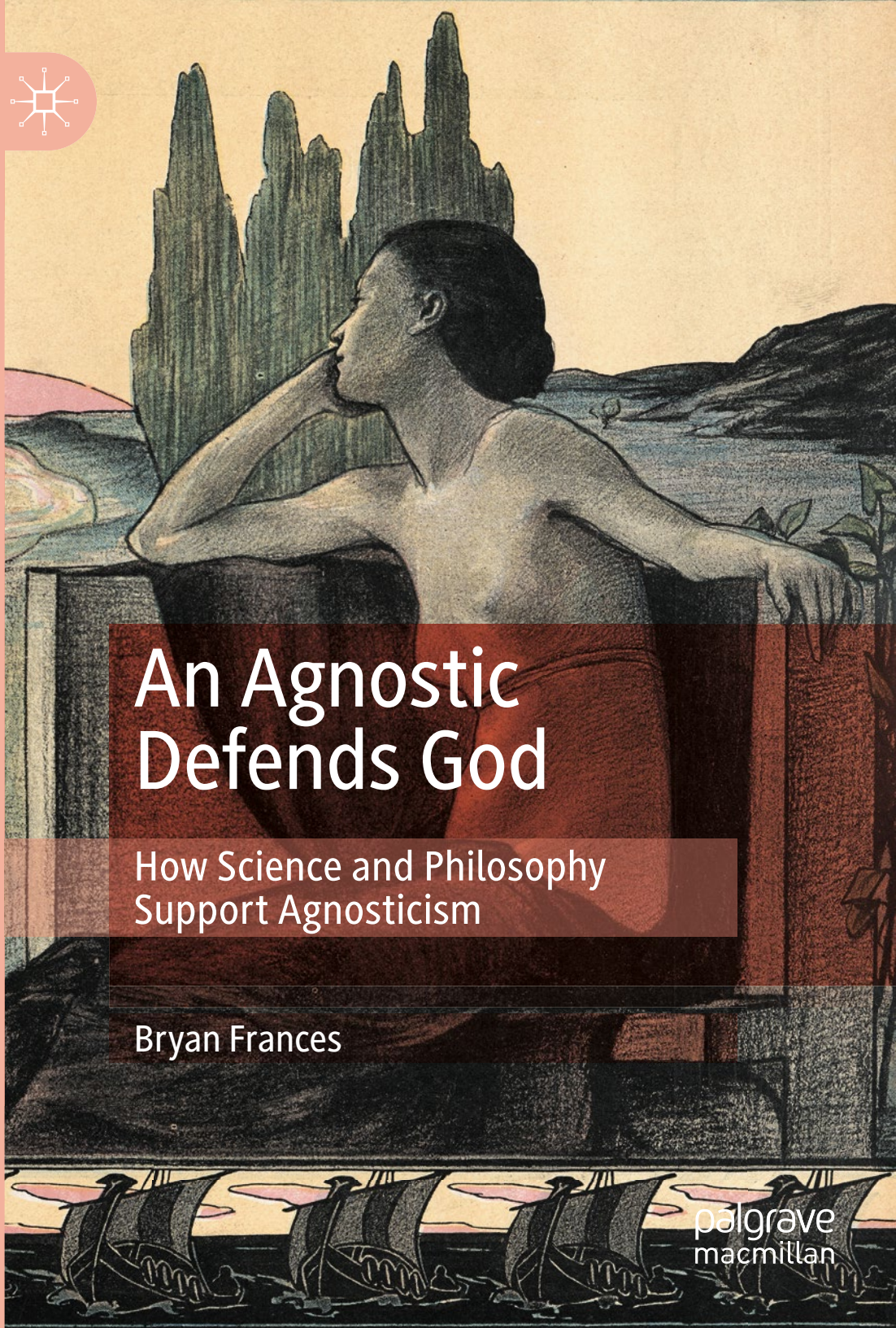

An Agnostic Defends God

How Science and Philosophy Support Agnosticism

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For Alec and Julia,
who are never far from my mind,
no matter the distance in space or time

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In chapter 6: *Gratuitous Suffering and the Problem of Evil*, Routledge Press (2013): portions of pp. 7–8, 13–34, 56–92.
In chapter 7: "Religious Disagreement," in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Graham Oppy, Routledge Press (2015), 180–191.
In chapter 8: "The Atheistic Argument from Outrageousness," *Think* 17 (2018), 107–116, Cambridge University Press.
In chapter 9: "Spirituality, Expertise, and Philosophers," in Jon Kvanvig, ed., *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, v. 1, Oxford University Press (2008), 44–81.

About This Book

Suppose you knew someone who had graduate degrees in science, philosophy, and logic and who had the opinion that all the standard so-called evidence for the existence of God was no damn good: it pretty much sucks.

You would expect her to be an *atheist*, someone who believes that God does not really exist—God is no more real than Zeus or Thor or the Easter Bunny. You would not expect to discover that she is an *agnostic*, someone whose attitude toward "God exists" is about the same as her attitude toward "It will rain in New York next year on May 1," an attitude captured best by "I have no idea. It could be either way, as the available evidence is totally inconclusive. I'm not stupid you know."

Well, I am a professor of philosophy with graduate degrees in physics and philosophy and I'm an agnostic who judges all the so-called standard evidence for God's existence to be awful. And yet, I am moved to *defend* the proposition that there is impressive evidence for theism. I am by no means unique; there are many philosophers with strong scientific backgrounds with similar positions regarding theism.

In this book you will learn why so many people with scientific and philosophical credentials are agnostics despite judging all the usual evidence for theism to be fatally flawed.

Bryan Frances

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About the Author

Bryan Frances I grew up near Chicago, Illinois, in the United States. When I was a boy, I was philosophically unconscious almost all the time—like most kids. I played baseball and thought about numbers obsessively. Baseball was good because it combined my main interests: sports and math. I was a lousy student in school despite scoring high on standardized tests. I read only two books, over and over: a biography of the baseball player Willie Mays and the *Baseball Encyclopedia* (3000 pages of statistics!).

In college I studied physics. I did a fair amount of work on my classes but I was distracted by philosophical questions about, well, everything. I read a great deal about religion. I spent a lot of my time listening to good Christian music groups like Black Sabbath and the Grateful Dead. This is why I'm hard of hearing today and expect to die young.

When I first went to graduate school, at the University of Southern California, I was a PhD student in physics. I wanted to be a physicist. Then I found out that I loved philosophy even more. So, I stopped with an MA degree in physics.

I went to the University of Minnesota to get my PhD in philosophy. I had the good fortune to experience the transition from "I am completely confident that this philosophical thesis is totally true" to "No. Just no. It's totally false. Damn" on a few occasions.

My first appointment was at the University of Leeds in England. After that I taught at Fordham University in Manhattan, New York. For the 2016–2017 academic year, I was a visiting full professor at Lingnan University in Hong Kong. For 2018–2020, I headed a research project at the University of Tartu, in Estonia. From 2021 on I am doing research and teaching at the United Arab Emirates University. I move around a bit.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: A Peculiar Defense of God

I am a professional philosopher who does not believe that God exists—but I don't believe that God doesn't exist either. To a rough approximation, my attitude toward "God exists" is the same as my attitude toward "There once was living bacteria on the planet Venus": I don't know what to conclude about it. Maybe God exists and maybe he doesn't; I just don't know and I have yet to make up my mind either way. As far as I can tell, the standard evidence *for* God that I am aware of isn't very impressive, but the evidence *against* God that I know of isn't very good either. It's a toss-up.

In spite of that agnosticism, I feel compelled to defend theism, the idea that God really, truly, literally exists. To a first approximation, I defend the idea that there is *good evidence* for God—but this evidence is not the kind of thing that people are used to seeing when the question of religion comes up. The evidence is real but maddeningly elusive. However, it is offset in a peculiar way that should, I think, prevent many of us from being theists.

I have all the marks of an atheist intellectual. In fact, I "should" probably be one of those atheists who laughs at the stupidity and ignorance of the idiotic teeming masses that are sheep when it comes to religion. I studied mathematics, physics, logic, and philosophy—in that order. I started out with a BS in engineering physics, proceeded to get an MA in physics, and then switched to logic and philosophy, culminating in a PhD in the latter. For many years now I have been a professor of philosophy.

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The clear majority of philosophers are atheists, or at least lean toward embracing atheism—where "atheism" is the name for the position that God doesn't exist anymore than unicorns or Lord Voldemort exist. Atheists think that the God of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism no more exists than Thor or Zeus or the Easter Bunny exist. Intellectuals like me, who have a heavy background in the hard sciences such as physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics, and logic, are usually atheists. But not only am I not an atheist, I am compelled to defend the rationality of theism.

It's not just my background that suggests I would be an atheist. It's also my views on the reasons theologians and other religious believers offer in defense of theism. I hold that the standard reasons they give when defending the existence of God are *virtually no good*. Most of them are just plain affronts to intelligence. Here are the briefest versions of just two of the *better* ones (I can't bring myself to discuss the awful ones):

The Cosmological Argument: Something must have created the universe. It can't just be a big random accident. It got here somehow. According to Big Bang theory the universe came into existence about fourteen billion years ago. Something must have caused that beginning; it could not have started up with no cause whatsoever. And even if the Big Bang theory is wrong and the universe goes back in time infinitely, there still has got to be something that creates or sustains it in existence. It can't create itself, so something separate from the universe must have done it. That's got to be God.

The Design Argument: Nature has an intricate structure that seems very carefully designed. Nature doesn't consist of just microscopic particles randomly zigzagging through space. There is all this marvelous, incredible order to it all. Just consider the human eye, or the process of photosynthesis, or the central nervous system of any mammal: in each case we are presented with a system that seems highly engineered. This order or structure or whatever you want to call it couldn't have come about randomly, without some designer. Something must have designed nature—but a design entails a designer. Only God could do that.

There are a great many versions of those arguments, some of which are exceedingly sophisticated, scientifically advanced, and meticulous. I think they all fail: none of them, or even the combination of them, gives much evidence for theism. Truly. I'm not *arguing* for that view here, in this introductory chapter; I'm not arguing for anything here. I present some

of my arguments later in the book. I'm just trying to explain why my defense of theism is so odd: if a philosopher with a strong background in logic, mathematics, and physics thinks *all* the standard arguments for God's existence are awful, even when combined, then why in God's name would he defend theism? Good question.

The question's short answer is *respect*—for physics, for mathematics, for biology, for psychology, and for philosophy. That's part of what this book is about.

In brief, the part of philosophy devoted to studying the notions *knowledge*, *evidence*, *rationality*, *wisdom*, *uncertainty, doubt,* and *understanding*—the field of epistemology—suggests but doesn't prove that there is impressive evidence for theism. The evidence cannot be presented in a court of law or reported in a scientific or philosophical journal. The evidence is veiled from public view. From the standpoint of dialogue and debate the elusiveness of this evidence is terribly unfortunate, but that's the situation we are faced with.

In addition, the other fields mentioned—physics, mathematics, biology, psychology, and the other parts of philosophy such as the philosophy of logic and metaphysics—show that our understanding of the universe, as incredibly impressive as it is, is still a lot more partial and superficial than most people think. So although the existence of a supreme being looks terribly unlikely from the standpoint of *much* of our scientific and philosophical knowledge of the universe, there are *other* parts of those *same* fields that say "Hang on. Our knowledge of the universe reveals that we have very little reason to conclude that there is no supreme being".

In Chaps. 2 and 3 I explain why so many philosophers think a great deal of belief in God is irrational—and rational. That's right: it's a mixed bag. A great many people believe in God for *both* lousy *and* good reasons. I attempt to separate the wheat from the chaff. So part of the task of those two chapters is to offer a partial defense of the rationality of a portion of religious belief. This is just a warm-up exercise, however. My ultimate goal is to explain why many philosophers think that even the most informed and evidence-respecting person should probably not be an atheist (or theist).

In Chaps. 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 I explain why so many philosophers think the famous arguments for and against theism are no good. I can't treat all the standard arguments, pro and con, but I can give the reader a taste. Then in Chap. 9 I present the peculiar arguments that partially support, directly or indirectly, theism—but not enough to seal the case. Chapter 10

examines ways that agnostics go too far in their own views, especially in their criticisms of theists and atheists.

Be careful: I'm not arguing for agnosticism here—at least in any thorough manner. For instance, in the previous paragraph I wrote that I would *explain* why so many philosophers think the famous arguments for and against theism are no good. I'm trying to *explain*—not *justify*—why so many people with philosophical and scientific credentials are agnostics instead of atheists. A complete justification would make the book too long. If you like, I present a partial justification—in fact, even my explanations will be partial. Occasionally I will use language such as "this argument shows X", but in most cases all I mean is something like "this argument has convinced many of us of X". Reinterpret accordingly.

Hence, this book's purpose is not to argue for agnosticism, in whole or part. Instead, it's meant to explain—partially, but representatively—why people with significant scientific knowledge and little respect for traditional arguments and evidence for theism are often not atheists.

Just to hammer the point home: despite the marketing-friendly title, this book's purpose is *not* to argue for agnosticism, in whole or part. Instead, it has three purposes.

The primary purpose is to explain, mainly to atheists, why *many people who are relatively unbiased when it comes to religion, have significant scientific knowledge, have little respect for the traditional arguments for theism, and are skeptical about the deliverances of the vast majority of so-called spiritual experiences, are often not atheists but agnostics.* Atheists often think no such people exist.

The secondary purpose is to explain, mainly to theists, why philosophers are so skeptical of the strength of the traditional theistic arguments, the strength of the origins of religious testimony, and the deliverances of so-called spiritual experiences. Theists are often unaware of the bases of such skepticism.

Its third purpose is to sow discomfort among agnostics as well. You read that right: I'm out to screw over theists, atheists, *and agnostics.* As Shakespeare's Mercutio puts it: "A plague o' both your houses!" (Act III, Sc. 1, *Romeo and Juliet*). Briefly put, agnostics tend to be wildly overconfident in their judgments of theists and atheists.

Hence, I've attempted to show that the philosophy of religion is surprising in an interesting way: many atheists, many theists, and many agnostics are wrong in some of their key assessments. Doom all around.

A smart person will at some point in this book—maybe right now—say something like this:

> Wait a minute. You need to tell us what you mean by "God". Otherwise, terms like "theism", "atheism", and "agnosticism" have no real meaning. Some people say "God" is something like an impersonal force that creates the universe, every second, but it has no awareness or knowledge of us. Others will say that God is quite literally a person who changes over time and has loads of thoughts and desires just like we do. Needless to say, you could believe in one without believing in the other. And there may be other conceptions of God. So what type(s) of theism are you discussing?

This is a good and necessary question, which I'll answer right now. We start with physics.

About a hundred years ago, scientists were investigating the insides of atoms. Roughly put, they had the idea that there were particles in there, which they called "electrons". They had all sorts of ideas about electrons, some of which were right and others which were wildly wrong. So Moni said that electrons have characteristics C1, C2, and C3 while Labiba denied that they had any of those qualities. It turned out that Moni was right and Labiba was wrong, on all three claims. But that doesn't mean that Moni's electrons have C1–C3 while Labiba's electrons don't have any of C1–C3. Labiba's electrons are just Moni's electrons. Labiba ended up with some false beliefs about electrons, the things inside atoms; she didn't have true beliefs about mere concepts or imaginary electrons. So, just because people have disagreements using the word "X" hardly means that they mean different things by "X".

Here is a useful way to think of it:

> We have a large group of people using the word 'electron'. Perhaps some of them have a solid grasp on the term, but many do not. Their uses of the word, the concepts they associate with it, the intentions with which they use it—these things go together to give the term its meaning, in one sense of 'meaning'. It turns out that there is a single group of objects out in reality that best *answer to* that meaning. Moni managed to get lots of their characteristics right while Labiba was less fortunate.

What might this mean for the term "God"?

Suppose that the many billions of uses of the word "God" throughout history latch on to exactly *one* entity. There is just one thing out there that

is even a rough candidate for the referent of "God", and the uses of "God" are attracted to it, so to speak. That one entity is a *reference magnet* for our uses of "God". Given the great diversity of opinion regarding God, the truth of this supposition has the consequence that some people are extremely confused as to what this one entity is. For instance, if the entity is a nonphysical person who has a mind just like ours, but with supreme power, knowledge, and goodness, then the people who conceive of God as a wholly impersonal force that recreates the universe every moment are wildly wrong. If you say "God is X" and I say "God isn't X", then one of us is just plain wrong. If I say that God instructed an angel to speak to the Prophet Muhammad, and you say God did no such thing, then one of us is just wrong. The situation isn't this: I'm right about my god and you're right about your god, these being differing gods. Nope. There's just *one* thing out there and we have differing beliefs about *it*.

For instance, I know people who disagree with one another as to whether God changes over time; some of these folks are my friends. But all this means is that one of them is wrong: it's a situation with two people with opposite beliefs *about the very same really existing entity*, if they are about any real entity at all. The two people I'm talking about are fairly standard Christian philosophers, and they just disagree about the nature of God. Here is another example, albeit a silly one: if I say the current Pope is really an alien, and not human at all, while you have the (sane) view that he's not an alien but human, our opposite beliefs are about the very same entity despite our *fundamental* disagreement as to what that entity is. Similarly, my two Christian philosopher friends are talking about the same entity, assuming there is one to talk about.

The preceding remarks are premised on the idea that there is *just one entity* that our uses of "God" are gravitating toward. If the atheist is right, then of course there is no entity at all that our uses of "God" latch on to: there is nothing even approximating it. The atheist will say that although our uses of "God" fail to actually pick out any entity in reality, they nevertheless suggest, or otherwise "go with", all sorts of characteristics. For instance, when a Baptist uses "God", he or she definitely has in mind the idea that God is a person; so the concept *person* is suggested by his or her use of "God". A friend of mine, a Catholic priest, insists that God is not a person, even though God has some characteristics we typically associate with persons. When he uses "God", the concept *person* is not connoted. The atheist can accept all of this.

Then again, it might be the case that our uses of "God" gravitate toward *multiple* entities, more or less equally. If so, then it looks as though polytheism is true. That stuff is complicated.

But virtually none of these complications will matter for our purposes in this book. In Chap. 2 I'll argue that there are many factors that make theistic belief reasonable—and for the most part it won't matter what the theistic beliefs are, as the rationality will apply to a great many actual religious beliefs. The same holds for Chap. 3, in which I argue that there are loads of irrational theistic beliefs out there. Ditto for Chaps. 4 and 5, where I argue that two scientific-based arguments for theism fail to generate decent evidence for much of anything remotely theistic, regardless of how one construes "theism". Chapter 6, on the question of why God permits so much horrific suffering, is targeted to a particular kind of theism, one that will be explained there. The semantics of "God" issue won't matter much to Chaps. 7 or 8. Only in the final Chap. 9 will the issue make a difference.

There are two more questions worth addressing before we leave behind introductory matters: "What about faith?" and "Why should anyone listen to a *philosopher* expound and defend his or her view regarding the evidence pertinent to theism?" Yeah, good questions.

Let's take the second one first. Why should we listen to philosophers about *anything* other than the history of philosophy? Isn't it the case that they agree on next to nothing—which suggests that their arguments and reasons never amount to anything solid? And setting that point about disagreement aside, haven't we as a civilization *graduated* from philosophy to science? For millennia philosophers sat in their armchairs and just *thought really hard* about how to answer certain fascinating questions—a method that never leads to any agreement because it is untethered from real evidence. In the meantime scientists have figured out an incredibly reliable *experimental* method for answering questions—one that has proven its worth a million times over. Surely we should dump philosophy as something that was fine a long time ago but we have finally grown out of.

I certainly used to think so. When I was an undergraduate studying physics—and even as a PhD physics student later on—I thought that philosophy was obsolete. Surely, I supposed, science has superseded philosophy. It's all well and good to study philosophy in a historical spirit, attempting to understand the history of ideas. And maybe it's fine when it comes to expressing your worldview, or working out your ethical views. Those are noble pursuits, and I had great respect for them. But it's another

thing entirely to study philosophical arguments when trying to find *solid evidence* regarding controversial topics that aren't just about how to behave morally or find meaning in an often cruel and unforgiving world. Or so many intelligent people believe.

There is some truth to all of that, but not as much as many people think. For one thing, there is a body of substantive philosophical claims that virtually all philosophers agree on. The reason why this fact is so little known is twofold: the claims are so obvious to philosophers that they are virtually invisible to them, and philosophers like to spend their time talking, writing, and thinking about the great unknown matters, not the stuff they believe to be settled. Since we are interested in epistemology in this book, here are some examples of epistemological claims that philosophers almost unanimously agree on:

1. Beliefs can be positive, negative, trivial, controversial, silly, serious, short-term, long-term, and concern just about any topic.
2. Some beliefs are true while others are false.
3. Evidence can be positive or negative. Positive evidence for a belief B is evidence that suggests B is true; negative evidence regarding B is evidence that suggests B is false.
4. One's overall evidence is the combination of all one's evidence regarding that belief. Overall evidence can be weak or strong (or somewhere in-between).
5. Two people could have the same belief but one person's belief is irrational while the other's is rational, due to the fact that the first person's belief is based on weak overall evidence and the second person's is based on strong overall evidence.
6. A belief can be reasonable but false provided the person with the belief bases it on excellent overall evidence, which turns out to be misleading.
7. A belief can be unreasonable but true provided the person with the true belief has very poor evidence that they are basing their belief on.
8. There are at least three important cognitive attitudes one can take to a claim: believe it, disbelieve it, or suspend judgment on it. Moreover, one can endorse a claim to different degrees, as when one person is extremely confident it's true while another person agrees it's true but isn't as confident as the first person that it's true.

9. In some cases, suspension of judgment is temporary; other times it is permanent.
10. Just because you suspend judgment on some claim (so you don't believe it or disbelieve it) doesn't mean that you can't act on it.
11. Knowledge requires truth: you can't know something unless it's true.
12. Knowledge requires good evidence, of some kind or other: you can't know something unless your belief is based on good overall evidence. However, we have to be open-minded about the radically different forms evidence comes in.
13. Knowledge is objective in this sense: just because someone *thinks* they have knowledge doesn't always mean that they *really do* have knowledge.
14. One can have a true belief without it amounting to knowledge.
15. One can have a belief based on excellent overall evidence that doesn't amount to knowledge.

The list is not anywhere in the vicinity of being exhaustive; with effort any competent epistemologist could make it 100 claims long. These claims are utterly elementary for philosophers, each the philosophical equivalent of 2 + 2 = 4.

Each of (1)–(15) is a substantive claim about notions central to epistemology: belief, true belief, evidence, knowledge, etc. Philosophers who actually listen to their students before teaching or indoctrinating them will realize that few of the fifteen claims are obvious to nonphilosophers. For instance, I recently read an article on the difficulties in using "belief" in translating the Qur'an or of characterizing Islamic religious attitudes, and the author was utterly confused about what is involved in believing something. The basics of epistemology are basics only to philosophers. And even though the fifteen claims are considered obviously true to almost all philosophers, this is no mark against the idea that they are substantive. It's also obvious that the earth is round and that other things being equal 10 kg objects fall at the same rate as 5 kg ones, but those are still substantive claims of physics. Substantive ≠ controversial.

There are a great many other claims that philosophers pretty much agree upon, some of which, as you'd expect, are unlike (1)–(15) because they involve jargon and complicated formulations. This isn't the place to examine them. My point is that the idea that philosophers don't agree on anything is just false.

On top of that, philosophers are hardly ignorant of science. I have a master's degree in physics and I'm hardly exceptional in that matter. Philosophers of mind tend to know quite a bit of cognitive science, philosophers of biology know a lot of biology, philosophers of physics know physics, philosophers of language know a decent portion of linguistics, metaphysicians tend to know a significant amount of physics, philosophers of mathematics know a lot of mathematics, philosophers of logic know a great deal of logic, etc. In fact, of all the people working in the humanities, philosophers probably know the *most* science, and not by a small margin. Of course, it would be best if they knew *all* the scientific results that are relevant to the philosophical issues they work on. Then again, it would be best if we had world peace, politicians weren't corrupt, and I had a pony and an indoor swimming pool. There are only so many hours in a day to educate oneself on everything relevant to one's interests.

There is a third reason to reject the idea that we should ignore what philosophers say about the evidence for or against theism: only philosophers are experts on the varieties and nature of evidence. Like I said earlier, epistemology is the study of knowledge, evidence, wisdom, understanding, rationality, and related notions. When we come to the task of answering the question of whether there is good evidence for or against religion, we had better have a good grasp of the variety of kinds of evidence.

So much for why we should listen to philosophers talk about religion. The other preliminary question asked about the role of faith. I close this section with a few words on that thorny topic.

There are loads of religious people who have very little confident belief in any substantive religious claims. For them, being religious is more about action than belief, more about how one organizes one's life than about what doctrines one accepts. Questions about the truth or even reasonableness of various religious claims strike them as irrelevant and merely academic.

Another group of religious people are different because they take belief very seriously. They truly believe that God exists, there is an afterlife, and the Prophet spoke with an angel, for instance. But when asked why they believe these things, they refuse to say much of anything other than "It is a matter of faith with me, not evidence or reason". However, matters can be deceiving here. I suspect that many of these people actually care a great deal about evidence. It's just that they put a narrow interpretation on "evidence". Many of them think that philosophical or theological

arguments aren't important for them because they know *through experience* that God exists and loves them. That kind of personal, private experience is the basis for their beliefs, and sophisticated arguments, pro and con, are beside the point.

That's fine, but "evidence" covers personal, private experience too, as we will see in several places in this book. Remember that my secondary purpose is to explain, mainly to theists, why philosophers are so skeptical of the strength of the deliverances of so-called spiritual experiences. Theists are often heavily invested in that issue, even if they have little patience with abstract arguments.

A third group of people are serious about their religious beliefs and care quite a bit whether those beliefs are backed up by evidence. If you're a religious person reading this book, then you are probably in the latter category.

When you have finished this book—and it's only about 57,000 words, so it won't kill you to read the whole thing—you will know a great deal about the evidence, pro and con, regarding religion. Use it to impress people; it's morally permissible.

PART I

The Rationality and Irrationality of Religious Belief

I'm not out to convince you that God exists. Why would I, when I don't believe it myself? But I do think the evidence for God's existence is significant. It's not enough, in my view, for me to go all the way and say, "Yep. God exists. I'm convinced." But it's impressive anyway.

We will get to all that material later in the book. In the next couple chapters, I take up some preliminary work. Plenty of people have, shall we kindly say, *highly confident* opinions regarding religion. Many think it's just completely obvious that God exists; others are utterly convinced that the odds that God exists are about the same as the odds that Zeus or the Easter Bunny exists. People in the first group tend to think theistic belief is totally reasonable; members of the second group often think that religious belief is totally unreasonable. If you don't personally know people from both categories, then you are living a sheltered, religiously provincial life. Fix it.

I think these people are both right and wrong. Belief in God can be and often is completely reasonable—and it can be and often is completely unreasonable. It is a good idea to see how the two opposite sides have a good point as well as a bad point.

CHAPTER 2

Rational Belief in God

Many highly educated people think religious belief is irrational and unscientific. Many of them are scientists, including some with world-class credentials. Think of Richard Dawkins, for instance. But they are *scientists*: they know a great deal about *science*, not epistemology, which is the study of notions such as rationality, evidence, certainty, doubt, reason, inference, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. In their effort to come to grips with religion, some of these scientists expand their horizons to learn quite a bit about religion. Needless to say, this is a great thing for them to do if they are going to attempt an evaluation of the rationality of religious belief. But there's a serious problem with their attempts: they rarely learn any epistemology. This is unfortunate since there are many things to learn from it that are directly relevant to evaluating the rationality of religious belief. Many years ago, before I became a philosopher, I was in the same boat as Richard Dawkins, the famous biologist, in having loads of opinions about the rationality of religious belief—opinions based on my knowledge of science and religion only. I was pretty clueless. Being clueless is not so bad: we are all impressive in the number of things we are clueless about. What's not good is being clueless that you are clueless about something. Assessing the rationality of religious belief without an education in epistemology is a lot like having many controversial opinions about baseball even though one has never seen a baseball game. Just don't.

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If you ask a philosopher about the status of religious belief, you'll likely get three answers: some religious beliefs are almost entirely irrational; others are almost entirely rational; and yet others are a mix of both. In this chapter I focus on the rationality part; in the next chapter I treat the nasty bit, the irrational aspects.

The majority of philosophers, even those who are atheists, are happy to admit that there is a fairly robust and common notion of rationality according to which millions of ordinary people have *totally rational* pro-religious beliefs and other religious commitments. Yes: atheists have this opinion! According to these philosophers you certainly don't need to be a theologian or religious leader to have rational religious beliefs. In fact, some of them think the more you know, the more difficult it is to have reasonable religious beliefs. I realize that that may sound paradoxical. I'll save that bit for later in the book.

By "religious belief" I mean beliefs that include some substantive claim and are part of some religion, such as "God exists", "Jesus rose from the dead", "Heaven exists and is everlasting", "The Prophet spoke to an archangel", etc. I mean to exclude beliefs like "Many people are religious", "The Catholic Church has an involved procedure for deciding that someone was a saint", etc.

By saying that the belief is "rational" I mean to imply that at the very least, charges such as "You should know better than to believe that", "You are being foolish", and "You aren't living up to your own cognitive standards—ones you do in fact live up to all the time" don't apply to the person in virtue of their having the religious belief. Very briefly, if one grows up in a social–epistemic environment with certain key features (e.g., everyone has just about the same religious beliefs, it's been that way for many years, the society is stable and functions pretty well when it comes to practical and ethical matters, etc.), the rationality of theistic belief can be easily acquired. Philosophers are happy to list some of the factors that very often help *make* those religious beliefs rational.

There are five epistemic factors that philosophers think prop up the rationality of many religious beliefs in the sense that many religious beliefs are rational *in virtue of* having these features: these are the most common factors that *make* religious belief rational. I'll go over them here.

Factor F1: Testimony

Factor F1 is the big one, the one that applies to the vast majority of people in helping make their religious beliefs rational: the fact that believers often have *strong testimony* for the religious beliefs. However, philosophers use "testimony" in a slightly idiosyncratic manner.

Testimony includes oral reports (from parents, friends, religious authorities, famous people, etc.), written statements (biographies, sacred texts), videos (of famous speeches and debates), and other related forms such as the long history and respected status of institutions (e.g., the Catholic Church or the nearly 1400-year tradition of reciting and memorizing the entire Qur'an). For many religious people, almost everyone they respect shares their religious views—and shares them wholeheartedly. This sociological fact usually starts in childhood, with the child implicitly realizing that everyone they look up to has the religious views that they themselves have come to. Of course, it's no accident: the child gets his or her views from those respected authorities.

But this has nothing special to do with religion. Testimony is clearly one of the most common ways of obtaining rational beliefs in general—even beliefs that amount to knowledge. When I tell you that I have a son Alec who composes classical music, and the situation of our conversation is entirely normal, you come to *know* that I have a son Alec who composes classical music. It's just that easy: you now know that my son Alec composes classical music, and you know it on the basis of my "testifying" it to you. This humble example shows that by "testimony" I don't necessarily mean some *official* statement, like that in front of a jury. All I mean to indicate are ordinary, everyday situations in which one person passes some information they know or believe to another person, so the other person comes to believe it. When a physics teacher tells you that the planet Jupiter has dozens of moons, and this happens in the usual circumstances, you come to know, via testimony, that Jupiter has dozens of moons. As you can guess, testimony helps back up almost everything we know about the world outside our little personal bubbles.

