example of such a metascientific idea would be the hypothesis that the universe eternally oscillates, the big bang subsequent on each big crunch producing a world with totally different physical laws.<sup>26</sup>

In short, the multiverse hypothesis, as employed by philosophical Naturalists, is metaphysics, not physics.

Does Naturalism together with the multiverse hypothesis—“Multiverse Naturalism”—offer a better explanation of fine-tuning than Theism does? Here we must consider at least two issues. (1) Obviously, Multiverse Naturalism complicates the Naturalistic hypothesis by adding on striking new claims--not just the claim that there are many universes, but also claims about how these universes are generated. And we need mechanisms that guarantee *enough* universes whose basic structures differ in random ways.

(2) It seems that there could be infinitely many universes, yet none that support life. Suppose we name all the possible universes, using the natural numbers: U1, U2, U3, . . . . If there are infinitely many universes, then clearly there are infinitely many odd numbered universes, but what if none of them support life? Perhaps only a few of the *even* numbered universes support life. So, it seems possible that there could be infinitely many universes (namely, the odd-numbered ones), yet none that support life. The question, then, is this: Even if we allow that there are infinitely many universes, does this (by itself) guarantee that at least one will *probably* support life? Apparently not. More importantly, if Multiverse Naturalists insist that they've postulated enough universes to make fine-tuning unsurprising, a second problem emerges: *Multiverse Naturalism explains too much, too easily; for by appeal to the multiverse we can explain any physical phenomenon P just by pointing out that, given that there are so many universes differing in random ways, it's not surprising that one of them contains P.* Any arrangement of physical particles or structures is apt to be realized if we postulate enough universes. So, the multiverse hypothesis can apparently explain *any* physical phenomenon. But

can it really be that easy to explain any and every physical phenomenon? Surely not. But, then, the multiverse approach offers a very dubious type of explanation; one that has all the advantages of theft over honest toil.

Naturalists might reply that “God did it” can explain anything too. But this reply seems to miss the mark. Theistic explanations must include more than an appeal to divine power or divine volition. They must provide plausible reasons for divine action, based on divine attributes, such as love and justice. And for most physical phenomena, no such plausible reasons are available. But theistic explanations may have plausibility in at least two types of cases: (a) cases that concern very general features of the world (e.g., that our universe supports life, or that contingent beings exist) and (b) apparent miracles (roughly, events that apparently have a redemptive purpose and are inexplicable via laws of nature, e.g., a person coming back to life after being dead for several days).

But just at this point some urge an alternate hypothesis, the hypothesis that a thoroughly evil, almighty Power accounts for the presence of our fine-tuned universe (and also the presence of contingent beings). Call this the “Evil-God” hypothesis.<sup>27</sup> An Evil-God might create intelligent conscious beings simply for its own amusement—to observe how they face the challenges of life on earth and to delight in their suffering and wrongdoing. And in the light of the problem of evil, doesn’t the Evil-God hypothesis make better sense than Theism? Of course, Naturalists cannot accept the Evil-God hypothesis, but they might claim it shows that the arguments for Theism fall short.

The Evil-God hypothesis, however, has a quite serious defect; it is self-defeating. But to see this we must take a somewhat indirect route. Start with the following thought experiment. Suppose you were locked in a very small room with no way to get out. And suppose there’s a slot in the door. Every minute or so a 3” by 5” card comes through the slot. Each card has a statement written on it. The statements concern topics you have no independent knowledge of; moreover, you have no way to check their accuracy. Furthermore, suppose you believe (never mind why) that the cards and statements are provided by a thoroughly evil being. How confident would you be that the statements on the cards are true? Surely you would have no confidence in their truth. An evil being cannot be trusted. It might provide you with some truth, but it might also delight in misleading you. You would be foolish to suppose that the majority of the statements were true.

