

Chapter 1

Introduction

Natural theology is that branch of theology which seeks to prove God's existence apart from the resources of authoritative divine revelation. If it does appeal to the data of divine revelation, as in a historical argument on the basis of the Gospels, it does not treat this data as authoritative, as does systematic theology. In our Prolegomena we took note of the resurgence of natural theology that has accompanied the contemporary renaissance of Christian philosophy.¹ While the systematic theologian is under no obligation to engage in natural theology,² the subject may be of keen interest to him, and certainly natural theology played an important role in systematic theologies of the past. Our excursus on natural theology surveys some of the arguments that I find convincing and have defended.

Arguments for the existence of God naturally raise the question as to what constitutes a good argument. Obviously the cogency of one's argument does not depend on one's having an answer to this question. One's argument may be a good one even if one cannot delineate exactly what it is to be good. But if an interlocutor argues that one's argument is not a good one because it does not rise to a specific standard, then if one's argument is not to suffer defeat, one will have show either that the critic's standard of goodness need not be met or that one's argument does, indeed, meet that standard.

¹ See this *Systematic Philosophical Theology*, vol I: *Prolegomena*, 13–14. For a survey of recent work in natural theology as of the date of this writing, see Chad A. McIntosh, "Recent Work on Traditional Arguments for Theism I," *Philosophy Compass* 17, no. 7 (2022). <http://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12854>. <http://doi.org/19.1111/phc3.1285>.

² See discussion in this *Systematic Philosophical Theology*, vol I: *Prolegomena*, 30–31, 59.

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Consider, for example, Graham Oppy's claim that there are no good theistic arguments.³ Oppy equates a "good" argument with a "successful" argument. This equation is potentially misleading, since an argument may be a good one even if it does not actually succeed in changing another person's mind. By the same token a bad argument may succeed in changing someone's mind. So actual belief change is not the standard of success. Rather Oppy holds that "in circumstances in which it is well known that there has been perennial controversy about a given claim, a successful argument on behalf of that claim has to be one that ought to persuade all of those who have hitherto failed to accept that claim to change their minds."⁴ The "ought" here is critical. Since theism is a claim about which it is well known that there has been perennial controversy, it follows that a successful theistic argument will be one that ought to persuade all atheists, agnostics, and innocents to change their minds.

Lest we dismiss peremptorily this standard of success as outrageously high, note that Oppy later qualifies this standard such that the persons who ought to be persuaded by the argument have "reasonable views" about the subject or are reasonable people. So, according to Oppy's account, a successful argument in general, and a theistic argument in particular, is one that ought to persuade all reasonable people who have reasonable views about the matter. So if we find that certain persons have not been persuaded by our argument, we have two options: we can conclude either that the people in question are not rational or else that our argument is a failure.⁵

Although he is not a theist, Oppy repeatedly affirms the rationality of theistic belief, as well as nontheistic beliefs. He thinks that theists can and do have reasons that make it rational for them to believe that God exists. Those reasons may take the form of the various theistic arguments. But while those arguments may render the theist's belief in God rational, still they are not *successful* arguments because they ought not to be considered convincing by all reasonable nontheists.

This understanding of what constitutes a successful argument colors Oppy's treatment of theistic arguments. Since he wants to show that all such arguments are failures, he repeatedly responds to the arguments by claiming that this or that premise in the argument can be denied by a rational person. This *modus operandi* leads him to hurl almost every conceivable objection at the arguments he discusses, for implausible or even clearly false alternatives to the premises of a theistic argument may be not

³ Graham Oppy, *Arguing about Gods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁴ Oppy, *Arguing about Gods*, 1.

⁵ Oppy, *Arguing about Gods*, 13–14.

be irrational to believe. It is easy to multiply questions and to assume the sceptical stance when the premises of a successful argument must be nothing less than rationally compelling.

So in one sense Oppy has made his project much too easy. For a good many natural theologians today would be quite willing to concede that the arguments they champion are not composed exclusively of premises that can be denied only on pain of irrationality. Even if their arguments are not rationally compelling, still, they would insist, the arguments should not be adjudged to be failures.⁶ So when Oppy remarks that “the main thesis that I wish to defend is denied by many contemporary philosophers,”⁷ we must ask what it is about that thesis that many philosophers will dispute. Not, as I say, the claim that there are no theistic arguments that meet Oppy’s high standard for success; rather their dispute will be with Oppy’s standard itself. When many contemporary philosophers maintain that there are successful arguments concerning the existence of God, it is because they reject Oppy’s account of rational argument and belief revision.⁸

It therefore becomes crucial that we inquire as to the grounds Oppy offers for his account. It is striking that Oppy offers no argument at all in support of his view. He sketches an *account* of what he takes a successful argument to be, but offers no *argument* in favor of that account. In fact, late in the book, we find the admission, “I have assumed that all *reasonable* parties to the dispute about the existence of orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods will agree with me about the way in which reason, argument, and dialectic ought to be understood.”⁹ Such an assumption is obviously false. What one looks for in vain is any reason from Oppy to think that an argument is a failure unless it would or ought to persuade *all* reasonable persons to accept its conclusion.

