

The Project of Natural Theology

CHARLES TALIAFERRO

Natural theology is the practice of philosophically reflecting on the existence and nature of God independent of real or apparent divine revelation or scripture. Traditionally, natural theology involves weighing arguments for and against God's existence, and it is contrasted with *revealed theology*, which may be carried out within the context of ostensible revelation or scripture. For example, revealed theology may take as authoritative certain New Testament claims about Jesus and then construct a philosophical or theological model for understanding how Jesus may be human and divine. Natural theology, on the other hand, develops arguments about God based on the existence of the cosmos, the very concept of God, and different views of the nature of the cosmos, such as its ostensible order and value. Natural theology is often practiced in the West and the Near East with respect to the theistic view of God, and thus the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But natural theology has also been carried out by those who reject such religious traditions (e.g. Voltaire (1694–1778) endorsed theistic natural theology, but he put no credence in Christian revelation), and philosophers have employed natural theology to argue that God has attributes and a character that is either slightly or radically different from orthodox, religious concepts of God. The philosophy of God developed by Spinoza (1632–1677) is an example of a natural theology, according to which God is radically different from the theism of his Jewish and Christian contemporaries.

Plato (428–348 BCE), Aristotle (384–322 BCE), and their successors in ancient and medieval philosophy developed substantial arguments for the existence of God without relying on revelation. In the West, Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), and Duns Scotus (1266–1308) are among the most celebrated contributors to natural theology. Muslim philosophy has also been a rich resource for natural theology, especially for cosmological theistic arguments. This may be due, in part, to the immense emphasis by philosophers such as Ibn Sina (or Avicenna, 980–1037) on the necessary, noncontingent reality of God in contrast to the contingent cosmos.

Natural theology played a major role in early modern philosophy. Some of the classics in the modern era, such as the *Meditations* by Descartes (1596–1650), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* by John Locke (1632–1704), *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* by George Berkeley, the *Theodicy* by Leibniz (1646–1716), the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* by David Hume (1711–76), and the *Critique of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant

(1724–1804) all constitute major contributions to assessing reasons for and against theism, without making any appeal to revelation. The last two works are commonly thought to advance the most serious challenges to carrying out natural theology at all, but in point of fact, they still remain works in the tradition of natural theology, insofar as they reflect on the credibility of believing that there is a God, employing arguments that do not explicitly appeal to revelation. It is difficult to exaggerate the role of natural theology in the history of modern philosophy. The first substantial philosophical work published in English was a work in natural theology: *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* by Ralph Cudworth (1617–88).

In this chapter, I explore the prospects of employing natural theology in its traditional role of supporting a theistic understanding of God. In the first section, I bring together a series of arguments to the effect that a theistic natural theology is either unintelligible or, in principle, at a major disadvantage over against naturalism. These objections include critical arguments from Hume and Kant contra natural theology as employed to justify theism. I then address each of these, and bring to light reasons why today there is a renaissance in the field of natural theology in contemporary philosophy. I conclude with observations about the role of natural theology in addressing nontheistic accounts of God, along with a modest observation about the virtues of inquiry. The goal of this chapter is to address the general framework of natural theology in order to pave the way for the chapters that follow, which address specific strands in natural theology.

Does Theistic Natural Theology Rest upon a Mistake?

According to classical theism, there is a creator and sustainer of the cosmos who is omniscient, omnipotent, necessarily existing, nonphysical, essentially good, omnipresent, without temporal beginning or end, and everlasting or eternal. How these attributes are understood with precision is a matter of controversy. For example, some theists understand God as not temporally extended but transcending temporal passage (for God, there is no before, during, and after), while others see God as temporal and still others think that “prior” to God’s creation of time, God is timelessly eternal, although temporal after the creation. In what follows, I shall not enter into such fascinating questions about the divine attributes. (For in-depth coverage, see Wierenga 1989; Swinburne 1994; Taliaferro 1994, 1999; Hoffman & Rosenkrantz 2002).

In the current intellectual climate, the closest competitor with theism, and the customary launching pad for antitheistic natural theology arguments, is naturalism. *Naturalism* has been variously described and is sometimes characterized so broadly as to be without substance. For current purposes, naturalism may be described as a scientifically oriented philosophy that rules out the existence of God, as well as the soul. Some naturalists do not deny that there are nonphysical processes or states (e.g. consciousness is not itself a physical process or state), but most embrace some form of physicalism, according to which there is no thing or process that is nonphysical. Here is a current description of naturalism by Richard Dawkins that seems to restrict reality to that which is physical or “natural.”

[A] philosophical naturalist is somebody who believes there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no *supernatural* creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles – except in the sense of natural phenomena

that we don't yet understand. If there is something that appears to lie beyond the natural world as it is now imperfectly understood, we hope eventually to understand it and embrace it within the natural. As ever when we unweave a rainbow, it will not become less wonderful. (Dawkins 2006, p. 14)

Far from becoming less wonderful, Dawkins and some (but not all) naturalists argue that the natural world is more accurately and deeply appreciated aesthetically, once theistic natural theology is set to one side. Four of the five arguments against a theistic natural theology that follow reflect some form of naturalism, a worldview that is advanced as more elegant and powerful than theism.

Argument I

There is no logical space for theism. According to D. Z. Phillips, theism can be faulted for its positing a reality that is independent of the structure of the world. He not only proposes that it makes no sense to think about what is beyond the world but also proposes theism can be faulted for its advancing what might be called a theory of everything. Phillips writes:

What kind of theory is a theory about the structure of the world? If by "the world" one wants to mean "everything", there is no such theory. Certainly, science has no such theory, nor could it have. "Everything" is not the name of one big thing or topic, and, therefore, there can be no theory concerning a thing or topic of this kind. To speak of a thing is to acknowledge the existence of many things, since one can always be asked which thing one is referring to. Science is concerned with specific states of affairs, no matter how wide the scope of its questions may be. Whatever explanations it offers, further questions can be asked about them. It makes no sense to speak of a last answer in science, one that does not admit of any further questions. Science is not concerned with "the structure of the world", and there are no scientific investigations which have this as their subject." (Phillips 2005, pp. xv–xvi)

Phillips's critique of theories of everything may also be seen as cutting against naturalism insofar as it advances a theory covering all of reality. Physicalist forms of naturalism would seem to fit that description, for example, as physicalists hold that everything is physical. However, insofar as naturalism involves a negative thesis (there is no God not identical with the cosmos), Phillips's reasoning is very much in keeping with a naturalistic perspective.

For another representation of the *no logical space for theism argument*, consider Kai Nielsen's challenge:

What does or could "transcendent to the universe" mean? Perhaps being "beyond the universe"? But how would that be other than just more universe? Alternatively, if you do not want to say that, try – thinking carefully about the sense of "beyond" – to get a handle on "going beyond the universe." Is not language idling here? (Nielsen 2004, p. 474)

If successful, this objection rules out any evidential case for theism in the offing from natural theology. Kai Nielsen counsels us to set aside the search for theistic evidence, even if such ostensible evidence were something fantastic like the claim "GOD EXISTS" appearing in the heavens.

