Why I Am an Agnostic: A Skeptical Introduction to Philosophy of Religion

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1 author:

Jan Dejnožka
Union College
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Jan Dejnožka

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Introduction

This paper began as three emails I wrote in 2016–2017 to a Christian believer who was very kindly trying to help me believe. It now goes well beyond those emails.

The title is inspired by Bertrand Russell's (1957 / 1927) lecture, "Why I Am Not a Christian." I agree with most of his paper, and most of it is consistent with my agnosticism.

I've been a nonbeliever since age 17. I made it official on my graduation from high school. As I recall it, this was due to my reading Russell, Freud, and Nietzsche. Russell argues for atheism, and the others offer psychological explanations of why people believe in God. I soon learned that Tibetan Buddhists hold that all gods are merely our own mental projections. I was a happy atheist for about eight years. But I eventually found that agnosticism is a more temperate view. I also found I was missing the spiritual values that are basically found only in a religion. That, of course, is not a rational consideration. If there is no God, then that is that.

The simplest definition of "agnostic" is that an agnostic is one who neither affirms nor denies that God exists. Or better, an agnostic is one who neither believes nor disbelieves that God exists. For not everyone who affirms something actually believes it, and not everyone who denies something actually disbelieves it. But both of those definitions leave evidence, knowledge, and any rational considerations out of the definition; and many people wish the definition to include *why* one is an agnostic. And since we are concerned here with the rational case for or against God, and not just with a simple dictionary sort of definition, I shall include the "why" in my own definition. By "(rationally skeptical, or evidentiary) agnostic," then, I shall mean one who finds no reliable evidence either that God exists or that he does not, or at any rate not enough evidence to justify rational belief either way by the preponderance (the "more likely than not") standard of evidence. Or more simply, agnosticism is for me the rational suspension of belief either way. The term has other more or less similar definitions, but that is what I mean. The other main definition is 'one who believes it is not *known* whether God exists'. But my definition concerns evidence, not knowledge; and making knowledge the test would make the definition too narrow. For we can be rationally justified in believing or disbelieving something on the basis of evidence that falls far short of knowledge. To borrow some legal standards of evidence, our evidence might be 'more likely than not', or even 'clear and convincing', and thus rationally justify belief, but not be 'beyond all reasonable doubt'. And if we *know* something, it is beyond all reasonable doubt, though the converse might not be true. And a definition whose scope is too narrow (or, for that matter, too broad) fails to state what the thing is. For a definition that successfully states what T is will apply to all and only the things in the world that are T. That is, a successful definition of T will neither apply to things that are not T nor fail to apply to things that are T. And the definition of agnosticism in terms of knowledge wrongly applies to *non*-agnostics who rationally believe or disbelieve in God, but who believe that the rational case, though strong enough to justify belief or disbelief, falls short of knowledge.

Both atheists and agnostics are nonbelievers. But atheists believe that God does not exist, while agnostics have no belief either way. Agnostics neither believe nor disbelieve.

Someone once asked Bertrand Russell what he would say if he found himself at the pearly gates after death, and God asked him why he hadn't believed in him. Russell said he would say, "You should have provided us with more evidence." Russell was an atheist, but that could equally well be the reply of an agnostic. Willard Van Orman Quine could equivalently reply to God, "You left the theory that you exist underdetermined by the evidence."

I find spiritual value in all the major religions of the world, and in some of the minor ones too. I admire Ramakrishna for saying that all religions are equally valid paths to the divine (or at least to spiritual life), and then adding that most people will feel comfortable only in the religion in which they were born. It is logically consistent to find spiritual value in statements that we do

not know to be true, insofar as facts and values are not the same thing. In fact, if there is an objective ethics at all, I think it would be the same whether God exists or not. I am far from those believers who say that without God, there are no values. Quite the opposite, I agree with those who hold that God (if he exists) is good because the things he values and supports are good independently of whatever he might wish to be good, and that things cannot be good simply because he wills them. For otherwise anything he simply willed to be good would be good, even murder and theft, in virtue of the mere fact that he willed it to be good.

I see agnosticism as a form of humanist skepticism. Erasmus and Montaigne are said to have used skeptical arguments based on the ancient skeptics to help end the European religious wars of the believers by promoting toleration of rival views. (Of course, there were also political and economic issues in these wars.) I view that as humanist in the sense that they valued saving human lives through keeping the peace over killing people based on their religion. I agree that if God exists, then humanist values cannot compete with the values God affirms. Who could argue with the ethical pronouncements of someone who is omniscient and perfectly truthful? That even quashes ethical relativism and skepticism, *if* there is such a God and *if* he makes objective ethical pronouncements. But whether God exists and, if so, what his values are, are precisely what is in question in the first place, at least for agnostics. Nor am I an agnostic and a skeptic because I am a humanist; that too is to put the cart before the horse. Also, "humanist" is too specific. "Sentient (feeling) rational (intelligent) being" is a far deeper and better level of generality for ethics. Arguably, even just "sentient being" is the best level.

Can we choose our beliefs?

We cannot choose to believe anything. Belief is not the sort of thing we can choose. It is not an act that can be performed at will. You can put this to the test as follows. Try randomly choosing to believe anything you don't believe, or to disbelieve anything you do believe, by a simple act of will, in the same way that you can simply choose to raise your hand or walk down the street. Try walking down the street and choosing to believe that the people and stores you see are not really there, or that the restaurant you see is really a clothing store. The next time you write an email, try sincerely believing that your computer is a toadstool. Can you do it?

Not all mental things are acts that we can choose to do. In fact, many or most are not. Aristotle distinguishes actions from passions. Actions are the things we do. Passions are what happen to us. We are their passive recipient. All emotions are passions. Even weak or faint emotions are passions in Aristotle's technical sense that we are their passive recipient. But while all emotions are passions, not all passions are emotions. Passions include not only emotions but beliefs, as we have just seen, and pains and pleasures. (The pleasure of happiness is an emotion, but the pleasure of a sweet candy is not. Sweetness is not an emotion but a taste, and it is located in the mouth. We can eat candies all day without feeling any emotions.)

This may help you understand Aristotle's technical sense: in the purely physical world, actions are *causes*, and passions are *effects*. The same event can be both a cause of one thing and an effect of another thing. But causes and effects as such are categorially different. No cause, qua cause, is an effect. No effect, qua effect, is a cause. No passion is an action. No action is a

passion. Love and belief are just two instances of these general points. All beliefs and all emotions are passions. We cannot choose to love any of the people we love, including to love God. Nor can we choose to believe any of the things we believe, including to believe that God exists. Thus there is nothing special about love of, or belief in, God. Love and belief are simply not the kinds of things that can be chosen. Again, this is basic Aristotle. And it is common sense. Aristotle is not called a common sense philosopher for nothing.

We cannot choose our beliefs or emotions. We can only be aware of them, identify them, and describe them. And it is often not easy to do even that. We can only affect them indirectly, by choosing to look for further evidence, or by choosing to throw away a person's photo.

We cannot simply, directly choose to have any passions, but only actions. We *can* choose to *submit* to God, to *receive* God, or *request* to be saved, or to *let* Jesus into our hearts and lives if it pleases him to do so. But we cannot choose to *believe* that God exists, or to *love* him—not unless you change the ordinary meanings of those words into very different meanings—into words which describe actions instead of passions. You can even choose to act "as if" you believe in or love God, but that's not really believing or loving at all. In fact, if I am only acting *as if* I believe or love, then I do *not* believe or love. However well-intentioned or well-motivated I may be, perhaps by following the advice of some well-intentioned theologian, it is false acting. It is pretense. It may be well-meaning pretense, and it may lead to belief or love later. But it is still pretense. So much, then, for the twentieth century theology of "as if." For "as if" implies "not."

The Apostle Paul is right that believing that God exists is not the same as receiving God into your life. He says even the devils believe that God exists, and shudder. And I see no real difference between the word "receive" and words like "accept," "invite," or "submit to." If this turns on mere semantics, that is, niceties of word use, then it would seem more like needing a magic formula than a willing heart. It would seem like God would then be playing a game of "Simon says" with us: "You said 'receive', not 'submit', so I won't be saving you."

I find it disingenuous when religious people say that choosing to believe or love God is meant in an "action" sense of those words that is not the same as, and is indeed the opposite of, their ordinary "passion" sense. For by the very fact that they make the distinction between the ordinary passion sense and their own new action sense, they implicitly admit *both* that they are *aware* of the ordinary sense of the words "believe" and "love," and that *in* the ordinary sense of those words, no one *can* choose to believe in or love God. For if one *could* choose to believe or love in the ordinary sense of those words, then there would be no *need* to invent or distinguish a second, action sense for them. For then ordinary belief and love would already *be* belief and love in the sense of actions we could choose. Thus this attempt to escape my point admits everything I am saying. Even worse, *trying* to believe or love implies that we do *not* believe or love.

But even if we could choose our beliefs as easily as we can choose to wave our hand to a friend or walk across a street, this would do nothing for the problem of lack of evidence that God exists. And agnosticism concerns our evidence. It has nothing to do with love, and concerns belief only in the sense that agnostics rationally suspend belief *due to* lack of sufficient evidence.

The Bible is not evidence, but itself stands in need of evidence

I don't think the Bible is evidence for anything, much less authoritative about anything, except perhaps for ordinary historical facts. Ass far as any miracles or supernatural claims go, it itself stands in need of evidence. That is because the miracles and supernatural claims strike me as lacking or even going against scientific evidence. To me, a "revelation" is a claim that stands in need of evidence. Faith is not evidence or reason, and it would not be faith if it were.

I distinguish the miracle claims from the supernatural claims in that there can be empirical evidence for or against a miracle claim, but not for or against a supernatural claim, which by definition is a claim about something that exists beyond (what can be observed in) nature. A professor of mine told me a story of a swami in the 1950s who was convinced that after many years of meditation, he could walk on water. So he invited the press to come with all their cameras and watch him step off a boat. One photo caught him sliding halfway down into the water with a very surprised look on his face.

—The miracles violate the basic laws of physics

As a character in the *Castle* television show says, "The miracles violate the basic laws of physics." Miracles would be empirically observable. And *all* reported empirical observations, of miracles or not, are witness testimony. But the best and most reliable evidence we have is in and for science—centuries of careful, usually controlled and repeatably confirmable observations. And while there are flukes and anomalies we cannot explain yet, especially in quantum physics, science goes pretty flatly against the religious miracles. And by definition, any religion's supernatural claims concern what lies beyond the empirical world—whether there are miracles or not. Granted, most religions include detailed predictions about all the empirical observations we will be able to make after we die. But that hasn't happened yet to living scientists, and those are the only scientists we know. And if there ever are such postmortem observations, for all we know now, they may disconfirm religious claims, or at least be subject to various interpretations. To sum up, we have nothing to go on now, though we logically might later. Of course, there are living people who claim to have personal death and rebirth experiences. From the scientific point of view, these claims are best classified as anecdotal reports, and it is hard to see how they could be scientifically evaluated, both as to their contents and as to whether the person really died. (Some merely claim to have been near death and "seen through death's door.) They also seem to be largely determined by one's own religious culture. Christians often report seeing Jesus, Tibetan Buddhists often report reincarnations into new bodies, and so on. Science is not like that, or should not be. Christian and Buddhist scientists should be confirming the same results, if any. In fact, the best scientific theory seems to confirm the Tibetan view that all the gods, and the whole "after-death experience," are just our own mental projections, and largely culturally determined. Of course, it is logically possible that God is real and presents himself in many ways, and in the ways we can each best understand him. But the question is what evidence there could be for such a supernatural claim.

I pause to make a distinction. I believe in free will. Therefore I do not believe in causal determinism. I believe that physical laws are "if-then" laws, and are therefore consistent with my free choices. Therefore, to be logically consistent, I believe that *if* God exists and chooses to part

the seas or raise the dead, then that is not a violation of physical law, any more that my choosing to wave my hand or walk across the street violates physical law. Thus I cannot *define* miracles as 'violations of natural law'. At most, they can violate physical law 'as we understand it'. But that is just my point. Agnosticism is all about the evidence. And all the evidence we have is that the seas cannot be parted, and the dead cannot be raised, because all the evidence is for physical law as we understand it. Our evidence could be wrong, but it is the only evidence we have, as opposed to claims and stories, including claims and stories that these things were witnessed. And agnosticism is not about being right, but about being rational and following the evidence. For an agnostic, God could exist, but there is no reason to believe that he does. If God does exist, then the atheist is wrong by definition; but from the purely rational point of view, the agnostic may well have been right to suspend belief.

C. S. Lewis, in his book *Miracles*, takes the intellectually heroic view that real miracles were performed in pagan religions too. For example, the Roman Emperor Vespasian, who was worshipped as a god, may well have miraculously cured a blind person with his spit, much as Jesus had done. Talk about shooting the moon! Looking at medical science, I find Vespasian and Jesus equally nonmiraculous. That's not the only problem I found with Lewis's book. His chief foil is David Hume's skeptical view of miracles. I will simply claim without argument here that Hume is the better reasoner. You can read Lewis and Hume, and make up your own mind. At least there is no doubt as to their existence, though of course there can be reasonable difference as to the interpretation and merits of their reasoning. I am merely making my own opinion of Hume known for the record. And while Hume may have been an atheist, his skepticism also supports agnosticism.

—Were there any witnesses, or were they just written into the miracle stories?

We don't know who wrote the Gospels some forty years after Jesus died. We only know who the writers *said* they were. There is not much evidence independent of the Bible that Jesus even existed as a human being. I think the earliest written record that's written by a non-Christian, and in that sense independent of Christian claims, is a brief Roman note. And who knows what that note was based on? Possibly only on Christian allegations! But based on that note, it seems more likely than not that Jesus existed as a human being. For the note was by a very reliable historian, Tacitus. See Tacitus, *Annals*, book 15, ch. 44, ca. 116 A.D. See also Pliny the Younger, Lucian, and the Jewish historian Josephus. But I think all these Roman and Jewish "independent confirmations" could only have come from the Christian allegations made decades after the alleged events, so they seem neither independent nor confirmatory. They were probably not even intended as independent confirmations.

Some have said that the existence of Christ is based on eyewitness accounts by people of *holy, pure, and honest* nature, and this outweighs the vastly more numerous (indeed, many centuries) of merely secular eyewitness accounts on which physics is based. I myself would favor vastly more numerous accounts by scientifically trained observers who are looking to confirm the same results repeatedly in a wide variety of conditions (which is a good corrective for dishonesty; holiness and spiritual purity are not required), over untrained laypersons observing a one-time,

not to say unique, event, or at any rate only a few events, if you want to count all the miracles described in the *New Testament*. Science is one place where we do wish to "bean count" observations as much as we can, and as reliably as possible. But my question here is another one. What evidence is there that the Gospel witnesses are not themselves fictitious inventions of the writers of the Gospels many years after the alleged event? Compare the *Singular Travels, Campaigns and Adventures of Baron Munchausen* by R. E. Raspe and Others. The book begins with a testimony to the veracity of the Baron. The testimony is signed by three eyewitnesses of the Baron's adventures— Gulliver, Aladdin, and Sinbad. The testimony and its witnesses are humorous because everyone knows it's all false in advance. But that's the only difference, for all I can see. For all a Gospel basically says is, "This is the Gospel of John. 'I, John, testify that I saw these events'. Signed, John." I for one see no evidence here that John ever existed as an eyewitness, or that John is any more than 'the person wrote those words and called himself John'. And much like the travels of the honest and esteemed Baron, the Gospel of John is full of stories that fly in the face of science. "We, the undersigned, as true believers in the *profit*, do most solemnly affirm that all the adventures of our friend Baron Munchausen...are positive and simple facts. *And... so* do we hope all true believers will give him their full faith and credence. Gulliver [x] Sinbad [x] Aladdin [x]." *Singular Travels*, page xli. There could scarcely be a better lampoon of true belief by faith alone. Monty Python's *Life of Brian* is a comparative latecomer.

Also, looking at the four Gospel authors, how did such simple folk become such deep religious writers forty years later, or if you please, such religious geniuses? Matthew was a tax collector. We don't know what Mark did. Luke was a physician. (Few physicians are deep religious writers, not to say religious geniuses.) John was a fisherman. Perhaps they were all literate enough and knew the basics of their religion well enough to pass the bar mitzvah, if it were offered back then. (The history and origins of the bar mitzvah are somewhat unclear.) But every ordinary person would be expected to do that. And there are untutored and unrecognized geniuses. —But all four of the Gospel writers? That would be quite a coincidence—one might say as much of a miracle as the miracles themselves. In particular, Matthew and John, the tax collector and the fisherman, are very deep writers, whether you agree with them or not. It would be far easier to accept that these deep writers simply signed that they were, or were pretended or assumed by others to be, disciples. Many scholars accept today that if these four disciples ever existed, they were not the ones who wrote the Gospels. Thus there was no sudden jump from humble fisherman to genius writer. This issue of depth and intellect must not be confused with the issue of sudden religious conversion. Religious conversions are only of belief, and may have psychological benefits. But they are not known to increase your intelligence or raise your I.Q. No one converts to religion to boost their intelligence for a top score on their college admissions test, though many may be praying!

It is more usual to explain apparent miracles as either very unusual physics, or some sort of mass illusions or delusions, or fake stories, or tales that grew in the telling á la Monty Python. But all of those approaches assume there actually were events and witnesses. My approach assumes only writers, and not even that the writers were ordinary folk who suddenly became great religious thinkers. Again, that would be a miracle in itself.

—The Creation story versus geology—fossils and rocks

Almost by definition, the Creation is the first miracle. I'm treating it separately because there were no alleged human witnesses. No humans are alleged until the creation of Adam; and no witness accounts are attributed to Adam or Eve in the Bible. Any angelic witness would seem to be written into the story. Of course, if the story is true, it could have been passed on to later generations in any number of ways: Adam, Eve, angel X or Y, God, or even the talking serpent.

Fossils raise the issue of Creation versus Darwinian evolution, and I will just quickly say that insofar as those two theories conflict, the scientific evidence favors evolution on the face of it. But there is a second conflict, of the Creation with the age of fossils and rocks; and here rocks are harder to reconcile with Creationism than fossils, since some rocks are far older than fossils. Of course, it all depends on when the Creation is said to have taken place: before or after science says the rocks and fossils came into existence?

Was the world really created just a few human generations before Jesus, including all the fossils and rocks buried under the earth that look like they were there a lot longer? (Matthew says there were 28 generations from Abraham to Jesus, and we would to add a few more from Adam to Abraham.) Were the fossils and rocks then put there by God to trick the scientists and deceive them? See Philip Henry Gosse, *Omphalos* (1857). It's *logically* possible, but the scientific evidence is that the fossils and rocks are far older than the Bible can be reasonably understood as claiming the world to have been first created. I'm stating Gosse's point in my own way. And yes, you can interpret "seven days" as "really meaning" seven million years, or at least seven thousand, based on the text, "A thousand years is but a day in Thy sight." But that is just a cheap dodge. There is no evidence that the text is true unless there is evidence that God exists. Without evidence of God's existence, there is no evidence for "Thy sight" either. And there is no reason to think that whoever wrote the Creation story intended it to be understood in terms of that text. Indeed, if God *did* exist, he *could* have done it in seven days, or even in an instant. But the main thing is that this interpretation is fanciful. It looks like it is clutching at a straw. The Bible says "seven days," and it looks for all the world like it means seven ordinary days. So it looks like the Bible is stuck with seven days. —Did Moses hold up his hands to make the days longer?