⁶ Dean Zimmerman observes that such an attitude generally prevails in analytic philosophy:

“Although analytic philosophers still put a lot of stock in truth, they generally admit that there is little in philosophy that we can claim to know to be true with much confidence – at least not when it comes to substantive philosophical theories.... But most of us, after careful consideration of alternative theories, still end up believing one of them. We know what can be said on behalf of rival theories, but the evidence seems to us to favor one, even though many of our peers do not see it that way; and so we come to believe the theory – reasonably, but, no doubt, fallibly” (Dean Zimmerman, “Three Introductory Questions,” in Peter van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman, eds., *Persons: Human and Divine* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007], 11).

⁷ Oppy, *Arguing about Gods*, xv.

⁸ See, e.g., the thorough discussion of Oppy’s standards of the goodness of arguments, including his more recent revisions, in Bruce R. Reichenbach. “Are Cosmological Arguments Good Arguments?” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (2022). <http://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-022-09837-y>. Reichenbach observes that on Oppy’s account, “it is practically impossible for any significant or controversial argument to be a good argument, for any argument that proceeds from premises that the other person does not accept will not be successful and therefore not a good argument.” Reichenbach argues that one must distinguish the goodness of an argument from its persuasiveness.

⁹ Oppy, *Arguing about Gods*, 425.

In fact Oppy's position seems to be self-defeating. For we find ourselves in circumstances in which it is well known that there has been perennial controversy about what constitutes a successful argument. Therefore, by Oppy's own account, a successful argument on behalf of his account of successful arguments must be one that ought to persuade all reasonable people with reasonable views on the subject who have hitherto failed to accept that account to change their minds. But Oppy offers nothing of the sort. Therefore, although it may be reasonable for Oppy to accept his account, the rest of us who disagree with it have not been given any reason, much less rationally compelling reasons, to embrace it. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how Oppy could come up with such a rationally compelling argument for adopting his standard of success in argumentation. But then his argument for the main thesis of his book must, by his own lights, be deemed a failure. For he has not shown that those of us who think that there are successful theistic arguments are, as he claims, not reasonable persons.

It seems to me, therefore, that Oppy's project fails at a fundamental level. His own account of successful argumentation requires that if he is to convince those of us who think that there are successful theistic arguments to change our minds, then he must provide a rationally compelling argument for his account of successful argumentation – which he has not even attempted to do.

But Oppy's project has another fundamental failing as well. Suppose the natural theologian accepts Oppy's account of success in argumentation and thinks himself to have successful theistic arguments. Seeing that otherwise reasonable people disagree with him about his argument's worth, he concludes that their rejection of his arguments is unreasonable. So he believes. But he does not argue for the irrationality of those unmoved by his arguments; he does not try to persuade others that such persons are unreasonable. Rather he just sticks to arguing for the truth of his premises, in hopes that reasonable people will accept them. Suppose, for example, the natural theologian thinks that the ontological argument is rationally compelling, but that he cannot prove that it is. This is a coherent position. It is not to admit that the ontological argument is not, after all, rationally compelling, for he is convinced that it is. He is convinced that all perfectly rational persons would or ought to accept its premises and conclusion. But he cannot prove that this is the case. It will be futile for Oppy simply to respond that it is reasonable to withhold acceptance of the ontological argument's key premise, for our natural theologian will disagree with this assessment. Since there are no perfectly rational persons about to gainsay him, the natural theologian who finds the argument compelling is not refuted by the avowal by others that they do not find it compelling.

What is needed in this case is some defeater of the ontological argument itself. So, again, Oppy makes it too easy for himself, even given his account of successful argumentation, when he thinks to defeat arguments just by asserting that it is reasonable to withhold belief from the premises of the arguments he discusses.

