

Arguments for Atheism

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Considerations about evil in the world are the most popular basis for atheism among professional philosophers and, perhaps, also among the public at large. But there are many other reasons that have been offered by reflective atheists for their view. It is the task of this chapter to offer the reader a representative sampling of such reasons and to offer some preliminary observations concerning their cogency.

It will be useful for my purposes in what follows to group atheological arguments into two categories. The first category of argument attempts to exploit the lack of palpable evidence for the existence of the Judeo-Christian God. I shall call these "No Evidence Arguments." The second category of argument begins with some observation or theory about the nature of religion and attempts to render theism unlikely on that basis. I call such arguments "Arguments from the Character of Religion." Sections one and two will be devoted to the first category of argument, outlining some atheological arguments that are pertinent to that category and then offering some critical remarks concerning them. Sections 3 and 4 will be devoted to the second category of argument.

1. No Evidence Arguments

1.1. The Core Argument

People frequently hold irrational superstitions. Some people think that certain kinds of pendants will bring them luck. But most of us feel that such people have no good reason whatsoever to believe this. Some people form expectations in accordance with the astrological deliverances of a column in their morning newspaper. But they do not have any good reason to place confidence in astrological predictions. Many atheists have an analogous attitude towards those of us who believe in the existence of the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition. By their lights, theists and astrologists are equally reckless in their willingness to form beliefs about the world that go well beyond what is warranted by the evidence. In this and the following sections, I shall be laying out some atheistic lines of thought that proceed in this vein.

— The most basic and bald variety of this kind of atheistic argument is straightforward enough. The core argument is this:

- * 1. No one has ever had any evidence whatsoever for the existence of a Judeo-Christian God.
- * 2. When no one has ever acquired any evidence for a certain hypothesis and has no reasonable prospect of acquiring any, we should all discount that hypothesis.
- * 3. Therefore, we should all discount the hypothesis that a Judeo-Christian God exists.

Two main ideas come into play here: *the lack of evidence*, and *the lack of prospect of acquiring it*. Both ideas are important to the line of thought under consideration. We know that in science a hypothesis, when first advanced, may not have been tested and thus may have little to no support. That does not typically mean we discount it. For we may instead set about doing some crucial experiments that provide a means of testing it. But suppose there is no evidence for some hypothesis and, in addition, no prospect of doing tests that would provide a means of gathering evidence for it. In that case we may feel altogether disinclined to take the hypothesis seriously. An atheist who advances the core argument believes that this is the situation with the hypothesis that God exists.

There are a number of ways that an atheist might, if he wished, attempt to tone down the premises of the argument. Let me mention two.

(i) As it stands, the argument makes a universal pronouncement that *no one* has any evidence for the existence of the Judeo-Christian God. There is a stripe of atheist, however, who may be willing to concede that for all he knows, someone has some evidence, insisting only that *he* hasn't any evidence. Such an atheist will, perhaps, be more interested in justifying and rationalizing his or her own views than in providing universally valid directives to others. He may say "I haven't any evidence. And until you provide me with some I will continue to discount the hypothesis that there is a Judeo-Christian God. If you are like me and haven't any evidence then I advise you to do the same. If you are unlike me and have evidence, then I cannot speak for you." (ii) As it stands, the argument claims that there is *no* evidence for a Judeo-Christian God. Some atheists might be more generous: they may concede that there is *some* evidence but argue that there is *nowhere near enough* to warrant our taking very seriously the hypothesis that there is a Judeo-Christian God. For example, an atheist might be willing to allow that the fact that sane and generally quite reasonable and intellectually respectable people believe in God all by itself counts as a little bit of evidence for the existence of God. But he may still insist that there is still nowhere near enough evidence to warrant a person coming to the issue with an impartial mind to come to believe in God. The thrust of the core argument will be unaffected as far as such an atheist is concerned. She will say: "The evidence for a Judeo-Christian God is very thin and there is no prospect of it getting much fatter. When the evidence for a hypothesis is very thin and there is no prospect of it getting much fatter, we should discount it."