Now, if we humans are created by a thoroughly evil God, then our cognitive faculties (the five senses, introspection, memory, and reason) are made by a being who cannot be trusted and who, for all we know, has no concern whatsoever that we obtain truth.<sup>28</sup> The assumption that our cognitive faculties generally yield truth is as dubious as the assumption that the statements on the cards in the thought experiment are generally true. Perhaps we are systematically misled by our cognitive faculties, to the delight of the Evil-God. Thus, the Evil-God hypothesis places a question mark over all of our beliefs. And that includes the Evil-God hypothesis itself, if we believe it. Hence, the Evil-God hypothesis is self-defeating—it calls itself into question. And obviously this is a very serious defect in a hypothesis.<sup>29</sup>

#### D. The Argument from Free Will and Moral Responsibility

Theists generally assume that there are important connections between God and morality, but different theologians and philosophers have different views of what those connections might

be. In this section and the next we'll explore two possible connections between God and morality. In both cases, however, we must work through some significant philosophical preliminaries before we can state an argument for God's existence.

Whenever we deliberate, we apparently assume that we have free will. Take a mundane case. You go to an Italian restaurant, look at the menu, and consider what to order: spaghetti or pizza? Let's say you opt for the spaghetti. Nevertheless, the fact that you deliberated indicates that you assumed you could have ordered the pizza instead. Your decision to order spaghetti marks a small "fork in the road" in your life; things might have gone otherwise, and the issue (however minor) was up to you, within your control.

Now, it is widely agreed that there is a connection between free will and moral responsibility. Suppose we hold someone morally responsible for robbing a bank or committing an act of arson. Aren't we generally assuming that the agent could have done otherwise? At minimum, he or she could have refrained from robbing the bank or starting the fire. Does it make sense to blame a person for doing some wrong act if he or she had no other options? Probably for most of us, the answer is, "No, it doesn't."

This answer is currently challenged by many philosophers. They offer one or more so-called "Frankfurt cases"--a special kind of thought experiment--in support of their view.<sup>30</sup> Here is a typical Frankfurt case. Suppose a mad scientist, Dr. X, has invented a "neuro-computer" that can monitor and control the brains of other people. Dr. X wants one of his assistants, Boris, to murder someone he (Dr. X) dislikes, namely, Joe. As it happens, Boris also dislikes Joe and has been thinking about killing him. (Dr. X and Boris aren't exactly the nicest people!) By using the neuro-computer, Dr. X finds out what's on Boris' mind. Dr. X could take control of Boris' brain and force him to kill Joe, and Dr. X will do so if the neuro-computer predicts that Boris will decide not to kill Joe. But the neuro-computer predicts that Boris will kill Joe, so Dr. X does not activate the control mechanism. And, indeed, Boris kills Joe. In this scenario, it seems that Boris would be morally responsible for killing Joe, but Boris had no alternative to killing Joe, because if the neuro-computer had predicted that Boris would not kill Joe *on his own*, then Dr. X would have activated the control mechanism and Boris would have killed Joe.

Does the Frankfurt case really show that we can be morally responsible for doing something when we have no other option? That seems very doubtful. First, Boris does have an alternative to *freely* killing Joe; for if Boris does not choose *on his own* to kill Joe, Dr. X will activate the control mechanism, in which case Boris will not kill Joe *freely*. If Dr. X activates the control mechanism, it is agreed that Boris becomes merely a tool in Dr. X's hands and Dr. X is responsible for the act. Second, in the absence of the neuro-computer (operated by Dr. X), it is assumed that Boris *would* have options, e.g., he could refrain from killing Joe. The neuro-computer is what is supposed to remove alternative courses of action for Boris. But on reflection this cannot be so. Here's why: if Dr. X wants Boris to act on his own, then Dr. X must make his decision *not* to activate the control mechanism *before* Boris makes his decision. But how could the neuro-computer infallibly predict what Boris *will* decide to do? That could only happen in a deterministic universe, in which Boris' decision and action were already guaranteed by the past and the laws of nature. In that case, the neuro-computer presupposes a deterministic universe and the Frankfurt case should be rejected by anyone who thinks determinism rules out free will. On

the other hand, if Boris' actions are not determined and the neuro-computer is making merely fallible predictions, then Boris might change his mind (and decide not to kill Joe) *moments after Dr. X has decided not to activate the control mechanism*, in which case Boris has an alternative after all.<sup>31</sup>

But *is* free will compatible with determinism? Determinism is the idea that given the past, only one future is possible. When you deliberate, you assume that multiple possible futures are open to you. You might phone your friend at time T, or you might read a book instead. You might turn right at the next intersection, but then again you might turn left. And so on. But if determinism is true, the appearance of multiple options is an illusion. In each case, only one of the *apparent* possibilities can be actualized.

