

Skepticism about the Supernatural

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ABSTRACT Atheism's dispute with religion primarily concerns supernaturalism. There are several good reasons, conclusive reasons perhaps, to skeptically reject the existence of a supernatural god. This essay describes the nature of the disagreement, the rational rules that ought to govern the debate, and the skeptical conclusions reached in the debates about god. The disagreement is between defenders of supernaturalism who believe in god and skeptical atheists not persuaded by the reasons offered for belief in god. The rational rules that ought to govern this debate are variations on the common sense idea that we should seek positive explanations for things since something can't come from nothing (the positive principle of sufficient reason) and its corollary refusal to accept increased mystery as a good explanation. This refusal of mystery is developed in six negative rules of reason. Five core arguments for a supernatural god (the arguments from mystery, creation, design, revelation, and morality) are outlined. Each argument is unreasonable because it extensively violates the six negative rules of reason. Furthermore, naturalism is capable of offering its own reasonable positions on the existence of mystery, the universe and its laws, religious experiences, and human morality. Because the core theological arguments fail to be rationally defensible, skepticism about a supernatural god and acceptance of naturalism is more reasonable.

1. The God Debates

Atheism's dispute with religion primarily concerns supernaturalism. There are several good reasons, conclusive reasons perhaps, to skeptically reject the existence of a supernatural god. This essay describes the nature of the disagreement, the rational rules that ought to govern the debate, the five core arguments that theology offers for god's existence, and the skeptical conclusions reached in these debates about god.¹

Supernaturalism assumes that nature and humans exist, just as naturalism does. Supernaturalism additionally asserts that a god exists beyond nature. A supernatural god has no basic natural properties (mass, physical energies, spatio-temporal dimensions, etc.) and does not partially overlap with nature. Pantheisms and panentheisms propose that god and nature overlap or intertwine in various ways, but supernaturalism is this essay's focus. Nor will we discuss interpretations of religion that hold that religious language should not be understood as making existential claims about god's existence. Inspirational, metaphorical, and poetic powers of god-language are not in dispute. Atheists have long suspected that the genuine meanings of religious language lie in its imaginative and aesthetic properties, since religious language can't be describing or referring to a god that doesn't exist.

The god debates are about the existence of god. This essay explains reasons to be skeptical towards supernaturalism. The skeptic shares some burden of justification (not the burden of "proof" however), along with the religious believer, in debates over god's existence. The effort of theology is to offer reasons for accepting religious claims, so the reasoned opposition to religious claims is atheology. Atheology offers reasons for skeptically doubting religious claims. Atheology is not necessary for atheism; most people who lack belief in god aren't interested in the god debates and may disdain religion for any number of causes. Atheology comprises just one aspect of all the ways that religions can be criticized. For example, religions can be criticized for perpetrating injustices and crimes, and religious people can be criticized for bad conduct. Atheology is a part of religious criticism, but it narrowly focuses on doubting claims made by religious people about the existence and activities of supernatural powers. Of course, some reasons are

better than others. Theology elevates into philosophical theology when intellectual specialists try to design the best rational justifications for religious beliefs about god. Similarly, philosophical atheology consists of designing the most rational justifications for skeptically rejecting the existence of gods. Since rules of rationality play the crucial role in philosophical theology and philosophical atheology, settling on basic rational rules acceptable to both sides would be extremely useful, so this task is taken up in the second section.

There are two kinds of philosophical atheology: “negative” and “positive” philosophical atheology. Negative philosophical atheology consists of showing that positive arguments offered by theology are unreasonable failures. Negative philosophical atheology is sufficient to lead towards a defensible skeptical atheism and a rational preference for naturalism over supernaturalism. Positive philosophical atheology constructs independent arguments showing why all available knowledge and reason indicates that it is highly probable or even provable that god does not exist. The typical logical schema of negative philosophical atheology is: Reasoning R could support a particular god’s existence; but such reasoning fails; therefore, be skeptical about that sort of god. The typical logical schema of positive philosophical atheology is: If a certain kind of god does exist, then evidence E would be obtained; evidence E is not obtained; therefore, be skeptical about this kind of god. Another variety of positive philosophical atheology has this form: A specific kind of god has this set S of attributes; set S leads to logical contradictions; therefore, be skeptical about this specific god. There are a very large number of impressive arguments in negative and positive philosophical atheology, too many to even list here.² After describing the rules of reason for the god debates, the rest of this essay is a basic exercise in negative philosophical atheology, to show why the five major theological arguments for a traditional supernatural god are all unreasonable.

Successful philosophical atheology accumulates into a sound defense of naturalism as the reasonable alternative to supernaturalism, and that is why skeptical atheists generally prefer to be naturalists. Since skeptics believe that nature exists (a sane and common sense belief shared even by supernaturalists), their doubt towards supernaturalism leaves naturalism as the default rational stance. Successful positive philosophical atheology goes the farthest to defend and apply natural scientific explanations, so it blends into the effort to provide philosophical naturalism with firm foundations. For the purposes of this essay, however, nothing about scientific methodology or the naturalistic worldview are presumed.

2. Rules of Rationality

The justification for skeptically doubting god is the judgment that proposals that a supernatural god exists are unreasonable because they violate common sense. All five of the core arguments for a supernatural god (mystery, creation, design, revelation, and morality) extensively violate basic rules of rationality.

How does reason help decide the controversy between supernaturalism and skepticism? Both sides claim to be rational and supportable with good reasons. Can there be agreement on what counts as reason? Well, what does it mean to be reasonable? Reasonable explanations partially reduce mystery; unreasonable “explanations” embrace or increase mystery. There are some basic ways that reason demands explanations for things. Ordinary positive rules of reason include these sorts of rules:

- (a) An event must have a prior cause.
- (b) The origin of a thing is due to something else.
- (c) Something contingent (it didn’t necessarily have to exist) must be the responsibility of something else.

