

PHILOSOPHY FOR US

Edited by Lenny Clapp



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FIRST EDITION

Philosophy for Us

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First Edition
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This book is dedicated to my friend and mentor Tomis Kapitan.
Tomis believed that philosophy could improve the lives of everyone,
and this belief influenced not only his teaching, but his courageous
approach to life. This book is inspired by his example.

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Introduction to *Philosophy for Us*

When selecting a textbook instructors of introductory philosophy courses face a dilemma. On one horn is the lamentable fact that many introductory college students are incapable of reading and comprehending original philosophical texts, whether these texts be classics of the ancient or modern periods, or more contemporary works. That such texts are inaccessible to introductory students is not necessarily indicative of a shortcoming on the part of the students: original texts are written by philosophers and *for* philosophers, and thus they often presuppose a lot of specialized background knowledge and use many unfamiliar archaic and/or technical terms. On the other horn is the widely accepted pedagogical attitude that learning philosophy requires *doing* philosophy; the pedagogical goals of most instructors of introductory philosophy courses primarily concern the development of critical thinking skills, and only secondarily concern acquiring knowledge of significant philosophical theories. Achieving this primary goal of developing students' critical thinking skills is not well served by texts that merely attempt to summarize, from "an objective point of view," the opinions and theories of influential philosophical figures. Rather, achieving the primary goal seems to require engaging with texts that are written with the objective of persuading the reader to adopt a particular philosophical position.

Philosophy for Us resolves this dilemma. This anthology contains short papers written *by* philosophers who really endorse the views they arguing in support of, but the papers are written *for* contemporary introductory students. Thus all technical terms are defined when they are introduced, and no familiarity with other philosophical texts is presupposed. The result is a collection of short papers that introductory students will find both comprehensible, and, I hope, philosophically engaging.

The text consists of five sections, each of which is devoted to a different philosophical issue. The issues addressed are all comprehensible to introductory students; they are the kinds of issue that minimally reflective students will have already thought about, though perhaps not in a careful and systematic way. Each section begins with a very brief introduction presenting a philosophical issue, followed by 2–4 short papers addressing it. Each paper is written by a contemporary philosopher who is attempting to establish a particular philosophical position with regard to the issue. As the positions defended in the papers are incompatible, students are compelled to engage in the process of critical inquiry and determine which of these positions—if any—they themselves endorse. The objective of *Philosophy for Us* is to motivate and inspire introductory students to *do* philosophy.

Part I:

Does God Exist?

Introduction to Part I

At one time or another most of us have considered the classic philosophical question, “Does God exist?” It makes sense for us to care about this question, because the answer affects many aspects of our lives. It’s obvious that whether or not God exists has consequences for our religious beliefs. But the question also has consequences for how we understand ourselves, and our place in the world. If God does *not* exist, can there still be an objective morality? Can our lives have any meaning? If God *does* exist, does it follow that everything is part of God’s plan, and that nothing can really go *wrong*? Does it follow that we are, or might be, immortal? Of course many of us are pretty sure we already know whether or not God exists, but part of what makes the question interesting is that we disagree about what the right answer is: some of us are confident that the answer is “yes” and others of us are just as confident that the answer is “no.” And it *can’t* be that *both* of these answers are right; as philosophers put it, the statement that “God exists” is **logically incompatible** with the statement that “God does not exist.” How then can we resolve this disagreement? Well, maybe we can’t; maybe there’s no point in talking about it, and we should just drop it. The papers in this section, however, were written by three philosophers who do not share this pessimistic view; these philosophers all think we can resolve this disagreement, or at least that we can make some beneficial progress toward resolving it. How do these philosophers attempt to make such progress? By presenting **arguments** in support of the answer they think is right. Note that the word ‘argument’ as it is used here has a rather special meaning. When philosophers talk about *arguments* they are not talking about a sort of verbal brawl that you might “get into” with your meddling parents or annoying roommates. And in this special sense an *argument* isn’t *merely* a *claim* or *statement* either. Rather as philosophers use the word, to present an *argument* is to give *reasons* in *support* of a claim or statement. The statements in an *argument* that provide the reasons are called **premises**, and the statement that the premises support—the statement that the person presenting the argument wants to show to be true—is called the **conclusion**. A *successful* argument is such that, taken together, the *premises* provide a compelling reason to accept the *conclusion* as true; that is, a successful argument will have premises that the reader accepts as true, and will be put together in such a way that it would be irrational to accept the premises, yet reject the conclusion.