We are no better off with the stars in the heavens spelling out GOD EXISTS than with their spelling out PROCRASTINATION DRINKS MELANCHOLY. We know that something has shaken our world [if “GOD EXISTS” appeared in the heavens], but we know not what; we know – or think we know, how could we tell which it was in such a circumstance? – that we heard a voice coming out of the sky and we know – or again think that we know – that the stars rearranged themselves right before our eyes and on several occasions to spell out GOD EXISTS. But are we wiser by observing this about what “God” refers to or what a pure disembodied spirit transcendent to the universe is or could be? At most we might think that maybe those religious people have something – something we know not what – going for them. But we also might think it was some kind of big trick or some mass delusion. The point is that we wouldn’t know what to think. (Nielsen 2004, p. 279)

Argument II

Theism fails in terms of explanatory power. Some see theism as a quasi-scientific hypothesis. This is Richard Dawkins’s position:

I pay religions the compliment of regarding them as scientific theories and . . . I see God as a competing explanation for facts about the universe and life. This is certainly how God has been seen by most theologians of past centuries and by most ordinary religious people today. . . . Either admit that God is a scientific hypothesis and let him submit to the same judgment as any other scientific hypothesis. Or admit that his status is no higher than that of fairies and river sprites. (Dawkins 1995, pp. 46–7)

But once we introduce theism as a scientific thesis, it seems utterly unable to carry out the kinds of work we expect in terms of science. This objection is articulated by Jan Narveson:

It ought to be regarded as a major embarrassment to natural theology that the very idea of something like a universe’s being “created” by some minded being is sufficiently mind-boggling that any attempt to provide a detailed account of how it might be done is bound to look silly, or mythical, or a vaguely anthropomorphized version of some familiar physical process. Creation stories abound in human societies, as we know. Accounts ascribe the creation to various mythical beings, chief gods among a sizeable polytheistic committee, giant tortoises, super-mom hens, and, one is tempted to say, God-knows-what. The Judeo-Christian account does no better, and perhaps does a bit worse, in proposing a “six-day” process of creation.

It is plainly no surprise that details about just *how* all this was supposed to have happened are totally lacking when they are not, as I say, silly or simply poetic. For the fundamental idea is that some infinitely powerful mind simply willed it to be thus, and, as they say, Lo!, it was so! If we aren’t ready to accept that as an explanatory description – as we should not be, since it plainly doesn’t *explain* anything, as distinct from merely asserting that it was in fact done – then where do we go from there? On all accounts, we at this point meet up with mystery. “How are we supposed to know the ways of the infinite and almighty God?” it is asked – as if that put-down made a decent substitute for an answer. But of course it doesn’t. If we are serious about “natural theology,” then we ought to be ready to supply content in our explication of theological hypotheses just as we do when we explicate scientific hypotheses. Such explications carry the brunt of explanations. Why does water boil when heated? The scientific story supplies an analysis of matter in its liquid state, the effects of atmospheric pressure and heat, and so on until we see, in impressive detail, just how the thing works. An explanation’s right to be called “scientific” is, indeed, in considerable part earned precisely by its ability to provide such detail. (Narveson 2003, pp. 93–4)

Matthew Bagger is equally convinced that theistic explanations should be discredited over against a naturalist alternative. He holds that no occasion can arise that would offer reason for questioning the adequacy of naturalism.

We can never assert that, in principle, an event resists naturalistic explanation. A perfectly substantiated, anomalous event, rather than providing evidence for the supernatural, merely calls into question our understanding of particular natural laws. In the modern era, this position fairly accurately represents the educated response to novelty. Rather than invoke the supernatural, we can always adjust our knowledge of the natural in extreme cases. In the modern age in actual inquiry, we never reach the point where we throw up our hands and appeal to divine intervention to explain a localized event like an extraordinary experience. (Bagger 1999, p. 13)

Bagger's position closely resembles that of David Hume's on miracles, although his position is more comprehensive than explaining away events within the cosmos. Bagger thinks that there cannot, in principle, be any supernatural or theistic account of the cosmos itself. Accounts of what exist, according to Bagger, must be naturalistic, which he describes as amenable to scientific investigation. Because theism involves descriptions and explanations involving a reality that is not itself subject to scientific inquiry, it cannot be employed in accounting either for events in the cosmos (ostensible miracles or religious experience) or of the cosmos itself. Both Narveson and Bagger propose that theism fails because of its comparative paucity to explanations in the natural sciences.

Argument III

Theism and anthropomorphism – there are at least two versions of this line of reasoning. The first comes from Hume and maintains that theism receives whatever plausibility it has in natural theology by comparing God to a human person. In one version of the argument from design, for example, theists argue that God must be like us because the cosmos resembles artifacts we make intentionally. But, Hume reasons, is there not something grossly anthropomorphic (and anthropocentric) to suppose that the creator or cause of the cosmos must resemble us when there are so many other possible sources of causal explanation? There is an implicit charge that theism is too human-centered in the following lines:

But allowing that we were to take the operations of one part of nature upon another for the foundation of our judgement concerning the origin of the whole (which never can be admitted), yet why select so minute, so weak, so bounded a principle as the reason and design of animals is found to be upon this planet? What peculiar privilege has this little agitation of the brain which we call thought, that we must make it the model of the whole universe? Our partiality in our own favor does indeed present it on all occasions, but sound philosophy ought carefully to guard against so natural an illusion. (Hume 1988, p. 19)

According to another version of this objection, theism is to be faulted not only for its somewhat hubristic identification of humanity as a model for the cause of the cosmos but also for a deeper reason: just as we have come to see in the philosophy of human nature that there is no sense to be made of humans having a nonphysical soul, we may similarly see that there is no sense to be made of the concept of the cosmos having a nonphysical creator. Bede Rundle has recently developed a version of this argument.

According to Rundle, our language and concepts that describe and explain intentional action are essentially references to material behavior. As God is nonphysical, the notion that God can act, hear, or know about the world is necessarily false or incoherent.

We have no idea what it means to speak of God intervening in the affairs of the world. . . . We may well have to broaden our conception of what this universe contains; why should there not be many species of being more intelligent than us, some of whom make their presence felt locally from time to time? However, such a concession leaves us within the physical universe. The difficulty with a supernatural agent is that it requires one foot in both domains, so to speak. To qualify as supernatural it must be distanced from any spatio-temporal character which would place it in our world, but to make sense to us as explanatory of changes therein it must be sufficiently concrete to interact with material bodies, and the more convincingly a case is made for the former status, the greater the difficulty put in the way of the latter. (Rundle 2004, pp. 10, 27, 28)

Rundle contends that the very notion of nonmaterial intentions, knowledge, and so on is incoherent, and he takes particular aim at what he sees as the misuse of language in theistic religion.

Someone who insists that God, though lacking eyes and ears, watches him incessantly and listens to his prayers, is clearly not using “watch” or “listen” in a sense in which we can recognize, so while the words may be individually meaningful and their combination grammatical, that is as far as meaningfulness goes: what we have is an unintelligible use of an intelligible form of words. God is not of this world, but that is not going to stop us speaking of him as if he were. It is not that we have a proposition which is meaningless because unverifiable, but we simply misuse language, making an affirmation which, in light of our understanding of the words, is totally unwarranted, an affirmation that makes no intelligible contact with reality. (Rundle 2004, p. 11)

Rundle’s main justification for this stridently confident conclusion lies in ordinary language and a general materialism (“if there is anything at all, it must be matter” (Rundle 2004, p. ix)).