Having noted these more modest versions of the premises, I wish to return to the core argument. How can the atheist motivate each premise? Let us begin with premise 1. It is very natural to think that there are two basic ways to acquire evidence for a hypothesis P. One way is to acquire direct perceptual evidence for P. (For example, the hypothesis may be that there is a cat nearby and the evidence may be your seeing it.) Another way is to get direct perceptual evidence for some claim or hypothesis, Q, that is explanatorily connected to P. After all, we often get evidence for hypotheses about things that we cannot directly perceive, including facts about the distant past or future, facts about microscopic entities and so on. So, for example, we might use evidence we can perceive about a dinosaur's skeletal structure as evidence for the hypothesis that the dinosaur caught its prey by running and pouncing (something we obviously cannot directly perceive).

Let us call these two kinds of evidence *direct perceptual evidence* and

explanatory evidence. There is yet another sort of evidence that fits into neither of these categories: the testimony of others. After all, much of what we know is acquired by trusting other people and not by direct observation or by explanatory conjectures on our part. According to the picture being developed here, testimony plays the role of *evidence transmission*. If someone acquires evidence for P, and you trust them and believe in P, then in a sort of way, what you believe has an evidential basis. By trusting them, you inherit the respectability of the evidential basis even if it is not in your reflective possession. But crucially, trust can only provide respectability to what you believe if somewhere down the chain of testimony and trust there is direct perceptual or explanatory evidence for the hypothesis. Testimony and trust, on this picture, can preserve the respectability of believing the hypothesis only if it was at some point respectable to believe the hypothesis *on grounds other than testimony and trust*.

With this (admittedly quite natural and plausible) picture in place we can readily see how the atheist will proceed: "There is no direct perceptual evidence for the Judeo-Christian God. And there is no explanatory evidence. So there is no evidence. Neither sacred books nor religious leaders can generate evidence out of nothing. So there is no evidence for the Judeo-Christian God."

1.2. Explanation and Theism

Why do atheists think that there is no explanatory evidence for a Judeo-Christian God? A common reason is this: Many atheists believe that fundamental physics, suitably developed, will provide a complete story about ultimate reality. They conclude that theism is superfluous, that we can explain everything that we need to explain without appeal to a God. Here a well-known contemporary philosopher, David Lewis, writes about the explanatory power of natural science:

... [T]here is some unified body of scientific theories, of the sort we now accept, which together provide a true and exhaustive account of all physical phenomena (i.e. all phenomena describable in physical terms). They are unified in that they are cumulative: the theory governing any physical phenomenon is explained by theories governing phenomena out of which that phenomenon is composed and by the way it is composed out of them. The same is true of the latter phe-

nomena, and so on all the way down to fundamental particles or fields governed by a few simple laws, more or less conceived of in present-day theoretical physics.¹

Lewis isn't saying that all we need is physics for our explanatory purposes. For example, we need psychology, and psychology is not the same as particle physics. Rather he is saying that at the fundamental micro-level, physics is the whole story, and that macro-level explanation in the lingo of psychology, geology, economics and so on will talk about phenomena that are constituted by the phenomena described by the fundamental theory of physics. (Thus, for example, he will hold that the minds we describe in the language of psychology and the living organisms we describe in the language of biology are ultimately constituted by the particles and relations that we describe in fundamental physics.) Lewis calls this thesis "The Explanatory Adequacy of Physics."

In his *Summa Theologica* (1a, 2.2), Aquinas has an interlocutor embrace the following argument: ". . . [A]ll natural things can be reduced to one principle, which is nature; and all voluntary things can be reduced to one principle, which is human reason, or will. Therefore there is no need to suppose God's existence." Lewis, and many contemporary philosophical atheists, go further. Believing that voluntary things are themselves ultimately natural phenomena, they will say, roughly: "All things in the world we live in can be reduced to one principle, which is nature. Therefore there is no need to suppose God's existence." (Think of "nature" as shorthand for "fundamental particles or fields governed by a few simple laws.")

Assume, first, that the only facts we have direct perceptual access to are physical facts. It follows that we have no direct access to the kinds of things the Christian supposes to exist (God, angels, souls, the Devil, heaven, etc.). In addition, assume now the "Explanatory Adequacy of Physics." The kinds of things the Christian supposes to exist become *explanatorily superfluous*. Finally, assume — as the earlier sketch envisioned — that evidence for theism must be either perceptual or explanatory. The result is that we are forced to conclude that there is no evidence for theism.

1. David Lewis, "An Argument for Identity Theory," *Philosophical Papers Volume One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 105.

1.3. Evolution

Ask atheists on the street why they don't believe in God and many will say "Because of evolution."