These positive rules of reason are just different ways of demanding explanations for the sorts of things that deserve explanation. They are, in a sense, all variations on a basic idea that something can’t come from nothing. That some particular thing now exists may be mysterious enough. To further think that

this something just popped into existence for no reason, from “nothing,” only increases mystery. Traditional theology often appeals to this kind of common sense rule as the positive “principle of sufficient reason.” Theology applies this principle in designing many of its arguments, and demands that naturalism also respect this principle.

Requiring both sides of the god debate to respect this principle of sufficient reason and its corollaries seems useful and wise. Philosophical theology and scientific naturalism already accept it. Indeed, philosophical theology is premised on demanding (divine) explanations for the world and everything in it. Likewise, scientific inquiry is grounded on an endless search for more and more (natural) explanations for the wonders of the world around us. There are limitations to the application of this principle of sufficient reason, as theology has always held, because some special kinds of things are exempt. The only sorts of things that are exempt from rational explanation are necessary and self-sufficient things: things that are neither events, exist in time, nor dependent. Such things are instead categorized as “timeless,” “eternal,” “necessary,” “absolute,” and “self-sufficient.” These things cannot have explanations, because they necessarily must exist. If it is impossible to deny their existence, there is no need to explain them by appealing to something else – nothing else could possibly create them or help them to exist. Only such necessary and self-sufficient things could theoretically be exempt from these positive rules of reason. Notoriously, some theological arguments claim that god is precisely the sort of thing that deserves this exemption. However, theological arguments are never exempt from the negative rules of reason, described next.

Common sense rationality refuses to accept increased mystery as a good explanation. This refusal can be elaborated into six negative rules of reason:

1. Don't accept mere mystery: Reject an “explanation” that consists simply of putting a label on something beyond human conceptualization or comprehension.
2. Don't accept contradiction: Reject an “explanation” that requires a logical contradiction, since that creates another mystery.
3. Don't accept repetition: Reject an “explanation” that requires the prior truth of the explanation, since that repeats the mystery.
4. Don't accept mysterious causes: Reject a “causal” relationship between two things that have absolutely nothing in common, since that creates another mystery.
5. Don't accept arbitrary justification: Reject an “explanation” where reasons given in its support can equally support rival explanations, since that leaves more mystery.
6. Don't permit unjustified exemptions: Reject an “explanation” that requires special exemption from a rational principle used to support the explanation, since that increases mystery.

Sophisticated logical fallacies can be developed from these basic rules of reason. For example, Rule 2 calls for the logical axiom that a proposition and its negation cannot both be true at the same time. Rule 3 is the idea behind logical rules forbidding begging the question and circular reasoning. Logical rules generate deductive inferences from premises to a conclusion. Additional rules for inductive reasoning and inferences to explanations (abductive reasoning) are also important to scientific method.

We do not need to appeal to sophisticated logical and scientific principles here. Neither complex logical systems, scientific methodology, nor scientific conclusions need to be presumed. Theology cannot complain that anything scientific or naturalistic is being used to beg the question against god from the start. Nothing beyond basic common sense is needed in order to show how traditional supernaturalism extensively violates rationality.

3. The Mystery Argument for God

SUMMARY: Supernaturalism proposes that god really exists out there in the mysteries beyond human knowledge. The skeptical atheist points out that there probably is only more nature. The supernaturalist cannot label the mystery as god (violating Rule 1). The supernaturalist cannot prove god exists instead of more nature. No one can admit deep mystery and then claim to know god in the mystery (violating Rule 2). Also, the mystery itself cannot supply enough evidence to decide between supernaturalism and naturalism (by Rule 5). Where science now falls short of reasonable explanation, proposing god as the explanation only adds mystery (violating Rule 1 again), or proposes a mysterious causal relationship (violating Rule 4), or assumes that science can never explain some things which religion can (violating Rule 6). Skepticism towards the supernatural is more reasonable.

The mystery argument proposes that since deep mystery exists, it is reasonable to believe in God. Why is belief in God needed? It is reasonable to accept the existence of deep mystery – mystery about what lies beyond current knowledge, and what may lie beyond all future knowledge. Common sense understands that our best human explanations still leave plenty of mystery. Reasonable people can respect and even enjoy the existence of mystery. However, calling a mystery “god” is not an explanation of a mystery (violating Rule 1). Furthermore, just because you accept the existence of mystery does not mean you accept the existence of god. The supernaturalist cannot argue that anyone who accepted the existence of mystery beyond knowledge automatically admits the existence of god. Precisely because everyone admits the deep mystery, no one can claim to know that god is out there without contradiction (violating Rule 2). Also, the supernaturalist would have to prove that this mystery does not consist of just more unexplored nature and that naturalism is false. The supernaturalist cannot prove naturalism false, after confessing the depth of the mystery (violating Rule 5). Since that proof is not possible simply given the existence of mystery, deep mystery only produces a skeptical stand-off between naturalism and supernaturalism.

It cannot help the supernaturalist to argue that it must be a supernatural god out there in the mystery on the grounds that god is the simplest explanation. This argument does respect reason: using god for an explanation is not a problem in itself; and simpler explanations should be preferred. Between two explanations that can enjoy the same support from evidence, prefer the simpler explanation (this is a specific variation on Rule 5). The criteria for “simplest explanation” in the supernaturalist’s argument here must be a principle that a simple explanation adds the fewest things in the explanation. Adding just one god to nature does sound pretty simple, but this argument doesn’t actually help. The naturalist replies that naturalism is even simpler than supernaturalism, since it proposes that there is only more nature out there in the mystery, hence adding nothing to nature. Nature plus a supernatural god cannot be a simpler explanation than just lots of nature. Furthermore, given available evidence so far from our investigations, only more nature has been continually discovered and nothing supernatural has been empirically verified, so it is more reasonable to think that only more nature awaits further investigation.