Rundle’s appeal to ordinary language may seem strained over against linguistic and conceptual flexibility of contemporary science with its quarks, leptons, dark matter, energy, and so on. But Rundle’s thesis may be bolstered by what appears to be an implicit *naturalism* in natural sciences. The sciences have not revealed clear marks of the divine, and theism as a hypothesis about reality does not help us with predictions. If theism is true, is it more or less likely that our sun will collapse in 4–5 billion years, turn into a red giant, and vaporize the earth? Daniel Dennett prizes physicalistic explanations that can answer such questions in terms of matter and energy, without bringing in theism or any kind of framework that privileges mental explanations that appeal to experience and intentions. For Dennett, Rundle’s line of reasoning is sound. Theism is discredited for its extracting from the natural world intentional, mental terms (knowing, thinking, loving, and so on) and then projecting them on to a nonphysical, supernatural subject.

Argument IV

An argument from uniqueness – this argument received one of its most famous versions in Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. According to this argument, the project

of theistic natural theology cannot get off the ground because there is no framework in which we can test the plausibility of theism over against its alternatives. In the *Dialogues*, Hume reasons that we may well reach conclusions about the cause of some object, such as a house, because we have seen many houses built in the past. But when it comes to the cosmos itself, we have no reference point by which to weigh alternative hypotheses.

But how this [design] argument can have place, where the objects, as in the present case, are single, individual, without parallel or specific resemblance, may be difficult to explain. And will any man tell me with a serious countenance, that an orderly universe must arise from some thought and art, like the human; because we have experience of it? To ascertain this reasoning, it were requisite, that we had experience of the origin of worlds; and it is not sufficient surely, that we have seen ships and cities arise from human art and contrivance. (Hume 1988, p. 21)

According to Hume, when we compare the cosmos itself to human artifacts and speculate about whether the cosmos resembles an artifact, we are simply moving from what we are familiar with in a commonsense context to form an analogy that is far beyond what we can properly evaluate.

If we see a house, . . . we conclude, with the greatest certainty, that it had an architect or builder; because this is precisely that species of effect, which we have experienced to proceed from that species of cause. But surely you will not affirm, that the universe bears such a resemblance to a house, that we can with the same certainty infer a similar cause, or that the analogy is here entire and perfect. The dissimilitude is so striking, that the utmost you can here pretend to is a guess, a conjecture, a presumption concerning a similar cause. (Hume 1988, p. 16)

This line of reasoning is used by Hume to undermine an argument from design.

Argument V

Natural theology is not enough. David Hume and Immanuel Kant both object to theistic natural theology on the grounds that the God that appears in natural theology is not sufficient to justify belief in the God of theistic tradition. So, while Kant is impressed by an argument from design, one of his objections is that the God evidenced by design would not thereby be shown to be omniscient, omnipotent, essentially good, and so on. Kant writes:

The proof could at most establish a highest architect of the world, who would always be limited by the suitability of the material on which he works, but not a creator of the world, to whose idea everything is subject, which is far from sufficient for the great aim that one has in view, namely that of proving an all-sufficient original being. If we wanted to prove the contingency of matter itself, then we would have to take refuge in a transcendental argument, which, however, is exactly what was supposed to be avoided here. (Kant 1998, p. A627)

Hume also proposes that the tools of natural theology are unable to fashion a concept of a “supreme existence” that would befit the divine. Building a case for a God that resembles human minds would seem to be hopeless given the limited, elusive, and fluctuating nature of human minds.

All the sentiments of the human mind, gratitude, resentment, love, friendship, approbation, blame, pity, emulation, envy, have a plain reference to the state and situation of man, and are calculated for preserving the existence, and promoting the activity of such a being in such circumstances. It seems therefore unreasonable to transfer such sentiments to a supreme existence, or to suppose him actuated by them; and the phenomena, besides, of the universe will not support us in such a theory. All our ideas, derived from the senses, are confessedly false and illusive; and cannot, therefore, be supposed to have place in a supreme intelligence. (Hume 1988, p. 27)

A Foundation for Natural Theology

I believe that the most promising reply to these arguments is to start with a challenge to the physicalism that lies behind most (although not all) forms of naturalism. It is first essential to set up a nonphysicalist alternative before addressing the *no logical space for theism argument* and so on. The importance of linking the philosophy of mind with the philosophy of God is not apparent *only* in the arguments by Rundle and Narveson. Consider Anthony Kenny's observation:

If we are to attribute intelligence to any entity – limited or unlimited, cosmic or extra-cosmic – we have to take as our starting point our concept of intelligence as exhibited by human beings: we have no other concept of it. Human intelligence is displaced in the behavior of human bodies and in the thoughts of human minds. If we reflect on the active way in which we attribute mental predicate such as “know,” “believe,” “think,” “design,” “control” to human beings, we realize the immense difficulty there is [in] applying them to a putative being to which is immaterial, ubiquitous and eternal. It is not just that we do not, and cannot, know what goes on in God's mind, it is that we cannot really ascribe a mind to God at all. The language that we use to describe the contents of human minds operates within a web of links with bodily behavior and social institutions. When we try to apply this language to an entity outside the natural world, whose scope of operation is the entire universe, this web comes to pieces, and we no longer know what we are saying. (Kenny 2006, pp. 52, 53)

If Kenny is right, the most promising theistic starting point must be to question whether or not terms such as “consciousness,” “know,” “act,” and so on are thoroughly physical or reducible to bodily states and behavior.

Given a thoroughgoing physicalism, theism is not likely to receive a friendly hearing. For some naturalists, theism and consciousness itself are in the same boat. Alisdair Hannay rightly recognizes how contemporary physicalists seek to marginalize consciousness, granting it only secondary or a provisional status to be explained away in nonconscious categories. Something even more negative can be said about the receptivity to theism.

The attitude of much physicalism [to consciousness] has been that of new owners to a sitting tenant. They would prefer eviction but, failing that, are content to dispose of as much of the paraphernalia as possible while keeping busy in other parts of the house. We should, I think, feel free to surmise that the current picture of consciousness eking out a sequestered life as a print-out monitor or raw feeler fails in a quite radical way to capture the facts. (Hannay 1987, p. 397)

How certain should we be that consciousness and other mental states are in fact marginal or thoroughly physical and identical to a bodily “web of links”? I suggest in what follows

that once we recognize that some conscious, purposive explanations should count as *bona fide* accounts of human (and perhaps other animal) lives, one may see that the theistic appeal to consciousness, and the purposive account of the cosmos itself, should be taken seriously as well.

