

# God and the Ethics of Belief

*New Essays in Philosophy of Religion*

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## Is God an Unnecessary Hypothesis?

PETER VAN INWAGEN

*Summa theologiae*, i, q.2, a.3 (the “five ways” article, the article whose topic is indicated by the heading “Whether God Exists”) begins with two “Objections.” Each of these objections is an argument. The first is a version of the argument from evil. The second is as follows:

*Objection 2.* It is, moreover, superfluous to suppose that what can be accounted for by a few principles has been produced by many. But it seems that everything we see in the world can be accounted for by other principles, without supposing God to exist. For all natural things can be accounted for by one principle, which is nature; and all voluntary things can be accounted for by one principle, which is human reason or will. Hence, there is no need to suppose that a God exists.

I will call this the superfluity argument. Here is a formulation of the essential point of the superfluity argument in language the modern mind may find more congenial than Thomas’s talk of “principles”:

The only reason we could have for believing in God would be that it was necessary to postulate his existence to account for some observed fact or facts. But science can explain everything we observe, and its explanations do not appeal to God or to any other supernatural agency. Hence, there is no reason to believe that God exists. That is to say, the existence of God is an *unnecessary hypothesis*.

(A parenthetical remark. Thomas’s formulation of the argument proceeds from the premise that it is superfluous to posit God when everything we observe is explicable as either a production of nature or of the human will. Thus, the existence of the Connecticut River Valley is explained by an appeal to the action of impersonal forces, and the existence of Hartford by the action of, as it were, personal forces – but only human ones. Today, I suppose, everyone who was willing to grant that the existence of everything that was not the work

of human beings could be accounted for by the action of impersonal forces would also be willing to grant that human beings, and the human will and all its determinations, could be accounted for by the action of impersonal forces – just those impersonal forces whose modes of operation are the subject matter of science. For that reason, in restating the superfluity argument in modern language, I have allowed the statement “science can explain everything” to do duty for Thomas’s “all natural things can be accounted for by one principle, which is nature; and all voluntary things can be accounted for by one principle, which is human reason or will.”)

The conclusion of the argument from evil is the proposition that God does not exist. It is therefore easy to see why this argument counts as an “objection” to the position Thomas takes in the article “Whether God Exists”: its conclusion is the logical contradictory of that position. But the conclusion of the superfluity argument is not the proposition that God does not exist. It is not even logically inconsistent with the proposition that God exists. The conclusion of the superfluity argument is that there is no need to suppose that God exists, or in the modern jargon, that the existence of God is an unnecessary hypothesis. I take it that Thomas was not confused on this point. I take it that he was well aware that the conclusion of the superfluity argument, unlike the conclusion of Objection 1, is not the proposition that God does not exist. I take it that by calling the superfluity argument an “objection,” he meant only that its conclusion, if true, constitutes a serious objection to accepting the proposition that God exists.

The superfluity argument, in one form or another, is well known to present-day atheists. Several atheists in the analytical tradition in philosophy (I’m thinking primarily of Antony Flew and Michael Scriven<sup>1</sup>) have defended the position that, although it is true that the conclusion of the superfluity argument is not the proposition that God does not exist, the argument can be elaborated in such a way as to produce an argument for that conclusion. Others have defended a somewhat weaker thesis: that the premises of the superfluity argument imply that atheism is the only reasonable position as regards the existence of God. I want to begin by asking whether the argument, or some elaboration of it, supports atheism. But the main questions I shall address are these: Does the argument indeed show (and if so, in what sense?) that the existence of God is an unnecessary hypothesis? Does the argument support agnosticism?

Can the superfluity argument be elaborated in such a way as to produce an argument whose conclusion is “God does not exist”? We could, of course, turn the superfluity argument into an argument for that conclusion simply by adding a premise: If there is no reason to believe that something of a certain

sort exists, if there is no need to postulate the existence of things of that sort, then nothing of that sort exists. But that premise wouldn't be very plausible. There is no reason to believe that there exist intelligent extraterrestrial beings within a thousand light-years of the earth. No observed phenomenon requires us to postulate the existence of such beings. If someone believes that there are such beings (and many do), we can correctly point out that that person has adopted an unnecessary hypothesis. But it hardly follows that no such beings exist. And there's really not much more to be said about this. There is no way to turn the superfluity argument into a plausible argument that is in the strictest sense an argument for the nonexistence of God – that is, an argument whose conclusion is that God does not exist.