Other examples of testimony don't quite get you knowledge but something pretty close. Suppose you talk to someone you know to be a real expert on the US Supreme Court. Many times in the past she has informed you of upcoming cases and given predictions on the outcomes.

Her predictions have been right a high percentage of the time—and you know this fact about her track record. This time around she says that the court will rule in favor of the plaintiff. She doesn't tell you her reasons because all she did is text you in reply to your question to her. Now, you know full well that these matters are awfully hard to be certain about. The court can and often does surprise even the most educated analysts. So, although you come to think that she is right, that the court will rule in favor of the plaintiff, it's arguable that you don't actually *know* that the court will do that (your friend probably doesn't know either). You have a *reasonable opinion* on the matter, based on her testimony, but you don't have *knowledge*. Nevertheless, in many cases testimony is good enough for knowledge.

What I'm saying about religious testimony is this: in a great many cases, ordinary religious people have religious beliefs that are based, in large part, on a huge body of testimony; and this body of testimony is impressive enough to lend a great deal of rational support to the religious belief based on it—in fact, in many cases it is sufficient to make the religious belief rational in the sense described earlier.

You might think I'm wrong about this. You could object that this testimonial evidence *for* religious beliefs is canceled out or at least significantly diminished in strength by both evidence *against* those same religious beliefs and evidence against the reliability of religious testimony. This type of canceling or diminishing happens all the time. For example, I might obtain excellent testimonial evidence that global warming is a myth: a friend of mine, who knows a lot more science than I do, might tell me so. In that case, my belief that global warming is a myth is based on some testimony: the word of someone I know to be highly educated in science. But when I learn that the many thousands of people most expert on the matter are virtually 100% agreed that global warming is real, this new piece of information overwhelms the testimony I got from my friend. I now see that he's a radical, someone far, far out of the mainstream and certainly not the epistemic superior of the people he disagrees with. So, although his testimony gave me good reason to think global warming is a myth, when I learn the new fact about the overwhelming scientific consensus, my "myth" belief is no longer rational, as its testimonial support is no longer sufficient. Similarly, even if someone's religious belief is partly based on an impressive body of testimony,

the epistemic support that that testimony provides might be later offset by other factors.

And you don't stop: there are other criticisms of testimony. Such as:

Your friend Stu thinks the Chicago Cubs are definitely going to win the World Series of baseball this year. You pity him. You know perfectly well that the only reason he goes on and on about how great the Cubs are is that he grew up on the north side of Chicago and his father was a rabid Cubs fan. If he had grown up in Boston, or Leeds, or Dhaka, he would be singing a different tune. So many of our attitudes are utter accidents of history, and most of us are utterly clueless about the contingency of our convictions. People like Stu are sheep.

There is a relevant distinction to make here—as is often the case when doing philosophy. There is nothing irrational or otherwise epistemically suspect about Stu being a fan of the Cubs. Becoming a fan of your local sports team is hardly irrational. What is silly is Stu's wildly overconfident belief in the Cubs' superiority. If he had grown up in a city far from Chicago, it's highly probable that he would have wildly overconfident beliefs in other sports teams.

However, matters are tricky here. If I had grown up in a different social environment, I would not have many of the scientific beliefs I have. I could easily have grown up in a milieu in which evolution by natural selection is laughed at. In fact, I could have grown up with the belief that Hell is an actual place in the center of the earth. And why not consider other times as well as places? If I had grown up in 1400 London, I would have wildly different beliefs. What of it? The charge that runs "You just believe that because . . ." has to be used carefully: sometimes it's a damn strong criticism, while other times it's powerless.

I'll get to some of those matters later, in the next and penultimate chapters. All I'm saying here in this chapter is this: there is an enormous amount of testimony for many religious beliefs. Even if it gets cancelled out in some or even most cases, or has other problems, it's still true that it exists in the first place.

But I'm not merely saying that there is enormous amount of testimony for many (not all, obviously) religious beliefs; I'm also saying that it amounts to *strong evidence*, which means that the testimony does a lot of work in making the belief reasonable. I will comment on the modifier "strong" below.

Factor F2: Plausible Religious Arguments

Second, it is usually understood if not explicitly acknowledged by philosophers that certain well-known arguments for specific religious beliefs can be *good enough* to help make many religious beliefs blamelessly rational in the sense described earlier—*even if unbeknownst to those people the arguments in question really have fatal flaws, ones that can't be repaired*. It may sound a bit odd at first, but a fatally flawed argument can make one's belief highly rational.

We now know that the earth is zooming through space. But hundreds of years ago, some highly intelligent people argued that it can't be zooming through space. After all, they said, if it were moving very fast then there would have to be a huge wind all the time; but there isn't a huge wind all the time; thus, the earth is not zooming through space. If you had heard this argument as a kid, it surely would have made a lot of sense to you! This was a pretty impressive argument. But its first premise, "If it were moving very fast then there would have to be a huge wind all the time", is just plain false. They weren't in any position to discover that fact, which is why they can't be fairly criticized for endorsing an argument with an objectively false premise. They are entirely *blameless* for giving that argument; it wasn't their *fault* for making that mistake in the first premise. People often make mistakes that they are in no position to detect. Just because you are in a position to see that X is a lousy argument, one that is fatally flawed so that repairs to the argument are fruitless, you have to use judgment in evaluating the rationality of people who wholeheartedly endorse the argument. That's a small piece of wisdom—and it's another piece to realize that it's overwhelmingly probable that some of the arguments that seem most certain to you are fatally flawed as well.

More to the present point: we can be entirely blameless for accepting a claim that turns out to be false, provided that there was virtually no way for us to discover that it's false. Hence, holding onto a fatally flawed argument need not mean there is anything wrong with the arguer, provided she had no real way of discovering her error. She is *blameless* in endorsing the argument.

Well, the same thing happens for religious belief. For instance, here are slogans of three popular arguments for God's existence—and it's worth noting that often enough people understand almost nothing beyond the mere slogans.

The Cosmological Argument: Something must have created the universe. It can't just be a big random accident. It got here somehow. Even if the Big Bang theory is wrong and the universe goes back in time infinitely, still there's got to be something that creates or sustains it in existence. It can't create itself, so something separate from the universe did it. That's got to be God.

The Design Argument: Nature has an intricate structure that seems very carefully designed. Nature doesn't consist of just microscopic particles randomly zigzagging through space. There is all this marvelous, incredible order to it all. This order or structure or whatever you want to call it couldn't have come about randomly, without some designer. Something must have designed nature, both the living parts and the non-living parts. Only God could do that.

The Experience Argument: Throughout history literally billions of people have believed in God. Obviously, some of them did so for little or no good reason, but the idea that *all* of them are wrong—even the large number of great geniuses of science and philosophy who were or are theists—strains credulity. In addition, throughout history many of these theists have claimed that they have actually *perceived* God, often through meditation. People get trained in meditation, which often takes years, and eventually learn to experience God. Sure, a great many people who say they have experienced God are delusional (e.g., many preachers on television), but it seems highly unlikely that *all* of them, including so many gifted ones, could be so completely wrong.

Even theistic philosophers (i.e., philosophers who believe in God) know that virtually all common versions of these arguments have fatal flaws in them. This does not require them to think that *all* versions fail! There are many cases in life when you think an argument is really good and successful even though you admit that some people have given lousy versions of that argument. In subsequent chapters I'll be explaining why philosophers think the usual versions of these arguments fail. In the penultimate chapter I'll switch gears and defend a new version of the Experience Argument.

Factor F3: Extraordinary Experiences

Third, some not uncommon intensely emotional experiences can be extraordinary enough that when combined with supporting testimony and a certain lack of imagination, culture, and/or knowledge of psychology, they can help make religious belief rational. Here's how it typically works. A person has an extraordinary experience, or sequence of experiences that they know is usually thought to be spiritual and as far as they can tell it "fits" in with their version of theism nicely. (There is more on these experiences in the next chapter.) Given that they have no other explanation available for that experience (i.e., the lack of imagination, culture, or knowledge of psychology) and no serious reason to distrust it, it's no wonder they take the experience to be somehow coming from or connected to or otherwise indicative of God.

Before I continue with the other factors, I should say that contrary to what you might be thinking—especially if you look at the title of the next section—I'm not going to argue that only ignorant people have reasonable beliefs in God. On the contrary, one of the first fascinating facts I learned when I switched from physics to logic and philosophy is that there are loads of exceedingly intelligent and informed people who are perfectly aware of the evidence and arguments against theism and yet who are confident theists. Most of what I'm doing in this chapter is showing that one does not have to be a philosopher or theologian in order to have completely reasonable religious beliefs—and I'm also showing what factors *make* one's beliefs so reasonable. Even so, I am dropping hints that there are reasons for thinking that the ordinary rational basis for theistic belief either has flaws or faces other obstacles.

Factor F4: Ignorance of Challenges

Religious believers are often unaware of any significant *challenge* to their religious beliefs or to the basis of those beliefs. They have yet to encounter the reasons to doubt their religious beliefs or the quality of the evidence for those beliefs. Or, if they have, they have not fully understood them. Here are some (but certainly not all!) of the standard challenges to theism:

1. There are scientific and philosophical reasons for thinking that the universe need not have had any starting cause at all, which challenges the relatively commonly known argument that we know God exists because

we know something must have caused the universe of things to come into being and only God could do that. I'll discuss this point in Chap. 5.
2. There is good reason to think some suffering has no moral justification, and God, as traditionally understood, would not permit such suffering. Chapter 6 treats this issue.
3. There are good scientific and philosophical reasons for thinking the intricate structure of nature need not have been designed, as we'll see in Chap. 4.
4. There are good philosophical and psychological reasons for thinking that so-called religious experiences don't indicate any connection with God. See Chaps. 3 and 9.
5. There are good epistemic reasons for thinking facts about religious disagreement (that many people are aware of) provide (to some people) significant evidence against some important religious beliefs. See Chap. 7.

Philosophers typically become aware of some of these challenges as young adults, but a great many people are unaware of them. For one thing, they have much more pressing things to attend to with their time; for another thing, no one is *paying* them to think about these topics. For example, when it comes to the common yet clearly flawed arguments for God's existence, all of the following hold of many typical theists:

(a) The flaws are hidden to the believer.
(b) The premises of the argument look perfectly correct to the believer.
(c) They are unable see any significant flaws in the arguments without extensive assistance (that they have not received).
(d) They have impressive testimony that the arguments are quite good and the criticisms of them are nitpicky or mistaken (as that's what people say to them, especially the people they trust most on intellectual matters).

Here is an example of this kind of thing:

When some ordinary thing comes into existence, such as a flower, there's always something that *made* that happen—a cause. In most cases, there isn't just one cause: there are several things that working together caused the new thing to come into existence. For a flower, it's the soil, the sunlight, the water, etc. For a puddle, it's the rain plus the depression in the surface that puddle is on. What would be bizarre is if something just

popped into existence from absolutely nothing at all. Just try to picture it: first there is just empty space, devoid of anything; and then, a second later, there is a material object that just appears there. We know—don't we?—that the universe doesn't work that way.

And yet, physics says (or so this argument thinks), based on a mountain of excellent evidence, that the entire material universe came into existence about 14 billion years ago *out of nothing*. Well, that just sounds like we have excellent evidence for a miracle, for a violation of the physical law that you can't get something from nothing, that energy is always conserved in every moment. In other words, contemporary physics is helping us recognize that there had to have been *some entity* that existed before there was any matter and that created the big bang and consequently the material universe. Gee, I wonder what that "some entity" could be?

No philosopher who is informed of the relevant details will endorse that argument for God's existence (some will endorse a much more sophisticated argument based off it, but that's another matter). But even so, surely it is an impressive argument. It relies on several seemingly true ideas:

1. The universe of material things had a beginning, as physics says.
2. When a material thing comes into existence, there is some entity that existed before it that caused it to come into existence.
3. Thus, some entity caused the universe of material things to come into existence. Further, this entity existed before the universe of material things.
4. If something existed before there were *any* material things, then it follows logically that thing is not material.
5. Thus, some nonmaterial thing caused the universe to come into existence.

Premise 1 is supposed to be backed up by the Big Bang theory. Premise 2 seems to be a physical law of how our physical universe works. Line 3 just follows from premises 1 and 2. Line 4 is just logic. The conclusion, line 5, follows from lines 3) and 4. Looks like a really good argument!

But nope. There is evidence, from physics, against both (1) and (2). And even if (1)–(5) were true, that would hardly mean that God exists. I'll go over these matters in Chap. 5.

If (a)–(d) from a few paragraphs back apply to someone, then the theistic arguments can help make her religious beliefs rational. That big

four-part "if" statement is true for many theists. Hence, even if in some objective sense the arguments for her religious views are no good (because of their fatal flaws), they can be *good enough* to help secure her rationality in having those views—a notion of rationality tied to praise and blame, as discussed earlier.

I am not saying that those challenges to theism that come from physics show that religious belief is irrational. I'm saying this: even if those challenges provide good evidence against important religious beliefs (or against the reasons why people hold those beliefs), many people are utterly unaware of the challenges, have no reason to be aware of them, and are almost completely cut off from the communities of people who are aware of them. Hence, they escape the threats to our notion of rationality, if any, posed by those challenges.

Factor F5: Defensive Testimony

There are times when we encounter an argument against our views—one that looks awfully strong, so we get worried—but soon after we are totally comfortable sticking with our view. What happened?

Even when theists are vaguely aware of some challenges to their beliefs (such as the five (1–5) mentioned above), a new factor comes to the rescue, thereby diminishing the force of those challenges: they often have strong (written, oral, video) testimony that the challenges aren't serious. For instance, the people they look up to confidently convince them that the problem of apparently gratuitous suffering (that was challenge 2 in the previous subsection) has a theistic solution. Then they hear that scientists don't know what they are talking about when they say there is no reason to posit God. Next, they hear that atheists and agnostics just haven't had any personal experiences of God, which is why they are nonbelievers. They thereby acquire strong testimonial evidence that the challenges to theism are defective.

A large percentage of theists never learn, or at least appreciate, anything like "But there are a great many sane, sincere, honest, highly intelligent, informed folk who hold that those challenges to theism are extremely strong". If they did, then it would be harder for them to just trust the people who say the challenges aren't serious. It's also rare that they encounter any really powerful, detailed, expert anti-theistic argument in the first place, thereby requiring really strong testimony that rebuts that

anti-theistic argument. Almost all of us live in nice, neat bubbles when it comes to politics, ethics, and religion.

The testimony in F1 (the testimony that says theistic beliefs are true) and F5 (the testimony that says the challenges to theistic beliefs are no good) is good enough to make theistic beliefs rational *independently of the testimony's origin*. This is an important point, so I want to go over it carefully.

You might have got your religious belief from someone who directly perceived God (for F1) or someone who is a true expert regarding theistic arguments and experiences (for F5). Those are the good cases. Unfortunately, you might have got your testimony from someone who was insane and deluded (for F1) or someone who is a blowhard who knows next to nothing regarding the challenges to theism (for F5). Those are the bad cases. Consider an analogy. Pretend that the whole idea of electrons and protons is a stunningly successful and long-running gag perpetrated by generations of twisted physicists and chemists. Even if that is actually true, it's also true that in ordinary senses of "testimony" and "intellectually reasonable" we nonscientists have excellent testimony for our shared belief that atoms contain electrons and protons—testimony good enough to make our belief reasonable in an intellectually robust manner. That's because the deception is completely unknown to us. We are blameless in holding those beliefs even if we are the victims of deception. Similarly, even if the people who say they have experienced God or have great arguments for theism are frauds or deluded, if we know none of those unhappy facts about them and they are otherwise trustworthy, then we are blameless in accepting their testimony. So the F1 and F5 testimony is often "strong" even if its origin is bad.

There are many fascinating and difficult philosophical questions to ask about the type of rationality in play and how the testimony (F1 and F5), arguments (F2), ignorance (F4), and experiences (F3) help to secure that type of rationality. I am not going to delve into those intriguing questions here, as they are not relevant to my purposes.

We have seen five factors that help make religious beliefs rational, in one interesting and important sense of "rational" tied to praise and blame: we can't blame people for adopting those religious beliefs (even if they are false!) and we have to admit that they did as well as can be expected of intelligent yet somewhat sheltered and otherwise busy people. So we can see from these five factors that *a great many religious beliefs are rational in a substantive, non-trivial manner*. We can learn this just by reflecting on

the common cases of religious belief all around us plus the five factors above.

The five factors are not the only ones! You might be chomping at the bit to point out other factors that cause people to rationally adopt religious beliefs. For instance, maybe you think that a great many ordinary people often actually experience or *perceive* God in a vivid, life-altering manner; and it's because of those perceptive experiences that they rationally believe in God. So you are saying that a portion of F3 can be perfectly legitimate and even confer genuine reflective knowledge of God. That's cool: I'm absolutely not suggesting that that doesn't happen. All I'm trying to do here is list some *uncontroversial factors* that cause *ordinary* people to have reasonable religious beliefs—factors that *even atheists* will admit exist and do important work in propping up the epistemic reasonability of many religious beliefs.

In Chap. 3, I will attempt to express what philosophers tend to think when they say, or are tempted to say, that much religious belief is "irrational".

CHAPTER 3

Irrational Belief in God

Many different people charge religious belief with irrationality: philosophy professors who have studied rationality and religious belief for many years; intellectuals such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Paul Zachary Myers, and Sam Harris who have serious intellectual training but virtually no serious study of rationality (which is a subset of epistemology); intelligent atheists with little intellectual training at all; or loser atheists who foam at the mouth on blogs and in bars. Different groups bring significantly different accusations under the heading "irrational". This chapter articulates what professional philosophers think on the matter, just as Chap. 2 described the primary factors that professional philosophers think make much religious belief rational.

Through most of the chapter *I will not be commenting on the strength of the charges*—that is, I won't try to figure out whether the charges show that religious belief is irrational in any *worrisome* sense.

Nine of the most common philosophical complaints about the epistemic status of most religious belief (which are not always the ones that get published in philosophy books) begin as follows.

B. Frances, *An Agnostic Defends God*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-73331-5_3

Charge C1: Irrational Sustaining Causes

On many occasions, although we *acquire* our religious beliefs in rational ways (almost always testimonial, when we are children), we frequently *sustain* many of our important religious beliefs via irrational means. The irrational means include factors such as mental illness, wishful thinking, fear (e.g., of the unknown), groupthink, the strong tendency for obedience and submission to authority, and the often unconscious desire for comforting worldviews. Even if there is rock-solid proof of God's existence, a large percentage of people are theists in an irrational manner due to the bad sustaining causes. These people do *not* hold their beliefs solely on the basis of good testimony or arguments or personal experience—even if such bases are available to them. Instead, the *main* factors that hold up their religious beliefs, the ones doing almost all the real causal work in making them stick with those beliefs, are the epistemically defective ones listed in the second sentence of this paragraph (as well as other, similar, factors). There are millions of people with rational religious beliefs, as stated in my previous chapter, but there are millions of *others* with straightforwardly irrational religious beliefs due to irrational sustaining factors. That's charge C1.

You could say the same thing about *many* political or moral beliefs that happen to be held by many millions of people. I think it would be bizarre for someone to deny C1! Again, agreeing with C1 does not, by any stretch of the imagination, mean that one thinks religious beliefs are never, or only rarely, rational in interesting senses of "rational". Note that *whatever* your political views, you have to admit that a great many people who have some of your political beliefs have them via patently irrational means. Or set aside beliefs and just think of political *actions* such as voting: you've got to admit that many people who voted for the same candidate you voted for did so for really bad reasons (to verify this point just read some political blogs for a few hours).

What is interesting is that many of the rational religious beliefs discussed in the previous chapter are often thought to have important irrational aspects *even when they aren't sustained* via *wishful thinking, mental illness, groupthink, the desire for obedience, fear, or the desire for comfort.* That is, it's thought that there are plenty of religious beliefs that (i) are rational in the respects described in the previous chapter, (ii) avoid *all* the problems noted in C1, but (iii) are still irrational—or, better,

"epistemically flawed" in a serious manner. Those are the beliefs I will discuss in the remainder of this chapter.

Charge C2: Flawed Amateur Arguments

Charge C2 says that most of the arguments for the existence of God *appealed to by nonexperts*, such as the three given in Chap. 2 under factor F2 (viz., the Design Argument, the Cosmological Argument, and Experience Argument), have fatal flaws. It doesn't matter if there are *other* religious arguments that are perfect: most of the common ones, the ones that large numbers of nonphilosophers *partly base their beliefs on*, have fatal flaws that philosophers have long known about.

For instance, even if the human eye and other impressive aspects of nature were directly designed by God, the simple design arguments that most nonphilosophers offer for this idea fail because of the impressive epistemic status of evolutionary theory. In those bad design arguments, evolutionary theory is either completely ignored or brutally misunderstood or evaluated in an exceedingly flawed manner. Maybe there is a *wholly successful* design argument! But the ones typically relied on are well known, by philosophers, to have fatal flaws; to think otherwise is to be overly sentimental, unobservant, or engaged in wishful thinking. The same holds for the simple cosmological arguments summed up with slogans such as "Well, something must have caused the universe to exist; that's gotta be God".

A *fatal* flaw is one so bad that in order to repair the argument by repairing the flaw, the argument would have to change so much that we wouldn't say that it was the same argument just revised. For the sake of comparison, think of all at once replacing the engine, tires, doors, seats, wheels, and chassis of a car: now you have a *new* vehicle, not the old car just repaired.

Charge C2 is consistent with the point made with factor F2 (from Chap. 2) that those arguments are *good enough* to help make religious belief reasonable in the sense described in Chap. 2, when the person in question has no inkling of the flaws in the arguments. There need be nothing *stupid* about the common philosophical or scientific argument for theism even when they have fatal flaws.

Charge C3: Flawed Professional Arguments

Charge C3, which is much more controversial than C1 or C2, says that the professional philosophical arguments for substantive religious claims (by, for instance, the contemporary philosophers Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne) have fatal flaws that as far as we know can't be repaired. Philosophers keep *trying* to find decent ontological, cosmological, and design arguments but they just keep failing—and this has been going on for centuries. By "failing" I don't mean to imply that critics have shown that all the arguments have false premises! No: the best, most sophisticated theistic arguments are hardly silly. Instead, critics have revealed objections powerful enough that for each argument for a substantive theistic belief there is at least one premise (e.g., the premise that every contingent thing that has a beginning has a cause) whose overall backing evidence isn't good (even if the overall evidence doesn't show that the premise is false).

Charge C4: Dueling Philosophical Arguments

Charge C4 says that highly educated theists know, or at least *should* know, that philosophical reasoning for grand philosophical claims is untrustworthy: for almost any halfway decent-looking philosophical argument *for* a grand philosophical thesis, we have halfway decent-looking philosophical arguments *against* that thesis and it's rarely plain which side is stronger.

C4 is advanced by a great many intelligent college students, but I think a significant portion of philosophy professors endorse it as well—even though the support amongst philosophers for C4 is less frequent than their support for the other charges, as C4 often casts doubt on the epistemic credentials of their own philosophizing.

C4 is like C3 in being controversial. I won't comment on whether it's really true.

Frankly, charges C2–C4 aren't that important for the simple reason that most religious belief isn't based on anything like discursive argument. And even when a religious belief has such a basis, that argumentative basis is just a *small part* of the full basis of the belief. Most of the important religious beliefs that are rational are primarily based on testimony and/or experience and are based on discursive argument to a very small degree. I will examine challenges to those testimonial and experiential sources now.

Charge C5: Poorly Grounded Testimony

Suppose Sari bases her religious belief entirely on testimony, including perhaps some tacit and partial reliance on something akin to the Experience Argument given earlier. So, it is not based on anything like wishful thinking, the desire for emotional comfort, flawed philosophical or scientific arguments, etc. Hence, she is looking pretty good epistemically considered.

Even so, charge C5 claims that a great deal of the testimony she bases her belief on *is* the result of wishful thinking, the desire for comfort, bad arguments, mental illness, experiential delusions, and the like. Sari might not be guilty of any of those things, but the odds are that *a great many* of the people in the testimonial chains leading to Sari are guilty of exactly those charges. In a large number of cases the believer will be completely and blamelessly unaware of this flawed basis, and this ignorance helps keep her belief reasonable. However, that doesn't change the fact *that many of the testimonial chains propping up her belief have these serious epistemic deficiencies.*

Suppose that's all true; what does it mean for Sari's belief? First, C5 admits that no matter what happened in the testimonial chain leading to her belief, Sari's belief is the same in epistemic quality as far as Sari can determine from the "inside" so to speak: she need not be at all aware of the defects in the chains. C5 also admits that the defects don't make her belief blameworthy *as long as she is blamelessly unaware of those defects*, which will be quite often provided she lives a philosophically sheltered life (which is true of most of us). The real substance of charge C5 is this: (a) Sari's belief's external, God's-eye-view, overall epistemic status is significantly lowered by the defects in the testimonial chains leading to her belief (even if she's blamelessly unaware of those defects); (b) if Sari is aware of those defects, then she is much less justified in continuing to hold the beliefs propped up by those flawed testimonial chains; and (c) if Sari has a little culture in her, then she *should* be aware of those defects.

Charge C6: Doubts About Spiritual Experiences

This charge is complex, as befits its subject matter, and is worth going over in detail. Again, let me emphasize that I am just articulating the doubts; I am not pausing to evaluate them. In Chap. 9 I'll return to this topic.

The vast majority of what people call "spiritual experiences" fall into four categories:

Meditation:	The experiences of those who have meditated for many years under the direction of a spiritual teacher and according to some well-established tradition.
Mind-Blowing:	The "out of the blue" mind-blowing spiritual experiences which are quite rare, very unlike any normal experiences, and not brought about via disciplined meditation.
Calm:	The much more common and *comparatively* calm yet meaningful experiences that people have when seeing the ocean at sunset, the starry skies, the birth of a baby, etc.
Overall:	The "overall" sense one has that many of one's everyday experiences and circumstances in life have been designed in an intentional way by God (e.g., he is rescuing me at various points, challenging me at others, pointing me in the right direction in yet others).

I suspect that most philosophers are willing to admit that it's *possible* that such experiences really do give one knowledge of various substantive theistic claims such as "God exists", "God loves us", "God knows me", and "God has awesome power". Mere possibility is cheap; just because something is possible gives one no reason to think it's true.

Despite that admission of possibility, philosophers also think *there is good evidence that the experiences in each category are not reliable indicators of the truth of important substantive religious beliefs; moreover, there is little good positive evidence that the experiences are reliable indicators.* Thus, with regard to the claim "The spiritual experiences are good indicators of the truth of important substantive religious beliefs", the two-part charge C6 says there is little good evidence *for* it and there is good evidence *against* it.

Meditation Category

There are several factors that make philosophers not trust the theistic reports of meditators as being good indications of the truth of substantive theistic claims.

First, a significant percentage of people who have years-long meditation training are atheists or agnostics. For instance, practitioners of Zen and other forms of Buddhism aren't theists. Thus, although there are loads of meditation practitioners who are theists, there are loads who are not.

There is so much long-running and pervasive "expert" disagreement among meditators that we on the outside are in no position to adjudicate and discover the ones to trust. This is akin to a situation in which we are well aware that one-third of nutritionists say that food X is healthy, one-third say it's not healthy, and one-third say they aren't sure about X even after reviewing multiple studies of the matter. In such a scenario we non-nutritionists who know about the profound split among experts hardly know which group to trust. So the significance of the fact that some meditators say that they have perceived God is partially offset by the fact that a great many meditators say that what happens in meditation is not the perception of God: the testimony of the former is at least partially offset by that of the latter.

Second, some philosophers are aware that a significant number of meditators insist that there are many interesting *delusions* experienced in meditation, including convincing illusions of other nonphysical persons (spirits) being present. They say that only more advanced meditation reveals the illusions. So, *even meditators* admit that some spiritual experiences that seem very impressive to the person having them are actually delusory. Thus, we have testimonial evidence that the testimony of other meditators is not reliable.

Third, much of what meditators say is nonsensical to non-meditators, including philosophers, even after centuries of investigation by a great many able people. This is a (fallible, not conclusive) sign that they don't know what they're talking about. For instance, when asked to articulate their spiritual insights these meditators often use nothing but vague metaphors that defy comprehension, thereby leaving us non-meditators in the dark as to what they mean. Even worse, they often passionately disagree with one another's metaphors ("Ultimate reality is X"; "Ultimate reality is non-X"). As a consequence, we have more reason to distrust what they say when they say that they have experienced God.

Fourth, as far as many people have determined, theistic meditators don't acquire any knowledge or other interesting quality that non-meditators can use as indicators that the meditators can be trusted. For comparison, although we non-mathematicians can't directly verify anything mathematicians say about their discoveries, we trust them to know what they're talking about *because they have skills that we can see are distinctive and significant*. For example, engineers use their ideas to help build things that work: if the math was false, it would be miraculous if the things based on those mathematical principles worked. Meditators have no such distinctive and significant skills. Or so it's often said.

So for those of us on the outside, who haven't done any meditation, *if we aren't sheltered*, if we are aware of the factors mentioned in the previous paragraphs, then we have good reason to not trust the theistic meditation practitioners (as well as the atheistic and agnostic ones). On the other hand, if a person is sheltered from those considerations, then of course they could easily be in a position in which it would be highly reasonable for them to accept the testimony from the theistic meditators; we saw that point in Chap. 2.

Mind-Blowing Category

With regard to the Mind-Blowing category of spiritual experiences, there are two relevant points to make.

First, it's clear that many of the experiences really are delusional, as the people who say they have had the experiences often insist that the experiences showed them that they should invade Iraq (George W. Bush really said that), that Satan is influencing them by telling them to do certain awful things, etc. Hence, we have excellent reason to not trust the testimony of mind-blowing experiences—and we also have good reason to not trust our own mind-blowing experiences.

Second, and more important, these experiences are incredibly emotional, surprising, and even shocking; and we know full well from psychology that people have a *very* hard time holding on to their rationality in such extreme circumstances (even ones that have nothing to do with spirituality). Mere amateur psychological knowledge will do the trick here; for example, that possessed by police detectives who know how unreliable people are when having extremely emotional or otherwise disorienting experiences. (If nothing like that has happened to you, then you just don't know how incredibly disorienting they are!)

If someone is aware of these two facts about mind-blowing experiences, then they should draw two conclusions: "I should not trust the people who have had such experiences"; and "If I have such an experience myself, then I should doubt that my experiences prove what they seem to prove".

Calm Category

With regard to the Calm category of spiritual experiences (the experiences had while sensing extreme beauty in nature or something appropriately similar), I think philosophers have several beliefs that make them skeptical

that such experiences give any remotely impressive indication that God exists (or loves us, or forgives us, or whatever). First, they think that when an atheist or agnostic sees her baby born or the starry skies, she has pretty much the same experience as the theist. Theists are having the same meaningful experiences as the non-theists but then they are immediately *grafting a theistic interpretation on to the experiences without any objective basis to do so*, an interpretation that in virtually all cases they have been taught in some form or other, usually implicitly. The crucial point: there is nothing in the experience that is a reliable indicator of God. The experiences may strike the theists as genuine experiences or perceptions of God or God's presence, but we know that people are generally not trustworthy about psychology.

Why do philosophers think this? Other than the testimony of some theists that they are somehow witnessing the works of God, there is no evidence that their experiences are any different from those of atheists or agnostics. It's not as though we have evidence that the brains of non-theists are importantly different from those of theists when they witness babies being born. Further, even if we had such evidence, what would that prove anyway? A mere difference could easily and plausibly be explained as resulting from different *prior* attitudes, not differences in perceptions. And when the atheists and agnostics consider their own experiences of babies being born, they see no good reason to think God exists: just because an experience is amazing and incredibly moving hardly suggests there are any supernatural entities.