It is precisely this standoff, where neither naturalism nor supernaturalism can be proven true, where skeptical atheism properly begins: the nature that we do know does exist, there is probably much more nature awaiting exploration, and the rest is doubt. Mysteries abound; there are many things that science has not yet satisfactorily explained. Premature declarations that “science will never explain X” does not give adequate rational justification for god’s existence, however. Science often explains something that a previous generation of scientists thought impossible to explain. The “god of the gaps” strategy of arguing that god is at work wherever human knowledge is incomplete is a violation of reason. This strategy consists of either proposing that every mystery must hide god behind it (violating Rule 1), or proposing that a mysterious feature of nature is caused by god (violating Rule 4), or assuming that there are some things that science can never explain but religion can (violating Rule 6).

Reason can recognize the existence of mystery, but that is quite different from recognizing a god or recognizing a god’s activity. Reason cannot accept mystery, or a label on that mystery, as an “explanation”

of mystery. While postulating god as an explanation shows respect for positive reason, science's efforts to penetrate deeper into nature does so as well, and does a better job.

4. The Creation argument for God

SUMMARY: Natural things exist and need explanation. Supernaturalism proposes that the whole of nature itself needs explanation because it is an event in time with an origin and cannot be timeless or infinitely old. The skeptic points out that the supernaturalist must first prove that time is a basic property of nature and that nature is not eternal in duration. The supernaturalist cannot prove either of these points. Reason and logic cannot help here; wholes may have properties that none of its parts have. Science cannot help here, because its understanding of the Big Bang is incomplete. Our universe may have no origin in time (if time originated with the universe); time might not be a real property of the universe; or more eternally older nature lies beyond our universe. Unable to prove that nature as a whole requires explanation, supernaturalism's god hypothesis is not needed. In any case, a supernatural god could not cause nature. This god would itself need a creator, and so on, unless a special exemption from positive reason is sought (violating Rule 6). Proposing a timelessly eternal god makes matters worse; there is no time when nature's creation can occur (violating Rules 1, 2, and 4). Also, divine and natural properties are too different for any causal relation (violating Rule 4) and a god could not create nature from nothing either (violating Rule 4).

The supernaturalist believes that a supernatural god created nature. By "nature" is meant everything natural that may exist: our visible universe plus the invisible "megaverse" that was also created by the Big Bang, plus the multiverse, if other universes exist too. Why would nature need a creator? Recall the three positive rules of reasons mentioned earlier: an event must have a prior cause; the origin of a thing is due to something else; and something that didn't have to exist must be the responsibility of something else. The universe appears to be an event, with an origin in the Big Bang, and perhaps nature didn't have to exist. Hypothesizing a god beyond our universe might be reasonable, so long as nature as a whole cannot be self-sufficient.

This creation explanation therefore depends on the supernaturalist first proving that nature as a whole is not timeless, necessary, and self-sufficient. How could the supernaturalist prove this? Although individual things within exist in time, have origins, and are not self-sufficient, nature as a whole may not have the same properties. Wholes can have properties that none of their parts possess, so an inference that the whole of nature must be as contingent or dependent commits a logical fallacy, unless the supernaturalist can prove otherwise. Time might not be a real property of the universe taken as a whole; science may someday agree since time might only exist within the universe (so that there cannot be a "time" before the Big Bang) or time might not even be physically real at all (just an illusion of organisms). Alternatively, our universe may have been caused by something naturally vaster and infinitely eternal in duration. Supernaturalists try to argue that nothing real can exist for an infinite amount of time, by claiming that it is impossible to conceive how an infinite amount of time has passed before the present time. (Interestingly, this is a problem for any temporal god too.) However, the very definition of infinity requires that conceiving its completion is impossible (if conceiving such a completion were possible, it wouldn't be a genuine infinity), so this argument misuses the concept of infinity. Either way, nature may be all that there is, because it may be either ultimately timeless or eternal, and hence entirely self-sufficient. Once again we see how the supernaturalist cannot disprove the possibility that there is only more nature to be explored. Naturally, the supernaturalist prefers that god enjoy the properties of timelessness or eternity, but there is no need for a god hypothesis if nature could have those properties.

Although supernaturalism cannot get the creation argument going in the first place because nature may need no explanation, adding a supernatural god still violates reason as well. Suppose a god is postulated as nature's cause. To avoid the problem that positive reason still demands another creator for god, and so on, this creator god needs a special exemption from the positive rules of reason (violating Rule 6). If this god has existed for an infinite amount of time, then the mysterious question arises about why God

waited an infinite amount of time before creating the world (violating Rule 1). On the other hand, if god is timelessly eternal, then there is no point in time when god creates the universe, leaving the universe's origin in mystery (violating Rule 5). The supernaturalist only makes matters worse by then claiming that we can know that a special exemption from reason is required for god because something must have created the universe (but this is just the claim to be established, violating Rule 3). There is only one way for the supernaturalist to avoid these problems from the start: god must be first hypothesized as a timeless, necessary, and self-sufficient being. On this theory, nature needs explanation while god does not.