Flew and Scriven reject this thesis. Insofar as arguments for its falsity can be found in their writings, they are all variants on what might be called the Santa Claus argument (or the Great Pumpkin argument). The idea is this: it is obviously irrational (for an adult) to believe in Santa Claus (or the Great Pumpkin or some other particular creature of childish fable); and when we think about the irrationality of such a belief, we see that it is due entirely to the fact that there is no evidence for the existence of Santa Claus (or the Great Pumpkin et al.). Here is a version of the argument that features Santa Claus:

Why do adults not believe in Santa Claus? Simply because they can now explain the phenomena for which Santa Claus's existence is invoked without any need for invoking a novel entity. . . . As we grow up, no one comes forward to *prove* that [Santa Claus] does not exist. We just come to see that there is not the least reason to believe he *does* exist. . . . Santa Claus is in the same position as fairy godmothers, wicked witches, the devil, and the ether. . . . the proper alternative when there is no evidence is not mere suspension of belief [in Santa Claus], it is disbelief. (Scriven, *Primary Philosophy*, p. 103)

This is wholly absurd. It is simply not true that the reason adults do not believe in Santa Claus is that there is no evidence for his existence. First, the fact, if it is a fact, that there is no evidence for the existence of *x* is no reason at all for believing that *x* does not exist. The case of the intelligent extraterrestrials shows this: there is no evidence for the existence of intelligent extraterrestrials within a thousand light-years of the earth, but, if there is also no evidence for their nonexistence, what it is rational to do is to suspend judgment about their existence, not to disbelieve in them. Secondly, it is flatly obvious that there is *no* "hypothesis" better supported by the evidence available to us than the hypothesis that there is no person with the properties children believe Santa Claus to have. (Well, maybe 'Something exists' and

‘There are conscious beings’ are better supported by the evidence.) If you want to collect a small part of the inconceivably vast body of relevant evidence in your own person, you have only to stay awake by the Christmas tree all through Christmas Eve and Christmas morning or collect testimony from parents about the source of the presents under the tree – or visit the North Pole. Although the parts of the world observable by six-year-olds look the way they would look if Santa Claus existed (the Santa Claus story has this feature by adult design), the parts of the world observable by adults do *not* look the way they would look if Santa Claus existed. And the same goes – or almost goes; the evidence isn’t *quite* as strong as in the “Santa Claus” case – for fairy godmothers (and for witches if by ‘witches’ we mean women who in reality have, from the devil, the powers that some women have no doubt *believed* they had and had from that source). And the same goes – or almost goes; the strength of evidence is a few notches down from that of the “fairy godmother” evidence – for the ether (if the ether existed, the Michelson-Morley experiment would yield different results at different points in the earth’s orbit, which it doesn’t).<sup>2</sup>

If, as I have been maintaining, there is no way to turn the superfluity argument into a plausible argument whose conclusion is that God does not exist, it does not follow that the argument is useless to the atheist. Atheism can be supported by other arguments than arguments for the nonexistence of God in this strict sense. Atheism would, for example, be supported by an argument that showed that atheism was the *most reasonable* of the three available positions concerning the existence of God: atheism, agnosticism, and theism. An argument for this conclusion could be derived from the superfluity argument if we added to it the premise:

If there is no reason to believe that a certain thing exists, then it is more reasonable to believe that it does not exist than either to believe that it exists or to suspend judgment about whether it exists.

But, again, this premise is not very plausible. Consider once more the case of the nearby (by cosmic standards) intelligent extraterrestrial beings. Because there is no reason to believe that such beings exist, the premise we are considering implies that it would be more reasonable to believe that no such beings exist than to suspend judgment about whether they exist. But that doesn’t seem right. Suppose there are neither good reasons for thinking that such beings exist nor good reasons for thinking that they don’t exist. Then, presumably, the rational thing to do is to suspend judgment about whether they exist. In any case, it certainly isn’t *more* reasonable to believe that they don’t exist than to suspend judgment about their existence.

Some philosophers have tried to strengthen the conclusion of the superfluity argument by adding the following principle to its premises:

If there is no reason to believe that a certain thing exists, and its existence is *highly improbable*, then it is more reasonable to believe that it does not exist than either to believe that it exists or to suspend judgment about whether it exists.

This principle does not seem right to me. I assign a very low probability to the thesis that there is an intelligent nonhuman species within a thousand light-years of the earth (and not simply because I think that there is no evidence that supports it; I have “positive” reasons for assigning a low probability to this thesis), and I think that there is no evidence for the existence of such a species. But I do not have the following belief: that there is no such species. And I do not think it would be reasonable for me to have this belief. What it would be reasonable for me to believe, in my view, is what I do believe, namely that the proposition that there is such a species has a very low probability. In any case, if we were to apply this principle to the question of the existence of God, we’d need some reason to think that the existence of God was highly improbable. Have we such a reason? What might it be?

