

God and the Calculus of Belief

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1. Reasonable belief

Religious belief is rarely induced by argument; conversely, it is a poor player in debate. Religion generally aims to convert rather than to convince, and more effective than argument is the blunt assertion, the slogan (*Jesus loves you!*) that carries emotional appeal.

By standards of practical and common sense beliefs, those of religion are mostly implausible. This can hardly be controversial even for ardent believers: ‘mystery’ is at the core of most religions, which recognize the natural and supernatural as distinct domains. Some no doubt consider their belief indiscriminable from common sense (*Jesus loves you. It’s plain as sunshine!*). Such an attitude may flourish in closed societies and groups where rigidly habitual thinking has smothered the art of argument. Most believers will on the contrary admit that the credibility of their belief is not measured by practical and common sense standards. Then, by which? How can they argue for their belief?

One may be radical and embrace (*Credo quia absurdum*) the irrationality and unarguability of one’s belief. Even then one must consider it rational, in a sense, to adopt *this* rationally unjustified belief rather than some other fantasy, to pray to one god rather than to another. Some call it a grace – supposedly God chooses his believers, rather than the believers their god. Again, a reason is implied why this should be a grace rather than a curse or simply an aberration. Though reason has no ultimate defense outside itself, irrationalism is self-refuting. ‘Why reason?’ asks for a reason (and many can be given). Reason is thus not circular but self-supporting, as long as the process of finding reasons and better reasons is not halted by some false closure (*And that’s how it is!*). One may break the chain of why’s, as we must from time to time, by simply perceiving, performing, by writing poetry or talking nonsense. In a sense, this too may be religion; a religion without truth-claims, without doctrine, without hierarchy, without government support, and non-conversional.

At the other side of the spectrum, religious rationalists believe not only that they have reasons for their belief, but that reason is an aid in its confirmation. This is the theological doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church; but really what it calls ‘reason’ is an appropriation of the term. When Pope John Paul II (or his holy ghostwriters) alluded to ‘reason’ and ‘faith’ as a set of “wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth”, he was very well aware that such harmonious aviation succeeds only with the special R.C. brand of reason perfected in the 13th Century by

Thomas Aquinas and preserved in *aqua fortis* ever since.¹ Most of the philosophical labour of the last four centuries is inevitably rejected, including (1) the religious critiques of Hume and Kant; (2) the more sophisticated successor to materialism, labeled ‘scientificism’ by adversaries (but considered updated common sense by proponents): basically this is the recognition that science is not just good for engineering, but allows us the best glimpses we can get of what there *is*, really; and (3) analytical philosophy, the upshot of which is an awareness of the strength and limitations of language and of its relevance to thinking.

What baffles the unbeliever is not just the ineffectiveness of such reasoning for belief, but the amount of sophistication (not to speak of academic pomp) invested in it. The debate keeps circling around a few issues, most of which have been exhaustively treated in the Eighteenth Century (except for Darwin’s explanation of apparent ‘design’). Though generally futile, the debate must go on, for by delving deeper into the hierarchy of beliefs, by finding better formulations even for weak arguments, we expose more clearly the emotional-conceptual attitudes (rather than reasons) supporting belief and disbelief. For some, ‘God’ is a belief-attractor: the concept radiates comfort, order and stability. For agnostics it is too vague or remote to bother. In the atheist view, the God of Christian fiction is more likely a composite of naive anthropomorphism (the universe-maker), immature parent longing (big daddy), autocratic pomposity (lord, king, and judge), glorified suffering (the crucifixion), and mystified inbreeding (the god who has a son by his mother).

It is a mistake – recently repeated by Richard Dawkins in his onslaught on religion² – to consider God a phenomenon lying somewhere (even if very low) within the realm of probability, and the question of his existence (the ‘God-hypothesis’) as a scientific question. No major religion has formulated its belief in such a way as to make it a possible subject of scientific enquiry. God is a construction of myth and metaphysics, located alternatively in the realms of fiction and of the *a priori*, not a hypothesis. It has always seemed to me that when Laplace uttered his defiant: “Je n’ai pas eu besoin de cette hypothèse”, this consideration of God *as a hypothesis* had been intended (and received) as a slap in the face of theology. A consequence of this view of God-as-hypothesis is the widely assumed empirical unprovability of his non-existence (like that of a ‘celestial teapot’ or other fancies designed to ridicule God-belief). On his own grounds (metaphysical rather than empirical), God’s non-existence is as close to being provable as any atheist might wish: not empirically, but logically. While we cannot demonstrate the non-existence of any entity which does not involve logical contradictions, the god of ‘theism’ is so incoherent as to rule itself out of the realm of

¹ John Paul II, *Fides et ratio: Encyclical letter on the relationship between faith and reason* [1998], motto and §§ 5, 9, 20, 78, 84 http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en.html (accessed 5-5-2007). Besides, truth ‘contemplated’ may be something altogether different from the plain truth: what makes a statement true.

² Dawkins 2006: 48, 109. Another error seems to me his taking theistic arguments at face value, instead of probing deeply into the *a priori* assumptions; a third is Dawkins’ failure to discriminate properly between belief, faith or creed on the one hand, and the much more embracing phenomenon of religion on the other.

the possible.³ But any god whose existence merely cannot be disproved is peripheral to theistic doctrine.

In locating God somewhere (however low) within the realm of probability, Dawkins meets a number of theological thinkers on their own ground, who try to promote their view of God as God-the-reasonably-acceptable.⁴ In this contemporary version of ‘natural theology’ the aim of demonstration is lowered down from deductive certitude to inductive probability; arguments should thus demonstrate his existence to be more probable than improbable, or still more modestly: to raise the likelihood of his existence. Richard Swinburne is most famous for such a defense, and while his arguments fall short of their purpose, in the process the poverty of his basic premises emerges with great clarity. God’s new clothes are so transparent as to reveal his non-existence beyond reasonable doubt.

2. God the hypothetical

How exactly should the God-hypothesis be stated? – To start cautiously:

G_1 There is a god, and one only.

This version is too meagre to reflect Christian theology. God thus hypothesized might be a marginal god.

G_2 God exists.

This implies, by the inclusion of a proper name, a person one is acquainted with through some source, like ‘Peter Pan exists’ refers (counterfactually) to the real existence of the person Peter Pan, known in fact from certain children’s stories. The use of the name makes the statement unhypothetical. The name points to a familiar entity, not ‘some x ’, and part of its essence is his very existence: for any believer, ‘God does not exist’ is analytically false. Rather like ‘I exist’ is an analytical, non-hypothetical statement, since it is of my essence that I exist, not being a character of fiction. (Though in my recreating myself as an authorial ‘I’ within the context of this essay, the issue becomes blurred. Rather, I invite the reader to state his own existence. What would it mean for anybody to say: ‘I do not exist?’) When we refer to personal or impersonal entities by name, existence or non-existence (being real or fictional) is implied. When we refer to Peter Pan (about whose fictional nature no doubt we agree), no evidence could make the statement ‘Peter Pan exists’ true: the approvedly real Peter Pan₂ would not be identical the fictional Peter Pan₁, merely a namesake. Many facts about some real person X might have been different or be discovered to be different: date and place of birth, parentage, accomplishments, even gender. But if he or she

³ Since this matter has been discussed in many places, I will not go over the arguments; some of them appear in the discussion below. See e.g. Th.M. Drange, *Incompatible-Properties Arguments: A Survey* (1998) http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/theodore_drange/incompatible.html (accessed 5-5-2007).