In answer to the question, “what shall we take to be the characteristics of a good (or successful) argument?” Oppy considers what he deems the “easy” answer: “a good argument is one that succeeds – or perhaps would or ought to succeed – in bringing about reasonable belief revision in reasonable targets.”¹⁰ This characterization allows degrees of success: the most successful argument would or ought to persuade *any* reasonable person to accept its conclusion, while less successful arguments would or ought to persuade *some* reasonable persons to accept their conclusions. Oppy proceeds to raise certain difficulties with the easy answer, but I cannot see any reason given for thinking that success is not a degreed or person-relative property. Such variability of success allows that an argument which is not rationally compelling but which makes it rational to believe in God does enjoy some measure of success.

Oppy assesses the worth of arguments on the basis of how reasonable people would or ought to respond to them. But that leaves it an open question what sort of arguments reasonable people ought to accept. There must be characteristics of good arguments which make them attractive to reasonable people, but so far we have not gained any insight as to what those qualities are. We need to look at the arguments themselves.

Arguments, including arguments for the existence of God, may be either deductive or inductive. In a good deductive argument the truth of the premises logically necessitates the truth of the conclusion. In a good inductive argument the truth of the premises merely renders the conclusion more probable than its competitors. It is worth observing that an argument’s having a deductive form is irrelevant to the epistemic status of the premises and conclusion. The difference between a deductive and an inductive argument is not to be found in the degree to which they approach demonstrative proof of some conclusion. A good deductive argument may leave a conclusion quite uncertain if its premises are themselves far from certain, whereas an inductive argument could give us overwhelming evidence for and, hence, confidence in its conclusion. This fact is especially evident when we reflect that some of the premises in a deductive argument may themselves be established on the basis of inductive evidence. Thus, contrary to the impression sometimes given, an argument’s being inductive

¹⁰ Oppy, *Arguing about Gods*, 10.

or deductive in form is not an indication of the certainty of the argument's conclusion. While the same theistic arguments may be formulated either deductively or inductively, I favor deductive formulations because of their simplicity and perspicacity.¹¹

A good deductive argument must be formally and informally valid, have true premises, and have premises which are supported by the evidence in such a way as to have a particular epistemic status for us. But what sort of epistemic status is required? Certainty is an unrealistic and unattainable ideal. Were we to require certainty of the truth of an argument's premises in order for the argument to be a good one, the result for us would be scepticism. It might be thought that a good deductive argument is one whose premises are more plausible or epistemically probable than their contradictories. But the difficulty is that even if each individual premise is more plausible than its negation, the conjunction of the premises might not be more plausible than its negation; plausibility is not closed under conjunction.¹² In that case the conclusion of the argument is not rendered more plausible than not. In order to *guarantee* that the conclusion is more plausible than its denial, the conjunction of the premises must be more plausible than not. If the conjunction of the premises is more plausible than not, then the argument's conclusion is guaranteed to be more plausible than not. Certainly such an argument would qualify as a good one.

But why think that a good argument must guarantee that the probability of the conclusion is >0.5 ? It is important to understand that in a deductive argument, the probability of the conclusion is not equal to the probability of the conjunction of the premises; rather the probability of the conjunction of the premises merely sets a *lower bound* to the probability of

¹¹ By contrast Richard Swinburne prefers inductive formulations, appealing to the resources of confirmation theory. See his *The Existence of God*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

¹² See Timothy McGrew and John M. Depoe, "Natural Theology and the Uses of Argument," *Philosophia Christi* 15, no. 2 (2013): 299–309, who reject what they call the Plausible Premise Criterion:

(PPC). If the premises of a deductive argument are more plausible than their denials, then the conclusion is more plausible than its denial.

They provide a sample argument whose conclusion follows deductively from the premises, whose premises each have a probability greater than 0.5, and yet whose conclusion has a probability less than 0.5. In personal correspondence McGrew illustrates how there can even be cases in which each premise is more probable than not and yet it would be irrational to believe the conjunction of the premises:

"there are cases where it is rational to believe P and rational to believe Q without its being rational to believe the conjunction (P&Q). Lotteries provide very intuitive examples of this, since in a simple fair finite lottery with exactly one winner to be drawn, it is reasonable to believe that ticket 1 is a loser, reasonable to believe that ticket 2 is a loser, . . . all the way up to the last number. But obviously it is unreasonable to believe the conjunction of these statements; the conjunction would contradict the very terms of the lottery since (taken with our background knowledge) it would entail that there is no winner" (Timothy McGrew to William Lane Craig, August, 2015).

the conclusion.¹³ The probability of the conclusion could actually be much higher, but it cannot be any lower than the probability of the conjoined premises. So in a case where the probability of the conjunction of the premises is not greater than 0.5, it may still be the case that the conclusion of the argument is more probable than not. Thus one need not be overwrought about determining the lower bound of the probability of the argument's conclusion. The inquirer may find each of the premises of the argument more probable than not and mutually coherent and so believe that the argument is sound and thus the probability of the argument's conclusion actually higher than its lower bound.