Consider first the project of marginalizing consciousness. To see the problem with treating consciousness as secondary to observable, bodily processes, witness the work of Daniel Dennett. Dennett has made a career seeking to displace what may be considered the apparent primacy of consciousness in terms of certitude. Early modern philosophy began with Descartes' stress on the indubitability of self-awareness. One early effort by Dennett to combat Cartesianism was to promote what he called "heterophenomenology," a method that did not completely dismiss introspection from the outset but treated people's reports on their states of consciousness as data that required additional scientific evidence before those reports could be taken seriously. Over the years, he has become increasingly hostile toward those who attribute to conscious experience an ineliminable, primary status. In a recent exchange, Dennett contends that David Chalmers needs "an independent ground for contemplating the drastic move of adding 'experience' to mass, charge, and space-time" (Dennett 2000, p. 35). Chalmers replies that "Dennett challenges me to provide 'independent' evidence (presumably behavioral or functional evidence) for the 'postulation' of experience. But this is to miss the point: conscious experience is not 'postulated' to explain other phenomena in turn; rather, it is a phenomenon to be explained in its own right . . ." (Chalmers 2000, p. 385)

I suggest that Chalmers is absolutely convincing in this reply. There can be no "contemplating" or observations of this or that evidence about behavior or functions or any theories about mass, charge, and space-time unless there is conscious awareness. Consciousness is antecedent to, and a presupposition of, science and philosophy. To emphasize the primacy of consciousness, note Drew McDermott's effort to defend Dennett against Chalmers. McDermott offers this analogy against Chalmers and in favor of Dennett: "Suppose a lunatic claims he is Jesus Christ. We explain why his brain chemicals make him think that. But he is not convinced. 'The fact that I am Jesus is my starting point, a brute explanandum; explaining why I think this is not sufficient.' The only difference between him and us is that he can't stop believing he's Jesus because he's insane, whereas we can't stop believing in phenomenal consciousness because we are not" (McDermott 2001, p. 147). But surely, this analogy is wide of the mark, ignoring the unique, radically fundamental nature of consciousness and experience. Without consciousness, we should not be able even to think that someone is sane or insane, let alone Jesus. Recognition of the reality of conscious awareness is not simply an obstinate belief; the reality of consciousness seems to be a precondition of inquiry. (As a side note, it is peculiar that in his defense of Dennett, McDermott implies that we are not insane because we believe in phenomenal consciousness.)

Once the existence of consciousness is conceded as no less and perhaps even more assured than Dennett's "mass, charge, and space-time," it becomes difficult to see how consciousness can turn out to be the very same thing as brain activity or other bodily states and behavior. The following observation by Michael Lockwood is telling:

Let me begin by nailing my colours to the mast. I count myself a materialist, in the sense that I take consciousness to be a species of brain activity. Having said that, however, it seems to me evident that no description of brain activity of the relevant kind, couched in the currently available languages of physics, physiology, or functional or computational roles, is remotely

capable of capturing what is distinctive about consciousness. So glaring, indeed, are the shortcomings of all the reductive programmes currently on offer, that I cannot believe that anyone with a philosophical training, looking dispassionately at these programmes, would take any of them seriously for a moment, were it not for a deep-seated conviction that current physical science has essentially got reality taped, and accordingly, *something* along the lines of what the reductionists are offering *must* be correct. To that extent the very existence of consciousness seems to me to be a standing demonstration of the explanatory limitations of contemporary physical science. (Lockwood 2003, p. 447)

There is a powerful, enduring argument against identifying consciousness and brain activity that is very much in favor now and that highlights the limitations of physicalist treatments of consciousness. A wide range of philosophers argue that it is possible for us to have an exhaustive observation of a person's physiology, anatomy, all outward behavior, and language use and still not know that the person is conscious (for a defense of this argument and reply to objections, see Taliaferro 1994, 2002; Swinburne 1997; Goetz & Taliaferro 2008; Moreland 2008).

It would be premature to refer to a consensus in philosophy of mind, but there is a strong, growing conviction that "solving" the problem of consciousness may require a revolution in the way that we conceive of both consciousness and the physical world. Thomas Nagel puts the matter as follows:

I believe that the explanatory gap [linking consciousness and physical processes] in its present form cannot be closed – that so long as we work with our present mental and physical concepts no transparently necessary connection will ever be revealed, between physically described brain processes and sensory experience, of the logical type familiar from the explanation of other natural processes by analysis into their physico-chemical constituents. We have good grounds for believing that the mental supervenes on the physical – i.e. that there is no mental difference without a physical difference. But pure, unexplained supervenience is not a solution but a sign that there is something fundamental we don't know. We cannot regard pure supervenience as the end of the story because that would require the physical to necessitate the mental without there being any answer to the question *how* it does so. But there *must* be a "how," and our task is to understand it. An obviously systematic connection that remains unintelligible to us calls out for a theory. (Nagel 1998, pp. 344–5)

Nagel's confidence that we will somehow bridge the gap and understand how consciousness may turn out to be brain activity does not inspire enthusiasm: "I believe," writes Nagel, "it is not irrational to hope that someday, long after we are all dead, people will be able to observe the operation of the brain and say, with true understanding 'That's what the experience of tasting chocolate looks like from the outside'" (Nagel 1998, p. 338).

The difficulty of explaining away the obstinate reality of consciousness, and the ostensible contingency of the relationship between consciousness and physical processes, should caution those who dismiss theism in light of a confident form of physicalism.

Reply to Argument I

I shall later reply in some detail to Rundle's argument that theism is incoherent, but I shall assume (provisionally) in my reply to the first argument that consciousness does indeed exist and that there are problems with explaining away what appears to be a contingent

relationship between consciousness and physical states and processes. It seems that we can conceive of the one without the other, and we currently lack an explanatory scheme to show that there is an identity between them (see Taliaferro 1994, 1997, 2002). I do not assume here that some form of dualism is true; I am asserting, however, that physicalism is not known to be true and that it is problematic to beg the question about the successful prospects of nonphysical explanations at the outset. Granted this foundation, consider Argument I. If we cannot rule out that consciousness with respect to human beings is something nonphysical, how can we justifiably rule out that there may be a nonphysical theistic mode of consciousness (a God who knows, acts, and so on)? If it is possible that there is a nonphysical, purposive causal agent as conceived of in theism, is there not logical space for asking the theistic cosmic question that Phillips and Kai Nielsen seek to rule out?

Furthermore, the fundamental theistic cosmic question is actually slightly different than Phillips and Nielsen suppose. In standard forms of the cosmological argument, theists ask the question of why the contingent cosmos exists rather than not. This is not akin to asking why *everything* exists, assuming God (*ex hypothesi*) is a substantial reality or subject who would (if God exists) be referred to as one of the “things” that exists. So the question of the cosmological argument (addressed in Chapter 3) concerns the cosmos and its origin and continuation, not the cosmos plus God. Nielsen’s objection to theism similarly seems to have purchase only if by “universe” we mean “everything.” If, instead, the “universe” refers to the contingent cosmos we observe, it seems that it is perfectly sensible to ask why it exists and whether it has a sustaining, necessarily existing, conscious, nonphysical, purposive cause. The latter would be “beyond the universe” as such a being would not be identical to the contingent universe. It is worthy of note, too, that some naturalists have been led to posit abstract objects (propositions, properties, sets) that exist necessarily and are thus “beyond the contingent cosmos.”