However, the hypothesis that nature had an external supernatural cause violates reason in several ways. Creation must come from something; if the universe can come from nothing, then no god is needed to explain its origin (and so this god explanation violates Rule 5). For supernatural creation to happen, either this god created nature out of itself, or god created it from nothingness (or god made nature out of some other god, but this non-traditional view is set aside here). If god created nature out of itself, god would have to create basic natural properties (mass, physical energy, space-time dimensions, etc.) from divinely supernatural properties. This process could not happen since natural and divine properties have nothing in common, and this god explanation violates Rule 4. This god may be timelessly eternal, but a causal creation happening at no time or in no time is a mystery (violating Rules 1, 2, and 4). If god created nature from nothingness, this explanation supposes that god can have a causal relationship with nothingness (violating Rule 4). If the supernaturalist asserts that god has a causal relationship with nature in order to create it, then this explanation relies on a principle that one thing can have a causal relationship with another thing before the second thing even exists (and so this god explanation violates Rule 4). If the supernaturalist instead proposes that god created nature without having any causal relationship with anything, then this creation would take place without a cause. But if nature can come into existence without a cause, then no god is needed (and so this god explanation violates Rule 5). If the supernaturalist finally asserts that god's creation of nature is the one special instance of a creation happening without any causal relationship involved, then this god explanation violates Rule 6.

Because a supernatural "explanation" cannot explain nature's origin, it could be inferred that nature has no external explanation: only more nature can explain nature. This is another way of confirming the naturalist's notion that only more nature lies out there in the mystery. This Anti-Creationist Argument prevents other arguments about a creator god from getting off the ground. For example, an argument that god must have created the universe's ordered design is already refuted. There are additional problems with this design argument, as well.

5. The Design Argument for God

SUMMARY: Supernaturalism proposes that a creator god is responsible for the universe's specific order. The universe by itself needs no explanation of supernatural creation (by the Anti-Creation argument). The design argument hence starts by making two claims: that the universe's lawful order is highly improbable, and that this order demands explanation. The first claim is not supported by either reason or science so god is not needed (violating Rule 5). The second claim assumes without argument a principle that "order cannot come from disorder" (violating Rule 1). Furthermore, if a creator god is highly ordered too, it would need a creator as well. Avoiding this regress problem is impossible: proposing a maximally ordered god violates Rules 1 and 6; while proposing a simple god to create order violates Rules 5 and 6.

The supernaturalist believes that a god is responsible for creating the complex order of nature. The design argument proposes that order requires intelligent design, by appealing to the principle that anything possessing impressive order is highly improbable and cannot originate from very simple order or no order at all. Of course, higher ordered things can probably create similarly highly ordered things. Unless the supernaturalist can first prove that there is no complex eternal nature responsible for the creation of our universe, there is nothing to explain. Until the supernaturalist can refute the Anti-Creation argument, the god hypothesis is not needed.

In any case, this principle, that improbable order cannot arise from disorder, itself requires rational justification (it is not among the basic Rules of Reason, nor is it a specific variation of any of them). Intuition and ordinary experience inspires this principle, since we rarely observe complexity arising from simplicity in ordinary human time-frames. However, human observation cannot justify a general principle like “no order from disorder” because human perception is not always the best guide to large time scales and very distant events. Supernaturalists must admit this fact about the limitations of ordinary human observation, since divine creations and miraculous interventions are not frequently observed either. Supernaturalists must supply a rational justification for “no order from disorder” for another reason besides the fact that human intuition is unreliable. The opposite notion that sometimes order can gradually arise from disorder under certain conditions (for example, in evolutionary processes) does not violate any basic Rule of Reason, and it does not violate any other logical axiom or mathematical principle either. “Order can arise from disorder” could, for all we know, actually be correct, and if the supernaturalist must deny it absolutely without exception then a good justification is necessary or else that principle’s truth remains a mystery (violating Rule 1).

Setting aside the problem of justifying the “no order from disorder” principle, there is a further problem with god creating natural order. If god created nature’s order, then god presumably must possess impressive order instead of being quite simple. If god were actually quite simple, then something quite simple could create impressive order, but then nature would not need a god explanation since it could have started quite simple and become complex all by itself (hence proposing god here violates rule 5). The supernaturalist could assert that god is a special case where a simple thing creates greater complexity, but that violates Rule 6. The supernaturalist could distinguish between complexity and high order, claiming that god is very simple yet highly ordered, but trying to conceive how something could have no parts yet be highly ordered is mysterious (violating Rule 1). If god has impressive order and complexity, and there can be no order from disorder, then the supernaturalist’s argument applies to god too, and hence god must have been intelligently designed by something else (and so on, for an infinite regress, violating Rule 5). If the supernaturalist argues that god is a special case that was not intelligently designed, that violates Rule 6. The supernaturalist might assert that a maximally ordered thing must exist to stop the infinite regress, which is god. The explanation that god is the “maximally ordered” thing that created nature’s order attempts to conceptualize a “maximally ordered” thing. We here encounter one of those “perfections” of god sometimes postulated by sophisticated theology. Trying to conceive of a “maximally ordered” thing is mysterious; the “god” label is here attached to a mystery (violating Rule 1).

As a special case of the design argument, consider the fine-tuning argument. This argument points to the delicate arrangement of basic laws of nature permitting life to exist in our universe. Supposedly, any minor divergence from these basic laws forbids life. Since life does exist, the universe might look “fine-tuned” (by a divine creator) to ensure that just the right basic laws prevail in our universe. The “fine-tuning” argument for god is a recent application of the “no order from disorder” rule. The fine-tuning argument is thus already defeated by the reasoning above. However, additional scrutiny reveals fine-tuning’s particular faults, because there might not be anything that needs explaining and hence no need to propose a god explanation in the first place.