The insight that the goodness of an argument may be a degreed property suggests that even an argument that does not guarantee that its conclusion is more probable than not may still be a good argument.¹⁴ Arguments may have different degrees of goodness, depending on our assessment of the premises. This fact may be especially important in considering a cumulative case, where a number of arguments each with a conclusion having a lower bound <0.5 conspire to support strongly the probability of the overall conclusion. Thus, it would be rash to say that an argument establishing its conclusion to a probability, say, of at least 0.35 is "no good." Fortunately, in the theistic arguments we shall consider, I should say that the probability of the conjunction of their premises is in every case pretty clearly >0.5 , so that these arguments are in my judgement very good arguments.

Now, admittedly, plausibility is to a great extent a person-dependent notion. Some people may find a premise plausible and others not. Accordingly, some people will agree that a particular argument is a good one, while others will say that it is a bad argument. Given our diverse backgrounds and biases, we should expect such disagreements. Obviously, the most persuasive arguments will be those that are based on premises which enjoy the support of widely accepted evidence or seem intuitively to be true. But in cases of disagreement we simply have to dig deeper and explore what reasons we each have for finding the evidence persuasive or unpersuasive.

¹³ To compute this lower bound one first subtracts from 1.0 the probability of each premise to obtain the uncertainty factor of that premise. One then sums the uncertainty factors of the premises together to obtain the uncertainty factor of the conclusion. Finally, one subtracts that sum from 1.0 to obtain the lower bound on the probability of the conclusion. *N.B.* that one does not multiply the probabilities of the premises to obtain the probability of the conclusion. See McGrew and Depoe, "Natural Theology and the Uses of Argument," 303–305.

¹⁴ McGrew and Depoe observe that "modest conclusions" that set merely a positive lower bound for the conclusion are "an acceptable way to move the discussion forward" and so "a modest defense of the premises," though it may not suffice to underwrite (PPC), "can do significant dialectical work" (305). That seems to be an endorsement of the claim that an argument may be a good one even if it does not guarantee its conclusion to be more probable than not. Good arguments will establish their conclusions to some positive lower bound without exhibiting any of the anomalies illustrated by McGrew and Depoe.

Over the years, I have come to share G. W. Leibniz's conviction that "nearly all the means which have been employed to prove the existence of God are good and might be of service, if we perfect them."¹⁵ My experience of discussing these arguments with atheist and agnostic philosophers has only served to confirm this conviction.¹⁶ In this excursus I shall defend a variety of theistic arguments each of which, I think, establishes its conclusion to be more probable than not and which together constitute a very good cumulative case for theism.

¹⁵ Gottfried W. Leibniz, *New Essays on the Understanding*, trans. Alfred G. Langley (New York: Macmillan, 1896), 505.

¹⁶ See my debates with Antony Flew in *Does God Exist?*, ed. Stan Wallace, with responses by K. Yandell, P. Moser, D. Geivett, M. Martin, D. Yandell, W. Rowe, K. Parsons, and Wm. Wainwright (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); with Walter Sinnott-Armstrong in *God?: A Debate between a Christian and an Atheist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); with Paul Kurtz in *God and Ethics: A Contemporary Debate*, ed. Nathan King and Robert Garcia, with responses by L. Antony, W. Sinnott-Armstrong, J. Hare, D. Hubin, S. Layman, M. Murphy, and R. Swinburne (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); with Alex Rosenberg in *Is Faith in God Reasonable? Debates in Philosophy, Science, and Rhetoric*, ed. P. Gould and C. Miller, with responses by R. Kaita, V. Stenger, P. Moser, T. Drange, T. McGrew, M. Ruse, M. Medhurst, and C. Rountree, Routledge Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (London: Routledge, 2014); with Sean Carroll in *God and Cosmology*, ed. Robert Stewart, with responses by T. Maudlin, R. Collins, A. Rosenberg, and J. Sinclair (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016); and with Erik J. Wielenberg in *A Debate on God and Morality: What Is the Best Account of Objective Moral Values and Duties?*, ed. A. Johnson, with responses by D. Baggett, M. Huemer, M. Linville, J. P. Moreland, and W. Morriston (London: Routledge, 2020).