Many philosophers think we can be both free and determined. This is the *compatibilist* view of freedom. From this perspective, a free act is one the agent performs because he or she wants to, all things considered. For example, at the restaurant, you might have had some desire for both spaghetti and pizza, but you couldn't eat both and (on this occasion) your desire for spaghetti was stronger than your desire for pizza. So, spaghetti was what you wanted, all things considered. No one coerced you--you did what you wanted to do, so your act was free. If we ask why your desire for spaghetti was stronger than your desire for pizza, the answer is that the strength of these desires was determined (necessitated) by the past and the laws of nature.

Of course, many philosophers think that free will is incompatible with determinism—this is the *incompatibilist* view of freedom. These philosophers reject the compatibilist view of a free action. On the incompatibilist view, a free action is undetermined but it is not a mere random occurrence; it is up to the agent. More precisely, one performs an act A freely at a time T if and only if one performs the act at T but *at T one has the power to refrain from doing A*. Thus, if someone robs a bank freely at time T, then at time T he (or she) had the power to refrain from robbing the bank.

The most important argument against the compatibilist view is the *consequence argument*.<sup>32</sup> In order to state the argument succinctly, we need to consider some preliminaries. Let's assume, for the sake of the argument, that determinism is true and that it is true because the universe is governed by deterministic laws of nature. A deterministic law of nature has the following form:

Deterministic Law: Given initial conditions A, B, and C, event D must occur.

In other words, once the initial conditions are met, only one result is possible, e.g., if we heat water to 212 degrees Fahrenheit, it always boils. We are assuming that every event that has ever happened has resulted from initial conditions operating in accordance with a deterministic law of nature. The history of the universe is one long chain of events tightly linked as one set of initial conditions gives rise to a result which in turn becomes an initial condition leading to another result.

Now, let **L** stand for a conjunction of all the laws of nature. In other words, **L** is a proposition of the form "A and B and C . . ." where each letter stands for a law of nature, such as the law of gravity. **L** includes *every* law of nature, including any that are yet to be discovered.

Let **P** stand for a proposition that describes the complete state of the universe at a moment in the remote past, before humans existed. **P** gives the location of every atom, its direction of movement, its charge, and so on. Since **P** gives a complete description of the universe at a certain point in time, it gives the initial conditions for all the laws of nature at that time. Therefore, **P** and **L** together logically imply any proposition describing a future event. Just to be concrete, let **F** stand for “You will go jogging tomorrow at 9:13 a.m.” Given that the universe is fully governed by deterministic laws of nature, **P** and **L** together logically imply **F**. This is so because **P** gives us the initial conditions of all the laws at one point in time, and **L** tells us what results; then **L** tells us what *that* result leads to next, and so on.

Virtually everyone agrees that we have no choice about the laws of nature, e.g., we don’t get to vote on the law of gravity. And virtually everyone agrees that we have no choice about the remote past, before humans even existed. Whatever was going on, say, a billion years ago, we have no choice about it now. So, we have no choice about the truth of “**P** and **L**.” And the following principle seems hard to deny:

If one has no choice about the truth of proposition **A** and **A** logically implies **B**, then one has no choice about the truth of **B**.<sup>33</sup>

This principle seems to be true, in part, because we have no choice about what follows *logically* from what. The rules of logic hold of necessity; we don’t get to vote on them. So, if **A** is true (and one has no choice about that) and **A** logically implies **B**, it seems clear that **B** is true and one has no choice about that either. Our lack of choice about **A** transfers to a lack of choice about **B**. Putting all the pieces together, then, the following argument seems sound:

1. One has no choice about the truth of “**P** and **L**.”
2. **P** and **L** together logically imply **F** (assuming determinism is true).
3. If one has no choice about the truth of “**P** and **L**” and **P** and **L** together logically imply **F**, then one has no choice about the truth of **F**.
4. So, if determinism is true, one has no choice about **F**.