⁴ Copan and Moser 2003: 8: “The advisable aim of a natural theological argument is to provide cognitively good grounds for theistic belief, thereby offering such belief as cognitively more reasonable or plausible than its denials.”

turns out to be somebody's fiction, I don't think we would say we had merely adjusted our image of X ; we would have lost a person and gained a character. This is implied in what we do with names: names are not determined by any defined set of properties, but attached by a baptismal (labeling) act.⁵ Much of the strength of the God-concept is in the name: even though this name may vary with believer's languages, it is assumed to refer to some real and known being. Therefore, while the believer speaks of God, the unbeliever (and the natural theologian, who is formally a doubter) speaks of 'God', meaning a something so-and-so. Significantly, the 'ontological argument' for God's existence toys with this: it purports to demonstrate that an imagined being is through the force of some attribute actually and necessarily real (in condensed form: Since we can imagine the greatest possible being, and a real being is greater than an imagined being, the greatest possible being is necessarily real).⁶

Unjustly favoured is therefore:

G_3 There is a God.

— which incorrectly couples a proper name with an indefinite article. Corrected:

G_4 There is a 'God'.

- i.e. there is such-and-such a being as certain people refer to by the name 'God', or 'The god of religion R is real'. G_4 is then equivalent to G_2 , with a supposedly defined identity. The objection remains the same. Removing the proper name and spelling out some of the defining attributes, we may get:

G_5 [...] "there exists a person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, is perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and the creator of all things".⁷

— which may smack too much of fairies and (unholy) ghosts. So I'll change it to:

G_6 There exists an eternal, perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good being with certain personal characteristics, which is the creator of all things.

This is in line, I suspect, with main Christian, Islamic and Jewish doctrines, without of course capturing important details. (I will limit myself to Christian theism, for reason of familiarity). Some theologians find the notion of 'a being' too narrow. Their critique may well be too metaphysical for most believers' stomach, and unbiblical as well. I will therefore adopt G_6 as the G to discuss.

⁵ A problem area famously discussed by Saul Kripke, Wittgenstein and Russell.

⁶ After Proslogium Ch. II

⁷ Swinburne 2004: 7 (supposed to be equivalent to 'there is a God' and 'God exists')

3. Why anything?

Why *G* anyway? Typically, *G* figures as the answer to a number of why-questions which follow patterns established in the medieval proofs of God's existence. The three basic ones (recognized by Kant as the only rationalistic types of arguments for *G*)⁸ are the ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments. They are like boxes fitting one into the other. Of these, only the first is considered to be *a priori*, and therefore ruled out from hypothetical reasoning. Spelling out the cosmological and two versions of the teleological argument (or argument from design) in a very general way, from the widest to the tiniest box:

C Why is there something rather than nothing?

*T*₁ Given that there is something (or everything there is, the Universe), why are things as they are – ordered rather than chaotic?

*T*₂ Given order, why this specific order?

— a question usually put with a heavy stress on the supposed improbability of the existence of us, humans. The theistic answer, probabilistic style, to all of these questions is: 'suppose such-and-such a being we call 'God' made it so; now that would be a good explanation; therefore, the likelihood of his existence increases by factor *x*.'

Are these *bona fide* inductive arguments? It was maintained by Kant that they all collapse into the ontological argument: the argument that the very conception of God (as maximally great) entails his existence. Would-be probabilistic interpretations do nothing to remove this dependency: they appeal to certain latent or explicit presuppositions, which are all of *a priori* nature. The name 'cosmological argument', moreover, is a misnomer: the argument does not ask about the cosmos or universe (it is the argument from design, next in the sequence, that does that); it asks a metaphysical question.

The cosmological argument begins with a fact about experience, namely, that something exists.

[...] the fundamental question which the cosmological argument addresses: Why is there something rather than nothing? At the heart of the argument lies a concern for some complete, ultimate, or best explanation of what exists contingently.⁹

The fact that 'something' exists is not a fact of experience, but a fact (if fact it is) of metaphysics. Our experience is not of *something* but of concrete things and sensations: this desk, this birdsong, that bird singing, that noise of a car I'm trying to ignore, the

⁸ Kant 1956: B619/A591.

⁹ B. Reichenbach: *Cosmological Argument*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2006 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2006/entries/cosmological-argument/> (accessed 5-5-2007).

sky, the planet. The abstract idea that ‘something exists’ implies and evokes the negation of its alternative: something exists ‘rather than nothing’.

If God does not exist, then the search for an explanation of all contingent facts leaves at least one inexplicable contingent fact, namely, that there is something rather than nothing. But if there is an absolutely simple God, the chain of contingent facts has its ultimate explanation in a cause that is necessary and self-explanatory.¹⁰

If the fact that there is an abstract ‘something’ were contingent, there could also be nothing. But the possibility of *there being nothing* and *nothing being the case* is not an option which can be asserted; let alone be confirmed in principle, like any contingent fact. I do not think it is a possibility which can be meaningfully entertained in thought. Try imagining *there being nothing*: we always frame it in a *something* – for else where would we be? – Or how could the question be asked?

Attempts to answer it unleash longstanding conflicts about causality. What is the Brute Fact that ends all explanation? – The totality of everything, alias Universe, or God, supposedly not included in the collection of ‘everything’? In this line of reasoning, ‘God’ fulfills the role of an ultimate *something*, something which exists ultimately because it exists necessarily. Now what does it mean: *exists necessarily*?

(a) It cannot *not* exist, or: its non-existence would be contradictory. It seems to me that the existence of *something* is necessary (for we cannot meaningfully uphold: ‘there is nothing’); but not the existence of *some specific thing*. As Kant maintained, the ‘necessarily existent’ is a regulative principle, designed to limit a causal regress, not *some existing thing*.¹¹ Try to find a replacement for the variable that would make the sentence “No *x* exists” logically defective. The only serious candidates are of abstract nature (like states-of-affairs, relations, or the empty set) – nothing to believe in, nothing like ‘a being’, nothing like ‘God’.

Alternatively:

(b) “[...] if it exists, it cannot cease to exist, and correspondingly, if it does not exist, it cannot come into existence.”¹² On this interpretation, ‘something’, or ‘any *x*’, is still a good candidate. I do not think that it makes sense to say that there might have been nothing; but there being something, there will always be something, if only the fact that there is or has been something. It just means then that we are left with the task of finding a value for some (whatever) variable, and no more than that: a Kantian ‘regulative principle’.

The question *C* is thus properly asked within the realm of the abstract. Only if we believe that words refer magically, that speaking of ‘things’ we mean *things* which

¹⁰ E. Stump, *Simplicity*, in Quinn and Tالياferro 1997: 256. I have not been able to make sense of a suggestion (made by W. F. Vallicella) that the question ‘why something’ does not imply ‘rather than nothing’. Asking ‘Why *x*?’ means asking for an explanation which favours *x* over any $\sim x$. Any explanation which allows for alternatives, in this case: ‘nothing’, would not be considered an explanation. Cf. <http://maverickphilosopher.blogspot.com/2005/02/two-forms-of-ultimate-explanation.html> (accessed 5-5-2007).

¹¹ Kant 1956: B620, 621/A592, 593.

