

DOES GOD EXIST?

Is it reasonable to believe in the existence of God? This question has concerned not only philosophers, but religious thinkers as well. Some religious thinkers, such as St. Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274), thought that the existence of God could be proved beyond a reasonable doubt. Others, such as Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), thought that belief in God was an offense to reason. According to this line of thought, belief in the existence of God requires a leap of faith. That is, to believe in the existence of God, one must leap beyond the evidence, beyond the dictates of reason.

In this chapter, we shall look at the reasonableness of belief in God's existence. In doing so, we shall treat the statement "God exists" as a hypothesis, which we call the *theistic hypothesis*. That is, we shall ask whether the existence of God provides the best explanation of the existence of the world as we know it, or of any features of the world as we know it. Is the statement "God exists" likely to be true? We shall also ask another question. Even if the hypothesis is not likely to be true, are there other reasonable grounds for accepting it?

To treat the existence of God as a hypothesis is to take a decidedly philosophical attitude toward the matter. It is to approach it from the point of view of the agnostic and to focus on available evidence and alternative explanations. In adopting this attitude, we deliberately ignore a variety of considerations.

For one thing, we ignore any claims of revelation. Whether the Bible, say, is the word of God is something to be considered only after we have decided to accept the hypothesis. For another thing, we ignore personal religious experiences. Although people have reported various sorts of personal encounters with God's presence, such reports may be given a host of psychological explanations. Our decision to treat them as accurate reports of God's work on earth must await a prior decision to accept the existence of God. In effect, what we must do when we take a philosophical attitude toward our question is suspend the influence of faith.

Is this a fair way of proceeding? From one perspective, it may appear that it is not. The deeply religious person most assuredly does not treat the existence of God as a hypothesis. To the deeply religious person, God is a constant presence, the cornerstone of an entire way of life, rather than a being whose existence is accepted as the best explanation of available evidence. In other words, to the deeply religious person, God is the central fact of a life of faith. To suspend the influence of faith, then, to treat God's existence as a hypothesis like any other, is in some sense to distort what we are talking about.

That much is undeniable. However, religious thinkers such as Aquinas have offered various arguments for the existence of God, and they have expected these arguments to be evaluated on their own merits. In that case, as long as we confine our attention to the arguments themselves, as long as we do not confuse the life of faith with the power of individual arguments, we remain on safe ground.

Besides, to suspend the influence of faith is not to ignore it. Indeed, after we evaluate Aquinas's arguments for God's existence, we shall turn to another justification for belief in God, which refuses to divorce God from the life of faith.

ANSELM'S GOD

What do we mean by "God" in our question? Certainly, there are many conceptions of God that people have accepted and continue to accept. The conception that will concern us here is one that has historically been shared by important segments of the three great Western religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

This conception has been captured best, perhaps, by the medieval theologian St. Anselm (1033–1109). According to Anselm, God is the being so great that we cannot conceive of any greater being. That is, God is so great that he has every conceivable perfection.

Five perfections are particularly important. First, God is *perfectly good*, in the sense that he does no evil. Second, God is *omniscient* (knows all there is to be known), and third, he is *omnipotent* (has infinite power). Fourth, God is a *personal God*. That is, he is a being capable of acting in the world, of coming into per-

sonal relations with human beings, and of loving us and being loved by us. Fifth, God is a *necessary* being. He is the one being in the universe that must exist. Although it is conceivable that there might have been a universe without human beings, trees, the earth, our sun, and so forth, according to Anselm's conception of God, it is inconceivable that there might have been a universe without God. God's nonexistence, according to Anselm, is impossible. God is the one necessarily existing thing.

THE FIRST CAUSE

The first argument for the existence of God we shall consider is a common one, which has no doubt occurred to you. Philosophers call it the *cosmological argument*, and its most famous formulations come from Aquinas. Aquinas stated the argument in a number of ways. The most-discussed version proceeds as follows.