This is the consequence argument. We made **F** stand for “You will go jogging tomorrow at 9:13 a.m.” So, you have no choice about the truth of this proposition. But of course, the same could be said about the truth of any proposition about the future. The upshot is that, if determinism is true, we have no choice about anything, i.e., we lack free will. If the consequence argument is sound, then the compatibilist view of free will is mistaken.

Compatibilists might reply that it remains true that we perform some actions because we want to. But this reply is not relevant. The compatibilist agrees that we have no choice about the remote past and the laws of nature. And premise 3 tells us, in effect, that our lack of choice about the past and the laws of nature transfers to the future if determinism is true. Thus, the compatibilist conception of a free act is simply inadequate.

What does all this have to do with Theism and Naturalism? Recall that only physical things exist, according to the Naturalist. So, Naturalists take a *physicalist* view of the human person, that is, they deny that humans have non-physical souls. Human beings are one small part of a vast physical system. And in an entirely physical system, outcomes are a function of two

factors: the initial conditions and the laws of nature. The laws of nature cannot be violated and the past cannot be changed. Thus, given Naturalism, it seems that our thoughts, feelings, desires, intentions, acts, etc., result from past states of the physical world and the operation of the laws of nature. But no human has any choice about the past and the laws of nature. And thus it is hard to see any room for free will in this picture. Moreover, if there is no room for free will, then there is no room for moral responsibility.

There is one complication here. While some Naturalists are determinists, some are not. The issue here is whether laws of nature are deterministic or probabilistic. A law of nature is deterministic if, given the initial conditions, only one result is possible. Probabilistic laws do not always yield the same result even when the initial conditions are the same. Probabilistic laws can be thought of as having a form along these lines:

Probabilistic law: If A, B, and C occur, then either D or E will occur (though one may be more likely than the other).

For example, one of the laws of radioactivity is that half of the atoms in a unit of radium 226 will decay over a period of 1602 years, but the law does not specify which of the atoms will decay during that period or the precise moment when any one of them will decay. Thus, within strict limits, different outcomes are possible. If some laws of nature are probabilistic—and they are according to contemporary physics, then the physical world is not a deterministic system.

But regardless of whether the laws of nature are deterministic or probabilistic, it remains true that we have no choice about what the laws are and about conditions holding in the past. And given that these two factors fully govern the outcomes in an entirely physical system, it is hard to see any meaningful sense in which we humans control the outcomes. Once again, it is irrelevant to point out that we sometimes perform acts because we want to. The consequence argument shows that this fact does not suffice to show that we have free will.

To sum up, assuming we are morally responsible (at least on occasion), it seems we must have free will. And for reasons we've just seen, compatibilist free will doesn't seem to be sufficiently robust to underwrite moral responsibility. We must be free in the incompatibilist sense. But Naturalism seems to rule out free will in this sense.

Given Theism, on the other hand, it is not surprising that we have free will. A morally good God would have reason to give persons the opportunity to live significant lives. And a life involving significant choices is more significant (other things being equal) than a life involving no such choices. (God might have created robots, but surely the life of a robot would have much less significance than the life of a creature that has free will.) So, God would have reason to give us the power to make important choices, such as the choice to help or harm ourselves and others. For this reason, a morally good God would have reason to give persons responsibility for themselves and others—prudential and moral responsibility. But if we are to be responsible in these ways, we must have free will in the robust, incompatibilist sense.