Genesis actually says God created the world in six days, and rested on the seventh day. Some "young earth" Creationists estimate that God created the world 6,000 to 10,000 years ago. But if we read the Bible figuratively ("old earth" Creationism), the dating of the Creation could be anybody's guess. (On a *general* figurative reading of the Bible, what the Bible means about *anything* could be anybody's guess.) And it seems intellectually dishonest to shift to a figurative reading merely to avoid falsification of the Bible. I'm pretty sure that everyone understood the six days text as literal all along—that is, until the scientists came along. And then the believers pulled out the "A thousand years are as a day in Thy sight" text, like a rabbit out of a hat. And that only adds up to 6,000 years for the Creation. The scientific evidence is that some fossils are over three billion years old, and that some rocks are over four billion years old. (Ironically, we do not even *count* remains as fossils unless they are over 10,000 years old, though this is arbitrary.) And I cannot imagine why an all-knowing, all powerful God would need six whole days, or any seventh day of rest. Why not an instant? Indeed, some suggest the Creation was the Big Bang; but that was scarcely creation from nothing. It looks like pulling a different rabbit out of the hat.

—Mythical miracles are far more likely than actual miracles

The Bible looks mythological and unscientific. One can debate how similar or dissimilar all the gods of all the ancient religions are, and all their stories of death and resurrection from the Sumerian goddess Inanna on. (The other main Sumerian story of death and resurrection, which is in the epic of *Gilgamesh*, is a story of failed resurrection. Gilgamesh fails to resurrect his friend.) Stanley Noah Kramer's book *History Begins at Sumer* shows that the earliest Garden of Eden and Flood myths, among others, are from Sumeria. The very name "Adam" is from 'adama', which is Sumerian for clay or earth. And Sumeria is the land the ancient Hebrews came from. But we need not go back as early as Sumeria to debate the similarities and differences. In large part, Psalm 104 looks plagiarized almost word for word from the Egyptian monotheistic *Hymn to the Aton*, which was written about a century earlier than the psalm. There is a line by line comparison in James B. Pritchard's *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Pritchard 1958: 226–230).

But let us take a moment to look at Sumerian mythology anyway. I shall mix together two somewhat different stories, the original Sumerian story of the descent of the goddess Inanna to the underworld, and a later Akkadian version using Inanna's Akkadian name, Ishtar. I add two glosses of my own in square brackets to smooth the transition between the stories.

The sky goddess or "queen of heaven" "the pure Inanna," who is also goddess of fertility, descends, fully dressed, and with "the seven divine decrees...fastened at her side" (Campbell 1969: 416), to the lowest level of the underworld, ruled by her sister goddess Ereshkigal, in order to "raise up the dead" (Pritchard 1958: 81). Inanna is progressively divested of all her clothing at each of the seven gates to the underworld. Inanna arrives at the lowest level of the underworld completely naked. Ereshkigal orders that Inanna be locked up and every part of her body tortured; everything in the upper world of the living then becomes infertile (Pritchard 1958: 83). Ereskigal [then] sits on her throne [with Inanna before her], and the seven judges of the underworld pronounce the sentence of death on Inanna (Campbell 1969: 415):

> The sick woman was turned into a corpse,
> And the corpse was hung from a stake....
> After three days and three nights had passed, (Campbell 1969: 415)

her god-father hears what happened, and creates "two angels" to bring down to her "the food of life and the water of life" (Campbell 1969: 416–417). They sprinkle these on her. She revives and returns to the upper world of the living, and back to her rightful place in the sky as queen of heaven. On her way back up, she receives back everything she was divested of at each gate (Pritchard 1958: 84–85).

The Inanna story is different from the Jesus story in many ways. But myths are like the game of telephone, where the story changes with each telling, And is the Inanna story so totally different from the Jesus story? Some of the details are remarkably similar. So, could it be the historical origin, or at least one origin? There are also other gods who die and are reborn in Mideastern and Mediterranean religions. Note also that Odin was hung from a tree.

What does all this mean? For an agnostic, it devolves to what is more objectively reasonable to believe, (1) that the Jesus story is unique in being the only true story of death and resurrection, and all the other stories are simply false across the board, or (2) that the Jesus story is just as mythological and unscientific as they are, and many of its details even came from them?

Some theologians have held that the pagan religions are inventions of devils, and that all their stories' similarities to the stories in the Bible—similarities which they frankly admit exist—are devilish perversions meant to mock Jesus. But if anything, there is even less evidence for that than there is for the basic Christian story, and the story is just getting more and more fanciful. I am reminded of the planetary ellipses (loops of retrograde motion) in Ptolemy's theory of astronomy that the earth is the center of the universe, and the sun and planets revolve around the earth—fanciful additions without which that astronomy will not work. There may be better theologians than these, and we know there is a better astronomy, but I think the evidence is that all the death and resurrection stories are just human stories—as Nietzsche would say, "human, all too human." And on that view, all the "devilish perversion" ellipses vanish. That is to say, treating the story of Jesus as real is merely Ptolemaic, with the real miracles as the ellipses.

While these holidays are not in the Bible, and started centuries after the death of Jesus, the holiday of Christmas is basically the Saturnalia, when Romans gave each other gifts in December to celebrate the coming new year, plus the Roman Kalends. See Clement A. Miles, *Christmas Customs and Traditions*. Christmas was made a Christian holiday to make Romans feel more comfortable with accepting Christianity. And Easter is named after the old Germanic celebration of the goddess Eostre. It celebrates the rebirth of the world in spring, meaning the end of winter and the return of vegetation. See Gale R. Owen, *Rites and Religions of the Anglo-Saxons*, citing the Venerable Bede. Easter was started as a holiday to make the northern pagans feel more comfortable with moving over to Christianity. There is no evidence that Jesus was born on December 25 (December 25 in the Roman calendar). And looking to science, the alleged witness testimony that the miraculous birth of Jesus (Christmas) and his miraculous resurrection (Easter) happened at all are just allegations, not only of the events. but also of the testimony itself. And these allegations were first made in writing some forty years after the alleged events.

Of course, many Christians agree that Christmas is basically a Roman pagan holiday, and some Christians therefore do not celebrate it, while others consider it spiritually "transformed." Even I could agree that it was basically well-intentioned to help pagans feel more comfortable and familiar with Christianity. And Christians can consistently accept that the mere *name* "Easter" is pagan, and that it was well-intentioned to "transform" the Eostre celebration of the springtime "resurrection" of the plant world in northern Europe into the resurrection of Jesus. But once again, the question devolves to evidence for the basic Christian claims to begin with.

—Overview on the Bible as evidence

None of this goes against God, but only against the Bible as reliable evidence. The Bible might be a really bad account of a really good God who really exists. Some have claimed that the Bible is like a dirty window stained and distorted by human writers, but there really is a God we are seeing on the other side of the window, whom we might just barely make out without being

very sure of it. Paul says, “Now we see but dimly.” But a dimly seen God is just an allegation too. Even the Corinthians’ unknown god, whom Paul suggests may be God, is just an allegation.

Leo Tolstoy rejects the miracles, but accepts the Sermon on the Mount as godly enough for him to admit Jesus as God. I really love that heroic approach. But this too is allegation.

It’s really great when someone makes an archaeological discovery of an ancient battle described in the *Old Testament*. I can accept such evidence as confirming that, say, the battle of Jericho really took place, though not that any trumpet calls miraculously brought down the walls. But I feel it’s not quite the same thing when someone pronounces that a certain ancient house is where Jesus or someone else must have lived, because (1) the Bible seems to place the house there, and (2) there happens to be a house there, as opposed to a house down the street or a few blocks away. (“Look, there’s an old hill with old olive trees, and it’s the only one. This must be where Jesus prayed and was captured.”) I understand you could debate the details endlessly, and that pastors take their flocks to the Holy Land every year, and they are overwhelmed to see what they believe are the places certain things actually happened. As it happens, I was in Corinth on Navy liberty in 1982, and our tour group of sailors was shown a certain stone platform near the archaeological excavation of the city. We were told that this is where Paul stood when he spoke to the Corinthians. And I can accept that, because I accept Paul as a historical human being. I have no doubt that Paul existed. But he came later, and he says that his own knowledge of God is ‘purely of the spirit’, and has nothing to do with any human witnesses who came before him. I can also accept that he had all the visions he said he did. But I could not accept any miracles he recounts, or that his visions were real, however sincere he was; for science suggests otherwise.

If there were real miracles, I would agree with the Buddha that performing them “is not conducive to spiritual development.” In fact, he says they are a positive impediment, as people would chase after the miracle producer as opposed to self-improvement and spiritual truth. Also, I do not believe in magic for the same reason I do not believe in miracles. But if magic were real, I would agree with Evelyn Underhill that magic belongs to an inferior level of spiritual development, as opposed to mysticism, in her dry but wonderful book, *Mysticism* (1961: ch. 7). In fact, I would scarcely call magic a level of spiritual development at all, even if it were performed with good intent for good ends. If it were so performed, it would be a tool at best. And it is hard for me to see why miracles would not belong to the same inferior level, or even to tell the difference between miracles and magic. I think a difference cannot be discerned, not even in the ends they serve, nor in their source of power. C. S. Lewis credits the Roman emperors with miracles, and the concept of a good witch is clear enough. And I am just as agnostic about the existence of any sources of power, such as God or the Devil, as I am about miracles and magic themselves. Yes, there is all the spiritual difference between holy Moses holding up his hands to God to part the sea and save his people, and an evil sorcerer casting a spell to blight a crop. But that goes to ethical intent or impact, not to the miracle or magic as such. And there does not seem to be much difference at bottom. Both miracles and magic equally violate the laws of physics, and equally appear to be imaginary and superstitious on the scientific evidence.

Are there three realms, the physical, the mental, and the spiritual?

Some people posit a third realm, the spiritual, in addition to the mental realm and the physical realm, in order to explain religion as about things that are real, but neither physical (and thus not subject to the laws of physics) nor just in our minds, nor just in God's mind. This raises questions about what these classifications mean, and which things belong in which realm.

Are emotions like joy or despair spiritual but not mental? Is there anything spiritual that is not mental? On the face of it, is not the spiritual a sub-realm of the mental? One might wonder about spiritual bodies, though. What would a spiritual body be like? If I were a spiritual person, and if my existence is bodily, and I live and die as my body lives and dies, would my body be spiritual?

Two thoughts might help show the difficulties.

First, it is often held that God is in some sense "outside" space and time. If he is a spirit, that is a handy way to distinguish spirit from body and mind, if all bodies are in both space and time and all minds are in time. And the view is handy for explaining how God could "see" everything that ever has or will happen without disturbing our power of free choice. He does not even see them "before" they happen, since he is outside time altogether. The problem here is that if we are pure spirits after death, then we too go outside of time, then we become changeless, since change can only take place in time. We could not talk or even think, much less change what we see and here. And any reward or punishment we receive would be likewise timeless. There would be no walking about the heavenly city, no talking or feasting with Gods, since all those must occur in time.

Second, perhaps we will be spirits in a different sense than the sense God in which is a spirit, not just because we are finite and limited, but because we will have "spiritual bodies" and "spiritual minds," so that we can move about and think. Of course, there would still be no talking or feasting with God, because while *we* could walk, talk, and feast, *he* could not, if he were truly timeless. Of course, you could say he is so great that he can be both in time and outside of time, and that is how he could be both fully human on earth and fully God in heaven. But then we are back to whether he is so great he could create a rock so heavy he could not lift it, or make the number two both even and odd. But the problem I wish to raise about this second point is another one. Namely, it is hard to see what difference there could be between our having spiritual bodies, perhaps such that we could see and hear each other (or even smell and taste each other), and our being ghosts. It does not help that "ghost" is the old word for "spirit," and that English Christians used to speak of the Holy Ghost. But perhaps part of the problem is that "spirit," or at any rate "heavenly spirit," connotes something exalted, while "ghost" sounds like something you might find in a graveyard or crossroads at midnight. And that not substance but advocacy: using either eulogistic or dyslogistic terms to describe the same phenomenon. I'm reminded of how Plato makes Socrates recoil from thinking that the exalted theory of Forms could apply to something as lowly as mud. If everything has a Form, then mud has a Form. If "spirit" and "ghost" refer to the same things, then God and everyone in heaven is a ghost, simply meaning they are spirits. And perhaps we can walk, talk, and feast with God after all. I see no logical inconsistency in thinking that God has a spiritual body and a spiritual mind (and perhaps three of each, if God is three persons—talk of mysteries of the faith!), and yet can timelessly *perceive* all things in all places and at all times. Here we are attributing *temporal eternity* to God's spiritual body and mind, and *timeless eternity* only to his faculty of perception. There is no

logical problem with the concept of temporal eternity. It is logically possible that a burning candle (a stock example) always existed and always will.

I'm not sure I would do it, but it's very handy to distinguish all reality into the mental and the physical, just as René Descartes does, and make the spiritual a sub-realm of the mental. For not everything that is mental is especially spiritual in nature. If I wonder what time it is or who will win the game, I see nothing very spiritual about that. But if I give my last penny to the poor, that would be very spiritual of me. Here spirituality would not be a category or realm sui generis, but a set of qualities, such as being loving or being hateful. We could even simply define mental items as anything that is not physical, and the spiritual would be mental, if it is not physical. and if we must always have some kind of body, so that we can perceive and talk with others without using mental (or spiritual) telepathy, and if our spiritual body is going to last forever, then surely our minds can and will last forever too. One's spiritual mind could even be causally or ontologically dependent on one's spiritual body. One's mind, including all that is our spiritual life, could be a mere aspect of one's body. And our new spiritual bodies (eternal and not subject to corruption or decay), our new spiritual minds (all evil and unhappiness wiped away), and new (fully transformed) spiritual souls, would all be in Heaven together forever, perhaps exactly as intimately linked as they were in earthly life, with our soul still being an aspect or set of spiritual qualities of our mind, and our mind still being an aspect of our body, if that is what they are. And likewise for any other theories of mind and body. The mind and body could change from "material" to "spiritual" on death, yet their relationship essentially remain the same.

This also avoids puzzling questions like, Am I only my spirit? Am I not also my mind, and perhaps even also my body, in some sense? Is it merely a verbal convenience for me to say I am six feet tall, weigh 203 pounds, and have poor eyesight— or is it true? Surely those things are not true either of my mind or of my spirit. My mind is not six feet tall, and my spirit does not weigh 203 pounds. The deeper questions are, *am* I a mind or do I *have* a mind? *Am* I a spirit or do I *have* a spirit? *Am* I a body or do I *have* a body? If I am not any of them, could I do without any of them? Could my (transformed) body, mind, and spirit all go to Heaven and I myself be left behind? Here I have sympathy for P. F. Strawson's view that I am a person with two aspects, a body and a mind.

My concerns are philosophical. They are simplifying concerns, at least in part. But even if it's a *simpler, more elegant* theory to admit only a physical world with some mental aspects, some of which are (also) spiritual aspects, or to admit only two realms (the term is really categories), the mental and the physical, instead of three (with the spiritual realm as the third), for all that it could still be *true* that there are three distinct categories. Ockham's razor, "Do not multiply entities beyond (explanatory) necessity," is not always right. It is logically possible that more entities exist than are needed to explain something. I could draw a design plan to explain very simply and perfectly how a certain clock works, yet there might turn out to be twice as cogwheels in the watch than were really needed, because the clockmaker's design plan was not as simple and elegant as mine. Even in biology, some animals have parts or organs that are not really or no longer needed. (That favors Hume over Paley on the design argument for God.) And if your concerns are primarily Biblical, you would be right to think that there's a lot to be said for *interpreting* the *authors* as distinguishing three realms. That is, I imagine that from the Biblical point of view, it might be best to say that I *am* a spirit, and at least currently *have* a mind and a

body. Interestingly enough, that is very close to Strawson's theory, where his 'person' is our biblical 'spirit'. And Strawson was doing straight philosophy with no religious axe to grind. So we might say that the Bible receives some Strawsonian philosophical support on this point. Of course, that is no help to the supernatural claims.

Are we spirits, or do we *have* spirits? If we *are* spirits at bottom, then at bottom, do we neither think through the mind nor feel through the body? If we live forever as pure spirits, then do we undergo both a physical death and a mental death? If so, then we are not looking at the spiritual realm as a proper sub-part of the mental realm. Or is that precisely the one part of the mental realm that survives? Or can we do Strawson one better and say that we are fundamentally persons, and persons have not only bodies and minds, but also spirits? Am I one person who is a little trinity of body, mind, and spirit? Compare Aristotle's theory that a human being consists of vegetative, animal, and rational souls. That's not a very close comparison, but it is trinitarian in its metaphysical composition of the person. In the Christian trinity, perhaps you could make Jesus the body on earth, God the perceiving and willing mind, and the Holy Spirit the spirit. But the whole trinity is supposed to be spirit.

Many Bible texts suggest that the authors believe there are three realms: the physical, the mental, and the spiritual. If so, then I would be pointing out to them that there are at least two simpler, more elegant ways to classify the same realms. Actually there are three, since we could take any one of the three realms as basic, with the other two realms being mere sub-categories or aspects of it. The third way would be to reduce *physical* appearances to aspects of the *mental*, so that there is only the category of *mental* items, which would include both spiritual items and appearances that seem to be of physical things, as its two main proper sub-categories. That is actually a view I think we can attribute to Leibniz, implicitly if not explicitly. Again, our "super-Strawson" makes persons basic with those three realms as aspects.

These are some of the main categorial or classificatory problems in the metaphysics of body and mind. As Gustav Bergman once said, the history of philosophy is a graveyard of ontologies. For they were found to be problematic on further thought. (He used the words "metaphysics" and "ontology" synonymously, which is a bit unusual.) And as Shakespeare's Hamlet says, "There are more things between Heaven and Earth... than are dreamt of in your philosophy." But if we want to understand the world and our place in it, we need to do our best. And we need evidence for the 'more things than are dreamt of', and even for the things that *are* dreamt of. These are hard questions, and it might be fair to say that no one really knows the answers in science or philosophy. And in religion, that is part and parcel of what may be called my deeper and, in a word, metaphysical agnosticism.

Was Jesus both fully human and fully God?—Was he ever actually tempted by anything?

Was Jesus ever sexually tempted by a specific, actual woman? Or did he simply or miraculously "happen" to find no woman sexually attractive? I suggest that no matter what the explanation, if he was never actually sexually tempted, then the whole thesis that he was fully human is fake. What ordinary adult actual human being is never sexually attempted? And if they are not, I want to say there is something wrong with them.

Probably the best interpretation for a believer would be that yes, he was tempted in all the ways ordinary people are, and felt all the desires we do. For otherwise, he was not fully human like the rest of us. Curiously, the last religious writer I read on this agreed with me, and I think he cited Paul.

Now, temptation is a passion. We are its passive recipient. No one chooses their temptations, any more than they choose their loves or their beliefs. Since we cannot choose whether or not we have them, we are not responsible for having them, considered in themselves, but only for our actions concerning them. This Aristotelian view has a Biblical correlate in Jesus's view that it is not what comes into us, but what goes out of us, that we are responsible for. But curiously, that seems to reverse Jesus's view that the bad guys are outwardly like beautiful sepulchers, yet within are all rotted bones and flesh, and to reverse his view that if we commit adultery only in our heart, or inwardly, then we just are guilty and responsible as if we actually committed adultery. An odd consequence of that view would be that then we might as well go ahead and commit all the adulteries we wish, since we would be no *more* guilty or responsible if we do. But the main point is that Jesus is just wrong. For we cannot choose our temptations or other feelings, and can only choose our behaviors (which may of course *indirectly* affect our feelings, as when we take down a photo of a person we desire).