One source of this reaction might be that the atheist takes evolution to be undeniably true, and also takes Christianity to deny evolution. The atheist might then think that since the Christian belief in God has the same (defective) source as their belief that evolution is false (namely, the Bible), both of the beliefs should stand or fall together.

Such sentiments deserve attention, but it is beyond my scope to do so here.² I wish instead to locate a different possible source of the atheistic appeal to evolution, by locating that appeal within the argument I have been pursuing above. For many centuries it seemed like physics could not be explanatorily adequate precisely because it could not explain a certain group of facts, facts which philosophers call "teleological facts." Teleological facts are facts that concern the ends-seeking or goal-directed behavior we find in nature. We are all well aware of certain teleological features of the world. It is just obvious that nature works towards certain ends. Somehow or other the atoms in our body organize themselves during fetal development into a wonderfully organized living system. Somehow or other the bits of an organism's body provide the means for that organism to be well adapted to the demands of its environment, thus allowing it to conduct and achieve goals of food, reproduction, and so on. Somehow or other the little bits of stuff in a seed unfold into a wonderfully organized and geometrically elegant tree or flower. It is hardly surprising that for centuries everyone was thoroughly convinced that the principles governing the motion of little particles (that is, the principles of physics) could not account for teleological achievements like those just cited. It thus seemed to them that we must suppose that there is some sort of "guiding hand" to account for those achievements. Some held that the "guiding hand" could be located in nature itself — on the model of Aristotelian "principles of activity" (we might think of these as "life forces") that were something over and above the fundamental matter. These principles/forces organized matter in ways over and above the dictates of the laws of matter. But there was, alternatively, a compelling motivation to invoke guiding hands driven by a supernatural mind or minds — the guiding hands being something different from the minds immanent in nature.

2. For more on the relation of Christianity and evolution, the reader should consult W. Christopher Stewart's chapter, "Religion and Science" (pp. 318-44 in this volume).

From this perspective, the most pertinent fact about the theory of evolution for the atheist is that it offers the hope to many contemporary intellectuals of explaining the facts of teleology in terms of the causal properties of bits of matter. In the language of Lewis, we may say that it offers the hope of showing how the facts of teleological explanation are constituted by the facts of fundamental physics. In this way, it makes it possible for many to believe in the explanatory adequacy of physics, and (accordingly) in the explanatory redundancy or superfluousness of positing the existence of the Judeo-Christian God.

1.4. *Divine Silence*

The most obvious way that a lack or paucity of evidence might tell against our believing in the existence of God has already been given: We need to have evidence in order to have reason to believe any hypothesis about the world, and in any case where there is none or next to none we are in no good position to reasonably believe. But there is another, more subtle way, that a lack or paucity of evidence might be thought by some to tell in a special way against the Judeo-Christian God. For it has been alleged that if there were a Judeo-Christian God (to whose acts of creation and grace we are beholden and to whom we are in some unnegotiable way responsible), he would be sure to provide us with palpable evidence that he exists. Thus we have:

1. If there were a Judeo-Christian God, he would provide us with palpable evidence of his existence.
2. There is no palpable evidence that he exists.
3. Therefore, there is no Judeo-Christian God.

Why "palpable evidence"? Well, proponents of this line of thought tend to think that if there were a God, he would not merely provide us with a little bit of evidence that he existed; rather, he would provide evidence that is loud and clear. As an atheist I once knew put it, "He would be calling us up on the telephone."³

3. Recently, J. L. Schellenberg has given an extended defense of this argument in his book, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992). A few published responses to Schellenberg (or to arguments of the type he advances) are Michael Murray, "Coercion and the Hiddenness of God," *American Philo-*

Why think that God would make it loud and clear? I suppose the atheist looks to analogues in the world of human relationships. If I want you to love me, then I would be sure to make myself rather visible to you. If I want you to behave in accordance with my wishes, I will make my wishes as evident as possible to you, especially if I am intelligent enough to put them in their most persuasive and attractive form. And so on.

But why bother having recourse to the Divine Silence argument, when the (second) premise alone — that there is no palpable evidence — appears to tell against the rationality of theism in any case? Here are three reasons:

(I) The Divine Silence argument might be used by an atheist to try to bypass any quarrels about whether there is some moderate degree of evidence for God. He may say: "Regardless of whether there is some or no evidence, the fact remains that if there really were a God, he would make his existence known loud and clear. And no one can claim that he does that: if he did, there wouldn't be so many folks like me. Thus if I am right that if he were to exist, he would make his existence known loud and clear, we can settle the matter decisively in favor of atheism."