Two statements or beliefs are **logically incompatible** just in case it is *impossible* for them both to be true together; if one were true, the other would *have to be* false. For example, the statement “Millions of illegal votes were cast in the 2016 presidential election” is *logically incompatible* with the statement “Exactly seventeen illegal votes were cast in the 2016 presidential election.”

An **argument** is a presentation of reasons in support of some statement. The statements of the reasons are the **premises** of the argument, and the statement that these premises are alleged to support is the **conclusion** of the argument. A successful argument demonstrates that, given the premises, it would be in some way *irrational* not to accept the conclusion as true. There are many different kinds of arguments, and, as one might expect, arguments concerning controversial philosophical topics are often very complicated.

This section contains one paper presenting an argument in support of the conclusion that God does *not* exist, and two papers presenting arguments in support of the conclusion that God *does* exist. Of course it can’t be that *all three* of the arguments presented in this section are successful, because, as we noted above, the conclusions of the arguments are *logically incompatible*. So, *you* are going to have figure out which (if any!) of these arguments *you* think are successful, and which *you* think are unsuccessful. And figuring out *why* you do or don’t find each of *these* arguments successful will probably help you to clarify *your own* reasons in support of what *you think* is the right answer. Creating *arguments* in support of interesting conclusions and debating whether or not they are successful is what philosophy is all about.

1. An Argument for Atheism from Naturalism

Graham Oppy, Monash University

Introduction

Atheists deny that there are gods. **Theists** say that there is at least one god. Most contemporary theists are **monotheists**; they say that there is exactly one God. Many—but not all—monotheists are practising members of monotheistic religions. The monotheistic religions include the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—and some of the Eastern religions, including some versions of Hinduism and Buddhism. Many atheists are also practicing members of non-theistic religions—e.g. some versions of Buddhism and Daoism; but many other atheists do not practise religion, and some atheists are vigorous opponents of all religion. In this paper, I shall develop the best argument that I can for atheism. I don't claim that this argument for atheism is ultimately conclusive; however, I do claim that it is the best argument on any side of the dispute about the existence of God.

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

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

Atheism says that there are no gods.

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

Monotheism says that there is exactly one god.

Polytheism says that there is more than one god.

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

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

Some atheists—**naturalists**—claim that, in an important sense, our universe is all that there is. In particular, naturalists claim that all causal entities have entirely natural constitutions—i.e. all causal entities are composed of nothing but quarks, electrons, protons, neutrons, and so forth—

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

Supernaturalism says that there are supernatural causes involving supernatural entities.

and that all intelligent agents are either entirely natural organisms, or else artificial intelligent agents that are ultimately the creations of entirely natural organisms. According to naturalists, there are no supernatural entities that preceded the universe and were responsible for bringing it into existence; there are no supernatural entities that exist along with the universe and that are responsible for keeping it in existence; there are no **supernatural** entities that interact with our universe despite inhabiting a domain that is somehow separated from our universe; and there are no intelligent agents apart from entirely natural organisms and agents that are ultimately the creations of those entirely natural organisms. Moreover, according to naturalists, there are none but natural causal forces and none but natural causal powers: there are no supernatural powers or supernatural forces that exert influence on our universe.