Overall Experience Category

The fourth and final category of spiritual experience is quite common: the person has the idea that some (often many) of the twists and turns in their life have been manipulated by God in various subtle ways in order to have them live a special kind of life. For each twist or turn, they will often admit that when taken in isolation there is no solid reason to think it shows God's hand in their life; but when you take them all together—which is hard to do without living through them yourself—one can see God's influence. A great many of the theists I know claim to have had such experiences.

Philosophers don't write much about this category, as far as I know. So I don't have anything to summarize. But my sense (a voice in my head) is that they are not impressed with this alleged source of evidence for theism.

For my own part, when I talk to people who say they have had this overall sense of divine guidance, they end up saying things that hardly call out for the existence of any "higher power".

For instance, I had a student relate the following story, which I think is pretty typical of this category. He walks his dog nearly every evening on the same route for many years. One day, right before a storm was going to hit, he decided to not cross the street (like he always, *always*, does) and instead continue on the sidewalk for another block to cross the street a little later. Well, a few seconds later a lightning bolt hit a tree which he would have been walking next to if he had crossed the street! And that strongly suggests that God exists and was looking out for him!

Sorry, but that has always struck me as just about the lamest idea I've ever heard. I suspect most philosophers would agree. There are several reasons for this attitude, but here's just one: if he had crossed the street and a tree limb had fallen on him or his dog, then he probably would have come to the conclusion that God was putting an obstacle in his path of life for some good purpose. If you're paying attention and you have some creativity, you can invent stories all day.

Finally, there is a consideration that goes against all four categories of alleged spiritual experiences: even if one thought that a person could perceive God as a certain kind of presence, and thereby know that he exists and is very powerful and loving, it's hard to see how any of the vast majority of spiritual experiences could justify more specific religious claims such as "Jesus will come again", "Jesus rose from the dead", "Heaven really exists", "Such-and-such miracle occurred", "God is not merely supremely powerful and knowledgeable but perfect in power and knowledge", "Salvation occurs only via X", "The Bible is true when properly interpreted", etc. Theists believe these things not *primarily* on the basis of experiences. For instance, an experience of tremendous love in the absence of a human, animal, or memory might (just *might*) tell me that some spirit is currently present, but it won't tell me that the Qur'an is true when interpreted accurately, or that there is an afterlife, or that Jesus performed miracles, or that God is omnipotent. Of course, it's *possible* that the source of the overwhelming love might *say* to the one living through the experience "Hey! I'm omnipotent and the Qur'an is true", but nothing like that happens in real life.

Charge C7: Suffering

Charge C7 says that a great many theistic responses to the existence of gratuitous suffering are epistemically flawed in significant ways.

Roughly put, an instance of suffering is gratuitous when it isn't coupled with an outweighing good that would make the suffering worth it. The primary ideas behind this charge C7 are two.

Premise 1: If the universe has been created by a supremely morally good, knowledgeable, and powerful being, then that being arranged things so that there is no gratuitous suffering.

Premise 2: But there is gratuitous suffering.

Clearly, if you're a theist then you have to choose among exactly two options when responding to this charge: hold that the two premises are true, or hold that at least one of them is false. If you take the first option, then you're saying God exists but doesn't fit the "supreme" characterization in the "if" part of Premise 1. But if you take that route, then you are faced with a different challenge: if God is not supremely knowledgeable, or powerful, or morally good, then why trust, love, or worship him?

Most theists, at least in philosophy, take the second option: they hold that at least one of the two premises is false. So they have taken a definite and controversial position: *either Premise 1 is false or Premise 2 is false*. If they aim to have an *informative* view—which of course is a big "if"—then they need to have some kind of defense of that either-or assertion. That is, they have to be able to say something in support of it.

There are multiple ways a theist might try to respond to the two premises in a manner that's both reasonable and informative. But this is a complicated issue that will take us too far afield, so I will postpone discussion until Chap. 6.

What is relevant to our limited concerns here is this: (i) a great many people have significant awareness of the serious nature of the challenge of suffering, but (ii) when they try to respond to it, philosophers find all sorts of glaring inadequacies in their responses. This is not to say that the suffering challenge refutes theism! What I'm saying here is intended to be analogous to what I said about philosophical and scientific arguments for God's existence. What I said there was this: even if there are *completely* successful theistic arguments—ones sufficient to generate high-grade

knowledge of various important theistic claims—the arguments most people actually rely on are different and have fatal flaws. What I'm saying here is similar: even if there are completely successful ways of dealing with the challenge of suffering, the ways most people respond are different and frequently epistemically highly defective. Therefore, people often defend their religious beliefs in epistemically highly flawed ways: they are aware of the seriousness of the challenge of suffering but they have no good response to it.

Charge C8: Awareness of Defects (This One Is Complicated)

When a person is aware of some challenges to their view *and* realizes that the challenges are serious *and* realizes that their responses to those challenges are significantly weak and defective, that takes away from the epistemic status of their overall position vis-à-vis that belief even if it doesn't affect the epistemic status of the belief itself. Charge C8 says that that statement is true—and the sentence's three-part conjunction is true for enough people to make the charge have some bite (even if it's true of a small percentage of theists, ones that are highly reflective, honest, and modest).[1]

For instance, it is often true of some highly reflective theists that (a) they are aware that there are enormous numbers of religious people who disagree with their specific religious beliefs; (b) they know, at least a bit, that they really don't have anything like a decent argument that their belief is right and the contrary ones are wrong; (c) they know, at least a bit, that the other people claim to have had spiritual experiences and sacred texts every bit as legitimate as their own; and (d) they know, at least a bit, that they have nothing to point to in a non-question-begging way that indicates that their belief is right and the contrary ones are wrong or are based on flawed texts or experiences or arguments. These are some *seriously* educated or highly reflective people. They know that when it comes right

[1] A more ambitious version of charge C8 claims that in many cases even if the three-part conjunction isn't quite true of someone, the person in question is sophisticated enough that it *should* be true of them, and that's enough for an epistemic defect in the retained theistic belief. Think of an athlete who misses something they should not have missed: they are blameworthy for failing to do X even though they didn't detect anything that called out for doing X. The idea here is that we have epistemic responsibilities and failure to meet them in some circumstances is a serious epistemic defect.

down to it, "I don't have anything to point to that shows I'm right and they're wrong". And yet, they stick to their guns anyway. Charge C8 says that this response is epistemically seriously flawed and takes away from the overall epistemic status of the retained theistic beliefs.

Charge C9: Lack of Preferred Evidence

One often encounters objections to theistic belief that run "there is no good evidence for it" and "those beliefs are unscientific".

On the face of it the first objection is poor. Clearly, centuries of testimony by an enormous number of outright geniuses has got to be counted as good evidence. Anyone who has thought much about religious belief knows that there is plenty of very impressive testimony for it. So we should not take the first charge literally.

Instead of literal interpretation, the accusation "there is no good evidence for it" could mean this: the *overall* evidence we have—and by "we" it is meant philosophers and other suitably informed people—doesn't support theistic beliefs. That statement might be a mere summary of points already made in this chapter: although there are significant considerations that seem to support theistic beliefs, that positive support for theism is completely washed away: (a) many of those considerations aren't even true (e.g., no, the face of Jesus did not appear in the peanut butter jar); (b) many others are true but don't actually do any work in supporting theistic beliefs (e.g., yes, you survived the plane crash, but that's hardly any reason to think God saved you; yes, nature looks carefully designed, but we now have strong evidence that that came about in a natural way; yes, your mother's cancer mysteriously went away even though the doctors insisted it wouldn't, but there's no reason to think that that indicates any supernatural forces at work); and (c) there is evidence against the beliefs (and there is evidence against the reasons those beliefs are based on) that is very strong (e.g., gratuitous suffering).

However, there is an interpretation of the first accusation "there is no good evidence for it" that I think better captures what the objection is intended to say: the "there is no good evidence for it" objection is a claim about the lack of a certain *type* of evidence: one given the title "scientific". That's why the two phrases in the first paragraph of this subsection go together. What is often meant by "there is no good evidence for it" is this: whereas *commonly accepted* substantive scientific belief is almost always backed up by evidence that is (i) strong, (ii) non-testimonial, (iii)

possessed and shared among many people, and (iv) not shown to be seriously flawed, *commonly accepted* substantive religious belief never satisfies all of (i)–(iv). Roughly put, our good "scientific evidence" satisfies (i)–(iv)—that's a stipulation of how we are using "scientific" here—and religious belief doesn't measure up. It's also thought that if a claim fails to be scientific in the sense of (i)–(iv), it's highly likely that it is epistemically second-rate. The conclusion of the two thoughts, of course, is that religious belief is epistemically second-rate.

Conclusion

None of these charges should be too unfamiliar: undergraduate students voice versions of most of the charges almost every time I teach a section on the epistemology of religious belief. Just to be clear: *I'm not suggesting that any of the charges consists of all true claims or that they show that suitably informed people should not be theists or anything else of the sort*. For what it's worth, my own view is that C1, C2, C5, most of C6, and C7 are true or awfully close to being true; I'm less certain of the others even though I respect them. But in this chapter I was just trying to articulate the doubts philosophers tend to have about the epistemic credentials of religious belief.

PART II

The Failure of Arguments *for* God

In my experience, people who believe in God (and who are not philosophers) typically, though not always, give at least one of the following intelligent responses to the challenge "Tell me what reasons there are for thinking that there really, truly, is a god—and I want *solid* reasons, not just BS like some dude's feelings or tradition or stories about alleged miracles."

- ***The Cosmological Argument***: Something must have created the universe. It can't just be a big random accident. It got here somehow. According to Big Bang theory, the universe came into existence about 14 billion years ago. Something must have caused that beginning; it could not have started up with no cause whatsoever. And even if the Big Bang theory is wrong and the universe goes back in time infinitely, there still has got to be something that creates or sustains it in existence. It can't create itself, so something separate from the universe must have done it. That's got to be God.
- ***The Design Argument***: Nature has an intricate structure that seems very carefully designed. Nature doesn't consist of just microscopic particles randomly zigzagging through space. There is all this marvelous, incredible order to it all. Just consider the human eye, or the process of photosynthesis, or the central nervous system of any mammal: in each case we are presented with a system that seems highly engineered. This order or structure or whatever you want to call it couldn't have come about randomly, without some designer. Something must have designed nature—but a design entails a designer. Only God could do that.

Philosophers have put a fantastic amount of thought into these arguments. I bet there have been literally over a *million pages* of expert philosophical attention paid to *each* of the two arguments. What appear above are not so much arguments but slogans, or mere tweets, for long and complex arguments that have many subarguments as parts. Philosophers have worked extraordinarily hard to find good arguments along these lines. Part of the reason for this devotion is that the arguments have been around in one form or other for hundreds of years. Another reason is that there are many superficially similar but importantly different *versions* of those arguments. If you Google "Cosmological Argument" and look at some of the results, it won't take too long to learn of this multiplicity: "the" Cosmological Argument isn't so much *one* argument but a unified bunch of closely related arguments. Yet another reason for the million pages of work on these arguments is that just about every philosopher, no matter what her specialties, scrutinizes these arguments as a part of her teaching.

I am not going to go into all those complexities in this little book. Instead, I will do two things. First, I'll comment on what conclusions the community of philosophers has reached concerning those arguments, as well as other philosophical arguments for God's existence that I'm not going to present even as bumper stickers. Second, I'll summarize some of the main reasons for the consensus.[1]

The philosophical community has concluded that the arguments are failures. I mean: the clear majority of contemporary philosophers think that *every* version of the two arguments outlined above has fatal flaws, weaknesses that can't be repaired without adding new weaknesses. So their view isn't merely that the arguments aren't airtight or that they have some nitpicky flaws here and there; it's the view that they each have at least one premise that we definitely know is not supported by good overall evidence. Thus, we as a community of experts fail to have good reason to accept them.

[1] There are several other famous arguments for God's existence, but in the interests of brevity I will treat just the two articulated above. For instance, some people think that miracles happen and make the existence of God highly likely. Like most philosophers, I think the evidence for miracles is shabby. I realize that some people *say*, in written and oral forms, that they have witnessed such-and-such miracle, but without a great deal of independent evidence there is little reason to believe them even when it's plain that they are being perfectly sincere, honest, and intelligent (other times it's clear that the alleged "miracle" definitely did happen, but there is little reason for thinking that it indicates anything supernatural). I can confidently say that philosophers generally think the arguments for God's existence that I'm leaving out of this book aren't any better than the ones I'm including.

In addition, the clear majority opinion is that the other arguments for God's existence, not summarized above, have failed. This consensus certainly isn't unanimous! Some philosophers of international distinction defend versions of some of these arguments. But the considered opinion of the clear majority of philosophers is that the arguments are failures.

When I say that most philosophers judge the arguments to be "poor," I mean this: they think that expert investigation of the arguments reveals serious flaws in them. However, I think most of those philosophers would agree that when *initially* faced with the arguments, before the long philosophical training, the arguments often look quite good. In particular, the Design Argument is simply excellent—provided one is unfamiliar with contemporary science. As I noted earlier, I think that prior to the rise of sophisticated biology just about any informed intelligent person would have to be highly impressed with that argument.

Therefore, the philosophical consensus is that those theistic arguments are poor. It should be said that some philosophers tend to object to facts about philosophical consensus. They like to say, "Well, sure, the clear majority of philosophers disagree with my position, but this isn't like science in which consensus usually implies really good evidence that the consensus is based on." But this is a weak response. It's not so easy to dismiss the consequences of philosophical consensus. If a philosopher thinks that philosophical consensus doesn't count for much, that strongly suggests that she has a dim view of the ability of philosophers to gather strong evidence for various philosophical positions. But if she has *that* view, then she should have that view *about herself*, as she is just another philosopher. And if she has a dim view about her own philosophical abilities, then why does she trust her own philosophical judgment—especially those judgments regarding religion and God?

In any case, philosophers probe the traditional arguments for the existence of God even today because of two facts:

(a) It's not proven beyond doubt that the criticisms of the old versions of the arguments are airtight.
(b) People continue to come up with new and allegedly improved versions of the arguments all the time.

Yeah, it is easy to be cynical about these continuing efforts. I certainly am! Many philosophers think the search for new versions of the arguments is foolish: after centuries of investigation, what are the odds that someone

will *finally* come up with a successful version of the Cosmological Argument, for instance? How rational is it for a philosopher today to say, "Yes, yes, yes but you haven't seen *my* latest version of the argument! It really works!"? Get serious. If you have looked for an old sock in your house for 37 years and haven't found it, it's probably time to conclude that it isn't there to be found. Of course, it *could* be found tomorrow but that means next to nothing: just about *anything* is possible. Similarly, if we have yet to find a good version of the Cosmological Argument, after centuries of truly expert investigation, it's probably time to conclude that it isn't there to be found. Give up, for goodness sakes.

On Tuesdays I am not quite as pessimistic as that. In any case, now you have an idea of what the majority of philosophers have concluded about arguments for the existence of God. I think this consensus is fairly significant. Obviously the consensus could be wrong: maybe one of those arguments is actually excellent and all those philosophers have misjudged it. Sure, but so what?

In any case, in the next two chapters I'm going to briefly reveal *some* of the faults philosophers claim to have found in the theistic arguments, so you can see for yourself *why* philosophers tend to have these negative opinions about the arguments.

CHAPTER 4

The Design of Life and the Laws of Nature

Let's start with the traditional version of the Design Argument. Here is the basic "form" of the traditional argument, a form that gets some meat on it when we fill in something for "F":

(a) The universe has feature F.
(b) If the universe has that feature, then it's very unlikely that that feature came about in a purely natural way, with no design behind it.
(c) Thus, by (a) & (b) it's highly likely that that feature of the universe was designed.
(d) If it's highly likely that that feature was designed, then it is highly likely that it was designed by God (obviously we didn't design it, and it's really unlikely that aliens did it).
(e) Thus, there is excellent evidence that God exists and designed the universe.

Before we go anywhere with this argument template, notice how modest it is. The conclusion is humble in the sense that it doesn't say anything as strong as "God exists" or even "It is highly likely that God exists". I will comment on this modesty feature later.

B. Frances, *An Agnostic Defends God*,
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As I said, one gets different versions of the argument by plugging in different things for "F". Obviously, whether an argument that fits this pattern is a good one depends on what gets plugged in for F: it has to be chosen so that there is excellent reason to think (a), (b), and (d) are all true. No one will dispute the fact that *if* (a), (b), and (d) are all true, *then* (e) is true as well. (And everyone agrees that if (a) and (b) are true then (c) is true too.) The *only* question is whether (a), (b), and (d) are all true.

It's easy to come up with Fs so that two out of the three premises (a), (b), and (d) are clearly true but the remaining premise is totally implausible. Here is one way to do so, an intentionally silly one:

(a) The universe has feature F: on September 30, 2020 everyone in the universe heard, in their own mind and language, a voice proclaiming that it is God's voice and God created the universe, is perfectly powerful and loving, etc. Moreover, this amazing moment was accompanied by various apparent flagrant violations of the laws of physics, all described beforehand by the voice in our heads.
(b) If the universe has that feature, then it's very unlikely that that feature came about in a purely natural way, with no design behind it.
(c) Thus, by (a) and (b) it's highly likely that that feature of the universe was designed.
(d) If it's highly likely that that feature was designed, then it is highly likely that it was designed by God (obviously we didn't design it, and it's really unlikely that aliens did it).
(e) Thus, there is excellent evidence that God exists and is a designer.

Obviously, no one has ever offered that argument! I'm using it just for illustration so we acquire a good understanding of the form of the traditional Design Argument before we look at serious applications of it. Its premises (b) and (d) are plausible but of course (a) is false (obviously: the event described didn't actually happen), so the argument fails. Here is another way to plug something in for "F":

(a) The universe has feature F: it contains lots of laptop computers (on earth, if not elsewhere).
(b) If the universe has that feature, then it's very unlikely that that feature came about in a purely natural way, with no design behind it.

(c) Thus, by (a) and (b) it's highly likely that that feature of the universe was designed.
(d) If it's highly likely that that feature was designed, then it is highly likely that it was designed by God (obviously we didn't design it, and it's really unlikely that aliens did it).
(e) Thus, there is excellent evidence that God exists and is a designer.

Once again, we have a silly argument: although (a) & (b) are reasonable (d) isn't. By choosing yet another candidate for F, we can make (a) and (d) reasonable while (b) lacks obvious support:

(a) The universe has feature F: it contains lots of fantastically enormous stars.
(b) If the universe has that feature, then it's very unlikely that that feature came about in a purely natural way, with no design behind it.
(c) Thus, by (a) and (b) it's highly likely that that feature of the universe was designed.
(d) If it's highly likely that that feature was designed, then it is highly likely that it was designed by God (obviously we didn't design it, and it's really unlikely that aliens did it).
(e) Thus, there is excellent evidence that God exists and is a designer.

The goal for the person trying to make the Design Argument be successful is this:

Find some feature that can be plugged in for F to make (a) and (b) and (d) ***ALL*** *look definitely true.*

If they can pull this off, then we have a good Design Argument; if not, and no one can, then there is no good Design Argument that fits that pattern. So much is agreed upon.

Over the centuries theistic philosophers have put forth various serious candidates for a worthy F (i.e., one that seems to have a good chance at making (a), (b), and (d) true), some of which can be summarized with approximate accuracy as follows:

F1: Aspects of the universe are structured or ordered in a very intricate and apparently purposeful way, with various parts (the human eye)

structured so that larger parts (humans) can do certain things (see things and act accordingly).

F2: The universe contains great beauty/mystery/love/goodness.

F3: The universe's physical laws and fundamental physical constants are finely tuned for the emergence of life and consciousness in the following sense: if even one of those laws or constants had been even the slightest bit different, then there is virtually no chance there would be consciousness, life, people, stars, planets … maybe even atoms.

F4: Biological life frequently has irreducible complexity.

The Design Argument versions one gets by plugging F1 and F4 into argument pattern have been demolished with biology and physics through the various results about evolutionary theory and thermodynamics. Very briefly: for F1, premise (a) is true—note the presence of the word "apparently" in premise (a)—but the overall evidence is against (b); for F4 the overall evidence is against (a). I am not going to treat F1 or F4 in any detail, as I just don't think it's worth it.

This may strike you as strange: I'm refusing to wade into the creationism–evolution debate! If you don't know much about science but you do pay at least some attention to politics in the United States, then you might be under the impression that the theory of evolution is controversial in the scientific community, as a significant number of politicians, journalists, and political commentators say so. Well, it's controversial among people who don't know much about it *and* people who are utterly unable to examine it in anything other than an extremely biased way. Among people who have studied it thoroughly and competently it's about as firmly established as the theory that most ordinary things around us are made of molecules. It's a sad fact about the popular sources of information in the United States, television, certain websites, and newspapers especially, that they completely fail to communicate these facts about the consensus among scientists. It's even sadder that there are whole organizations, such as the Discovery Institute, who spend colossal amounts of energy to intentionally mislead the public about these matters. Hopefully, the present intellectual darkness regarding these issues is temporary and the United States will join most other advanced countries in not paying attention to the evolution deniers. Yeah, right.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not saying that scientists have the origin of life and related biological matters all figured out, in exact detail. They certainly do *not*. Like nearly every other major scientific theory that is overwhelmingly accepted today, there remain lots of gaps in the theories—and *not* just little ones. No one respectable (especially me!) is saying that the consensus regarding evolution and natural selection can't include some falsehoods—but then again the scientific consensus could be wrong about the existence of molecules, the link between reproduction and sex, the approximate distances between planets (despite the fact that we've successfully sent various spacecraft to those planets based on those very calculations), or the tie between smoking and poor health. But anyone betting on it is either uninformed, brainwashed, or a fool. Here's the cold, hard truth: betting that evolution is mistaken is like betting that the New York Yankees will win about 144 games next season: it's certainly *possible*, as it really could happen and we definitely have no proof against it, but only someone seriously ignorant of baseball or caught in some bizarre alternate psychological reality—brainwashed—would take such a possibility to be *likely*.

The evolution objection to the Design Argument doesn't deny that nature is marvelously organized in an intricate way. Sure it is! And that stunning organization must have an explanation. Or at least that seems a very reasonable view to have. But what biology and physics tell us is that the explanation need not invoke any designer at all. Despite what you might have read from various morons, we do not face a choice between "There is a designer" and "It is all random".

It's easy for non-theists to get carried away with evolution stuff. People can go overboard on this criticism of the traditional design arguments (i.e., the design arguments you get when you plug in F1 and F4). The facts behind evolution and physics absolutely do *not* show that God doesn't exist. They don't show that the universe wasn't designed. They don't show that God didn't design the universe. All they prove is that two arguments for the God-as-designer conclusion are weak because they rest on premises that our overall scientific evidence is against. That doesn't mean that that conclusion is false, and it doesn't mean that there is no *other* argument, a *better* one, that shows that God did design the universe.

The evolution/science objection to the traditional design arguments is *quite modest*: for F1, all it says is that premise (b) fails to be justified (which is not to say that science says (b) is false); for F4, all it says is that premise (a) fails to be justified. Just because one argument for a certain conclusion stinks does not mean that the conclusion is false or that no other argument exists that is quite good and proves the conclusion is true. This has nothing to do with religious matters; it's a general point about arguments.

I've never seen a good argument with F2 plugged in, but then again I don't know too many people who think you could get a good argument that way. I have often heard the idea that goes "But just look at great art! How could that exist without God?" But I know of no reason at all to think that the works of Renoir or John Lee Hooker, for instance, could only have come about with a designer other than Renoir and John Lee Hooker (and the artists who influenced them). The same holds for wonderful things like the love and laughter of little children: there just is no remotely obvious reason to think the only way this could come about is with a god. I love sentimentality too, but we are looking for evidence here, not feel-good stuff. I included F2 for the purpose of pointing out that there are many things one could try to plug in for F. Whether they generate a decent Design Argument is a matter for thorough investigation, not flip remarks either pro or con.

When you plug F3 into the argument pattern you get something, called the *Fine-Tuning Argument*, which in the judgment of many experts is better than the arguments generated by F1 or F4. This argument is better than those others because it's consistent with physics and biology. In fact, you may be surprised to learn that it appeals to contemporary physics for support: *this is a new scientific argument for the existence of God*, as I will now explain.

Everyone knows that science is filled with formulas and numbers. The most famous formula is "$E = mc^2$", from Einstein's Theory of Relativity. But of course there are many others. There is Newton's law "$F = ma$". And the Ideal Gas law "$PV = nRT$". These formulas and numbers characterize how our universe works. You will be happy and relieved to learn that I am *not* going to rely on you understanding what those formulas say, even approximately.

Now imagine those formulas and numbers being a bit different (here I take some liberties in omitting all sorts of technical qualifications that won't matter to our investigation). Instead of a universe that obeys "$E = mc^2$" imagine a universe that is governed by "$E = 7mc^2$". Instead of a universe in which electrons weigh 9.11×10^{-31} kilograms, imagine one in which they weigh 8×10^{-38} kilograms. Instead of a universe in which light travels at about 186,000 miles a second, think of one in which it travels at 1788 miles per hour. In fact, think of formulas and numbers as coming in packages. There is the package that characterizes our universe, package P1:

P1:
$E = mc^2$
Electrons weigh 9.11×10^{-31} kilograms
Light travels at about 186,000 miles a second
$PV = nRT$
$F = ma$
Etc.

All of those formulas and numbers are actually accurate; they characterize the way our universe really is. And here are a couple of other packages, P2 and P3, which are "imaginary" in the sense that they don't characterize the actual universe but merely possible universes:

P2:
$E = 7mc^2$
Electrons weigh 9.99×10^{-31} kilograms
Light travels at about 146,000 miles a second
$PV = 16.6nRT$
$F = 185ma$
Etc.

P3:
$E = 77.7mc^2$
Electrons weigh 9.11×10^{-3} kilograms
Light travels at about 186,000 miles a year
$PV = 77.7nRT$
$F = 77.7ma$
Etc.

Of course, there are zillions of *possible* packages (you can adjust the formulas as you please, and add new ones as well), but only one is *real*: the one that characterizes the real, actual universe. P1 is real; P2, P3, and the rest are merely possible. For any one of the possible packages we can raise all sorts of interesting questions. What would those universes be like—the ones characterized by alternative packages of formulas and numbers? For instance, if a universe obeyed the formulas in P2, and another universe was governed by the formulas in P3, what would those two universes be like? Would there be humans in them? Would there be other forms of conscious life? What would planets be like? Would they be closer together, bigger, hotter, shorter-lived, or what? And what would life be like? Would it be more common in the cosmos or would it be rarer? Would there be bunnies and bugs, or would life be very different, with no mammals or fish or reptiles but completely different creatures instead?

The advocates of the Fine-Tuning Argument have a truly stunning answer to these questions, one that certainly appears to be backed up with detailed scientific calculations by genuine expert scientists: if the formulas and numbers were even a tiny, tiny bit different, the overwhelming odds are that there would be no conscious life, no life, no planets, no stars. In fact, there might not even be any atoms! The most that would exist is virtually invisible dust and empty space. Or maybe that's not quite right; but if so, then the universe would be nothing but a soup of insanely hot particles that burns itself out into nothingness in no time at all. Of all the trillions of possible packages of formulas and numbers, *virtually only one* produces a universe with intelligent life: ours. It's mind-boggling.

Here is an easier way to think of it. Imagine each package as being a description of a room in a hotel and each room is a mini-universe accurately characterized by the package for that room. Suppose our package, P1, characterizes room 8987978. So if you're in the hotel of possible universes and go to room 8987978 and look inside, you'll see planets, stars, galaxies, life, humans, and baseball games. Package P2 characterizes room 4893, P3 characterizes room 18788788789787, etc. The Fine-Tuning philosophers, scientists, and theologians are saying that of the trillions and trillions of rooms in the hotel only one has anything interesting it in: room 8987978. For every other room, if you open it up you see nothing in it because there is virtually nothing there to see (alternatively: you see a soup of high-energy particles that fail to form anything stable or interesting such as carbon atoms, and then it burns itself out in a few seconds).

You won't be surprised to learn that this strikes most people as extraordinary. It doesn't look like an accident. It looks as though it can't be a mere coincidence that of all the possible packages, of all the zillions of possible hotel rooms to make real, the one that got to be real just happens to be virtually the only one that has anything interesting in it. What a miraculous coincidence! The actual universe could have been any of those rooms; why did it turn out to be close to the only interesting room out of gazillions of rooms?

The advocates of the Fine-Tuning Argument say that it's too much of a coincidence. If the package that got to be the one that characterizes the real, actual universe were picked randomly—like choosing a room at random in the hotel—then surely the outcome would be a universe with no stars, no planets, no life, no consciousness, and no baseball. After all, that's what virtually all of the rooms boil down to. And yet, the room that got chosen is practically the only one with anything interesting in it.

To see this last point, imagine that you're standing outside this ridiculously enormous hotel and you throw a rock at it totally at random and hit a window. Of the zillions of windows to hit, you managed to hit the only one that opens up to a room with anything in it. That would seem pretty unlikely, right? Since the room that got chosen is the only special one, something, or someone, must have *purposefully* chosen the room 8987978 over all the others. And, of course, any being powerful enough to choose the laws of nature—laws expressed by the formulas and numbers in the equations that characterize the universe—has got to be God.

Thus, *cutting-edge science itself* has generated evidence for the existence of God. That was unexpected.

Here is the Fine-Tuning Argument in a nutshell, fitting the template of the Design Argument given earlier:

(a) The universe has feature F3: the universe's physical laws and fundamental physical constants (what I've been calling "formulas and numbers") are finely tuned for the emergence of life and consciousness in the following sense: if even one of those laws or constants had been even just a tiny bit different, then there is virtually no chance there would be consciousness, life, people, stars, planets … maybe even atoms.
(b) If the universe has F3, then it's very unlikely that F3 came about in a purely natural way, with no design behind it.

(c) Thus, by (a) and (b) it's highly likely that this feature of the universe was designed.
(d) If it's highly likely that this feature was designed, then it is highly likely that it was designed by God (obviously we didn't design it, and it's really unlikely that aliens did it).
(e) Thus, there is excellent evidence that God exists and is a designer.

Unfortunately, most philosophers who have thoroughly examined these arguments think there is little reason to accept either (a) or (b), despite all the supporting arguments I gave above. I don't have the space to fully explain why, but I can give a quick taste of just *some* (not all) of the reasons why philosophers are highly skeptical about both (a) and (b).[1]

However, I want to make one thing perfectly clear while you examine the objections I list below: there remains the *possibility* that the advocates of the Fine-Tuning argument can maneuver around the defects revealed below in order to produce a version of the argument that turns out quite powerful. Just because I can sit here and offer brilliant, trenchant criticisms of staggering genius does not mean that the advocates of the argument have to hang their heads in shame, retire from philosophy, and retreat to spend the rest of their lives restricted to remote caves in the mountains. If it were that simple, then no philosopher would endorse the Fine-Tuning argument; but there are such supporters. All this applies to the Cosmological argument as well, covered in Chap. 5.

The first thing to note about the argument is that it is a scientific one. It appeals to some of the most advanced, cutting-edge physics there is. If you're not a philosopher familiar with some of the upper echelons of contemporary physics *and* the philosophy of physics, then you should probably just demur when someone asks you about this argument. Unfortunately, that fact virtually never stops anyone from pontificating, as I will prove by example now.