God is full of joy, and wants or needs nothing outside himself. He is totally self-sufficient. As a purely logical point, therefore, surely he could not be tempted by anything. He already has everything worth having. Whether he was here on earth in a human body should have nothing to do with it. And that could be the best explanation of why Jesus was never tempted: he could see that the temptations were worthless at bottom. But it is not a great explanation. We fully human ordinary people are tempted by and succumb to temptations all the time that we know are worthless. They are just so tempting! Typically they give at least some pleasure. The Buddha was tempted by everything! But the real problem with the explanation is that it makes God quite the opposite of human. Again, how could he be both fully God and fully human?

In the monotheistic family tree, Judaism and Islam have no such problems. Their God really is just one God, not just in not being a trinity of three persons, but also in not being both fully human and fully divine. And there is no reason for a fully divine God to be tempted.

How could Jesus have been fully God while he was here?

If Jesus was given "power over all things" *after* the resurrection, then did he *not* have that power over all things *before* that time? In what sense, then, was he fully God, if he was not *omnipotent* while he was here on earth? Indeed, how could he have been *omniscient* if he "marveled" at the faith of the centurion who told him just to give the order and his servant would be healed? (Jesus: "I didn't see that coming.") Note the paradox, not to say contradiction, involved in saying that one and the same person both knew, qua fully God, and did not know, qua fully human, one and the same thing. Either he knew or he didn't. I'm arguing here against the mainstream view that Jesus was a single person, both fully human and fully God, while he was here on earth. If he was *only* human, or *only* God, these problems would not arise. And since Judaism and Islam see God as *only* God, and Jesus as only a holy man at best, these problems do

not arise in those religions. But unfortunately, in mainstream Christianity the "only human" and "only God" options are heretical. And for the mainstream, the situation is even worse than that.

If Jesus was both fully human and fully God, even that makes him not really one of us

Every ordinary human is fully human in the species sense, but no ordinary human is or can *also* be fully God. Indeed, I suggest that being *fully* human entails being *only* human. You cannot be fully human, fully Everyman, fully (essentially, totally stuck) in the human condition, if you are fully God too. If I am right, then if Jesus (or anyone else) is fully God, then simply in virtue of that very fact, he (or that person) is logically precluded from being fully human. If I may spell it out, to be *fully* human is to be *completel*y human, that is, human *through and through*. If I am fully an apple, I cannot also be a stone even in part, much less fully a stone. As Lewis Carroll would say, if I give you my only cake, I give you *all* the cake I have (and vice versa). If a phenomenal spot is a fully red color patch in a visual field, then it cannot also be a fully green color patch. If I am right, then even if Jesus actually did feel every human temptation, he was *still* not fully human, because he was *also* fully God. And, to spell it out, because he was also God, he was fully able to resist all of his temptations in his behavior. What human could do that?

I am not arguing here that God does not exist, but only that the mainstream Christian theological account of Jesus as both fully God and fully human is intellectually incoherent. We can still admit God the way Judaism and Islam do. Or we can offer another theological account of Jesus. The two obvious alternative options are to hold either that he was only human or only God. Those options were deemed heretical by the early church, but at least they are logically self-consistent, while the mainstream view is not. And either of them logically might be true. The fourth alternative in our mix-and-match matrix would be to hold that he was *neither* human nor God. The matrix of possible views has only four options: either he was both fully God and fully human, or neither, or one, or the other. Quintum non datur. But perhaps we could hold that he had *parts* of both natures, or had *aspects* of both, in some sort of hybrid composition. For example, some hold that Jesus progressively became more and more aware that he was God, and eventually attained full God-consciousness, or full conscious identity with God, only upon his death and resurrection. That would make him somewhat like a Hindu guru who eventually attains divine awareness. (Some say that Jesus visited India and / or is buried in Kashmir, but I think there is no real evidence of that, and it is not to the point in any case.) Or we can suspend theology on the point, which would be an agnosticism about the nature of Jesus. That might be wisest, since according to the Bible itself, we understand so little about what God is, or even what God is like. Isn't his nature supposed to be a mystery? That might be the best answer of all to the mind-body-spirit theologico-metaphysical interpretation problem. But having a mysterious nature does not help with the evidence problem. To echo the old TV ad, how can you tell if there are witches, or if there is a witch right in front of you, if you don't know what they are, or even what they look like?

Is there a spiritual world beyond what we perceive in this life?

What real or noumenal realm, if any, lies hidden beyond the "veil of appearances" that is composed of our perceptions of the world? What happens if the "veil is parted" when we die?

What is the evidence for the existence of such a hidden realm? Or do we just take the existence of the spiritual world (if that is what lies behind the veil) on faith?

At least since Immanuel Kant, it has been popular to say that the veil of appearances is, virtually by definition, an impenetrable barrier that we cannot perceptually or intellectually go beyond, precisely because it consists of all our perceptions and thoughts. But, just as Kant did, we can try to find "transcendental arguments," that is, arguments that transcend the barrier, in the sense that they argue that in order for the phenomenal world of appearances to be the way it is, there must be a real or noumenal world behind it that has such-and-such features. In simplest terms, Kant argued that there must be a real world of things in themselves, including physical bodies subject to physical law, ourselves as limited agent selves, and God, but that we can know no more than that bare structure (Kant 1929 / 1787).

Today we might replace Kant's talk of synthetic *a priori* transcendental deductions about the real world with talk of inference to the best explanation, that is, inference to postulations or posits of the entities that best explain or account for the phenomenal appearances we are presented with. Such inferences ought to be more reasonable than not, or at least more reasonable than any other possible accounts; but they need not be *a priori*. In Kant's case, such posits would include bodies in themselves to explain the physical order as it is presented to us, agent selves in themselves to account for the appearances that we sometimes make free choices that we are morally responsible for, and God in himself to explain our feeling that this must be a morally just world. Since people do not get what they deserve in this life, Kant feels there must be an afterlife where we finally get the rewards and punishments (or both) that we deserve, and that this must be administered by a just God (as opposed to, say, an impartial law of karma).

That's a very crude and simplistic picture of Kant, and of how we might improve on him. I will make a few comments and adjustments.

First, who is to judge whether the phenomenal world does not continue after we die? Even after we die, would there not be a question what, if anything, lies behind the veil of our *after-death* perceptions and thoughts? Compare Wittgenstein's question in the *Tractatus Logico-Philososphicus*, which I will pose in my own way: Is any philosophical question solved if I survive my bodily death, or even if I live forever? For example, if I find that I continue to exist as a conscious person after my bodily death, I might well remain an agnostic, if my evidence that God exists is no better than it is now. The only question that would be answered is whether I survive bodily death. And nothing follows, from that mere fact as such, about whether God exists. "I survived bodily death, therefore God exists" is no more valid an argument than "Snow is white, therefore grass is green."

Second, there are at least two rather different ways to understand the veil of appearances; and one way makes the veil more penetrable than the other. For there are two main schools of phenomenology, the Continental school, and British empiricism.

On British empiricism, we are directly given or presented with merely phenomenal items often called sense-impressions or sense-data. These include two-dimensional red spots in our visual field, sounds in our auditory field, pains and pleasures presented introspectively, and

so on. Usually they are understood as temporary, nonrecurrent, private to the observer, and mental, though Moore and Russell argued that they are mind-independent. Ordinary minds and bodies are understood as *bundles or constructions of* these data.

On Continental phenomenology, we are directly given or presented with ordinary minds and bodies, and not thousands or millions of fleeting, nonrecurrent sense-data. Sense-data are understood as *abstractions from* presentations of ordinary minds and bodies, except perhaps for visual after-images and the like.

Thus the veils are very different. On British empiricism, even ordinary minds and bodies are mere bundles or constructions; Russell calls them logical fictions. But on Continental phenomenology, we are directly given ordinary minds and bodies, and thus, so to speak, we are already halfway there to real or noumenal minds and bodies in themselves. Of course, there is no literal or exact numerical sense to the term "halfway." That is just a casual expression.

But in a deeper sense, the difference between the two veils makes no difference as to their impenetrability. In fact, Kant himself was a Continental phenomenologist. (He is commonly regarded as the first one, but I see this as rooted in the common-sense realism of Aristotle.) For Kant, we primarily see houses and trees, not phenomenal square images and tree-shaped images. And yet for him the veil or barrier was just as impenetrable as it is for British empiricists, and he needed his transcendental arguments just as much.

In Kant's view, our "ordinary consciousness" presents us with an "empirical realism" of perceived houses and trees. Within ordinary consciousness, we make an ordinary distinction between real houses and trees and "*mere* appearances" such as dreamed houses and trees. He analyzes our perception of houses and trees into two basic components, percepts and concepts. He says "concepts without percepts are empty, and percepts without concepts are blind." That we cannot know things in themselves behind the veil of ordinary consciousness, but can at most offer transcendental arguments to prove the most general features of the most general categories of things in themselves, such as that bodies in themselves are subject to causal laws, is his "transcendental idealism," which might be better called transcendental unknowability of the concrete or specific features of things in themselves.

I have a transcendental argument that I think succeeds in penetrating the veil by justifying our claim to have at least minimal evidence for our most detailed scientific theories about things in themselves. It is based on my theory of evidence. My theory of evidence is that at bottom, evidence is *objective, rational seeming to be the case*. The theory is basically due to Carneades, and to his modern interpreter and exponent, Roderick M. Chisholm (1966). In simplest terms, many (but not all) of the appearances we are given are *also* given as objectively, rationally seeming to be the case, that is to say, as veridical, while others seem to be, at least in the light of our appearances taken as a whole, illusory (that is, correct that the thing is there, but mistaken as to what properties the thing has) or even delusory (that is, the thing is not there). This applies both to our sense-perceptions and to our intellectual thoughts, as in logic and mathematics. It can objectively, rationally seem at the time of cognition that the laptop on my desk is veridical, that the pencil that is half immersed in water and looks bent is illusory, and the pink rat I see after ten drinks is delusory. Similarly for proofs in logic or mathematics. They can objectively, rationally seem to be veridical, illusory, or delusional. Similarly also for the existence of logical or mathematical entities, depending on the objective, rational plausibility of

our metaphysical and our ontological theories. (Metaphysics is the study of what categories or kinds of things there are; ontology is the study of what it is to exist or be real.)

My transcendental argument is simply that it objectively, rationally seems to be the case that there are bodies and minds that exist even if they do not have the properties I perceive them as having, or even I do not perceive them at all, for example rocks on the far side of the Moon. But it does not objectively, rationally seem to me that God exists, based on the arguments given in this paper. I see ordinary bodies and people every day, but not God. It is logically possible that there are people who veridically see God everywhere and in everything. But I do not, and I question whether they really do, based on the arguments given in this paper. Perhaps they do have evidence, but I do not have their evidence, nor do I think it would be reliable.

The price I pay for success in penetrating the veil of appearances is that it is a weak penetration. I do not and cannot *know* what lies behind veil. I only have *minimal evidence*, based on what objectively, rationally seems to me to be the base, and on my self-evident synthetic *a priori* thesis that an objective, rational seeming to be the case is at least minimal evidence that the thing is the case. I only wish to point out that there is a world of difference between having minimal evidence and having no evidence whatsoever. In this modest way, for ordinary minds and bodies, though not for God, my theory of evidence takes me beyond both the greater veil of British empiricism and the lesser veil of Continental phenomenology.

The problem of the veil was not a problem for Aristotle or Aquinas. For them, things in themselves are given, at least to some degree, *through* our experience. For them, our experience is not a barrier between us and the world, but precisely the vehicle by which we learn about the world. Anthony Kenny (1980: 35) explains this beautifully in the case of Aquinas. And my theory of evidence justifies their common-sense realism as much as it can be justified. But I depart sharply from Aquinas on God; I will discuss Aquinas' arguments for God shortly.

Logic and ethics are logically independent of God—does that limit God's power?

Is God so powerful he could create a rock too heavy for him to lift? Is he so powerful that he could choose to ignore his own omniscient knowledge while he was here in a human body, so that he could honestly marvel at the centurion? Could he choose to forget things and still be all-knowing? Can he be unaware of the things he knows? We rightly say Smith knows that 2 + 2 = 4 even when Smith is asleep and not thinking about it. But God is supposed to know everything at all times, and never sleep (even though he rested on the seventh day).

Actually, this is not a good argument against God's existence. I accept the familiar answer that God can do all *possible* things; it is just that by definition, logical impossibilities are *not* possible things. Grammatically, our language allows us to *say*, "God can do what is logically impossible." But the *meaning or sense* that expresses is intellectually incoherent. Grammatically, we can say, "The color green is salty and is a prime number." We can say all sorts of things that are logically impossible.

Even if God's existence is in some sense necessary (could it be contingent or dependent on anything outside God?), God's existence is logically independent of the existence of logical necessity. That is because the nature of logical necessity is logically independent of the

existence of God. So to speak, God is not so powerful that he can break or change the laws of logic. If God were greater than logic, then he could create a rock so heavy that he could not lift it. he could square the circle, he could make 1 + 1 = 3, and so on. But it logically cannot be done. And this is not really a limitation on God's power. The truths of logic are just empty tautologies. They do not really say anything, except perhaps about what might be called logical form, in the case of formal truths. Thus when we say that anything is possible to God, we mean just that: he can do anything that is (logically) possible. He cannot do anything that is logically impossible, but there logically cannot be any logical impossibilities anyway. I think this is more or less the mainstream theological view, since the alternative does not really make any sense.

The existence of God is also logically independent of the existence of ethics or morality. So to speak, God is not so powerful that he can break or change the nature of goodness or evil. If God were greater than ethics or morality, then he could make murder good, compassion evil, and so on. In short, he could make good into evil or evil into good by a mere act of his will, and anything could be good, and anything could be evil. Nothing would be really good or evil except insofar as he simply wills it to be so. But that is intellectually incoherent and absurd. It cannot be done. And this is not really a limitation on God's power. In fact, I think logical independence of goodness from God is just an instance of the logical independence of logic from God. For the basic principles of ethics are, broadly speaking, logical truths. They might not be formal truths, but they are synthetic *a priori*. We ought to do good. We ought not to do evil. These look like empty tautologies on their face. Even if they are not formal truths, they are true simply in virtue of the meanings of their words. They give no real guidance in life, any more than the knowledge that circles are not squares, or 1 + 1 = 2. The only way God can make good things evil, or evil things good, is the same way we mortals can: by changing the consequences so that something that used to cause the greatest happiness for the greatest number of sentient beings now causes the greatest pain, or vice versa. That is, God and we can change utilitarian values. But utilitarian values can neither be the only values nor the most basic values. This is on pain of vicious infinite regress of consequences. Why is Act A good? Because it produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number. But why is happiness good? Because it produces the greatest pleasure for the greatest number? But why is pleasure good? Because it produces the greatest what? Or is it an intrinsic good?

If there are intrinsic goods and evils, such as that compassion is good and murder is evil, then the plain consequence is that we have the same moral obligations whether God exists or not. For intrinsic goods and evils cannot change. For things have their nonformal intrinsic features synthetic *a priori*. It is therefore wrong to say that if God does not exist, then anything goes. Quite the opposite, no moral obligation changes in the least. It is not logically possible for an intrinsic moral truth to change, any more that it is logically possible that 1 + 1 = 3.

If we hypothetically assume for the sake of the argument, or merely posit without evidence, that God exists, and that he is omnipotent, omniscient, and infinitely good, I do think it logically follows that we morally ought to do whatever he says. In fact, we can leave out omnipotence out of it and base this simply on his being omniscient and infinitely good. (I credit C. S. Lewis for this point.) This is simply because God would perfectly know what is good, and being perfectly good, would tell us what is good, if he told us anything. This too is just an empty tautology, if not a formal truth, then a synthetic *a priori* truth that is true in virtue of the

meanings of its words. Either way, ethical truth is logically independent of whether God exists, and regardless of whether some so-called "holy book" really conveys his word.

Therefore, I hold that giving ourselves to God is the *logical* thing to do, *if* he exists, and perhaps even if he only *might* exist. Note how far we are from Pascal's Wager. Pascal's Wager is based on probabilities. My view is based on logical necessities. I am not "gaming God" here. But that is not due to any virtue of mine. It is just another empty tautology.

To sum up, God cannot change a single synthetic *a priori* truth, either in logic or in ethics, any more than he can change a single analytic *a priori* truth. This is intuitively satisfying because by definition, a synthetic *a priori* truth is just an *a priori* truth that is not analytic, that is, that cannot be reduced to a formal *a priori* truth by applying definitions (replacing defined terms with defining terms or vice versa), or by replacing synonyms with synonyms. And that is also why these points describe no real limitations on God's power. For tautologies are empty truths that describe nothing real. The most they describe is the logical or *a priori* structure of the world.

When we really want help, and would want to look to God for help, it would be with the practical applications of ethics. One way to start would be with my practical ethics paper, "Personal Relationships: Emotions and Responsibilities" (2016). The ethical guidance it offers is logically independent of whether God exists. If my theory of emotions and my theory of continuums of values are true, they would be true *a priori*. But by the same token, the guidance on offer there is broadly speaking tautological, and is aimed more at understanding what is involved in making practical decisions in general, than at actually making any specific ones.

The main arguments that God exists

The literature on these arguments is old, huge, deep, and often very subtle. What follows is only a brief overview. It is widely understood that these arguments are inconclusive. They are also controversial, and they have their proponents. But in the end, our very inability to agree on them only seems to make them more uncertain.

—The ontological argument

There are many versions of the ontological argument. I was told once that someone had listed 93 versions.

The basic idea is that it is God's very nature to exist; his existence is part of, or essential to, who he is. If you please, he exists simply by definition of who he is. A main version of the argument is this. 1. God may be defined as the being who has all perfections, or who is supremely perfect. But (2) he would be less perfect if he did not exist. Therefore (3) he exists, and must exist by his very definition.

I agree with Kant's, Frege's, and Russell's criticism of this argument. I will state the criticism in my own way. Existence is not a property that things can have, much less a property that is a perfection in any sense. For when we define or describe a thing, we are saying *what* it is, not *that* it is. But when we say it exists, we are doing the opposite: we are saying *that* it is, not

what it is. Therefore it is a logical category mistake to make a thing's existence part of its definition. And not only is the definition logically ill-formed, but it also begs the question of whether the thing exists. Thus the ontological argument is both logically incoherent and question-begging. Therefore it cannot prove that God exists. That the argument can be stated in grammatically correct ordinary language is just one more example of ordinary language that is grammatically correct, but asserts something that is logically impossible because it commits a category mistake. Another example is, "The number two was happy to be green."

The core intuitive idea behind the ontological argument seems plausible enough. It is that God's existence cannot depend, or be contingent on, anything other than God himself. God must be in some sense self-sustaining, or be in some sense his own reason for existing. And I agree that we would and could not admit anything as God whose existence depends on anything outside itself. To use an analogy for purposes of illumination, as opposed to argument, God is more like a rock, which can exist even if nothing else exists in the physical world, than he is like the flame of a lighted candle, whose existence causally depends on many things external to it, such as there being oxygen in the air, there not being too much wind, the candle's not being dropped in a pail of water, and so on. But I think the core intuitive idea suffers the same two defects as does its articulation in a definition or a statement of the nature of God. Namely, it is categorially confused, and it begs the question. The core idea would be better expressed as, *if* God exists, then his existence cannot depend on anything other than himself. But that "if" makes it impossible to argue that God must exist because the very idea of him demands it.