¹² See n. 10.

somehow *are there*, can we derive an ‘existent’ entity or being from this line of questioning.

Now if *something* as posited in *C* were a ‘real thing’ it would count as an improbable phenomenon in need of explanation, given the supposed greater likelihood of there being nothing. As such it would show features of design and be evidence of a creator (here the cosmological turns into the teleological argument).

It remains to me, as to so many who have thought about the matter, a source of extreme puzzlement that there should exist anything at all.¹³

Call it premise or presupposition P_1 :

P_1 *Nothing* is more likely than *something*.

Why should this be the case? – Because this line of reasoning proceeds by false analogies. Consider:

I am wearing a red pullover. But I might have worn a green one, or a kaftan, or anything, or nothing. – I live in this house I live in. But I might have lived in another, or on the streets, etc. – There are these things. But there might have been other things. – There are things. But there might have been nothing.

There being nothing is inconceivable. It has no place in our language and thought, because our language and thought have no place in it. Absolute ‘nothingness’ leaves us nothing to speak of and nothing to speak with. The premise or presupposition figuring in the cosmological argument (so-called) is the confusion of the concrete and the abstract, effectively repudiated by Kant. I’ll call it P_2 :

P_2 Speaking of something, we speak of some *thing*.

It figures quite prominently in Swinburne’s ontology. According to Swinburne, there are things. A philosophically more respectable term for things is objects. And a philosophically more respectable term for objects is substances. Thus, there are substances; but substances are just ordinary tangible things at various scales:

The world consists of substances. Examples of substances, in the sense which I shall shortly begin to elucidate, are such individual things as this table and that chair, the tree over there, you and I. Substances have properties. Properties include both monadic properties [...] and relations [...] Events, as I shall understand the word, are the instantiations of properties in substances (or other events) at times, (or the comings-into-existence, existing or ceasings-to-exist of substances at times). Events thus include both unchanging states, such as this tie being now green [...] and changes of state [...].¹⁴

It is his own naive materialism which Swinburne is trying to exorcise, rather than an ontology acceptable to contemporary ‘scienticists’ or ‘naturalists’. If events are instantiations of properties or universals, this makes properties, which exist only in our way of speaking of things, into real things: as if the world is just a reflection of our

¹³ Swinburne 2004: 336.

¹⁴ Swinburne 1994: 7; 1996: 20: “The world consists of objects – or, more technically, as philosophers sometimes call them, substances”.

way of speaking. If lettuce is green, its being green is the instantiation of greenness in lettuce. But ‘greenness’ as such only exists in our maltreated language, it is nothing out there. The world consists of things. When we talk certain ways, of objects. Speaking different ways, and viewed on different time scales, what is ‘real’ or a ‘thing’ takes on other shapes. Ontology involves on the one hand the pragmatically (situation-bound) real for human animals, created in basic cognition and reflected in language and common sense; on the other hand, the objectively but never definite real explored by the sciences. Here our intuition has little access. Language is limited in its range of use, and ‘what there is’ can not depend on it. At certain levels of description nature (or ‘what there is’) is not describable in ordinary language, nor accessible by intuition or sentimental projection. We cannot ‘intuit’ what it is to be an electron – the very idea makes no sense, since we are biological beings.

A variant of the question ‘Why something?’ is known as the ‘Problem of Persistence’: Why do things persist from one instant to the next, “propelling themselves from the present into the future,”¹⁵ rather than simply *cease to be*? Again, this question seems to voice that rather puzzling intuition – that there should (more likely) be nothing rather than something. It echoes the Aristotelian physics of ‘bodies tending to rest’ – as ‘things tending to nothingness’. *Being* is apparently seen as work, an activity which tires.

4. Why everything as it is?

Given everything – the universe – why is it as it is, why does it show a specific order, or rather, order of specific kinds?

The underlying presupposition is P_3 :

P_3 Given something, it should (probably) be chaos.¹⁶

That is, until God takes it in his hand. Given that for *something* to exist implies a certain order, *nothing* being ultimately chaotic, P_3 seems merely to restate P_1 contrary to the assumption. The argument hinges on ‘coincidence’. Coincidence is a concept which functions within specific contexts: where a pattern of events is discerned, coincidence is an event which does not fit in with the pattern. So we look for a pattern we missed. Speaking of everything, the concept of coincidence makes no sense. Coincidence – coinciding – of what? What is the pattern in which the pattern of *everything* fits in? Answer: the pattern of *everything* + *God*. This leads to a notorious endless regress; so we choose a stopping point. For Kant, this is not something like a being or an ultimate physical cause: causality is a regulative principle, not an entity-factory.

Swinburne treats plurality as inherently chaotic. But without plurality there are no relations, therefore no order. It is not that things are chaotic by nature, and then *enter* the Great Orderer. Order is of the essence of what exists, not a bonus. Swinburne is

¹⁵ H. J. MacCann, *Creation and Conservation*, in Quinn and Taliaferro 1997: 308

¹⁶ Cf. Swinburne 2004: 154

baffled by the complexity of elementary physics as such: so many entities (particles), which ‘coincidentally’ show uniform behaviours (‘powers and liabilities’).

[...] the great complexity of materialism arises from this, that it postulates that the ultimate explanation of things behaving as they do now is provided by the powers and liabilities of an immense (possibly infinite) number of material objects. [...] These material objects belong to kinds, which have exactly the same powers and liabilities as each other. [...] According to materialism, ultimate explanation stops at innumerable different stopping points, many of them - according to materialism, coincidentally - having exactly the same powers and liabilities as each other. [...] It remains a very complicated hypothesis - in postulating that the complete causes of things now are innumerable separate objects (coincidentally, with exactly the same powers as each other).¹⁷

These are the complications of a thingish (‘substance’) ontology. Elementary particles are not substances or objects; they are a feature of natural structure, a structure which is more basic than the entities we measure separately. From a different perspective: how is it possible that eighty instruments played by eighty players reproduce a symphony written by some Beethoven 200 years ago? – Not because the composer’s ghost keeps magical control over the performers’ bodies, scraping and blowing every note of his symphonies, but because he has constructed a structure (a score) within a structure (musical-cultural tradition) which allows for the same ordering (roughly and for all that matters) to be reproduced. There is nothing thingish in that, nothing to be explained by substances, all by process and structure. The point is not that a symphony is, evidently, designed, but that some specific order (a concert) proceeds from another order (score and musical tradition), like natural phenomena have a certain order because without order there would not be a universe but chaos – for all we know, *nothing*. In this sense, both there being something and there being order is more ‘probable’ than the contraries. (Between scare quotes because I think the word is misapplied, but about that later).

The argument from order (or design) has often focused on fine-tuning (as in the ‘Ultimate Boeing 747 Gambit’ originating with Fred Hoyle and refuted by Dawkins), though it is not at all clear why this would make the question any more stringent. Without elaborating on the narrow margin implied for cosmic constants, we may state that the universe is ordered in the uniquely specific way that has allowed us, homo sapiens, to evolve. The fact is considered ‘improbable’, in the same sense as having the one winning ticket in a 10¹⁰ (or whatever) ticket lottery is improbable. Amusing about this problem is the ease with which it is resolved on both sides. On the one hand: ‘Easy! - God made it so’; on the other hand: ‘Easy! – Had the universe been different, we wouldn’t be there; we are there, so the universe could not have been different’. On this view, the problem is due to an ‘anthropic bias’.