But how might God give us free will? There may be a couple possibilities here. (1) God might give us non-physical souls that have (within limits) the power to form intentions and thereby to initiate brain processes, which in turn cause nerves to fire and muscles to contract. In

this picture, outcomes would not be governed entirely by laws of nature and initial conditions. (2) Given Theism, God creates the physical world and sets in place those regularities we call laws of nature. Might God also be able to actualize the following sorts of relations between the mental and the physical (but without giving us non-physical souls)? Some physical events are caused by a *combination* of both mental and physical events, neither of which are, by themselves, sufficient causes. For example, a decision (in combination with supporting neural activity) causes an action. If such relationships are logically possible, God could presumably actualize them.

Let's pause now to summarize the argument from Free Will and Moral Responsibility:

1. Humans are sometimes morally responsible and they have the sort of free will that is needed for moral responsibility.
2. Free will and moral responsibility are apparently very unlikely on the Naturalistic view, while they seem likely on the Theistic view.
3. So, the presence of moral responsibility and free will gives us a reason to accept Theism over Naturalism.

Before leaving the argument from Free Will and Moral Responsibility, let us note that, if premise (2) is true, Naturalism faces a problem of evil of its own; for in order to explain the presence of genuine moral evil in the world, one must have a world view that allows for free will and moral responsibility. But, as we've just seen, Naturalism seems to rule out the type of freedom necessary for moral responsibility. So, although many suppose that the problem of evil is a problem specific to Theism, Naturalism also seems to falter in explaining the full range of evils in the world.

#### E. God and Morality

Religious believers generally assume that there is some deep and important connection between God and morality. They also typically assume that there is an objective truth about which acts are right and which acts are wrong. An objective truth is one that holds whether or not we humans believe it, e.g., *the moon orbits the earth*. (Note: an objective truth, as here defined, is not necessarily one that all humans believe. Not everyone believes that *Mt. Rainier is 14,411 feet high*--after all, many people simply aren't informed of its height--but nevertheless, this is an objective truth.) Plausible examples of objective truths about moral issues include: "It is wrong to torture people just for fun (and without their consent)," "It is wrong to inflict harm on a person without a good reason for doing so," and "A person ought to keep his or her promises unless there is a very good reason not to."

Some religious believers claim that there could be no objective truth about morality if there were no God--morality would just be a matter of individual feeling, or of societal norms. This suggests the following argument:

1. If there is no God, there are no objective truths about right and wrong.
2. There are some objective truths about right and wrong.
3. So, God exists.

Now, most people accept premise (2) of this argument. For example, most people believe strongly that *genocide is wrong* and that *slavery is wrong*--and that the truth of these statements does not depend on whether we humans believe them.

But many philosophers would deny premise (1) of this argument. For example, many philosophers have suggested that moral truths—at least some of them--may be similar to mathematical truths, such as  $1 + 1 = 2$  or *No circles are squares*. That is, some moral truths are *necessary truths*—they simply cannot be false under any circumstances. What makes necessary truths true? No one knows, but it is hard deny that there are such truths. Examples include: *All husbands are married*, *Every even number is divisible by two*, *No person is a number*, and *nothing is red all over and green all over at the same time*.<sup>34</sup>

Some religious believers have suggested a different sort of connection between God and morality. This line of thinking begins with the observation that people who take morality seriously typically believe that *if an act is one's moral duty, then one has overriding reason to perform the act*. (Call this “The Overriding Reasons Thesis.”) We often have reasons not to do our duty, of course. Doing one's duty may be inconvenient or unpleasant, and it may involve making a sacrifice of some sort. For example, suppose I'm late for work. I know my boss will be upset and reasonably so since I've been late a number of times recently. So, I consider telling my boss a plausible lie, “There was an accident on the Ballard Bridge and traffic was all backed up.” Lying would placate my boss and get me off the hook, which would be nice. But lying would be wrong in such a situation. And because it's wrong, I have an overriding reason not to lie: my reasons to lie are outweighed, trumped, or overridden by the simple fact that lying is wrong. In general, “X is morally wrong” gives me a powerful, overriding reason *not* to do X; and “X is my moral duty” gives me a powerful, overriding reason *to* do X.