Everything in nature must have a cause. My existence, for example, was caused by my parents. But every cause must itself have had a cause. My parents' existence, for example, was caused by my grandparents, and their existence by my great-grandparents. What we have, then, is a series of causes, in which every event is the cause of some later event and the effect of some earlier event. But this series of causes cannot reach back forever. It cannot be an infinite series. There must have been some first cause. For if there had been no first cause, there could have been no second cause. And if there had been no second cause, there could have been no third cause. And if there had been no third cause, there could have been no fourth, and so on. In other words, without a first cause, there would be nothing at all. But there most obviously is something—an entire universe. Therefore, there is a first cause.

This first cause must, of course, be something the existence of which needed no cause. That is, it must be something that exists necessarily—something that could not have failed to exist. Such a thing could only be God. Therefore, God exists.

Although this argument undoubtedly has great intuitive appeal, it also has serious problems. Although my own students have been swayed by it long before taking their first philosophy course, they are often concerned by the following. First, assuming that the argument does prove the existence of a first cause, why does it have to be God? Second, even if the first cause is properly called God, what guarantee do we have that it is anything like Anselm's God?

These points are well taken. At best, the argument gives us a first cause, some unique event or being that needed no cause itself. But it is a far step from such an event or being to a God worthy of our worship.

Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), whom we shall discuss later in this chapter, put the matter this way. Such arguments at best give us what he called a philosopher's God. They do not give us the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That is, they

THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Most arguments for the existence of God share a common feature—God's existence is inferred in order to explain the existence of the world. Anselm, on the other hand, thought that God's existence could be proved another way. According to Anselm, God's existence follows necessarily from our conception of him. As long as we can think of God as a being so great that we can conceive of no greater being, we cannot deny that God exists without involving ourselves in a hopeless contradiction. This argument is called the *ontological argument*, and has been used by a number of important philosophers since Anselm, including René Descartes (1596–1650), Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716).

In its most discussed form, the argument goes like this: God is the being so great that we can conceive of no greater being. Suppose that we conceive of something that has all conceivable perfections yet does not exist. That cannot be God, because we can conceive of a being alike in all respects that does exist, and that which exists is greater than that which doesn't. Therefore, existence is a perfection which must belong to God. That is, God must exist.

Is Existence a Perfection?

Although the logic of Anselm's argument appears, on the face of it, to be impeccable, the argument also appears, on the face of it, to be a cheap trick, as though Anselm simply defined God into existence. This was pointed out by a contemporary of Anselm, a monk named Gaunilo, who objected that he could just as easily define a perfect island into existence. Imagine an island called The Lost Island, which is so great we can conceive of no greater island. Now conceive of an island that has every conceivable perfection yet does not exist. This cannot be The Lost Island, because we can imagine an island alike in all respects that does exist. Therefore, The Lost Island exists.

What, then, is wrong with Anselm's argument? In his famous criticism of the argument, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) argued that it is wrong to think of existence as a perfection, or, indeed, as any sort of property at all. This point can be illustrated as follows. Think of your bedroom, and as you do, describe it to yourself. That is, list as many of its properties as you can. No doubt, you will list the color of its walls, the furniture inside, its size, and so forth. One thing you would ordinarily not list is its existence. Or try this. Imagine describing your ideal lover. No doubt, you will think of looks, character, personality, intelligence, wealth, sexual tastes, and who knows what else. What you will not ordinarily think of is existence.

Why do we leave existence out in such cases? Because it adds nothing to our conception. Once you have listed all the qualities you want your ideal lover to have, it is understood that anybody who has them must exist. Existence is not a property, but a necessary condition of having any properties at all.

So of course, when we conceive of God, we conceive of him as existing. That does not mean, however, that God *really* exists, any more than our conception of The Lost Island guarantees that it exists.

A Second Version of the Argument

Kant's criticism has generally been accepted as decisive against the ontological argument as presented above. In recent years, however, attention has been focused on another version of the argument, also found in Anselm. According to this version, it is not simply existence that is taken to be one of God's perfections, but *necessary* existence. Our conception of God is of a being that could not have failed to exist, of a being whose nonexistence is impossible, of a being who always was, always will be, and of whom it could not have been otherwise. And certainly, to say that about God is to ascribe a property to him.

Many philosophers have denied that there is any such property as necessary existence. Anything that exists, they claim, might not have existed. But to say that is to beg the question against Anselm. That is, it is to assume from the outset that Anselm's God cannot exist.