Theists differ in the ways that they depart from naturalism. Some theists believe in a God who created our universe *ex nihilo*, that is, *out of nothing*. Some theists believe in a God whose actions preserve our universe in existence. Some theists believe in a God who inhabits an eternal realm that has no spatiotemporal relation to our universe. Some theists believe in an intelligent and active God who is neither a natural organism nor an artificial intelligence created by natural organisms. Some theists believe in a God that is a non-personal supernatural power or supernatural force that exerts influence on our universe. Some theists believe that the universe possesses the non-natural property of being divine, or that the non-natural property of being divine 'permeates' the universe. And so on.

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

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

A central premise of my argument in support of atheism is the **Principle of Parsimony**. This general principle states that if there are two competing theories and one is *simpler* than the other, then, unless the more complex theory provides a *better* explanation of something than the simpler theory, one should endorse the simpler theory. Since naturalism and theism are competing theories, and, as I just explained, naturalism is *simpler* than theism, the Principle of Parsimony implies that unless theism provides a *better* explanation of some relevant phenomenon than naturalism, one should endorse naturalism. And since naturalism implies atheism, it follows that unless theism provides a *better* explanation of some relevant phenomenon than naturalism, one should endorse atheism. So, if we assume that theism and naturalism agree in their beliefs about which natural entities there are, in order to decide between theism and atheism we just need to determine whether or not theism provides a *better* explanation of some relevant phenomenon than naturalism. Is there any reason to think that there's something that theism explains *better* than naturalism?

Theism would provide better explanations than naturalism if theism were **logically consistent** and naturalism were **logically inconsistent**. Logically inconsistent theories have the fundamental flaw of being *necessary false*; such theories cannot possibly explain anything. But is it plausible that theism is logically consistent even though naturalism is logically inconsistent? Surely not! We can think of naturalism as the product of two claims: (1) a claim N which is an account of the natural universe; and (2) the claim that the natural universe is all that there is in the causal domain. And we can think of theism as the product of three claims: (1) the same claim N to which the naturalist is committed; (2) a claim T which is an account of the theistic realm; and (3) the claim that the natural realm and the theistic realm are all that there is in the causal domain. If N is not logically consistent, then neither theism nor naturalism is logically consistent. But, if N is consistent, then it is hard to see how naturalism could be inconsistent. Furthermore, if N is consistent, it is very tempting to think that it is much more likely that theism is inconsistent than it is that naturalism is inconsistent. After all, it might be that T is inconsistent. And even if T is consistent, it might be that the conjunction of T and N is inconsistent.¹

The ***Principle of Parsimony*** states that if two theories are *competing* and one is *simpler* than the other, then, unless the more complex theory provides a *better* explanation of some relevant phenomenon, one should endorse the simpler theory and reject the more complex theory. (Two theories are *competing* just in case it cannot be that both theories are right.) This principle is often called ***Ockham's Razor***, after fourteenth-century English philosopher William of Ockham (c. 1285–1349).

How else might it be that theism provides a *better* explanation of some relevant phenomenon than naturalism? The obvious thought is that there might be phenomena in the natural universe

¹ Some theists who endorse **a priori** arguments for the existence of God are committed to the implausible view that naturalism is logically inconsistent. (See for an example of an a priori argument in support of theism.)

that have no explanation on naturalism, but that are explained on theism. Or it might be that there are features of the natural universe that have an explanation on naturalism, but that have a better explanation on theism. If there are explanations of natural phenomena given by theism that are superior to the corresponding explanations of naturalism, then, at the very least, we no longer have a straightforward argument for the superiority of atheism over theism. However, if it turns out that there are no features of the natural universe that have a better explanation on theism than they do on naturalism, then the principle of parsimony gives us a very good reason to think that naturalism, and thus atheism, is superior to theism.

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

Where a theory is a set of *beliefs* or *propositions*, a theory is **logically consistent** just in case it is *possible* for every belief or proposition in the theory to be simultaneously true.

A theory is **logically inconsistent** just in case it is *not possible* for every belief or proposition in the theory to be simultaneously true.