Scientists have argued that if one looks at packages that aren't too different from ours (ours is P1), then you don't get any familiar things like planets, stars, or life-forms. For instance, you get no carbon, which is one of the basic building blocks of life as we know it. Let's take their word for it, as they have the detailed calculations backing them up. I have a master's

[1] One reason I can't fully explain why is that "the" Fine-Tuning Argument actually comes in a variety of different forms, and it would take a lot of words and complex argumentation to go over them all in a fully responsible manner.

degree in physics, but I have not even looked at the calculations; so I can't evaluate them with much justification. And let me tell you: a master's degree in a subject is very unimpressive compared to the knowledge acquired by true experts in that subject who look upon their PhDs as their first baby steps in the field. So far, so good.

But I don't see much reason to think that they are able to tell what entirely *new* kinds of matter would result, or what new kinds of material organization might result. If you alter the laws of nature (or the "physical constants" in the equations), there is very little to go on in determining what new things you might end up with—even if you can be somewhat confident in figuring out what familiar things you will *not* come up with. You don't get to assume that if the numbers change then you will be dealing with the same stuff as before—electrons, protons, neutrons, photons—but they will just be obeying different laws. Instead, you have to think about the likelihood that the new laws will bring entirely new kinds of matter—some of which might be organized into new kinds of life and consciousness. And I don't think anyone has the foggiest idea how to calculate those odds.

So we have our first criticism:

> *Even if the physicists are perfectly right that slight changes in packages would result in the lack of familiar entities such as carbon, that doesn't give one much reason to think there would be no life or consciousness.*

There is a second criticism of (a). As I mentioned above, physicists like to say things like "If you change this equation by a one part in a gazillion, then you get no life; isn't that amazing?!" But as far as I know physicists have not considered *radically different packages*, ones with very little in common with ours. Such packages might govern universes rich in material, biological, and conscious existence but utterly different from ours; hardly dust and empty space. Physicists say things like "Well, if you keep every fundamental law of nature and fundamental physical constant the same, but change this one here by one billionth of a percent and that one there by a millionth of a percent, but change nothing else, then you get no stars, no planets, and no carbon; isn't that incredible?" That's fine, even incredible, but what about universes in which *many* laws and constants—even the fundamental ones—are very different, with different numbers *and even different variables* (e.g., ones other than energy, force, mass, electric charge, etc.)? As with the first criticism, nobody has even the *slightest* idea what such

packages would produce even if some of us do know what they would *not* produce (e.g., they wouldn't produce carbon). Clearly, it is going to be near impossible to reasonably speculate what would happen if there were entirely new kinds of physical factors. We might be able to confidently say there would be no carbon-based life, but we have no idea what new things—including forms of life—might come into existence. We just have no idea at all.

Hence, there are good reasons to doubt (a). But let's assume for the moment that the above pair of criticisms are mistaken and (a) is true; we want to give the advocate of the Fine-Tuning Argument every chance at success. Hence, we are now assuming that if the laws and constants were even slightly different—or completely different—there is almost no chance of life or consciousness *of any kind at all*, carbon-based or otherwise.

Unfortunately for the Fine-Tuning advocates, even if (a) is true there is little overall reason to think (b) is true. I'll describe three reasons why (b) is so doubtful even on assumption that (a) is true.

First, it might well be the case that our package is *necessary* in the sense that it's the only possible package. That is, it might be the case that all the other packages are literally impossible. (That means that the "if" part of (a), "if the laws and constants were even slightly different", is vacuous, as the laws and constants could not have been different.) Saying "But we can imagine a universe with $E = 7mc^2$ instead of $E = mc^2$" might be like saying "But we can imagine a universe in which water has no hydrogen in it" or "But we can imagine a world in which the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter is 3.14159 exactly instead of pi". Yes, you can *imagine* those things (at least under some conceptions of imagination), but what you're imagining is, according to firmly established science and math, literally impossible. It's impossible to have water without hydrogen, so why think that it's possible that $E = 7mc^2$? The formulas in mathematics are said to be necessary (it's not an *accident* that twice two is four instead of five), and we know that many of the statements in science are too; the fundamental formulas and constants in science may be as well, regardless of what imagination suggests. Some physicists and philosophers have speculated thus.

Now, if we knew a *great deal* regarding how those formulas and constants were fixed, then perhaps we would be in a position to confidently say that they genuinely could have turned out different. But whether we like it or not, we don't have such knowledge at the present time. Sometimes it is easy to know that something could have been different: I could have

lived my life without being a professor. But when it comes to the fundamental notions of physics, only ridiculously overconfident people make such claims. We simply have *no idea* whether the fundamentals of physics could have been at all different. I'm not saying that contemporary physics says that those fundamentals could not have been different; I'm saying that it says nothing worthwhile on the topic as of yet. Scientists do two things: figure things out and *speculate*; we shouldn't confuse them. So that's one reason why we should be wary of (b).

Let's move to the second important objection to (b). If the laws of nature were finely tuned with the intention of producing life and consciousness, then you would probably expect laws that produce *a significant amount of life and consciousness.* And yet, there is barely any life and consciousness in the universe—even if there is plenty of life on other planets. There's some life here on the sliver of reality known as the earth's crust, but for literally billions of miles in any direction there isn't any (or, there is a minute amount but it's incredibly primitive, like bacteria, and unbelievably rare), life has been present on earth for only a very short time, and consciousness has been around for a vanishingly short time, compared to the age of the universe. If you were God designing a universe so that there would be life and consciousness, why would you design the laws so that life and consciousness are so incredibly rare and fragile? Instead, it looks like the *last* thing the universe was designed for—assuming it was designed at all—was either life or consciousness.

To return to the hotel idea: in actuality *all* the hotel rooms—including ours—look virtually completely devoid of life or complex matter: for each one, either 99.999% of the space in the room is occupied by nothing bigger than a proton (i.e., for all we can see with our senses there is nothing bigger than a proton there; here I'm setting aside the possibility discussed above that there might be all sorts of new kinds of existences in those rooms), or it has lots of matter but 99.999% of that matter is lifeless.

We need to appreciate the numbers here. If our sun were the size of the period at the end of a sentence, how far away do you think the *nearest* star would be? A few feet? How about fifty feet? Five hundred feet, which seems crazy? No: about *five miles*, and we are in the midst of a galaxy, the crowded "urban" part of the universe; the "rural" space between galaxies is even sparser. And virtually the whole universe is around a balmy -455° Fahrenheit. To say the universe is *virtually all* frozen empty space is an extremely mild thing to say.

The advocate of the Fine-Tuning Argument wants you to think that our universe is extraordinary compared to all those other possible universes, as ours has things like galaxies and life and the others don't. They want you to think that if you look in our hotel room you can see lots of galaxies, stars, and planets whereas when you look in the other rooms all you see is a tiny bit of dust floating in the air. This is a lie. Even if we accept that the other universes wouldn't contain any impressive physical things—which we saw in the previous pages we have no reason to believe—almost all the universes look exactly the same when you open the hotel room doors, and the ones that don't are occupied by nothing but dead matter. Our universe is almost entirely excruciatingly cold empty space—and the parts that aren't empty are almost entirely without any life.[2] Our universe-room is surprising only if you are surprised that in a few *infinitesimally small* places in the room there is some biological activity going on—life about the size of a proton compared to that of the room. If God designed the universe, it looks like he is really fascinated by frozen dust and empty space, not life or consciousness.

This line of reasoning is supposed to get us to be highly suspicious of (b) *even if we are convinced that (a) is true*: that is, even if we agree that it's incredible that the laws and constants turned out to give rise to life and consciousness, this is not the result of design but just a highly interesting side effect. The extreme rarity of life and consciousness is what makes them look like a side effect and not the result of design. But if they are mere side effects, then they don't need a designer.

This "empty cold space" objection to (b) focuses on the fact that life and consciousness are fantastically *rare*. (We should call it the "life & consciousness are unbelievably rare" objection, not the "empty cold space" objection.) The main point of the objection is that even if life and consciousness are objectively amazing and our universe is virtually unique in having them (so (a) is true), the fact that life and consciousness are so stunningly rare makes it unlikely that they are the result of design: given their extreme rarity, they look exactly like unintended and curious side effects.

Here is an example that illustrates this point. Suppose I flip a coin not a hundred or thousand times but 97 gazillion times (this would take forever, but pretend I have eternal life and not much to do). Suppose further that people take turns watching me do this (presumably they would be

[2] I am here ignoring dark matter and energy, which should be called "dark" because so little is known about them.

paid, as it's so boring). When it's your turn to watch me, the coin comes up heads *fifty times in a row*. Naturally, you find this extraordinary. You say to yourself that this can't possibly be a coincidence. You conclude that someone has messed with the coin so that it turns up heads. You would say that the odds that any coin just happens to turn up heads fifty times in a row even though the coin is a "fair" one is so absurdly improbable that we can dismiss that possibility out of hand.

But you're wrong! If I really do flip a coin that much, crazy things are *bound* to happen: they are inevitable. Eventually, exceedingly rare things like getting fifty heads in a row are going to happen even if it's not the result of design. You probably already know this, at least implicitly: if you examine any extremely large group of things long enough weird results will come up. For instance, if you look at snakes all your life (so that's a large group of things) you will discover some that have two heads (I'm not making that up). Similarly, for any extremely large collection of coin tosses there will be long stretches in which the coin comes up heads every time. It's inevitable given the large number of tosses. Similarly, just because right here on earth things seem pretty remarkable with so much life and consciousness, when you take a big picture view of the universe, earth looks like one of those *inevitable* flukes (like the string of fifty heads in a row), not something designed. Given the extreme rarity of life and consciousness, the universe looks exactly as though it was *not* designed for them. Now, if we found life and consciousness throughout the universe, and (a) were true (so our universe is the only one with any life or consciousness at all), then perhaps the extreme rarity objection to (b) would be no good. But that's not what we find in the universe.

I hear an objection: God has excellent reason for creating a universe virtually without consciousness or life even though it was designed for life and consciousness (e.g., perhaps there is some hidden benefit to our discovering the vast emptiness of the frozen universe). You can *make up* all sorts of divine reasons here, pulling them out of your imagination, or maybe your ass. But the line of reasoning of the previous paragraphs does suggest that it's not at all obvious that the universe was designed with consciousness in mind *even if the laws and constants have the amazing feature mentioned in (a)*.

There is a third reason to be wary of (b). Some physicists have hypothesized that there are an enormous number of universes. Think of blowing some bubbles for children: their idea is that each universe exists sort of like a bubble. If there are a great many of these bubble universes (say, 10 raised

to the 10th power raised to the 10th power raised to the 10th power…), and they have all sorts of different laws of nature, then even if there is no divine hand designing any of them, even if the universes are generated without any design, since there are so many of them it stands to reason that eventually some "interesting" universes—with life and consciousness—will be generated. We can use the hotel of universes idea I described earlier to see what's going on. In that discussion we assumed that there is just one real universe: just one room in the hotel is real. And then it seemed mysterious that the one room that got to be the real universe just happened to be one of the incredibly rare rooms that have life and consciousness in them. But the physicists I am alluding to now are suggesting that a fantastically large number of the hotel rooms are real, one for each bubble universe, and so it's no surprise that the interesting rooms get realized along with the boring rooms.

The upshot of this idea: even if our universe is extraordinary in the fact that it is one of the tiny few possible universes that permit life and consciousness, there is no mystery as to how it came into existence, given the incredible number of bubble universes that actually exist. The vast majority of these bubble universes have no life or consciousness, but given the fantastically large number of them it's almost inevitable that *some* will end up with life and consciousness. It's a bit like flipping a coin a gazillion times: if you do it enough times, eventually weird and unlikely things will happen (e.g., fifty heads in a row, or the coin lands on its side a few times in a row). Thus, even if (a) is true, if the speculations of these physicists are on track, there is no reason to posit a designer.

This third criticism of (b) is common in the philosophical literature, partly because it's so cool. However, I am skeptical regarding its worth, as it is based on what everyone agrees are highly speculative hypotheses (regarding the number and nature of the bubble universes). The other two criticisms of (b) strike me as more solidly grounded.

Finally, you probably noticed that the Fine-Tuning Argument does not try to establish "God exists and is a designer"—in fact, all it concludes is that there is excellent evidence for that idea, which hardly proves it because there could be strong evidence *against* the idea that cancels out the strong evidence *for* the idea. Not only that: it doesn't even *try* to get "God is supremely good", "God is supremely knowledgeable", or "God is supremely powerful". Clearly, additional mighty arguments would have to supplement the Fine-Tuning Argument in order to get anything like a decent argument for the existence of the traditional God. Thus, even if the

Fine-Tuning Argument is *completely successful* we are still a helluva long distance from a good argument for the existence of the traditional God. Wise Fine-Tuning advocates are aware of this; they certainly don't hang their entire case for God on this one argument.

Often when I present these criticisms of the Fine-Tuning Argument I get the response "Well, maybe God set up the laws anyway; you haven't shown that he didn't". And that's exactly right:

I have done nothing to show that God didn't set up the laws of nature.

I have no such ambition here, especially since I'm agnostic on this issue. But keep in mind what is going on:

The theist is trying to construct a scientific argument for the existence of God.

Hence, it's *up to her to deliver the goods*: she is the one who has to come up with the evidence backing up her claims. That's what she has set out to do. When we evaluate her argument, trying to figure out how good it is, we need not attempt to show its conclusion is false. Indeed, we may well agree with its conclusion (I have colleagues who are competent in the philosophy of religion, who are theists, and who reject the Fine-Tuning Argument entirely). To respond to our criticisms with "But you haven't shown that God didn't design the laws of nature" is to totally misunderstand what's going on. The critic of the Fine-Tuning Argument has the burden of showing why we fail to have good reason to accept the premises; she has no obligation to argue against the conclusion. Indeed, she may well agree with it.

What I have written above is an *incomplete* evaluation of the Fine-Tuning Argument, as I'm leaving out all sorts of additional important considerations, including further criticisms as well as intelligent responses by the advocates of the Fine-Tuning Argument. I myself have no firm opinion on its quality, but you should not concern yourself with my personal opinion or any other particular philosopher's opinion. In any case, I hope the above discussion will suffice, for our limited purposes here, as a quick but intelligent explanation of why philosophers are so skeptical of the Fine-Tuning Argument. Now we leave it behind and move on to the other argument for God's existence.

CHAPTER 5

The Origin of the Universe

Like the Design Argument, the Cosmological Argument comes in lots of versions; I will examine just two. I will start with a simple presentation of what we'll call the *Finite* version, since it says that the universe has a finite past (which means, roughly, that it doesn't go back in time infinitely):

(a) The universe had a beginning: there was a *first* event.
(b) If the universe had a beginning, then the first event must have been caused to happen by something; at least, this is highly probable.
(c) Whatever caused the beginning of the physical universe must be God; at least this is highly probable.
(d) Thus, there is excellent evidence that God exists.

We are going to assume for the moment that (a) is true. This is not a gift though. The theist has two arguments, Finite and Infinite, with one saying the universe goes back infinitely and the other saying it goes back finitely. Clearly, one of those two premises has to be true, so one of the arguments starts off with a truth.

However, many, perhaps most, philosophers think there is little reason to believe (b) is true. There are good reasons to doubt it—and I mean

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doubt it for *serious* reasons, and not merely doubt it because like virtually every idea it's conceivable it is false.

Our first reason to doubt (b) is that we are now talking about the first physical event of the universe, what is usually called the "Big Bang".[1] Consider your toilet. If it suddenly flushes even though no one touched the handle or any other part of it, it's still a good bet that something caused the toilet to flush even if you haven't figured out what it was. (I once had a toilet that did this for a while; it was puzzling.) That's the way toilets work: when they do something, something must have caused them to do what they did. The same holds for a flower: if a flower opens its petals, you can bet that something made that happen, even if the "something" is a group of factors working together. But the Big Bang is hardly your ordinary, everyday event. Just because ordinary, everyday events like toilets flushing and flowers opening their petals have causes doesn't mean that bizarre, utterly extraordinary events do. The Big Bang is nothing ordinary: *it's unwise to extrapolate from the ordinary to the utterly extraordinary.*

The second reason to doubt (b) is that a good number of obviously competent and accomplished physicists have, after much thought, come to the conclusion that many events occurring at the quantum level—involving electrons, photons, and things like them—are uncaused. Now, maybe they're right and maybe they're wrong; there are lots of uncertain, speculative matters here. Only overly confident fools think they know the answers here. But in any case the idea "Well, anything physical that comes into existence must have a cause" is nowhere near obviously correct. It's obviously correct for ordinary events, but as we just said above, the Big Bang is by far *the strangest and least well-known thing in the universe*; it's unwise to extrapolate from the ordinary to the utterly extraordinary.

I'm hoping you are not too impressed with those first two criticisms. I'm hoping that you are wondering just *how* extraordinary the Big Bang is compared to other physical events. That's a very good thing to wonder about. Let's think about it.

In order to get an idea of the extraordinary nature of the Big Bang, and as a consequence see the wisdom of the first two criticisms, first consider

[1] As we'll see below, some physicists insist that the Big Bang is not an "event", considered as something that happens at a certain time.

that to *informatively* hold that the Big Bang was caused by something, one would have to have at least one of the following:

(i) A good argument that shows that absolutely all physical things, no matter how bizarre, simply must have causes. If we had this argument, then the fact that the Big Bang was so odd would be no good reason to question whether it had a cause.
(ii) Detailed knowledge of what the Big Bang was—knowledge which shows that it, like ordinary events, probably had a cause.

Philosophers think (i) is not viable (even though philosophers tried for several centuries to find such an argument). Naturally, it is hard for many people to imagine something just popping into existence with no cause (I have no trouble at all with this, but maybe that's just me). Such an idea may seem philosophically unseemly, especially if we confine our imagination to things like toilets flushing and flowers opening their petals. But we are looking for evidence here, not prejudices that make us comfortable in our philosophical beds. So (i) is out, as there simply is no such argument. And no one who is wise about contemporary physics thinks (ii) is now available. The more one knows about the Big Bang the more one sees how we have no good reason to think it had a cause.

Let me explain a bit why (ii) is lacking (which means we lack a good reason for premise (b) of the Cosmological Argument). Physicists have a lot of good (but hardly conclusive) evidence for their theories regarding the time around 14 billion years ago when, roughly put, the entire universe was concentrated in a superhot and very tiny energy "ball". And they have offered speculations on what happened immediately before that time: many (but not all) think the universe, including space and even time, was *created* in the Big Bang, which very quickly produced that very tiny energy ball. The idea of the Big Bang comes from Einstein's General Theory of Relativity (GTR), which has some impressive evidence in its favor.[2] However, GTR is incompatible with another theory in physics, Quantum Mechanics (QM)—which has truly stunning evidence backing it up. In fact, QM is probably the most impressively verified scientific theory ever. Because QM is so well verified and GTR is incompatible with QM (by "incompatible" I mean that they can't both be true, as they conflict with

[2] Years earlier Einstein came up with the "Special Theory of Relativity". GTR is a significant improvement on it.

one another), we have good reason to doubt the predictions of GTR, including that of the Big Bang.

Don't get me wrong: we have *good evidence* that around 14 billion years ago the whole universe consisted of a superhot tiny ball of extremely high energy, and our universe today came from that ball (at least, the *known* physical universe came from that ball). So I am definitely not putting any doubt on that part of the Big Bang theory. But the idea that the universe was *created* shortly before that time is a more contentious hypothesis, one that we don't have a lot of evidence for. Furthermore, GTR gets you evidence for the Big Bang only on the assumption that there are no undiscovered laws of nature that have significant effect on what happened before the time of the superhot energy ball. But since our understanding of *that* period of the universe is so weak, and that time period is so utterly unlike the rest of the history of the universe, it is pretty risky to suppose that GTR's assumption is correct. For several decades physicists have been trying to construct a consistent theory that includes only what is right with both GTR and QM, but thus far there is little experimental support for the speculations. It's pure speculation, as the physicists themselves will tell you. Thus, information about GTR and QM should make us realize that contemporary physics by no means justifies the idea that there was a beginning to the physical universe and it had a cause.

However, things get even weirder than that, as for our fourth reason to doubt (b) shows. Some physicists claim that the Big Bang is the beginning of time itself, as I mentioned above. That is, there is no "before" the Big Bang. That's very hard to imagine, but there it is. If they are right, then it is hardly obvious that there was a cause of the Big Bang, in any sense of "cause", since it is usually (to put it mildly!) true that the cause of an event precedes it in time, and yet according to these physicists there was no time before the Big Bang. Challenge: think of a case of x causing y when neither x nor any other physical thing existed before y. You can't do it. In fact, it's much worse than that: these physicists would say that strictly speaking the Big Bang is probably not an "event" or "thing that happened" at all, contrary to what I've been saying over and over, since events happen in time and the Big Bang is the origin of time. Odd as it may seem, the Big Bang did not happen *at* a time; it is the origin of time. Challenge: think of a case of x causing y when neither x nor y occur at any time at all (not even over a temporal interval). You can't do it, and yet premise (b) is insisting that there is such a case when y = the Big Bang and x = the cause of the Big Bang. This is yet another reason to not apply ordinary rules about

events to the Big Bang. In response, some philosophers have tried to spell out a notion of "the ground or explanatory source of an event" that doesn't include the ground, source, or whatever coming *before* the event, but it's all just highly doubtful and contested philosophical speculation without even the slightest bit of experimental confirmation. Some of it is interesting and inspiring speculation, at least according to some philosophical tastes, but that's all that can be said for it.

In order to articulate the fifth reason to doubt (b), suppose that contrary to what I've been arguing our very best science today said that the Big Bang really happened and something, X, caused it to happen. Science is not saying this, at least not today, but for the sake of argument pretend it is saying it or will say it in the future. All by itself, this means nothing. Whether or not we should take stock in the speculations of physicists depends on how much evidence they have for their theories. A significant number of physicists openly speculate on certain grand matters without much in the way of evidence. Naturally, they are aware that they are offering mere speculations—ideas that are definitely worthwhile because they suggest new avenues of research but do not claim to be supported by real data. What counts as our "very best theories regarding X" need not have much in way of evidence backing it up.

The sixth reason to doubt (b) comes from the weirdness of contemporary science. Ever since Darwin, science has often gone contrary to many commonsensical beliefs from ordinary life. And before him as well: the heliocentric view of the Solar System was also deeply against common sense, and the transition from a geocentric to a heliocentric model occurred well before Darwin. The results of evolutionary theory (in which, to put it crudely, stupid things just naturally organize to make smart things without any help from intelligent agents), GTR, QM, and transfinite mathematics (in which, for instance, there are infinitely many infinite numbers) show that ideas derived from common experience just aren't at all reliable when applied to odd cases. And the origin of the universe, or the Big Bang, has got to be the oddest case ever. When people stamp their feet and insist "But something can't come from nothing! So there simply had to be a cause of the Big Bang!" the right response is to point out that in ordinary life that's perfectly true but when it comes to the origin of the physical universe we have good reason to hesitate in thinking that that rule still applies.

Further, and this strikes me as crucial, the alternative idea—God caused the Big Bang—*is just as fantastic as the idea that the Big Bang had no cause.*

When I hear someone insist that he or she just can't imagine how the Big Bang could just pop into existence with no cause, I *sympathize with their inclination*, as it strikes me as weird as well. But then I have to go on to insist that I for one have no grasp whatsoever on how a nonphysical being could cause a physical event—especially when the physical event in question is so bizarre that some experts say it's not something that happened at a particular time. To a real extent, we are faced with at least two potential incomprehensible marvels here: a nontemporal, nonphysical cause (God or some nonphysical "force" of some sort) of a possibly nontemporal event (the Big Bang), or an uncaused possibly nontemporal event (the Big Bang). Only the overconfident has any view on which really happened.

I'm *not* saying with these six criticisms "Well, we can't be 100% absolutely certain that the universe had a beginning and that beginning had something, X, cause it to happen". I'm saying something much stronger: our evidence just leaves us *utterly in the dark* regarding whether X really existed. The upshot of these scientific reflections is *not* that we should think that GTR is false or that there was no Big Bang or even that the Big Bang had no cause (either divine or not). Instead, we should *withhold judgment* on the matter of what the Big Bang was like, if indeed there was any such thing. And that means that we should not think that physics gives much support for (b), the premise that the beginning of the universe had a cause. That is, (ii) is lacking, just as I said earlier.

But let's not get carried away here with the force of these six criticisms of (b) (six may seem a lot, but mere large numbers don't guarantee collective strength). There is certainly nothing *crazy* about thinking that the universe began billions of years ago and that, like other physical events, was caused by something! On the contrary, (b) is a *reasonable* claim, at least in my judgment, even if there is significantly less evidence for it than many people say. So let's assume for a moment that the above criticisms are no good and (b) is true. Hence, we're now setting aside *all* previous criticisms and assuming for the sake of argument that (a) and (b) are perfectly true: the universe began in the finite past and something, call it X, caused it to start up. That's a reasonable position to have, even if science doesn't back it up sufficiently.

With all that in mind: is there any good reason to think X is God, as premise (c) says?

It is hard to think of any such reason coming from philosophy or science. There is reason to think that X would have to be nonphysical (as God is virtually always thought to be). Here's the reason: since the Big

Bang is supposed to be the *first* physical event (even though, as we mentioned above, it might not really be an event at all), X caused the Big Bang, and causes of events precede those events (perhaps not always, but let's set that criticism aside), X can't be physical. (Actually, there is nothing in the physics that says that all matter originated in the Big Bang—all it says is that all *known* matter (especially that governed by gravity and other familiar forces) so originated—but let's set that problem aside too.) But is there any reason to think X has to have a mind, or know anything (let alone virtually everything), or be loving, or be forgiving, or be morally good (or even be just *one* thing X, instead of a bunch of things X, Y, Z, and so on)? Nope.

It's important to know the argumentative situation. The traditional theist is saying that they have good evidence for the existence of God: the premises (a), (b), and (c). But we have encountered no good reason to accept either (b) or (c). So we have not found any good evidence *here* for the existence of God. As before, this is not to say that God doesn't exist or that there is no evidence for God's existence.

For the sake of speeding up this chapter on cosmological evidence of God's existence, let us take a much briefer look at the *Infinite* version of the Cosmological Argument:

(a) The universe has no beginning: it goes back in time infinitely.[3]
(b) Even though the universe goes back in time infinitely, there has to be some *explanation* of the whole temporally extended thing. At least, it's highly likely that there is such an explanation.
(c) Whatever explains the infinite chain must be God; at least this is highly probable.
(d) Thus, there is excellent evidence that God exists.

Now the key premises are (b) and (c) (recall that at this point we are simply assuming the truth of (a)). I'll just assume that (b) is true in order to focus on (c). To see very briefly why (c) is doubtful consider a very simple model of cause and effect. Event E1 is caused to happen by preceding event E2, which is caused by preceding event E3, which is caused by preceding event E4, etc., going back in time:

[3] This premise is not saying that there was a beginning but infinitely many years have passed since then. Instead, it's saying that there was no beginning at all and for any finite number of years you can imagine, the universe's past is older than that.

$$\ldots E6 \rightarrow E5 \rightarrow E4 \rightarrow E3 \rightarrow E2 \rightarrow E1$$

$$\longrightarrow \text{Time going forward}$$

So, E1 is explained by its cause E2, E2 is explained by its cause E3, E3 is explained by its cause E4, etc., going back in time infinitely. So *every* event in the chain has a non-supernatural explanation—assuming every event has a cause. (If not every event in the chain of causes and effects has a cause then premise (b) is in trouble.) So why think that there has to be an *additional* explanation, a supernatural (God) one, of the whole chain? We just explained *each and every one* of its parts without invoking God; we have explained literally *everything in the physical universe*. So what have we left out? Nothing. So, even if (b) is right, so there has to be an explanation of the whole universe, the obvious explanation is "Each part of the whole is explained by another part of the whole".

You can't just respond with "Well, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts; so, even if you explain each part, that doesn't mean you've explained the whole". That's a nice slogan, but is there any reason at all to think that it's actually true for the physical universe, which by supposition here is infinite in time (as premise (a) demands)?

The same holds for the response that goes "But now you're wedded to the absurd idea that the universe as a single composite thing *explains itself*, as each part of it is explained by another part!" The comment is accurate, as that is indeed what we're saying, but that's a lousy objection because that's just the way *infinite* objects work. If the universe is an infinitely long object (infinite in temporal length, going into the past if not the future), then it can be something that "explains itself" in the sense that each part is explained by another part without circularity or end. Yes, that sounds weird. In medieval times, and even according to some folks today, the idea of a physical thing that can explain its own existence would have been pronounced absurd, contradictory, and contrary to reason. That's nice, but our intuitions about physical objects are formed regarding finite ones alone, not infinite ones, and infinite objects are utterly different from finite ones.

There are all sorts of violently counterintuitive results about infinite collections; so, we should get used to them. For instance, you can prove, about as rigorously as you can prove anything, that there are just as many positive numbers as there are positive and negative numbers—and yet, there are fewer positive and negative integers than there are decimal numbers between 0 and 1! Take the collection of all positive integers; now add something to that collection, such as the number 0; the resulting set is *no*

bigger even though you have indeed *added* something to it that it didn't have before. Sounds crazy, doesn't it? (It certainly did for me, but after learning and reflecting philosophically on some transfinite math I was able to "see", in a sense not tied to the rigorous proof, how it isn't crazy at all and is actually intuitive.) After learning about the mathematical work on infinite quantities (started by the mathematician Georg Cantor in the 1870s), much of which is indisputable yet utterly against common sense, we should no longer be *at all* confident in our pre-scientific prejudices about infinity when applied to the infinite physical world. And if that's the case, then we should not rely on our commonsensical ideas that seem to call out for a separate explanation of an infinite chain of causes and effects.

There is a common criticism of the Cosmological and Fine-Tuning arguments that doesn't focus on any one premise. It's this: how on earth are we supposed to know anything substantive about the origin or ultimate explanation of the universe or the universe's laws of nature (or the nature of infinity for that matter)? If we had some reason to think that contemporary physicists had finally settled the major issues regarding the universe's origin or laws, then perhaps we could just study physics and reflect appropriately. But most physicists will tell you that only fools put so much faith in the most advanced and least confirmed speculations of physicists. In my view, the right answer to most of the questions involved in the Cosmological and Fine-Tuning arguments is "How the hell should I know?" Doesn't God punish hubris anymore?

I am *not* trying to argue that (1) the universe had no beginning, or that (2) although it did begin it had no cause, or that (3) although it began and was caused, the cause had no mind, or that (4) although it began and was caused by a mind, the mind fails to have the characteristics typically accorded to God. In the foregoing pages I presented no convincing evidence *against* the idea that the universe was caused to exist by a mind that is loving, good, knowing, and powerful (which is not to say that there is no such evidence against that theistic idea).

But that's not what I was trying to do. All I'm saying is that we don't have any impressive evidence *for* the key claims of the Fine-Tuning Argument or the Cosmological Argument. It can be difficult, especially for really smart people like sophisticated Design Argument or Cosmological Argument advocates, to admit that our current evidence just completely runs out, leaving us not *merely* short of certainty (regarding the key premises of the two arguments) but short of anything that can justify substantive belief, but in my judgment that's what happens when we contemplate matters such as the origin or explanation of the physical universe.

PART III

The Failure of Arguments *Against* God

There are many arguments against the truth or rationality of theism. You can find some of them in recent popular works by Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Richard Dawkins. For the most part, these books are amateurish. In particular, the esteemed scientist Dawkins suffers from a malady that afflicts a surprisingly large percentage of outstanding scientists: the idea that he can succeed at philosophy because he has succeeded at science. It is easy to see how training in philosophy but not science would leave one utterly unprepared to do competent science—even if one is excellent at philosophy. What Dawkins misses is that the reverse is true as well: training in science but not philosophy leaves one utterly unprepared to do competent philosophy—regardless of how good one is at science.