Does God's existence follow from our conception of him as necessarily existing? The commonly accepted answer is no. To say that it belongs to our conception of God that he necessarily exists is to say that anything that does not necessarily exist is not God. Necessary existence is like any other of God's perfections. Anything that is not perfectly good is not God. Anything that is not omnipotent is not God. And anything that does not exist necessarily is not God. In other words, the best that this argument can claim is that if God exists, he exists necessarily, just as it is true that if he exists, he is perfectly good and omnipotent.

Necessity and Possible Worlds

The statement "If God exists, he exists necessarily," probably sounds strange to you. After all, when we say "If such and such is true," we seem to be saying that it is possible that it is *not* true. But if it belongs to our conception of God that he exists necessarily, how can we say, without contradiction, that it is possible that he does not exist? Isn't that the point of Anselm's argument? That is the point, of course, but it is not well taken. The following example from mathematics will show why.

All mathematical truths are taken to be necessary truths. One way of expressing this is to say that mathematical truths are true in all possible worlds. What is a possible world?

The terminology comes from Leibniz, and has been brought back to philosophical discussions by the contemporary American philosopher Saul Kripke. The world in which we live might very well have been different. My parents might have never met, in which case I would never have been born. Hitler might have decided to invade England rather than Russia, in which case Germany might have won World War II. You might have decided not to go to college, in which case you might now be holding down a full-time job or traveling around the country. In saying what might have been, I am stipulating different possible worlds. That is, I am conceiving of worlds that do not exist but might have, rather as a novelist does, or a playwright, or a liar, for that matter. To say that a mathematical truth, "twice two is four," for instance, is a necessary truth, then, is to say that there is no possible world in which twice two does not equal four.

There is in mathematics a claim called Goldbach's conjecture, which says that every even number above two is the sum of two prime numbers. (A prime number is a number divisible only by itself and one.) This is called a conjecture, because nobody knows whether it is true. If it is true, then, being a mathematical truth, it is necessarily true. But if it is false, then, being a mathematical falsehood, it is necessarily false. That is, if an even number above two that is not the sum of two primes exists in this world, then that number exists in all possible worlds. If it does not exist in this world, then it does not exist in any possible world.

The same can be said of Anselm's God. If he exists in this world, then he exists in all possible worlds. But if he does not exist in this world, then he does not exist in any possible world. So if, along with Anselm, we think of God as necessarily existing, then we must think of him as existing in all possible worlds or no possible worlds. That is the proper conclusion of Anselm's argument. God's existence, on the other hand, is not.

do not prove the existence of a loving God who intervenes for the good in human affairs. And that is the God in whom we are interested. A distant first cause with no personal attributes is of no interest to the religious concerns of humankind.

But there is a more fundamental problem with the cosmological argument—the premise that there could not have been an infinite series of causes. He Aquinas's support for this premise seems to be based on a misconception. He assumes that anyone who denies that there was a first cause is somehow removing some event or being from the universe, thereby removing everything else. That is, he seems to have in mind something like a house of cards. If we remove the bottom cards, the entire house comes crashing down. Similarly, if we remove the first cause, the entire history of the universe comes crashing down. But when we deny that there was a *first* cause, we are not *removing* any causes from the universe. Rather, we are saying that for any cause you might pick out, no matter how far back, it in turn is the effect of some earlier cause. It is like saying that the house of cards has no bottom, that for any row of cards you might pick, there is some row beneath it. It is to say that the history of the universe is infinite.

The Big Bang

But is the history of the universe infinite? If scientists are right, it is not. According to current science, the universe did have a beginning—the big bang. In the beginning, all matter was concentrated in one large mass. This mass exploded, creating the present universe.

Where did this mass come from? Perhaps it was always there. Or perhaps there was a universe before ours, which collapsed in on itself and then exploded to create ours. Perhaps there was an infinite series of universes, each one collapsing in on itself and then exploding into a new one.

Such questions are difficult to answer, and scientists are divided on the point. Some think that there is so much matter in the universe that gravity will cause the universe to collapse in on itself. Others think that there is not enough matter to cause that to happen. If the first group is right, then it is reasonable to believe that the huge mass that exploded into our universe was the result of a previously collapsed one. If the second group is right, then it is probably more reasonable to believe that the huge mass was always there.