(II) I have thus far blurred over an important distinction, namely between "What justifies atheism?" and "What justifies agnosticism?" It might be felt that the lack of evidence for theism doesn't justify atheism but only agnosticism. After all, if you can't see over the garden fence, that doesn't make it reasonable for you to believe there is nothing growing in the garden. It only makes it reasonable to suspend judgment over whether there is anything growing in the garden. Likewise, one might argue that the unbeliever who lacks evidence concerning God's existence can at best admit that they do not know whether God exists or not.

The atheist may want to resist the analogy on a number of grounds. Here is one: Does the lack of any evidence whatever warrant only agnosticism about the existence of a world of invisible goblins? In the case of the garden, we know gardens very often have things growing in them, and this prohibits our believing that the garden is empty when confronted with the tall fence. But there is no analogous belief that requires caution in the case of invisible goblins. And similarly, the atheist who believes there is no evidence for God may contend there is no analogous belief — or reason to take theism to be *prima facie* reasonable — in the case of

sophical Quarterly 30:1 (1993): 27-38; Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Argument from Divine Hiddenness," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1996): 433-53; and Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 153ff.

Judeo-Christian doctrine. But here is another point of disanalogy with the garden example: Even were one to think that in general, a lack of evidence only justifies a *suspension of belief* rather than *disbelief*, one may think that owing to the Divine Silence argument, a lack of evidence positively militates in favor of disbelief rather than mere suspension of belief where the existence of God is concerned. If one thinks that a certain kind of thing would elicit our attention were it to exist, then a lack of evidence for it would seem to be especially damning to the idea that it exists. One wouldn't be surprised were flowers to exist over the fence and be hidden from view. But, says the atheist, it would be very surprising for a loving God to exist and yet be hidden from view.

(III) As we shall see, some Christians have held that believers are warranted in their belief that God exists even though they have no evidence for this belief. A proponent of the Divine Silence argument might agree that there are *some* cases in which it is reasonable to hold a belief without evidence. Still, the atheist might continue, when it comes to believing that God exists, one cannot reasonably hold this belief without evidence because one ought to see that if there were a God, he would make known his existence loud and clear.

1.5. *A Priori Knowledge*

The basic argument from no evidence relies on the idea that in order to rationally believe something we need evidence for it. But from the perspective of many philosophers, the latter claim represents a gross overgeneralization. *At first glance*, it appears that there are some claims that we can reasonably believe without looking for evidence for them, it being somehow intrinsically rational to believe them. Take the law of contradiction which says: No claim is both true and false. We find ourselves primitively compelled to believe this claim and would find it strange were anyone to ask us to provide evidence for it. We may well say: "If you don't believe that, I pity you. For if you don't find the law of contradiction compelling all by itself, then it is unlikely that I can find anything more compelling that might lead you to it." In brief, it seems that some propositions are self-evident, meaning roughly: Any minimally rational person with their intellectual faculties intact will, by simply understanding that proposition, come to know it is true. Call the self-evident propositions *a priori axioms*. Once we have a stock of *a priori axioms* that we know, we can come to know further propositions by drawing inferences that are sanc-

tioned by the axioms to move from them to various conclusions. (Think of a rigorous mathematical proof.) Let us call a proposition *knowable a priori* if it is either a self-evident axiom or else deducible from self-evident axioms. A priori knowledge does not appear to require either perceptual evidence or explanatory evidence.

As a result, we can now see that our original atheistic argument was a little quick. For now we can see that there are, in fact, beliefs which do not require evidence of the sort described in that argument. This leads us to wonder whether or not the belief *that God exists* is one of those beliefs. And as long as we are uncertain about this, we should not find the atheistic argument at all convincing.

There is no option but to refine the argument a little. It is, however, not hard to see how this can be done, *viz.*:

1. If theism is worth taking seriously, that is either because theism is knowable *a priori* or else because there is good evidence for theism.
2. Theism is not knowable *a priori*.
3. There is no good evidence for theism.
4. Therefore theism is not worth taking seriously.