The ontological argument does not appear to survive examination. But it does not follow from that this that God does not exist, nor even that he is in not some sense the cause of his own being. It follows only that we cannot *prove by argument* that he exists by appealing to the fact that (*if* he exists,) his existence depends solely on himself.

—The argument from personal experience

We come now to the opposite extreme in arguing that God exists. The ontological argument was a purely logical, purely *a priori* argument based on a certain definition of God's nature. The argument from personal experience is based purely on experience. The argument is very simple: I see (cognize, experience) God, therefore (I know) he exists. The form of the argument is no different from: I see an apple on the tree, therefore there is an apple on the tree. Assuming that the argument is valid (that is, that the conclusion logically follows from the premiss), the question is whether the premiss is true, that is, whether the experience is veridical, as opposed to illusory or delusory. I have no doubt that many visionaries have the experience and sincerely believe it is veridical. The question is whether we have any objective, rational evidence that it is veridical.

Thus it should come as no surprise that the main objection is that the argument begs the question of whether the experience is veridical, illusory, or delusory. I may see an apple in a dream or a hallucination. Qualitatively, the experience may be exactly the same as if I were seeing a real apple while awake. I simply cannot tell from the experience alone, no matter how convincing it may be or seem at the time.

Another main objection is that only those who have had the experience are personally entitled to infer the conclusion. The rest of us have to rely on the testimony of those who claim to have had the experience.

A third objection is that the visionaries and mystics have very different experiences, or at least report their experiences very differently. Some say they saw Jesus. Others say they saw Krishna, or any of hundreds of other gods. Some even say they have experienced several gods. Ramakrishna claims to have experienced several main gods as equally valid personalizations of the divine, and also to have experienced the deeper impersonal divine being of which they are personalizations. His analogy seems easy to understand. He compares the impersonal divine being to water. All the personal gods are like sculptures of ice. If they are melted down, they return to being the water they were made. And he claims to have experienced, so to speak, not just all the main religious ice sculptures, but also the water that they are made of. I see no reason why his experience or testimony would be less reliable or convincing than that of those who claim only to have experienced one version of God. and if his experience is veridical, it would in effect be confirming and making sense of all the many different experiences of God claimed in all the major religions, and also of many mystical experiences of the impersonal divine. In effect, Ramakrishna is claiming to have personally experienced the truth of Shankara's metaphysics, which admits the many personal gods of the many religions as real, but also as personifications or personal aspects of a deeper and more real impersonal divine being.

There are three reasons why I like Hinduism as the most ecumenical of religions. First, there is its most popular scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*, which affirms many approaches to God as equally valid. Second, there is the testimony of personal experience of Ramakrishna. Third, there is the metaphysical religious ecumenicism of Shankara.

I remain an agnostic because I still see no reliable evidence for or against the existence of God. If we take the "Ramakrishna approach," it seems to me that there are too many experiences across too many religions and too many times for them all to be dismissed as fake or dishonest. But sincerity is not the question. The question is whether there is any independent objective reason to believe that these experiences are veridical.

It seems to me that there is no reason to prefer any of the following three options over the other two: either the experiences are (1) veridical, or (2) illusory, or (3) delusory, where the illusion or delusion is rooted in the human condition, or may we say in our neuroscience. So to speak, we cannot step outside or go beyond the veil of the human condition to see. I can ask others if they see the same stone or tree that I do, or to verify my scientific experiment in their laboratory. But if fifty people verify that they all see the Virgin Mary floating above a garden, the question becomes whether we can step outside their collective experience to see if they really are seeing Mary or are lying, or are fictitious witnesses, or are completely sincere but experiencing a mass illusion or delusion. Unlike real sightings of the Virgin Mary, there is no doubt that people sometimes experience mass illusions or delusions. Just look at all the people convinced by "fake news" supported by doctored photos today! Optical illusions can even be photographed without faking the photos. Here my theory of seeming applies not only to our individual perceptions and thoughts, but to the role of coherence with our collective experience over time. And it seems to me, in my technical sense of objective, rational seeming, that seeing the Virgin Mary floating in the air does not cohere with our best and most reliable collective experience, which is scientific

experience, and which is described by the basic laws of physics. Perhaps we have all heard of Charles Mackay's 1841 book, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, advertised today as "an early study of crowd psychology."

Nietzsche and Freud offer atheistic psychological explanations of why we believe in God, as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Their explanations apply to both individual and mass experiences of God. Their explanations might be too negative or morbid, or more neutrally, outdated and unscientific. But psychological explanations in general need not be. Also, we are after truth regardless of whether it may turn out to be negative or morbid. But at bottom, our evidence for the truth, whether it is that God exists behind the veil of appearances, where the appearances include our personal experiences as well as our best logical reasoning. That said, it is logically consistent to say that God exists, but that some particular experience of him is illusory or delusory. I exist, but some sightings of me might be sightings of someone who looks like me. Deserts have real oases, and we sometimes do perceive them; but not all perceptions of oases are veridical, especially not to travellers who are deliriously thirsting for water. And even some texts in the Bible say that no one has seen God.

Atheists may apply Ockham's razor at this point, and conclude that the "delusion" explanation is best because it assumes the least. Ockham says that entities ought not to be multiplied beyond necessity. That means that if we have two (or here, three) equally plausible explanations, then we ought to prefer the one that assumes or posits the fewest entities. But I do not think that we are best described as seeking the simplest or most elegant explanation here. That may be appropriate for physics. But here we are simply seeking the truth, or what corresponds to reality, regardless of whether the reality is simple or complex. Also, I will omit the cite, but there is a companion maxim that entities should not be simplified beyond necessity. So to speak, we want a "Goldilocks" theory that is neither too simple nor too complex in its description of the world, but just right. We want a theory that affirms all and only the entities that there are.

I myself accept a "full dimension" theory of explanation on which, if possible, nothing should be left unexplained. And if there were a dimension of my perception or understanding of the world which could only be explained as my seeing God in all things (and not just as especially beautiful, shining, heavenly sunsets that feel like they are bathing us in their glow), then I would agree that my own full dimension theory would demand that we admit God as existing. But I do not have that dimension of perception or understanding, or at any rate not very often. And when I do, I question whether it is veridical. And that devolves to whether I have any objective, rational evidence for its being veridical. And looking at the present paper, I do not think I do, or that anyone does.

Likewise for an "inference to the best explanation" argument that God exists, or an unargued appeal simply to our best intuitive sense of why the world is as it is, or is at all. If there is no evidence, then there can be no best explanation of the evidence either, since there is no evidence *to* explain. Nor can there be any objective, rational sense of why the world is as it is, or is at all, if there is and can be no evidence.

I am not happy with the popular idea that we cannot see God if we are blinded by our sins, which are like a cloud of dust obscuring our spiritual view. I agree that our selfishness can blind us to many things, including the merits or suffering of others. But these are ordinary

empirical things. And it comes to the empirical existence of ordinary stones, trees, or people walking by, my sins have nothing to do with whether I can see that they exist. Whether I have been sinful or not, I can see them just as well. Scientists can be full of personal failings and still do, so to speak, blameless science.

We could abandon the "dust cloud of blinding sins" theory, and say that God *chooses* not to be seen by sinners, or *chooses* to blind our perception of spiritual things if we have sinned, this is just a fanciful addition to what needs to be shown in the first place, namely, that God exists at all. In other words, this popular "blinded by our sins" idea simply begs the question. If God does not exist, then he is not there to be veridically seen, and therefore neither can our sight of him be blinded.

Both explanations, that our sins automatically, karmically blind us to God, or that God blinds our vision of him if we have sinned, also have the defect that they make the existence of God empirically unverifiable by personal experience. For if we do not see God and do not seem to have sinned, then it is postulated without evidence that we must have some secret sin, perhaps that is hidden even from ourselves. The doctrine of the original sin of Adam and Eve is a variation on this theme, and just as lacking in evidence. In fact, it is morally worse. I can be blamed for my own sins that I refuse to admit, and even for my refusing to admit them. But I do not see how anyone today can be blamed for sins committed by people who died thousands of years ago. And if God chooses to punish us for sins committed thousands of years ago, even as a way of punishing Adam and Eve by punishing their descendants, I am obliged to think that God is not "the best and wisest of persons" (see below). For we all know that it is wrong to blame or punish the Germans who were born after the Nazi holocaust that was committed in World War 2, since they did not do it and could not have done it. And for many of them, that was only one or two generations ago. Thus if God is punishing us for the original sin of Adam and Eve, that implies we are better and wiser than he, because we know we should not do that to the Germans.

—The "five ways" of Aquinas—five arguments based on general features of experience

Perhaps the most plausible arguments for God are those that are based on general features of experience, but rely on logical reasoning to infer from our experience that there must be some sort of primary, first, or most real entity. I have never heard of anyone saying it, but these arguments would qualify as transcendental arguments in Kant's sense. (Kant found these particular arguments problematic, so he would implicitly regard them as *failed* transcendental arguments.) The most famous are the five offered by Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas was well aware that the arguments prove at most only that there is *some* sort of primary entity, not that it is a personal God. That the primary entity is God would have to be an article of faith. But it would be a big step forward just to show that there is *some* primary entity. In fact, William James says that such a primary entity could only be mental (or spiritual) in nature, since all physical bodies have causes, so that no body can be the First Cause. My criticism of James is that you could say that ordinary minds have causes too. We come from our parents, cats from theirs, and so on.

The principle of sufficient reason asserts that every entity has some sort of cause or reason for being. This principle seems intrinsically plausible. Thus on my theory of seeming, it

objectively, rationally seems to be the case. Thus it seems plausible that ordinary bodies and minds alike have causes or reasons for being, and the question here is whether there is *any* entity of *any* kind which is its *own* cause or reason for being.

Aquinas' "five ways" to prove God are all basically similar. They are all vicious infinite regress arguments which conclude that there must be some first member in a series, in order for the series members that we know of to exist. That is, each claims that there is some absurdity in supposing that the series of items it describes can go back infinitely, and infer that there must be some first member of the series. I shall discuss infinite regresses in general first, and then discuss Aquinas' arguments in particular.

I think that some infinite regress arguments are clearly sound, that is, describe a regress that is clearly vicious, so that a first member of the series must exist. For example, Aristotle argues that there must be something we know to be true without proof (or argument), on pain of otherwise having a vicious infinite regress of proofs (arguments). For if all knowledge were by proof, then if we prove conclusion A from premiss B, then we must also prove B as a conclusion from premiss C, and so on ad infinitum. But then we would never prove A. This is not just a matter of finite time. The problem would exist even if we had infinite time to do infinitely many proofs. We really need a starting point, a premiss P which we know to be true without proving it by inferring it from any prior premiss P1.

I think that other infinite series are clearly benign too, meaning that they involve no paradox or other problem. Consider the series of natural numbers, and the series of even integers. They each have a first member, but they need (and can have) no last member. Thus if you invert them, the inverted series need (and can have) no first member. And if we use the inverted series of natural numbers to count moments back into the past, it seems that we would be counting no first moment of time. That is, no First Moment is required to explain the existence of the present moment, and is seemingly even impossible. Of course, no moment explains the existence of the next anyway, but that is beside the point. This is just an illustration of a benign series. I omit discussion of the verificationist theory that time did or could not exist until observable things that observably change started to exist. Verificationism cannot even verify itself. The verificationist principle, "The meaning of a statement is the method of its (empirical or logical) verification," is neither empirically nor logically verifiable. Carnap called it a "meaning postulate." But as Russell says, "Postulation has all the advantage of theft over honest toil."

Thus there are some clearly vicious regresses, and there are also some clearly benign ones. But what about Aquinas' Five Ways? Where is their place on the spectrum? Are they at the benign end, the vicious end, or, so to speak, somewhere in between?

Aquinas' five arguments are respectively that there must be a First Mover, a First Cause, a First Being, a Most Perfect Being, and a First Reason or Purpose. I discuss the first three of these arguments in my "Zeno's Paradoxes and the Cosmological Argument" (1989), and my discussion would apply to the last two arguments just as well. There are differences among the arguments, and often very subtle ones of interpretation. But I think the differences will make no difference for the present paper. For the differences would make no difference for the Zeno paper either, since it only discusses the general concept of the regresses. Thus I will discuss just one argument as an example.

Let's take the First Cause argument. Now, it is a general feature of the world that all

ordinary events have causes. Say we observe that event 1 is caused by event 2. But if all events have causes, then event 2 is caused by some event 3, and so on. But, the argument says, there must be some "First Cause" that has no cause other than itself, on pain of otherwise having a vicious infinite regress of causes, so that event 1 would not have been caused in the first place. But event 1 *was* caused, therefore there must have been a First Cause. That is the argument. The question is, would an infinite regress of causes be vicious or benign? Why couldn't or wouldn't event 1exist even if its series of causal antecedents goes infinitely back into the past, so that the series of causes always existed?

Would a series of causes going back into the infinite past be more like Aristotle's vicious infinite regress of proofs? Or would it be more like a benign infinite series of numbers? We could even place the series of causes into one-one correspondence with the inverted series of natural numbers. In fact, we were already doing that with first event 1, earlier event 2, and so on.

This looks like an intuitive judgment call. And if we can't even tell if a series of causes is more *like* a clearly vicious regress, or more *like* a clearly benign regress, then the First Cause argument is simply unreliable.

Different philosophers have different logical intuitions about this. Obviously, *Aquinas* considers the regress vicious and the argument sound, or he would not have offered it. But Russell (1957 / 1927) finds the regress benign, and evens find the notion of a First Cause logically confused. Russell says there cannot even be a cause of the world considered as a whole. Russell compares that to thinking that there can be a mother of the human race. Russell is correct that this is a category confusion, and that only individuals can have mothers. But the newspaper claim that there *is* a single "mother of the human race," where the scientists claim only that all human *individuals* can trace their DNA back to a single mother long ago, may confuse the reader. Therefore I offer my own analogy: saying the whole world has a cause is like saying the whole series of positive integers is even or odd. Only individual integers can be even or odd.

Russell cites Kant, who finds the Five Ways worthless. In effect, Kant lumps them all together as "the Cosmological Proof," and derides its pulling the rabbit of God out of the hat of a contingent event as a "transcendental illusion." He does this implicitly in the Fourth Antinomy of Reason, and explicitly in "The Impossibility of a Cosmological Proof of the Existence of God" (Kant 1929 / 1787: 415–421, 507–514; page 511 mentions the infinite regress of causes). He says the cosmological argument presupposes the ontological argument, that is, the existence of God.

Without any consensus among some of the best and most logical thinkers who ever lived on whether the Five Ways of Aquinas are sound, each group of thinkers having perhaps an equally plausible rival logical intuition, once again it looks like (and seems, in my technical sense of seeming) that all such regress arguments for the existence of God are intellectually unreliable.

Things are even worse than that. I find a technical flaw in the first three arguments of Aquinas (my 1989). Again, my paper is general enough that the flaw would occur in the other two arguments as well. You can read the paper on ResearchGate; I shall not repeat it here. The only point I would add now is that the flaw remains even if we admit infinitesimals, since there is no smallest infinitesimal. That can be seen as early as the work of Cantor.

But even if my Zeno paper is wrong, and there is no technical flaw at all in any of the Five Ways, it would remain an intuitive judgment call whether their regresses are vicious or benign. And it certainly seems logically self-consistent to say that the world always was, and that

all the series of causes, movers, ontological dependences, or whatever, logically can go back infinitely in time, so that the regresses are benign.

Of course, that these chains of items *logically can* go back infinitely in time does not imply that they *actually do.* There logically can be a First Cause, Prime Mover, or First Being, even if all five of Aquinas' arguments are unsound. But if the answer is logically contingent—if there logically could be *either* an infinite series or a first member— then these arguments fail. They fail to give us any *reason* to believe that there is a First Cause, Prime Mover, or First Being. And, so to speak, they give us even less reason to believe there is any entity that is in any sense its own reason for being.

—The argument from design, also called the teleological argument

This differs from the teleological argument of Aquinas in that no infinite regress is involved. We are simply looking at nature as a whole and finding that it is so beautifully and perfectly ordered and harmonious, surely it could only have been created by God; therefore God exists. The argument is most famously associated with William Paley. His argument is really an analogical argument. He compares nature to a finely designed watch, and argues that just as the watch surely could only have been designed by a maker, so nature surely could have only been designed by a maker.

For criticism, I will merely refer the reader to David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Briefly, nature is not as beautiful or perfect as one might think—far from it. Much of nature is better described as cruel, uncaring, wasteful, haphazard, and destructive. If we were to argue for a maker, the maker would seem to be cruel, uncaring, wasteful, haphazard, and destructive, but also to have some good points.

A twentieth century philosophy paper (John Wisdom, "Gods" (1944) casts doubt on the design argument by comparing nature to a possibly tended garden. I shall give Anthony Flew's 1971 version in my own way. A certain patch of land in the jungle sort of looks like a garden, but it also sort of looks untended, or perhaps even never tended. Is there then an invisible gardener no one can see? Or was there ever a gardener? It's hard to say. This too is an argument by analogy, but in this case for skepticism about God.

—The argument from the perfect holiness of Jesus

The argument is that only God could be as perfect and holy as Jesus. But how likely is it that any person is perfect? How do we know the Bible has not simply mythologized Jesus as perfect? And what evidence is there that the alleged witnesses of his perfection ever existed?

Russell (1957 / 1927) offers an amusing rebuttal of this argument. Russell says that if Jesus is God, then he should at least be "the best and wisest of men." But, Russell argues, Jesus does not even clear that low hurdle. Jesus appears to make a false prediction that the world would end soon after his death (some theologians pile fancy upon fancy to explain that, along the lines of "A thousand years are but a day in thy sight"), and often seems angry or vindictive, crying woe

to people who disagree with him. Jesus even cursed a fig tree for bearing no fruit out of season. Russell says, "This is a very curious story, because it was not the right time of year for figs, and you really could not blame the tree." I find it odd to assign moral blame to trees at all. And if even trees are to be judged by their fruits, then what about Jesus himself? Is not his church the fruit of his work? But the main point is that many ordinary people would seem better and wiser than that, not to mention Buddhists or Jainists. I can hardly imagine the Buddha cursing a tree, overturning the tables of money changers, or crying "Woe!" to anyone, for any reason. The Buddha was compassionate to everyone. It is an open question whether a pure, holy, divine anger is even a coherent concept. There are several books on divine anger; Micka (1943) is a classic.

One could add that Christian ethics does not seem to be the best and wisest of ethics. Many find sexism, acceptance of slavery, and simplistic rules about things like marriage and divorce in the Bible. Not all of that can be found in the words of Jesus himself. But he did lay out some quite absolute rules about marriage and divorce. I myself think divorce can be for the best even if there is no adultery, the one exception that Jesus allows. On the whole, Jesus sometimes seems to make simplistic judgments that show little regard for human context or different possible circumstances. There is much golden wheat, like the Sermon on the Mount. But there is also much chaff. Of course, even some Christians see the Bible as the work of many different human writers. Thus they can accept the "dirty picture" interpretation of the Bible, that God is being imperfectly revealed by limited and imperfect human writers. And I wholly grant that all these things can be debated. There are some egalitarian texts. Slavery is not praised as good, but seen as comparatively unimportant next to being saved for eternal life, and even, I think, as a great suffering in this life that increases the slave's eternal reward. Hegel says:

> Equality was a principle with the early Christians; the slave was the brother of his owner; humility, the principle of not elevating one's self above anyone else, the sense of one's own unworthiness, was the first law of a Christian.... (Hegel 1948 / 1795–1796: 88)

But for agnostics, the question is what reason or evidence is there here that Jesus is God? And if the ethical evidence is mixed, and the picture is unclear, then it is not clear that Jesus was even the best and wisest of men.