But surely, one is tempted to say, *something* must have created this mass of matter. *Something* must have caused a *first* big bang or the *unique* big bang that created our universe. This temptation arises because of the difficulty we have in grasping the notion of anything stretching backward for an infinite duration. It also arises because of a fundamental limitation of scientific explanation. Science cannot explain everything. It must always leave off at some point taken to be basic. Explanation must stop somewhere. And the force of Aquinas's argument comes from our dissatisfaction with science's stopping point. Can't we explain the unexplainable by appealing to God?

We can, of course, but if we do so, we must face the following rejoinders. First, appeals to God in this case succeed only in pushing our problem back a step. If God's existence cannot be explained, how have we improved our understanding of anything? And if we cannot grasp the notion of matter stretching backward for an infinite duration, how can we grasp the notion of God doing so? Moreover, there is a further problem. Suppose that God did cause the first big bang or the one unique big bang. Either he created the mass of matter out of nothing or there was something that, along with God, always existed. Either way, the theistic hypothesis leaves more unexplained than the atheistic one. The first answer, which is accepted by much Christian theology, leaves us with two mysteries—God's existence and creation out of nothing. The second, which is implied by the creation story in Genesis, also leaves us with two mysteries—God's existence and the existence of something else. The atheistic hypothesis, on the other hand, only leaves us with one mystery—the existence of the mass of matter. Thus, the appeal to God not only pushes the mystery back a step, but seems to multiply mysteries as well.

THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN

The cosmological argument, we have seen, is far from conclusive. It does not show that there must have been a first cause, nor does it show that if there was a first cause, it must be God. Still, there is another argument, also advanced by Aquinas, which is believed by some people to provide additional support for the theistic hypothesis. This argument is known as the *argument from design*.

The argument goes like this. Just look around. It is impossible not to be struck by the order of the universe. Consider, for example, such ordinary events as the migration of birds. Every autumn they travel south; in the spring, they

return. Or think of the water that falls as rain, allowing plant and animal life to flourish, and then returns to the atmosphere to fall as rain once again.

Think also of the seemingly miraculous interdependence of all living things. Modern ecology has taught us to think of the world in terms of *ecosystems* contained within ecosystems. A lake is an ecosystem, for example—a delicately balanced system of living things, in which distinct species of fish and plant contribute to the health of the whole. But the health of the lake depends also on the health of the larger ecosystem in which it is to be found, the entire forest, and the brooks that feed the lake. Ultimately, we can look at the earth itself as an ecosystem, in which every species has a role to play, as do wind patterns, rock formations, sand dunes, and so forth.

Think also of the remarkable organization of any individual living thing, of the nervous system of human beings, for instance, or of such organs as kidneys and livers, and the functions they play in our lives. Think of how well various creatures fit into their environments, of the variety of instinctual behaviors and colors and sensory abilities exhibited in different parts of the world.

Everything, it seems, has a purpose. Obviously, there is some design exhibited here. And where there is design, there must be a designer. And what must this designer be like? Well, given the enormous size and complexity of the universe, the knowledge and power of the designer must be infinite. And given the benign nature of the universe, we cannot deny the ultimate goodness of the designer. Therefore, the universe cannot have been created by blind causal processes. It must have been created by God. Nothing else can account for the orderliness and purposiveness of nature.

Hume's Criticisms

The most famous discussion of the argument from design comes from David Hume (1711–1776), who provided many powerful criticisms of it.

First, assuming that the world is the product of design, does that mean that there must have been one designer? Given the immensity of the task (designing and building an entire universe), might we not assume that it was performed by a committee? Take a relatively small task, like the design and construction of a building. The architect usually does not select the furniture or artwork, and neither the architect nor the interior designer creates the artwork or furniture, and neither the architect nor the interior designer nor the artists nor the furniture designer erects the building. The larger and more complex the artifact, the more hands and minds involved. Why should it be otherwise with the universe itself?

Second, granting that there is but one designer, what evidence do we have of perfect goodness? Or any goodness at all? I once read (I forgot where) a variation of the argument from design: the world is such a colossal muckup that it must have been designed by a grand practical joker. We shall discuss in the next chapter certain problems concerning God's goodness, but for the time being, just think whether you could suggest any improvements in the world.