The extra wrinkle is clear enough: the atheist is obliged to claim that theism is not knowable *a priori*. But here the atheist is, presumably, fairly well placed. Even Aquinas was at pains to deny that theism is self-evident:

No one can mentally admit the opposite of what is self-evident. . . .
But the opposite of the proposition *God is* can be mentally admitted:
The fool said in his heart, There is no God (Ps. lii. I). Therefore, that
God exists is not self-evident. (Summa Theologica 1a.2.1)

Furthermore, the apparent failure of *a priori* arguments for the existence of a Judeo-Christian God in the history of philosophical theology (and, in particular, the apparent failure of ontological arguments) seems to tell against the claim that God's existence can be derived from self-evident premises. Thus this refinement to the core argument does not immediately make serious trouble for the atheist. Go along with the atheist's contention that there is no evidence and the atheist will say: "That leaves two options. Either theism is irrational or it is *a priori* knowable. But it is not *a priori* knowable, so it is irrational."

2. No Evidence Arguments: Some Critical Remarks

2.1. *A Priori Knowledge*

Let us return to the refined version of the no evidence argument which figured in section 1.5:

1. If theism is worth taking seriously, that is either because theism is knowable a priori or else because there is good evidence for theism.
2. Theism is not knowable a priori.
3. There is no good evidence for theism.
4. Therefore theism is not worth taking seriously.

The premise that most philosophers would likely agree upon is premise 2. But even here, things are not clear-cut. Recall Aquinas's argument against the self-evidence of theism — namely, that there are people who understand and yet do not believe. If self-evidence requires that everyone who understands believe, then hardly anything is self-evident. Take the law of contradiction — that nothing is both true and false. Many people on the street, a lamentable number of undergraduate collegians, and a fair smattering of philosophers understand that proposition perfectly well and yet refrain from believing it. Indeed, philosophers have found weird reasons for withholding belief from a wide variety of propositions that appear to be dead obvious — say, $2 + 2 = 4$,⁴ and good things are good.⁵ A more interesting conception of self-evidence is this:

A proposition is self-evident if it is such that anyone who understands it and is not cognitively deficient will find that proposition *primitively compelling*.

Yes, there are fools of sufficient delinquency who deny certain laws of logic even when they understand them. But on the latter conception of self-evidence, these propositions are still self-evident. Similarly, the mere fact that there are fools who say in their heart that there is no God does not *entail* that theism does not enjoy the status described above. Now perhaps Aquinas — in the company of most contemporary philosophers —

4. See Hartry Field's *Science Without Numbers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

5. Consider the noncognitivist handlings of deductive inference and apparently logical truths involving the subject matter for which they wish to be noncognitivist.

is right when he says that the nature of human reason is such that it is not disposed to find theism primitively compelling. Perhaps he would be right to deny that the failure of various humans to find theism primitively compelling is best explained as an overlay of delinquency upon the natural light of reason. But the core consideration that he offers in favor of this is hardly decisive. Perhaps Christian philosophers in this century have been a little quick to concede that theism is not knowable a priori.

2.2. *Evidence, a Priori Knowability, and the Gift of Faith*

Most Christians on the street, upon understanding the argument from lack of evidence would reply "But what about faith?" And most atheistic philosophers would reply:

"Without a priori knowability and without evidence, theism is not intellectually respectable. Perhaps by 'faith' you mean 'Well I believe it anyway, even though it has nothing going for it by way of evidence or by way of a priori attraction.' In short that means 'I believe it even though it's thoroughly irrational.' But no one can reasonably insist that I be thoroughly irrational. Perhaps you don't think faith is thoroughly irrational. If so please explain to me how faith — in the absence of evidence and a priori knowability — escapes the clutches of irrationality."

In support of the Christian on the street, it might be useful to lay out a model of faith that makes vivid how faith can escape a charge of irrationality. Let us return to the conception of self-evidence just presented and note a needed refinement. What is self-evident for one species/kind of individual might well fail to be self-evident for another. Perhaps God could make a race of skeptics that, while understanding a great deal, found nothing primitively compelling, nothing flat obvious. If a member of that race failed to find " $2 + 2 = 4$ " primitively compelling, that could not be properly explained as a result of any deficiency interfering with natural, God-given, belief-forming mechanisms. Similarly, perhaps, there could be a race that found more things primitively compelling. To take a boring example, human beings do not find complicated true sums (like $117896 + 132587 = 250483$) primitively compelling — though of course they can deduce it via primitively compelling moves from primitively compelling starting points. But for all that there could be a gifted race of beings that do find it primitively and immediately compelling.