Reasons for believing things, if they can be stated at all, if it is possible to put them into words, can be formulated as arguments. Is there a nontrivial argument for the conclusion that the existence of God is highly improbable? (There are, of course, trivial arguments for any conclusion.) Any valid argument whose conclusion was ‘God does not exist’ and the conjunction of whose premises was known to be highly probable would (in effect) constitute a nontrivial argument for the conclusion that the existence of God was highly improbable, and it is certainly a popular view that there are arguments with both these features. Suppose an atheist thinks that a certain argument for the nonexistence of God, “Argument X,” proceeds from highly probable premises. That atheist might suggest that Argument X and the version of the superfluity argument we are now considering could usefully be employed together. Argument X by itself (given that the conjunction of its premises is highly probable but not certain) can lead those who have appreciated its force only to agnosticism<sup>3</sup> (the atheist might argue), but, if Argument X and the superfluity argument are employed together (the atheist might continue), the above principle entails that they can together establish the conclusion that atheism is a more reasonable position than agnosticism. But this suggestion represents the present version of the superfluity argument as functioning as an appendage to some other argument – as, essentially, completing the work that some other argument leaves unfinished. Has the argument any force in its own right, so to speak? It may be that some who employ the present version of

the superfluity argument would say that it was just *evident* that the thesis that God exists was highly improbable, so evident that no argument was needed to establish its very low probability. I make bold to say that these people are just wrong. And, in any case, as I have said, the principle upon which the argument rests is doubtful. One simply cannot deduce from the premise that the truth of some proposition is highly improbable the conclusion that it is more rational to reject that proposition than to suspend judgment about whether it is true. Consider any proposition whose truth is known to be highly improbable but which is not known to be certainly false. (For example: the proposition that New York City will be destroyed by a huge meteorite at 11 :23 P.M. on August 12, 2073.) If someone who is aware of this known probability does not accept the denial of that proposition (and, of course, does not accept the proposition itself), that person violates no norm of rationality. Let us, therefore, consider other possibilities.

Some philosophers have advanced arguments that are very much like Thomas's superfluity argument, but with the following premise added:

If there is no reason to believe that a certain thing exists, and that thing, if it existed, would be *very different from* the things we know about through experience, then it is more reasonable to believe that it does not exist than either to believe that it exists or to suspend judgment about whether it exists.

Because it seems reasonable to accept without further argument the thesis that God, if he exists, is very different from the things we know about through experience (I suppose sense experience is what is meant; I leave questions of religious or mystical experience aside), the revised argument may seem promising. I think, however, that the suggested new premise is, again, not very plausible. Consider the hypothesis that there are intelligent beings somewhere in the physical universe that are vastly different from us and from everything in our experience. (Wells's Martians wouldn't be different enough; I'm thinking of something like the intelligent cloud of intersiderial matter in Fred Hoyle's novel *The Black Cloud* or, a current favorite of science fiction writers, very flat beings inhabiting the surfaces of neutron stars.) There is no reason to think that intelligent extraterrestrial beings very different from us and from everything in our experience exist and no reason to think that they don't. Or, at any rate, let us assume that there is no reason of either sort. The proposed principle then tells us that it is more reasonable to believe that such beings do not exist than to suspend judgment about their existence. And that seems wrong. We should be wary of supposing that a thing's being very different from the things we know about is even a weak reason for supposing it not to exist. As the biologist J. B. S. Haldane – a staunch atheist – said (endorsing



Hamlet's well-known remark to Horatio), "Now my own suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we *can* suppose." A similar point was made by the dying atheist William Herrick Macaulay, who, when his pious sister (the novelist Rose Macaulay) suggested that he consider the possibility of God and an afterlife, replied, "Well, there's nothing so rum it might not be true." If we take 'queer' and 'rum' to apply to that which is vastly different from anything we're familiar with, these two quotations rather support my point.

We must conclude, I think, that there is no way to turn the superfluity argument into a plausible argument for the conclusion that atheism is the only reasonable position one can take as regards the existence of God. If it can indeed be established that there is no reason to believe in the existence of God, the most that can be got out of this premise is – unless, in addition to having no reason to believe that God *does* exist, we also have some reason to believe that God *does not* exist – that we should be agnostics, that we should suspend judgment about the existence of God.

Still, that's very far from being a trivial thesis, even from the atheist's point of view. If it is right, then theism is not a tenable position. And no doubt atheists would prefer a world in which all nonatheists were agnostics to a world in which some nonatheists were theists. In the sequel, I'll try to determine whether the superfluity argument can be used to show that one should *not* be a theist – even if it can't be used to show that one *should* be an atheist.

How good an argument for this conclusion is it? Let us examine it. One obvious question the argument raises is whether its premise is true: *can* science indeed explain everything we observe? Well, it is certainly not true that science can *at present* explain everything we observe. Perhaps the idea is that science will *one day* be able to explain everything we observe? This is far from evidently true. How can even a metaphysical naturalist be sure we human beings are intellectually capable of discovering scientific explanations for everything we observe? It is certainly conceivable that the observable world outruns our capacity to understand it. Is the idea then that science can *in principle* explain everything we observe – given world enough and sufficient time and brainpower? (Actually, there could be other barriers to our achieving a complete scientific understanding of the world than our having insufficient time or insufficient intellectual capacity. It is entirely possible that we cannot discover the correct laws of physics without employing some piece of experimental apparatus that it is physically impossible for us to construct – a linear accelerator many thousands of light-years long, for example.) A more plausible version of this thesis about scientific explanation would be this: there *exists* (in some Platonic sense) a purely scientific explanation for everything we observe,

whether or not we human beings are able to discover it. Or, if it sounds strange to talk of a scientific explanation that can't be known by human beings (science being a human endeavor), let us say a purely *natural* explanation. By 'a purely natural explanation' I mean an explanation that involves only, refers only to, or appeals only to natural things. I will not attempt to say what the words *natural thing* mean; I will say only that whatever these words mean, they do not apply to supernatural beings like God or the archangel Michael, and they do not apply to nonnatural things, like moral properties as conceived by G. E. Moore.

