

An Argument for Atheism

In this chapter, I shall develop the best argument that I can for **atheism**. I don't claim that this argument for atheism is ultimately conclusive; however, I do claim that it is the best argument on any side of the dispute about the existence of God.

Atheists deny that there are gods. Theists say that there is at least one god. Most contemporary theists are **monotheists**; they say that there is exactly one God. Many—but not all—monotheists are practising members of monotheistic religions. The monotheistic religions include the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—and some of the Eastern religions, including some versions of Hinduism and Buddhism. Many atheists are also practicing members of non-theistic religions—e.g. some versions of Buddhism and Daoism; but many other atheists do not practise religion, and some atheists are vigorous opponents of all religion.

When atheists and theists argue with one another, they inevitably find that they disagree about many matters other than the existence of gods. Moreover, when they argue with one another about the existence of gods, atheists and theists inevitably find that they disagree about many matters that bear on the existence of gods. Of course, it is not just atheists and theists who disagree about matters that bear on the existence of gods. On the one hand, theists disagree with other theists about many matters that bear on the existence of gods; and, on the other hand, atheists disagree with other atheists about many matters that bear on the existence of gods. If we are to arbitrate a disagreement between an atheist and a theist about the existence of God, we must consider the many matters about which they disagree that bear on the existence of gods. Whether one has a better view about gods than the other depends upon whether one has a better overall view than the other, having regard for everything that bears on the existence of gods.

Imagine repeatedly using uniform sampling to select an atheist from among the world's atheists and a theist from among the world's theists. It is beyond belief that, when you do this, it will *always* be the atheist who turns out to have the better overall view; and it is equally beyond belief that it will *always* turn out to be the theist who has the better overall view. Despite the fact that the overall views of some theists are better than the overall views of some atheists, I propose to argue that the best overall views are atheist views. Here is the general idea.

Think about the universe that we inhabit. It is a vast spatio-temporal arena. Its history stretches back about 13.8 billion years. On smaller scales, it contains components from which everything else in the universe is constituted: photons, quarks, electrons, protons, neutrons, atoms, molecules, cells, and so forth. On somewhat larger scales, it contains the organisms that populate the earth: viruses, bacteria, plankton, amphibia, insects, fish, birds, reptiles, mammals, human beings, etc. On larger scales, it contains entities of interest to astronomers: our earth, our solar system, our galaxy, our galactic cluster, our galactic supercluster, and so on. While there is much that we do not know, our sciences—both natural and human—provide us with an increasingly comprehensive and increasingly accurate account of our universe and its history.

Some atheists—**naturalists**—claim that, in an important sense, our universe is all that there is. In particular, naturalists claim that all causal entities have entirely natural constitutions—i.e. all causal entities are composed of nothing but quarks, electrons, protons, neutrons, and so forth—and that all intelligent agents are either entirely natural organisms, or else artificial intelligent agents that are ultimately the creations of entirely natural organisms. According to naturalists, there are no supernatural entities that preceded the universe and were responsible for bringing it into existence; there are no supernatural entities that exist along with the universe and that are responsible for keeping it in existence; there are no supernatural entities that interact with our universe despite

inhabiting a domain that is somehow separated from our universe; and there are no intelligent agents apart from entirely natural organisms and agents that are ultimately the creations of those entirely natural organisms. Moreover, according to naturalists, there are none but natural causal forces and none but natural causal powers: there are no supernatural powers or supernatural forces that exert influence on our universe.

Theists differ in the ways that they depart from naturalism. Some theists believe in a God who created our universe *ex nihilo*. Some theists believe in a God whose actions preserve our universe in existence. Some theists believe in a God who inhabits an eternal realm that has no spatiotemporal relation to our universe. Some theists believe in an intelligent and active God who is neither a natural organism nor an artificial intelligence created by natural organisms. Some theists believe in a God that is a non-personal supernatural power or supernatural force that exerts influence on our universe. Some theists believe that the universe possesses the non-natural property of being divine, or that the non-natural property of being divine 'permeates' the universe. And so on.