Now suppose Aquinas is right that theism is not primitively compelling for humans. The natural light — which means, roughly, the dispositions accorded to human nature to find certain things obvious — may not illuminate theism. Nevertheless, perhaps God could make a species for which theism is self-evident. Indeed, perhaps he has. Perhaps theism is self-evident for angels but not for humans. Thinking about things in this way, it is quite easy to think of faith as a gift of grace that confers intellectually respectable belief. Take a race for which theism is primitively compelling. I take it that theism is reasonable for that race, in just that way that it is reasonable for us to believe what is flat obvious. Assume that we as a race do not by nature find theism primitively compelling. Think now of faith as a gift by which our nature is transformed into that of the former race. We become, through the gift of faith, just like them. If their theism is respectable, and we become just like them with respect to our epistemic relation to theism, then so is ours. It thus seems relatively clear that the reasonableness of theism requires neither evidence nor accessibility by the natural light of reason accorded to human beings.

The atheist may complain at this point: “But how do I know that your faith is a gift as opposed to an illusion.” That is precisely a complaint that one should expect from someone who lacks the gift of faith. Consider by analogy a race of sceptics who cannot bring themselves to believe in arithmetic or the laws of logic. They come across human beings and notice that those beings feel compelled to believe in various claims of arithmetic and logic. They then say to those human beings: “How do you know that this is not an illusion as opposed to a power of knowing how things really are?” The humans will not have much to say back. They will say: “It just seems obvious and compelling to us.” But that will hardly quell the suspicions of the sceptic. Indeed, unless the sceptic acquires certain abilities, there may be nothing much directly to say to the sceptic. But our inability to pacify a race of arithmetical and logical sceptics need not oblige us to stop believing in a host of propositions of arithmetic and logic. Similarly, our inability to pacify a group of atheists who lack the gift of faith need not oblige us to become less convinced of theism.

2.3. Evidence for Theism

We now turn our attention from premise 2 of the argument to premise 3 which, you will recall, claims that there is no good evidence for theism. Many Christians will claim to have had some religious experiences and

treat such experiences as reasons for their belief. Some of these experiences verge on the mystical, and some do not. Some people claim to see God at work in the world in roughly the way that we see a mind at work in a body. Now of course in the crudest sense of “observe” we do not observe God in such a case. But neither do we observe other minds in the crudest sense of “observe.” In both cases, however, the perceptual experience is structured by the fact that it represents mind — in one case natural, in the other supernatural — as immanent in that with which one is confronted.

If the atheist thinks that there is no way that such experiences could provide evidence for theism, it is incumbent upon him to say why. I myself know of no principled reason for denying that such experiences could provide evidence. But we can of course still very well understand the atheist who complains:

“Well, it is possible that others have evidence. But I don't have these experiences you speak of. And how am I to know whether, in actual fact, anyone is really getting evidence for anything? All sorts of people report conflicting experiences. I have no idea who to trust. No one stands out as particularly trustworthy. Thus I am not being presented with anything that you can properly regard as evidence for me.”

What should we make of such a speech? One reaction might be to attempt to invoke our notion of explanatory evidence. That is to say, we might think it reasonable to expect people to believe the core doctrines of the Judeo-Christian religion on the basis of its explanatory power. I myself am somewhat dubious about this tack. Christians shouldn't believe in the explanatory completeness of physics. Having come to believe Christian doctrine, they should believe that God explains the structure of nature's laws, that God sometimes overrides nature by miraculous intervention, and so on. Such claims put Christian doctrine to explanatory work. But let us distinguish the question of whether Christian doctrine is explanatory from the question of whether it is reasonable to expect people to believe Christianity on the basis of explanatory considerations. Many contemporary philosophers — including Christian philosophers — are pretty convinced that one cannot reasonably expect people to come to believe Christian doctrine on the basis of its explanatory power. (It should be acknowledged, though, that some other thinkers have a great deal more confidence in the explanatory virtues of theism. I invite the reader to look at the chapter on Miracles, Theistic Arguments, and the Fine-Tuning Ar-

gument as a means of forming for herself a judgment concerning whether we can reasonably believe a segment of Christian doctrine on the basis of explanatory considerations.)