Consider, again, Nielsen’s claim that “God exists” is akin to “procrastination drinks melancholy.” Unless we charitably interpret the latter as a poetic report that, say, the tendency to delay projects promotes melancholy (which seems to hold in my case, on occasion), the latter report is profoundly different from the former. People and animals drink, but not tendencies or states of character. I suggest that the second phrase is meaningless, but the first expresses a proposition which may, in fact, be true and so ought to arouse our interest in its truth. If we have some reason to think human consciousness may not be physical and this opens up the question of whether there may be a nonphysical divine agent, then asking about (human or divine) causes of events is vital. A strict behaviorist who denies the possibility of any mental events may urge us to put to one side any search for a mental cause for my writing this sentence. But once strict behaviorism is put to one side, the search for causes can no longer be so contracted. (More on Phillips’s claim about science and “the structure of the world” later in this chapter.)

Reply to Argument II

I first note that many of the arguments in natural theology do not treat theism as a scientific hypothesis. Dawkins seems to suppose that if God exists, God’s existence should be evident in gravity, electromagnetism, nuclear forces, lumps of matter, rocks, asteroids, and black holes. But while theism (rightly, I think) can serve as a justified explanation of some events in the cosmos (I subscribe to a theistic argument from religious experience), the chief

evidence of much theistic natural theology is the very existence and endurance of our contingent cosmos as a whole. Those of us who accept a version of the cosmological argument hold that to fully explain the existence and endurance of this cosmos requires appeal to the intentional agency of a necessarily existing, good being (see Chapter 10). Contrary to Dawkins et al., theism is better seen as a philosophical explanation of *the cosmos* rather than as a scientific account of events *in the cosmos*.

Let us now turn to Narveson's argument. Narveson wants scientific details *about* how divine agency works. He compares explanations that work (water boils because of molecules in motion) with those that do not (God commanded that there be light and, lo, there was light). But consider an example of human agency: You light a candle in order to see your beloved. Most of us assume that such acts are truly explanatory. There may be highly complex layers to such an intentional account, distinctions between basic and nonbasic actions, and there would be a physiological story to tell about muscles and brains and so on, but most would hold that the intention to see the beloved was part of the account (Searle 1983, 1992, 1997, 2004). I suggest that if intentions are truly explanatory, then there must be a sense in which they are not reducible to the physiologically detailed explanations. "I wish to see my beloved" may need backing in terms of other intentions such as "I like to see her golden hair," but I suggest that if agency is genuinely causal, there must be a sense in which it is basic in the sense that it is not fully accounted for in other terms (Danto 1965; Swinburne 1997). If every intentional explanation were acceptable only if it involved a further intentional explanation (I intended to turn on the lights A by intending action B, and I intended B by C *ad infinitum*), then I should never be able to undertake the first intentional act. I shall further spell out a positive account of agency in response to Rundle's work, but I now wish to make the further observation against Narveson that the physical sciences themselves are not inimical to basic explanations. In contemporary particle physics, objects without mass are posited with primitive charges or spins, which are presumed to be the basic foundations for explaining more complex events. Positing a basic power, terrestrial or divine, is not, *ipso facto*, explanatorily empty. On this point, Phillips's observation cited earlier about science seems curious. In the sciences, we may well claim that with respect to any explanation, further questions can be asked of it, but this is not the same thing as claiming that science does not or cannot posit basic powers and accounts that are not themselves explained by further powers or scientific accounts. If the sciences can allow that subatomic particles have basic powers, it is hard to see how we can rule out that intentional agents have basic powers. (Phillips's claim that science is "not concerned with 'the structure of the world'" also seems curious. The atomic theory of matter seems unintelligible unless it is interpreted as offering a description and explanation of the structure of the world.)

If Narveson's dismissal of theism is unsuccessful, it is hard to see how Bagger's *a priori* ruling out of theism is more promising. This is especially true because Bagger's form of naturalism does not seem linked to a strict naturalism or some form of reductive physicalism. Bagger's form of naturalism allows for almost anything but theism.

Despite the occasional references to natural law and science both here and in the final chapter which might suggest otherwise, I intend my use of "natural" to entail (1) no commitments to a physicalistic ontology; (2) no valorization of the specific methods, vocabularies, presuppositions, or conclusions peculiar to natural science; (3) no view about the reducibility of the mental to the physical; (4) no position on the ontological status of logic or mathematics; and

(5) no denial of the possibility of moral knowledge. Beliefs, values, and logical truths, for example, count as natural and folk psychological explanations, therefore, are natural explanations. The concept of the natural, in the sense I use it, has virtually no content except as the definitional correlative to the supernatural, taken here as a transcendent order of reality (and causation) distinct from the mundane order presupposed alike by the natural scientist and the rest of us in our quotidian affairs. (Bagger 1999, p. 15)

Imagine, however, that a physicalist ontology is found wanting and (as suggested earlier) that we need to be open to nonphysical states, processes, and the like. Imagine that the mental is irreducible to the physical and that we give no primary place to the natural sciences, and that we further allow that intentional explanations involving purposes are all permissible. Bagger seems to allow for all of this; but once such a wider framework is taken seriously, it is hard to see how one can (in principle) know that theistic explanations are never acceptable.

Reply to Argument III

Let us first consider Hume's disparaging observation about using human beings as a model for God.¹ The ways in which Hume denigrates consciousness is interesting because it is itself so laden with a narrow anthropomorphism. Why assume that if thought were the key to some cosmic metaphysic such as theism, then thought or a divine intention would be "minute"? Hume does not say that thought would have to be minute, but the passage implies that it is the minuteness of thought (in human life) that should dissuade us from thinking that it might be the key to a comprehensive account of nature. Thought (whether human or divine) would not be small in physical size because nonphysical and divine thought (if classical theism is true) would be neither "weak" nor "bounded." Cosmic theistic explanations would be in the form of appealing to the limitless knowledge and unsurpassable power of God. It may be that in constructing a theistic metaphysic, we employ the concepts of intentionality and consciousness that are used to describe our contingent and limited life, but in theism the concepts of intentionality and consciousness are then conceived in terms of a noncontingent, limitless, powerful, intentional, conscious Creator. To many naturalists, as we have seen, this is a matter of unwarranted projection, but, whether it is a mere projection or discovery, a theistic metaphysic needs to be seen as introducing a comprehensive, powerful, intentional account of the very existence and continuation of nature.

I believe that the basic point that is obscured in the passage from Hume is the way in which overall accounts of the cosmos should be contrasted. At the broadest level of description and explanation, theism and naturalism represent two of the more promising accounts of the cosmos. The one treats intentional, purposive explanations resting in a supreme agent as foundational, while the other accounts for the emergence of purpose and agency (if any) in terms of nonpurposive, nonconscious causal powers. The theistic account is no more to be disparaged if one of the reference points of teleological, conscious explanations is in human life than if one of the reference points in naturalistic accounts is water's boiling

1. Technically, the passage by Hume cited earlier occurs in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* as a claim advanced by one of the characters and not as a direct claim by Hume himself. In this context, I am following the practice of most philosophers in seeing the character, Philo, as a spokesperson for Hume's position.

(to use Narveson's example). (More on the topic under the section "Nontheistic Natural Theology" later in this chapter.)

Let us now consider Rundle's critique of theistic natural theology. Rundle's critique of divine agency is linked with his critique of human agency. He not only finds it puzzling to suppose that God's intentions could causally account for the origin and continued existence of light, he also doubts that human intentions play a causal role in human action. By taking this line, I suspect that Rundle winds up with his own version of "dualism," in which the apparent role played by our emotions and intentions is cut off from causal relations in the world. Because of the importance of Rundle's noncausal account of human agency and its bearing on the central attack on theism, I cite him at length.