Although theists differ in the ways in which they depart from naturalism, there is a common feature to theistic departures from naturalism. In every case, theists differ from naturalists by believing in something *additional*: either believing in one or more additional intelligent agents, or believing in one or more additional forces or powers, or believing in one or more additional non-natural properties of the universe.

Suppose that we are comparing a particular version of theism with a particular version of naturalism. Suppose, further, that these versions of theism and naturalism agree in their beliefs about which natural entities, and natural powers, and natural forces, and natural properties, and natural laws there are. In this case, it's not just that the theist has beliefs in something over and above the things the atheist believes in; it's also the case that the naturalist does not have beliefs in anything over and above the things the theist believes in. From the standpoint of the naturalist, the theistic beliefs of the theist are pure addition; and, from the standpoint of the theist, the naturalistic beliefs of the naturalist are pure subtraction.

In this case, if all else is no better than equal, then there is clear reason to prefer naturalism to theism. For, if all else is no better than equal, then there is no *reason* to have the additional theistic beliefs. Hence, in this case, in order to decide between theism and naturalism, we just need to determine whether all else is no better than equal.

Could it be, for example, that, while theism is logically consistent, naturalism is contradictory? Surely not! We can think of naturalism as the product of two claims: (1) a claim N which is an account of the natural universe; and (2) the claim that the natural universe is all that there is in the causal domain. And we can think of theism as the product of three claims: (1) the same claim N to which the naturalist is committed; (2) a claim T which is an account of the theistic realm; and (3) the claim that the natural realm and the theistic realm are all that there is in the causal domain. If N is not logically consistent, then neither theism nor naturalism is logically consistent. But, if N is consistent, then it is hard to see how naturalism could be inconsistent. Furthermore, if N is consistent, it is very tempting to think that it is much more likely that theism is inconsistent than it is that naturalism is inconsistent. After all, it might be that T is inconsistent. And even if T is consistent, it might be that the conjunction of T and N is inconsistent.

Suppose, then, that theism and naturalism are both logically consistent. How else might it turn out that there is reason to have theistic beliefs? The obvious thought is surely that there is evidence that favours theism over naturalism. It might be, for example, that there are features of the natural universe that have no explanation on naturalism, but that are well-explained on theism. Or it might

be that there are features of the natural universe that have an explanation on naturalism, but that have a much better explanation on theism. If there are explanations given by theism that are superior to the corresponding explanations of naturalism, then, at the very least, we no longer have a straightforward argument for the superiority of naturalism over theism. However, if it turns out that there are no features of the natural universe that have a better explanation on theism than they do on naturalism, then, I think, we have very good reason to think that naturalism is superior to theism.

The burden of the rest of this chapter is to argue that there are no features of the natural universe that have a better explanation on theism than they do on naturalism. Of course, I won't be able to examine every feature of the natural universe that might be thought to have a better explanation on theism than it does on naturalism. However, I shall try to examine all of the most prominent features of the natural universe that have been widely supposed to have a better explanation on theism than on naturalism. Given the treatment of the cases that I do discuss, it should be obvious how to extend the discussion to features of the natural universe that I do not examine here.

1. Existence

Some theists might be tempted to argue as follows: Naturalists can give no explanation of the existence of the universe; but theists can explain the existence of the universe in terms of the creative activities of God. So, on this point, theism is ahead.

To see what is wrong with this argument, compare the following argument for the claim that the earth rests on the back of a giant elephant. You who do not believe in the elephant have no explanation of why the earth does not fall, given that it is hanging in empty space. I, on the other hand, explain this by appeal to the elephant, which keeps the earth from falling. So, on the point of the earth's not falling, we believers in the elephant are ahead of you who do not believe in the elephant.

The obvious point to make about belief in the elephant is that the elephant hypothesis suffers from exactly the same alleged deficit as the hypothesis of the unsupported earth. If the earth does require something to stop it from falling, then the elephant will be equally in need of something to stop *it* from falling. So, clearly, the postulation of the elephant does not bring with it any explanatory advantage.