First, this argument is based on current scientific knowledge of the laws of nature involved with the Big Bang. Cosmological understanding of the Big Bang is in its infancy; calculations of the “probability” of our universe’s laws are highly speculative and revisable. Second, current Big Bang theory implies that most of the universe created by the Big Bang is beyond our visible universe, having exploded off in other directions so fast that its light can never reach us. For all we know, basic physical laws may vary widely across all that “megaverse” and we happen to live in a portion hospitable for the emergence of our kind of life. Third, this design argument only considers life like us. Other kinds of life, unknown to us, might be possible in other parts of the megaverse, or in different kinds of universes, so this universe did not have to turn out just right for us. In other words, we emerged as we did to survive in this universe, and if the universe had been different, other life-forms may have emerged in those. There may be nothing special

about our form of life, and getting this universe “just right” for us does not need to be viewed as anything special requiring explanation.

Fourth, because we may be an accidental product and might not be special at all, this design argument specifically proposes a supernatural creator that personally cares enough to intentionally and intelligently ensure the creation of a universe for life like us. The design argument is therefore actually an argument designed to support a theistic creator god (rather than just any “god”, such as Hinduism’s impersonal Brahman or Taoism’s Tao). However, our universe is actually highly hostile towards the emergence, survival, and growth of life. Only a tiny, tiny, fraction of the immensity of the universe looks inhabitable, and it won’t be habitable in the long run (as universal expansion and entropy eliminate heat sources over the next dozen billion years). It is very easy to imagine a more hospitable universe for our kind of life. In short, the evidence we have, of this universe so hostile and indifferent to life, looks rather more like a universe not designed for life, at least any kind of life similar to ours. This fourth point is the basis for the “problem of evil” argument of positive philosophical atheology proposing that a theistic god deeply concerned for our lives probably does not exist.

For these four reasons, any “fine-tuning” of the universe is probably not anything special requiring explanation, since life doesn’t seem special from any universal perspective. Summarizing, the supernaturalist would have to first prove that current science is fairly correct about the Big Bang; that no other kind of life could exist in other sorts of universes; and god wanted to create life like ours. Even if these obstacles to getting the fine-tuning argument started could be somehow resolved, appealing to a creator god still won’t work.

Consider three situations, perhaps the only three scenarios to logically consider, when trying to explain the laws of nature that emerged from the Big Bang. Situation one: science decides that time, space, and causality all came into existence with the Big Bang. It is nonsensical to ask for a prior “cause” of the universe since there is no time or place before the universe to locate a cause of the universe. Our universe is just a random accident with an unexplainable arrangement of laws that seem “lucky” from our living perspective. Situation two: science discovers that any universe producible from a Big Bang explosion must have pretty much the observed laws of nature. There is very little variability, so if there is a universe at all, it has our laws of nature, and life is possible. Situation three: science discovers that our visible universe exploded from some prior natural reality, explaining how lots of megaverse or even other multiverses could emerge in similar explosive processes. If these many other universes have a wide variability of basic laws (unlike situation two), then our visible universe is probably just one of a very large number of universes. We happen to have emerged in one of those universes “lucky” enough to support life like ours. For situation one and situation two, there is no “fine-tuning” that could be explained. The supernaturalist may still demand an explanation for the origin of the universe, which returns the debate to the Creation argument. For situation three, science proposes more nature before and behind our Big Bang to explain “fine-tuning” so no god hypothesis is needed to explain any design.

Unable to prove that there is a universal design needing explanation, and unable to prove that there cannot be endlessly more nature, supernaturalism is halted by another skeptical impasse.

6. The Revelation argument for God

SUMMARY: Supernaturalism proposes that the best explanation for revelations about God is that God actually exists. Supernaturalism must prove that no naturalistic explanation (perceptual error, illusion, or hallucination) can give a better explanation for a revelation. Furthermore, whether revelations can be taken in groups or as singular experiences, they violate Rules of Reason. Revelations contradict each other (violating Rule 2), or they just repeat the belief “God exists” (violating Rule 3), or they presume that god caused them (violating Rule 4), or they yield beliefs that different gods exist (violating Rule 5). Even taken singly, a lone revelation cannot be checked for veracity without verifying God caused it (violating Rule 3 and 4); checking it against other approved revelations (violating Rule 5); or assuming it carries its own self-evident character (violating Rule 1, 3, 5, or 6). Because revelations violate so many Rules of Reason, and

naturalism offers better explanations that do not violate Rules of Reason, this argument for supernaturalism fails. Since the revelation argument is a failure, any argument from scriptural testimony is an automatic failure too. There are many common sense explanations why testimony about alleged revelations cannot be taken as probable evidence for a god. Furthermore, a religion preferring its own scripture as the only truth ends up violating Rule 3, 5, or 6. Perhaps people's own concepts of a perfect god could count as evidence of god, but such concepts are mysterious (violating Rule 1), contradictory (violating Rule 2), or conveniently arbitrary (violating Rule 3 or Rule 5).

Sometimes supernaturalism appeals to direct experience to argue that a god exists. Revelation is taken to be a direct encounter with something divine, and the argument claims that the best explanation of such an experience is that it really is a direct encounter with god. There are two forms of this argument: the first starts from collective experiences of many people, while the second only needs one personal experience.

Revelations taken collectively, from different people of the same religion, or people of different religions, obviously exhibit incredibly immense variety. Revelations can be highly mysterious in themselves rather than indicate how a god is involved (violating Rule 1), they often contradict each other (violating Rule 2), they sometimes take the form of a belief "god exists" (violating Rule 3), they require that god somehow causes them (violating Rule 4), and they often yield beliefs that different gods exist (unless there are a million gods, this violates Rule 5). Precisely because religious believers understand all these problems, they are tempted to resort to the additional claim that their own revelation is different as an exemption from such rules (violating Rule 6). All these violations lead skeptics to judge the argument from collective revelation is a failure.