Is this a good argument? Hardly; indeed, it is not difficult to refute. It is surely true that if the universe is observed by observers who exist in it, then it must have whatever

¹⁷ Swinburne 1996: 41-43

properties are necessary for the existence of those observers. But this trivial observation does nothing to negate the idea that there is apparent design, nor does it explain the apparent design that we see.¹⁸

Fact is that in a fair lottery somebody will be the winner – but there will always be a lucky winner who wants to know *why him or her*. This is not a philosophical but an emotional perplexity; it is asking not for a problem solution, but for affection and human intent lifted to the cosmic plane. Let me then call this anthropic bias P_4 :

P_4 What happens to me (to us) is special.

Improbable things *do* happen. The probability of an event is a function of its specificity and the context of occurrence. A statistically improbable outcome is only subjectively perplexing, on the basis of a pre-established preference or bias. Basically the argument is biographical, whether this concerns one's personal biography or the biography of the species. Any event, defined precisely enough, is hugely unlikely. What is the probability that I, this person, would at this particular moment on the 4th of May 2007 be sitting at this particular desk writing this particular line? – Predicting from yesterday, remote. From last week, still more. From the year 1900, incalculably so. From the Big Bang ...? The continuous realization of an infinite number of improbabilities is part of the fabric of the universe.

Swinburne proposes a thought experiment (or parable) to bring his view across:

Suppose that a madman kidnaps a victim and shuts him in a room with a cardshuffling machine. The machine shuffles ten packs of cards simultaneously and then draws a card from each pack and exhibits simultaneously the ten cards. The kidnapper tells the victim that he will shortly set the machine to work and it will exhibit its first draw, but that, unless the draw consists of an ace of hearts from each pack, the machine will simultaneously set off an explosion which will kill the victim, in consequence of which he will not see which cards the machine drew. The machine is then set to work, and to the amazement and relief of the victim the machine exhibits an ace of hearts drawn from each pack. The victim thinks that this extraordinary fact needs an explanation in terms of the machine having been rigged in some way. But the kidnapper, who now reappears, casts doubt on this suggestion. 'It is hardly surprising', he says, 'that the machine draws only aces of hearts. You could not possibly see anything else. For you would not be here to see anything at all, if any other cards had been drawn.' But of course the victim is right and the kidnapper is wrong. There is indeed something extraordinary in need of explanation in ten aces of hearts being drawn. The fact that this peculiar order is a necessary condition of the draw being perceived at all makes what is perceived no less extraordinary and in need of explanation. The teleologist's starting-point is not that we perceive order rather than disorder, but that order rather than disorder is there. Maybe only if order is there can we know what is there, but that makes what is there no less extraordinary and in need of explanation.¹⁹

¹⁸ Davis 1997: 112. Similarly A. Plantinga in *The Dawkins Confusion: Naturalism ad absurdum*, Books & Culture, March/April 2007, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2007/002/1.21.html> (accessed 5-5-2007).

¹⁹ Swinburne 2004: 156-157

This parable fails to do what it should precisely because its elaborate detail exemplifies the bias involved in rather crude and obvious ways: (1) humanity is not kidnapped and locked in alien space, but part of nature (of the ‘machine’); (2) unlike the kidnap victim, we have no memory of a pre-universe life (nor does it make sense to suppose that we could have); (3) we are not told in advance of an all-or-nothing lottery. From this parable thus emerges the further presupposition, that without God:

*P*₅ We are aliens stranded in a hostile universe.

Least appealing, and therefore most revealing, is the variant of the argument which replaces order and fine-tuning with beauty. Order is a condition for beauty; chaos is ugly. Since there is no *a priori* reason why the world should be beautiful rather than ugly, God must have made it so.

The argument has force on the assumption with which I am happy and commend to my readers that beauty is an objective matter, that there are truths about what is beautiful and what is not. If this is denied and beauty is regarded as something that we project onto nature or artefacts, then the argument could be rephrased as an argument from human beings having aesthetic sensibilities that allow them to see the universe as beautiful. In the latter case, there is certainly no particular reason why, if the universe originated uncaused, psycho-physical laws (of the kind that I shall consider in the next chapter) would bring about aesthetic sensibilities in human beings.²⁰

One does not have to be particularly hostile to theism to see the perspective of this argument as ‘anthropically’ skewed: it presents man planted into the world as a ready made entity, with moral and aesthetic standards originating outside space and time. That our sense of beauty has evolved and is part of our animal well-being (and has a function in survival), is therefore not ‘projected unto’ nature but derived from it, hardly needs arguing. Thus neither the phenomenon of beauty nor the existence of some universal aesthetic sensibilities ask for explanations beyond biology; only prejudice which views our species as stranded angels rather than animals at one end of the food chain.

5. What is a cause?

The question ‘Why *x*?’ is satisfactorily answered if we can point to some *y* to which it stands in a causal relation. Now, when do we speak of a causal relation?

Events are caused by substances. The dynamite caused the explosion, one billiard ball caused another to move away, and the marksman caused the motion of the gun trigger.²¹

The nonsensicality of this view is all too obvious. Put two billiard balls on the table and they will not start pushing each other away. Swinburne’s ontology is made up of substances, enriched with powers (to effect) and liabilities (to suffer). That billiard balls bounce as a consequence of their bouncing power is an exemplary case of *vis dormitiva*

²⁰ Swinburne 2004: 190

²¹ Swinburne 1996: 21-21

explanation: though not demonstrably untrue, it does not say anything, really. It is just anthropomorphic baby-talk in academic vocabulary.²²

That things happen by causes does not satisfy emotionally, since causes are not anything, really. Causality is a regulative principle in the description and relation of processes, the justified assumption that whenever we witness a physical event, we may expect to be able to relate it as effect to some previous physical event, within a specific framework of explanation (involving, of course, 'laws of nature'). Apart from the very diverse answers to very diverse *why*-questions, therefore, there seems to be no phenomenal *cause*. If the ground under our feet is stable through an incalculable chain of interconnected causes, suspicion remains that suddenly it may give way. If things happen, or don't happen, this must all be for some deep and unique reason: it is God's will or 'intention'.

Now God's existence or 'God made it so' in itself does not explain anything, unless we know *how* he makes his effects. You and I may push the billiard balls, and our pushes (not our existence or 'we') would be causes. If God does things like you and I do things ('personal explanation'), he must be a biological being, in other words, an animal. Alternatively, one would have to deny our (exclusively) biological being. This is the usual move according to Christian views of human nature. In raising 'personal explanation' to philosophical status, Swinburne wants to lend 'intention' explanatory value superior to that of causality:

[...] [theism] postulates that all explanation is reducible to personal explanation, explanation in terms of the free intentional agency of God or of some finite agent permitted by God to exercise such agency. According to theism, explanations of the other kind - that is, scientific explanations - are reducible to personal explanations in the sense that the operation of the factors cited in the scientific explanations is to be explained in personal terms. Newton's laws work because God keeps them in operation.²³

One necessary premise for this is dualism, the dissociation of mind and the body. Let this be P_6 , explicated in three progressive assertions:

$P_{6.1}$ Mental events cannot be explained as brain events, even though they are mostly caused by brain events.