Now, if God exists, it is always in one's best interests to do one's moral duty. After all, to fail to do one's moral duty is to sin. And sin alienates a person from God. Moreover, it is never in a person's best interests to be alienated from God, for, as creatures, we have a deep need to be on good terms with God, our Creator and Judge. But if there is no God and no life after death, there *do* seem to be cases in which it is in one's best interests not to do one's duty. Consider the case of Ms. Poore:

Ms. Poore has lived many years in grinding poverty. She is not starving, but has only the bare necessities. She has tried very hard to get ahead by hard work, but nothing has come of her efforts. An opportunity to steal a large sum of money arises. If Ms. Poore steals the money and invests it wisely, she can obtain many desirable things her poverty has denied her: a well-balanced diet, decent housing, adequate heat in the winter, health insurance, new career opportunities through education, etc. Moreover, if she steals the money, her chances of being caught are very low and she knows this. She is also aware that the person who owns the money is well off and will not be greatly harmed by the theft. Let us add that Ms. Poore rationally believes that if she fails to steal the money, she will likely live in poverty for the remainder of her life. In short, Ms. Poore faces the choice of stealing the money or living in grinding poverty the rest of her life.<sup>35</sup>

If there is no God and no life after death, it seems to be in Ms. Poore's best interest to steal the money. *Moreover, if there is no God and no life after death, it seems that Ms. Poore would have a stronger reason to steal the money than not to steal it*. The very quality of her life is at stake.

And whatever fulfillment she can achieve must be achieved in this earthly life: “You only go around once!” So, if Naturalism is true, it seems that “X is morally wrong” does not always provide an overriding reason not to do X.

Naturalists respond to the Ms. Poore case in various ways. (A) *Some say that stealing isn't wrong in this type of case.* Note, however, that this response is a departure from what most people believe about right and wrong, i.e., simply being poor doesn't justify stealing. If Ms. Poore were literally starving to death, or if her children's lives were at stake, we might agree that stealing is permissible, but that's not Ms. Poore's situation.

(B) *Some say that, despite appearances, it is really in Ms. Poore's best interest not to steal. She will be plagued with guilt if she takes the money.* Now, some people would be plagued by guilt if they stole the money. But others wouldn't. And most of us know we have done some wrong things, but as time passes, we cease to berate ourselves for these actions. Furthermore, from Ms. Poore's perspective, what she stands to gain may be worth *some* guilt feelings. So, the point about guilt doesn't really seem to defuse the Ms. Poore case.

*Similarly, some say that Ms. Poore should avoid stealing assuming she doesn't want others to steal from her.* But stealing goes on constantly in the world. Just think of all the thefts that occur in a modern city on a daily basis! What Ms. Poore does in this one rare, special case will make her no more vulnerable to theft than she already is. Also, keep in mind that, by hypothesis, it's virtually certain that no one will find out that Ms. Poore took the money. And as a matter of fact, if she steals the money, she may be able to live in a part of town where there is less crime and fewer thefts.

(C) *Still others shrug their shoulders and say, “Maybe ‘X (e.g., stealing or lying) is wrong’ is occasionally overridden by ‘X is in my best interest.’ So what? Furthermore, if people do their duty because it's in their best interest to do so, they aren't really being moral. Being moral involves doing the right thing because it's right--not to get a reward.”* There are two important points here and both need to be considered carefully. First, is it a small matter to grant that one's best interest sometimes overrides duty? This would imply that it is sometimes irrational to do one's duty, because *doing one's duty involves acting on the weaker reason.* And if Naturalism leads us to conclude that *it is sometimes irrational to be moral*, Naturalism does not uphold the rational authority of morality. Second, Theists agree that people should do what's right because it's right. The problem, however, is that given Naturalism, doing what's right is sometimes contrary to one's long-term best interest, while given Theism, one is never *ultimately* penalized for doing what's right--a God of love is able and willing to set things right in the life after death. Thus, Theism, unlike Naturalism, fully upholds the rational authority of morality.