Perhaps you might make cancer less painful, for instance, or do away with it altogether.

The point here is that if we look at the world without any preconceptions of the designer, we would not conclude that he or she was perfectly good. But even if we did, given the evidence found on the small part of the universe we inhabit, what guarantee do we have that the rest of the universe is so perfect? Might not the rest of the universe be an utter mess? What would we think of the designer, for example, if we'd been born on the moon?

Furthermore, the argument rests on the idea that the world is analogous to a human artifact—a building, say, or a watch. Perhaps that is the wrong way to look at it. Perhaps it is more accurate to think of it as an organic whole, like a plant. Although individual buildings and watches are products of designers, individual plants are not. Where does a plant come from? Another plant. Perhaps the world came from another world, in like manner. In that case, wouldn't God be more correctly likened to an oak tree than an architect?

Although Hume apparently meant this last point to be taken somewhat humorously, there are many human cultures that do not take it in that way. The biblical creation story is far different from those of many other religions. According to some ancient creation stories of Japan, the Middle East, and Australia, for example, the world is the product of a sexual union between a god and goddess. Adherents to this point of view see the world as an organic whole, an animal, and assume that it was created like any other animal. Who is to say that the artifact analogy is any more appropriate, given the evidence before us?

The answer we are most tempted to fall back on is this—purpose. Everything seems to be put here for a purpose, and that means that there must be some designer whose purpose that is. But does it?

Purposiveness Without Purpose

There is good reason to answer our question negatively. Things can seem to have been put someplace for a purpose even though there was no guiding hand involved. According to Darwin's theory of evolution, for example, that is the case with dominant traits of species.

Evolutionary theory seems to deal with purpose, in that it explains why different species have different traits in terms of the purposes of these traits. Why do giraffes have long necks? To eat the leaves from tall trees. Why do fish have gills? To take in oxygen without having to surface. Why do tigers have sharp teeth? To tear apart raw meat. But according to Darwin, these traits did not come about through the influence of some guiding hand. Rather, they came about by blind causal mechanisms. Traits are carried by genes. For various reasons, mutation and the like, genes are changed, producing new traits. If these traits have survival value, if they help the individuals who have them adapt better to their environment, these individuals will live to reproduce. Eventually, these traits will become dominant throughout the species. Otherwise, they will probably die out or continue in a minority of the members of the species.

Consider evolution in action today. A newly discovered poison is used to protect crops from insects. The first year, most of the insects are killed. But some survive because of some genetic variation that made them immune to the poison. The survivors reproduce and before long the insects are capable of doing the same damage they did earlier, the new poison notwithstanding.

So apparent purpose need not lead us to believe in a designer. Of course, if we already believe in God, we can say that the evolutionary process just described (called *natural selection*) is the way that God achieves his purpose. But if we are starting from scratch, if, that is, we begin as agnostics, there is no pressure to say so.

RATIONAL DECISION

The argument from design, then, like the cosmological argument, is at best inconclusive. Does that mean that we should reject the theistic hypothesis, or at least remain agnostic toward it? If our decision here turned only on the likelihood that the hypothesis is or is not true, we would have to answer yes to this question. But, it might be argued, our decision turns on much more. In fact, Pascal argued just that.

Theism, Pascal pointed out, is more than just the acceptance of the statement "God exists." It includes the acceptance of a number of other statements, as well as the adoption of an entire way of life. Belief in God appears in the context of an entire religious story and of a religious way of life. For Pascal, to believe in God is also to believe that the Christian story is true. And to believe in that story is to adopt a whole way of life—including participation in religious rituals and adoption of certain moral principles—if for no other reason than to gain entrance to heaven. Once we realize that, we must see that the probability of a single hypothesis is only one consideration in a complex decision. To see why, consider the following example.