Suppose you are pleased at having won a game of bridge, or disappointed at having lost. These are not, surely, brute-factual relations, but there are conceptual connections: the responses *make sense* in the light of what has led to them. That is indeed so, but is the relevant relation one of causation? How do you know that it is your loss at bridge that disappoints you? There may be feelings akin to those of disappointment at whose source you can only conjecture, but there is no room for conjecture as to what you are disappointed at, so that you might say: I think it is because I lost at bridge that I am disappointed, but it may be my failure to win the lottery that is having this effect. The inappropriateness of mere conjecture is not because we are infallible when it comes to identifying a cause in this connection, but because the very notions of cause and effect, as these are understood in the natural sciences, are out of place here.

Consider this in terms of reasons for action. You say that you are opening the door in order to let the cat out. If this is an explanation made in all sincerity, and with understanding of the words used, then the reason cited is indeed your reason for acting. Its being your reason just consists in its standing as an honestly made avowal, with no room for rival alternatives. It is not as with causal propositions, where one's honest say-so does not decide what caused what, but where it is always in principle possible that one's attribution of a cause will be overturned by further investigation. To say, for instance, "I think I am opening the door to let the cat out", would be to relocate what would ordinarily be a matter of one's reason for acting in an altogether different domain. It would be to treat one's avowal as a matter for conjecture on one's own part, much as if the act were involuntary, as with "I think I am sneezing because of the dust." Just the standing appropriate to a causal hypothesis, but a distortion of our conception of a reason. The conclusion is not that causal relations are, after all, a species of logical relation, but that we are concerned here with reasons rather than causes. (Rundle 2004, pp. 48–9)

Is Rundle's account plausible?

I do not think so and I suggest that, at the least, his position faces an enormous burden of proof. First, consider again Rundle's examples. Surely the whole idea that you are disappointed over a loss at bridge is that the realization that you lost and your desire to win is what (along with other factors) brings about (causally contributes to) your feeling disappointed. Rundle uses a humorous alternative (*viz.* losing the lottery) to cajole us into thinking there is no causation going on but adjust the example to something less remote (e.g. maybe the real cause of disappointment is that you are about to lose a friendship), and the example seems to resist Rundle's noncausal analysis. Surely you may be fully justified in believing that your disappointment stems from your belief that a friendship is on the rocks and not confusing this with your disappointment at failing to win 350 million dollars with your lottery ticket, which had a one in a trillion chance of winning. Consider also his case of letting the cat out. Plausible cases are readily described where a person's

motives may be unclear, and this lack of clarity is owing to our not knowing what was the fundamental, intended cause of our action. Was the reason for opening the door to let the cat out or to welcome a visitor or to get fresh air or to interrupt a job interview? Rundle's noncausal account of reasoned, motivated action strikes me as promoting an intolerable dualism of sorts, whereby human action is cut off from the natural world. At least from a common sense or prephilosophical perspective, a person is a causal agent, one who brings about changes on the basis of reason. I am sympathetic with the claim that human agency involves more than "cause and effect, as these are understood in the natural sciences," if by the latter Rundle means nonintentional, nonmental processes. But once you allow the "natural sciences" to include things such as an agent's wanting there to be light (and other relevant desires and intentions), it is harder to see why these mental processes should not have causal roles.

It does not follow that if Rundle's noncausal account of human agency fails, then his case against divine agency fails. But as one looks more closely at some of Rundle's other examples, his overall case against theism wavers. Take, for example, the following critique of divine agency. He allows that *some* intentional control over remote objects may be imaginable or intelligible, but theism nonetheless faces an "intractable difficulty" with conceiving of the scope and precision of divine causation. Rundle shapes his objection against a proposal that psychokinesis could provide a model for thinking of divine agency.

Those who believe in the reality of psychokinesis consider it possible to effect changes in the world merely through an act of will – Locke's account of voluntary action, we may note, amounts to regarding it as an exercise of psychokinesis directed at one's own limbs. It is not absurd to suppose that issuing a spoken command should have an effect on things in one's environment, nor even that formulating the command to oneself should likewise have external repercussions. Neural activity associated with such an act could conceivably harness larger forces which impacted upon things beyond the brain. Whether the command is delivered out loud or said to oneself, what is difficult to account for is the specificity of the effect. If a soldier is given the command "Attention!" or "Stand at ease!," his understanding of the words puts him in a position to comply. Even when the words are uttered *in foro interno*, we can imagine that some sort of signal should reach an inanimate object, but a seemingly intractable difficulty remains on the side of the object, which is not possessed of the understanding which would result in its moving to the left when told to move to the left, or rotating when told to rotate. Psychokinesis is not a promising model for making sense of God's action on a mindless cosmos, and God's supposed role as lawgiver. (Rundle 2004, p. 157)

This is puzzling. The cited passage suggests that theistic accounts of God's creative power rest on creation's understanding and then obeying divine commands. Clearly, this is a Pickwickian treatment of divine agency, although perhaps Rundle's observation bears on accounts of divine revelation when it is not clear what (or whether) God wills. All that to one side, once Rundle allows that an agent can have causal effects on remote objects (Rundle speaks of "some sort of signal"), why would it be incoherent to imagine that such causal efficacy is irresistible (necessarily, if God wills that there is light, there is light) and unsurpassed in specificity? Why suppose that God might only be able to set subatomic particles in motion but not be able to specify whether this be (in reference to some frame of reference) to the right or the left?

Let us now consider Rundle's charge that a nonphysical agent cannot hear prayers and so on. Rundle's work is reminiscent of the Wittgensteinian tactic (also employed by J. L.

Austin and G. Ryle) of professing bafflement over an opponent's position; Rundle maintains that he has "no idea" of theistic claims. "I can get no grip on the idea of an agent doing something where the doing, the bringing about, is not an episode in time . . ." (Rundle 2004, p. 77). One may well agree that he, Rundle, does, indeed, not understand the metaphysical claims he writes about, and yet challenge Rundle's charge that others also fail in this respect. Certainly, the line (presumably taken from Wittgenstein) that to talk of God's seeing requires (grammatically) that God have (literal) eyes seems open to question. I am tempted to ask the question, "Whose grammar?" Anselm of Canterbury and Ralph Cudworth (to pick two remote and otherwise quite different figures) held that God's cognition of the world and all its aspects did not require bodily organs. Perhaps they are mistaken, but it is hard to believe that they were merely making a mistake in Latin or English grammar. This is especially true if one adopts Rundle's view of meaning, according to which we fix the meaning of "God" and presumably words such as "to see" and "eyes." Rundle writes: "As with any other word, the meaning of 'God' is the meaning that our usage has conferred upon it, so what is true of God of necessity – that is, by dint of being required for the applicability of the term – is in principle something of which we know" (Rundle 2004, p. 101). In the seventeenth-century work *The True Intellectual System*, did Cudworth not use the terms "God" and "seeing" and "eyes" coherently in claiming God sees and knows without using eyes? Maybe "our usage" makes the claim problematic and we now know that it is impossible for there to be a nonphysical, cognitive agent. But what scientific account of (or conceptual investigation of) our eyes, brain, and so on led us to believe that a different form of agency and knowledge is metaphysically impossible? (It would be hard to argue that Cudworth was misusing the term "theism" since it appears that he coined the word in English.)