There's a lot of very deep and great religious or spiritual thinking in the Gospels. But that almost goes against their historical veracity. It sounds like nothing a simple fisherman or tax collector could come up with. In fact, it would practically be another miracle if they became great religious thinkers after Jesus died. And here too, which is more likely—miracle or mythology? I wholly grant that *someone* had to write those great spiritual writings. But was it the simple folk who had such trouble grasping the simplest things *before* Jesus died? It seems very unlikely.

I do find some likelihood that Jesus existed, in that there is a single unique and consistently deep religious personality or style in the sayings attributed to Jesus. There may well have been a historical man who was a deep religious thinker, very saintly in character, and a true believer in God. Such people come along from time to time, deeply impress the people around them, and often found new religions. But there is also a more or less progressive religio-political transition in the Gospels as well. They begin with the Christians's being Jews with a great new

rabbi, and end with the Christian's sharply separating themselves from the Jews and portraying them Christ-killers. The consequences were devastating to Jewish communities for two thousand years. My point is that this transition of view has been argued by scholars to be a mythologizing of an actual historical progression of a sect within a one religion into a new split-off religion.

The question of the unity of Jesus's sayings is part of the question of the unity of the four Gospels. I would have thought that four people who were constantly on the road with Jesus for three years, and who all witnessed exactly the same events, would have told more consistent stories. And I feel that believers are too quick to gloss over the differences. But then my own family lived together for sixteen years, and I'm sure we remember some things very differently. Still, the Gospels read more like differently patched-together accounts based on earlier stories, rather than like eyewitness reports themselves. If so, the "telephone game" was doubtless played, so that the big fish that Daddy caught but gave away to a hungry person soon became a real whopper. And as many have noted, these were uncritical, not to say superstitious, times.

Before I leave this section, I wish to examine Jesus's views on divorce and adultery in more detail. Does he really have the best and wisest of views on those topics?

Jesus says, "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery" (*Matthew* 19:9). Strictly speaking, this applies only to men who divorce women, not to women who divorce men, and it applies only to men who divorce women and then remarry. That is, strictly speaking this does not apply to men who divorce but do not remarry, and it does not apply to women at all, Women get no guidance here. We can impose assumptions on the text. We can assume that men and women are to be treated equally, and that the main thing is that you are not supposed to divorce at all. We can debate the merits of those assumptions scripturally and ethically. But the assumptions are irrelevant to the point I am about to make. Namely a woman can torture her husband and beat him to an inch of his life. She can cripple him or cut off his arms and legs and make him a paraplegic. She can take away all his goods and money, starve him, lock him in a prison cell, and emotionally abuse him day and night. She can use a flame thrower on him, or use nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons against him, She can do all of the above at once! But if she is not *sexually* immoral—if sex has nothing to do with it—then the message of Jesus is that if he divorces her and remarries, *he* is committing adultery. And the message only gets worse if you add in the assumptions. For then the message applies to more people, and in more situations. For in fact it is almost always men who beat women; and many people who divorce do not remarry. This is not an ethical view I would expect from "the best and wisest of men." In fact, it strikes me as savage and barbaric. Mere sexual immorality pales in comparison. Of course, we can and should weigh and balance, say, a light slap on the wrist against a very cruel and devastating rape. But Jesus does not even consider that. There is no weighing and balancing here. My conclusion is that Jesus himself is giving immoral or at least unbelievably bad advice. Even if Jesus would condemn every form of cruelty and abuse as wrong and evil, that very condemnation only make his advice more cruel and abusive. For he is still telling us we cannot, or is at least not positively telling us we can, take the remedy of divorcing the cruel abuser and starting a new life with someone in a new and hopefully better marriage. If we do that, he says we are "adulterers."

Why the emphasis on sexual immorality? Why is it the only stated justification for divorce and remarriage? I feel it is Jesus who cannot be justified here. And I feel no obligation to

justify a text I believe cannot be justified, in a Bible whose metaphysical claims I have no real evidence for. But there are at least three explanations of the text I can think of.

The first explanation is based on a fairly common view. Namely, Jesus is giving patriarchal advice to a patriarchal society in a basically patriarchal world. That could be true. We could debate the merits of claiming that Jesus is patriarchal or that he is egalitarian. But even if it is true that he is patriarchal, that is irrelevant here. For his ethical view is wrong regardless. No matter how patriarchal or how egalitarian you make his statement, some class of people is still being considered adulterous if they divorce and remarry. And ironically, if you interpret his view in an egalitarian way, it only makes his view worse. His denouncement of the remedy would only apply to more people.

The second explanation is that Jesus places a special, not to say unique, weight on trust or faith. We are justified through faith. Judas is the greatest sinner because he betrayed Jesus. And sexual immorality violates the promise of faithfulness that is typically part of marriage. It violates your spouse's trust in you to keep your promise. The problem is that when you marry, you typically also promise to love, honor, and help your spouse. And nonsexual cruelty violates that promise. And personally, I think that other things being equal, meaning in the ordinary course of life, beating your spouse to an inch of death is a far greater violation of the marriage than kissing someone else for five minutes.

The third explanation is intended as an improvement of the second. Here we read the text narrowly. We read it as Jesus's giving specific advice in reply to a specific question. Here the reason for making sexual immorality the sole ground for calling someone who divorces and remarries an adulterer is that adultery was the only topic under discussion in the first place. Jesus was asked a question about adultery, and he very relevantly answered it. On a deep spiritual level, he might even be right. If your spouse promises to be faithful and commits adultery against you, and if you then divorce and remarry, then you are not an adulterer too. For even in ordinary contract law, it is a general rule that if the other person breaches the contract, then the contract is null and void, and you are released of your own obligations. In effect, Jesus is saying that if your spouse violates the marriage agreement's specific provision of faithfulness, then if you divorce and remarry, that specific provision is null and void with respect to you. I think that this is the best explanation of the three, and the best reading of the text. It is the only reading that makes any real sense to me. Note also that it is only people who divorce *and remarry* who are called adulterous. If you divorce, never remarry, and abstain from sex altogether, you can scarcely be an adulterer. In fact, I am not sure how you could be an adulterer if you remarry into a pure, sexless marriage. Would you then be a purely spiritual adulterer?

In support of the third explanation, it is sometimes said to be a good rule in general to interpret a text on the lowest or most specific level possible. A graduate student in theology once told me that this is the best way to interpret the Bible in particular, But I myself would amend that rule, both in general and with respect to the Bible in particular. I would say that the best interpretation is neither too general nor too specific, but just right. That is, the best interpretation is the Goldilocks interpretation. I might add that it is another rule of biblical interpretation that since Jesus wants everyone to be saved, his messages should be understood as simple ones that most people can understand. But the third explanation does not fit this rule very well. Here the Pharisees are trying to trip him up with technical questions of legality, and these are the questions

he is answering. I think the "simplicity" rule of interpretation is best restricted to his messages on salvation, and his message on divorce is not a message on salvation. But even the messages on salvation can be hard to understand. Perhaps the best answer is that the Bible presents God as a mystery, and no one is expected to understand everything the Bible says.

The problem with the third explanation is the very generality of the general rule about contracts, and the very specificity of Jesus's advice on divorce and remarriage. Namely, Jesus leave us with the definite impression that the only justification for divorce, not to mention divorce and remarriage, is sexual immorality. Just look at the whole history of Christian interpretation of this text. That is basically just what every Christian thinks Jesus is really telling us. Just look online. But maybe they are all bad interpreters!

To save Jesus here, I think we could only appeal to the fact that he does not answer every specific question, and that the record is probably incomplete. But in light of all the divorces, Jesus would have done well to make clear that although God says "I hate divorce" (*Malachi* 2:16), even God would sometimes approve of divorce as being for the best (that is, as being the least of evils) even if there was no sexual immorality. For surely God hates nonsexual immorality too. But then Jesus leaves us no reason to think that he thinks nonsexual immorality could ever justify divorce or remarriage.

Of course, in this argument from the perfectly holiness of Jesus, you can substitute for Jesus the perfectly holy religious figure of your choice.

—The argument from universal or nearly universal belief

The argument goes something like this: About 90% of humans believe that there is some sort of god. Therefore there is reason to believe that there is some sort of god. I have several replies. First, the near-unanimity largely vanishes when we look at what is specifically believed. The gods people believe in differ widely both in characteristics and in number of gods. This is even more so if we include the old pagan religions, as I think we should. Second, beliefs logically can be nonrational. Objective seemings are one thing, beliefs quite another. Beliefs can be irrational or even absurd. Third, it is a logical fallacy to infer from the mere popularity of a belief that it must be true. Supposedly most people once believed the earth is flat. Fourth, there is no huge buildup of probable evidence over billions of believers, if no one person's belief has any rational evidence in the first place. Fifth, we all have a common human nature which tends to mythologize if unschooled in science and philosophy, and that would seem a more likely explanation of the near-universality of the belief. I should say unschooled in philosophy, since scientists are notoriously unable to accept the basic scientific problems with religion, or even to do competent philosophy of science, unless they have been trained in philosophy too. To state the obvious, philosophy of science is not science but philosophy, and the same goes for philosophy of religion. Sixth, very few philosophers even discuss this argument, because all or nearly all philosophers, not to mention all or nearly all people, understand that mere belief as such has no evidential weight. But I will not press the sixth point, since it too might fallaciously argue from what most philosophers find to be the case to what actually is the case. So strike the sixth point (I seem even to be committing an apophasis now), and consider only the first five.

We would have a far better argument if we argued that it *objectively seems* to about 90% of humans that there is some sort of god, therefore there is at least minimal evidence to believe that there is some sort of god. But I question the truth of the premiss, especially in the light of the evident physical impossibility, or almost total unlikelihood of, the miracles, and the problematic nature of all the *other* arguments for the existence of God. And again, there is really no unanimity on which gods exist and how many. There are only some large pluralities at best, and they conflict with each other, as well as divide further into smaller and smaller sub-groups.

—Kant's justice argument

I have already somewhat discussed this. In simplest terms, Kant's argument is that for the world to be just, there must be a God who administers justice in an after-life, since there is not enough justice in this life. My objections are mainly the usual ones.

First, the argument begs the question on whether the world is just. And unfortunately, all the evidence we have is that the world is *not* a totally just place.

Second, this is an argument that justice will exist in the after-life. We have no evidence for or against that claim in this life.

Third, even if justice is served in the next life, the vehicle could be an impersonal law of karma, as opposed to a personal God.

Fourth, the idea of an eternal reward or punishment seems actually very unjust. For we are finite limited beings in this life, and all our moral acts, good or evil, are finite and limited. If the world comes to an end at some point, then even the consequences of our acts over time will be finite and limited. But even a finite reward or punishment in the after-life would become infinite over infinite time. Thus all rewards and punishments would not only be unjust, but they would be infinitely unjust. The only mathematical way out I can see is that an infinitesimal reward or punishment could be finite over infinite time. But what kind of reward or punishment is that? It would be negligible, not to say infinitesimal, at every moment. See my (2012 / 1992: 51–53).

It might be replied that God is infinitely sensitive, and infinitely suffers our slightest sins, and infinitely delights in our slightest good deeds. My rejoinders would be these.

First, there is no evidence for or against this supernatural claim.

Second, therefore such infinite impacts on God could not be objectively, reasonably foreseeable to us. Thus they could not have been rationally intended by us.

Third, if God is omnipotent, omniscient, and infinitely loving, he can see all his suffering coming in advance, can get over it easily in the blink of an eye if he wants to, and would lovingly understand that we had no evidence that our actions would have such infinite impacts on anyone, and that this was not reasonably foreseeable to us.

Fourth, to sum up, it is weird and wonderful how one can debate back and forth like this about supernatural claims, since no evidence is possible. Here there can be nothing like "a sordid fact to slay a beautiful theory," except perhaps after death. Many things have had to wait for confirmation or disconfirmation in science too. But those waits are a logically contingent matter, while in religion the waits seem to be a priori and in principle, due to the nature of

supernatural claims. Even in any after-life, supernatural claims will continue to be about what is beyond our (in this case postmortem) empirical experiences.

Confidence ratings of the evidence for various holy persons' existence

In the twentieth century, the Roman Catholic church admitted that many of the saints on its calendar of saints' days could not be confirmed as existing, or were even clearly fictitious. Some of their saints had their skeletons or bodies claimed as holy relics in several European cities at the same time. The Roman Catholic church even had three Popes at the same time as God's chosen holy successor to Peter at one point. This was in medieval times, but it suggests how little religious claims are based on, or even concerned with, truth. Of course, it is logically consistent to affirm that God exists and Jesus saved us, and that admitting all these saints and popes was, broadly speaking, human error. But once again, the question devolves to evidence. All these saints supposedly performed miracles too, and this was accepted as true, often for over a thousand years. What makes the even older miracles of Jesus any more credible?

Based on my understanding of the historical evidence, here are my ratings of the probability that various alleged holy persons really existed:

Ratings Chart

Abraham 5% - sounds too mythological to me, but could be a mythologized spiritual leader
Moses 50% - sounds half mythological, half historical; he could be a mythologized leader
Jesus 90–99% - no contemporary records, but there are later Roman cites; the sayings show unity
Muhammad 99.99% - contemporary accounts of well-known events; claimed only to be a man
Buddha 99.99% a specific prince in a specific royal dynasty that was recorded
Lao Tzu 50% - the writings could be a collection over the centuries, but do show unity of vision
Krishna 1% - sounds too mythological; only his "incarnations" are claimed to be earthly beings
Sri C(h)aitanya 99.99% - 1486–1534, believed by his followers to be an incarnation of Krishna
Dalai Lama 100% - I heard him talk in person at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor

God himself still might or might not exist. But in the absence of reliable evidence either way, my confidence rating in God is 50%, per Bayes' Theorem for when there is no evidence. And if "Krishna," for example, is just another name for God, then Krishna's rating is the same 50%. Of course, we cannot really "bean count" the evidence here.

Bayes' Theorem belongs to the uninterpreted probability calculus, and that belongs to mathematics. To that extent, there is nothing wrong with it. In fact, just as its name indicates, it is a provable theorem. But so long as it remains uninterpreted, it really says nothing. It is just an empty tautology of mathematics. Interpreting it, that is, finding applications of it to the real world, is a problem. Of course, if there is no evidence at all, then it is equally 50% probable whether one god, ten gods, or a hundred gods exist. In the absence of any evidence, it is just as probable that the Christian God exists as that the Christian God and Zeus both exist. For Bayes' Theorem is not about real probabilities, but only about mathematical probabilities. And when we offer interpretations or applications of pure logic or mathematics, it is always good food in, good

food out—or garbage in, garbage out.

My "objective seeming" theory of probability is a theory of real probability. It is an interpretation of the probability calculus. It is beyond the scope of this paper. The best published discussion is a note in the second edition of my book, *Bertrand Russell on Modality and Logical Relevance* (2015). It has origins in Roderick M. Chisholm and the ancient Carneades. On my theory, a 50% probability means that there is evidence in the form of objective, rational seemings to be the case going equally both ways. Unfortunately, this paper indicates otherwise. I think the evidence seems better that God does not exist; but I find it too close to make a judgment call.

Is there a core of truth behind the myth of religion?

It is not logically necessary that every myth or fiction have a core of truth. It is logically possible, and I think often actually the case, that some myths are simply false. But in philosophy, we try to "explain away the appearances" if we can, meaning explain plausibly why many people have believed otherwise. The following fourteen proposed cores of truth or reality behind religion can be held to apply to all or most of the religions of the world. They can be and often are proposed individually. But they can also be proposed in any mix-and-match grouping, all the way up to all four. The proposed cores also often overlap. And other plausible cores may always be just around the corner.

1. Psychological projection of God as the core of truth behind religion.

Nietzsche, Freud, and Tibetan Buddhists find the explanation of why so many believe in God in our psychology. We mentally project good, kind, wise, loving Gods onto the world because of our own fears and insecurities about death happening and justice not happening. Our very deep and real need for hope, security, and consolation is why Karl Marx called religion "the opium of the people." Or we might more kindly call religion wishful thinking, and a consolation in our time of need. But the theory of mental projection is different from just that. It specifically proposes or posits the existence of projection as an unconscious mechanism to explain why people actually believe that God exists. The theory became popular among psychologists in the 19th century, if not earlier. Typically, we are held to project an idealized version of ourselves onto the cosmos. But it is enough simply to personalize or personify the cosmos as God, or to project into reality a God who created the cosmos. I am sympathetic to this line of explanation. I think there is much to it. Of course, people would have to be unaware that they are doing that, since if they knew they were doing it, they would know it was fake, or at least not known to correspond to reality. Which God or gods are projected is usually held to be due to our cultural upbringing. Christians will project Jesus into reality, Muslims will project Allah, and so on. And some people may project more strongly than others. A curious version of this is Tibetan Buddhism, where the deities are frankly admitted to be only fake mental projections, but are worshipped anyway because it is conducive to spiritual progress, more or less like helpful and psychologically natural meditational devices. They might be right!

2. Primitive scientific explanation of the cosmos as the core of truth behind religion.

Scientists like to explain religions as efforts to explain why things happen as they do in nature. The stars are so regular because the gods guide their movements. If there is lightning and thunder, Zeus is throwing is lightning bolts, or Thor is swinging his hammer. This helps relieve our fears and insecurities about why things happen as they do. I'm sympathetic to this line of explanation too. I think there is much to it. This was very popular among scientists starting in the 19th century, if not earlier. And of course it is consistent with the mental projection theory.

3. Meditational experience as the core of truth behind religion.

There may be a somewhat different and plausible basis of much that is in religion, though not of all, in our psychology in the old sense of theory of the soul (psyche). I will simply quote Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, and let readers draw their own comparisons to the religions of the world. I call him "The Wild Man of Meditation," but this much seems simple and plausible:

> This whole life is a challenge to growth. That is true religion and true psychology too—because a true religion cannot be other than a true psychology. I call that psychology 'the psychology of the Buddhas'. It gives you a great challenge to be more than you are. It gives you a divine discontent. It makes you aflame to go higher and higher—not higher than others, but higher than yourself....
>
> Mind is something unnatural; it never becomes your natural state. But meditation is a natural state—which we have lost. It is a paradise lost, but the paradise can be regained. Look into the child's eyes, look and you will see tremendous silence, innocence. Each child comes with a meditative state, but he has to be initiated into the ways of the society.... And slowly slowly, he loses contact with his own innocence. He becomes contaminated, polluted by the society....
>
> All that is needed is to regain that space once more....You have forgotten. The diamond is lost in piles of rubbish. But if you can recover it, you will find the diamond again—it is yours.
>
> It cannot really be lost: it can only be forgotten. We are born as meditators, then we learn the ways of the mind. But our real nature lies hidden somewhere deep down like an undercurrent. Any day, a little digging, and you will find the source still flowing, the source of fresh waters. And the greatest joy in life is to find it. (Rajneesh 1983: viii. 4)

This is a very Hindu view. In Western thought, it resembles Rousseau. And you can see a fairly common, ordinary, pre-philosophical basis for distinguishing the mind from what might be called the spirit. All the main religions might then be viewed as paths to let go of the mindful world and recover the spirit. The stories of Inanna and Jesus are cultural maps for the gradual divestment of our mind from our soul, and "rebirth" (divestment) of our soul. The stories also associate that, by

analogy, with the seasonal "rebirth" (fertility) of the plant world in spring, in the real world we live in. And some maps may be better than others. But given the nature of the subject—one's soul, and communities of souls following the spiritual maps in their cultures—readers will need to draw their own comparisons for themselves. There is nothing new in this. The credit goes to Campbell, and to all the thinkers like him. And please remember that this too is only a theory, and there can be evidence both for and against it. Philosophy is an open marketplace of ideas. In fact, we may question whether this diamond in the rubbish story, about the pure, innocent spirit we really and perhaps eternally are, is not itself just another myth, or at least a little simplistic. And that is my skepticism about a meditational core of truth to the myth of religion.