A similar point applies to the explanation of the existence of the universe. Whatever range of options is open to the theist to explain the existence of God, exactly the same range of options is open to the naturalist to explain the existence of the universe. If it is open to the theist to say that God exists of necessity, then it is open to the naturalist to say that the universe exists of necessity. If it is open to the theist to say that God's existence involves an infinite regress, then it is open to the naturalist to say that the existence of the universe involves an infinite regress. If it is open to the theist to say that the existence of God has no explanation, then it is open to the naturalist to say that the existence of the universe has no explanation. Insofar as we are interested in explaining the existence of the universe, the postulation of a God who creates the universe does not bring with it any explanatory advantage.

2. Causation

Some theists may be tempted to argue as follows: Naturalists can give no explanation of the causal relations that hold in our universe; but theists can explain these causal relations as originating with God.

To see what is wrong with this argument, we need only think about the structure of global causal reality, i.e. about the structure of the sum of all causings. Since it is the best case for theist, let's suppose that global causal reality involves a first causing—i.e., a causal relation in which the cause is not also an effect in a prior causal relation.

If we are thinking about the *original* causings in causal reality, then, while the naturalist supposes that the first causing is a transition from the initial, uncaused state of the universe, the theist supposes that the first causing is a transition from the initial, uncaused state of God. Since, as we've already seen, theists and naturalists have exactly the same range of options when it comes to explaining the existence of the initial uncaused state, it is obvious that theists and naturalists have exactly the same range of options when it comes to explaining the original causings in global causal reality. Insofar as we are interested in explaining causal origins, the postulation of a God who creates the universe does not bring with it any explanatory advantage.

If we are thinking about what *powers* causings in causal reality, then, where the naturalist supposes that there is no *further* thing that powers transition of state of the universe, the theist supposes that there is no *further* thing that powers transition of state of the global reality that includes both God and the universe. While, in this case, theist and naturalist may differ on the question whether independent causal power rests with global causal reality or with a part of global causal reality, it is clear that postulating God as the locus of independent causal power does not confer any explanatory advantage on theism over naturalism.

3. Fine-Tuning

Some theists may be tempted to argue as follows: Naturalists can give no explanation of the fine-tuning of our universe, whereas theists can explain the fine-tuning as originating with God. (The claim that our universe is fine-tuned for life just is the claim that, if any of several fundamental physical constants had taken a very slightly different value, life would not have emerged in our universe. For the purposes of the present discussion, I shall simply assume that our universe is fine-tuned for life.)

To see what is wrong with this argument, we should ask ourselves where it might be that the fine-tuning first makes its appearance in global causal reality. There are really just two possibilities.

On the one hand, it might be that there is a non-initial point in global causal reality at which the fine-tuning appears. Before this point, the fine-tuning of our universe is not set in stone; but, after this point, the fine-tuning of our universe is fixed. If that's how it goes, then it is clearly a matter of chance that our universe is fine-tuned: any transition from 'not set in stone' to 'set in stone' must be a matter of chance. But, in that case, the fine-tuning of our universe is ultimately a matter of chance. Hence, in that case, there is no explanatory advantage that accrues to theism.

On the other hand, it might be that there is an initial state of global causal reality in which the fine-tuning of our universe is already fixed. On the naturalist view, that initial state is the initial state of the universe; on the theist view, that initial state is the initial state of God, which includes God's detailed intentions for the creation of our universe. In this case, it is clear that naturalism and theism have the same range of options when it comes to explaining the fine-tuning of our universe. On each view, it might be said that the initial state is necessary, in which case the fine-tuning turns out to be

necessary. On each view, it might be said that the initial state is contingent, and that there are other possible initial states that do not lead to our fine-tuned universe; and, in that case, the fine-tuning of our universe turns out to be brutally contingent. However it plays, there is no explanatory advantage that accrues to theism.

4. Morality

Some theists may be tempted to argue as follows: Naturalists can give no explanation of the instantiation of objective moral values in our universe, whereas theists can explain the instantiation of objective moral values in our universe as originating with God. (Many people—theists and naturalists alike—agree that it is morally wrong to torture human infants just for fun. And its being morally wrong to torture human infants just for fun is all that it takes for there to be at least one objective moral value.)