$P_{6.2}$ The mind is an "immaterial substance, a soul, which is connected to the body."²⁴

$P_{6.3}$ The mind may exist without the body.

The correlation of mind and brain events is a process which is by far not fully understood, and maybe for us (due to biological limitations) not fully understandable, but a mystery only on this assumption that our mental events constitute something like

²² Swinburne 2004: 33: "Powers and liabilities (the 'why') are thus among the properties of substances. Laws of nature are then just regularities [...]. That heated copper expands is a law is just a matter of every piece of copper having the causal power to expand, and the liability to exercise that power when heated."

²³ Swinburne 2004: 334

²⁴ Swinburne 1996: 73

an independent substance, as if the play improvised by the actors on stage were ‘causing’ the actors to act, or ‘caused’ by their acting, or operating besides it, instead of being a representation, a semiotic construct. An awareness that in observing the self one is observing (in one’s own and others’ minds) a play or representation is totally absent in Swinburne’s thinking, in which everything, symbolical and real, abstract and concrete, is pushed down into one flattened ontological plane of ‘substances’ (P_2).²⁵

The thinking life of the mind exists on a different (representational) ontological level from the neuronal events with which it is correlated. The mystery (a problem of intuition, not of reason) disappears once we do not emotionally dissociate our ‘selves’ from our bodies. The origin of this dissociation may have been a defense mechanism against pain, or fear of death; sometimes it is good to pretend ‘we’ are elsewhere; but it is not what we are. The alleged independence of mind and brain is again and again illustrated with thought experiments of brain transplants (‘A surgeon transplants the halves of your brain into two different craniums. Which one is you?’)²⁶ These fables do not demonstrate anything: for one thing, you can imagine whatever you like; besides, there is no reason to suppose that identity is indelible and unitary. All the evidence points to the contrary: personalities are changed, damaged and obliterated by brain damage. For the theist, personal identity is an indestructible substance:

$P_{6.4}$ The ‘I’ is indelible.

The theist’s interest is not in clarifying the relation of mind and body: it is in mystifying human nature, positing the ‘soul’ as an additional entity having ‘mental states’, implying the new and perplexing problem how this soul is joined with the mind-brain-complex: an entirely fictitious problem calling for God to solve it (the ‘argument from consciousness’). God’s nature in turn is explained as similar to that of the human soul, in that he *causes through intention*.

Since mental events exist in the realm of representation, explanation by volition cannot be invoked as an alternative kind of causal explanation, as ‘personal’ or ‘mental causation’. Someone may ask: ‘Why is it cold in here?’ – expecting a ‘physical’ answer like: ‘Because the window is open’. Similarly: ‘Why didn’t you put on the heating?’ Expecting an ‘intentional’ answer like: ‘Because I want to save gas.’ (In Dutch however the questions are usually differentiated: physical ‘why?’ is ‘*waardoor?*’, intentional ‘why?’ is ‘*waarom?*’, corresponding to ‘*doordat*’ en ‘*omdat*’ and *causes* and *reasons*.) The first question: – ‘Why is it cold in here?’ – might be answered elliptically by the last answer: ‘I want to save gas.’ The ellipsis is evident, and to say that I by my concern about the gas bill ‘mentally caused’ the temperature to drop would be patently absurd. Explanations in terms of personal actions may thus be given in parallel to physical-causal explanation – but not of the same fact. The fact explained by my concern is my action or non-action of not turning on the heating, not entropy.

²⁵ Swinburne 1997: xii: “That bodily events cause brain events and that these cause [!] pains, images, and beliefs (where their subjects have privileged access to the latter and not the former), is one of the most obvious phenomena of human experience”.

²⁶ As in Swinburne 2004: 197, Swinburne 2006.

In human action, the relations of intentions, actions and effects cannot be described as a causal process. Our intention may produce an action or coincide with it; maybe there was a ‘willing’ before the action, maybe not – this is a secondary problem, the importance of which has been exaggerated on dualistic assumptions. I do not ‘cause’ my arm to rise – I raise my arm (which too is part of *me*, fortunately!) There is no law that describes a process that starts with my ‘intending’ to hit the ball and its landing on the other side of the net. The action account and a purely physical account overlap, but do not concern the same facts; the parabola described by the ball in the air is not caused by my intention, but by factors like the force exerted on the ball by the racket and air resistance. ‘Why is the kettle boiling?’ and ‘Why are the H₂O molecules in motion?’ may refer to the same event – though not to the same fact. Only the first question is answered by: ‘I wanted to offer you a cup of tea’. My will causes nothing; it realizes itself in action.²⁷

The ontology implied in causal explanation – that whatever things there are, are the things postulated in our scientific theories – lacks the personal touch. The absence of a concrete and uniform, phenomenonal causality leaves a loophole for God to slip in. His involvement is the glue that bonds all diverse causes and effects: *God makes causality work* – for ‘naturalists’, ‘scienticists’ and ‘positivists’ a perplexing explanatory overkill.²⁸ The *G*-hypothesis may explain everything, but adds nothing to scientific explanations (which have the virtue of being specific, precise and quantified), and offers no basis for any prediction. If the end of the line of all explanation is personhood, thought and mind, the scientific endeavour is doomed to irrelevance. The idea that nature needs supernatural glue seems to reflect a vision of nature as essentially unconnected – just ‘things’ (P_2 and P_3). The existence of these things is considered to be a dubious and perilous state; only a divine will, incessantly willing them into existence, wards off an eruption of non-being (P_1).

6. What is it like to be a person?

The ‘I’ is a symbol that recedes ever further into a mirrored distance whenever ‘I’ perceive ‘myself’. The multiplicity of such mirrorings may be one indicator of intelligence (or negatively, of obsession). Even if explanation by intention (‘direct action’ or ‘basic action’) were a valid and competitive kind of explanation on the human

²⁷ Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §§ 616-628.

Swinburne in *The Justification of Theism* (<http://www.leaderu.com/truth/3truth09.html>, accessed 5-5-2007): “When I intentionally move my hand, my purposing to move my hand causes the motion of my hand via causing a brain state which in turn causes the hand motion. Although humans directly cause their brain states [?], they normally do so under a description which describes a brain state in terms of its effects. [...] Certainly the purposes of humans are focused not on their brain states, but on the effects of their brain states - that is, they execute their purposes indirectly. But nothing of importance turns on this. Humans could easily learn to bring about brain states described in terms of their intrinsic nature, and seek so to do. When scientists tell me which neuron has to fire in order to cause my hand to move, I can then learn to make that neuron fire directly.” [!] In this context his credulity towards the tricks of Uri Geller should give no surprise, see Harris 2002: 99.

²⁸ Swinburne 1994: 128.

plane, it still would not account for God's being active by volition. By dissociating mind and body, I may (with some effort of the imagination or just a trick with words) imagine that my will to raise my arm causes my arm to rise. God's will however operates on the universe, which on theistic premises cannot be his body (it leaves pantheism as the more reasonable option). God's 'direct action' remains a mystery within the theistic framework.²⁹

While the mind-brain-soul model offers no solution to the problem of how God acts, his alleged personhood contradicts his transcendent being. His transcendent properties among themselves provide notorious problems of consistence³⁰; the coexistence of personhood and transcendence involves an even more blatant contradiction. Personhood is the odd man out, being inherently non-transcendent and not admitting of a superlative degree, like power and goodness. We may be inclined to grant it in different degrees to different kinds of living beings: we do not call an amoeba a person, a dog with reservations, and our fellow humans without, except in extreme cases of brain damage or senility. But to call a being 'omni-personal' is devoid of sense.