4. Mystical states or experiences as the core of truth behind religion.

The idea is that reality is one and indescribable, and all describable perceptual and intellectual appearances of duality or plurality, that is, of our many objects of perception or thought, is "the world-illusion." This is not the same concept as a Taoist way of nature. For here nature *is* the world-illusion. But it is very similar, since there is something mystical about the Tao (and also about the Rajneeshian core). And it is similar enough that the problem with it is exactly the same as the problem with the Taoist core. It is an unverifiable hypothesis. We do not even know what evidence for or against it would be like, much less have any evidence for or against it, other than allegations of mystical experiences. And even if the One is the only reality, it would be beyond descriptions like "personal God." Descriptions like that would amount to personifications of something impersonal.

Cores (3) and (4) are different, but overlap if meditation leads to a mystical experience. However, many mystical experiences may be spontaneous.

5. A mysterious, unknowable ultimate nature of things as the core of truth behind religion.

We may call the next possible core a "Taoist" core of truth. (I love the *Tao Te Ching*, by the way.) Here the Tao is the ultimate truth or reality of things. It cannot be named or described, or even approached by direct action or exertion. But apparently it can be recognized and discussed at least paradoxically and obliquely or metaphorically, at least by sages. Taoists generally hold that the Tao is the core of all religions. The problem is that there is no evidence that the Tao is a personal, all-powerful, all-wise, loving God of the sort we have been discussing in this paper, and no evidence that it even exists as the nature or natural path or way of things. If it cannot be named or described, we would not even know what could count as evidence for or against it. I'm reminded of the spooky old TV commercial that begins by asking, "How do you know if witches exist, if you don't even know what one looks like?" So, how do you know the Tao exists, if it cannot even be described or (normally) thought of?

6. An unknown God as the core of truth behind religion.

This recalls the Apostle Paul's talk with Greek philosophers. But it is not at all the same as the Greeks' altar to the unknown god. The Greeks had many altars to many gods. They had that one just in case there was another god that they did not know about, since they wished to honor and not offend such a god if there was one. And Paul held that God, as Jesus, was known. He was identifying their unknown god for them. He was saying it is Jesus. He was also denying

that their other gods, the ones they thought they knew, were real, or at least denying that they were gods, as opposed to some sort of 'spiritual principalities'.

The strong point of this core is that it avoids the problems with the more occult and mysterious cores. It is just a god, a sort of super-person, whom we do not know, or barely know. And we can consistently combine that with the psychological projection core. God is real but unknown. Christians project onto him the character of Jesus, Muslims project onto him the character of Allah, and so on. We could even hold with the Tibetan Buddhists that all such projections are fake, though conducive to our spiritual growth as worthy meditational devices. But we would part ways with the Tibetan Buddhists in that they hold the projections are *delusions*, that is, are projected onto *nothing* that is there, while we would hold the projections are *illusions* or are at least not *known* to be true, that is, are projected onto something that is there, but unknown.

The weak point of this core is that known or not, God is what our agnosticism is all about in the first place. If anything, the hypothesis of a totally unknown God only makes the case for agnosticism stronger than ever.

Cores (5) and 6) overlap. But core (5) exists alone if the ultimate reality is not a personal God, or is not known to be at least a personal God.

Note that if core (6) is true, then religion is basically not a myth, but true! But an unknown God can still be the core of truth behind a specific religion, such as Christianity.

7. Religion as a blueprint of the soul, and as a spiritual road map for living in this life.

This is my personal favorite proposed core of truth. Here religion is an objectification or symbolic guide, if not specifically a mental projection, of core aspects of our own souls, which Carl Jung calls archetypes, and of how they ought to play out for the best, both in the human soul and in societies of interacting human souls. I call this the Joseph Campbell theory of mythology. It is presented in his many fine books, and in his popular public TV series with Bill Moyers. I think there is a great deal to this approach to understanding why we have religions. But it should be tempered by reflecting that there is much merit to all the other proposed cores of truth as well. Indeed, Campbell might be the first to admit that. But the main point for us is that while this theory is logically consistent with the existence of God, it is logically consistent with agnosticism and even with atheism as well.

Note that once you arrive at your destination, you no longer need road signs or maps. And if you drive the same way again, now knowing the route by sight, then looking at signs and maps as you go is not only no longer necessary, but can be a positive distraction while you are driving. In like manner, the Buddha compares his path to enlightenment to a boat crossing a river. Once you cross to the other side, the boat is no longer needed, and it would be a positive impediment to take the boat with you any further.

Compare techniques for learning to play the violin. Louis Krasner taught me three techniques for playing with a good tone. First, I drew the bow imagining it as a toothbrush, and I had to make every bristle pluck the string. Then I had to imagine the string as covered with a wad of chewing gum, and I had to dra the bow through the chewing gum. Third, I imagined the string as once inch thick, and I had to draw the bow down to the core of the string. All the techniques worked. But once I knew how to get a good tone, the techniques dropped away as unnecessary. In

fact, I found it a positive impediment to focus on any of the techniques as opposed to hearing the sound itself.

Coming more to home, insofar as meditation is about letting things go, I have read three techniques for learning to do this. First, you can imagine your thoughts and feelings as being like people in a room—the room of your mind. Just let them come and go as they please, and stay as long as they please. Do not be concerned with them. Second, think of your thoughts and feelings as like leaves in a stream. They come down the stream to you, pass by you, and then continue on down the stream. If they are snagged for a while or caught in an eddy while they are by you, do not be concerned. Let them come, stay, or flow on as they please. Third, you can think of your thoughts and feelings as like clouds in the sky. Let them drift into sight, stay in view, and pass on as they please. Now, all the techniques can help, depending on the individual. But at some point, you have to let such techniques go too. They will no longer be necessary when you have learned to let your thoughts and feelings come and go. And in fact they will become a positive impediment to your meditation if you actively pursue them any further. For they, themselves, are like people, leaves, or clouds that you should let come, stay, or go in your mind as they please.

What does all this have to do with agnosticism? Well, all this amounts to an analogical argument that insofar as religions are basically road maps or blueprints for us to follow, once you learn the way, religions, too, become unnecessary, and can even become a positive impediment to further development. As far as I know, this analogical argument is original to this paper. The road driving and violin playing analogies are good, but the meditation analogy seems especially close to home. For many religions have meditations that concentrate on Jesus, the Buddha, Allah, Krishna, Shiva, and so on. Again, one of my favorite thinkers, Ramakrishna, actually tried all these paths to the divine, each one several months at a time, and found them all equally valid. But he also found them all like ice sculptures made of water, and he found his experience of the deeper impersonal divine to be like the water out of which the ice sculptures (Jesus, the Buddha, and so on) are all made. He found that most people are only comfortable with the ice sculptures they grew up with in their own culture or family. But he also found that a few people like himself can learn to value other ice sculptures as equally valid depictions of the divine, or even to let them all go as unnecessary, and eventually even find them a positive impediment to experiencing the deeper impersonal divine (water) of which they all consist. Of course, an agnostic would consider arguing that the divine exists on the basis of any such personal experiences of the divine, whether of the personal divine or the impersonal divine, to be our old friend the argument from personal experience; and we have already rejected that argument as inconclusive at best.

A curious result of the meditational version of the road map analogy is that as agnostics, we should not enforce a ban against religion in our life across the board, but let religions come and go in our life as they please. If they leave, they leave. If they stay, they stay. After all, we are agnostics, not atheists. Some religious beliefs may be true! We just don't know if they are.

Perhaps the present paper is a road map or blueprint for agnosticism, to be dropped as well, once you get the hang of it. But before doing that, I would need to add this: Most people cannot drop or let their religions go. Most find value in their religions that they find hard to get

elsewhere. And there is value in all the main religions (I cannot answer for all religions). But since logic and ethics are logically independent of religion, all religions can and ought to be judged on the basis of logic and ethics as independent guidelines, at least as best we can. Our use of logic has led us to agnosticism in this paper. But ethical judgments about religion are often far less clear. We clearly don't want any religious wars, oppression, or abuse against other religions and / or nonbelievers, or anything like that. And we clearly want to encourage charity, kindness, helping others, and everything like that. But there will be a large gray area in between those two extremes. And assessing the ethics of every religious act, or act done in the name of religion, is far beyond the scope of this paper in any case, regardless of whether God or anything divine exists. So you and your conscience must carry the ball from here. And I think we are all in that boat. Here religion is to be judged just like any other human institution—social, political, or whatever. For ethics is logically independent of all of them.

Cores (1) and (7) are very different. Core (1) is a false projection of religion onto the world. Core (7) is a true projection of religion onto ourselves, as a kind of depth psychology.

8. Intuitive insight, perhaps through religious stories, one of the arts, or nature.

I like this proposed core the best. Many people have exalted or holy moments where they feel inspired, or even transported beyond the ordinary world into a realm of true bliss. Perhaps most people—billions of people— have experienced this at times. It may be occasioned by reading religious literature, other uplifting literature, uplifting paintings, sculpture, music, or an awesome scene of natural beauty. The mystic Jakob Boehme saw God in the reflection of sunlight on a shiny pewter dish, or some such. (This might be more plausible than you think. I myself was once a gleam in my father's eye!) Generally the intuitive insight is presented as some sort of cognition of things beyond that may be difficult to express in words.

Ironically, though such experiences are often occasioned by reading religious writings, the experiences themselves may seem basically impossible to describe in words, and to transport us beyond the words of the writing. —Or not.

Now, if that is *all* we say about it, then this might well *be* the main core of truth behind the myth of religion. But if we take this as an *argument* for the truth of religion or the existence of God, then this is merely a version of the argument from personal experience, which we found to be unreliable. It seems far more likely that the cause is not veridical cognition, but lies in our psychology, our psychological constitution. We might cite our needs, hopes, and fears, but perhaps the best and most direct explanation lies in the psychology of symbolic experience (Carl Gustav Jung), or more deeply and generally, as well as more in the scientific mainstream, in the psychology of imprints, innate vs cultural images, and innate releasing mechanisms. Imprints are not only prehistorical, but prehuman. A turtle can imprint on the zookeeper's shoe as its mother, and so on. Joseph Campbell begins his monumental four volume study of the mythology of religion, *The Masks of God*, with vol. 1, part 1, "The Psychology of Myth," chapter 1, "The Enigma of the Inherited Image," and chapter 2, "The Imprints of Experience." I recommend these two chapters, and the whole four volume study (Penguin Books, the 1969 revised edition).

The holy emotion in such experiences can be psychologically overwhelming. See the very brief and recent Michaeleen Doucleff, "Awe Appears To Be Awfully Beneficial" (Doucleff 2021). If an overwhelming emotion of awe were all it took to for me become a believer, I would

have become a believer long ago. Just this year (2021), I have been overwhelmed by the psalms (not biblical psalms, but religious folk songs) sung by *Bozhychi* (God-people, God's Ensemble), a singing group based in Kyiv (Kyev), Ukraine. But alas, I am too rational to let that happen. I need reasons to believe. I'm a Doubting Thomas, and more so than Thomas himself, if his story wasn't just written into the Bible.

Core (8) can overlap with several other cores.

9. The quantum plenum "big bang" as the core of truth behind religion.

In his *Brief Answers to the Big Questions*, Hawking states an argument that God need not be posited as creator of the universe, since the universe started itself with a big bang coming out of the quantum plenum:

> Since we know the universe itself was once very small—perhaps smaller than a proton—this means something quite remarkable. It means the universe itself, in all its mind-boggling vastness and complexity, *could* simply have popped into existence without violating the known laws of nature....
>
> But here's the crucial bit. The laws of nature itself tell us that not only *could* the universe have popped into existence without any assistance, like a proton [in quantum physics], and have required nothing in terms of energy [due to the zero sum balance theory of positive and negative energy, but also that it is *possible* that nothing caused the Big Bang. Nothing.
>
> The explanation lies back with the theories of Einstein, and his insights into how space and time in the universe are fundamentally intertwined. Something very wonderful happened to time at the instant of the Big Bang. Time itself began....
>
> When people ask me if God created the universe, I tell them that the question itself makes no sense. Time didn't exist before the Big Bang so there is no time for God to make the universe in. It's like asking directions to the edge of the Earth—the Earth is a sphere that doesn't have an edge, so looking for it is a futile exercise. (Hawking 2018: 34–38, my emphasis; see 2017 / 1988: 141)

Hawking's argument in the first two quoted paragraphs seems to be that the universe *could* have simply popped into existence at the quantum level, and then expanded in the Big Bang. Therefore the universe "doesn't *need* to be set in motion by some god" (Hawking 2012 / 2010: 135, my emphasis), though of course it still *could* have been created by God. One would then presumably use Ockham's razor to eliminate God as unnecessary. Hawking's argument in the second two quoted paragraphs is quite different. It is that "Time itself began" with the Big Bang, therefore "there is [or was] no time for God to" create the universe before the universe existed. Here the tenor of the argument is that God could *not* have created the universe. I shall call the conjunction of these two sub-arguments Hawking's Big Bang argument against God, or more simply his Big

Bang argument.

Hawking says that using Richard Feynman's sum over histories method:

> Our picture of the spontaneous quantum creation of the universe is then a bit like the formation of bubbles of steam in boiling water. Many tiny [soup] bubbles appear, then disappear again. These represent mini-universes that expand but collapse again while still of microscopic size. They represent possible alternative universes, but they... do not last long enough to develop galaxies and stars, let alone intelligent life. A few of the little bubbles, however, will grow large enough so that they will be safe from collapse. They will continue to expand at an ever-increasing rate and will form the bubbles of steam we are able to see. These correspond to universes that start off expanding at an ever-increasing rate—in other words, universes in a state of inflation. (Hawking 2012 / 2010: 136–137)

Even empty space is always bubbling over with zero-sum quantum events (Hawking (2018: 135; 2012 / 2010: 113, 137).

But if a primordial quantum plenum or "soup" existed before the universe did, then why could not God? And it is very hard for me to see how the universe could emerge from the soup unless the soup existed first. And why is there a plenum?

But Hawking says that there is no need to postulate God:

> [T]he quantum theory of gravity has opened up a new possibility, in which there would be no boundary to space-time and so there would be no need to specify the behavior at the boundary. There would be no singularities at which the laws of science broke down, and no edge of space-time at which one would have to appeal to God or some new law to set the boundary conditions for space-time. One could say: "The boundary condition of the universe is that it has no boundary." The universe would be completely self-contained and not affected by anything outside itself. It would be neither created nor destroyed. It would just BE. Hawking 2017 / 1988: 141)

Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow say in *The Grand Design*:

> Because there is a law like gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing.... Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist. It is not necessary to invoke God to... set the universe going. (Hawking 2012 / 2010: 180)

But in *A Brief History of Time* (Hawking 2017 / 1988), Hawking sounds for all the world like he

is raising the basic "why" question of classical theism about his own account. He says:

> What is there that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe? The usual approach of science of constructing a mathematical model cannot answer the questions of why there should be a universe for the model to describe. Why does the universe go to all the bother of existing? Is the unified theory so compelling that it brings about its own existence?....
>
> Up to now, most scientists have been too occupied with the development of new theories that describe *what* the universe is to ask the question *why*. On the other hand, the people whose business it is to ask *why*, the philosophers, have not been able to keep up with the advance of scientific theories. (Hawking 2017 / 1988: 190, Hawking's emphasis)

Hawking is surely right to say that the classical theist question of why the universe exists at all, even as modern cosmology describes its origin, still can and ought to be raised. Even if the universe is physically self-generating, why is *that* the case? Why was there a quantum soup for it to bubble up from? Why are the laws of physics the way they are?

I have two comments. First, the *Brief History of Time* conclusion trumps the *Grand Design* conclusion. For this only postpones the question of why to the level of asking why the law of gravity is the way it is, not to mention asking why there is physical spontaneous creation. Second, spontaneous physical creation is neither logically necessary nor even physically necessary. For the statement "The universe exists" is logically contingent on its face.

For more, see my "Critical Discussion of Stephen Hawking's Big Bang Argument Against God" (my 2022b). For more on science versus religion in general, see my "Critical Discussion of Seungbae Park's 'The Problems of Divine Location and Age'" (my 2022a).

10. The Quantum Physics-style Dual Complementarity of Science and Religion

This core is an analogy of science to religion based on the dual complementarity of wave- and particle-descriptions of quanta in quantum physics. The analogy was drawn by some of the great quantum physicists themselves, as described in Werner Heisenberg's paper, "Science and Religion" (1927).

First, I shall briefly explain the basis of the analogy in quantum physics.

Complementarity, the duality of description of quanta, concerns only describing them using the fairly ordinary concepts of classical physics to discuss experimental observations. The basically mathematical language of the actual theory is univocal and clear. Niels Bohr says:

> [I]t is often said that quantum theory is unsatisfactory because, thanks to its complementary concepts of "wave" and "particle," it prohibits all but dualistic descriptions of nature. Yet all those who truly understand quantum theory would never even dream of calling it dualistic. They look upon it as a unified description of atomic phenomena, even though it has to wear different faces when it is applied to experiment and so has to be

> translated into everyday language. Quantum theory thus provides us with a striking illustration of the fact that we can fully understand a connection though we can only speak of it [in everyday language] in images and parables. In this case, the images and parables are by and large the classical concepts, i.e. "wave" and "corpuscle" [both waves and corpuscles being ordinarily understood as having certain locations in space and time]. *They do not describe the real world*[, since only the mathematical language of the actual theory does that,] and are, moreover, complementary in part, and hence contradictory. For all that, since we can only describe natural phenomena with our everyday language, we can only hope to grasp the real facts by means of these images.
>
> This is probably true of all general philosophical problems and particularly of metaphysics. We are forced to speak in images and parables which do not express precisely what we mean. Nor can we avoid occasional contradictions; nevertheless, the images help us to draw nearer to the real facts. Their existence no one should deny. "Truth dwells in the deeps." This claim is no less true than the first proposition of Schiller's poem. (Heisenberg 1971: 209–210 quoting or paraphrasing Bohr in 1952 and J. C. Friedrich von Schiller, my emphasis)

The parallel to Einstein's general relativity theory is striking. We must use the ordinary language of classical physics to describe our observations of things as being here or there, then or now. But in the actual theory itself, which uses basically mathematical language to describe objective physical reality, as Einstein repeatedly tells us, there is no such thing as space or time, and no such thing as a certain place in space-time. Here the multiple conflicting descriptions are those from the different frameworks of reference. Instead of a quantum's being conflictingly described as either a wave or a particle, a body would be conflictingly described as either moving or not, and as either earlier than, later than, or at the same time as another body.