It is interesting that Rundle does not explicitly repudiate divine agency based on a form of contemporary physicalism. He writes:

The idea that an ultimate source of being and becoming is to be found in the purely mental and non-physical is at odds with the conception of mind espoused by most contemporary philosophers. It is commonly held that mental states are to be characterized in terms of their causal role, but since such states are thought to be states of the brain, there is no lessening of a dependence on the physical. This is not a position I wish to invoke. It is doubtless true that we could not believe, desire, or intend without a brain, but any attempt to construe belief and the rest as states of that organ involves a serious mismatch between the psychological concepts and physical reality. Beliefs can be obsessive, unwavering, irrational, or unfounded, but nothing inside anyone's head answers to such descriptions. (Rundle 2004, pp. 76–7)

But given Rundle's (I believe correct) misgivings about the identity between mental and brain states, why be so sure that it is impossible for there to be nonphysical agency and cognition? All the theist needs here is the bare coherence of dualism, not its plausibility. And many materialists in philosophy of mind at least grant that dualism is intelligible though mistaken (Peter van Inwagen, Lynne Baker).

Reply to Argument IV

In reply to the argument from uniqueness, it has been argued that contemporary astrophysics and cosmology would not be carried out if Hume's objection were taken seriously.

Big Bang cosmology seems undeterred by the fact that our universe is the only one we experience; moreover, there seems to be little worry about the scientific use of analogies or the appeal to resemblance when it comes to referring to the cosmos as a whole. Richard Swinburne counters the uniqueness objection as follows:

From time to time various writers have told us that we cannot reach any conclusions about the origin or development of the universe, since it is (whether by logic or just in fact) a unique object, the only one of its kind, and rational inquiry can only reach the conclusions about objects which belong to kinds, e.g. it can reach a conclusion about what will happen to this bit of iron, because there are other bits of iron, the behaviour of which can be studied. This objection of course has the surprising, and to most of these writers unwelcome, consequence, that physical cosmology cannot reach justified conclusions about such matters as the size, age, rate of expansion, and density of the universe as a whole (because it is a unique object); and also that physical anthropology cannot reach conclusions about the origin and development of the human race (because, as far as our knowledge goes, it is the only one of its kind). The implausibility of these consequences leads us to doubt the original objection, which is indeed totally misguided. (Swinburne 2004, p. 134)

I suggest that the most promising way to compare accounts of the cosmos is to appeal to such general criteria as explanatory scope, simplicity, compatibility with known science, support from other domains of inquiry including ethics or value theory, philosophy of mind, and so on. An analogy with assessing nonhuman animal mental life may prove helpful.

According to many philosophers, it is reasonable to believe that some nonhuman animals are conscious agents, and yet it is a commonplace observation that none of us will or can directly confirm the existence of nonhuman animal consciousness on the basis of the observation of nonhuman consciousness, anatomy, and behavior. No account of the animal brains and physiology, behavior, and language (or signals) has been accepted as definitive proof. Despite striking similarities to our own organic causes of suffering, and profound analogies with our own behavior when we are in pain, it is still possible to be a skeptic like Bob Bermond, who argues that animal emotions and behavior all occur without any conscious feeling (see Bermond 1997). Bermond reasons that in the case of humans, conscious feeling is correlated with certain brain states (a fully formed prefrontal cortex and right neocortex) not found among nonhuman animals. Because of this missing correlation and given the possibility that animals lack consciousness, we should not posit animal consciousness. In my view, this is a rationally defensible position, but in the wake of such profound analogies between human and nonhuman anatomy and behavior, it is more reasonable to believe that what appear to be symptoms of conscious suffering in great apes, chimps, dolphins, and many other animal species are the result of actual suffering. Bermond, for his part, has no positive reason for believing that conscious feeling occurs if – and only if – there is such and such brain developments. With support absent for such a strong claim, I think the reasonable stance is to accept that there is some nonhuman animal consciousness (Rollin 1990). To settle this debate (if it can be settled) would require a lengthy book of its own. Rather than establish my preferred position, my more modest point is that the debate over animal consciousness can and should take place, even though the debate would be undermined by Hume's objection about uniqueness. We are not in a position in which we can compare nonhuman animals, some of whom we *know* to be conscious and others not. Bernard does not

recognize an uncontroversial case of nonhuman consciousness to get such a comparative study under way. But debate need not end. Which account does the best job in terms of explanatory power and what we know independently in terms of evolutionary history, and so on? A similar concern for scope and explanatory power befits the theism–naturalism debate.

Reply to Argument V

Consider the following three points in reply to Kant’s objection to theistic natural theology.

First, what Kant thinks to be too modest an outcome in natural theology would be intolerable to many naturalists. Imagine that contemporary naturalists such as Narveson, Bagger, or Rundle become convinced that philosophical arguments “establish a highest architect of the world.” This would not sit well with their central claims about the explanatory hegemony of naturalism.

A second point worth observing is that natural theology is one domain among others in which the justification of religious belief is assessed. There are extant treatments of religious belief that do not require natural theology in order for religious belief to be warranted (Plantinga 2000). Perhaps some religious believers would be uninterested in natural theology unless it can deliver a full commitment to a religious tradition, but this seems a matter for apologetics, not philosophy. In pursuing a philosophy of God, I suggest philosophers of all stripes should pursue natural theology and follow the arguments wherever they lead. More general accounts of justification and value might subsequently come into play about whether natural theology is sufficient in determining one’s conviction about religious matters.

Third, while I began this chapter by noting the distinction between natural and revealed theology, that distinction has become less sharp. While a philosophical project that presupposed the authority of biblical or Qur’anic scripture would still not count as natural theology, philosophical arguments about the evidential value of religious experience now are treated in the domain of natural theology. This allows for greater material for theists and naturalists to argue for evidence that might or might not fill out a religious concept of the divine (Wainwright 1981; Davis 1989; Alston 1991; Yandell 1993; Gellman 1997, 2001). The current work on religious experience does not pass over into revealed theology so long as scriptural texts are not treated as presuppositions of inquiry.

Nontheistic Natural Theology

I conclude this chapter with a section on the virtues of inquiry, as I hope to encourage what I suggest is a golden rule in philosophy of religion. But before addressing the role of humility in philosophical inquiry, it is vital to note that the philosophical investigation into the divine without appeal to an authoritative scripture has historically included nontheistic accounts of a divine reality. I cited Spinoza earlier, who advanced a monistic view of God (or, as he put it, God or nature), according to which God is not an intentional, purposive agent. In the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, there are developed accounts of the divine employing the process philosophy inspired by Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) and Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000). Feminist philosophers have developed views of God that have distinctive pantheistic forms (Rosemary Ruether). I believe this to be a sign of

the healthiness of natural theology today, an indication of a growing interest in natural theology, whatever its specific religious implications.

The development of nontheistic natural theology is also an emerging new chapter in the dialogue about the relationship of science and religion. Rather than supporting a warfare model of science versus religion, works such as the Macmillan *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion* under the editorship of J. W. V. Van Huyssteen (2003) is a sign of the rich interplay on theistic and nontheistic natural theology.