Whatever the defining characteristics of personhood may be³¹, a person is a complicated being, and we grant greater personhood to those beings that show a greater intricacy of mind. A being with knowledge and intentions has representations. Higher personhood involves multiple representation (representation of self, of one's knowledge, of one's knowledge of one's knowledge ... etc.). An omniscient being should have such reflected knowledge to an infinite degree. If God is a person, he can't be simple; if simple, he cannot be a person. It is therefore surprising that many theologians who maintain God's personhood, at the same time maintain that God is exactly that, *simple* – meaning: (1) his having no parts, (2) more specifically, and most problematically, his being identical to his attributes or properties which in turn are identical to each other (the 'Doctrine of Divine Simplicity'). Thus:

God is eternal, perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good,
person and creator

would be equivalent to:

God = eternal = perfectly free = omnipotent = omniscient = perfectly
good = person = creator.

Though an amazing amount of sophistication has been invested in the defense of this doctrine, making it an arcane and impenetrable topic, basically it boils down to a simple and meaningless confusion of copula and equality sign. Consider:

The doctrine of simplicity states that each of God's real or intrinsic properties is identical with his other real or intrinsic properties, and with his being or nature. God's knowledge is identical with his power, for example, and both are identical with his being.

²⁹ See the critique in Harris 2002.

³⁰ See note 4.

³¹ Swinburne 2004: 334 "A person is a being with capacities, beliefs, and intentions."

Just as “Thomas Jefferson” and “the third president of the United States” have different meanings but refer to the same person, so “the knowledge of God” and “the power of God,” although differing in meaning, refer to the same reality, namely, the infinitely perfect divine life or activity. Just as “Thomas Jefferson” and “the third president of the United States” have different meanings but refer to the same person, so “the knowledge of God” and “the power of God,” although differing in meaning, refer to the same reality, namely, the infinitely perfect divine life or activity.³²

This gets off on the wrong foot: “Thomas Jefferson” and “the third president of the United States” are different names for one person, not attributes, and

Thomas Jefferson = the third president of the United States

is an incorrect rendering of what may be more adequately expressed as something like ‘The person we know under the name Thomas Jefferson was the third president of the United States’ or ‘the name of the man who was third president of the United States is Thomas Jefferson’. Co-reference of names is totally unlike identity of attributes.

Swinburne has created a simple version of the doctrine by taking the words ‘person’ and ‘simple’ and combining them in the simplest way:

Theism postulates God as a being with intentions, beliefs, and basic powers, but ones of a very simple kind, so simple that it postulates the simplest kind of person that there could be.

There is neatness about zero and infinity that particular finite numbers lack. Yet a person with zero powers would not be a person at all. So in postulating a person with infinite power the theist is postulating a person with the simplest kind of power possible.³³

Theism thus postulates one person of an incredibly simple kind—one with such powers, beliefs, and intentions that there are no limits (apart from those of logic) to his powers, to the extent of his justified true belief, and to his choice of intention; and no limits of time to his existence.³⁴

This adds other interpretations to the divine simplicity: numerical and conceptual. Postulating that (1) God possesses his attributes to an infinite degree, (2) infinity is simpler than any finite number (excluding 0), (3) simplicity being “the major determinant of intrinsic probability,” God is maximally probable.³⁵ But since wisdom and knowledge increase in complexity with their being possessed in greater degree (or a simpleton would be a know-all), an infinite amount can never be simpler than a limited amount. Even *if* an infinite degree of e.g. wisdom would be numerically simple, this simplicity would be limited to the numerical aspect (and it is hard to see in this

³² W. Wainwright, *Concepts of God*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2007 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2007/entries/concepts-god/>. See also W.F. Vallicella, *Divine Simplicity*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2006 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2006/entries/divine-simplicity/> (accessed 5-5-2007).

³³ Swinburne 2004: 97.

³⁴ Swinburne 2004: 335.

³⁵ Swinburne 2004: 108.

connection what the number ∞ actually numbers), without making the wisdom itself a simple matter. In what sense could an infinite pile of carrots be simpler than 194.669.293.475.869 carrots? – And if we opt for numerical simplicity anyway, why not prefer 0 gods or ∞ gods to 1 god? – an option cursorily swept aside.

While on the one hand God's simplicity is numerical or quantitative, on the other hand it is qualitative: God is simple because he is absolutely free.

A person with an inbuilt detailed specification of how to act is a much more complex person than a perfectly free one. And theism makes the simplest supposition, that God is not merely omnipotent, and omniscient (and so knows what are all the possible actions) but also perfectly free. He chooses between actions solely in virtue of *a priori* considerations about whether they are good actions, and how good they are.³⁶

If this is true, a robot is a more complicated (may we say: sophisticated?) being than God. In his simplicity, Swinburne's God himself looks like an automaton: rigorously obeying *a priori* considerations he is subject to such constraints as to leave him neither choice nor freedom.

7. The calculus of belief

Why is it desirable that God should be simple? – Because otherwise his existence would not be a proper stopping point (first cause, first will) in theistic explanation. For Swinburne, simplicity is the main determinant of 'intrinsic probability', meaning the likelihood of a hypothesis irrespective of the directly relevant evidence.

(P₇) "The simpler a theory, the more probable it is."³⁷

Consequently, the simplest theory is closest to certitude. Or, less academically: 'The truth must be easy'. Though simplicity plays a part in science, no scientist will accept the simplest theory just because of its simplicity (how did we ever get beyond Aristotle?), and most sciences have advanced to points where only genius discerns simplicity. In science, the choice for simplicity may be partially motivated by a sense of beauty, but a weightier factor is no doubt pragmatism; we work more efficiently, think quicker, with simpler structures. Of course, the primary scientific criterium is predictive power linked with refutability. *G* 'predicts' (retrodicts) everything, but is (inductively) irrefutable, though deductively, as I maintain, false. This leaves us with nothing but the discreet charm of simplicity. *G* feels simple to Swinburne, but to anyone who does not share his *P*'s it appears deeply complex and problematic. The theological literature as a whole refutes its simplicity.

Proposing his versions of the arguments for *G*, Swinburne attempts not to demonstrate its truth, but more modestly to show that the evidence contributes to its

³⁶ Swinburne 2004: 335. For a critique of Swinburne's plurality of notions, see Prevost 1990: 46-47, and on the simplicity of infinity K.M. Parsons, *Science, Confirmation, and the Theistic Hypothesis* (1986), http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/keith_parsons/theistic/ (accessed 5-5-2007).

³⁷ Swinburne 2004: 53

probability, makes it more likely than it would be without (what he calls ‘C-inductive’).³⁸ If one does not accept the several P ’s, however, all the arguments fail. Further, it is supposed that the arguments can be combined in building up a ‘cumulative case’, adding up the admittedly weak probabilities of his separate arguments to create a positive balance on the whole set.³⁹ Though each argument for God’s existence might be supposed to substantiate a different hypothetic ‘God’, Ockam’s razor is applied to reduce this resultant plurality, leaving one God to account for all (supposing that no contradictory attributes are involved.) The further assumption that this abstract or transcendental and ‘probable’ God is also a ‘personal God’ is supposed to permit the crucial move that follows: relating the rational arguments to certain chosen sources of revelation, and thereby justifying the acceptance of a concrete denominational God, the God familiar of scripture, of the ‘chosen people’, virgin birth and crucifixion. Since I have never come across anything resembling an argument for this move from the hypothetical to the historical (and frankly do not expect to), I will not discuss it.⁴⁰ The God of ‘natural theology’ and the God of scripture reside in different domains.