The parallel to Bohr's extension of complementary language to science and religion, and to very different religions, is no less striking; and Bohr seems to invite it by speaking of "images and parables." In fact, there might even be a parallel to the univocal language of the actual theories of general relativity and of quantum physics in the univocal, unified theory of the compatibility of science and religion in Aquinas, and in that a mystic would fully understand the language of another mystic, even though to an ordinary person the talk would be paradoxical. See "Science and Religion" (Heisenberg 1927), in Heisenberg (2007 / 1958: p.s. 11–24; 1971: 82–92) suggesting that science, religion, and even mysticism may offer seemingly conflicting yet equally valid complementary descriptions of the world, all of which need to be understood for full and adequate understanding of the world. One is reminded of the old Indian metaphor of the elephant. One blind person feels the trunk and thinks the elephant is a tree. Another feels the tail and thinks the elephant is a rope. Another feels a tusk and thinks it is a spear. Another feels an ear and thinks it is a fan. Another feels the side and thinks it is a wall. And none understands the elephant as it really is.

Of course, if we treat this as the core of religion, it would beg the question of the

existence of God. There can be no complementary religious description of the real order if God or some other religious entity does not exist in *any* sense, any more than there can be dual descriptions of quanta if quanta do not exist. And mysticism, *pace* Bohr, is supposed to be beyond description. And that includes complementary description. Thus if we affirm this core, we are affirming religion as some sort of valid complementary description of the world, and affirming religion as being in some sense true, and part of the complete picture of the world, even if it is not literally true.

This sort of "complementary" thinking about science and religion as dealing with different levels, departments, or aspects of reality can be found in Schopenhauer and many others, and can be traced back to Aquinas, who held that there are two kinds of truth, scientific and theological, if not to Aristotle's theory of four overlapping kinds of cause, including efficient cause (physics) and teleological or final cause, including ordinary organisms and the argument from design, also called the teleological argument, discussed earlier in this paper.

11. Arthur Schopenhauer's will to live as the core of truth behind religion.

Arthur Schopenhauer is widely held to be the last great speculative metaphysician in Europe. Albert Schweitzer is widely held to be the greatest advocate of reverence for all life, and therefore to be the greatest voice against anthropocentrism (the view that human life is the best and most, if not the only important kind of life), and also for environmental ethics. For reverence for life entails that all animal and plant life is important, and arguably equally important. It is well known that: Schweitzer bases his ethic on Schopenhauer (1969 / 1859)'s metaphysic of a primordial will to live which underlies all life, and which is in fact the cause of the world; that Schweitzer regards his ethic as a spiritual development of and improvement on Schopenhauer; and that this is Schweitzer's interpretation of, or even substitute for, God (the will to live) and for religion (the ethic of reverence for life). Thus this might well be called Schweitzer's proposed core of reality for the myth of religion. All this is in Schweitzer's *Civilization and Ethics* (1987 / 1922). For convenience, Richard Taylor will be our guide to Schopenhauer.

Taylor sums up Schopenhauer's theory of the will to live as follows:

> ... Schopenhauer claimed that we can in fact know reality, as it is in itself, because each of us is, im his own true nature, that reality. We do not know our true nature by sense, reason, and [intellectual] understanding, for these testify what we are only as phenomena. With respect to ourselves the veil of Maya [the phenomenal world-illusion] is pierced, and we apprehend ourselves, not through the distorting portals of space, time, and causality, but intuitively, in our true and inmost nature. And what we are, we find, is not a physical, animal body, nor even this together with thought and reason, but *will*. Indeed, Schopenhauer maintained that our thoughts, no less than our bodies, are themselves nothing but expressions of this will, that our bodies and bodily behavior, voluntary as well as involuntary, is simply the mirror of this will. This was Schopenhauer's basic metaphysical principle, the "single idea" that *The World as Will and Idea* was declared, in its preface, to express. We

> know what ultimate reality is, as will, because we are ourselves not merely an expression of a will but identical with the will that underlies all phenomena....
>
> The will of which the world and most clearly the organic world is the expression is essentially a primordial, ungrounded force, and a blind one. That it is ungrounded means only that there is no further cause or ground for its existence, as of course there cannot be, since it is itself an ultimate reality. To say that it is blind means that it has no ultimate goal or end other than existence itself. It is in this sense that Schopenhauer thought it could be described, though somewhat misleadingly, as self-caused, a description that theologians have always reserved for God, conceived as an ultimate reality outside the world. The will exists neither in space nor time, for these Schopenhauer considered phenomenal distinctions, not does it stand in ordinary causal relations to any objects, for the same reason. There is, accordingly, but *one* will; not in the sense that that this is one thing among others but rather that distinctions of multiplicity, which presuppose phenomenal space and time, do not apply to it. He likewise thought of the will as infinite and eternal; not, again, in the sense of being greater and more durable than other things, but in the sense of being beyond temporal and spatial distinctions altogether. (Taylor 1975 / 1962: 367, Taylor's emphasis)

Taylor goes on to describe Schopenhauer's theory as having negative, gloomy consequences. Basically, for Schopenhauer, the best we can hope for is disassociate ourselves from attachment to this world, and try to do good for others based on sympathy for our common plight.

Schopenhauer is well aware of the affinity of his view for Hinduism and Buddhism, insofar as they hold that the best we can do is disassociate ourselves from attachment to this world, and try to obtain release through doing good, nonviolence, and so on. Likewise, I have little doubt that Schweitzer is well aware of the affinity of his view for Jainism, the small Indian religion that has shown reverence for all life more than any other religion, and which is therefore often held up as an ethical ideal by Hindus and Buddhists.

Schopenhauer's philosophy can be praised for several virtues. First, Taylor notes that Schopenhauer very realistically depicts the world as a deeply irrational place, with civilization as a thin veneer masking the will to live, the will to power, our desires, and so on. (Taylor 1975 / 1962: 368). And Schopenhauer pointed this out long before Sigmund Freud held out World War I as proof of that. These days in the United States, sad to say, democracy is turning out to be part of the thin veneer as well, infected as it is by authoritarianism and all its lies; and this is happening in other countries too. In any case, instead of offering rationalist optimism, he offers a down to earth, realistic pessimism based on the world's being an irrational, terrible, uncaring place. It is as Hobbes describes primitive life: 'poor, nasty, brutal, vicious, and short'. It is also as Hume describes nature: caring only for the survival of the species, and not a whit for any individual life.

Second, Schopenhauer very realistically describes all sorts of life forms' survival

behavior to survive as empirical evidence of the will to live shared by all (Taylor 1975 / 1962: 368). And this would be a very nice metaphysical grounding of Charles Darwin's empirical theory of survival of the fittest.

Third, Schopenhauer's finding the will to live as underlying all life, and as a commonality shared by all life, is the groundwork or basis for anti-anthropocentrism. (Taylor 1975 / 1962: 368).

Fourth, successful or not, Schopenhauer's positing of the will to live as the noumenon behind the curtain of the phenomena we experience in daily life is a brilliant dialectical move in support of Immanuel Kant's philosophy. It also accords well with Plato's thesis that existence is power. Even though will to live, as such, is not the same as Nietzsche's will to power, the will to live implicitly includes the will to have enough power to live in the face of any obstacles to life.

Fifth, the will to live is a very plausible proposed real core of the myth of religion. For the will to live is a very plausible substitute for God, and for God's will to create life and sustain life.

But Schopenhauer's philosophy has major flaws as well, and all the more so if the will to live is proposed as the core of truth behind the myth of religion. I shall offer seventeen criticisms.

First, despite all of Schopenhauer's careful and thorough provision of empirical evidence for the will to live as manifest in all life forms, his view has the same skeptical, agnostic problem of lack of evidence that all the other proposed real cores for the myth of religion have. For all his evidence is consistent with each individual life form's simply having its own will to live, which ends when that particular life form ends. There is no need to posit a single big will to live as an ultimate reality, when positing many small wills to live, individual to each life form, is a perfectly adequate explanation of exactly the same survival behavior.

Second, the will to live is clearly not God. Far from being loving and caring, it is blind and irrational. The will to live is not even conscious! It is more like the blind Demi-Urge of the Gnostics.

Third, the basic blindness of the will to live rules out Kant's justice argument for God, even if justice is blind! For the blindness of the will to live includes being blind *to* justice. Any sense of justice is to be found only in the 'higher' life forms, and not always even there.

Fourth, the amorality of the will to live rules out the perfect holiness of Jesus argument. For there is nothing holy about the will to live. Any sense of holiness is to be found only much later in history, in the 'higher' life forms, meaning humans. Of course, we were skeptical about that argument anyway.

Fifth, the statement "The will to live exists," or even just "There exists some will that some life form has," is logically contingent on the face of it. And that rules out the ontological argument. There is nothing logically necessary about any will's existing, even if Schopenhauer can make a plausible argument that space and time do not apply to the will to live. In the same way, even if our finite souls are timeless, it does not follow that they are logically necessary beings. On classical theism, our souls could not exist at all, if God did not create them.

Sixth, the three regress arguments of Aquinas are consistent with the will to live's being the ultimate reality, but they are equally consistent with God's being the ultimate reality.

For they have nothing to say about what the ultimate reality is, other than it is the first cause, the unmoved mover, and the independent being. Of course, those three arguments are fallacious anyway, as I argued earlier.

Seventh, there is no such thing as a homeless will. A will can only be had by a mind, and only a mind can have a will. And that is no different from thoughts, feelings, or ideas. These logically and categorially cannot exist on their own outside a mind.

Eighth, the will to live runs afoul of the old debate of whether will or reason is primary within a mind. Thus even if we locate the will to live in a supreme mind, say the Blind Demi-Urge, it does not follow that the will to live is the primary constituent in that mind.

Ninth, no will is totally blind. For all acts of will imply acts of cognition of an object that is will. For you cannot will nothing. And the will to live is a case in point. It is the will *to live*. And to that extent, reason is logically prior to will, insofar as the object of a cognitive act must be minimally intelligible as an object. Here I am siding with Aquinas in my own way.

Tenth, the will to live is supposed to be not only the ultimate reality of all phenomena, but also to animate them. But it is very hard to believe, and there is no evidence for the view, that the nonliving objects in the world have a will to live at all, much less that they are manifestations of an ultimate will to live. Compare the "Gaia hypothesis" that the earth is a living organism, or at least an interactive system with living components, in the many books of James Lovelock. Just as the universe seems largely composed of unconscious stars, planets, and gases, so the earth seems largely composed of unconscious rocks, water, and lava.

Eleventh, Schopenhauer wants his will to life theory to be based not on religious dogma but on empirical evidence. But then he should not rely on his own personal observations of the world around him, however objective and insightful they may be. Instead, he should rely on physics, which is the ultimate science of nature, and which is supported by our best empirical evidence. And in physics, the overwhelming evidence is that the world originated not from some gigantic, blindly striving Will to live, but from a fundamentally probabilistic quantum plenum, from which there eventually was a big bang that generated the universe we live in. See core (9) above. Roger Penrose (2012) argues that there may have been many big bangs, most of which did not get very far and quickly fell back into the quantum soup, but some of which generated a cyclic series of relatively stable universes that rose and eventually fell. But for our purposes, whether there was just one big bang or a whole series of them does not matter. For us the main thing is that in any case, any will originated billions of years *after* the (last) big bang, as a mere matter of the probability of quanta entangling together into living organisms, and as thus a very derivative by-product of the quantum plenum. For stars and planets would have to be formed first, the physical laws of the generated universe would have to be favorable to life, and so on (Hawking 2012 / 2010: chs. 6–7). Thus will, and indeed life, would be what logicians call an emergent property, or property of a whole which none of its parts has, and what some of the quantum physicists would call a complementary description of the reality of organisms, by analogy to the complementary descriptions within quantum physics of quantum events as both particles and waves. See Heisenberg (2007 / 1958: 76–82, and especially P.S. pp. 23–24; 1971: ch. 9, and especially pp. 91–92), and core (10) just above.

Twelfth, in physics there is in fact no empirical evidence at all that there is a single gigantic will, blindly flailing about in the noumenal world behind the curtain of phenomenal

experience and somehow creating the phenomenal world. There is not even any evidence that there is a 'species will to live' for each species. There only seem to be a great many individual wills of the members of a species that operate collectively to help perpetuate the species through a blend of each individual's will for self-preservation and its will for species-preservation, or at least offspring-preservation. And arguably it is not so much the individual organism, which is just a sort of housing, but its embedded DNA (genes and chromosomes), that really 'wills to live' So to speak, our bodies are just the housing for our DNA, which 'decides' how our bodies grow.

Thirteenth, in light of the fact that there seem to be a great many individual wills, one for each organism, the "one big" will to live would have to be composed out of the many little ones, perhaps much as my body is composed of living organs and cells. But it would seem more plausible and appropriate to think of "will" as a mass noun like "water," which applies to all oceans, lakes, puddles, clouds, icicles, and even water molecules in the air. If so, then much like water, the will to life would what Quine calls a "scattered" object. But the most plausible and appropriate metaphysical assay would be that the will to live is really a universal that the many little wills to live instantiate. And if it is inappropriate to apply the concepts of space and time to the will to live, then the will to live would be a universal ante rem. And that would explain its so-called blindness and unconsciousness quite nicely. For a universal can have no consciousness any more than a number can. And while even numbers are arguably things (Gottlob Frege argued at length that numbers are objects), a universal is not even a thing, but only a property that things can have. Whether or not Schopenhauer admits universals does not detract from this criticism. In fact he has a sophisticated theory of particulars and universals, and admits the will to live as both a universal and the particular will of a big particular 'mind' (Wicks 2021). But that does not make the thesis that there is a single big particular will (or 'mind') "in whom we live and move and have our being" any more plausible. The idea is familiar in many religions, but that does not make it plausible either. How can a mind exist inside another mind?

Fourteen, it is not clear that every organism even has a will. C. D. Broad says that the inner mental life of a grasshopper is not sufficiently developed or organized or unified to count as a mind. Doubtless it has a will to survive, and has been shaped by survival of the fittest. But what about an amoeba, or a virus? They too have been shaped by survival of the fittest. But is this a matter of will or of serendipity? Recall that acts of will require some minimal acts of consciousness. For one cannot will a thing without being aware of it. (Again, so much for blind will! Blindness of will is a relative thing.) In very slow motion films, plants appear to fight each other for sunlight. But do they really have a will? Are they really competing? Are they in effect consciously saying to themselves, "I must fight these other plants for more sunlight?" Or does survival of the fittest merely mean that those life forms that happen to do X tend to be the ones that survive? This devolves to reductionist philosophy of science. We want the truth, but we have to settle for what can be shown, and we may even have to settle for the simplest explanation. Even if Ockham's razor is only one factor of at least 34 to be weighed in theory assessment, it is still a huge factor. See my (2022).

Fifteenth, as Russell says, Schopenhauer "held that what appears to perception as my body is really my will" (Russell 1948: 755). And given a choice between a metaphysic in which all is mind, including what we perceive as body (Berkeley, Leibniz, Schopenhauer), and a metaphysic in which all is body, including what we perceive as mind (Holbach, La Mettrie), I

have long preferred the first choice. For it is easier to understand body as a sort of frozen mental perception than it is to understand how thoughts, feelings, choices, and what Russell calls egocentricity (self-indexicality), not to say mind, could be merely physical. But on the face of it, both of these one-sided metaphysics pale in comparison to admitting some sort of mind-body dualism, whether mind is understood as separable from body after death (Descartes, the Christian tradition), or not (Aristotle, the non-religious substance tradition).

Sixteenth, Schopenhauer is hobbled by his accepting Kant's radical division of the world into phenomena and noumena, and its attendant difficulties of explaining how we in the world of phenomena can understand anything in the world of noumena, or how the two worlds are even related. The whole traditional conception of substances which we find intelligible via phenomena (Aristotle, compare Thomas Reid)is gone. More specifically, what is gone is the conception of an idea of a thing as having both formal reality and objective reality, such that the objective reality of the idea of a horse is formally identical with the form of a horse, making both the horse and our idea of it equally intelligible (Descartes, Suárez, and much of the medieval tradition). Today that theory of ideas, called the via antiqua, would apply to the idea of quantum entanglements, and to the other ideas of current science. The post-Descartes early modern tradition, including Kant and Schopenhauer, reject the objective realities of ideas, and in effect retain only the formal reality of ideas as mental beings. And the price they pay is that their theory of ideas, called the via moderna, makes ideas an impenetrable barrier (phenomena) between us and the world of things in itself (noumena). But it also creates another problem: What things belong in the world of phenomena, and what things belong in the world of noumena?

Seventeenth, Kant and Schopenhauer are faced with a problem of square pegs and round holes. What should they locate in the world of phenomena, and what in the world of noumena? Is there anything they should locate in both worlds? Are there transcategorial properties, such as identity, difference, number, and existence in the minimal and general sense of not being nothing, that belong to everything in both worlds?

Both philosophers seem to make the same bad choices. They locate morality in the world of noumena. And since they view morality as essentially concerned with will as opposed to intellect (a big issue in the middle ages), they have to make the will noumenal too. And then they have to make minds and choices noumenal too. As if our introspections of ourselves and our moral choices were not just as phenomenal as seeing an apple and eating it!

The end result is schizophrenic. We are in effect each two people: a doer who makes choices, and an observer who perceives the ordinary phenomenal world. We are metaphysical amphibians. We are a phenomenal self and a noumenal self. This is metaphysical madness. It is completely at odds with the phenomenology of ordinary, pre-philosophical life. I would like to assure everyone that I, for one, am one person and not two! I may be dual-aspected as a mind and as a body, or even as a perceiver and a doer. But I am not two minds in metaphysically different worlds. Kant and Schopenhauer might deny that this is what they mean. But let the reader judge whether this is what their views amount to. See Russell (1948: 755).

Schweitzer basically accepts Schopenhauer's will to live as the ultimate reality, but argues that it develops a positive ethical character as it comes to manifest itself in human beings who have an ethical character. In fact, Schweitzer argues, the highest ethical manifestation of the will to live, in the ethically most highly developed humans, is a reverence for all life.

Schweitzer bases his ethic of reverence for life on Schopenhauer's will to live. The idea is that since everything is a manifestation of the will to life, the highest ethical ideal is to show reverence to the will to life as manifested in all life forms. Of course, Schweitzer has a practical side, and recognizes that some conflicts between different life forms have to end in death or disability for one of them. But he says we ought to minimize that. On at least one occasion, Schweitzer himself halted construction of a new building for his hospital in Africa because it would needlessly kill some lowly living things.

Schweitzer is very sympathetic to religion, while Schopenhauer is largely derogatory, except for holding some eastern religions in high regard for holding that escaping from all desires for the meaningless things of this world is the best we can do. Besides that, Schopenhauer values the sympathy or compassion we feel for the plight of our fellow sufferers, who are imprisoned with us in this phenomenal world that was created by the will to live, as the basis of morality.

Schweitzer bases a very positive reverence for life on the will to live, while Schopenhauer does not. But the basis is not a logical derivation. Schweitzer holds that ethics is an independent realm and cannot be derived from nature. Thus he basically agrees with David Hume's view that we logically cannot derive values from facts, or an "ought" from an "is." I profess astonishment that Schweitzer never refers to that specific view of Hume's, even though he discusses Hume and mentions him often (Schweitzer 1987 / 1922).