Religious believers can attempt to claim that only some collective experiences supply revelation evidence: the highly similar experiences of the same sort of god. Indeed, many religions are based on a small set of near-identical experiences of the same god by a small group of people, in order to avoid all the noted violations of reason. This special set of revelations can serve as an authoritative guide to proper religious beliefs, useful for instruction in the religion and for testing any new revelations for validity. Unfortunately, problems with reason remain. There is no good explanation why just this group's set of similar experiences should count as the only valid revelations. The group should not claim that no explanation exists (violating Rule 1). They should not claim that god approves of just this set and no others since that assumes that god exists (violating Rule 3). If the group claims that no other experiences belong because they are too different from the basic set, this justification is circular by first assuming the validity of the group (again violating Rule 3). If the group claims their set of revelations seem like the best about god to them, any other group could make the same sort of justification for their revelations and their god (violating Rule 5). Small sets of revelations violate the rules of reason just as large collections do.

The use of shared sets of similar revelations is the basis for one version of the ontological argument for god, which starts from the fact that a person can have the conception of a perfect or "greatest possible" being. Another version of the ontological argument instead starts from a definition of a necessarily existing being and one or two logical principles from a formal system such as modal logic. We won't consider the second version here, because controversial logical axioms get involved, few theologians are convinced the whole argument really works, and everyone agrees that it falls quite short of demonstrating that anything like a theistic god actually exists. As for the first version, it requires people to start from their conception of a perfect or "greatest possible" being. From this conception, the argument explains that anyone having this conception of such a being must be having a conception of it as actually existing, on the grounds that something that actually exists is more perfect or greater than something that is only a conception. But once a person is conceiving this being (conveniently labeled by the theologian as 'god') as actually existing, this person is believing that this god actually exists, and the argument has reached its desired conclusion. The problems with small sets of revelations already raised apply here, at the start of this conceptual form of the ontological argument. How can people be sure that they are having a conception of a perfect or greatest possible being? These terms like "perfect" and "greatest" have some meaning, but those meanings cannot

be presumed to be identical across multiple people, and it is highly doubtful in any case than mere humans are even capable of accurately conceiving of such infinitely high perfection or greatness (a failing that other theologians continually emphasize to atheists), so it is a mystery how some people could accomplish this (violating Rule 1). If such people claim that their set of conceptions of god seem like the best about god to them, any other group could make the same sort of justification for their revelations and their god (violating Rule 5). A third version of the ontological argument overlooks these problems and claims that only a god could be responsible for people having such high conceptions of god, but this explanation begs the question (violating Rule 3) and it cannot explain how god could cause conceptions in people (violating Rule 4).

The best argument from revelation should stay focused on private personal experiences. This tactic avoids the problems already mentioned, and it makes better sense when trying to understand religions and revelation anyways. Put another way, if only collective shared common experiences count as revelations, most of the genuinely intriguing and impressive accounts of divine appearance and intervention are discarded. How could Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism be taken seriously as religions if the private experiences of a Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, or Buddha don't really matter? Of course, some of their followers may receive impressive revelations, but that's the point: very loyal followers (a Paul, for example) can have some private revelation experiences too.

Because an argument from revelation is best based on personal experience, arguing over the validity of revelation must not assume otherwise. For example, demanding that one revelation must get confirmed by lots of other identical revelations doesn't make sense. Science demands plenty of common confirmations, but that is an advanced principle of science and not among the simple basic rules of reason. Without independent confirmations, can a revelation experience get validated as proof of god's existence?

Supernaturalism argues that the best explanation for a revelation experience that seems to be about God is that it is actually caused by God. Therefore, supernaturalism must prove that there cannot be any equally good, or better explanation, for revelation experiences. The three simplest naturalistic accounts of alleged revelations are (a) erroneous perception, (b) illusion, and (c) hallucination. Naturalism therefore offers its the strongest explanation for revelations to rival supernaturalism: all revelations are either cases of error, illusion, or hallucination. The ordinary method of showing that a strange experience is either error, illusion, or hallucination is to investigate the experience to discover if some natural thing was erroneously perceived, something naturally real operated on perception to cause an illusion, or nothing was in fact perceived but only internally generated by a brain malfunction. By contrast, there is no "ordinary method" of showing that a strange experience is an actual revelation of an existing god. In fact, there can't be any method at all, since we have agreed to consider only lone experiences taken singly. Common sense suggests some options: for example, verifying a revelation would consist of checking to see if God is actually present (but such checking would consist of a second revelation of God, violating Rule 3); or verification could track the causal relationship between God and the person having the experience (violating Rule 4); or verification could consist of checking it against other revelations already verified (but that appeals to a group of revelations, violating Rule 5).

The impossibility of verifying lone revelations has been noticed by supernaturalists. Some supernaturalists therefore claim that revelations do not need any verification. They don't need verification if they have the special character of "self-verification" or "self-evidence" or "veracity." This special character violates Rules of Reason, however. The supernaturalist must explain how to distinguish when an experience truly possesses this self-evident character and when an experience does not (for not all experiences, and not all claimed revelations, have it). If the supernaturalist claims that revelations have a unique mysterious quality which establishes a mysterious divine cause, that violates Rule 1 and Rule 3. The supernaturalist might claim that self-evident revelations are ones that common sense does not challenge but simply accepts until proven false. Much of ordinary experience goes unchallenged, it is true, but revelations about God are almost always challenged and questioned by some people, especially by people of other religions (hence this explanation violates Rule 5). Worse, plenty of religions all claim that

revelations of their particular god carry such self-evident verification, so that appeal to self-evidence leads to a violation of Rule 5. If a supernaturalist claims that other religions' revelations fail to carry proper self-evidence since they are not about the truly existing god, that explanation violates Rule 3 and Rule 6. When supernaturalists are required to describe what this "self-evident" character actually consists of, they are always driven back to favorably comparing a revelation with other prior approved revelations (violating Rule 3) or comparing a revelation with an approved prior conception of God (violating Rule 3 again).