For instance, Dawkins thinks that "it has not escaped the notice of logicians that omniscience [roughly: knowing everything] and omnipotence [having all power] are mutually incompatible." We can prove that God doesn't exist in one long sentence: if God exists as traditionally conceived, with omnipotence and omniscience, then it's possible that a single thing has both characteristics; but that's impossible (as the logicians have noted); so, God doesn't exist as traditionally conceived. I studied logic for several years as a PhD student and yet know of no prominent logicians who have "noticed" this alleged incompatibility. Do we really need to point out to

Dawkins the many great logicians of the last century, for example who are or were devout theists in spite of thinking quite hard about theism and

logic? How about the contemporary philosopher and logician Saul Kripke, who is a committed theist and who started publishing groundbreaking papers *in logic* while a boy in high school? Sorry, but Dawkins is clueless here.

There are serious arguments against the truth or the rationality of central theistic beliefs such as "God exists," "Mohammad communicated with an archangel," and "Jesus rose from the dead." In this part of the book, I examine three such arguments: the Problem of Gratuitous Suffering, the Problem of Disagreement, and the Argument from Outrageousness.

CHAPTER 6

The Problem of Suffering

Introduction

Pretend that you know some very old woman who is incredibly wise. Everyone calls her "Mother Abigail." She is wise in knowing about life in general as well as being incredibly, almost supernaturally perceptive: she has the uncanny ability to see right into your soul and know what kind of person you are, and what your strengths, weaknesses, hopes, dreams, and fears are. Numerous reports say that she is unfailingly kind, fair, and loving to everyone. Mother Abigail has adopted many orphaned children as well. Then some of the orphans come to you with tales of woe: they have had to suffer on many occasions while living in Mother Abigail's fine large home. You find these stories puzzling: How could Mother Abigail permit such suffering in her home?

You can think of various possible explanations of what's going on:

- She doesn't know about the suffering. Even if she would find it abhorrent and would not permit it, because she doesn't even know it's happening she fails to put a stop to it.
- She knows about the suffering and wants to prevent it but for some reason it lies outside of her control, so she can't do anything about it.
- She's secretly a horrible person who knows about the suffering, could put a stop to it, but lets it go on anyway.

B. Frances, *An Agnostic Defends God*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-73331-5_6

- She knows about it, thinks it's terrible, can put a halt to it, but she allows it to happen because she knows that there is some hidden benefit to the suffering (e.g., it makes the children more resilient).

We may not know which of the four hypotheses is true, but what we can be confident about is this:

- *If* she knows all about the suffering, and
- *if* she knows the fact that it's within her power to stop it, and
- *if* she's a morally excellent person,
- *then* she will put a stop to any suffering that isn't worth it—where a bout of suffering is worth it when it's linked with some benefit that outweighs the suffering.

So we can understand why there is suffering in Mother Abigail's home even if we are convinced that she is perfectly good, knowledgeable, and powerful in her home: she permits suffering *only when the suffering is worth it*.

Most theists think God is in a position a bit similar to Mother Abigail's: he knows all about the suffering in the universe, he is all powerful, and he is morally perfect. Those are three "reports" concerning God, analogous to those regarding Mother Abigail with respect to her home. Most theists don't want to give up any of those three reports about God. When faced with the reasoning about Mother Abigail applied to God, they will usually decide that God must know of some good reason to permit our suffering to occur, even if we have no idea what it might be. Whenever we encounter suffering that doesn't seem worth it, we are mistaken: it's always worth it. There is no *gratuitous* suffering, even in the Holocaust in World War II. But is that true?

Our world contains enormous amounts of suffering. Virtually all the higher animals, humans included, experience fear, terror, agony, sorrow, misery, anguish, and torment. In fact, these horrors are not exceptions but the rule, since for untold eons nearly all higher mammals, again including humans, have experienced each of these at various points in their lives. What happens to the vast majority of animals in the perfectly normal course of nature (so set aside factory farming) would without a second thought be labeled as the worse types of torture if done by a person. Such a tormentor would be confidently pronounced a moral

monster who deserves the harshest punishment justice allows. Of course, there are great amounts of love and happiness in the world. But there is agony and torment as well, and they touch all but the exceedingly fortunate.

When faced with this theistic paradox, most people who believe in God suppose that there must be some good reason God allows vast amounts of horrific suffering. He must have a plan of some kind, even if we cannot discern it. All that suffering must be worth it in some fashion; otherwise, he wouldn't have permitted it. Every single instance of suffering, regardless of whether it is minor or appalling, must have some good if unfathomable purpose attached to it that makes it worth it, even if that attachment is obscure to us. God is aware of what is going on, even if we don't know what he's doing. Many theologians and ordinary believers in God will give a response along this line when challenged with the existence of horrific suffering. In fact, there are many books devoted to the question, "Why does God permit so much horrific suffering?," and most of them are written by devout theists who defend some version of that idea.

Of course, we can all agree that many instances of suffering are definitely attached to good things that justify them. The theistic response sketched in the previous paragraphs is by no means silly or unreasonable, since it is based in part on some accurate reflections on suffering and goodness. For instance, when I donated blood one Sunday, my small dose of suffering was outweighed by the benefit the donation led to when someone in a hospital got that blood of mine. In this case, there is an instance of suffering, and then, later, there is an instance of goodness that is the result of the suffering. In other cases, an instance of suffering leads not to an obvious case of a good thing but to the prevention of a really bad thing. For instance, I take some truly awful medicine for a major illness. It tastes so hideous that I suffer a bit because I drank it. But it was worth it because it stopped a bad thing from happening (the illness worsening perhaps). These are the simple cases, but it's good to have some simple ones in mind before we tackle the complicated cases.

Sometimes the order is reversed: a good thing inevitably leads to a bit of suffering. For instance, some children enjoy themselves roughhousing in the basement. They are having a great time. But the rough play leads to one of the children getting hurt. Even so, the pain is worth it to the

children because the badness of the minor injury is amply outweighed by the goodness of the play. That's why they do it again and again.

But are *all* instances of suffering throughout history justified? In order to profitably explore that question, let's define an instance of suffering as gratuitous if it is not coupled with any combination of goods whose goodness outweighs the badness of the suffering. I will also use the somewhat awkward but convenient phrase "a suffering" to talk of a particular instance or occasion of suffering (and the word "sufferings" will indicate multiple instances of suffering).

A gratuitous suffering does not have to lead to or be otherwise coupled with no good at all. As I'm using the term, a "gratuitous suffering" may be coupled with plenty of goods but such goods would not outweigh the suffering. For instance, suppose you get tendonitis in your knee. One way to get rid of it is to amputate your leg. The amputation is definitely coupled with a good thing: the elimination of your tendonitis. But of course it wouldn't be worth it, as the cure is worse than the disease. Thus, an instance of suffering can be coupled with a good thing but still be gratuitous: the goodness of the good thing is less than the badness of the suffering.

I will offer to further clarify the notion of gratuitous suffering below. For the next few pages it will suffice to (i) stick with familiar examples of how instances of suffering are often coupled with outweighing goods and (ii) keep an open mind regarding what further examples might be like. For (i), we already have a good intuitive understanding of such coupling: think of the cases given earlier—rough play, blood donation, medicine—as well as many other cases you can think of yourself. For (ii), consider the fact that some people think that there are "moral laws" that should never be broken even if the circumstances are so extreme that the breaking of the moral law will actually produce much more good than evil (e.g., torturing someone in order to get information that prevents a bomb going off and killing millions of people). This opens the possibility that God allows suffering in many cases because there are absolute moral rules that have to be followed even though they bring about great amounts of suffering and don't seem to lead to any tangible good that adequately compensates for that suffering.

Now, I'm not saying that any of those remarks about morality are true. I'm just saying that the outweighing goods might be quite a bit different from the familiar cases I have already listed. So we have to keep an open

mind when considering potential goods that might be tied with instances of suffering.

Thus far we have partially defined the phrase "gratuitous suffering" (although as I said I will further clarify it below). The key issue is whether there *actually are* any gratuitous sufferings—that is, whether there are any cases of suffering that actually fit the definition. And we also need to determine how the existence of such sufferings (if there are any) bears on the question of the existence of God.

Here are two important claims to consider when pondering the relation of God to suffering:

Consequence Premise: If the universe has been created by a supremely morally good, knowledgeable, and powerful being, then that being arranged things so that there is no gratuitous suffering.

Gratuitous Premise: But there is gratuitous suffering.

The ***Problem of Gratuitous Suffering*** is simply this:

> There is good reason to think that the Consequence Premise is true, there is good reason to think the Gratuitous Premise is true, and yet if both are true then there is no supremely morally good, knowledgeable, and powerful creator of the universe.

If the Consequence Premise and the Gratuitous Premise are true, then God doesn't exist. Of course, this last statement assumes that the word "God" is supposed to pick out the supremely morally good, knowledgeable, and powerful creator of the universe. We should think of the Problem of Gratuitous Suffering as focusing on a particular conception of God: let's call that conception *the 4-Part conception*, since it says that God is the unique (1) supremely moral, (2) supremely knowledgeable, (3) supremely powerful, (4) creator of the universe. (Recall the points about "God" made in Chap. 1.)

Some theists don't exactly reject the 4-Part conception but insist that God is such a mystery that we can know almost nothing about him—in fact, we know so little about him that we should not be confident that he fits the 4-Part conception. So they neither accept nor reject the 4-Part conception. I have heard them say that the Problem of Gratuitous

Suffering doesn't apply to their religious view because they don't embrace the 4-Part conception. Some professors of philosophy have insisted on this idea to my face. But in response I usually ask them this (without the insulting manner):

> So, what part of the 4-Part conception are you willing to give up? Are you saying that God's strength is significantly limited, so he can't do anything about the horrific suffering all around us—even though it's pretty easy to get rid of lots of it? Or is it his knowledge that is significantly lacking, so he doesn't do anything about suffering because he's clueless about what's going on—even though any adult who isn't a total idiot knows about apparently gratuitous suffering? Or is he so morally flawed that he knows about our suffering, can relieve or prevent it, but just doesn't care—and doesn't that make him the ultimate evil tyrant? Or what?

After struggling with these questions for a while, many (not all) theists who emphasize God's mystery start to think that the 4-Part conception actually looks pretty good! So, they have to face up to the Problem of Gratuitous Suffering.

In the rest of this chapter we will take a preliminary look at the two premises, in order to better understand what they are saying and why one might think that they are true. I'll start with the Gratuitous Premise and then move on to the Consequence Premise.

The Gratuitous Premise

Suppose an exceedingly cute deer (adorable enough for a Disney movie) is slowly burned to death in a forest fire. She experiences a great deal of excruciating pain before death. This is definitely a case of horrific suffering. Indeed, it is a low percentage of people nowadays who have even the slightest idea of what such pain is like—such as having a limb blown off or burned away or chewed off; I'll return to this point below. A key question is this: Is the deer's suffering coupled with an outweighing good or combination of goods?

It is easy to *imagine* goods that could be linked to the deer's suffering:

1. If she hadn't died, she would have accidently spread a disease that led to the extinction of humanity. So by her dying a really bad thing was prevented.

2. Her dying led some people to see how awful the consequences of forest fires are. This in turn led a great many people to be much more ethical in their treatment of nonhuman animals for many years.
3. A lion ate her carcass. And a hunter who was about to die of starvation killed the lion and ate some of it, thereby cheating death. Then the hunter went on to save the universe from the Dark Lord (either Voldemort or Sauron).

But just because it's easy to *imagine* these things doesn't mean that any of them are really true. When we are confronted with the question "Is this instance of suffering coupled with an outweighing good?," we can't justify an affirmative answer just because we can easily imagine that the suffering is linked with an outweighing good. We need good reason to think the suffering *really is*, as a matter of *fact*, coupled with an outweighing good. We're not engaged in fantasy here; we are concerned with reality.

It's worse than that. In reality, (1)–(3) would do *nothing whatsoever* to justify her suffering even if one of them were true. At most, they justify her dying, not her suffering. Just because she had to die in order for certain great things to happen—which would be the case if any of (1)–(3) were true—gives no reason why she had to suffer while dying. The modest lesson is this: seeing how suffering and goods are related is a tricky matter, requiring careful thought.

In order to fruitfully think about the Gratuitous Premise, we should consider the extent of suffering (in addition to its intensity in many particular instances). There were animals on earth capable of feeling horrific pain for many millions of years before humans showed up. Thus, there have been trillions (that's millions of millions) of animals who have felt pain. And almost all of them have, at some point in their lives, felt truly horrific pain; such is the life of an animal in the wild. So that's many, many trillions of instances of horrific pain. All the Gratuitous Premise says is that *some* cases of horrific pain were not morally justified. To put it mildly, it's not easy to think of justifications for all those trillions of instances of suffering. Indeed, most people find it hard to think of justifications for even a tiny percentage of that suffering.

I need to say something right away to prevent a common and pretty much fatal misunderstanding of the Gratuitous Premise. I assume that most of you could talk at length about how some really bad things

actually led to outweighing goods—even though when the bad things were happening, there were *no* signs that everything would turn out all right. Your argument might even come from your own personal experiences: you may recall enduring some painful suffering in your past but you now think that all that suffering was definitely worth it, even though the suffering was intense and at the time you were suffering there was no way you could have known that it was going to end up worth it. I think this way too. When I was a child and a teenager, my family was near poverty for several years, and I resented it during some of that time, but now I am glad that I've grown up in such a way that I don't need many material things to make me happy. Ministers tend to make such appeals. They often note that many people come to them with tales of woe but go on to say that long afterward they came to firmly think that their own suffering was worth it.

You might get excited at this point and think that you've shown that there is no good reason to think that there are *any* gratuitous sufferings, as there is *always* a real chance that a good thing will come about that justifies the suffering. Who knows what the future may bring? So, you conclude that there is no good reason to accept the Gratuitous Premise.

That argument has the significant merit of showing this:

> *On many interesting real-life occasions there are well-hidden goods (often located in the future) that justify significant amounts of suffering.*

I think this is one of life's great lessons, one that wise people heed. But unfortunately it doesn't even come close to showing that the Gratuitous Premise is doubtful. In order to cast doubt on the Gratuitous Premise, you have to argue that it's plausible that *absolutely all suffering* has outweighing goods. The argument of the previous paragraphs would be a good one to present to someone who thought that on balance the world was a simply horrible place in which suffering is *almost never* justified. But we aren't considering such a depressing idea. The person who presents the Problem of Gratuitous Suffering as a challenge to theism need not be someone who thinks that the universe or human existence is doomed or hideous or depressing, that life is not worth living.

For the first time in this book, we are on the edge of really insulting people. After all, many people will say that it's just about the most obvious thing in the world that there are gratuitous sufferings. For them, the

idea that one would need to provide evidence or argument in favor of that premise is almost ridiculous. My demands for evidence and argument might be thought insulting and insensitive. After all, what about the *Holocaust*? It's easy to admit that the Holocaust led to some good here and there. For instance, in the midst of all that unimaginable suffering, some great, loving, and lifelong friendships developed among concentration camp prisoners, relationships that never would have occurred without the Holocaust. This is, thus, a "good thing" to have come out of the Holocaust. But the idea that such an evil event is coupled with some goods that are so stupendous that they outweigh the suffering of the Holocaust strikes an intelligent and reflective person as profoundly insulting, if not malicious. Some people with that view go on to assert that it's an affront to those who suffered in the Holocaust to even attempt to discuss, in a logical, dispassionate way—as I'm trying to do—the possibility that some outweighing goods justified the Holocaust's enormous evil. It's just plain stupid and insensitive, they say, to think that the Holocaust was morally justified due to its being coupled with goods that were so amazingly good that their goodness outweighed the badness of the Holocaust.

Yet, most theists who accept the 4-Part God think there is an adequate justification for horrors like the Holocaust, even if that justification eludes us. Some theists even think they have a plausible idea what the justification is. One thing advocates of these views do is suggest that the goods associated with suffering are often unfamiliar, hard to understand, or difficult to detect; or that the connections between the goods and the suffering are often hard to see or are so indirect that they are very hard to discover. They claim that these difficulties explain why it certainly seems as obvious as anything ever gets that there are many gratuitous sufferings, even though in reality there are none.

However, many other people who have thought deeply about the nature of evil think that the idea of outweighing goods for all suffering is based on either delusion or an understanding of suffering that is almost comic in its naiveté. In order to even begin to look for outweighing goods, one has to have a real grasp of the *intensity* of suffering; otherwise one would have no chance of judging when a good is good enough to outweigh the badness of the suffering. But very few people who read this little book have suffered incredible pain, either physical or psychological; neither are they significantly aware of it through other means. Sure, many of

us have broken some bones, burned a hand, suffered through a nasty divorce, or had a family member die after a long and hideous fight with cancer. Some of us have read detailed first-person accounts of such things as well. But who has actually witnessed one of their parents or children tortured to death? How many of us who have the luxury of reading philosophy have suffered unbearable pain not just for an hour or two or three until the pain medications kicked in but have suffered the pain for years upon years until our minds were warped beyond repair? Who has had to sit idly by while that happened to his or her child? How many of us have realized that our own faults have directly led to the agonizing, torturous deaths of our loved ones? Worse yet, how many of us know this but also know that we could have done something to prevent all that suffering and death?

The cold, hard fact is that very few people reading these words have much understanding of the intensity or depth of extreme suffering, either physical or emotional. The intensity of suffering goes up to level 100; the vast majority of people who read books like this one have experienced nothing beyond the teens. If you have the opportunity to read this book, then you're probably one of the lucky ones who have avoided suffering so intense that it ruins your ability to think straight or have the time to read philosophy books.

These people who emphasize the prevalence of ignorance regarding the intensity of suffering insist that some things are so utterly horrendous and soul-destroying that nothing conceivable could justify them; and philosophers who think otherwise are like innocent preteens arrogantly pontificating about the intricate emotions of couples who have been married for decades. (Some more analogies: it's like people from the fourteenth century trying to think about Quantum Mechanics, twenty-first-century telecommunications, or nanotechnology: the people don't even come close to having the background necessary to think competently about the topics.) According to this line of thought, the approach that says "God has some plan that makes every bit of suffering worthwhile" is doomed from the beginning. Even if all the goodness in the universe hung on one particular evil, if the evil is horrendous enough—keep in mind the cases described above—this hardly means that the evil is justified. The evil of the suffering has gone off the scale and nothing can justify it. Imagine a speech along these lines delivered to a theist who insists that there is no gratuitous suffering:

> How on earth do you reconcile your view with the horrors we already know about? What would it take to show you that some suffering is gratuitous? If every one of the billions of creatures on earth died a horrible death through extreme suffering and you were the last one standing, would that, finally, be enough to convince you? Suppose further that you died and ended up in an afterlife of utter misery for trillions of people and animals. You would recant then? Probably not!
>
> You would say "Well, there simply must be some good reason for all this suffering, even if we can't see it; maybe there is an after-after life of bliss and justice". You are so wedded to your view that no matter what horrors are visited on the world, either natural or supernatural, you will continue to insist that there must be some outweighing good of some kind, even if we can never discover it. It must be oddly comforting to be so irrationally devoted to an idea that one will never give it up, no matter what the circumstances or evidence before one's eyes.

I respect both the view and its supporting argument for the thesis that horrific suffering is much worse than most of us think and the goods people think of as justifying that suffering are laughably inadequate. Fortunately, I can't evaluate the argument for the simple reason that I have not experienced any evil of that character. It would probably be prudent of us to withhold judgment on it until that sad day when, God forbid, we experience such evil.

The Consequence Premise

The idea behind the Consequence Premise is that a creator of the universe as powerful, morally good, and knowledgeable as God is supposed to be would:

(a) Try to eliminate as many gratuitous sufferings as possible (even if he would allow some nongratuitous sufferings), and
(b) Have the power to eliminate all gratuitous sufferings even while creating a universe with conscious beings living lives more or less like ours.

To see this, start by imagining that you know for certain that the action you are contemplating performing will lead to trillions of truly terrible bouts of suffering (e.g., the torture of a young child, the slow-burning death of a deer). You also know perfectly well that many of those awful

things won't be paired with any outweighing goods (neither "positive" goods like pleasure or enlightenment nor "negative" goods like the prevention of something even worse). Finally, you know that you have the power to choose a similar but alternative action that won't result in gratuitous suffering. Well, for goodness sakes, wouldn't you change your plan if you were being morally good?

It seems so: *if* you had all that foreknowledge of the consequences of your actions, and *if* you had all that power, and *if* you were being morally upstanding, then you would prevent all the gratuitous suffering you had the ability to prevent. Since the 4-Part God is supposed to be one for which all those "if"s are true, he must have prevented as much gratuitous suffering as he could. And if he's *all powerful*, then surely he has the power to prevent *all* gratuitous suffering even while creating a world with conscious beings living lives like ours: he just needs to arrange things so that all suffering is worth it (in the long run or the short run; we won't distinguish these). That's the general line of thought that typically leads people to accept the Consequence Premise.

Thus, there is decent reason to think the Consequence Premise is true: if God really is as powerful, knowledgeable, and morally upstanding as many people say he is, then he would successfully prevent all gratuitous suffering.

But be very careful in interpreting the premise! Unfortunately, it's easy to misunderstand it. Here are some vital things to keep in mind when trying to understand what it says:

- The Consequence Premise does *not* presume that God exists; neither does it presume that God doesn't exist. All it says is that *if* he exists and fits the 4-Part conception, *then* a certain result follows (viz., the result that there is no gratuitous suffering).
- The premise does *not* say that God would have had to create a world without suffering. In fact, the advocate of the Consequence Premise (by "advocate" I mean the person who thinks the premise is true) is happy saying that *the 4-Part God might exist and allow there to be many trillions of cases of truly horrendous suffering.* All she's saying is that if God allowed all that horrendous suffering, then he must have had a good reason for it: all that suffering is outweighed by good things, even if we can't understand it. The advocate of this premise can admit that for all we know God often has excellent and perfectly morally upstanding reasons for allowing huge earthquakes, crippling

plagues that wipe out millions of people, unimaginable physical and emotional pain, tsunamis that level whole countries, volcanoes that wipe out hundreds of villages, and so on. Sometimes one encounters a person who says that according to the problem of evil there should be no earthquakes, tsunamis, or other natural disasters that cause great suffering; this is *not* the view we're considering in this chapter. People who argue that way are giving you a lousy version of the Problem of Gratuitous Suffering. All the Consequence Premise says is that a supremely morally good God would not allow there to be *gratuitous* suffering; it says nothing about *nongratuitous* suffering. It says that there is a certain kind of *limit* to the suffering God can permit: no gratuitous suffering is allowed.

- The premise doesn't demand that we are made *aware* of the moral justification for each bit of suffering (or even a large portion of the instances of suffering). All it's saying is that the justification has to exist. The 4-Part God will have to be aware of it, as he is supposed to know everything, but we need not.

We have now seen that there is good reason to believe both premises, which makes the Problem of Gratuitous Suffering a genuine problem for the theist. The theist's critic is articulating the two premises (Consequence and Gratuitous), claiming that both are well supported, and requesting a rational and preferably informative theistic response to them.

Every reasonable theist will admit that there is *some* good reason to accept both the Gratuitous Premise and the Consequence Premise. But just because there is a reason to endorse a claim (even a good reason!), there might be evidence against it that is much, much more powerful than the evidence for it, and in fact the claim might even be false. For example, although there is evidence in favor of the idea that the Earth is still and the Sun goes around it once a day—as that's precisely how it looks from a nonscientific standpoint—there is evidence against this idea that is much, much more impressive, which is why we gave up the Earth-is-stationary-and-at-the-universe's-center idea centuries ago.

Why the Problem Is Not Insurmountable

In order to understand the situation we are in when trying to figure out how to respond to the Problem of Gratuitous Suffering, consider a story:

> Arif is on a jury that is judging a court case in which Fatima is accused of murdering Olaf. On the one hand, there is excellent reason, presented by the prosecution, that Fatima desperately wanted to kill Olaf: there are her diary entries saying how much she hated him and wanted revenge on him, her purchase of a long knife that matches the murder weapon, etc. Furthermore, we know that it's highly probable that she was the only person at the scene of the murder, she was found there with his blood on her clothes, etc. So, there is excellent evidence that Fatima killed Olaf. In addition, there is excellent evidence, from the experts, that Olaf was murdered with a downward knife thrust by a left-handed person who is very strong. But to complicate matters, there is excellent evidence that Fatima is right-handed and not nearly strong enough to make the knife wound that killed Olaf.

The juror Arif has a real problem here, doesn't he? He has good or excellent evidence for three ideas:

(a) Fatima killed Olaf.
(b) Whoever killed Olaf was left-handed and very strong.
(c) Fatima is not left-handed and not very strong.

But any fool can see that there is no way that all three of those claims is true: at least one of them has got to be false. Arif now has to compare the evidence for the three claims and see which one is the weakest. Suppose for a moment that the evidence from the experts regarding (b) was heavily qualified: the expert said that she *suspected* the killer was left-handed. And the expert allowed that if the murderer angled the knife just right, he or she would not have to be very strong in order to kill the victim—even though this circumstance is a bit improbable. Given that expert testimony, (b) looks to be quite a bit less certain than (a) or (c). In that case, Arif should reject (b) while keeping his beliefs in (a) and (c), assuming his overall evidence for those two is quite a bit stronger than his evidence for (b). So much is clear.

We are like Arif in being faced with three claims, one of which *must* be false:

Consequence Premise:	If the universe has been created by a supremely morally good, knowledgeable, and powerful being, then that being arranged things so that there is no gratuitous suffering.
Gratuitous Premise:	But there is gratuitous suffering.
Theism:	The universe has been created by a supremely morally good, knowledgeable, and powerful being.

Just like Arif, we have to compare the evidence for the three claims and reject the one that has the weakest support. The advocate of the Problem of Gratuitous Suffering—the person who says it *shows* that God probably doesn't exist—says that the overall evidence for the last one is significantly lower than that of either of the first two. That's why she says we have to conclude that theism is probably false (the insertion of "probably" is important, as the advocate need not think that the evidence for the first two claims is *overwhelmingly* more impressive than the evidence for theism).

Surely she is right that there is decent evidence for the first two claims. Regarding the Gratuitous Premise, we know that there is a large group of people who are *highly intelligent*, who know an *enormous* amount about suffering and its moral justification, who have spent a *great deal* of time (centuries collectively) thinking *very hard* about the justification of suffering, and who have undertaken a *very long* (again, centuries), intelligent, heartfelt, and otherwise serious search for goods or facts or reasons or whatnot that justify suffering—and they have not been able to find the reasons for literally billions of cases of suffering. These are philosophers and theologians. Given their competence and effort, it stands to reason to think that the best explanation of their failure to find the justifications for suffering is the obvious one: not all those instances of suffering are justified. That is, the reason we haven't found the justifications for suffering is that on at least some occasions the justifications just ain't there to find.

But although that is good evidence for the Gratuitous Premise, it doesn't tell us much, as we might have decent evidence for the last claim, theism, as well. The question is not, "Which claims are backed up with good evidence?" but the *comparative* question "Which claim has the least amount of backing evidence?" We should reject the least-supported claim *even if it has good evidence supporting it.*

We won't get anywhere in evaluating the challenge to theism posed by the Problem of Gratuitous Suffering unless we firmly keep in mind what the atheist has to do in order to succeed here:

> *Show that the evidence for theism is significantly less than that for either the Gratuitous Premise or the Consequence Premise.*

If she pulls that off, then she has an excellent argument against theism. Pretty much everyone who understands the logic of the problem agrees with that. But if she doesn't pull it off, then her attack on theism fails.

That would *not* mean that theism is true, however. All it would mean is that *one* argument against theism ultimately fails. It's entirely possible that theism is false anyway and some *other* attack is successful.

Hence, in order to know which of the three claims to reject, in order to determine whether the atheist has succeeded, we need to know what the evidence for the third claim, theism, is: otherwise we can't make the comparison of evidence. That's the key point here:

> *Whether the Problem of Gratuitous Suffering is a good argument against theism is totally dependent on how good the evidence is for the existence of God.*

I am postponing the positive case for theism for the penultimate chapter. But we can take a quick look right now at the main two relevant theism-friendly factors mentioned briefly in Chap. 2: spiritual experiences and testimony.

People have experiences that are emotionally staggering and that *seem*, to a great many intelligent and reflective experiencers, to be connected to God in some intimate fashion. Even if the experiences are in objective fact delusions, they certainly don't seem that way *at all* to the people who have the experiences. It's not as though they had some bad pizza, got a really upset stomach, and subsequently hallucinated God. So even if the experiences are not *in fact* connected to God in any fashion, they might make belief in God reasonable anyway.

In addition, we hear from a great many disparate sources, some of whom have impeccable epistemic credentials, stories of God communicating to people in all sorts of private ways, some of which are low-key and others that are spectacular. It is true that *many* of these people have acquired or sustained their belief in divine-human communication through irrational means such as mental illness, wishful thinking, fear (e.g., of the unknown, such as after death), groupthink, the strong tendency for obedience and/or submission, and the often-unconscious desire for comforting worldviews. We saw this in Chap. 3. But of course *a great many* of these theists show no signs at all of such factors. To begin with, note that *many millions* of people claim to have spiritual experiences of God—ones they implicitly take to generate significant warrant for theistic beliefs. People have been making that claim for centuries, and to all appearances an enormous number of them have been sincere, intelligent, sane, and no more gullible than the atheists or agnostics. You may well be personally acquainted with some of these people; I certainly am. Naturally, there are

plenty of morons who say that God talked to them, but there are plenty of nonmorons as well.

In Chap. 9, I will elaborate on these remarks. The upshot will be that there is decent reason to think there really is a God—reason that is *comparable* to that for the Gratuitous Premise and the Consequence premise. I'm not saying that the evidence for theism is *better* than that for either the Gratuitous Premise or the Consequence Premise. No freakin' way am I saying that. All I'm saying is that *it's not at all clear that the evidence for theism comes in last place in the evidence contest among those three claims.* And if that's the case, then the case against theism from the Problem of Gratuitous Suffering is not successful.

Why Is God Hidden from Many of Us?

Before we leave the Problem of Gratuitous Suffering, it's worth commenting briefly on a closely related argument against theism: the *Problem of Divine Hiddenness.*

If you know much of anything about theistic religions, you know that they hold that a personal relationship with God is a pretty nice thing to have. Actually, according to some people *it's the best thing possible for a human*. Take the best moments of your normal life and put them all into one big pot. Being in tune with God is a million times better than that. Better than your greatest accomplishment. Better than your greatest sexual moment. Better than the best times you ever had with the love of your life. Even better than those occasions as a child when you laughed in happiness so hard that you peed your pants and couldn't breathe.

Of course, those theistic religions insist that God is extremely loving and good, knows what is going on with you, and has power like you can barely imagine. So, umm, why is he allowing you to miss out on this greatest thing in the universe? It seems pretty clear that an enormous number of people—a colossal number, in fact—die without having anything like that wonderful connection with God. How can that be? If God is so knowledgeable, then he knows that Pedro hasn't had that relationship with him. And God is incredibly loving and good, so surely he wants Pedro to have that relationship. Finally, God knows perfectly well that he could make something happen that would lead to Pedro having that relationship with him. So why the hell is God just sitting back and letting Pedro die without ever having even a shadow of that invaluable relationship?