Existence

Some theists might be tempted to argue as follows: Naturalists can give no explanation of the existence of the universe; but theists can explain the existence of the universe in terms of the creative activities of God. So, on this point, theism is ahead.²

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

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

A similar point applies to the explanation of the existence of the universe. Whatever range of options is open to the theist to explain the existence of God, exactly the same range of options is open to the naturalist to explain the existence of the universe. If it is open to the theist to say that God exists of necessity, then it is open to the naturalist to say that the universe exists of necessity.

² Theists who endorse what is known as *The Cosmological Argument* reason in this way. Influential versions of the Cosmological Argument are offered by many philosophers, including St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) and Samuel Clark (1575–1729).

If it is open to the theist to say that God's existence involves an infinite regress, then it is open to the naturalist to say that the existence of the universe involves an infinite regress. If it is open to the theist to say that the existence of God has no explanation, then it is open to the naturalist to say that the existence of the universe has no explanation. Insofar as we are interested in explaining the existence of the universe, the postulation of a God who creates the universe does not bring with it any explanatory advantage.

Causation

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

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

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

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

Fine-Tuning

Some theists may be tempted to argue as follows: Naturalists can give no explanation of the *fine-tuning* of our universe, whereas theists can explain the fine-tuning as originating with God. (The claim that our universe is *fine-tuned* for life just is the claim that, if any of several fundamental physical constants had taken a very slightly different value, life would not have emerged in our universe. For the purposes of the present discussion, I shall simply assume that our universe is fine-tuned for life.)³

³ Robin Collins presents an argument in support of theism based upon the fine-tuning of our universe.

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

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

On the other hand, it might be that there is an initial state of global causal reality in which the fine-tuning of our universe is already fixed. On the naturalist view, that initial state is the initial state of the universe; on the theist view, that initial state is the initial state of God, which includes God's detailed intentions for the creation of our universe. In this case, it is clear that naturalism and theism have the same range of options when it comes to explaining the fine-tuning of our universe. On each view, it might be said that the initial state is necessary, in which case the fine-tuning turns out to be necessary. On each view, it might be said that the initial state is contingent, and that there are other possible initial states that do not lead to our fine-tuned universe; and, in that case, the fine-tuning of our universe turns out to be brutally contingent. However it plays, there is no explanatory advantage that accrues to theism.

Morality

Some theists may be tempted to argue as follows: Naturalists can give no explanation of the instantiation of objective moral values in our universe, whereas theists can explain the instantiation of objective moral values in our universe as originating with God. (Many people—theists and naturalists alike—agree that it is morally wrong to torture human infants just for fun. And its being morally wrong to torture human infants just for fun is all that it takes for there to be at least one objective moral value.)⁴

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

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

If there are non-derivative instantiations of objective moral value in global causal reality, then objective moral value is theoretically primitive: non-derivative instantiations of objective moral values are not explained in terms of anything else. Typically, theists suppose that God is good,

⁴ **Immanuel Kant** (1724–1804) articulated an influential and complex argument of this sort. A more recent, and accessible, appeal to morality to support theism is provided by Robert Adams (1987). (In Chapter 11 Christian Miller defends the view that morality is best explained by God.)

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

Consciousness

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

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

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

Miracles

Some theists may be tempted to argue as follows: Naturalists can give no explanation of various *reports of miracles* that have occurred in the unfolding of history in our universe, whereas theists can explain the occurrence of those reports of miracles in terms of special divine action.⁵

To see what is wrong with this argument, we need to make sure that we pay attention to the *full range* of reports of interventions, episodes, activities and phenomena that are anomalous from the standpoint of currently well-established science. On any plausible view, it is uncontroversial that the overwhelming majority of reports of interventions, episodes, activities and phenomena that are anomalous from the standpoint of currently well-established science should not be given any credence at all. As **David Hume** (1779) said in his famous discussion of miracles, everyone can agree that *almost* all reports of interventions, episodes, activities and phenomena that are anomalous from the standpoint of currently well-established science are squarely in the domain of ‘knavery and folly’. While naturalists are able to give a uniform explanation of reports of miracles—attributing *all* of them to human knavery and folly—theists who wish to mount an argument from miracles are required to claim that there are a small number of reports of miracles that do not suffer from the crippling liabilities which attach to all of the other reports of interventions, episodes, activities and phenomena that are anomalous from the standpoint of currently well-established science.