Is it true that there exists a purely natural explanation for everything we observe? One important challenge to this thesis has been raised by some present-day philosophers of mind, who have presented various arguments for the conclusion that the subjective features of consciousness – the way pain feels or the way red things look to us – cannot be given a purely natural explanation. I propose simply to ignore the questions raised by this challenge, because they do not seem to be closely related to the question whether it is reasonable to believe in the existence of God. Leaving to one side, then, considerations about the subjective features of consciousness, is it true that there exists a purely natural explanation for everything we observe? I think that even the most committed naturalist should be suspicious of this principle. Consider the proposition that there exist natural things. This is a fact, and one easily verified by observation. Has it a purely natural explanation? That seems unlikely. How could facts about the properties of natural things and how they are related to one another (which are the only facts a purely natural explanation may appeal to) explain the existence of natural things? The difficulty of seeing how there could be an answer to this question suggests a general principle: To explain the existence of things of a certain type, we must somehow appeal to things that are not of that type. To explain the existence of human beings, for example, we must somehow appeal to things other than human beings. The explanation of the existence of human beings in Genesis appeals to God and the dust of the earth; modern scientific explanations of the existence of human beings appeal to the evolutionary precursors of human beings and the environments in which they lived – and, going further back, to the production of carbon and oxygen atoms in stellar cores, and their dispersal when some of the stars in which they were formed exploded. If this plausible principle about explaining the existence of things of a given type is correct, then there can be no natural explanation of the existence of natural things – for it implies that if there is an explanation of the fact that there are natural things, things other than natural things must figure in that explanation.

Reflection on the fact that there are natural things suggests that the best course for the proponents of the superfluity argument to take might be to say that they hadn't got their premise quite right, and to qualify it as follows: insofar as an observed fact *has* an explanation, this explanation is a purely natural one. That is, perhaps they should concede that some observed facts have no explanation at all, and go on to say that those observed facts that *do* have an explanation have a purely natural one. They *could* say that the proposition that there are natural things was a necessary truth, and thus had no explanation – at any rate, no causal explanation. But it doesn't seem very plausible to suppose that the proposition that there are natural things is a necessary truth. The friends of the superfluity argument would, I think, do better to maintain that the fact that there are natural things is a brute, contingent fact – a fact because there *are* natural things, contingent because there *might have been* no natural things, brute because there is no explanation whatever of there being natural things.

How plausible is the thesis that every fact has either a purely natural explanation or else no explanation at all? *Theists* will certainly not find this thesis plausible. Theists think that at least one observed fact, the fact that there are natural things, has an explanation and has no natural explanation – its explanation being, of course, that there are natural things because God created them. Doesn't the thesis that everything we observe either has no explanation whatever or else has a purely natural explanation simply assume the falsity of theism? Those who grant the truth of this thesis will not need the superfluity argument and its rather weak conclusion. They have available an argument whose conclusion is not simply the superiority of agnosticism to theism, but the nonexistence of God. Here is the argument:

Everything we observe either has no explanation whatever or else has a purely natural explanation;

If God exists, something we observe has an explanation but has no purely natural explanation (namely, the existence of natural things);

*hence,*

God does not exist.

But this is not a very impressive argument – and its weakness does not rest on its second premise, which is obviously true. Here is an only very slightly simplified version of this argument:

The world is uncreated;

If God exists, the world is created;

*hence,*

God does not exist.

Neither of these arguments is likely to embarrass the theist – any more than the following argument is likely to embarrass the atheist:

The world is created;

If the world is created, a Creator exists (or creators exist);

*hence,*

A Creator exists (or creators exist).

It is not always entirely clear to me what it means to accuse an argument of “begging the question,” but one could hardly find arguments that more clearly deserved to be called question-begging than these.

But the justice of these reflections – *I think they’re just* – does not imply that the superfluity argument is hopelessly flawed. If I were a defender of the superfluity argument, I think I would reply to them by saying something like the following:

I do not need the principle ‘Everything we observe either has no explanation whatever or else has a purely natural explanation’ in order to make a case for the explanatory superfluity of God. That is to say, I do not need to maintain that this principle is *true*. I need only maintain that it is *true for all anyone knows*. And surely the success of science establishes this? Repeatedly in the history of science, it has turned out that things people thought had personal explanations had impersonal explanations. The dethronement of the Design Argument by the Darwinian theory of evolution by random mutation and natural selection is only the most salient case of this. One could also cite, among many other examples, Newton’s belief that the planetary orbits were unstable and required periodic correction by God – a belief that Laplace and Lagrange showed was false. Isn’t it at least a very reasonable hypothesis, in the light of these examples, that no irreducibly personal explanation is required by any observed fact of nature, that every observed fact of nature either has an explanation that is ultimately impersonal – or else has no explanation? If the answer to this question is Yes, we should be agnostics (at least in the absence of a proof or disproof of the existence of God that was based on some consideration unrelated to explanation). No deep epistemological reflections are needed to establish this result. Here is a simple but exactly parallel case. Suppose Winifred has been accused of murdering Henry. And suppose that it is a very reasonable hypothesis – true for all you and I know – that Henry’s death was an accident. Then (at least in the absence of some cogent demonstration that Winifred *didn’t* murder Henry), we should suspend judgment about whether Winifred murdered Henry.

There is a good deal of rhetoric in this argument. Here are its bare bones:

For all anyone knows, everything we observe either has no explanation or a purely natural explanation. So, as far as anyone knows, everything we observe can in principle be explained without reference to God – if it has any explanation at all. In the absence of a cogent argument either for the existence or the nonexistence of God, therefore, we should suspend judgment about whether God exists.

But why should I concede, why should anyone concede, that for all anyone knows, everything we observe either has no explanation or a purely natural explanation? Remember that ‘Everything we observe either has no explanation or a purely natural explanation’ entails that God does not exist, for, if God exists, then at least one fact has an explanation that is not a natural explanation – to wit, the fact that there are natural things. The above argument is therefore no better than this one:

For all anyone knows, God does not exist;

If, for all anyone knows, God does not exist, then we should all suspend judgment about whether God exists;

*hence,*

We should all suspend judgment about whether God exists.

I say that the former argument is no better than the latter because I don’t see any reason to accept ‘For all anyone knows, everything we observe either has no explanation or a purely natural explanation’ that would not be an equally good reason to accept ‘For all anyone knows, God does not exist’. All the defenders of the first argument have given us, after all, are some reflections on the success of science in explaining observed phenomena in terms of natural objects and processes. They have given us no reason to suppose that the totality of natural objects and processes (that is, the natural world) has no explanation.

Suppose the defender of the superfluity argument again falls back a bit and makes a stand on the following ground:

We know of no consideration that forces us to believe that anything we observe requires a supernatural explanation of any sort. We should believe in God only if something we observe forces us to postulate a supernatural being. Hence, we should not believe in God.

Well, suppose some theist were to reply to this argument by pointing out that there was a well-known argument whose conclusion was that something we observe – namely, the existence of a natural world – forces us to postulate a supernatural being (or beings). (The argument, of course, is the cosmological

argument in any of its various forms.) This theist will no doubt be told that plenty of philosophers who understand the cosmological argument perfectly do not accept its conclusion, owing to the fact that they see no reason to believe that there is an explanation of any sort for the existence of the natural world. Therefore (the theist will be told), nothing we observe *forces* us to postulate the existence of a supernatural being. This reply seems to be grounded on the following general principle: We should believe in supernatural beings only if some intellectual consideration *forces* us to. How could this principle be justified? Not, I think, by any appeal to the still more general principle that, for any proposition whatever, we should accept that proposition only if some intellectual consideration forces us to. For one thing, the objector will find that an appeal to this principle is self-defeating. It would imply that one should be an atheist (or an agnostic) only if some intellectual consideration *forced* one to believe that atheism (or agnosticism) was superior to any competing position concerning belief in God. And, obviously, no intellectual consideration has this power, owing to the fact that there are plenty of theists who are aware of all the intellectual considerations that have ever led anyone to be an atheist or an agnostic and who nevertheless remain theists. An atheist or agnostic might, of course, maintain that these theists are unreasonable, and that certain intellectual considerations should force any *reasonable* person who considered them carefully to abandon theism. But then, of course, those who find the cosmological argument convincing might maintain that those who say that there is no explanation for the existence of the natural world are being unreasonable, and that certain intellectual considerations should force any *reasonable* person who considered them carefully to reject the thesis that the natural world has no explanation.

In any case, it would seem that all human beings have beliefs that are not forced on them by the totality of the relevant intellectual considerations of which they are aware. Most of our philosophical beliefs are like that. Here are two of mine: that we have free will and that our thoughts and feelings are identical with certain physical processes in our brains. I believe these things, but many of my fellow philosophers do not, and at least some of the philosophers who do not believe these things are aware of every intellectual consideration that is relevant to the question whether we have free will or to the question whether mental events are physical events. And I'm not willing to say that these philosophers are obtuse or irrational. Not all of them, anyway. The point I have made can be made about kinds of beliefs other than philosophical beliefs; it can obviously be made about our political beliefs. But why should belief in God be held to stricter epistemic standards than beliefs of other sorts? It cannot be demonstrated that God exists; not, at least, in the sense that intellectual

considerations can be adduced that would force any reasonable person who understood and carefully considered them to conclude that God exists. But it cannot, in this sense, be demonstrated that we have free will or that the country would be better off under one political party than another. If it's all right to believe, in the absence of conclusive demonstration, in the absence of what I have called a compelling argument, that we have free will or that the country would be better off under one political party than another, why isn't it all right to believe, in the absence of a compelling argument, that God exists?