The moral argument under consideration has the following structure:

1. Morally serious people generally presuppose the Overriding Reasons Thesis: “X is one's moral duty” always overrides any reason not to do X.
2. If Naturalism is true, the Overriding Reasons Thesis is false, and so the rational authority of morality is denied.
3. If Theism is true, the Overriding Reasons Thesis is true, and the rational authority of morality is upheld.

4. A view that upholds what morally serious people generally presuppose is more likely to be true than one that denies it.
5. So, Theism is more likely to be true than Naturalism is.

Our discussion has centered mostly on premises (2) and (3). Premise (1) seems to be true and indeed, most ethical theorists, whether Theists or not, assume that the Overriding Reasons Thesis is true. Of course, some may doubt premise (4). But what's at stake here is, at least in part, the fundamental method of doing philosophy. And many philosophers agree with Aristotle, who taught that the best way to do philosophy is to examine the commonly held beliefs about a given topic, and then seek a theory that preserves most of those beliefs, or at least the most important ones.<sup>36</sup>

At this point the reader is left with the admittedly complex task of evaluating the cumulative case for Theism, bearing in mind also the arguments for Naturalism. The arguments for Theism amount to a response to the Naturalist's appeal to simplicity. These arguments purport to show that Naturalism is too simple—it leaves too much unexplained (or inadequately explained). But the problem of evil and the Hiddenness Argument suggest areas in which theistic explanations falter. In the end, as with most philosophical issues, one is left with the task of discerning which view faces more (or more severe) difficulties. But often, for a given individual, one or two key strengths or weaknesses of a view will leap out and provide direction, at least provisionally.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For a careful discussion of divine omnipotence, see Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), chapter 4.

<sup>2</sup> It is important not to confuse the laws of nature with the laws of logic. For example, it is not a logical contradiction to say that a person died, was buried for a week, and then came back to life. But of course such an event cannot happen if only natural causes are at work. (Only a supernatural cause could raise someone from the dead.) And laws of nature describe what happens when only natural causes are operative.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of theistic responses to the problem of evil, see Daniel Howard-Snyder, "God, Evil, and Suffering" in Michael J. Murray, ed., *Reason for the Hope Within* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 76-115.

<sup>4</sup> John Schellenberg, "What Divine Hiddenness Reveals, or How Weak Theistic Evidence is Strong Atheistic Proof," [http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/john\\_schellenberg/hidden.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/john_schellenberg/hidden.html), 1-10. My outline of the Hiddenness Argument is borrowed in its essentials from Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Hiddenness of God," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, second edition (MacMillan, 2006), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Howard-Snyder, "Hiddenness of God," *op. cit.*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David Swenson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1936), ch. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Responses nine and ten are borrowed from Howard-Snyder, "Hiddenness of God," *op. cit.*, 6-7.

<sup>8</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: New American Library, 1958), 68.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Beardsworth, *A Sense of Presence* (Oxford: Religious Experience Research Unit, 1977), 121.

<sup>10</sup> My formulation of the Principle of Credulity is borrowed from ALSTON, WILLIAM P. (1998). Religious experience. In E. Craig (Ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London: Routledge. Retrieved December 30, 2010, from <http://0-www.rep.routledge.com.deborah.spu.edu/article/K084SECT2>

<sup>11</sup> Descartes pointed out that all our sense experiences could conceivably be caused by a very powerful evil demon intent on systematically deceiving us. And obviously, we cannot disprove such a possibility by appealing to our sense experiences.

<sup>12</sup> Webb, Mark, "Religious Experience", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/religious-experience/>, 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>14</sup> My responses to objections B, C, D, and E owe a heavy debt to Alston, *op. cit.*, section 3.

<sup>15</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (NY: Harper and Row, 1951), 69.

<sup>16</sup> To cite one specific case, Edmund Creffield, leader of a small religious group in the state of Washington, claimed that God had ordered him to commit adultery. See Gerald J. Baldasty, *Vigilante Newspapers: A Tale of Sex, Religion, and Murder in the Northwest* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 61.