The weather report says that there is a 40 percent chance of rain this afternoon. Is it more rational to adopt the hypothesis that it will rain, or that it will not rain? If only probability were concerned, it would be more rational to adopt the hypothesis that it will not rain. But it is not. Suppose, for example, that you will go swimming if you work on the hypothesis that it will not rain, bowling if you work on the hypothesis that it will. In that case, your problem is really to decide whether to go to the beach or the bowling alley. You'd prefer to swim, all other things being equal, but all other things are not equal. It may rain. And if you go to the beach and it does rain, your afternoon will be ruined. If you go bowling, on the other hand, you run no such risk. So what do you do? If you are rational, you balance the likelihood of rain against the comparative values to you of swimming versus bowling and the displeasure it would cause you if your afternoon were to be ruined. If swimming is much more fun to you than bowling, and if having your afternoon ruined is not such a dire prospect, you will probably decide to go to the beach. That is, you will work on the hypothesis that it will not rain. If, on the other hand, you prefer swimming to bowling only

marginally, and if you would hate to be stuck at the beach on a rainy day, you will probably choose to go bowling. That is, even though the probability of rain is only 40 percent, you will work on the hypothesis that it will rain.

What you are doing when you deliberate in such a way is calculating the *expected utility* of the alternatives. That is, you think of the possible consequences of the alternative decisions, decide how much you like or dislike these consequences, and then take into account the likelihood that these consequences will occur. The result is the expected utility of each alternative, and if you are rational, you choose the alternative with the highest expected utility.

In the example we just looked at, there are two alternatives—to go to the beach or to bowl. Each alternative has two relevant possible consequences. On the first alternative, you will either end up swimming or being stuck at the beach in the rain. Assign to each possible consequence the appropriate positive or negative value. Then multiply the first by 60 percent (the probability that it will not rain) and the second by 40 percent (the probability that it will rain). The sum of these two figures gives you the expected utility of going to the beach. Similar computations will give you the expected utility of going bowling. You can then select the alternative with the highest result.

Two factors are relevant, then: the value placed on the possible consequences of your decision, and the likelihood that these consequences will occur. The more you prefer swimming to bowling, the more rational it is for you to go to the beach. But the more likely that it will rain, the more rational it is for you to go to the bowling alley instead.

Pascal's Wager

Pascal treated the question of God's existence as a problem of rational decision. Let us suppose that we choose not to believe in God. Certain advantageous consequences will come to us whether or not God exists. We can avoid boring church services, for instance, and we can drink and smoke to our heart's content, as well as lead any sort of sex life we like. These may be great advantages. Of course, if there really is a God, we end up paying for these advantages by spending eternity in hell. Spending eternity in hell, it seems, is infinitely awful. And if we are right? If God does not exist? Well, in that case, there seems to be nothing extra gained. After all, we won't be around after we die to gloat to our believing friends.

Suppose, on the other hand, that we choose to believe in God. If so, certain disadvantages will come to us whether or not God exists. We're stuck with the boring church services, for one thing, and personal habits and our sex lives will be severely hampered. But if we're right, and there is a God, we get to spend eternity in heaven, which amounts to something infinitely wonderful. Of course, we could be wrong. But being wrong in this case is much better than being wrong if we choose atheism.

Thus, as long as there is some probability, however small, that God exists, the expected utility of theism is infinitely wonderful, while the expected utility of atheism is infinitely awful. So the rational decision-maker will bet on theism.

Criticisms of Pascal's Wager

There are two standard criticisms of Pascal's wager. The first is that a person can't *choose* to believe whatever he'd like, regardless of the evidence. Stare at this book, for example, and try to believe that it isn't there. Obviously, you can't. Or stare at your watch and try to believe that it's run by an invisible gremlin. Once again, you can't. Similarly, if you believe that there is very little likelihood that God exists, you cannot choose to believe that he does.

But this objection misses Pascal's point. To return to our initial example, if I choose to work under the hypothesis that it will rain (that is, if I choose to go bowling), I don't really *believe* that it will rain. I adopt the hypothesis as a working assumption, not as a belief. That is what Pascal advises us to do regarding God's existence—adopt it as a working assumption.

But is that enough to convince God, should he exist, that we should be admitted into heaven? Well, maybe yes, maybe no. But Pascal did not believe that this was a real problem. If we act on the theistic hypothesis, if we truly behave as Christians, if we really live the life of faith, what was once a best bet will turn into a genuine belief, either through force of habit or, perhaps, God's intervention.