Those who agree with me that those arguments do not, on their own, make belief in Christianity reasonable will hold that if someone has no compelling religious experiences and lacks the gift of faith then he is indeed poorly placed to reasonably treat anything as evidence for theism. An analogy: If a piece of music is truly beautiful and an aesthetic dullard in a world of largely aesthetically challenged people doesn't see it, what is one to do? One can hardly argue that person into a change of mind. One might say "Well, the fact that the music is truly beautiful is the best explanation of why seventeen percent of the population says it is." But surely the dullard would be quite reasonable to balk at our trying to bully him into a change of mind with such explanatory considerations. Nor will it be of much use to say "Just listen. Just listen. Don't you see?" Only when "aesthetic vision" is something that we can take for granted among the population will such pleas make any sense. What to do? Here is the best we can do: hope that he acquires the right kind of aesthetic appreciation and do what one can to provide an environment that makes it most likely that such a gift will befall him.

2.4. *Divine Silence*

The reader will recall a different way that a lack of palpable evidence has been used against theism. The idea is that if God existed, he would be kind enough to make his existence obvious. Many theists I know will complain "But he did make it obvious to some of us." To sidestep this complaint, let us suppose that the atheist is one who thinks that if the Christian God existed, he would make his existence pretty much obvious to *everyone*. The Christian's response to this complaint will likely be relatively short, I suspect. According to many strands of Christianity at least, it is essential to God's plans for humanity that human beings freely choose to embrace him. It's fine that, having chosen to embrace him, his existence becomes obvious. But it does not seem that we could very well *freely* choose to embrace him if his nature and plans for us were all clearly and distinctly manifest to everyone. Just as a marriage to someone would not be freely chosen if it were made perfectly clear from the outset that the partner would destroy you should you choose not to marry, so a decision to love and serve God would not be freely chosen if it were, for ex-

ample, always preceded by a full guided tour of Hell. While the spectacles of faith may render God's existence manifest, it is important to God's plans for free creatures and the love and devotion he desires that one's vision be less than perfect prior to putting those spectacles on.

3. **Arguments from the Character of Religion**

In myriad ways, atheists have found supposed or obvious aspects of religion to count against the respectability of religious belief. Let me briefly examine three such ways.

3.1. *The Evil Done in the Name of Religion*

Much evil has been done in the name of religion. Even within the history of the Judeo-Christian religion, there is little doubt that a good deal of evil has been done in the name of Christianity. Christian institutions have suffered from a fair share of corruption. Christian institutions have endured a fair share of evil people in positions of power. Christian people have expressed a fair share of hatred on grounds of religious sentiments. Christian people have done a fair share of killing on grounds of theological squabbles. Christian people have perpetrated a fair share of brutality in the name of evangelism. Christian people have supported a fair share of evil regimes on the grounds of religious interests.

I suppose that the atheist might thus argue:

1. If there were a God, he would not allow his institutions on earth to perpetrate evil in his name.
2. Christian institutions frequently perpetrate evil in the name of God.
3. Therefore, there is no God.

3.2. *The Diversity of Religious Belief*

Human beings exhibit wildly different religious beliefs. Some find in this fact a reason for discounting any religious belief in general and hence Judeo-Christian religious belief in particular. The tacit line of thought is not hard to understand.

Let's begin this argument by assuming, as the theist seems to do,

that we human beings have some ability to perceive, figure out, or somehow know the truth about supernatural reality. If we really did have such an ability, then we should expect that human beings would come to some measure of agreement about the nature of supernatural reality. (An analogy: Human beings have an ability to perceive the truth about the spatial configuration of the material objects around them — that the bookshelf is to the right of the door, for example — and because of this there is agreement among them in their beliefs about these matters.) But there clearly is no agreement in the beliefs that humans have about supernatural reality. So it seems that human beings have no distinctive ability to perceive, figure out, or somehow know the truth about supernatural reality. Once we come to see that human beings as a species have no such ability, we must react to anyone who claims to know about supernatural reality by (a) distrusting that person, or else (b) thinking that this person is very special in having a distinctive ability most others do not have. Faced with a glittering array of conflicting religious claims, the outsider seems to have no good reason to think that any particular claimant has special powers of this sort and very good reason to think that human beings in general have no such special powers. In this situation it looks like the right thing to do is to distrust all of them.