David Hume

(1711–1776) was a principle architect of the Scottish Enlightenment, and arguably the greatest ever naturalist philosopher. His most famous works include the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), and the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779).

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

Religious Experience

Some theists may be tempted to argue as follows. Naturalists can give no explanation of the religious—mystical, spiritual, sacred—experiences of human beings: reports of encounters with the divine, reports possession by the divine, and sensations of oneness with the divine. But theists can explain all of these religious experiences in terms of perceptions of God.⁶

⁵ Note that theists cannot claim against naturalism that *miracles themselves* are phenomena that theism explains better than naturalism, where miracles are understood as supernatural events. For the question of whether or not *there are* such supernatural phenomena in addition to all the natural phenomena is precisely what divides naturalism from supernaturalism, and atheism from theism.

⁶ Theists cannot claim against naturalism that *perceptions of God themselves* are phenomena that theism explains better than naturalism. For, just as was the case for *miracles*, the question of whether or not there are such supernatural phenomena is precisely what divides naturalism from supernaturalism, and atheism from theism.

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

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

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

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

Meaning and Purpose

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

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

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

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

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

Epicurus (341–270 BC) was a Greek philosopher who argued that the basis of moral goodness and badness is the experiences of pleasure and pain.

The problem of evil is a problem for theism. The *evil* referred to concerns *suffering*, in particular the suffering of creatures that do not *deserve* to suffer—innocent children and animals being the classic examples. The problem that undeserved suffering poses for traditional monotheism is simple: According to traditional monotheism, God is *omniscient* (all knowing), *omnipotent* (all powerful), and *omnibenevolent* (all good). But if there were such a God, it would not allow undeserved suffering to occur. But it certainly seems as if undeserved suffering does occur. So, it seems that the God of traditional monotheism cannot exist.

Conclusion

As I mentioned at the outset, I cannot claim to have considered all of the phenomena that bear on the decision between theism and naturalism (and not can I claim to have given a fully adequate assessment of any of the data that I have considered). However, I hope that I have done enough to indicate how my argument based on the Principle of Parsimony in support of atheism would look if it were set out in full and complete detail.⁷

⁷ I give a fuller—but still incomplete—exposition of the argument in Oppy (2013).

A Final Note about Evil

Of course, there is data that some atheists suppose favours naturalism over theism—e.g. there are natural phenomena that some atheists think is *better* explained by naturalism than by theism. For example, some atheists think that the horrendous suffering of innocent children is much *better* explained by naturalism than it is by theism. In fact, some atheist's even think the suffering of innocent people is **logically inconsistent** with theism.⁸ The problem that such suffering poses for theism is known as **the problem of evil**, and theists and atheists have been debating this problem for centuries. **Epicurus** (341–270 BC) presents succinct statement of the problem that suffering—which Epicurus refers to as *evil*—poses for theism:

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

Though I think the problem of evil poses a difficult challenge for theism, it should be appreciated that my argument from naturalism in support of atheism goes *beyond* this challenge. That is, my argument does not depend on the claim that theism *cannot* explain the data of horrendous suffering; rather my argument requires only that, on any piece of data, naturalism does *at least as well* as theism in explaining it. So, even if theism has a solution to the problem of evil, that is, even if theism can explain why God would allow horrendous undeserved suffering in our universe, this would in no way undermine my argument from naturalism in support of atheism.

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⁸ Other naturalists think that data about horrendous suffering renders theism, not *logically impossible*, but nonetheless *highly improbable*: given the major horrors of the twentieth century alone, isn't it incredible to suppose that our universe is the work of an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being?