Now here is one more argument of the "superfluity" sort. Suppose a defender of agnosticism argues in this fashion:

Agnosticism is the result of a straightforward application of Occam's Razor, that is, of the principle that postulated entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity. You theists believe in what we agnostics believe in and more besides. You and we both believe in the world of natural things. *We* stop there. We don't deny that there *may* be more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy, but we do not affirm the existence of anything outside the natural world. *You* don't stop there. You go on to believe in a supernatural Creator. But believing in the world of natural things is belief enough. To go on to postulate a Creator is to multiply entities beyond necessity – or at least to *add* one unnecessary entity.

I have in effect already considered the contention that to postulate a Creator is to multiply entities beyond necessity. I argued for the conclusion that this may be so, but that it has not been shown to be so. (And it's up to the defenders of agnosticism to show that it's so, because they're the ones who are trying to establish a conclusion – the conclusion that agnosticism is superior to theism. I'm not trying to establish anything, or at least I'm not trying to establish anything beyond the failure of the agnostics to make their case. I'm certainly not trying to establish the conclusion that theism is superior to agnosticism.) Let us leave this question, the question whether someone who postulates the existence of a Creator of the natural world is postulating entities beyond necessity, aside. And let us also leave aside another important question: whether I believe in just those things the agnostics believe in and more besides. (I think it's not implausible to suppose this is so, although I shouldn't be willing to say this in the case of atheists. I think atheists believe in things I don't believe in, most notably a world of natural things that can exist without a Creator, or, indeed, a cause of any sort.) I want to examine instead a presupposition of this (and probably of all) versions of the superfluity argument, viz, that belief in God is an explanatory hypothesis.

Compare this case. Bishop Berkeley says to me, "You believe in what I believe in and more besides. You and I both believe in minds (including the

supreme Mind, God) and thoughts and sensations. *I* stop there. *You* don't stop there. You go on to believe in material things. But believing in minds and God and thoughts and sensations is belief enough. To go on to postulate material things is to postulate entities beyond necessity." Or let us suppose not that Berkeley himself says this (after all, Berkeley does not simply decline to accept the thesis that there are material things; he accepts its denial and he marshals an impressive array of arguments for its denial), but rather someone who has not been fully converted to Berkeley's immaterialism but who has been impressed by Berkeley's arguments to the extent of becoming an agnostic about the existence of material things. Suppose this person appeals to Occam's Razor in support of the conclusion that one should not believe in material things, should not have the belief that there are material things. Should we take this appeal to heart? Like almost everyone, I'm not willing to. I'm not going to allow an appeal to considerations of ontological economy to turn me into an agnostic about the existence of material objects, and I expect very few of my readers would allow such considerations to have that effect on *them*. But what is wrong with such an appeal? One thing that might be wrong with it is that the order and uniformity of my sensations can't be adequately accounted for without postulating the existence of material bodies. But this doesn't seem too plausible. I suppose God or a sufficiently able evil genius could produce any sequence of sensations whatever in an immaterial observer, and although I myself think I'm not an immaterial observer, my reasons for thinking this depend essentially on the assumption that there are material things. Why, then, do I persist in believing in material things despite the fact that the data of observation can be perfectly well accounted for without assuming that any such things exist? In my view, this question has a false presupposition, to wit, that one should not believe in things that exist independently of the mind unless the existence of such things is the explanatory hypothesis that best accounts for the order and uniformity of one's sensations. In my view, one does not need a reason, a reason of any sort, to believe in the existence of material things. I do not think that one, as it were, "starts with" one's sensations – the ultimate "data of observation" – and with nothing else except perhaps the fact of one's existence, and then somehow has to find within one's interior mental life a ground for believing in things that exist independently of the mind. In my view, if we were indeed in this epistemic position, we could never find any ground for believing in material things. (The landscape of modern philosophy is littered with the wrecks of attempts to find such grounds.) In my view, a belief in material things is simply a part of our physiological makeup. It is, as they say, "hardwired" into our brains by whatever is responsible for the design of those brains – God or evolution or both. I therefore have no reason (or



at least no articulable reason, no reason that can be put into words) to think that there are material things, and yet I accept their existence and I do not see myself as thereby convicted of irrationality. If someone tells me that, if I can adduce no articulable reason for believing in material things, then my belief in material things must be irrational, I'll reply that my critic has a mistaken and impossibly demanding theory of rationality.