Is it because Pedro is an asshole? Well, many people who end up assholes are led to that sorry state through having to endure more than their fair share of suffering, humiliation, injustice, and other awful things. It hardly seems right to rob Pedro of the greatest thing there is if he turned out to be an asshole for reasons that had nothing to do with his character or judgment. Even if Pedro is an asshole mainly due to his own flaws, and not his environment, it seems harsh to allow him to lose out on the greatest thing there is just because he's imperfect. And what if Pedro is basically a nice person? God doesn't even have to lift a finger in order to set in motion a sequence of events that will lead to Pedro experiencing the most valuable thing a human can experience. Why isn't he doing it?

You might think God has already set up all sorts of avenues for Pedro to go down, each of which can lead to him having that ultimate relationship. Okay, but it's not working, is it? Hundreds of millions of people die without ever having the relationship. Now it's starting to look like God is a lousy designer because so many of us are failing to have the greatest thing imaginable.

Maybe someone will say that in fact God has served us a relationship with him on a silver platter. It's so easy! He has made it incredibly easy to have that relationship! One just has to ask for it, in the right way!

No. That is wishful thinking. It is a fact that many millions of people spend *years* asking for a relationship with God but get nowhere. Maybe if one does just the right thing, the relationship happens without further ado, but millions of people try—often very hard, for many years—and it doesn't turn out right. And look: suppose it *is* easy. Fine, then the method still sucks, since hundreds of millions of us never take it even when attempting to do so.

Another response to our problem: one cannot really *do* anything to make the relationship happen. One can't even do anything to *earn* it. Instead, it happens only through "grace." Okay, but doesn't that mean that God set up a lousy system? There is this good thing available, and God has set up the universe so that there's nothing we can do to get it? Doesn't that make him the asshole?

When thinking about this problem, the fact that we must focus on, the one that we simply must not ignore, is this key fact:

> *An enormous number of people are definitely not having this ultimately wonderful relationship despite wanting it and trying for it—and God knows this, wants us to have the relationship, and could do something about it in order to make it happen.*

So why isn't he doing things differently? That is the problem in a nutshell.

Well, you might speculate that in order to have the really rewarding relationship with God, one has to pass through some sort of test, almost like a psychological obstacle course. Perhaps one has to come to realize how sinful one is, or weak, or alone in the world, or something similar. If you don't do that, then your mind just isn't ready for the relationship; it hasn't matured enough. One has to have a certain level of emotional or otherwise psychological maturity in order to have the relationship. Making that personal connection with God available to immature minds is akin to making water but not using hydrogen: it simply cannot be done.

There are two serious problems with this proposal of the theist's. First, why on earth did God set it up that way, requiring the high level of psychological maturity? For comparison, I could set things up with my fiancé so that she can't know my inner demons unless she passes some test, but isn't that kind of stupid for me to do once she has made it plain that she truly accepts me and wants to know about my inner life, demons and all? God is supposed to be ridiculously powerful, and he created the universe, so why on earth did he set things up so that it's so damn difficult to connect to him—with a certain high level of psychological maturity or sophistication or self-awareness or whatever?

The second problem is slightly different. The first problem says: God should not have set up the world so that we have to get to some high level of maturity in order to connect with God. The second problem says: even if such a maturity is required, God should have set things up so that it isn't so damn difficult to attain that maturity. He could have made our minds in such a way that it's not so hard to acquire the relevant humility, or self-awareness, or whatever it is that is required. But he didn't do that.

Look, *it's God's fault*! Zillions of people are positively *begging* to connect with him and failing. Since God knows practically everything, he knows of this absolutely colossal failure. And of course he's incredibly powerful. So why in God's name doesn't he correct it? One can dream up all sorts of excuses here, but the fact remains that God could do something about it; he knows of this colossal failure, and yet he allows it to happen, every single day.

There are several different hiddenness arguments depending on what group of people one focuses on. For instance, we could focus on people who existed without knowing anything about any religion that was devoted to the 4-Part God. A great many of them lived and died without

ever hearing anything about God. Or think of people who grow up in a community that insists that there is no God. Or consider people who die young, before having much chance to even think about pursuing a relationship with God. Or the people who are psychologically damaged in such a way that they cannot handle even attempting a relationship with God.

For the sake of illustration, I will examine just one hiddenness argument, focusing on one collection of people who never connect with God. Here is the first premise.

- If the 4-Part God exists, then having a personal connection with him is one of the greatest things in life for a person.

It is not obvious that this claim is true. It is arguable that theistic religions endorse it. Okay, but it's not clear, at least to me, that there is much evidence for it. Yes, there is plenty of evidence that if God exists and some people have a close personal relationship with him, it's a pretty great thing. But is it better than the staggering *kensho* of Zen? It is hard to say. Is it better than the love one gets from one's young child? Again, hard to say. Some people would reply to the latter question with the assertion that such love is a "manifestation" of God's love, or some such. But what is the evidence for that? Moreover, does it even make sense? It's the love of *my child* for *me*; how on earth can it literally be a personal relationship between me and God? Isn't this "manifestation" talk just sentimental metaphor?

Never mind that; let it go. Let's move on to the second premise.

- If having a personal connection with the 4-Part God is one of the greatest things in life for a person, then the 4-Part God would not allow someone who tries hard to have a personal relationship with him to fail in all his or her attempts.

The idea here is that God will make sure that the person who is really trying to connect with him will eventually succeed. He will remove whatever obstacles stand in the way. Maybe not the first time the person tries. Perhaps a person has to struggle a bit in order to reach the level of maturity to connect with God. That's fine, but surely God—who knows exactly what is going on, has virtually unlimited power, and is supremely good and loving—will not allow the sincere inquirer to fail forever.

The third premise:

- The 4-Part God allows some people who try hard to have a personal relationship with him fail in all their attempts.

This seems to be a sad fact about our lives. It happens to all sorts of people, even ones who choose a religious profession, such as priests.

It follows from our three premises that the 4-Part God doesn't exist. Is it a good argument?

In my response to the Problem of Gratuitous Suffering, I realigned the argument so that we are faced with a set of claims that we know to be inconsistent, so at least one of them simply must be false. We can do that with the hiddenness argument too:

- If the 4-Part God exists, then having a personal connection with God is one of the greatest things in life for a person.
- If having a personal connection with the 4-Part God is one of the greatest things in life for a person, then the 4-Part God would not allow someone who tries hard to have a personal relationship with him to fail in all his or her attempts.
- The 4-Part God allows some people who try hard to have a personal relationship with him fail in all their attempts.
- The 4-Part God exists.

The advocate of the Problem of Divine Hiddenness—the person who says it *shows* that the 4-Part God probably doesn't exist—says that the overall evidence for the last one is significantly lower than that of any of the first three. That's why she says we have to conclude that theism is probably false (the insertion of "probably" is important, as the advocate need not think that the evidence for the first three claims is *overwhelmingly* more impressive than the evidence for theism).

I think most theists, when confronted with this argument, will accept the first of the four claims. And they should, if they are being honest, admit that there is at least some respectable reason for endorsing the second and third claims. But she will then go on to say that the evidence for the last claim dwarfs that of the second and third claims. Remember Arif, the jury member faced with deciding whether the defendant Fatima is guilty of murdering poor Olaf. Arif had to weigh the evidence for three claims that were individually reasonable but collectively inconsistent.

When we assess the Problem of Divine Hiddenness, we are in the same situation, with the abovementioned four claims. Whether the problem amounts to a refutation of theism depends on the relative strengths of the bodies of evidence for the four claims.

It seems to me that the theist is being reasonable—I don't say factually correct—in judging the evidence for the second claim to be less than that for the fourth claim. Even if we assume for the sake of argument that having a personal connection with God is one of the greatest things in life for a person (so we are accepting the first of the four claims), why should we think that God would make sure that anyone who tries hard to have a personal relationship with him will eventually succeed? We already know that God allowed the Holocaust to happen. He allowed cancer to happen. He allowed life to develop in such a way that most animals survive by killing and eating other animals—with stunning amounts of pain involved. So, we already know that God allows all sorts of horrible things to happen.

None of this is to say that the Problem of Divine Hiddenness is weak or a mere version of the Problem of Gratuitous Suffering. But I think the response to the latter is plausible enough to work against the former. I mean: the response shows that one can be a reasonable, fair-minded, intelligent theist who is fully aware of both problems and yet retains her theism. The two arguments against theism are good but not so strong as to make theists unreasonable in retaining their theism even after thoroughly digesting the two arguments.

CHAPTER 7

Intractable Religious Disagreement

Introduction

I think Willie Mays was a better hitter than Mickey Mantle. Others who study the history of baseball disagree. I also think Hank Aaron wasn't a home run hitter; you probably think that's crazy but it's not (he was the master at hitting the ball hard all over the place, and it was an unintended consequence that many of them ended up home runs). You may think capital punishment is an effective crime deterrent in the US. Unless you're incredibly sheltered, you know that there are intelligent adults who disagree with you. Disagreement is a part of our lives, and it's not going away.

Did Jesus rise from the dead—in the literal sense of coming back to life after being biologically dead? Did Mohammad really talk with the archangel Gabriel, as is commonly thought in Islam? Are there really *many* gods, instead of just one?

In each case, some say "yes," while others say "no." In fact, *hundreds of millions* of people are on each side of the debates. And let's face it: the disagreement isn't going to go away. It's not as though people are waiting around for more evidence. On the contrary, they've made up their minds, are not looking for more evidence, and don't really care much for additional evidence anyway. The disagreement is all but *intractable*.

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Facts like these suggest to some people that religion is BS and we should be atheists. I'm going to give some arguments that this attack on religion goes nowhere.

For starters, in virtually every real case the fact of intractable disagreement about belief B won't generate a decent argument against the *truth* of B. Just because there is intractable disagreement about some proposition hardly means that the proposition is false. For instance, there might be intractable disagreements about the details about the life of some historical figure, and yet someone has to be right about it. Perhaps scholars fight over whether so-and-so was homosexual. The so-and-so in question might well have been straightforwardly homosexual even though the evidence available now, to scholars, is maddeningly equivocal. Just because there is intractable disagreement about belief B doesn't mean that B is false or nonsensical.

It's more reasonable to think that intractable disagreement is an attack not on the *truth* of religion but on its *rationality*. Briefly put, the idea is that most religious belief fails to measure up to modest principles such as "It is irrational to believe something when you know full well that you are no expert and what you believe is a matter of intractable disagreement even amongst the experts." That is, the idea is this: (a) most religious believers are aware that they aren't experts on religion and what they believe is a matter of intractable expert disagreement; (b) but if that's true, then the religious believer is irrational in sticking with her belief when she is aware of intractable expert disagreement; hence, (c) the religious believer is irrational in sticking with her belief in the face of intractable expert disagreement.

There are many situations that that rule in (b) seems to cover perfectly. For instance, suppose that you read of a scientific study that moderate use of red wine is significantly good for the cardiovascular system. (This isn't true, but that doesn't matter for the purposes of our illustration.) So, you believe it, based on legitimate expert testimony. But then let's suppose that you subsequently read a summary of another large scientific study that says that red wine has no such benefit. And then you hear of a third large scientific study that says red wine has only *very mild* cardiovascular benefits. Finally, you hear of yet a fourth study, which concluded there was no benefit at all. (This is all fictional!) It seems pretty clear that after learning of all that expert disagreement, you, the amateur, are in no position to believe that red wine does, or does not, have significant cardiovascular

benefits. You might, of course, continue to *say* it's beneficial provided you're a big fan of red wine and like to express your love of it, but unless you're a fool you would have a smile on your face because you know the only reason you're saying it is that you love red wine. It's clear that the wise thing to do in the face of this expert disagreement is *suspend judgment* on the issue of whether red wine has significant cardiovascular benefits.

The question we face in this chapter is whether much religious belief is irrational in failing to live up to that, and similar, rules.

I think every reader of this book will go along with the idea that one should not be confident in the truth of a religion that tells one to murder the heathens. If your faith is telling you to bomb an abortion clinic, for instance, it's time to reassess those beliefs, as one needs to be pretty darn sure of one's beliefs before one goes around murdering people.

So much is obvious to enlightened folk, many of whom are happy to adopt less violent religious beliefs. But I think the basic point applies to those beliefs as well: How can you justify any religious belief at all, pro *or* con, given that you know full well that there are a great many highly intelligent and well-informed people who reject that belief?

The religious belief might be something relatively specific, such as "Jesus rose from the dead," "The Prophet Mohammad spoke with an archangel," or "The soul is reincarnated." Or it might be something more fundamental, such as "God exists." It could be something scientific such as "Humans were created in pretty much their present form in the last few thousand years," or "The earth was covered in water several thousand years ago." It could also be opposing beliefs: "Jesus didn't rise from the dead", "Mohammad didn't really communicate with any archangel," "God doesn't exist at all," or "Humans evolved from other sorts of animals over a great many millennia." It's plausible that in *some* cases apparent disagreement is merely apparent. For instance, there are the so-called disagreements about "salvation" that are artifacts of different understandings of that term. However, it's clear that in an enormous number of cases only one group can be right: Jesus either rose from the dead or he didn't, okay? We either are or are not conscious after the death of our bodies. And either at least one person created the physical universe or no one did. In each case if you aren't culturally sheltered, then you are perfectly aware that there are many very intelligent people who disagree with you. If you believe X is true and they think X is false, well then you're definitely saying that *they are wrong and you are right.*

Don't fool yourself here: if you think Jesus rose from the dead or Mohammad spoke with Gabriel, then you are definitely saying, as a consequence, that hundreds of millions of people are wrong in their contrary belief—and among those millions of people there are a great many extremely intelligent and informed people. But what makes you think you and your co-believers are right and all those other folks are wrong? Is your group smarter or more careful in its reasoning? Does your group have key evidence the other group lacks? If you think that's the case, then consider this scary thought: How do you know *they* don't have key evidence that *you* lack? Has your group evaded some bit of irrationality that infects the other group? If you think your group has got the issue right, and everyone who disagrees has got it wrong, you probably think that your group has some epistemic advantage the other group fails to have—but do you really?

It can be difficult to be rationally confident in answering the questions in the previous paragraph in a way that reflects happily on oneself. In particular, it will often be difficult if you are familiar with the diversity of, and excellent epistemic credentials of members of, religious viewpoints. Suppose I have the following beliefs: God exists, Jesus is God, and some of us have eternal life in Heaven. I know perfectly well that there are a great many philosophers who have examined the publically available evidence for these claims and have found it highly defective; indeed, many think the evidence against my beliefs is very strong. In fact, I'm aware that a clear majority have this skeptical view about my religious beliefs. I am not oblivious, or living under a rock; and I am not in denial, fooling myself with wishful thinking. I know perfectly well that my religious beliefs are highly controversial in the uncomfortable way: they are denied by a great number and percentage of the *best thinkers around* who have studied the publically available information that might be relevant to the rational assessment of my beliefs.

Despite all that, it's pretty clear that a great many people are utterly reasonable in sticking to their beliefs in the face of religious disagreement—in one familiar sense of "reasonable." For instance, a child with religious belief B might be told by her parents and *all* the other people she looks up to that although there are people who doubt or even reject B, they are screwed up in any of various ways: horribly irrational, biased, brainwashed, ignorant, insane, and so on. She believes them on this score; why on earth would she not do so, given that she is sheltered from reality, she has always unreflectively trusted those adults, and those adults have

proven reliable about so many issues before? She has a false belief—it's certainly not true that all those people are screwed up in those ways—but she is completely reasonable in accepting it and then, as a consequence, sticking with her belief in B. Nothing relevant changes if the believer is a sheltered adult instead of a child. Neither is this verdict dependent on the belief being a pro-religious one: it applies to atheism and other anti-religious views.

Those are the easy cases. With respect to the easy cases, we may want an informative story about the *kind of reasonability* in question—the kind that applies to her sticking with her belief in B. The kind of reasonableness the child has means we can't truthfully accuse her with the charges "she should know better" and "if she doesn't change her view, then she's being foolish." The theistic child has strong testimony that there is good evidence for her religious beliefs; more simply, she just has strong testimony for the truth of her theistic beliefs. Note that the testimony suffices for an ordinary type of epistemic reasonableness in her religious beliefs *independently of the testimony's origin*, where the origin might be someone who directly perceived God but also might be someone who was insane and deluded. Recall the case from Chap. 2: even if the whole idea of electrons and protons is a stunningly successful and long-running gag perpetrated by generations of twisted physicists and chemists, it remains true that in ordinary senses of "testimony" and "epistemically reasonable" we nonscientists have excellent testimony for our shared belief that trees contain atoms and atoms contain electrons and protons—testimony good enough to make our belief reasonable in an epistemically robust manner.

Awareness of Religious Disagreement

The topic of intractable religious disagreement gets most interesting when the believer isn't sheltered. She need not actually *meet* anyone who disagrees with her. Instead, her problems often begin with a simple train of thought that can be expressed as follows.

> Hang on. There are loads of religions out there: dozens and dozens if you separate different kinds of Christianity, Buddhism, etc. They can't all be right: they conflict in many ways. If the Catholics are right about X, then the Protestants are wrong about X and the Buddhists are so far off it's almost comical. How do I know my religious beliefs are the true ones? I think Jesus rose from the dead; lots of other people say he didn't; we can't both be

> right! Of all the dozens of religious views out there, how do I know I've managed to latch on to the right one? Is it okay [practically? morally? epistemically?] for me to just *have faith* or *hope* that I've got the true one?

As soon as one is well aware of and reflects seriously on the diversity of religious opinion, pro and con, one is put in what looks to be an epistemically bad position. *If* one manages to rationally come to think that the folks on the other side are the epistemic inferiors to the folks on one's home team (one's home team is the people who share one's belief), *then* one usually can be reasonable in sticking to one's religious belief. For instance, I am rationally confident that Hell is not located in the center of Earth, even though that belief might be quite controversial among ten-year-olds who have been brought up in certain primitive religious communities. Knowing that some benighted fools disagree with me about whether Hell is a real place in the center of the earth hardly means that I'm irrational in retaining my prior belief that Hell isn't located there. The problem is that the more worldly one becomes, the harder it is to rationally think that one's home team always has the advantage over the people one disagrees with. Keep in mind that *this applies to atheists as well as theists.*

Let's look a little more carefully at how awareness of religious disagreement usually comes about, focusing on pro-religious belief. In most cases one acquires the pro-religious belief B via testimony when one is young, where (i) the testimony comes from people one would regard as one's superiors on the matter (for one thing, they are adults) and (ii) one learns pretty quickly that *a great many people* have that belief B, usually including many people one would judge to be one's epistemic superiors on the belief. It is usually later that one learns of people who disbelieve B, and this realization has several distinct stages:

> First, one learns of other religions—ones that differ from one's own. That's stage 1.
>
> Next, one learns that these other religions have different beliefs: whereas mine has beliefs B1 and B2, that other one has beliefs B3 and B4. That's stage 2. Note that 1 and 2 are different stages: one could be aware of other religions but put no thought into the question of whether the other religions have different beliefs. (In fact, I suspect that many people don't think too much about the central beliefs of religions.)
>
> Third, one learns that the other religion denies what one's own religion affirms: we think their B3 is false and they think our B1 is false. That's stage 3. So, finally, the person becomes aware of religious disagreement as such: we

can't all be right in our religious beliefs, so a tremendous number of people are wrong.

These stages might all occur in one conversation, but then again their unfolding might occur over a span of years; it depends on the child's intellectual sophistication and curiosity, as well as the remarks of people she interacts with, directly and indirectly. When one learns about the disagreement, one typically learns that there are *a great many* people who disbelieve B (e.g., one learns of multiple *world* religions). When you disagree with your sister about which relative played the piano at your grandmother's house when you were little children, there is a *disagreement-with-one* case; religious disagreement is virtually always a *disagreement-with-many* case.

Finally, after reaching stage 3, one *can* proceed to the "Hang on" stage described above, which we can label stage 4. But this doesn't always happen. Even at stage 3, the problem of religious disagreement typically does not arise with much force. A great many Catholics, for instance, will acknowledge that there are millions of people who think the central tenets of Catholicism are false, but *no reflection at all* goes along with that knowledge. The same holds for other faiths of course. (This can be difficult to comprehend for philosophers, since they are hyper-reflective.) Only when the "Hang on: how do we know we're right and they're wrong?" attitude passes through one's consciousness with some force does the epistemic challenge become acute—or at least has the *potential* for being such.

If my students over the years have been at all representative, then the "Hang on" stage 4 of awareness is fairly uncommon. For what it's worth, when I teach the topic, I encounter a significant percentage of students who by their behavior and facial expressions have clearly not reached stage 4 even though they have managed to reach stage 3. Just because the challenge of religious disagreement has been served on silver platter does not mean that people will catch a whiff of it. From now on I will address only those people who have reached the "Hang on" stage of awareness and reflection.

The Rationality of the Theist's Response to Disagreement

One natural thing to do upon reflecting on disagreement at stage 4 is wonder whether your group has some *epistemic advantage* over the disagreeing group. For instance, although I think that global warming is happening, I know that there are many people who disagree with me. I

stick with my belief in the face of disagreement because I think my group—the group of people who agree with me—is more likely than the opposing group to have come up with the right answer to "Is global warming happening?" For one thing, my group has much better epistemic credentials regarding the relevant topics. Here is another apt example: although I think Jones is going to win the political election, and I base this belief on my readings of sophisticated statistical analysis of many polls, I know that many prominent political pundits disagree with me based on their alleged insider knowledge of how the election is going. Even so, I rationally stick with my belief because I rationally think the statisticians are more likely to get the right answer than the pundits, who I know to have lousy track records when it comes to election predictions.

Similarly, I might think Jesus is the Messiah because I think Christians "know something others have missed" where that phrase indicates some crucial piece of evidence that I and other Christians have and others lack. I would be silly to think that Christians are *smarter or wiser* than non-Christians. But I might well be reasonable in thinking Christians have had *personal experiences of Jesus* that show he must still exist; and if that's true, I can hardly be blamed in supposing that the central doctrines of Christianity must be true despite being rejected by billions of people.

Generalizing beyond Christianity, the theist can say to the atheist and agnostic the following:

> Well, I hate to tell you this, but there's this special spiritual mental experience that has allowed me and millions of others to come to know that God exists, and until you get it you may (just 'may') never find any evidence—argument, experience, or whatnot—that provides any decent support for theism. I know that stinks, from your perspective, and I know it stinks from the perspective of philosophical discussion. In fact, if I were in your shoes I might well find theistic belief positively nuts! But those are the facts about spiritual experience. I wish I had better news for you. My apologies!

The Christians can just reflect on their "inner" spiritual experiences and say to themselves, "Well, I guess other people just haven't been as lucky as I have; if they had had these experiences, they would be Christians too." Again, they need not think they are smarter or wiser or more moral or anything like that.

Even if these spiritual experiences are, as a matter of brute fact, delusions, they do not seem that way *at all* to the people who have them—even upon intelligent reflection.

Lots of atheists and agnostics miss this point. There are a great many people who have experiences that are emotionally staggering and that overwhelmingly seem, to a great many intelligent experiencers—even after very intelligent and extended reflection—to be connected to God in some intimate fashion. Even if the experiences are *in fact* delusions, contrary to the views of the people having the experiences, the experiences certainly don't seem that way at all—even on expert reflection. This is just an empirical fact about the people who have these experiences. Like I said before—and I don't mind repeating myself, as it's an important point—it's not as though the experiencers had some bad pizza, got a violently upset stomach, and subsequently hallucinated God. And it's not as though the experiencers are just uninformed of science or logic or whatever; many of them are among the smartest people I have ever encountered. So even if the so-called spiritual experiences are not as a matter of objective fact connected to God in any fashion, they might be convincing enough to make belief in God reasonable.

Here is an example of how experience can be both illusory and yet productive of reasonable belief:

There are oddities and paradoxes about color that have caused a great many experts on color—scientists as well as philosophers—to hold the view that the color patches we experience in ordinary visual experience are not out there in the world around us, on the surfaces of objects. Instead, they are in our minds.

To get a brief taste of why they have this weird view, imagine that we have a surgeon fiddle with your eye—or central nervous system (CNS) generally—while you are looking at an ordinary, everyday orange pumpkin. Here is what happens to you as you sit on a hospital bed while the wise and benevolent doctor alters your eye/CNS:

> One minute you're looking at the pumpkin in the room and experiencing orange. The next minute, after the doctor has made an adjustment to your eye/CNS but nothing has happened to the pumpkin or anything else, you're still looking at the pumpkin but now you're experiencing red—meaning, your experience is precisely as if the pumpkin were naturally the same color as a nice ripe tomato. Moreover, when you are experiencing the

> red color you can see the pumpkin just as well as you saw it when you were experiencing orange. So it's not as though it starts to look fuzzy when it appears red. (We could generate all the same philosophical issues with an experiment in which the medium through which the pumpkin is seen is changed so that you experience a different color after the alteration.)

One needs to vividly imagine sitting in the hospital bed and having the experiences, one after the other: picture it in your mind as well as you can. The pumpkin hasn't changed a bit, as no one has even touched it. But of course your visual field has gone from orange to red. So, it certainly seems as though the patches of color you experienced weren't out there on the pumpkin. As I said, many experts reflect on experiments like this and come to the view that the patches of color we experience are really just in our minds, in our sensory experiences, and not "out there" on objects like pumpkins. Some of them think that the color patches are in our *nonphysical* experiences; others think that they are literally *parts of our eyes.*

Now, I don't know if any of these folks are right. There are a lot of considerations to go through here. I discuss the puzzles of color in some of my forthcoming professional works. But color provides a good illustration of how one's experience can, at least *potentially*, be illusory even though it seems perfectly fine even on intelligent reflection. In fact, and this is the relevant point here, one's commonsensical belief that the color patches one experiences are on the surfaces of ordinary objects like pumpkins is *completely reasonable*, even though, if these scientists and philosophers are right, it's false and based on illusory experiences. Similarly, people who have the so-called spiritual experiences can be completely reasonable in thinking that they are experiencing God even though, if the atheists are right, their belief is false and based on illusory experiences.

Now, you might object to this defense of the rationality of retaining religious beliefs in the face of awareness of intractable disagreement:

> But come on. How can those Christians be reasonable in *trusting* their so-called spiritual experiences? Surely they know that Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Jews have so-called spiritual experiences, ones that they think show that their religion's doctrines are true. But there's no way that all of those doctrines are true, since they just plain contradict one another. So, some of those experiences are definitely delusions. And the Christians have no good reason to think their experiences are the good ones. The same holds for the other religions!

But think about how far we've gone now. The theist has responded to the stage 4 awareness of disagreement with "Yeah, but we have actually experienced God!" and now you're expecting her to move on to *stage 5*, in which she encounters the objection just voiced above. We are down to a really tiny group of theists, so who really cares if they are reasonable in sticking with their religious beliefs?

But even this group of theists may have a reasonable response, at this advanced stage 5. Imagine her giving the following speech:

> First, almost all of us with *these* spiritual experiences agree that there is a God who is all knowing, good, powerful, and loving. There's a lot less disagreement here than you think.
>
> Second, some of the disagreement isn't real disagreement. Maybe salvation through Jesus shows up in different ways to practitioners of different religions; I don't know about complicated stuff like that. It's not as though Jesus appears with a hat that says 'Yeah, it's me … Jesus … and I'm the Messiah'.
>
> Third, I realize that there are a religious people who claim to have had spiritual experiences but who don't buy theism. *I get it*. But all that suggests to me is that they've had spiritual experiences very different from ours. I'm not saying there is anything wrong with them! All I'm saying is that they haven't experienced what we've experienced.
>
> Fourth, if you're going to get totally strict on me, so I can't believe anything unless I'm absolutely sure I can trust my experiences, then I won't be able to believe almost anything. For all we know in that super-careful sense, we are just living in a computer program or something similar.

Maybe some of the assertions she makes are false, but is she being irrational in making them? I suggest you ruminate on that question.

CHAPTER 8

Why Advanced Science and Philosophy Support Humility

The argument of this chapter is unlike most of the preceding ones in being entirely my own invention. Most of the book's other materials, up to this point, can be found in some or other form in the works or at least thoughts of other philosophers. But not this one. And I must say: the thoughts that I present in simplified form in this chapter had a large impact on my attitudes toward religion. Roughly put, it was one of several factors that pushed me from being halfway between agnosticism and atheism to being firmly agnostic (another one is summarized in the next chapter).

When pressed, many atheists offer four reasons why they reject theism:

- There is strong evidence *against* theism.
- There is no strong evidence *for* theism (setting aside testimony, which is manifestly unfair but there you have it).
- An enormous number of people accept theism for laughably bad reasons.
- Theism is so outrageous compared to what we already know about reality that it needs a great deal of support in order for us to believe it in a reasonable manner—but we lack that support.

In this chapter I examine the last reason, arguing that it fails.

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Here's something that most of us can agree on: theism looks simply incredible compared with our *unproblematic knowledge about the universe*. One hears remarks to this effect all the time—even from theists. I once heard a prominent theistic philosopher of religion joke that he has this "invisible friend" who he talks to. He was intentionally comparing himself to a child or a crazy person. I once heard another say, before beginning a lecture that was premised on the truth of theism, that he realized that many audience members will take that premise to be about as plausible as the idea that the Easter Bunny really exists. He was wise to make the observation.

It's tempting to think that theism is about as outlandish as the idea that the Moon is made of cheese. The proposition that the Moon is made of cheese *could* be made non-outlandish. Suppose we found out that Venus is made of chocolate, Mars is made of frozen yoghurt, and Jupiter is nothing more than a huge bag of onions smashed together. Well, then the Moon-cheese proposition would no longer be incredible. We still would have no evidence *for* the Moon-cheese proposition, but we could no longer say it's beyond the pale. Similarly, if we discovered an invisible friend who was omniscient but not omnipotent, or a visible friend who could create whole clusters of galaxies with just thought or will, then *perhaps* theism would no longer be incredible. That's because we would have found entities that are pretty similar to God. But we have found nothing even approximately like theism to be true: we have no unproblematic knowledge of anything *remotely* like an omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good and benevolent creator. Or so many atheists and agnostics think, if only implicitly.

When an intelligent theist engages an intelligent atheist in debate (it happens, just not often), they will inevitably cover some of the standard, nonstupid arguments for and against theism. If the theist is a real expert, she will be able to cast wholly reasonable doubt on a good portion of the atheist's counters to pro-theism arguments. She will also, let us assume, be able to reveal important defects in the arguments against theism. But at that point in the conversation, the atheist who has been paying attention and who is sharp typically doesn't give up. Instead, he will say, "Yeah, but theism is just so damn crazy compared to what we already know!"

That last remark sums up the ***Argument from Outrageousness***. I used to think it had a lot going for it. At that same time, I had a lot of respect for intelligent and philosophically informed theists. But I always thought something along the lines of this:

> Even though I have to respect their testimony for theism, what they're saying—the hypothesis that there is a person who created the universe (!), is all powerful (!), is all knowing (!), and perfectly good (!)—is just plain nuts compared with what we definitely know about the universe. And the fact that what they're saying is so crazy means that I should probably discount their testimony quite a bit.

Nevertheless, I will argue that the Argument from Outrageousness is no good. I changed my mind. Philosophical argument can help one change their mind about even the most consequential matters.

The Weirdness of Science

Most of us tend to think that over the last few centuries science has provided a big objection to religion: if science discloses truth—and how could it not, given its stunning success?—then many of the reasons for thinking God really exists fall apart. We have seen instances of that idea in this book. I think that idea is right, but in another way science supplies an indirect argument against the Argument from Outrageousness, as I'll try to show in this section.