In making up his balance, Swinburne intends to apply Bayes’ theorem, which derives a probability value P from the relations between a hypothesis h , evidence e and background knowledge k . For these variables, no concrete values are being (or could be) given (only relative), so that the formula in fact remains inert, making one wonder why it receives so much attention in the first place; it certainly does not contribute much to the clarity of the concept ‘probability’.

I am not convinced that there is another concrete and formally defensible interpretation of probability than the statistical. Probability values relate to occurrences in relation to other related occurrences and predict their distribution over a large enough sample. G explains (as Hume stressed) a unique phenomenon - since we only know of one universe (and according to theists of one God), a statistical interpretation of the probability of whichever argument is impossible. There can be no relevant background knowledge - k is empty.⁴¹

Swinburne however relies on the ‘inductive’ interpretation of probability, which expresses degree of confirmation rather than the distribution of occurrences over a space of alternatives. Since degree of confirmation is closely (though problematically) associated with degree of confidence, the notion of probability easily slides into the

³⁸ Swinburne 2004: 6.

³⁹ Swinburne 2004: 12-13, Harris 2002: 129.

⁴⁰ Copan and Moser 2003: 9, wagging admonishing fingers: “One might quickly dismiss natural theological arguments on the ground that they do not add up to warranted belief in the Judeo-Christian God. This move would be too quick. A wiser response would be to examine the interrelations between the lessons of natural theology and the offerings of special revelation. Rather than stopping, for instance, with the observation that the designer of the universe might not be omnipotent or omniscient, one might be well advised to examine the distinctive characteristics of the designer, particularly in connection with the offerings of special revelation. One might pay close attention to how special revelation illuminates the findings of natural theology.”

⁴¹ Though we cannot conceive of an explanation of the universe as the all-encompassing set, this does not prevent cosmological attempts to explain individual features of the whole: Hume’s argument stands up to Swinburne’s objections, 2004: 134; cf. Parsons (n. 41).

more subjective *plausibility* (persuasiveness)⁴². As put to use by Swinburne, ‘probability’ at best refers to consistency (of b with e or k), but often it merely means conceivability, imaginability, or conceptual charm. The outcome of P strongly depends on k , mostly referred to as ‘(mere) tautological evidence’ and in one place as ‘irrelevant knowledge’⁴³. Though in the 2004 edition of *The Existence of God* more attention is given to k than in the original of 1979, the concept is still treated with cavalier negligence. Above all, the notions of ‘tautology’ and ‘evidence’ are contra-dictory. Presumably, what is meant is *a priori* knowledge, which is not spelled out – though it should be, since (as I have been arguing) the arguments rely on *a priori* judgments (including the P ’s) rather than any inductive reasoning.

A physical ‘Theory of Everything’ purports to explain everything physical; theism purports to explain everything logically contingent (apart from itself). In consequence there will be no background knowledge with which it has to fit. It will not, therefore, be a disadvantage to it if it postulates a person in many ways rather unlike the embodied human persons so familiar to us. In considering the arguments for the existence of God, we shall begin with a situation of tautological background knowledge, and so the dissimilarities between human persons and the postulated God will not as such affect the prior probability of theism.⁴⁴

Paraphrased: b explains everything. Therefore, k is included in the explanation. Therefore, b may be anything (though preferably something simple). G , then, stands on the foundation of simplicity as ‘intrinsic’ or ‘prior probability’ ($P(b/k)$).

Without intrinsic probabilities you cannot even assess the probability of the most down-to-earth theory; and so again you’d better give up any idea that there is any objective rationality in science. You’d have to suppose that the probability calculus is concerned only to measure individual strengths of belief, and allows you to infer that if you believe that you believe this proposition to this degree, then in consistency you ought to believe that proposition to that degree; but there’s no truth about what evidence objectively renders probable.⁴⁵

Which is exactly how Swinburne uses probability: as a calculus of belief. While ‘prior probability’ (i.e. probability of the hypothesis prior to confrontation with the directly relevant evidence e) is a more rational concept than ‘intrinsic probability’, still better is it to speak of ‘plausibility’. How plausible a hypothesis is on its own must be a structural

⁴² Swinburne 2004: 14-15; J. Hawthorne *Inductive Logic*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2008/entries/logic-inductive/> (accessed 5-5-2007):

“[...] in any probabilistic logic that satisfies the usual axioms for probabilities, the inductive support for a hypothesis must depend in part on its prior probability. This prior probability represents how plausible [!] the hypothesis is supposed to be on its own, before the evidence is brought to bear. A Bayesian logicist must tell us how to assign values to these pre-evidential prior plausibilities [!] for each hypothesis or theory under consideration, and must do so in a way that relies only on their syntactic logical structure, or on some measure of their syntactic simplicity.”

⁴³ Swinburne 2004: 17: “The division between new evidence and background evidence can be made where you like - often it is convenient to include all evidence derived from experience in e and to regard k as being what is called in confirmation theory mere ‘tautological evidence’, that is, in effect all our other irrelevant knowledge.”

⁴⁴ Swinburne 2004: 66.

⁴⁵ Swinburne: *Comments on Chapter 7 of Sobel’s Logic and Theism*, http://www.scar.utoronto.ca/~sobel/OnL_T/SwinburneOnCh7.pdf (accessed 5-5-2007).

feature of the hypothesis (it can therefore not be a probability value, which relates to at least one referential set). The dubious conversion of plausibility into probability into fact has led to a few notorious cases of judicial error.⁴⁶ It is quite ordinary that in criminal cases all the evidence contributes to the plausibility of some suspect's guilt, while no piece of evidence is more than circumstantial and all can be explained in other ways. Take Swinburne's version:

That arguments may support and weaken each other is even more evident, when we are dealing with inductive arguments. That Smith has blood on his hands hardly makes it probable that Smith murdered Mrs Jones, nor (by itself) does the fact that Smith stood to gain from Mrs Jones's death, nor (by itself) does the fact that Smith was near the scene of the murder at the time of its being committed, but all these phenomena together (perhaps with other phenomena as well) may indeed make the conclusion probable.⁴⁷

Proving G may be a matter less serious than trial for murder, but on the basis of the case as thus presented, Smith will go free in any decent court. The concept of 'beyond reasonable doubt' has been introduced to exorcise a pyrrhonian skepticism, which would never allow a verdict. That we can allow ourselves to go *beyond* is because in the natural world, every piece of evidence implicitly constraints other pieces: this is a function of k , which involves basic facts (mostly tacit knowledge) about the world and what constitutes 'coincidence', probable or improbable (involving e.g. uniqueness of individuals). The series $e_1, e_2, e_3 \dots$ may never reach the limit of absolute certitude, but because each e_n puts a limit on alternative explanations of e_{n+1} , the result may allow us (on better evidence than the above) to convict upon conviction. No such considerations apply to G , which is only restrained by our willingness or unwillingness to fantasize. Like Anselm in the ontological argument, Swinburne tries to construct his God-in-reality from a God-in-mind, replacing the 'then which nothing greater' by a 'then which nothing more simple/plausible'. To effect this, he has shifted the traditional concept of God's existential simplicity toward subjective conceptual simplicity.