3.3. *The Psychological Origin of Religious Belief*

Many atheists find extremely plausible various psychological accounts of the origin of religious belief. Feuerbach thought that religious belief is best explained as a primitive form of self-knowledge, where one projects an idealized conception of one's own nature as if it belonged to something outside of oneself. Bertrand Russell, more mundanely, thought that religious belief was best explained as an expression of human beings' self-importance, whereby humans think themselves too important to enjoy a mere passing place in the "flux of nature." Another theme in Russell — one that is also extremely prevalent among many atheists — is the idea that religion is a coping strategy whereby human beings come to grips with their deep fear of death.

For simplicity's sake, let us focus on the latter explanation. Suppose that human religion is best explained as a coping strategy for death anxiety. Were someone to be convinced of that, it is not hard to see why he does not take religious doctrines very seriously. In general, we think that our knowledge must somehow depend on the subject matter we claim to

have knowledge about. If people have knowledge about chairs, they form and maintain beliefs because the chairs exist in such-and-such a way. If someone's belief about chairs were produced and maintained by certain *anxieties* (he believes there is a chair nearby because he is extremely anxious that he will never sit down and wants to relieve that anxiety), then one would hardly accord that belief very much respect. We know of course that a belief may initially come about for silly reasons and then acquire respectability later on. One might believe at one time that one will soon be rich on the basis of one's horoscope and later on learn that a rich uncle died. But when a belief is grounded in things which have nothing to do with the subject matter that the belief is about, it does not look like the belief is deserving of very much respect at all. Thus, religious belief grounded in "death anxiety" does not deserve very much respect at all.

4. Arguments from the Character of Religion: Some Critical Remarks

Many Christians will certainly be troubled by the evils done by religious institutions that they believe to have been established by God. But this is a special case of a more general concern: How can we make sense of God's permitting horror and corruption among objects of his creation when it was within his power to prevent this? I recommend that the reader turn to Daniel Howard-Snyder's chapter on the problem of evil for some guidance on this difficult issue. How about the remaining arguments concerning the character of religion?

4.1. *Religious Diversity*

No one can deny that religions are diverse. Nor should we place too much weight on responses of the sort "Well, they are all basically saying the same thing — that there is something out there." To suppose that they are all "basically saying the same thing" is to purge religious doctrine of the details that its own proponents live by and find important and compelling. I do not want to deny that the fact of such diversity merits attention from Christian believers. Nor do I pretend to have no sympathy at all with atheists like Russell, who when faced with the facts of diversity respond with such cynicism as the following: "In practice people choose the book considered sacred by the community in which they are born and out of that

book choose the parts they like, ignoring the others.”⁶ But let us remember that atheists and theists alike hold and feel justified in holding convictions on a variety of topics where diversity abounds. Consider the diversity of moral convictions, or the diversity of convictions about economics, about politics, about philosophy, about certain aspects of civil war history, and so on. Conviction in the face of diversity is a familiar commonplace in our epistemic lives. We Christians ought thus say to the atheist: “Why do you choose to sneer at religious belief on the basis of facts about diversity, when you yourself cling tenaciously to certain convictions in the face of diversity with commonplace frequency?” Here, as elsewhere, atheological arguments are very far from being decisive. (See also Timothy O'Connor's chapter, “Religious Pluralism,” pp. 165-81 in this volume.)

4.2. The Psychological Origins of Belief

Turning finally to the third category of argument: Criticisms of religion based on accounts of psychological origin hold little sway among professional philosophers. It is all too easy to come up with speculative psychologies concerning the origin of this or that belief. But the process of arriving at such speculations seems to me and many like me altogether too undisciplined to be worthy of serious respect.

We ought also to recognize that many altogether respectable beliefs had a shaky psychological origin. To discard a theory on the basis of its origin — say a scientific theory on account of the fact that it was first thought of during a dream — is to commit what is known as the “genetic fallacy.” The category of arguments that we are considering run some considerable risk of committing the genetic fallacy as well.

5. Conclusion

It is no surprise to anyone to learn that atheism is widespread in the contemporary academic community. What is surprising is to see how tenuous the arguments which favor atheism are. In this chapter we have taken a brief look at some of the ones more commonly offered and shown why they are, on the whole, something far less than rationally compelling.

6. Bertrand Russell, “An Outline of Intellectual Rubbish,” *Unpopular Essays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), 81.