Science has proven that reality is almost unimaginably bizarre. Just think about what we know about the universe. The earth is pretty damn big: about 25,000 miles all the way around. But when you compare the size of the earth to that of our solar system, it's like comparing a grain of sand to the whole beach—that's how comparatively minuscule our earth is. The same holds when comparing our solar system to our galaxy: just a grain of sand. And our galaxy? When it comes to the cosmos, our enormous galaxy is just a grain of sand compared to a beach. Finally, some physicists have speculated—but it's *only* speculation at this point—that there are zillions of whole universes out there, completely cut off from one another, so each universe is like a self-contained soap bubble. So you are a grain of sand on earth, which is a grain of sand in the solar system, which is a grain of sand in our galaxy, which is a grain of sand in our universe, which is a grain of sand in all of reality.

Now consider Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Suppose two things happen: you turn on the oven, call that event X, and some person honks the horn in her car, call that event Y. It seems as obvious as anything ever gets that exactly one of the following has got to be true: either X happened before Y, Y happened before X, or they happened at the same time. Surely

that's obvious, right? But no: according to the standard interpretation of the Theory of Relativity, all three options are true. That is, from some physical perspectives, X happened before Y; from others, Y happened before X; and from yet others, X and Y happened at the same time. None of the perspectives is the "right" one. Whether X happened before Y is relative to the physical perspective in question, on how people in the three perspectives would be moving relative to X and Y. How X and Y are temporally related to one another is *perfectly objective* in the sense that it doesn't depend on what any person *thinks or feels*, but it does depend on the physical perspective from which X and Y are seen. Or so many physicists believe.

Now consider Quantum Mechanics, which is the mathematics behind the theory of atoms, electrons, protons, and other microscopic particles. On the one hand, this is probably *the most impressive theory ever*. For instance, its predictive accuracy is simply mind-boggling. But there is a version of Quantum Mechanics, due to the work of physicist David Bohm, which says, roughly, that *the entire universe consists of just one particle that exists in a physical space of almost unlimited dimensions.* The activity of that one particle generates the entire universe, including people. No one knows whether Bohm's one-particle view is true, but it's taken seriously as a live option since it can account for all experimental results. It's hard to imagine anything weirder than that.

Consider biology. It really is hard to reflect on the human eye, or the heart, or photosynthesis and to think anything other than "How on earth did nature get this way?". The idea that atoms and molecules randomly moving through space and subject to blind forces like gravity and electromagnetism could create eyes and hearts seems crazy. Instead, it certainly looks as though someone had to have *designed* the human eye and the other amazing parts of nature. So, we have a variant of the traditional design argument for the existence of God—which philosophers know is no damn good. But when we examine nature, we do learn that biological life is incredible: over millions of years of fluctuations, things like eyes and hearts can come about naturally just by changing in accord with the laws of nature. Now, some theists will say that God designed the laws of nature. I don't know of any good evidence for that view, as I argued earlier, but my point here is just this: microscopic particles zooming around obeying the laws of nature naturally produced all the wonderful biological things on earth, and *that* fact is just incredible *no matter how* the laws of nature came about.

Here's another completely amazing thing: Did the universe have a beginning, with the Big Bang perhaps, or did it always exist? There are just three possibilities, and each one is utterly bizarre:

(a) The universe had no beginning, so it goes back in time infinitely. So the question "Where did matter come from?" has no real answer.
(b) The universe had a beginning, but nothing caused it to start up. So the birth of matter had no cause whatsoever. It just started up without anything at all making it happen.
(c) The universe had a beginning, and something—call it X—caused it to happen. So X would have to be nonphysical, since it caused the beginning of the physical universe: X is a nonphysical thing (or group of things) causing the universe to happen.

Pretty strange, no? Yet consider this: exactly one of (a)–(c) has simply got to be true (as those are the only possibilities) and yet each one is mind-boggling.

I could go on, with more amazing things about our universe, but why bother? It isn't hard to realize that the universe is utterly astonishing in the sense that it contains things and features that were totally unpredictable from the standpoint of scientifically uninformed common sense.

I am not saying that any of this weirdness provides decent evidence for theism: it does not. But when atheists think to themselves that theism is utterly bizarre, they should remind themselves that that's not a good reason to think it's unlikely to be true. *We already know that the universe is filled with the bizarre*, so it would be foolish of us to reject theism just because it's bizarre. But science isn't alone in showing this, as we will see next.

The Weirdness of Philosophy

Philosophy is still going as strong as ever in twenty-first century, and part of the reason is that over the millennia people have uncovered mysteries that have resisted solution and show that our universe is astonishing. I'll go over a few of those mysteries here.

A good portion of these mysteries have to do with us as human beings. Is consciousness just a physically generated aspect of the brain? And if, as seems likely, consciousness is physically generated, how does that happen: How does the technicolor of consciousness arise from the electrochemical

activity of the gray matter of our brains? No one knows, despite centuries of investigation.

In fact, it is much worse than that. As far as people know, there seem to be three possibilities when it comes to figuring out the relation of consciousness to physical reality. The first option says that consciousness is just some high-level physical processing in the brain, involving neurons and being made up of the movements and other activities of molecules. The second option says that consciousness is not built up from complicated activity of molecules but is something completely novel—kind of like how electricity and magnetism are something different from, not reducible to, gravity, kinetic energy, and potential energy. The third option holds that consciousness is physical, like in the first option, but it's also universal: *everything* is conscious. Even electrons are conscious, although their consciousness is fantastically primitive compared to ours because they don't have emotions or thoughts or anything very much like them.

For a long time, investigators thought the first option was the right one. But there is a growing number of defectors who think, after working in that paradigm for years, that it's a dead end. They think that either consciousness is a fundamental, nonreducible part of reality (option 2) or it's ubiquitous, showing up everywhere (option 3). No one knows the truth here—even today.

Here is another mystery, this time about meaning: Do our lives have any overarching meaning or purpose, or are meaning and purpose things we invent for ourselves as we go along? Ethics supplies eternal questions as well: Are there any real moral truths, or does morality reflect nothing but a bundle of subjective preferences and emotions that we are genetically programmed to accept or are indoctrinated into? Is free will ruled out by the (alleged) fact that our bodies are just highly complex biological systems wholly obedient to stubbornly impersonal physical laws of nature—exactly like any other flesh and blood organism? We don't know.

Even the simplest thing, like the fact that twice two is four, gives rise to fundamental questions that have yet to be satisfactorily answered. For instance, what *makes it true* that twice two is four?

To get a sense of the thought behind this odd question, consider the truth "The ball is on the table." Suppose that that's true. What *makes* it true is the *physical presence* of the ball on the table. Obviously. It's not like I'm saying something amazing here. What makes the sentence or thought "The ball is on the table" true is a certain physical situation involving a ball and a table. That is just plain obvious.

This seems to be a general rule: if a certain sentence or thought is true, one that makes a positive statement (so it's not something like "There are no unicorns"), there has to be something in reality that *makes* it true, something in reality *in virtue of* which the sentence or thought ends up true. The sentence "The ball is on your head" is not true because, of course, there is no physical situation that makes it true. Positive claim is true ➔ something exists that made it true.

But when it comes to something mathematical like "Twice two is four," no one knows what makes it true. Some people say that our conceptual framework makes it true; others say that mathematical truths are made true by a realm of really existing abstract numerical objects that exist independently of both us and the physical universe; yet others say the subtle structure of physical reality does the trick; and then some say that nothing whatsoever makes them true—nothing in our minds, the physical universe, or the nonphysical universe. No one knows who is right, if anyone is.

Oh, don't get me wrong: there are plenty of philosophers who *think* they know. Many of them are not moved by the fact that a great many equally competent philosophers disagree with their alleged answers. Worse yet, there are plenty of *scientists* who think they know the answers—despite the fact that they are clueless morons when it comes to offering even rudimentary arguments that display their alleged evidence for their views. I know that's a helluva nasty thing to say about scientists, but I speak from experience here—including that of my own past overconfidence.

With the exception of the mathematical one, the mysteries I just mentioned are *familiar* ones you can find in many popular philosophy books and standard introductory courses in philosophy. In saying that they are "familiar," I don't mean to say that they are easy in any way: clearly, some of them are profoundly difficult to probe. I mean rather to point out that those mysteries are well known in that many educated people outside of universities are aware of at least some of them.

So what other philosophical mysteries are there, ones completely out of public view?

One unexpected mystery suggests—and I kid you not—that there are no ordinary material objects such as cats or cups. You think you have a cat and a coffee cup? Nope, not really. There are electrons and other particles where you think your cup and cat are, but there is no cup or cat there. The universe is nothing more than a swarm of particles; electrons exist but cats, cups, and humans do not.

Another mystery suggests that the whole notion of linguistic and cognitive meaning is an illusion: so "I have shoes on" and "Bill Clinton was President of the USA" are meaningless, as is every sentence and word in this book and every thought running through your mind. The arguments for this astonishing thesis have been analyzed for centuries, and there is no significant agreement as to what's wrong with them.

Yet another mystery seems to show that the notion of truth is contradictory in the sense that it is simply incoherent: nothing is true and nothing is false—including this very statement. You probably think that we know of tons of truths, such as "Miles Davis had soul" and "I have clothes on" (I assume you aren't reading this while being naked). But even if the mystery of meaning (in the previous paragraph) is illusory, another mystery says that no statement whatsoever is true because the notion of truth is as contradictory as the notion of a naked person with an opaque dress on.

The final mystery appears to show that even if there are trees and tables, none of them are green, brown, or any other color. The universe is utterly colorless. There may be bananas, but none of them are yellow. Oh, and one of the consequences of our colorless universe might be that our minds are partially nonphysical, although there is no hope here for an afterlife (not to say there's no hope elsewhere).

Most philosophers do not accept these radical views. They think that there must be some flaw in the arguments for such insane ideas. The problem with their view (a problem they are fully aware of, unless they are wildly overconfident and disrespectful of their colleagues) is that no one has been able to convince others that he or she has put their finger on the flaws in the arguments for those stunning conclusions. Disagreement about the solutions to the mysteries is rife. And this remains true despite many centuries of investigation into the mysteries by a good portion of the best and brightest minds that have ever walked on our planet.

As was the case with scientific weirdness, there is no argument here for theism. Instead, what we have is an argument that *reality is incredibly, absurdly strange*—so strange, in fact, that the oddness of theism is not good evidence that it's false. This point is trickier than it looks, so I will elaborate.

The Consequences for the Argument from Outrageousness

It's pretty reasonable to get excited about the success of science. There are zillions of things that our ancestors were completely clueless about that we have figured out. What is the sun, why does it come back every day, and why doesn't it burn out? How do plants grow? What makes a baby grow inside a woman? Why are there the seasons? How does rain become snow? These and many other questions were completely beyond our ancestors.

We know the answers now. In fact, science is putting together a view of reality, one that gets tested for accuracy a million times a day in all sorts of ways. If science's picture was wrong, there is no way medicine would work, smartphones would work, electricity would work, airplanes would work, and so on. One could be forgiven that science is, by a huge margin, the most amazing human endeavor ever.

Furthermore, and this point is crucial, *there is nothing in this view that looks anything remotely like theism*. Science hasn't discovered a bunch of nonphysical objects interacting with physical objects, as standard versions of theism require since God is not supposed to be a physical object (since he creates the entire physical universe). Science hasn't discovered any super amazing beings who are anything close to omnipotent or omniscient. Science hasn't discovered anyone magically turning water into wine or raising the dead. Science hasn't discovered anything like Heaven or Hell or any other kind of afterlife. No one is even close to being morally perfect, whatever that would even mean.

In sum: science is enormously successful and hasn't found anything remotely like theism. Given all that, theism seems really improbable. Or so an intelligent person might think. That's the Argument from Outrageousness.

But the things I went over in the two previous "weird" sections (science and philosophy) show that our universe is still *incredibly* mysterious and unknown to us. Many of the simplest things remain mysterious even though we have been incredibly successful, through science, in figuring out how they move around, change, and behave. There is little reason to think "we have things figured out now": we most definitely do *not* have things figured out now despite the fact that we are a million times more knowledgeable than our ancestors. More to the point, even if theism is utterly bizarre compared to what our incredibly successful science has shown, this doesn't amount to a good argument that theism is

improbable, because that same science—as well as philosophy—has shown that reality is *filled* with the utterly bizarre.

Recall the Moon-cheese story from the beginning of this chapter. We start out with what we think is a great reason for thinking that the Moon is not made of cheese: the fact that things like moons and planets are made of rock and gases, not kinds of food. But then we discovered that a bunch of planets are made of various kinds of food. Upon this discovery we learned two key things: we learned that some of our reasons for thinking the Moon couldn't be made of cheese are false and we learned that we couldn't trust ourselves to make guesses about the composition of things like moons and planets.

Something a bit similar occurs with the weird aspects of science and philosophy. We start out with what we think are great reasons for thinking that theism is false. One reason we already saw: the fact that there is good reason to believe in gratuitous suffering that God would not allow to exist. But there are others that are worrisome for theists. For instance, we haven't been able to see how a nonphysical thing can create a physical thing, or how anything could be omniscient (especially if it's nonphysical). But we now know that our knowledge of meaning, sensory experience, material existence, truth, time, physical identity, the origin of the universe, the origin of the laws of nature, free will, consciousness, et cetera has enormous gaps at the most fundamental levels—and these gaps suggest that the truth of these matters will be utterly bizarre. Upon this discovery we do not learn that our original reasons for thinking God doesn't exist are false. To that extent, the two cases, theism and moon, are different. But we do learn, in the theism case, that we can't trust ourselves to make grand guesses as to the outer limits of existence, such as that tied to creation or the origin of puzzling spiritual experience.

The weird things about science and philosophy should not cause us to be skeptical of *everything*. For instance, we should stick with the view that we can trust ourselves to tackle difficult questions like that of the cause of the demise of the dinosaurs. We are indeed awfully good at figuring out things like that. But when it comes to the big questions, history shows that we are still like wide-eyed children, discovering the fundamental questions but very far from having any answers.

So the Argument from Outrageousness just doesn't amount to a compelling reason to reject theism.

PART IV

The Case for Agnosticism

CHAPTER 9

The Experience Argument for God

I know I've already said this a bunch of times, but still: I'm not trying to convince you that God exists, or that people experience him. Not at all: I believe neither of those things. Perhaps more surprisingly, I'm not even trying to convince you of my own view, agnosticism, since I don't have space to give you *all* the reasons for it. Instead, I've been trying to summarize, in a short book, the reasons that often push intelligent people toward agnosticism even if they are hyperaware of science and philosophy. In this chapter, I will present just one part of the case against atheism: the one involving testimony.

Some theists almost *recoil* from the challenge "What *evidence* is there for the idea that God exists?" They probably hate this book and think the title was deceptive. In reply to the challenge for evidence they often insist that religion is a matter of "faith." But "faith" is a slippery term. When pressed with a follow-up question such as "Why choose faith in theism, as opposed to some other religion or some superstition or something utterly silly like astrology?" they will, after a fashion, often say that theistic faith is more reasonable *because it is so common and accepted by sober smart folks*, while faith in obvious silliness is not. This is, I think, a (fallible) sign of an implicit reliance on testimony: theism is respectable, astrology is not, because of the two, only the former is endorsed by intellectually serious people.

B. Frances, *An Agnostic Defends God*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-73331-5_9

I'm not saying that the testimonial evidence for theism—which we will see is much more complicated than it appears—is "impressive" in the sense that once you're aware of it, you should be a theist. Think of being on a jury and listening to an impressive argument by the prosecutor. She gives you good evidence that the defendant is guilty, but you don't go all the way and believe in his guilt because you realize that the evidence isn't conclusive—in fact, there are reasons to doubt the competence of the sources of that evidence, although those reasons aren't conclusive either. I'm saying the same thing about the testimonial case for theism: it's *good*, but it has enough flaws and other limitations (some of which I'll be pointing out) to make it far from *conclusive* even though it remains strong enough to be an important plank in the case for agnosticism.

In multiple places in this book, we have had occasion to note the impressive testimonial case for theism: a simply overwhelming number of people over so many centuries have been theists. (In effect, throughout this book I've been slowly unveiling the testimonial case for theism.) The theists include a great many highly intelligent people who have been trained in argumentation and are fully aware of the reasons to doubt theism. Everyone agrees with those facts. The challenge is to *account for those facts*, *explain why they are true*. That is, we have to answer this: Why is it that so many people—*especially* people who are intellectually sophisticated and wholly familiar with all the challenges to theism and the rationality of theistic belief—believe in God?

The obvious, theistic, explanation of these facts is this:

> A large number of people have had fairly direct and revealing *experiences* of God: they have experienced him, in some fashion or the other. Call these people *the spiritual experiencers*. These people then talk and write about their experiences and what they learned from them. Millions of other people read or listen to their accounts. Many of them believe the spiritual experiencers, since a good portion of the experiencers seem to have their act together: they are roughly as intelligent as the rest of us, and they don't seem to be any more gullible or bad at reasoning compared to other people.

That is a plausible explanation. But the plausibility is partially offset by our awareness that people in general are easily manipulated and

fooled—even ones that are highly intelligent, reflective, and aware of relevant criticisms. If you don't already know this, God help you. Is there an explanation of the testimony that is much better than the theistic one, so we can dismiss the latter as too improbable to take seriously?

I have a great deal of respect for many of the theists I know. Not the cranks. Not the idiots. Not the mentally deranged. No, I'm talking about theists who fall into any of three groups:

Group 1: These are people who are very intelligent, who are fully aware of the good reasons to think there is no God or that religious belief is epistemically suspect, who have no significant cognitive or emotional or other mental problems, and yet who stick with their religious beliefs anyway. I have in mind professional philosophers who believe in God.

Group 2: These are people who have undergone years-long training in some meditation discipline devoted to exploring the intricacies of spiritual experience—one that has been around for centuries and shows no obvious signs of odd amounts of mental derangement or fraud.

Group 3: These are people who are intelligent, who are no more gullible than the average atheist or agnostic, who have no cognitive or emotional or other mental problems whatsoever, and who claim to have directly experienced God on multiple occasions over a long period of time even though they are not meditators.

The ***Experience Argument*** starts from the simple idea that since so many people of those three categories have believed in God—literally millions—it is pretty likely that some of them have genuinely experienced God. The argument allows for the truth that there are *lots* of cranks in the world who delude themselves into thinking that they have perceived God. But the argument also says that it's unlikely that *all* the alleged perceivers and geniuses are deluded. Given the large numbers of geniuses and self-proclaimed perceivers of God, there are certainly going to be some frauds among them, but what are the odds that *all* of them are grossly mistaken?

(a) Throughout history there have been millions of people in one or more of the three groups.

(b) If (a) is true, then *at least some* of those people are believing in God on the basis of genuinely experiencing him. (Here we more or less set aside Group 1.)
(c) Hence, by (a) and (b) at least some people have actually experienced God—so, God exists.

I'm going to spend almost all of this chapter attacking this argument. In my opinion, the attacks fail to provide enough reason to think (b) is false. But the evidence *for* (b) isn't conclusive either. In sum, the evidence for (a) is extremely good and the evidence for (b) is good *enough* that the combination of the two premises provides one with decent albeit inconclusive evidence for God. Hence, it's a significant argument against atheism.

It should be obvious that just because millions of people believe something doesn't mean they are doing so on the basis of good evidence. I'll go over just a few reasons that are applicable to religious belief.

Like most philosophers I suspect that there is no afterlife (it may surprise you to learn that many *theistic* philosophers think there is no afterlife). And yet, after my mother died unexpectedly I felt the pull of the idea that perhaps, just maybe, my mother could somehow see me or hear me after her death. It was a powerful emotional reaction of mine that provides no evidence—by itself—that there really is an afterlife or God. For instance, there is no reason to think that I was on the brink of becoming perceptively in tune with the afterlife. Please put aside wishful thinking. This isn't the movies folks; it's real life. The desire to communicate with loved ones who have died (especially recently) is *very* strong, and belief often helplessly follows such extreme desires. Those intense desires push us in the direction of theism regardless of whether we have any supporting evidence.

Just to be clear: nothing in the previous paragraph suggests that there is no afterlife. Sure, nothing in science suggests there is an afterlife—and the silly books written by people who say they have "visited" the afterlife are just, well, silly. Over and over again, they get exposed as frauds. But just because a bunch of fools and charlatans say X is true doesn't mean that X is false. There could be an afterlife anyway. I know of nothing conclusive in science that says otherwise. And as we saw in the previous chapter, science traffics in the bizarre all the time, so the strangeness of the afterlife is not a good argument against the idea that there really is an afterlife.

In addition, many people have an extremely strong reaction to injustice. If we see a gross injustice and the perpetrators get away scot-free, this

can be very distressing, especially when we or our loved ones are the victims of the injustice. Again, there is an incredibly fierce desire for justice to be made; it often bleeds into desire for revenge. And since justice very often doesn't come before death, we are strongly, if unconsciously, tempted by the idea that it *must* come eventually, in the afterlife.

Here is third reason to be skeptical about the reasons people become theists: it is pretty suspicious that the percentage of highly educated people who accept theism is decreasing all the time. When we look at the percentage of scientists and academics who are theists we see that it is much less than it was a century or so ago. And the percentage of highly educated theists from a couple centuries ago was more than it was one century ago. The amount of societal pressure to publically advocate theism has dropped over the years, and in response the number of admitted theists among the most educated has *plummeted*. Furthermore, the percentage of theists among those who examine the evidence for theism the most—the philosophers—has *really* plummeted over the centuries, as it's become socially acceptable to do so. This data raises the *possibility* that a great many highly educated people endorsed theism over the centuries not because they had some decent evidence but because it was socially unacceptable to refrain from doing so.

Hence, there are several forces pushing us toward accepting various religious doctrines, and for many of them there is no corresponding impressive *evidence* behind the push. Indeed, *reflective theists almost always will accept that claim*, as they need to account for the hundreds of millions of religious people who disagree with their specific religious beliefs (e.g., the specific beliefs about Jesus). The upshot: given the strong emotional pressures to believe in specific theistic doctrines—pressures we recognize to not be based on evidence—humanity has a strong disposition to believe in theism even in the absence of evidence for theism.

I don't suppose any of the foregoing is terribly controversial. But I went over them in order to point out that the Experience Argument is immune to those criticisms. It says that even though plenty of people believe in God for reasons that are, quite frankly, lousy, it's highly unlikely that *all of them* are fools or deluded or whatnot. Let's move on to better challenges to the Experience Argument.

It's crucial that the Experience Argument concern, at some point, *nontestimonial* evidence. Pretty much everyone agrees that there are millions of respectable sources of religious testimony. The intelligent atheists think that these people have no good nontestimonial evidence backing them up. To see why this is important, consider a brief piece of fiction.

Several thousand years ago, on a large and isolated island, a woman Jo took care of children. Jo was incredibly creative in the stories she told the children. She made up all sorts of fantastic stories in order to entertain them and develop their creative impulses. She imagined huge animals with noses that were up to 8 feet long and could be used as arms; she imagined incredibly tall animals with patches all over their bodies and necks that were often over 6 feet long. She told stories about giant animals that were 100 feet long with huge teeth, horns, or claws; she imagined birds that had wing spans of over 30 feet. There were no animals even remotely like that on her island; they were the product of her creative imagination.

She also told stories designed to get the children to be kind, generous, truthful, and so on. In particular, she told them that there is a little voice in their heads—their "conscience"—and it's the voice of a real person. This conscience person was invisible but knew all of your thoughts—in fact, it knew the thoughts and deeds of everyone. So if you did something naughty, then even if no adults or kids knew about it, the invisible, all-knowing conscience person would know all about it—and she would strongly disapprove and be sad. Jo told the kids that it would be bad to make the conscience person sad, as she is unfailingly kind and wants the best for each one of us.

Jo was just making this up of course (this is *my* story, folks: I'm *telling* you she purposely made it up as fiction). It was her creative way to make the children reflective and better behaved.

Jo's stories became famous on the island. Children adored her, which made the parents adore her as well. She was often asked where she got her stories. She would always reply "It's as though they come to me in a dream," which she knew was false but sounded beautiful and mysterious, which she hoped would encourage others, especially the children, to become storytellers just like her.

Jo's stories were passed on orally from generation to generation for centuries. So much time went by that people forgot that the stories were just children's tales. It was even forgotten that they were fiction. People knew them as great old stories, but there was widespread disagreement on whether they were intended as fact or as fiction. Since most of us develop, over time, a "voice of conscience," some fanciful people took the conscience story as alleged fact, while others—most of the island's historians, for instance—correctly insisted that Jo's stories were intended as fictional tales for children.

Eventually, technology on the island advanced enough that they were able to build ships that could travel great distances. They ended up discovering other large islands and continents. And lo and behold: they encountered animals that fit the descriptions of Jo's stories! And they found fossils of dinosaurs that also fit her stories. This was pure coincidence: she was just making up stories to help the children. People on the island tended to ignore the fact that most of her imagined animals were never found in the real world. They focused only on the ones that were found.

People who thought Jo's stories were intended as fact treated these discoveries as further evidence—in fact, as *proof*—that Jo's stories were fact, not fiction. And so nearly everyone started taking the stories about the invisible mind-reading conscience person as fact as well: if Jo was right about the animals, then she must have been right about the conscience person too! They started thinking that Jo must have got her knowledge of elephants, giraffes, and dinosaurs from the conscience person, who was, as Jo said, good, kind, all knowing, and spoke to her in dreams.

I'm probably better at being a philosopher than being a storyteller. But as you can see from my short story, it's child's play to imagine a realistic scenario in which fictional stories end up being the basis of a whole religion. And that opens the possibility that good portions of the origins of theism might lie in things like fiction, not fact.

This shows how important it is to look for an *evidentially solid nontestimonial* basis for testimony—precisely what was missing in my story about Jo. If in a normal conversation I tell you I have two children, Julia and Alec, you will believe me. And your belief is backed up by excellent evidence—testimonial evidence. What makes that testimony worthwhile is that it's based on strong *nontestimonial* evidence: the evidence I have that I have two children. My nontestimonial evidence is perceptual (I was there at their births), memorial (I remember being with them), and so on. When atheists claim that there is "no evidence" for theism, we should charitably interpret them as saying that although there is plenty of testimonial evidence for theism, it is based on nothing but bad arguments and delusory experiences: "no evidence" really means something like "no good nontestimonial evidence." I'll return to that issue in the final chapter.

Here's another example. Sherlock Holmes announces that he is completely confident that the butler killed the maid. You read this announcement and come to believe that the butler killed the maid. Although you and Holmes share a belief—you both think the butler did it—you have entirely different bodies of evidence backing up your beliefs. Holmes has

things like a bloody knife, some diary entries of the butler outlining plans for murder, testimony of a love triangle, and so on. You don't have any of that evidence. All you have is this: you've heard many people say that Holmes has an excellent track record on things like this, he has said that he's completely confident the butler did it, and there's no special reason this time around to doubt him. That's enough evidence to make your belief reasonable, but all you have is testimonial evidence that there is good detective evidence for the butler's guilt. If the butler's wife heard that you thought her husband was guilty, which she thinks is false, and she confronted you about it, she would demand you back up your belief with detective evidence, not mere testimonial evidence. The latter evidence is fine, but what we really care about is the former evidence. Similarly, what we really care about is direct evidence for God's existence; testimonial evidence is a highly unsatisfying substitute.

This is why we must demand a nontestimonial basis for testimony. The Experience Argument is a response to that demand. In my opinion, the philosophical and scientific arguments for theism aren't strong enough to provide a decent non-testimonial basis. But for the most part people don't rest their theistic beliefs on arguments: they rest them on *experiences.*

In Chap. 3, we encountered charge C6: the idea that we should doubt that spiritual experiences are often connected to God. We saw that most such experiences fall into one or more of four categories:

Meditation:	The experiences of those who have meditated for many years under the direction of a spiritual teacher and according to some well-established tradition.
Mind-Blowing:	The "out of the blue" mind-blowing spiritual experiences which are quite rare, very unlike any normal experiences, and not brought about via disciplined meditation.
Calm:	The much more common and *comparatively* calm yet meaningful experiences that people have when seeing the ocean at sunset, the starry skies, the birth of a baby, and so on.
Overall:	The "overall" sense one has that many of one's everyday experiences and circumstances in life have been designed in an intentional way by God (e.g., he is rescuing me at various points, challenging me at others, pointing me in the right direction in yet others).

In that chapter I went over some standard reasons why one should be skeptical about the claim that these experiences come from God in some fashion. *The advocate of the Experience Argument agrees with all that.* She just thinks that it's implausible that *all* alleged experience of God is just delusion. Roughly put, her argument starts with the premise that there are *a great many* people who believe in such experiences and yet are *extremely intelligent* and *aware of the reasons for being skeptical about experiences of God*; and then she says that although a great many of the spiritual experiencers may be deluded, for any of a variety of reasons, this delusion hypothesis is implausible if taken to the extreme.

Let's see if we can press the case for the key atheist claim: absolutely *all* the so-called experiences of God are delusions.

We are faced with the question of what to make of the spiritual experiences people have—and for the sake of brevity let's restrict ourselves to the people who probably have the best case for being genuine experiencers of God: those who have meditated for a number of years in a community devoted to exploring the intricacies of spiritual development. But how on earth are we supposed to figure out whether those experiences call out for the existence of God? It would be nice if we could just *ask the experts*, as we do in lots of other cases in which we are faced with a really tough question. For instance, if you want to know whether Uranus is heavier than Neptune, you ask someone who is an expert (via what is written on a reliable website perhaps). You could ask a college student who majors in physics or astronomy. Better yet, you could ask an astronomer. Even better: ask a professional astronomer, and not an amateur astronomer. Probably best: ask a professional astronomer who specializes in our solar system, as opposed to specializing in remote galaxies or black holes or the like.

I assume that the advocate of the Experience Argument, who thinks at least some spiritual experience is genuine and hence indicates the existence of God, will insist that some people have more spiritual experiences than other people. In addition, she will think that some people have a spiritual experience akin to a lightning bolt out of the sky while others have spiritual experiences as a result of a highly disciplined and long-term participation in one of the world's meditation traditions. Furthermore, when it comes to spiritual experiences, she will hold that some people are like the college student, others are like the amateur astronomer, yet others are like the professional astronomer, and then there are those who are like the professional astronomer with the relevant specialization. In order to figure

out whether spiritual experiences are good evidence for the existence of God, it would be best to consult the people who are like the professional astronomer with the relevant specialization. Let's call those people "spiritual experts."

I take it the people with the most plausible claim to be spiritual experts are the ones with lots of spiritual experience, especially advanced spiritual experiences, *and* lots of competent reflection on spiritual experience, *usually* acquired by helping others develop their own spiritual capacities. And I take it that most of these people will be advanced members of meditative disciplines, since these are the disciplines primarily devoted to developing spiritual experience. For instance, the meditation masters/teachers of various forms of Zen, Christianity, Vajrayana Buddhism, and many other traditions or disciplines through the centuries will count as spiritual experts if anyone does. These experts are, to all appearances, as intellectually and morally and psychologically upstanding as you like (that's my experience with them anyway). They say all sorts of very intelligent and substantive things about religious experiences or states of consciousness.

Of course, you might deny that there are any experts regarding spiritual experience! That's fine; lots of intelligent, informed, and fair-minded people have that view. And I'm not going to suggest that that view is incorrect. But the atheist's criticism of the Experience Argument will not rely on that controversial denial. For the sake of argument, I am going to assume, *with* the advocate of the Experience Argument, that there are experts regarding spiritual experience. By admitting the existence of spiritual experts, I'm meeting the advocate of the Experience Argument half way. I'm going to argue that even if there are spiritual experts, there is sufficient doubt about premise (b) of the Experience Argument that we should not accept it, at least not yet—but on the other hand, we should not reject it either, as the evidence against it isn't very good. We have to suspend judgment on it.