I want to say something similar about my belief in God. Why do I believe in God? Certainly not because I can write down some reason for believing in God that would force anyone who understood it to share my belief. There is no such reason. I can – I often do – set out reasons for believing in God, but these reasons are not *coercive*: a person who understands them and is unmoved by them is not, by that very fact, irrational. (This is only to say: every argument for the existence of God is a philosophical argument, and philosophical arguments are never coercive.) As far as I can see, the reason I believe in God is that belief in God is built into me – and, I would add, into everyone else. As Saint Paul says in the [first chapter](#) of his letter to the Romans (vv. 19, 20), “For that which may be known of God is manifest among human beings; indeed God himself has made it manifest. The invisible attributes of God, his eternal power and deity, have been perceived since the beginning of the world, being understood through created things.” This is not, as some have maintained, a statement of the argument from design.<sup>4</sup> It is not a statement of an argument at all, any more than my observation (*I call it an observation*) that belief in material objects is “hardwired” into us is an argument.

The thesis that belief in God is hardwired into all human beings immediately raises a difficult and important question: If this is so, why does not everyone believe in God? I am not going to answer this difficult and important question; my excuse is that it does not really matter to my larger point whether belief in God is built into me, much less into everyone else. What does matter to my larger point is only my contention (or admission) that my belief in God is not based on – or is not based entirely on – storable reasons or publicly available arguments. In this, my belief in God is like my belief in a material world, my belief that the human figures with whom I daily interact have interior mental lives very much like my own, my belief in free will, and my belief in an objective truth and objective morality. And many of my beliefs that are too much concerned with the particularities of things to be called philosophical beliefs are likewise not based on storable reasons and publicly available arguments: my belief in the intellectual equality of the sexes, my belief that Marx and Freud have contributed nothing to intellectual history but rubbish, and my belief that it would be a grave mistake to legalize physician-assisted suicide are in this category. I repeat: it's not that I can't produce arguments in favor

of or reasons that support these beliefs – I can, and with the least provocation will, argue interminably with anyone who disagrees with me about free will or physician-assisted suicide or any of the other matters I've mentioned. It's rather that my beliefs about these matters are not *based on* (or not based entirely on) the arguments I would, if provoked, bring in their defense. Here's an analogy I hope will make my position clear. I once met a man who believed that the moon did not exist, that it was a sort of optical illusion. Being unable to escape politely from the conversation he had forced on me, I asked him how he accounted for the tides. In my view, "If there were no moon, there would be no tides; There are tides; Hence, the moon exists" would be a good argument for the existence of the moon – if the person presenting the argument were in extraordinary circumstances, circumstances in which it was appropriate to present an argument for the existence of the moon. But my belief that the moon exists is not based on this argument. (I doubt whether it's even partly based on this argument.) Or consider my belief in "other minds," my belief that "the human figures with whom I daily interact have interior mental lives very much like my own." I think that the so-called analogical argument for the existence of other minds is a fairly good argument – as philosophical arguments go – but my belief that my wife has thoughts and sensations generally similar to my own is not based on this or any other argument. Not even partly.

Not only are my beliefs on the matters I've mentioned not based on the arguments I would use to defend them, but (in my view) someone who listened patiently to these arguments and was not convinced by them would not thereby convict himself or herself of irrationality. A philosopher who rejects the analogical argument is not *ipso facto* irrational. And I am not irrational in believing that the human figures with whom I daily interact have interior mental lives very much like my own.

I find this whole topic so fascinating (and so important) that I could easily be seduced into going on about it for another twenty pages or so. I must resist the temptation to do that, but I can't refrain from expanding on just one point. (And perhaps in the present ideological climate, it would be prudent to say something more about it.) The point has to do with the equality of the sexes. Does it follow from what I have said that it is epistemically permissible to believe in the inequality of the sexes – not to put too fine a point upon it, to believe that men are the intellectual superiors of women? Or does it follow from what I have said that it might be epistemically permissible to suspend judgment on the question whether men are intellectually superior to women? No: it follows only that it might be epistemically permissible to hear and understand all the arguments I could give for the equality of the sexes and either believe that men are intellectually superior to women or to

suspend judgment on this question. An asexual Martian who had had no experience of human beings and who listened to a debate between me and a defender of male intellectual superiority might after listening to this debate believe that human males were intellectually superior to human females (or might suspend judgment on this question) and be guilty of no sin against reason. But this Martian would not be in the same epistemological position as a human being who was deciding what to believe about the intellectual capacities of men and women. Unlike the Martian, a human being has lived his or her whole life as a human being, interacting with other human beings, using the cognitive equipment supplied by human biology; and the human being will have been raised in a human culture and will be heir to the stored wisdom of that culture. My belief in the intellectual equality of the sexes is based on a lot more than what I am able to put into words, and the epistemic warrant it enjoys may be – I believe it is – due to many factors that cannot be put into words. But enough.