8. What is it like to be a believer?

If G is irremediably incoherent, what is it like to be a believer? – To the unbeliever, stranger than being a bat; though we may have the good fortune of being both, consecutively: believer and unbeliever. If to a now-atheist-formerly-theist theistic concepts appear to be unintelligible, either loss of understanding must have taken place, or false understanding has been replaced by true incomprehension.

Dutch children used to be raised (some still are) as believers in St.-Nicolas, alias Sinterklaas (a source for the U.S. Santa Claus, whose global conquest marks the cultural

⁴⁶ See R. Meester, M. Collins and R. Gill, "On the (ab)use of statistics in the legal case against the nurse Lucia de B." *Law, Probability and Risk*. Advance access. Published online on May 5, 2007. <http://lpr.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/mgm003v1>.

⁴⁷ Swinburne 2004: 12.

impoverishment of capitalism). In later childhood, they would be let in on the deceit, had they not arrived at it independently. That this guided or unguided and sometimes dramatic fall from Sinterklaas-belief which has taken place in the lives of so many generations of little Calvinists has not caused a massive dechristianization early on still surprises me. Belief in Sinterklaas involves the holding true of a number of improbable if not impossible propositions, such as his longevity, his total knowledge of children's good and evil deeds, his horse riding over roof tops, his black slave's climbing down all the chimneys to deposit presents in shoes, etc. How did in Christian minds God survive the death of Sinterklaas?

What a relief! – not to have to believe in Sinterklaas' nocturnal cavalcades. What a relief! – not to have to believe that all God's atrocities done out of favoritism and petty jealousy are 'good', that the crucifixion has been for my benefit (though I may still go to hell), that the son is identical to the father; not to have to explain the misery in the world in spite of the good intentions of an almighty ruler-creator; and not to have to reconcile the contradictory doctrines of twenty centuries of schismatic Christianity and thirty-something of Judaism with the reasonable and moderate metaphorical beliefs of modern progressive Protestantism.

I can talk no longer to the Master of the Universe. But on the basis of our best knowledge of what the universe is, such talk is pointless, absurd and undesirable. It is true that no Divine Intention is directing my and everyone's life, that no ulterior good compensates for the here and now. But what relief to take refuge in a perspective beyond my personal – or any – sorrow! The world is balanced toward misery, and there is little individual and collective hope. Hope is a beautiful thing and nobody can live without, but also the parent of laziness, arrogance, slavish obedience, irrationalism, and perseverance in error. Should we give up and cry despair? – Indeed we should, for doomed we are, unless we *see* that we are, in which case *maybe* we are not. There is no principle which guarantees that 'all will be for the best', no excuse to go on living in a selfcomforting faith, on an antiquated set of moral values reflecting human self-perception as the Chosen Species.

Then how did God-belief survive Sinterklaas-belief? – I will offer a brief, incomplete, and sketchy speculation (Sinterklaas is traditionally associated with cookies called 'speculaas'). Beliefs are compartmentalized. In itself this is just a term, not an explanation. How do we compartmentalize? – Among the contributing factors I would count:

(1) Lack of understanding and carefully cultivated childish incomprehension. Inconsistence and incomprehensibility may help to preserve an idea intact during one or more lifetimes, protecting it from analysis and scrutiny. *G's* incoherence contributes greatly to its credal potential. It is the unassailable, quoted propositions which are 'professed' rather than proposed and discussed. A Christian reciting his weekly 'Credo in unum Deum' does not state a proposition but performs the ritual of declaring the state of belief, so to say.

(2) Awe of authority, another childish attitude carefully cultivated, and supported by misgivings about personal and general reason (*We can't know all!*).

(3) Awe of abstraction and especially lack of recognition of the abstract as such, i.e. substitution of the falsely concrete. One way to round off our incomplete knowledge is the creation of stories, the reification and personification of abstract limiting principles as agencies. Religious ideas may remain suspended in a limbo between story-myth and history-account-explanation, especially since the process of linguistic reference is not a simple correlation of words and things. Our ability to gather multiple and complex phenomena into one bundle and refer to them with a single word is impressive, and hazardous. (In a historically no doubt true statement: 'A US-led coalition attacked Iraq on March 20, 2003' – *what exactly* corresponds to component expressions like 'US-led', 'attack', 'Iraq?')

(4) In general, a reluctance to analyze language and concepts, which supports a magical belief in the power of words. The magical element in rationalist (as opposed to empiricist or naturalist) thinking is a strong faith in the sufficiency of our concepts to describe reality at any level. 'Personal explanation' promotes the categories of human social interaction (things you do and things I do) to supracosmic status (things God does). It is rational (not rationalistic) to accept the limits of reason, the blind walls we hit upon when thinking through concepts like induction and causality. It is of doubtful rationality to have any strong positive belief beyond those limits; we may fantasize, without making our fantasies surreal.

Theists who sustain their belief through a consideration of *G* as hypothesis are probably fewer than confident atheists. Rationalistic defenses of theism serve rather to demonstrate its coherence and uphold its respectability vis-a-vis philosophy, than to convince the doubter. While they fail in their purpose, such defenses at least help in laying bare the more basic infra-rational feelings in a quasi-rational form. Without pretense that the several *P*'s distilled here mainly from Swinburne's work will make up anything like an exhaustive or universal Basic Unstated Creed of Christian God-belief (or that we cannot delve any deeper), the list may serve as a guide to go beyond surface-argumentation with its false inductions, and to move on to what motivates the will to believe. As basic intuitions or sentimental attitudes, these *P*'s stand to acceptance or non-acceptance rather than debate.

*P*₁ *Nothing* is more likely than *something*.

*P*₂ Speaking of something, we speak of some *thing*.

*P*₃ Given something, it should (probably) be chaos.

*P*₄ What happens to me (to us) is special.

*P*₅ We are aliens stranded in a hostile universe.

*P*₆ The 'I' is indelible.

*P*₇ The truth must be simple.

Paraphrased: 'Without God, there cannot be anything; if anything, chaos; if us (me), lost in alien space. Being lost, we are redeemed by God's sense of purpose. Being souls/spirits like he is, we exist eternally; on the dimensions of eternity, all will be well.'

It should be true, because it is simple.' To me, none of this has the slightest emotional or intellectual appeal ('plausibility', 'probability').

To the extent that issues depend on sensibilities rather than reason, we may leave them to satire.

ABSTRACT: Arguments in contemporary 'natural theology', operating with a 'God-hypothesis' of an inductive or probabilistic kind, are mistaken for two reasons: (1) Since the ontological status of the God-concept in theological tradition excludes it from probabilistic reasoning, the purported inductive arguments are in fact disguised a priori arguments; (2) These arguments conflate probability, plausibility, imaginability and desirability. Attempts to refute such a 'God-Hypothesis' with arguments within the framework of science are therefore futile. Instead, the debate should lay bare in quasi-rational form the basic intuitions which motivate the will to believe. Attempting to explain the fact that theistic belief can be upheld in spite of illogicality and implausibility, we should look into the structure of language and language use.

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