To see what is wrong with this argument, we should ask ourselves what we can say about the instantiation of objective moral values in global causal reality. In our discussion, we set aside the thought that there are no objective moral values instantiated in global causal reality, since this is clearly a case that does not favour theism over naturalism.

In global causal reality, it may be that some things instantiate objective moral values derivatively, i.e., merely because other things instantiate objective moral values. Since an infinite regress of derivative instantiations of objective moral values would clearly not favour theism over naturalism, we can set this case aside. That leaves us with the case that there are non-derivative instantiations of objective moral value in global causal reality. But it is clear that naturalism and theism are on a par when it comes to explaining non-derivative instantiations of objective moral value in global causal reality.

If there are non-derivative instantiations of objective moral value in global causal reality, then objective moral value is theoretically primitive: non-derivative instantiations of objective moral values are not explained in terms of anything else. Typically, theists suppose that God is good, where God's goodness is understood to be theoretically primitive: there isn't anything else in virtue of which God is good. Typically, both naturalists and theists suppose that pleasure is good, where the goodness of pleasure is understood to be theoretically primitive: there isn't anything else in virtue of which pleasure is good. But, if objective moral value is theoretically primitive, then considerations about the fact that there is instantiation of objective moral value in our universe does not favour theism over naturalism.

5. Consciousness

Some theists may be tempted to argue as follows: Naturalists can give no explanation of the instantiation of consciousness in our universe, whereas theists can explain the instantiation of consciousness in our universe as originating with God. (Consciousness is instantiated in the universe in the lives of all typical human beings, and in the lives of typical members of many other animal species. While, in typical members of this large range of animal species, there are periods in their lives when they are not conscious—e.g. when they are deeply asleep—there are also periods in their lives when they are conscious, aware of their surroundings, and so on.)

To see what is wrong with this argument, we should ask ourselves what we can say about the instantiation of consciousness in natural causal reality. In particular, we should ask ourselves what we can say about the connection between the instantiation of consciousness and the instantiation of other natural properties in natural causal reality.

On any plausible view, there is a very tight connection between instantiations of consciousness in human beings and instantiations of neural properties in human beings. Opinion differs on the exact nature of this connection: some maintain that consciousness in human beings just *is* a neural property of human beings, while others maintain that there is *mere correlation* between consciousness in human beings and a neural property of human beings. If consciousness in human beings just is a neural property of human beings then there is no difference between the explanations that naturalism and theism give of the connection between instantiations of consciousness in human beings and instantiations of neural properties in human beings. If, however, there is mere correlation between consciousness in human beings and a neural property of human beings, then, while naturalists will appeal to *emergence* to explain the connection between instantiations of consciousness in human beings and instantiations of neural properties in human beings, theists will appeal to *God's creative intentions* to explain the connection between instantiations of consciousness in human beings and instantiations of neural properties in human beings. Here, it seems that naturalism and theism are on an explanatory par: each has an explanation of the connection between instantiations of consciousness in human beings and instantiations of neural properties in human beings that does nothing at all to *illuminate* the nature of the connection. But, if that's right, considerations about the instantiation of consciousness in our universe do not favour theism over naturalism.

6. Miracles

Some theists may be tempted to argue as follows: Naturalists can give no explanation of various miracles that have occurred in the unfolding of history in our universe, whereas theists can explain the occurrence of those miracles in terms of special divine action.

To see what is wrong with this argument, we should ask ourselves how we propose to explain all of the *reports of miracles* that we find in the unfolding history of our universe. In particular, we need to make sure that we pay attention to the full range of reports of interventions, episodes, activities and phenomena that are anomalous from the standpoint of currently well-established science.