The second objection is a bit trickier. Pascal imagines only two alternatives—atheism and Christianity. But there are other religions, with their own dogmas and rituals and ways of life. Assuming that we cannot practice all of them, and assuming also that the wrong choice bars us from the positive consequences of the true religion, doesn't Pascal's wager become unworkable?

Not really. As the objection stands, we can respond as follows. The existence of many religions merely complicates our deliberations. Now we must calculate the expected utility of all religions. We must now decide not only between swimming and bowling, but also among playing pool or poker, seeing a movie, reading, visiting a friend, or whatever. Or, to use a different analogy, we are now at a horse race, having to balance the betting odds on each horse against our judgment that it will win, rather than having to do the same for two teams in the Stanley Cup finals.

Will this rejoinder to our second objection do the trick? Not quite. There is a problem in choosing among religions that does not arise in choosing among horses. Many religions promise an eternal reward if accepted, and warn of an eternal misery if not. Buddhism, for example, teaches that all life is suffering, and that we are doomed to an eternal cycle of death and rebirth unless we achieve *Nirvana*, a state of infinite peace that frees us from that cycle. In that case, the expected utility of accepting Buddhism is infinitely positive, while the expected utility of rejecting it is infinitely negative. But that is the same pair of expected utilities offered by accepting or rejecting Christianity. How can one rationally choose, then?

If we restrict ourselves to mathematics, we can't choose. Mathematically, the positive expected utility of accepting Buddhism equals that of accepting Christianity, and the negative expected utility of rejecting Buddhism equals that of rejecting Christianity. Still, we can make a choice following the spirit of Pascal's

wager. Does an eternity in hell *seem* more awful to you than an eternity of death and rebirth? Does the Christian story seem less improbable than the Buddhist one? If so, choose Christianity. If the nod goes the other way, choose Buddhism.

A Live Hypothesis?

What can be said about Pascal's wager? I think that as long as we believe that there is some probability, however small, that the Christian story (or some other story promising eternal reward and threatening eternal misery) is true, the force of his argument is inescapable.

If, on the other hand, we think that the Christian story (or any other story promising eternal reward and threatening eternal misery) is utterly impossible, the force of the argument evaporates. Although the product of an infinite magnitude and any number other than zero is infinite, the product of zero and any other number is zero.

But notice, the conclusion of Pascal's argument is that it is rational to *behave* as though God exists, not that it is rational to *believe* that God exists. Recall our first example of rational decision-making: should we go to the beach or go bowling? The point of the example was that it may be rational to *act* on the assumption that it will rain even though it may not be rational to *believe* that it will. The same point holds for Pascal's wager. If we believe that the Christian story is not utterly impossible, then it may be rational to *act* on the assumption that it is true. But if we also believe that the story is highly improbable, it is not rational to *believe* that it is true.

What must be added to Pascal's argument to make belief in God rational? The American philosopher William James (1842–1910), in an argument similar to Pascal's, required that the existence of God be a *live hypothesis*. What is a live hypothesis? One with enough likelihood that it can be taken as a serious competitor to its rivals.

Suppose, for example, that we are midway through the major-league baseball season, and that the Yankees lead the American League East and the Phillies lead the National League East. Suppose also that I believe that these two teams will meet each other in the World Series. A friend of mine believes that the Astros, who lead the National League West, will appear in the Series against the Yankees. Another friend believes that the Expos, who trail the Phillies by only two games, will meet the Brewers, who trail the Yankees by a game and a half. All of these would be live hypotheses. However, if we suppose that the Cubs have the worst record in the National League and that the Mariners have the worst record in the American League, then the hypothesis that these two teams will meet in the Series would not be a live one. Of course, if someone were to bet me \$2 million against fifty cents that such a meeting would occur, I would take the bet. That is, for purposes of the wager, I would act as though the Cubs and the Mariners would meet in the World Series. That would be rational. But to *believe* that they would meet would not be.

What we must ask, then, is whether the existence of God is a live hypothesis.

Naturalism versus Theism

To ask whether the theistic hypothesis is a live one is to ask, in effect, whether it is worthy of serious consideration. Recalling our discussion of Aquinas's arguments for God's existence, we can ask this: although these arguments do not *prove* that God exists, do they at least show that God's existence is a hypothesis worthy of serious consideration? Here, opinion varies. It seems, though, that the worth of the hypothesis stands or falls on the strength of its chief rival—*naturalism*.