One interesting variation on the argument from revelation is the argument from testimony about revelation for God. By this argument, the best explanation for the existence of people's testimony about their revelations is that God exists to deliver these revelations. Since this argument must assume the existence of genuine revelations, and the argument that there are genuine revelations fails (by the above reasoning), this argument from testimony automatically fails too. Additionally, naturalistic explanations for why people make testimonial claims about revelations are numerous and persuasive to common sense. For example, people frequently do make revelation claims when they falsely believe that a revelation has happened to them. Also, people sometimes invent and lie about revelations in order to deal with great emotional stress or psychological trauma, to draw attention to themselves, to cause public sensations, or to make money. Furthermore, no religion can rationally explain why its own scriptural testimony is good evidence for the existence of its own god while other religions' scriptures are all bad testimony without violating Rule 3, Rule 5, or Rule 6. No appeal to religious scripture can be used to form an adequate rational argument for the existence of a god.

Another interesting variation on the argument from revelation is the ontological argument for god. The ontological argument begins from the fact that a person can have the concept of a perfect being. (It cannot start from that concept or definition or proposition alone, since the argument fails to produce the intended knowledge of god if no mind actually entertains this concept.) The ontological argument then proceeds by proving that a person who has this concept of a perfect being must (to avoid self-contradiction) must be a person conceiving of a perfect being that actually exists (for a non-existent being must be somewhat less than perfect). If it is additionally true (perhaps) that any person who is holding the concept of an actually existing perfect being must necessarily be a person holding a belief that this perfect being actually exists, then this person is now logically believing in god's existence, and god's actual existence is hence demonstrated for this person. Repeat this process for every person, and everyone (who is fully rational) will believe that god exists.

This argument fails right from the start: the supernaturalist must first prove that a person can accurately and truly have the concept of a perfect being. Such proof is impossible. Merely putting words together does not establish the full possession of the concept (try "round square" or "greatest possible poem") but probably only generates mystery (violating Rule 1). Also, people do not even agree on what they specifically have in mind when they think of various perfections. Notoriously, the Christian Church has had to categorically define a small set of perfections for god just to get all Christians focused properly, which assumes what is to be proven (violating Rule 3) or seems suspiciously arbitrary (violating Rule 5). However, even a careful list of things such as omniscience, omnipotence, and benevolence still generate conceptual contradictions (violating Rule 2). Because of these problems, the ontological argument collapses into a revelation argument: the claim basically is that people simply do have perfect ideas of a perfect god, and such assumed perfections could only arise in a human mind by divine intervention (a revelation). This simplified form of the argument suffers from all the problems of revelations that have already been covered.

7. The Morality argument for God

SUMMARY: The supernaturalist proposes god as the best explanation for objective moral truths. The supernaturalist cannot prove that one such objective (independent from all people) moral truth exists in the first place. An unknown moral truth is a mystery (violating Rule 1) or it assumes god exists (violating Rule 3). If the supernaturalist claims that a known moral truth is objective, this claim cannot be proven

either, since neither independence from one's own mind (violating Rule 2) nor from all humanity (violating Rule 6) could be demonstrated. The argument therefore fails to even get started. Realizing this, the supernaturalist tries to shift the burden on the naturalist by arguing that no one should believe that important moral truths are simply subjective. Most people do believe a few high moral principles and think that everyone should likewise believe them too. But this fact about what people try to believe cannot prove the existence of any objective moral truth. Furthermore, subjectivity is not the only alternative to objectivity. The naturalistic account of "globally objective" moral truths (principles that still depend on humanity's existence but not on any individual's belief) is the better explanation for why civilized peoples have gradually converged on some high moral principles through long practical human experience.

The morality argument for God proposes that the best explanation for the existence of objective moral truths is God's existence. An "objective" truth is true independently of human beings; its truth does not depend on what anyone thinks or wants to believe, and it would remain true even if no one exists. The naturalist denies that any such objective truths are real, and so there is nothing for a god hypothesis to explain. The naturalist instead proposes that there are moral truths which depend on the existence of humans but do not depend on what any individual person thinks or wants to believe. Such moral truths, for the naturalist, are true because humans exist and they are known to be true because large numbers of people (sometimes entire cultures, civilizations, or even most of humanity) have come to know them through their collective long practical experience.

The supernaturalist must first prove that there is at least one objective moral truth, or else the argument cannot get started. The supernaturalist cannot avoid this burden by claiming that such a truth exists even though no one knows what it is (violating Rule 1 or Rule 3), or by claiming that God knows what the moral truths are even if we don't (violating Rule 3). If the supernaturalist offers some moral truth as an objective moral truth, the supernaturalist must prove that this moral truth does not depend on what people think about it, and that this moral truth does not depend on the existence of people at all. The supernaturalist obviously cannot perform an experiment to check on this moral truth's truth by eliminating his own mind from thinking about it (violating Rule 2), and cannot check on this moral truth's truth by eliminating the existence of all humans (violating Rule 6).

Precisely because the supernaturalist soon realizes that proving the objectivity of a moral truth is impossible, the usual strategy is to try to throw the burden of proof on the naturalist. The supernaturalist claims that agreeing to the naturalistic account of moral truths abandons moral objectivity for the only alternatives of relativity and/or subjectivity. Here, "relativity" means dependence on people and "subjectivity" means dependence on what people want to think about morality. The supernaturalist makes various claims to argue that we should not reasonably believe that moral truths are relative or subjective. When the supernaturalist explains that moral truths must instead be dependent on god, moral truths simply become relative and subjective for god (so they can't be both objective and subjective, violating Rule 2). This is Plato's Euthyphro dilemma: supposed objective moral truths could still be different if god were different (if the divine mind changes its will, for example). Dependence on god cannot make morality any more objective in the sense required for the supernaturalist's argument from morality.