On any plausible view, it is uncontroversial that the overwhelming majority of reports of interventions, episodes, activities and phenomena that are anomalous from the standpoint of currently well-established science should not be given any credence at all. As [David Hume] said in his famous discussion of miracles, everyone can agree that *almost* all reports of interventions, episodes, activities and phenomena that are anomalous from the standpoint of currently well-established science are squarely in the domain of 'knavery and folly'. While naturalists are able to give a uniform explanation of reports of miracles—attributing *all* of them to human knavery and folly—theists who wish to mount an argument from miracles are required to claim that there are a small number of reports of miracles that do not suffer from the crippling liabilities which attach to all of the other reports of interventions, episodes, activities and phenomena that are anomalous from the standpoint of currently well-established science.

The fact that naturalists are able to give a uniform explanation of reports of miracles, whereas theists who wish to give an argument from miracles are required to give a highly non-uniform explanation of reports of miracles, gives naturalists a significant advantage when it comes to the explanation of reports of miracles. Given that theists agree with naturalists on the explanation of the vast majority of reports of miracles, but disagree amongst themselves on the identification of the reports of miracles on which naturalist explanations go wrong, there is every reason to suppose that theists do not have a stronger position than naturalists when it comes to the explanation of reports of miracles.

7. Religious Experience

Some theists may be tempted to argue as follows. Naturalists can give no explanation of the religious—mystical, spiritual, sacred—experiences of human beings: encounters with the divine, possession by the divine, and sensations of oneness with the divine. But theists can explain all of these religious experiences in terms of perceptions of God.

To see what is wrong with this argument, we should ask ourselves how we propose to explain all of the *reports of hard-to-interpret experiences* that we find in the unfolding history of the universe. In particular, we should make sure that we pay close attention both to the reports that we all make of hard-to-interpret experiences that we typically do not take to be perceptions of God—e.g. shivers down the spine, variations in mood and affect, certain types of feelings of being watched, and so forth—and also the interpretations that naturalists give to their own ‘mystical’ experiences—e.g. intense sensations of looking at familiar things from new perspectives, feelings of being completely at home in the universe, and so on.

The most obvious thing to note in connection with reports of hard-to-interpret experiences is the sheer diversity of religious and non-religious interpretations that are attached to these experiences. In particular, it is worth noting that more or less every religious sect in the world takes its hard-to-interpret experiences to be confirmation of the truth of its teachings, even though the teachings of the religious sects of the world are in manifold contradiction with one another. Given this more or less universal inclination to take hard-to-interpret experiences to be confirmation of the truth of teachings that are in manifold contradiction with competing teachings, it is clear that all of the religious sects of the world give interpretations of their own hard-to-interpret experiences that are very different from the interpretations that they give to the hard-to-interpret experiences of those who belong to other religious sects. But, when we set the conflicting interpretations to one side, it seems that the content of the conflicting hard-to-interpret experiences is universal: everyone has much the same hard-to-interpret experiences.

Given the similarities in the hard-to-interpret experiences across diverse cultures, there is clear reason to prefer unified explanations of these hard-to-interpret experiences to the non-unified explanations provided by the different religious sects of the world. The obvious suggestion—adopted by many naturalists—is to seek unified explanations in terms of cognitive science and evolutionary theory. Perhaps, for example, the diversity of interpretations ultimately springs from our universal disposition to suppose that we are in the presence of agents even when we are in fact alone. Hypersensitivity to the presence of agents would very likely have been an evolutionarily successful strategy: mistakenly supposing that hostile agents are present is much less costly than mistakenly supposing that there are no hostile agents present. But it is easy to see how a tendency to postulate agents when no agents are present could underwrite interpretations of the experiences attendant upon misfiring detections in terms of the types of entities postulated by the religious sects of the world. (Think about the uneasy feelings that you sometimes have when you hear noises while you are lying awake late at night. Surely that’s not someone trying to force open your door!)

Perhaps the hypothesis of hypersensitive agency detection does not explain all of the data about the interpretation of hard-to-interpret experiences. However, as things currently stand, there is no reason to suppose that theists have, or are ever going to have, better explanations of the data about reports of hard-to-interpret experiences than naturalists.

8. Meaning and Purpose

Some theists may be tempted to argue as follows: Naturalism, unlike theism, entails that our lives have no meaning and purpose. Naturalists, unlike theists, lead lives that have no meaning and purpose and believe that their lives have no meaning and purpose. On naturalism, unlike on theism, there is no possibility of life after death, and there is no epic cosmic melodrama in which human beings figure as central characters.