<sup>17</sup> Webb, *op. cit.* 10.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Paul Davies, *The Accidental Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 89-91. Note:  $1/10^{60}$  may also be written  $10^{-60}$ .

<sup>21</sup> Paul Davies, *Superforce: The Search for a Grand Unified Theory of Nature* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 242.

<sup>22</sup> This point and the next are borrowed from Ernan McMullin, "Fine-Tuning the Universe?" *Science, Technology, and Religious Ideas*, eds., Mark H. Shale and George W. Shields (New York: University Press of America, 1994), 113.

<sup>23</sup> Max Tegmark, "Parallel Universes," *Scientific American* (May, 2003), 46.

<sup>24</sup> McMullin, *op. cit.*, 113.

<sup>25</sup> The precise number of independent parameters listed in the literature varies, depending on the theoretical orientation of the authority. See Hugh Ross, *The Creator and the Cosmos*, 3<sup>rd</sup> expanded ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1993). For a more rigorous and detailed discussion of fine-tuning, see John Leslie, *Universes* (New York: Routledge, 1989, esp. chapters 2 and 3. See also Niall Shanks, *God, the Devil, and Darwin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 206.

<sup>26</sup> John Polkinghorne, *Science and Theology: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: 1998), 39.

<sup>27</sup> The Evil-God hypothesis has been developed by Stephen Law, "The Evil-God Challenge," *Religious Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) **46**, 353-373.

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<sup>28</sup> This is so whether the Evil-God creates us directly or indirectly via other things it has created, such as atoms, laws of nature, and so on.

<sup>29</sup> What about the hypothesis of a God that is partly good and partly evil? Well, the more morally imperfect a being is, the less trustworthy it is. Would a morally mediocre God take care to give us reliable cognitive faculties? That seems doubtful. Accordingly, if we postulate anything short of a very good God, our hypothesis is apt to call all our cognitive faculties into question.

<sup>30</sup> These types of cases owe a major debt to Harry Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility" *The Journal of Philosophy*, v. LXVI, n. 23 (Dec. 4, 1969), 829-39.

<sup>31</sup> This third point summarizes a response to the Frankfurt cases offered by David Widerker, "Frankfurt's Attack on the Principle of Alternative Possibilities," *Philosophical Review*, 104 (1995): 247-61.

<sup>32</sup> The consequence argument has been developed and stated rigorously by Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1983).

<sup>33</sup> Principles similar to this have been discussed extensively by philosophers and some have been shown to be flawed. My version is a paraphrase of one defended by Alicia Finch and Ted A. Warfield, "The *Mind* Argument and Libertarianism," *Mind*, v. 107, n. 427 (July, 1998), 515-528. These authors state their principle as follows: "One has no choice about the logical consequences of those truths about which one has no choice" 522. As far as I know, no one has refuted this principle.

<sup>34</sup> Does God make necessary truths true? That seems very doubtful. If God makes them true, then he could presumably make them false. But then there is a circumstance in which they would be false (namely, one in which God decides to make them false), and so they aren't necessary truths after all. If a truth is not necessary, it is contingent, i.e., it's true but could be false under different circumstances. Examples of contingent truths include: "I exist," "Leo Tolstoy wrote *War and Peace*," and "The capital of Ohio is Columbus."

<sup>35</sup> The case is borrowed from C. Stephen Layman, "God and the Moral Order," *Faith and Philosophy* (v. 19, n. 3, July, 2002), 304-316.

<sup>36</sup> "The true method for us to follow, here and elsewhere, is to set forth the views which are held on the subject and then, after discussing the problems involved in these, to indicate what truth lies in all or—if that proves impossible—in the greatest in number and importance of the beliefs generally entertained about these states of mind. I am convinced that, if the difficulties can be resolved and we are left with certain of these beliefs—namely, which have stood our test—we shall have reached as satisfactory a conclusion as is possible . . ." Aristotle, *Ethics*, book VII, chapter 1, trans. J. A. K. Thomson (Penguin Books, 1953), 194.