Schweitzer's book *Civilization and Ethics* (1987 / 1922) is basically a long discussion of the history of ethics, focusing on whether ethics can be derived from nature, and culminating in his own ethic of reverence for life. In the end he denies that ethics can be derived from nature, implicitly following Hume's 'no ought from an is'. But then he opposes the will inside ourselves to the world that is external to us, and holds that it is perfectly all right to derive ethics from at least the higher and more spiritual levels of the will inside us. As if what is inside us were not just as much fact as what is outside us!

In effect, Schweitzer tries to get around the 'no ought from an is' problem by just adding ethical and spiritual aspects (values) to the will to live inside us (fact) until he gets the ethics he wants coming out of it. He does this in stages throughout the book. This begs the question, since he just pulls them out again to "base" his ethics on the will to live. You can see this pretty directly in that from the mere fact that life exists, nothing logically follows about whether it ought to be revered, or is even of ethical value at all. —Unless you can derive a value from a fact, or an "ought" from an "is"! But perhaps I am being unfair, since Schweitzer himself denies that we can derive any ethic from nature.

12. The "stone soup" concept as the core of truth behind religion.

Our next candidate for core of reality is based on the old story of stone soup. In the version I read when I was young, a soldier walking home from the wars enters a village asking for food. Everybody says they have no food. He then pulls a stone out of his pocket and says that although it may look very plain and ordinary, it is a magical stone that will produce the most wonderful soup if dropped into a kettle of boiling water, and he will make soup for everyone. The villagers are skeptical, but they watch as the soldier starts to make a big kettle of stone soup. He whistles merrily and insists that the soup is coming along fine and will be truly magnificent. But then he says wistfully to himself that the soup would even better if only it had some onions

in it. Someone brings him onions. Then he says the soup would be truly perfect if only it had some carrots. Someone brings him carrots. Eventually it is a magnificent soup with all kinds of good things that the villagers have brought out from hiding. All praise the soldier for his wonderful soup, and there is plenty for everyone. He then says he must go, but he leaves them the stone so they can make the soup whenever they want. They happily wave good-bye. Then he comes to the next village, and with a sigh he picks up another stone from the road.

In all its versions (axe soup, nail soup; tramps, friars), the story is about the value of sharing; and all its versions have a happy ending, since the people end up sharing what they have, and create something bigger and better than any of them could have individually (Rubel 2015). But here I am using the story as the basis of a core of reality for the myth of religion. The stone is the core of reality for the myth of God, with the stone standing in the place of God. The stone is real but worthless in itself, and the story of God is worthless too, since God is not even real. Nonetheless, just as in the story of the soup, people can be coaxed into their best efforts at sharing and helping others through the inspirational story of God.

In fact, the relationship is even closer than that. In India, anything, even a stone, can be used as a meditational device in yoga, where "yoga" means link or union to ultimate reality. (Sanskrit and the modern Indian languages based on it are Indo-European; and the word "yoga" is etymologically related to the English word "yoke," as in yoking two oxen together.) In fact, some villages worship a stone as God. And while that may be spiritually low-level, it is not wrong, if everything is God, and God is in everything. And this is not far from sculpting a statue of a god from a stone and worshiping the statue, either as literally being a god or as representing the god, for example the statue of Athena in the Parthenon Temple in Athens, Greece. The statue was literally lifeless, but was inspirational. This is functionally the same as the story of stone soup, except that here the stone (or a statue made from it) is worshipped, and not just dropped into a kettle of boiling water. But even the stone in the soup is regarded as amazing and magical.

In turn, worshiping a statue is not far from worshiping a living human being (or other life form) as a god, if not the god. You can take your pick, from the ancient pharaohs of Egypt as embodiments of the god Horus, to the Dalai Lamas of Tibet as successive reincarnations of Chenrezig, god of compassion. Even the Roman emperors were worshipped as gods in the Roman state religion. These people were real. They may or may not have been very inspirational considered in themselves, but the stories told about them often were. And we can add Jesus to the list.

Ancient times were very superstitious. One can only imagine how godlike some very advanced religious people may have appeared back then. As the saying goes, "The pagan peasant believed in all gods, the pagan philosopher laughed at all gods, and the pagan magistrate made use of all gods." The saying is doubtless a simplification of the Edward Gibbon quote below.

13. Buddhism or other spiritual discipline as the core of truth behind religion.

Buddhism, especially early Buddhism (Theravada school, or Hinayana = the small vehicle / journey / path that only the few can take), is often understood not as a religion, but as a spiritual path to a state called nirvana or enlightenment. The main reason is that there is no God; there is no one to pray to for help, and you have to achieve your own enlightenment or Buddhahood yourself. No one can do it for you. (Somewhere on the Internet, there is a list of

about twenty things that no one can do for you, many of them in the nature of personal achievements; and no doubt there are other things that can be added to the list.) This is commonly understood to take place based on an impersonal law of cosmic justice called karma. But in point of fact, nothing like karma is mentioned in Buddhism's Four Noble Truths or its Eightfold Path of Righteousness. Thus karma is something like a lemma (auxiliary axiom or theorem) in a proof. But unlike a lemma, karma does not seem strictly necessary to the "proof," i.e., understanding that and how Buddhism works. In fact, I have argued that the law of karma is multiply problematic and therefore false in my (2012 / 1992); and as far as I can see, Buddhism (and Hinduism) can keep on going as well as ever.

Later Buddhism (Mahayana = the great vehicle / journey / path that many can take) is often understood as a religion or as much like a religion. For even if there is no God to worship and pray to for help, there are godlike beings that one can worship or at least beg for help. These are the Bodhisattvas, or near-Buddhas, compassionate beings who, after many lifetimes of following the Buddhist path of righteousness, have arrived at the stage where they could pass into nirvana if they wanted to, but choose to remain in this world (or in a spiritual heaven) until all sentient beings are able to pass into nirvana together. Thus the Boddhisattvas will not pass into nirvana for a rather long time! But they can make things much easier for the rest of us, if we ask them. They can do that by transferring some of their great storehouse of accumulated spiritual merit to us.

This is just one mainstream and very plausible understanding of Buddhism. It would take a book or more to discuss interpretations of what Buddhism is with any real fullness. One might say that every major Buddhist thinker has their own interpretation.

Tibetan Buddhists seem to blend Hinayana and Mahayana. Perhaps that is because Tibetan Buddhism is a blend of Buddhism with the original Tibetan Bon religion. They worship many gods (Bon), but they also hold that all gods are merely our own mental projections.

The other thing we would need to explore, besides what Buddhism is, is what religion is. For we cannot tell if Buddhism is a religion unless we know both what it is to be Buddhism and what it is to be a religion. I suppose the main question, though, is fairly simple. Namely, must a religion have a God, in order to be a religion? A second question would be, are either Buddhas or Bodhisattvas gods? To answer that question, we would need to know what it is to be a Buddha or a Bodhisattva, and what it is to be a god. The main scholarly problem is that the main work of Buddhism, the rather brief *Dhammapada*, often mentions gods as though they exist. Are they mentioned hypothetically, so as to say things like "If there were gods or demons, they could not take away the enlightenment you have achieved"? Or are the gods mentioned not because Buddhism really admits them, but to cater to the popular understanding of religion, and make the work more congenial and accessible to the average person of the times? Or are these gods not really gods, but godlike Bodhisattvas that the ordinary person would think of as gods? Or *are* Buddhas and Bodhisattvas gods? Do they fit the definition of "god," or a reasonable definition of "god"? There are much the same questions in Hinduism. Depending on your view of reincarnation, it might be that we all started out as humans; but over many lifetimes some of us ended up as godlike reincarnations in spiritual heavens, and others as demonic reincarnations in spiritual hells, due to our own acts; and all of us can choose to improve or worsen our status over many more lifetimes, perhaps over millions of years; and eventually attain enlightenment,

enter nirvana, and reincarnate no more. There is no reliable evidence; I am just explaining the scholarly problem in the *Dhammapada*.

Note that it is a fairly well established view that the Buddha was not very interested in metaphysical questions, and even said that many such questions are nonsensical or "ill-put." Thus the Buddha (who was not only an early Buddhist, but the very first one) may not have been even very interested in whether gods exist. And that would be in tune with the early view that you can only attain enlightenment by your own efforts, or by your own just letting go.

In this subsection, the idea is that Buddhism's four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path of Righteousness are the spiritual core behind the myth of religion. The idea is that they are not a religion, but are four core spiritual truths plus a spiritual path to enlightenment. And the idea is that they are all that is truly worth while in any possible religion. The idea is that whether there is a God or not, that does not and cannot matter to one's attaining salvation, i.e., enlightenment.

The door is open to other spiritual disciplines' claiming much the same thing. But this proposed core of truth behind the myth of religion is very controversial. Can you imagine a Jew, Christian, or Muslim admitting that one can and indeed must save oneself without a God to help? Hinduism is divided on this. Shankara and Ramakrishna admit gods, but also admits an impersonal divine reality that is deeper, and is in fact the ultimate divine reality. So to speak, both we and the gods are like ice sculptures carved from frozen water, or individual drops of water spray (the gods would be much bigger spiritual drops than we are, having improved themselves far better over many lifetimes than we have), and the ultimate divine reality is water (or the ocean) itself. This is the Advaita school. But Ramanuja insists that the ultimate divine reality is a personal God, and you cannot go beyond God, who is the ultimate reality.

Agnostics find no reliable evidence for or against any personal gods, but perhaps can consistently admit an impersonal divine reality; and perhaps could even admit Bodhisattvas who are no different from us, but who have achieved a far greater level of spirituality that we have. But surely most agnostics are skeptical enough in general to be skeptical of those claims too.

14. The myth of religion as itself the core of truth behind religion.

Here the idea is that the myth of religion is itself the core of whatever reality it has. We are now dropping the stone or stone statue of core (12), or other physical representation of God, and just keeping the *story* of God as what is real about religion. Certainly the books are real! They are made of paper. And before writing was invented, the oral storytelling about various gods consisted of real sound vibrations in the air. Cave paintings of the great mother goddess consisted of physically real paint, and so on. Even an atheist can accept this as the core of reality behind the myth of religion.

Conclusions on the search for a true core of the myth of religion.

If we found no true core of religion, we just have to carry on as best we can. At least we increased our understanding by investigating. And that we didn't find a core doesn't mean there isn't one. It might even be a core we discussed, but could not establish to be true or even likely, based on our available evidence. It just means that no core of religion is known to be true. My explanation is that religious claims are so ultimate and mysterious that regardless of whether we are on holy ground, we are on rationally very uncertain ground.

One could investigate all sorts of possible cores of truth in religion. And many may overlap. But I suggest that in general, all efforts to find a core of truth behind the myth of religion will be enough like these main proposed cores that they, too, will face much the same problems.

The main point to take away is that none of these cores will settle the rational case for whether God exists. If God exists, then God is the core of religion. (Or if only nirvana or only the Tao exists, then nirvana or the Tao is the core.) The proposed cores discussed in this section are not even intended to settle whether God exists. Instead, it is well known that their function is to explain why we have religions in case God does *not* exist. And that is why people generally propose them only *after* determining (to their own satisfaction) that God does not exist. That is, these cores are intellectually plausible efforts by *atheists* to "save the appearances" by explaining why religions are so basic and important in human life even though (or so they believe) there is no God. In contrast, an *agnostic* should more properly say that God is not *known* to exist as the core of religion, and that these other proposed cores *may* be, or perhaps even *would* be, the best explanation of our having religions, *if* God does not exist.

Final remarks and recommendations for further reading

This is basically a long introductory paper for beginners, though I hope it may interest intermediate and even some advanced thinkers. All these topics are vast, fascinating, and rewarding; and if I have invited your attention to them for your further investigation, mission accomplished. Of course, my specific mission was to make the case for agnosticism, the view that there is no real or reliable or rational evidence either for or against God. We just don't know.

I love to fall into mythological ways of thinking as much as anyone, and love to see God smiling in a beautiful morning sunrise. But agnosticism seems rationally best. And seeing God in the sunrise is, for all I know, the psychological equivalent of an optical illusion. Again, I'm not arguing for atheism at all. I'm saying we just don't know, and basically can't know.

Lucian offers a hilarious send-up of agnostic views in his essay, *Philosophies for Sale*: "9th Buyer. What are you doing with that pair of scales? Pyrrho. I use it to weigh arguments. I get them to balance and, when I see they're exactly equal, then I'm once and for all sure I don't know which is right." I don't think that's what I did in this paper! Nor is it what Lucian did. His essay, *Hermotimus, or the Rival Philosophies*, beautifully argues for the definitely skeptical view that we'll never be able to tell the truth about anything in philosophy.

The great English historian Edward Gibbon says in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, chapter 2, "The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful." Clearly, Gibbon's philosopher is an atheist, not an agnostic. But nothing Gibbons says here is our issue. Many uneducated people are brought up to believe without question. Many educated people find many reasons to doubt. And there are nonbelievers who make use of, or even cynically manipulate, religion to support their views or actions. But none of this says anything about whether any of them are actually right or wrong in their belief or nonbelief.

The French scientist and polymath Pierre-Simon LaPlace told Napoleon that he had

no need of 'the God hypothesis'. That is not our issue, though it is consistent with agnosticism. Yes, Ockham's razor says we should not multiply entities beyond explanatory necessity. And it is useful and convenient to simply science. But we should not admit fewer entities than there are either. I credit Kenneth Burke with this point. Burke says, "Entities should not be reduced beyond necessity" any more than they should be multiplied beyond necessity (Burke 1945: 324). To use an old example you can come up with a very simple, elegant explanation that predicts how an elevator works. But if you take the elevator apart to see how it actually works, it may be far more complicated than you thought. W. A. Sinclair says, "The real world is astonishingly rich and complex." Shakespeare's Hamlet says, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy." And here we cannot even take the world apart to see if God is there or not. No telescope will find him, and so on. All this calls out for agnosticism.

Blaise Pascal asks us to consider making a wager where the evidence for God is slim to nonexistent, but the rewards of leading a Godly life are eternal. That is not our issue either. Our only issue is whether there is a rational case for or against God's existence sufficient to merit belief either way. I credit Pascal with piety, sincerity, and having our best interest in mind. And his point is of intellectual interest. But seriously, would a sincere person be "gaming God"?

Which account do you believe? Just as following the path of faith is a testing ground of the spirit (spiritual soul), so following the path of reason is a testing ground of the reason (rational soul). Which path do you think is best? And though it is not our issue, would you accept Pascal's wager?

The early Christian Tertullian said, "I believe *because* it is absurd." How absurd! Would we believe that the moon is made of green cheese because it is absurd? The argument form, "Belief B is absurd, therefore I ought to believe it" is a non sequitur (is logically invalid) on the face of it. Quite the opposite, it is "Belief B is absurd, therefore I ought *not* to believe it" is intuitively valid on its face. We can rescue Tertullian by charitable interpretation. He might mean, "I (can only) believe on nonrational faith, because rationally it is absurd." He might even mean, "I (can only) believe on nonrational faith, because God is so fundamental, he is beyond all (human) reason and understanding." But if God is beyond all understanding, then Tertullian has no idea of what he is even talking about, and is completely unaware of God. His statement does not express a belief that is rationally absurd, but is simply unintelligible. In fact, it is not even a statement, but just a grammatically well-formed sentence that literally makes no sense, if the term "God" is beyond all understanding. His sentence does not even clear the low hurdle of the moon that is made of green cheese. That statement may be absurd, but at least it is intelligible!

I wrote this paper to explain why I am an agnostic. I wish I could believe in God. For I believe it is a trivial point of logic that the world would be an infinitely better place if an infinitely wise, good, powerful, and loving God were in charge. But in simplest terms, there is not enough evidence either to believe or to disbelieve, and thus it is plausible to think that religion is wishful thinking.

Yasir Arafat says, "Having a war about religion is like having a fight over who's got the best imaginary friend." (He was co-awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, along with Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin, in 1994 "for their efforts to create peace in the Middle East.") I wish only to note two things. First, in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic family tree of monotheism, all worship the same imaginary friend, though interpreted differently. Thus for them it would be like a fight over

who has the best interpretation of their shared imaginary friend. And second, this actually sounds like atheism. If God is my imaginary friend, then God is unreal. An agnostic would say instead, "Having a war about religion is like having a fight about who's got the best friend, where it is unknown whether the friends are real or imaginary." Of course, Arafat only says that a religious war is "*like*" a fight about who has the best imaginary friend. It's just an analogy or comparison, and of course, offering it would be logically consistent with his being a believer. However, even the mere comparison is precisely that God is like an imaginary friend. And for an agnostic, the evidence is such that for all we know, God really *is* just our imaginary friend.

But religion is not always the only factor, nor even the primary factor, in a religious war. Religion can even be a guise, pretext, and / or excuse for the real causes or reasons, which may be territorial, cultural, political, and / or economic. Always look for all the other factors you can find. A 'religious war' may then seem almost agnostic or even atheistic in action if not in word, and largely just a basic and emotionally deep way to mark 'us' from 'them'.

Of course, a religious war can be primarily religious. The Renaissance humanists used skepticism about religion to help defuse religious war in Europe. But most of them were believers, so how skeptical could they be? Perhaps they would have been less hypocritical and more convincing if they had been agnostics. But both warring sides agreed that God exists, and disagreed only on specific doctrines. Thus a moderate skepticism only about specific doctrines may have worked best to help promote religious tolerance in Europe. But I think the main reason the fighting ended was that there was simply too much war. The Peace of Westphalia, two treaties signed in 1648, ended the Thirty Years' War between Catholics and Protestants, which killed about eight million people in Europe (Wikipedia contributors: 2020). Online sources say, 'Mercenaries slaughtered whole villages.... Wolves roamed the streets.... Whole [sections of Central Europe] were depopulated.... People hid in the forest.... Farming stopped and rodents went out of control.... One third of the German population died, many from famine and disease'. If you don't want that to happen in your country, don't start any religious wars!

Even the quest of philosophy of religion may not always be what it seems. Are we really interested only or even primarily in whether God exists, or in which religion, if any, is the best? Are we really that interested in the rational case? Or we really just looking for some sort of security, community, and / or mystical ultimate explanation of how things are that we can just take on faith? This is a matter for individual self-assessment. But if you read this paper, you are definitely interested in the rational case! People can often be either more rational or less rational than others (or even they themselves) think.

I have been painting in very broad brush-strokes. For a technical discussion of infinite regress arguments in my own philosophy, see my (2015: 257–267). For my technical theory of seeming, see my (2015: 575–590). For the technical flaw I find in Aquinas' arguments, see my (1989). For a brief technical statement of my agnosticism, see my (2013: ix–x).

For further reading, I recommend two books for the general reader. John J. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (1983) is dry, technical, and academic, but brief, concise, well-balanced, and excellent. It is widely used in introduction to philosophy of religion college courses. It's almost 150 pages. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1961 / 1902) is a century-old world classic by the great Harvard philosopher-psychologist. It is loquacious and almost conversational, though still somewhat slow reading. It has been called a masterly work,

and covers a lot of bases. It's just over 400 small (about 4" x 7", or 10.5cm x 18cm) pages. On science and religion as complementary descriptions of reality, I recommend the very brief Heisenberg (1927), which is in both Heisenberg (2007 / 1958) and Heisenberg (1971).

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