Naturalism is the view that all natural phenomena have natural explanations. According to the naturalist, science can provide explanations of everything that happens in the world. That is not to say that current science, restricted to current theories and laws, can do the job. Rather, it is to say that as long as science can grow, change its theories, posit new forces and particles and laws, we can expect it to explain all natural phenomena.

The naturalist tends to see God as a placeholder in the history of humankind's search for understanding. Whenever we could not understand something, we explained it by referring to the will of God. But as we acquired greater understanding, God as a hypothesis was given less work to do. Changes in the weather were no longer seen as reflections of God's moods, such natural catastrophes as earthquakes were no longer seen as acts of God, and the vicissitudes of history were no longer seen as God's balancing of the moral scales. Now when we cannot otherwise explain some event, we do not fall back on God as an explanation. Instead, we marshal the forces of science. But that is to say that we no longer treat God as a serious hypothesis.

What can be said against the naturalist? This. As William James pointed out, whether a hypothesis is live depends on who is entertaining it. To the naturalist, the existence of God is not a live hypothesis. But it is possible to accept science as a powerful tool of human understanding yet continue to entertain the possibility that the world was created by God. Although naturalism is a view *justified* by the history of human learning, it is not *forced* on us by that history. The question of the origin of the universe is such a unique one that it is not at all unreasonable to think that some unique answer is required. This uniqueness makes the theistic hypothesis a live one, and that, combined with Pascal's wager, makes it reasonable not only to act as though the hypothesis is true, but to believe that it is true.

THE FINAL WORD?

It is useful, I think, to frame the debate between the theist and the naturalist in the context of the imaginary debate presented in Part IV of this book. In Chapter 12, I compared belief in a nonphysical mind to belief in a nonphysical gremlin running a watch. In the beginning, the gremlin was put forth as a hypothesis to explain the workings of the watch. As the real workings

of the watch became understood, there was no longer any reason to believe in the gremlin. According to the naturalist, God has gone the way of the gremlin.

According to the theist, there remains at least one unexplained phenomenon—the existence of a universe—allowing us to keep the hypothesis of God's existence alive. The naturalist disagrees. Rational belief in Anselm's God depends on much more than ignorance of the origins of the universe. Anselm's God was part of a larger view of the cosmos, a view that saw the constant influence of God in human and natural history. In Part V, we saw that justification is a matter of explanatory coherence. A belief is justified because it fits into our network of beliefs better than its competitors. The naturalist claims that Anselm's God has lost its network, that he does not belong in the same network that contains modern physics and astronomy and evolutionary theory. Naturalism belongs there instead.

If we continue to believe that the existence of God is a live hypothesis, then, it is not because this belief is justified by the other beliefs in the modern network. Rather, it is because of a nonrational religious impulse—a need to find purpose in a world of blind causal mechanisms, perhaps, or a passionate desire for eternal life, or a drive to express our wonder and awe through worship of something perfectly good and powerful.

In his discussion of religious belief, James stressed the influence of our nonrational side—what he called our *passional natures*. If we assimilate this side to the life of faith, then it seems that we must agree with Kierkegaard, whose view we contrasted with Aquinas's at the beginning of this chapter—theistic belief requires a leap of faith.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Explain Anselm's conception of God.
2. What are the two versions of Anselm's ontological argument? Why does Kant's criticism of the first version not apply to the second? What other criticism can be raised against the second?
3. Why did Pascal charge that the cosmological argument could only prove the existence of a philosopher's God, not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?
4. Why did Aquinas believe that there must be a first cause? What flaw in his reasoning have philosophers claimed to find?
5. In my discussion of the cosmological argument, I claimed the following: The atheistic hypothesis leaves us with one mystery, while the theistic hypothesis leaves us with two. What were my reasons for making the claim? Do you agree? Why or why not?
6. What is the argument from design? How did Hume criticize the argument? Do you agree with his criticisms? Why or why not?
7. How does evolutionary theory show purposiveness can arise without the need of some guiding hand?
8. How did Pascal turn the question of religious belief into a problem of rational decision-making?