The key atheist point is this: *many* of these spiritual experts insist, based on their genuine expertise on these matters, that the spiritual experiences had by many people who aren't part of some meditative discipline *are not experiences of God*. Instead, these spiritual experts say, the correct explanation of those religious experiences is nontheistic, and people who form theistic beliefs upon having such experiences are victims of a particularly interesting and pervasive illusion *typical for beginners* at spiritual experience. Many religious experiences are very advanced, in the evolutionary psychology sense. That is, the spiritual states of consciousness are in some

sense more advanced than any of those states of consciousness most of us live through in our ordinary lives. When developmental psychologists make the concerted effort, they will discover that there are stages of psychological development *far* beyond those typically studied in psychology; and it turns out that these stages are the home of spiritual experiences. People who have them are not deranged or irrational in virtue of having those experiences; on the contrary, these people may be evolutionarily advanced because they have those experiences. Many of these folks are beginners, yes, but what they are doing is beginning to explore the intricacies of the "higher realms" of psychological development, not regressing to the womb or other such nonsense that applies to the deranged preachers on television such as Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell in the United States.

The spiritual experts I'm considering here aren't saying anything insulting or condescending about people who have spiritual experiences! They aren't saying, for instance, that such people are really just deluded and deeply yearn for a supreme father figure (although such an explanation does of course depressingly apply to some theists). But they are saying that *those experiences don't signal the existence of any being other than the one having the experience*. Given any of a fairly large range of appropriate cognitive backgrounds and expectations, one will have experiences *as if* there is a nonphysical and roughly person-like being in their presence; the spiritual experiences are "malleable" as we might put it. And one can eventually realize that fact, but only after one has had more mature spiritual experiences—in fact, this realization almost never happens unless one takes up some meditative practice in a serious way for several years. Eventually, with more advanced spiritual experiences one has years later, one can see one's earlier mistakes. Indeed, there are many testimonials from spiritual experts describing how their initial spiritual experiences were deceptive in many ways despite their being illuminating and "on the right track." These experts say that the spiritual experiences many people have are somewhat akin to the visual experiences had by someone who was congenitally blind but who has just had an operation to gain the power of sight. She is having genuinely new visual experiences. But her experiences are those of a novice, and novices make lots of perceptual mistakes.

The spiritual experts who offer what I'm calling "alternative" explanations of some spiritual experiences need not be atheists; in fact, they can be *and actually sometimes are* theists—even theists who believe that we can know God through spiritual experiences. Just like I sometimes say to my students:

> I agree with your essay's conclusion. And I think your argument is sophisticated, illuminating, and worth an "A" grade. Unfortunately, I also think your argument doesn't really support your conclusion, as there is a subtle mistake present,

some actual spiritual experts will say to many of us,

> I agree that God exists. And I think one can experience God, come to know God through spiritual experience, and your experience was extraordinary and meaningful. So we agree on some quite fundamental matters. Unfortunately, I also think that you have not really experienced Him this time around.

Many others will be agnostics who say that many spiritual experiences are extraordinary and genuinely spiritual but don't come from God, regardless of whether He exists, because these experiences are indicative of the higher realms of human inner experience, and not experiences of divine entities. They take no stand on God's existence but just hold that the spiritual experiences have nondivine sources and explanations. And of course many of the spiritual experts will be atheists (of a great variety of kinds). But they aren't any old atheists, like the ones who sometimes write editorials in newspapers or misleading but popular books. The atheists I have in mind acknowledge the "legitimacy" and extreme importance of spiritual experience but don't think it is experience of any supernatural entity.

I am certainly not saying that these atheistic spiritual experts are right about any of this. Part of what I am saying is this: they are genuine spiritual experts *if anyone is*, and their considered opinion is that a huge portion of spiritual experience is not of God.

Now, what are *we* supposed to do with this information—where the "we" in question do not consist of spiritual experts but relatively ordinary people like me and, I assume, you?

Well, for what it's worth, it makes me think that although a lot of people say they have perceived God, and these people are perfectly sincere and intelligent and aren't trying to fool anyone, there are serious grounds for doubting that they have characterized their experiences correctly. As much as I would like to take their word for it, I can't because of the serious controversy surrounding their claims of perception.

The intelligent theist should, I think, just grant all this. It's pretty obvious that Zen masters, for instance, are spiritual experts, if anyone is, and they don't think there is anything remotely like a monotheistic God.

However, none of this makes me think that premise (b) from the Experience Argument is false:

> If throughout history there have been millions of people in one or more of the three groups of theists mentioned earlier, then *at least some* of those people are believing in God on the basis of genuinely experiencing him.

I acknowledge that the preceding atheist arguments supply excellent evidence that *much* spiritual experience has no supernatural aspect, but as far as I can tell it fails to give us sufficient reason to think that *all* spiritual experience has no supernatural aspect. In other words, we have encountered no sufficient reason to reject (b). The atheist's attempted refutation of (b) fails.

Moreover, it seems as though the theist has at least some reasonable responses to the atheist's considerations. For instance, she could plausibly argue that "spiritual experience" is a diverse category—even going beyond the fourfold classification I gave earlier. She can admit that Zen masters, for instance, have perfectly true and insightful things to say about "spiritual experience"—but they simply have not had the *right* spiritual experiences. A few pages back, I brought up the astronomy example with Uranus and Neptune. I mentioned that there are various classes of experts: professional astronomers, and professional astronomers with the relevant specialization. The theist can say that the category of spiritual experts includes Zen masters but they have the wrong specialization when it comes to judging theism.

There is a great deal more to be said about the evidential value of religious experience. I hope I have done enough here to explain why although many are not convinced of theism by the Experience Argument, they do respect it.

CHAPTER 10

Two Troubles with Agnosticism

At first glance, the agnostics look to be in the superior position compared to the theists and atheists. They almost look like the "He said, she said" type of political journalists, the ones who try, with frequent desperation, to be evenhanded in their assessment of politicians and political parties—as if the political parties and individuals they are covering as journalists deserve equal assessment outcomes in addition to equal treatments. This is not a flattering comparison.

I have met many smug agnostics. They think it's relatively obvious that both theists and atheists are far too confident in their religious convictions. The theists are fools for thinking that their meager amounts of evidence are worthy of belief in God; the atheists are fools with their attempts to "prove a negative," which are always anemic. As Shakespeare's Mercutio puts it: "A plague o' both your houses!" (Act III, Sc. 1, *Romeo and Juliet*). As we have seen in Chaps. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9, there is at least some truth to this attitude. Even so, there are significant philosophical landmines that the sophisticated agnostic should avoid.

Here's a true generalization: just because you are in group X does not mean that you endorse what other Xs say about X. You may even cringe at some of the arguments some Xers give for being an X.

This has nothing to do with religion or philosophy. For instance, you may have voted for Mr. Goofy, a politician in your city (so in this example X = voter for Mr. Goofy). But the only real reason you did so is the fact that the only other candidate was Ms. Scum. You may disagree

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vociferously with another voter regarding Mr. Goofy's merits even though you both voted for him. Another example: you may think the ethical thing to do is refrain from eating meat, but that hardly means that you will endorse everything that intelligent vegetarians say about vegetarianism.

Analogously, even though I'm an agnostic that hardly means I endorse everything that intelligent agnostics say about agnosticism. On the contrary, I think it is difficult to articulate plausible principles of agnosticism beyond the obvious "I neither believe nor disbelieve that God exists." In particular, when someone tries to justify why other people should be agnostic, they frequently say things that are just plain false. In the first half of this chapter, I will go through a series of them. I do not even try to be comprehensive in addressing all such possible justifications. I do just enough to give a taste of the difficulties lying in wait for those who want to say that *other people* should be agnostics.

In the second half of the chapter, I investigate an odd way in which the debate over theism could be definitively settled in a "meta" type of way. Agnostics are often confident that their position is not only the only "fully" rational one but will maintain that status indefinitely, at least until death. As I'll explain below, I think this confidence is misplaced.

But first: it's pretty easy to *explain* why one is an agnostic. For my own case, I say this when people ask me: as far as I have been able to figure things out, the overall evidence I know about is neither strongly for nor strongly against theism. Notice that I do *not* say this: the overall evidence I know about is neither strongly for nor strongly against theism. For all I have been able to figure out, the evidence I know about does in fact point strongly in one direction, either toward theism or toward atheism. After all, it can be quite difficult to assess the overall direction a large body of evidence points. As far as I've been able to tell, *my* overall evidence regarding theism is made of up of pro and con considerations that more or less cancel out; moreover, the evidence I know about—including the stuff I don't have myself—is similarly balanced, as far as I have been able to determine. That's why I'm agnostic. But I'm prepared to be wrong in my judgment about all that evidence. I can easily imagine a person smarter than me coming along and proving that my overall evidence, or the evidence I know about even if I don't actually have it myself, is actually strongly in favor of one of the two sides.

So far, so good: it's not hard to offer a short and sweet explanation as to why one is agnostic. But agnostics often insist that *lots of other people* should be agnostic too. That's the hard part. How can they justify that opinion?

We start with thesis **T1** as a potential justification: (a) there is no good evidence for theism, and (b) there is no good evidence against theism. I've heard clever people make these remarks many times when saying that others should be agnostic. However, we know that both (a) and (b) are false, since there is good testimonial evidence both for and against theism. **T1** was naïve. So the agnostic could try thesis **T2** in place of **T1**: there is no good *non-testimonial* evidence either for or against theism. Is that thesis reasonable?

There are difficulties here that come from the fact that "evidence" has several meanings (in one sense of "meaning"). To see this, consider a story.

You're on a jury and the defendant is accused of murder. The prosecution presents their case—and it looks exceedingly impressive. Various expert witnesses and police officials testify that the defendant was discovered at the murder scene, holding the murder weapon—a long butcher knife sunk several inches deep into the victim's chest. In the defendant's wallet there was a receipt proving she purchased a knife matching the murder weapon in every detail. Moreover, there were several letters to the victim, written in the defendant's handwriting, detailing her romantic obsession with the victim, her intention to kill him if he did not become her lover, and so on. And that is just the tip of the iceberg. So much evidence! It is overwhelming.

And yet: none of it is true. The defendant did not purchase the knife, was not at the murder scene, and did not write those letters. She has been framed—with incredible sophistication and attention to detail. The police, the expert witnesses, just about everyone: they are all in on the deception.

On the one hand, you, on the jury, are clearly blameless in thinking the defendant is guilty (in an ordinary sense of "blameless"). In assessing the material presented to you by the prosecution, you have done as well as you possibly could; no one could do better! In fact, you would be an utter fool to *not* believe the defendant is guilty. The operative question is this: Do you have *evidence* for thinking the defendant is guilty?

Surprisingly, some philosophers would say "no." Roughly put, their reasoning is that apparent evidence need not be real, genuine evidence. The material the prosecution gave the jury made the subsequent belief that the defendant is guilty blameless—in fact, to withhold belief on "The defendant is guilty" would be almost epistemically perverse—but that does not mean that the jury had legitimate evidence. An apparent duck—a duck decoy—is not a real duck; and apparent evidence that is rooted in false lies is not real evidence. I think these lessons apply to theists as well. Even if religious experiences are never perceptions of a god, they have enough epistemic power, at least in some cases, to make subsequent religious beliefs blameless.

If you are fascinated by the semantics of "evidence," then this issue and this story are important. But if you are interested merely in whether a belief is praiseworthy or blameworthy, in the ordinary sense when we say things like "She shouldn't believe that; she's being foolish," then matters are otherwise. Say what you will about the jury's so-called evidence, the fact remains that the jury members would have been foolish to do anything other than form the false belief that the defendant is guilty. According to my own lights, the term "evidence" is polysemous: it not only has multiple meanings but some of those meanings are closely related, subtle variants of one another.

With that in mind, consider again thesis **T2**: there is no good nontestimonial evidence either for or against theism. If we focus on the meaning of "evidence" according to which the jurors did have good evidence for thinking that the defendant is guilty, then it should be obvious that there is a great deal of nontestimonial evidence for theism and a great deal for atheism as well. So, **T2** is clearly false.

Think about it: if there really were *no* nontestimonial evidence for theism, then why on earth would there be so many geniuses who were theists? Is it really plausible to hold that these smart folks have *nothing* other than "Lots of people say so" as their evidence for the existence of God? And do we even want to seriously consider the idea that atheists have *no* supporting nontestimonial evidence either? Consider another way to set up the Problem of Gratuitous Suffering:

> Claim (a): There has been, spread out over the centuries, a large group of people who are *highly intelligent*, who know an *enormous amount* about suffering and its potential moral justification, who have spent a *great deal* of time (centuries collectively) thinking *very hard* about the justification of

suffering, and who have undertaken a *very long* (again, centuries), *intelligent, heartfelt, and otherwise serious* search for goods or facts or reasons or whatnot that justify suffering.

Claim (b): These people have collectively failed to find justification for an enormous number of instances of suffering. That is, there is an enormous number of instances of suffering S such that these people have collectively failed to come to know any highly informative truth of the form "The justification for S is such-and-such".

Claim (c): If there has been spread out over the centuries, a large group of people who are highly intelligent, who know an enormous amount about suffering and its potential moral justification, who have spent a great deal of time (centuries collectively) thinking very hard about the justification of suffering, and who have undertaken a very long (again, centuries), intelligent, heartfelt, and otherwise serious search for facts or reasons or whatnot that justify suffering, and they have collectively failed to find them for an enormous number of instances of suffering, then for *at least one instance* of suffering there were no such goods or facts or reasons or whatnot to be found.

From (a)-(c) it follows that there is at least one instance of suffering that has no justification.

Claim (d): if there is an instance of suffering for which there is no justification, then God—conceived as perfectly morally good, omnipotent, and omniscient—does not exist (since he would not permit *unjustified* suffering).

It follows from (a)-(d) that God—conceived as perfectly morally good, omnipotent, and omniscient—does not exist.

We can analyze and evaluate this argument until the end of time (you can bet on it), but the point here is simple: it's an argument that provides pretty good evidence that God doesn't exist—using "evidence" in the way tied to praise and blame.

So, agnostics should not say, regarding the claim "God exists," that there is no nontestimonial evidence for or against it. So, what should they say?

The agnostic could endorse thesis **T3**: the *overall* evidence regarding theism goes neither strongly for it nor strongly against it. But that won't do either. We already saw in Chap. 2 that for many people their overall evidence is strongly in favor of theism: just recall the person who grows up in a religious environment of the right kind. They have loads of testimonial evidence for theism, and they may have little or no evidence against theism. An analogous point holds for many atheists, as we saw in Chap. 3. The "overall evidence" regarding theism varies a great deal from person to person. **T3** is another failure.

Ok, so how about **T4**, which wisely shifts the focus from the individual to the community: the *overall publically available* evidence does not support either atheism or theism. There are problems with this too.

First, I thought we were dealing with the agnostic who says that lots of other people should be agnostics. Even if **T4** is true, that doesn't mean lots of people should be agnostic. Maybe there aren't many people who have just the publically available evidence. Just because evidence is available doesn't mean lots of people have it.

Second, it might be the case that many people have evidence that is not publically available but is pretty strong. If so, then even if they have the publically available evidence that is overall neutral on theism (so we are assuming **T4** is true and the problem of the previous paragraph doesn't apply), their extra evidence, that is not so public, tilts the balance toward atheism or theism. In fact, that's obviously true. For instance, those who have studied in detail the Problem of Gratuitous Suffering have impressive evidence against theism, even if it is not conclusive evidence, and precious few people have that evidence (since few people have undergone that study). And theists who are aware of the many highly detailed personal accounts of religious experience thereby have evidence for theism that the vast majority of people don't have.

Maybe the agnostic should give up on saying that most or even lots of people should be agnostic. In my experience, agnostics tend to think that if one is sufficiently informed of the pro and con considerations, then one will be agnostic. So, perhaps her point is this. **T5**: if someone is diligent in examining the publically available evidence, and she does a good job assessing it, then she should see that it supports neither theism nor atheism. Roughly put, she is saying that if one does an expert job in evaluating the evidence for and against theism, one will, if one is rational, conclude with agnosticism.

Well, even a die-hard theist might agree with **T5**. She could admit that any truly expert analysis of the *publically available* evidence supports agnosticism. In fact, she could admit that it supports atheism! But then she will be quick to say that the private, nonpublic evidence from religious experience is the important stuff, so the truth of **T5** is not very important. Consider an analogy:

> There is a murder trial that is getting an enormous amount of press. An A-list celebrity was murdered and another A-list celebrity is being tried for the murder. Something akin to **T5** is true: the overall evidence that has been

revealed via social media is nowhere near conclusive. Anyone rational who is going by that evidence alone will say that it supports neither "She is guilty" nor "She is not guilty". But who cares? The evidence presented at the actual trial is much more impressive and conclusively points towards her guilt.

We could keep going, in evaluating **T5** and other principles. In the interest of writing a short book, and because I'm lazy, I will stop here. Hopefully, the foregoing discussion gives one a flavor of the challenges in justifying a claim like "Most of us should be agnostics." Let's move on to the second task of this chapter.

Many people understandably think that the debate over God's existence will never be resolved. In response, theists often joke that if you wait until you're dead, and then find yourself in Heaven or Hell, then you will have your proof that God exists. But it doesn't take much reflection to see that this is by no means obvious. Just because you find yourself in an afterlife—one that is good or bad or a mix of both—hardly means that God exists. Perhaps it would show that we have disembodied souls, which is a central claim of many religions, but that doesn't automatically mean that there is a being that rules over all of reality. Even if you meet some people in the afterlife that say God exists, why believe them? We don't just take their word for it here, on Earth, so why accept it there?

Suppose you somehow meet—in some sense of "meet"—a being in the afterlife who claims to be God and does some pretty amazing miracle stuff. That would prove that there is at least one incredible being, judging by our standards on earth. But would it prove that God exists? I suppose it depends in part on the miracles. But even if a being has supernatural powers, that doesn't mean it's God. Hell, most religions would accept that remark, since most of them think there are supernatural beings with impressive powers that aren't God.

Set aside the afterlife, if there is any to set aside. One can imagine a being that does some staggeringly amazing miracles in a very public way here on earth. But that's just imagination. It's not as though it's at all realistic to think that there will be some stunning miracle that thousands or millions of people see and that could only come from God. This isn't the movies, folks. If something like that was going to happen, it probably would have already. If you think it has already happened, well, you haven't paid attention to the use of "public."

More to the point of this chapter, an agnostic might think that there will never be proof of God's nonexistence. Atheists can talk all day about

how unlikely it is that God exists, but it's just talk. We can prove that there is no alligator in your kitchen by examining your kitchen; we can prove that there isn't $200 in my wallet by examining it for a few seconds. Most of the time it's easy to "prove a negative," contrary to what you may read from time to time. But when the entity in question is supposed to be famous for being hidden and not physical? Some agnostics will think it's obvious that it's virtually impossible to prove it doesn't exist.

I disagree.

Centuries ago, there were people who thought that volcanos were inhabited by spirits who controlled the eruptions. It wasn't a foolish idea. After all, volcanic eruptions don't seem to have anything to do with any weather conditions or any other recognizable factor. For instance, it's not as though eruptions are caused by lightning storms. With that fact in mind, one might come to suspect that there is some nonhuman person who decides when the eruptions happen. Not a crazy thought at all.

Of course, *now* it's nuts to think there are gods or spirits that control volcanic eruptions. We have over the last few decades come to understand how volcanos work, and there isn't the slightest need to think spirits have anything to do with it. Of course, we don't know *everything* about volcanos, but only a fool thinks that the gaps in our knowledge will need to be filled with appeal to volcano gods. As a consequence of this scientific advance, we don't believe in volcano gods anymore. If you do, then how on earth did you get this far in the book?

There are plenty of other examples of the same phenomenon. For instance, it was once commonly thought that some people with mental illness were possessed by evil spirits. Now we know a great deal about the causes of mental illness, and once again there is no reason to think that spirits have anything to do with it. We may have immortal souls, but there is no good reason to think that people who develop mental illness have been possessed by some invading spirit.

So much is obvious now. I went over some nonobvious instances of the same reasoning in Chap. 3. People used to look at the marvelous complexity of nature and think "The only way to explain it is to appeal to God." People used to consider the origin of the universe and think "The only way to explain it is to appeal to God." What we keep seeing, over and over again, is that there really is no good reason to appeal to supernatural entities in order to explain things like the complexity of nature, the origin of the universe, mental illness, or volcanic eruptions—and the list could be made longer.

The pattern is the following: there is some phenomenon X; we look for an explanation of X; we can't find one that isn't supernatural; so, we conclude that some supernatural entity or entities must exist, in order to account for X; but then much later we find a nonsupernatural explanation of X; so, we lose the reason for thinking that the supernatural entity or entities exist in order to account for X.

With that point in mind, here is a key question, one that on the face of it should worry *the crap* out of intelligent theists: Will science account for religious experience in entirely nonsupernatural terms? In other words, what if X = religious experience? That is the question we will consider in the rest of this chapter.

I've tried to explain why so many philosophers think that the only strong *pubic* evidence for theism is the body of testimony. The rest of it—the scientific and philosophical arguments and evidence—is not good in their opinion. But if we are to take this testimonial evidence seriously, there has got to be a nontestimonial *basis* for the testimony. If person A believes something because person B believes it, and B believes it because C believes it, and C believes it because D believes it, and so on, then, well, this chain has got to have some solid nontestimonial evidence show up somewhere or else all we have is a bunch of people talking with no basis for the talk. We went over this point in the previous chapter.

Hence, if there are zillions of extremely intelligent careful reasoners out there who believe in God, and this widespread belief is worthwhile, then there has to be some solid nontestimonial evidence that the testimonial evidence is based on. But what might that good nontestimonial evidence be?

I've already explained why so many people think that the only plausible nontestimonial evidence base left is religious experience. So if there is an entirely adequate nonsupernatural account of all religious experience—*so there is no more need to posit God than there is to posit volcano gods*—then it looks as though there is no basis for religious testimony. Hence, those interested in the evidence regarding religion should be extremely interested in whether cognitive science and philosophy will account for religious experience. By my own lights, there is *as of yet* no purely non-supernatural account of religious experience. But we have to keep an open mind. There is a relatively new and insightful research project into the "cognitive science of religious belief."

In Chap. 9, I gave a fictional scenario which, if true, would undermine religion in a peculiar way. It would not cast any *direct* doubt on God's

existence. Instead, it shows that the reasons people believe in X don't involve X in any way. This was the story of how, on a large and isolated island, a woman Jo took care of children and started the Conscience-God story. If we found out that in the real world the only reasons people believed in God have nothing whatsoever to do with any supernatural entity, then we would lose any serious reason for believing in God. Here's a similar case:

Your child is convinced that there is a monster in the closet. But the reason she has this view is the combination of several factors: right before her bedtime she watched a movie that featured scary ghosts; she is six years old; from her perspective of looking into her closet from her bed, there are some odd shadows in the closet; and the cats were in the room on the opposite side of the closet growling at a stray cat that they could see roaming about the backyard. So, now we have explained why your daughter thinks there is a monster in the closet—and the explanation hardly requires, at any point, any monsters.

Similarly, some people have thought that we can account for why people believe in God—and the explanation hardly requires, at any point, any gods. These are known as *debunking arguments*, as they aim to show that religion is bunk. Are they right?

I don't know. I'll address that point below. But look: we have enough here to show that the smug agnostic's claim that her view is always going to be the rational one is pretty doubtful. Contrary to what many agnostics think, it is not difficult to imagine getting pretty conclusive evidence in favor of atheism via a strong debunking argument. Put it this way: if after we accounted for *all* religious belief in a way similar to how we explained the monster-closet belief, and the explanations never required, at any point, any gods, then it would be pretty silly to maintain one's theism with "Yeah, but maybe God exists anyway!"

So, it should probably strike you that the results of the cognitive science of religious belief is of incredible importance: it just might show that the ultimate potential source of evidence for religious belief—religious experience—is a bunch of nonsense. The stakes are high.

Despite talking up the possibility of using the cognitive science of religious belief in order to argue for atheism via a debunking argument, I think this research is a long way from being comprehensive enough to serve in a good atheistic argument. To see why, consider an analogy.

You attend a talent show for kids 7–14 years old. Awww, they are so cute. But one 12-year-old kid seems exceptional. She plays a solo on the

violin that's fantastic, in your amateur judgment. Then you find out that five people who attended the show believe that the kid is *among the best young violinists in the entire world*. This surprises you. You thought that she was excellent, and put on the best performance of the evening, by far. But … among the best in the world? That seems a bit much to you. You have seen Youtube videos of what strike you as much more impressive violin solos performed by children.

Then you find out who the five people are. One, her dad. Two, her mom. Three, her grandfather. Four, her aunt. Five, her younger brother. At this point, you are content to keep your belief that although the kid is great, she's very probably not among the best in the world for her age. The reason is this: there is a perfectly good explanation of why those five people have their belief, an explanation that doesn't in the slightest way suggest that their belief is true. In brief, the explanation is this: parents and other family members very often exaggerate the good points of young members of their family. With this explanation we have debunked the beliefs of those five people: we have accounted for why they have that belief, and the account doesn't even faintly suggest that their belief is true.

But wait. Then you find two other people who were at the talent show who have the same belief as the first five. They are the main violin instructors at the Juilliard School and New England Conservatory of Music and have no connection whatsoever to the child, her family, the school, each other, or anything else of relevance. It's much harder to explain why they have that belief without the explanation also suggesting that the belief is actually true. That is, the best explanation of why the two experts think—independently of each other and anyone involved with the kid—that the kid is among the best young violinists in the world is that *it's really true* that the kid is among the best young violinists in the world, and the highly competent and relatively objective experts figured that out.

This is important for assessing the atheist's debunking argument for atheism. Imagine a theist Victoria who is a pessimist-realist: she thinks the vast majority of people are theists for pretty stupid reasons. So when Karen tells Victoria about how God sometimes speaks to her, Victoria looks at Karen in something like the way we look at a 12-year-old who tells us that Taylor Swift is the greatest songwriter and singer in history: neither Karen nor the child knows what they are talking about. Hence, this pessimist-realist-theist Victoria is more than happy to admit that 98.8% of people who say that they have seen God, or felt his presence, or heard him talk to them, or similar things, are in self-deception even if they are very nice,

upstanding people who are kind to cute animals, give money to charity, and say all the right things about tolerance, respect, and other virtues. When it comes to their views about their religious experiences, they are just like the 12-year-old informing us of his or her careful analysis of centuries of musical composition. This Victoria theist is probably not too popular in her chosen house of worship. When the atheist goes on and on about how theists believe in God for stupid reasons, she just nods her head, in complete agreement.

Victoria does all this while maintaining her theism because she thinks that a *very small portion* of the people who claim to have had some contact with God are correct. In particular, she thinks this of some *but not all* of the people in these categories, which we have encountered before:

Mind-Blowing:	The "out of the blue" mind-blowing spiritual experiences which are quite rare, very unlike any normal experiences, and not brought about via disciplined meditation.
Meditation:	The experiences of those who have meditated for many years under the direction of a spiritual teacher and according to some well-established tradition.

This pessimist-realist attitude toward something one supports has nothing to do with religious experience or even religion. For comparison, take some political belief B of yours, one that is shared by many others. If you look around on the internet, you probably can find all sorts of really bad arguments for B. If you have never done this, it can be educational. These arguments might be so bad as to make you cringe. Suppose you are aware of 20 popular arguments in favor of B. You think 19 of them are no good. But you stick with your belief in B because you think argument #20 is excellent. If the one argument is good, you don't care about the lousy ones; they are irrelevant to whether #20 proves that B is true. Similarly, the pessimist-realist-theist Victoria maintains her belief in God's existence despite admitting that almost everyone who says "I have perceived God" is deluded, because she thinks that there is excellent evidence that a small group of people really did experience God. The fact that a great many others are deluded is irrelevant in the same way that arguments #1–19 were irrelevant.

In order to have a debunking argument that can support "God doesn't exist" instead of merely "A huge portion of people who say they have

experienced God are deluded," one must address *all* religious experience, and not merely a big portion of it. This is similar to the fact that in order to disprove B, one would have to cast doubt on arguments #1–20, not merely #1–19. Thus, in order to provide the scientific basis for a good argument against theism, the debunker would have to examine the cognitive science of religious belief and experience not merely among the ordinary riffraff of life—losers like me, and most likely you and the person sitting closest to you—but the people with the best claim to have experienced God. That's a large and complicated research project. As far as I know, virtually all the scientific research on religious experience does not target the "elite" religious experiences. It's a damn shame, but understandable given the difficulty of the task. In order to carry out the relevant research competently, the research team would need expertise in many areas: philosophy, psychology, experimental methods, meditation disciplines, and religion. That's a tall order. Summaries of some of the first serious attempts appear in *Transformations of Consciousness: Conventional and Contemplative Perspectives on* Development, edited by Ken Wilber, Jack Engler, and David Brown (Boston: New Science Library/Shambhala, 1986). Unfortunately, the authors are less skeptical than they should be, since they lack philosophical training. Even so, it's a good start.

Concluding Remarks

I have emphasized several propositions in this book. First, even though theism is bizarre compared to what we uncontroversially know about the universe, this in itself is not a reason to be wary of theism since we also know that the universe is filled with the bizarre. That's a point in favor of theism. Second, there is an impressive testimonial case for both theism and the separate idea that some people perceive God. But third, we should adjust our religious beliefs to the evidence. This latter claim has been implicit throughout the book: I have focused on the question "What does the evidence show about this matter?" over and over again, under the assumption that we should take it into account when figuring out what to think about religion. Fourth, the publically available nontestimonial evidence for theism is not good. Fifth, the publically available nontestimonial evidence against theism is not good. Sixth, many claims made in the service of agnosticism are false or at least dubious.

I want to wrap things up by repeating what I said near the beginning of Chap. 1:

Despite the marketing-friendly title, this book's purpose is *not* to argue for agnosticism, in whole or part. I realize that the plethora of arguments point in that direction. Instead, it has two purposes.

The primary purpose is to explain, mainly to atheists, why *many people who are relatively unbiased when it comes to religion, have significant scientific knowledge, have little respect for the traditional arguments for theism,*

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and are skeptical about the deliverances of the so-called spiritual experiences are often not atheists but agnostics. Atheists often think no such people exist. They are wrong about that.

The secondary purpose is to explain, mainly to theists, why philosophers are so skeptical of the strength of the traditional theistic arguments, the strength of the origins of religious testimony, and the deliverances of the so-called spiritual experiences. Theists are often unaware of the bases of such skepticism.

Hence, I've attempted to show that the philosophy of religion is surprising in an interesting way: many atheists and many theists are wrong in some of their key assessments.

Further Readings

There are many books and articles that include an epistemological investigation of central religious claims. In recent years I've published several works on the topic, available at bryanfrances.weebly.com.

The best places to go for advanced work regarding the strength of evidence pro and con regarding theism are probably the works of Alvin Plantinga (pro) and Graham Oppy (con). For about a million works on the topic, conveniently organized by subtopics, go here: http://philpapers.org/browse/philosophy-of-religion. For an introduction to many interesting topics in the philosophy of religion, see these works:

Robin Le Poidevin's *Agnosticism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2010).

Graham Oppy's *Atheism and Agnosticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2018).

William Rowe's Philosophy *of Religion: An Introduction*, Wadsworth/Thomson Learning (2001).

Here are two collections of sophisticated essays that examine most of the issues investigated in this book:

Trent Dougherty and Jerry Walls, eds. *Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God: The Plantinga Project*, New York: Oxford University Press (2018).

Trent Dougherty and Justin McBrayer, eds. *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, New York: Oxford University Press (2014).

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