Undeterred by these paradoxes, the supernaturalist typically takes some agreeable moral truth like "never kill innocent people" and declares that everyone wants to believe that this truth is always and everywhere true (except for maybe some evil atheists). Actually there are plenty of people who might be willing to consider rare special circumstances where an innocent life is worth saving the lives of many others (this is why many people are morally comfortable with the deaths of innocent civilians during wars). The supernaturalist is not able to point to even one allegedly objective moral truth that all reasonable people want to believe is objectively true all the time. The supernaturalist cannot even point to one specific moral rule that every member of her own religion accepts as objectively true – religions suffer from notorious internal disagreement over high moral principles across the centuries.

But let us permit the supernaturalist to try one more strategy with this morality argument for god. Suppose everyone (well, almost everyone) wants to believe some moral truth and wants everyone else to believe this moral truth too. What does that prove? Wanting to believe something does not make it an objective truth. Paradoxically, the supernaturalist is arguing that a moral truth is objective because most everyone wants to believe in its truth (but that makes this truth relatively and subjectively dependent, violating Rule 2). The god hypothesis is not needed here, in any case. The naturalistic account for why there are few moral principles that most people believe are true is the explanation that most civilized peoples have learned through long experience that these moral principles are true. These high moral principles enjoying near-universal reasonable approval are regarded as relative to human life (they serve human life, after all) but they are not regarded as subjective: they are not dependent on what any individual person happens to believe, or wants to believe. The naturalist has a better explanation for the way that many people (but not all) regard high moral principles as true. These high moral principles are “globally objective”: their truth depends on humanity but not on personal belief.

There is an interesting variation on the morality argument that can be proposed by the supernaturalist. Suppose that the naturalist’s “global objectivity” account of civilized moral principles is accurate. In that case, the emerging consensus of civilizations over millennia towards a small set of moral principles is a fact that requires further explanation. A different moral argument for god could be devised: the best explanation for emerging global objectivity is that god really exists, because only a god could explain why diverse peoples would have convergent beliefs. Maybe god is quietly talking to people, stirring their consciences or luring their spirits, or maybe seeking moral convergence is precisely the search for god. This convergence argument is analogous to the objectivity argument for scientific realism: objective nature exists, because this objective nature is the best explanation why scientific investigation gradually converges on one scientific theory rather than many. After all, there must be something real out there in nature beyond what scientists happen to want to believe which helps to guide inquiry towards convergence and agreement.

Unfortunately for this supernaturalistic argument, the best explanation for convergence on global moral objectivity is entirely natural: the natural experience of humans living together in a natural environment. Poor moral principles get weeded out, by people gaining hard experience of learning from mistakes and teaching the lessons to next generations, and also by people dying out from suffering the extreme consequences of poor moral choices. Humans are a social species trying to survive in diverse tough environments. Globally objective moral rules aim to protect the young, guard the group, promote the healthy and strong, conserve resources efficiently, and prevent reproductive unfitness. Even principles like “sacrifice your own interests for others in your group” and “be hospitable to strangers” make great sense in the long run for human tribes and clans.

As civilizations grew, they have experimented with additional moral principles, and we are in the middle of such experiments. The world’s religions can have their combative war-like aspects, and the pacifying sympathetic sides. Christianity has produced both genocidal Crusades and humble monks. Buddhism has produced pacifists and Zen samurai warriors. These divergent features of evolving religions is best explained naturalistically. Furthermore, a god could easily produce much faster and firmer moral convergence. This fact arouses the problem first raised with the design argument: the moral design in evidence is poor evidence of a moral god.

8. Religion, reason, and skepticism

The skeptical atheist argues that belief in the supernatural violates common sense rationality. Core theological arguments for the existence of a god commit numerous severe violations of common sense rationality. Although many sorts of gods have not been touched by these refutations (for example, a god that doesn’t create or sustain the world and has no contact with its inhabitants), the traditional theistic notion of god is clearly unreasonable. The skeptical atheist’s preference for naturalism is better supported by available evidence and does not require violations of common sense rationality. Theologians have not

failed to notice theology's conflicts with basic rationality. Indeed, many theologians have devised ever more intricate evasions of rationality, making their god more mysterious than before (and more mysterious to ordinary religious believers, too).

Some theologians claim that rationality itself cannot exist without god, but that begs the question, since using god to explain reason violates Rule 3. In any case, even trying to use reasoning to explain how god explains reason displays the kind of prior confidence in reason held by atheists too, so there really isn't a dispute here: both sides are relying on reason. Other theologians toss reason aside to claim that god and the question of god's existence is "beyond" reason and all powers of human intelligence. This strategy only backfires, since it amounts to an agreement with the skeptical atheist that it is irrational to believe in god and that god cannot be known to exist. Finally, some theologians embrace god's conflict with reason and simply assert that people should faithfully believe that god exists anyways. That strategy also backfires, since these theologians simply abandon the field of rationality and atheism wins the god debates by default. Perhaps some sort of god exists beyond the reach of all reason and science (the skeptic need not prove otherwise), but such a god is not worthy of human appreciation.

NOTES

1. Expansions of the arguments over god's existence described in this essay, and many more arguments, are explained in my forthcoming book *The God Debates*, published by Blackwell.
2. Atheological arguments are collected in the volumes edited by Michael Martin and Ricki Monnier: *The Impossibility of God* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2003) and *The Improbability of God* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2006).