As the field widens, I believe that more philosophers are appreciating the role of *cumulative arguments*, the combining of independent reasons for embracing a conclusion. Thus, a case for pantheism might be supported by an appeal to religious experience as well as a principle of simplicity. A leading philosopher of religion, Graham Oppy, has recently sounded a warning about cumulative arguments. Consider Oppy's somewhat complex analysis in his fine book *Arguing About Gods*:

If we have two valid arguments, each of which entails the conclusion that a particular monotheistic god exists, then we can form a disjunctive argument that also entails the same conclusion. More generally, if we have a large collection of valid arguments, each of which entails the conclusion that a particular monotheistic god exists, then we can form a multiply disjunctive argument that also entails that same conclusion. However, it should not be supposed that a "cumulative" argument that is formed in this way is guaranteed to be a better argument than the individual arguments with which we began (even if we are properly entitled to the claim that the arguments with which we are working are all valid). For, on the one hand, if all of the arguments are effective on grounds other than those of validity – for example, because they have false premises, or because they are question-begging – then the cumulative argument will also be defective. But, on the other hand, if even one of the arguments with which we began is not defective on any other grounds, then *it* is a cogent argument for its conclusion, and the cumulative argument is plainly worse (since longer and more convoluted). So, at the very least, we have good reason to be suspicious of talk about a cumulative case for the claim that a given monotheistic god does – or does not – exist that is based upon a collection of (allegedly) valid arguments for the claim that the god in question does – or does not – exist. (Oppy 2006, pp. 5, 6)

It is certainly right that simply having a greater number of arguments for one position (theism) rather than another (pantheism) is not, *ipso facto*, an advantage. The larger number of arguments may raise a larger number of good objections. But what Oppy's analysis may lead us to miss is that independent lines of reasoning can increase the *bona fide* cogency of their mutual conclusion. So if religious experience gives one some reason to embrace pantheism and an argument from simplicity gives one reason to embrace pantheism, then pantheism is better supported than if one only had one such argument. This is not a matter of a mere disjunction but a case of one argument supporting the other. To offer one other example, the moral theistic argument and ontological arguments are conceptually distinguishable (one may embrace one without embracing the other), but if both have some evidential force, then the evidence for the conclusion has grown greater than if only one had evidential force.

Consider a concrete case in which pantheistic and theistic arguments might together offer a cumulative case against naturalism. Without spelling out the details, John Leslie has developed a sustained argument for pantheism on the grounds that the cosmos is best explained in terms of values. Leslie is in the Platonic tradition, according to which the

cosmos exists because it is good that it exists (in the *Republic*, Book VI, Plato proposes that the Good is what gives existence to things). And Leslie goes on to argue that the world itself is identifiable with “divine thought-patterns” (Leslie 2007, p. 3). Imagine that Leslie’s argument has some, but not decisive, weight. Now, imagine that a moral theistic argument has some, but not decisive, weight. What follows? It may be that we are at a point where the evidential basis for theism and pantheism is on a par, but we would also be in a position (*ceterus paribus*) where there is more reason to question the sufficiency of secular naturalism. Both the nontheistic and theistic arguments would function as providing independent reasons for seeking a nonnaturalist account of the cosmos.

While my suggestion in the section that follows about the conduct of philosophy takes its focus to be the biggest debate in modern natural theology (theism versus naturalism), its broader point bears on the growing rich variety of viewpoints that are being developed by philosophers in natural theology today.

Virtues and Vices of Inquiry

In recent epistemology of religious beliefs, there has been great attention to the virtues of inquiry. Is there some overriding virtue that theists and naturalists can recognize as truly virtuous that will incline us to one or the other side? Anthony Kenny has recently developed an interesting case for humility, which he believes should incline us to agnosticism. This, in fact, is Kenny’s current position: he thinks both atheism and theism are unwarranted:

For my part I find the arguments for God’s existence unconvincing and the historical evidence uncertain on which the creedal statements are based. The appropriate response to the uncertainty of argument and evidence is not atheism – that is at least as rash as the theism to which it is opposed – but agnosticism: that is the admission that one does not know whether there is a God who has revealed himself to the world. (Kenny 2004, p. 109)

He then develops the following argument, based on his view of humility as a virtue.

If we look at [the debate over theism versus atheism] from the viewpoint of humility it seems that the agnostic is in the safer position. . . . The theist is claiming to possess a good which the agnostic does not claim to possess: he is claiming to be in possession of knowledge; the agnostic lays claim only to ignorance. The believer will say he does not claim knowledge, only true belief; but at least he claims to have laid hold, in whatever way, of information that the agnostic does not possess. It may be said that any claim to possess gifts which others do not have is in the same situation, and yet we have admitted that such a claim may be made with truth and without prejudice to humility. But in the case of a gift such as intelligence or athletic skill, those surpassed will agree that they are surpassed; whereas in this case, the theist can only rely on the support of other theists, and the agnostic does not think that the information which the theist claims is genuine information at all. Since Socrates philosophers have realized that a claim not to know is easier to support than a claim to know. (Kenny 2004, p. 109)

Does his argument succeed? I do not think so, but it opens up what I believe is a promising avenue for inquiry to note at the end of this first chapter.

Kenney structures his argument on the grounds that the theist claims to have a good (which he describes as a gift or information) that others lack, whereas the agnostic does not. Yet agnostics historically claim to have a good that theists and atheists lack: the good of intellectual integrity. If you like, they claim to have the information that we should withhold our consent both to theism and atheism. And, if it were successful, Kenney's argument would explicitly secure the idea that agnostics have a good that theists and atheists lack, namely, humility. There is a further problem about claiming that theists are only supported by theists. First, it is not just possible but commonplace for atheists to admire theists and theists to admire atheists. In this sense, there is mutual support and a massive amount of collaboration between the different parties. If by "support" Kenney means "belief," then (arguably) only agnostics support agnostics because if you support agnostics in the sense of *believing they are right*, you are yourself an agnostic.

I think humility in the context of the theism versus naturalism debate should be understood more along the lines of what may be described as the philosophical golden rule of treating other people's philosophies in the way you would like yours to be treated. I suggest that humility involves stepping back from one's own position and trying to evaluate and sympathetically consider the range of beliefs and evidence that can be arrayed in support for another position. If one employed such a rule in the debate between naturalism and theism, then I suggest that theistic philosophers should truly seek to see naturalism in its best, most comprehensive light, weighing the different ways in which consciousness and values and the very nature of the cosmos should be described and explained. Conversely, a naturalist philosopher needs to see theism in comprehensive terms. For example, rather than dismissing from the start the possibility that religious experience could provide evidence of a divine reality, one should consider such ostensible evidence in light of a comprehensive theistic account of the contingency of the cosmos, its apparent order, the emergence of cosmos and values. Claims to experience God look profoundly unreliable unless one takes seriously the whole pattern of such experiences across cultures and assesses their credibility in light of a comprehensive case for theism or some other religious philosophy.

The importance of what I am referring to as the philosophical golden rule may be seen as even more poignant when one appreciates that the field of natural theology involves not just theism and naturalism but a growing literature in nontheistic natural theology.

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