To see what is wrong with this argument, we need to ask where meaning and purpose plausibly arise, and we need to ask what connection the source of meaning and purpose has to life after death and the context provided by epic cosmic melodrama.

[Aristotle] taught that meaningful, purposeful, flourishing human lives are lived in flourishing communities by flourishing people who have genuine friendships, exercise both theoretical and practical wisdom, and act with a range of moral and intellectual virtues in the pursuit of valuable individual and collective ends, in the absence of certain kinds of liabilities, such as ill-health, financial hardship, bereavement, and the like. On the assumption that this account of meaningful and purposeful lives is roughly right, it is clear that naturalists are no less capable than theists of living meaningful and purposeful lives. Moreover, it is also clear that neither life after death nor participation in an epic cosmic melodrama is required for meaningful and purposeful lives: our lives can satisfy all of the requirements for meaning and purpose even if death is an absolute full stop, and even if the universe will eventually become a cold, empty void.

Even if you think that Aristotle's account of meaning and purpose is mistaken in its details—perhaps, for example, in what it says about liabilities that would destroy meaning—it is plausible to suppose that it is in the right ballpark overall. In particular, it is surely plausible to suppose that neither life after death nor participation in an epic cosmic melodrama is the kind of thing that could make a human life meaningful and purposeful if that life did not otherwise have meaning and purpose. If you can't find meaning and purpose in love, family, friendship, and the pursuit of intrinsically valuable projects, then, I think, there is no chance that you will find it anywhere else. But, if that's right, then theism gains no advantage over naturalism with respect to considerations about meaning and purpose.

9. Conclusion

As I mentioned at the outset, I cannot claim to have considered all of the data that bears on the decision between theism and naturalism (and not can I claim to have given a fully adequate assessment of any of the data that I have considered). However, I hope that I have done enough to indicate how my argument for naturalism would look if it were set out in full and complete detail. (I give a fuller—but still incomplete—exposition of the argument in *The Best Argument against God*, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013.)

10. Note about Evil

Of course, there is data that at least some theists suppose favours naturalism over theism—e.g. data about horrendous suffering, data about non-belief, and data about the scale of our universe. Some naturalists think that data about horrendous suffering is logically inconsistent with theism. As Epicurus argued long ago:

Is God willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?

Other naturalists think that data about horrendous suffering renders theism highly improbable: given the major horrors of the twentieth century alone, isn't it incredible to suppose that our universe is the work of an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being?

I have focussed on data that many theists suppose favour theism over naturalism because my argument requires only that, on any piece of data, naturalism does at least as well as theism in explaining that data. Even if it is true, for example, that naturalism affords a *better* explanation of horrendous suffering in our universe than is given by theism, that truth makes no contribution to the argument that I have been advancing here.

First Text Box (**atheism**)

Theism says that there is at least one god, i.e. at least one supernatural causal agent or power.

Atheism says that there are no gods.

Agnosticism is suspension of judgment between theism and atheism, i.e. suspension of judgment on the question whether there is at least one god.

Second Text Box (**monotheism**)

Monotheism says that there is exactly one god.

Polytheism says that there is more than one god.

Third Text Box (**naturalism**)

Naturalism says that there are none but natural causes involving none but natural entities.

A *naturalist* is someone who accepts what naturalism says.

Supernaturalism says that there are supernatural causes involving supernatural entities.

Note that naturalism entails atheism, and that theism entails supernaturalism.

Fourth Text Box (**David Hume**)

David Hume (1711-76) was a principle architect of the Scottish Enlightenment, and arguably the greatest ever naturalist philosopher. His most famous works include the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), and the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1778).

Fifth Text Box (**Aristotle**)

Aristotle (384-322 BCE) is perhaps the most influential philosopher of all time. Although much of his work has been lost, we have a large body of his work on logic, physics, psychology, biology, ethics, politics, and metaphysics. Aristotle was a student of Plato and tutor of Alexander the Great.