I maintain that my belief in God is in this respect like my belief in free will, my belief in other minds, and my belief in the intellectual equality of the sexes. It is not based on argument or on reasons I can put into words (I *hope* it and the other beliefs I have used as examples are based on reasons I have but which I can't put into words) despite the fact that I can give arguments for the existence of God that seem to me to be good arguments. (I don't, of course, claim that an atheist would agree with my judgment that these arguments were good arguments. An atheist would almost certainly say they were inconclusive – even that they were *bad* arguments that rested on long-exploded fallacies. But then I think the arguments I could give in support of the intellectual equality of the sexes are good arguments, but I would not expect someone who thought that women were intellectually inferior to men – or, for that matter, someone who thought that men were intellectually inferior to women – to agree with my judgment that they were good arguments.) You will misunderstand what I have been saying if you think I claim to have shown that my belief in God is rational; I have presented no argument for *that* thesis, and, indeed, I know of no plausible argument for it. To argue for the rationality of my or anyone's belief in God was not my project in the final part of this essay. My project was rather to defend the following conclusion: the fact that my belief in God is not based on stable or publicly available reasons is not a good reason for thinking that my belief in God is irrational. And this I have done. Whether the arguments I have used to defend this conclusion are good arguments is, of course, another question.

One thing, however, should be clear. One cannot show that these arguments are bad arguments by constructing parallel arguments for some absurd

conclusion – a conclusion of the form that it is not irrational to believe that  $p$ , where  $p$  is some thesis that it obviously would be irrational to believe. (I'm led to make this remark by the popularity of the so-called Great Pumpkin objection to Plantinga's religious epistemology.) For such a *reductio ad absurdum* of my argument to be possible, there would have to be some thesis such that a person who accepted that thesis and had no cogent or compelling argument for it was irrational – and was irrational *simply because* that person accepted it without having a cogent or compelling argument for it. And there is no such thesis.<sup>5</sup>

My conclusion is this: that God exists is not an unnecessary hypothesis because it is not (not for us human beings at any rate) an hypothesis at all. A hardwired illusion, perhaps. For all I've said, it could be that. But not an hypothesis.

#### NOTES

1. See Antony Flew, *The Presumption of Atheism and Other Philosophical Essays on God, Freedom and Immortality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), chapter 1, "The Presumption of Atheism" (13–30); Michael Scriven, *Primary Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 98–110. (Reports in the press suggest that Flew has recently abandoned atheism for some form of deism.)
2. The same *doesn't* go for the devil: *his* existence, unlike the existence of the other items in Scriven's list, is not disconfirmed by our everyday observations of the world around us or by anything science has discovered. Or so I say. From my point of view, therefore, belief in Satan is in an entirely different epistemological position from that of belief in Santa Claus or fairy godmothers. It may be that it is – I have said nothing inconsistent with this – as irrational to believe in the devil as it is to believe in Santa Claus, but even if it is, there is one extremely important *argument* for the irrationality of (adult) belief in Santa Claus that does not apply in the case of Satan: as I have pointed out, one can *show* that Santa Claus does not exist simply by staying awake throughout the appropriate night of the year. No such *experimentum crucis* is available in the matter of the existence of Satan. As I said a moment ago, the parts of the world observable by adults do not look the way they would look if Santa Claus existed. But the whole physical universe looks exactly the way it would look if Satan existed, and, a fortiori, the parts of the physical universe observable by adult human beings look exactly the way they would look if Satan existed.
3. A "negatively weighted" agnosticism perhaps – a negatively weighted agnostic is an agnostic who assigns a low probability to the existence of God – but agnosticism nonetheless. Negatively weighted agnosticism as regards the existence of God is comparable to my agnosticism about whether the card that is about to be drawn (in a random drawing from a standard deck of cards) will be the four of clubs. My doxastic relation to the proposition that the card will be the four of clubs is one of agnosticism because I do not accept the denial of that proposition (and, of course, I do not accept the proposition itself). My agnosticism about whether the card will be the four of

clubs is negatively weighted because I accept the proposition that the probability of the card's being the four of clubs is low – less than 0.02.

4. Then why does Paul say, “being understood through created things”? Compare this imaginary text with Paul’s text: “The invisible interior lives of human beings other than myself, their thoughts and feelings, have been observed since the beginning of my life, being understood through their speech and facial expressions and bodily movements.” If I imagine someone saying these words, it does not seem to me that I have imagined someone’s presenting a philosophical argument for the existence of other minds. It seems to me, rather, that I have imagined someone’s reporting the results of introspection. People do not believe that there are minds other than their own because they have examined various hypotheses each of which purports to explain the speech and facial expressions and bodily movements of the human figures around them, and have, upon reflection, concluded that, of all these hypotheses, the “other minds” hypothesis best explains those phenomena. (For all I know, it is *true* that the “other minds” hypothesis has this explanatory power – but this fact, if it is a fact, is not the explanation, is not a *part* of the explanation, of our beliefs about the thoughts and feelings of our fellow human beings.) As I understand Paul, his message can be stated in modern terms in words something like these: We perceive the invisible reality of God in the operations of created things – in a way analogous to the way in which we perceive the invisible mental lives of our fellows in their speech and facial expressions and bodily movements.
5. Many think there are such theses, but I have never seen a plausible example of one. The only supposed examples I am aware of are “Great Pumpkin” or “Santa Claus” examples.