

Why I Believe there are no Successful Arguments for God's Existence

I am a naturalist: I believe that there are no causally efficacious supernatural entities. In particular, I believe that there are no ghosts, spooks, immaterial souls, or gods. Because I believe that there are no gods, I hold, in particular, that God does not exist: there is no superhuman being that has and exercises power over the natural world, over the fortunes of humanity, and over any other superhuman beings that hold and exercise power over the natural world and the fortunes of humanity.

Since I believe that God does not exist, I hold that I have never encountered an argument for the existence of God that *ought* to have persuaded me to change my mind. Indeed, more generally, since I believe that God does not exist, I hold that I have never encountered anything—argument, evidence, chain of reasoning, or the like—that ought to have persuaded me to change my mind. Of course, this is not a consideration that is specific to the claim that God exists: for any proposition that I believe, I hold that I have never encountered anything—argument, evidence, chain of reasoning, or the like—that ought to have persuaded me to change my mind. For it would simply be irrational to have a belief of the form *p*, but I ought to believe that not *p*, or a belief of the form *p*, but I ought not to believe that *p*. (Doubtless, there are many cases in which my beliefs are open to correction: doubtless, there are many propositions that I believe that I ought not to believe, given the arguments, evidence, chains of reasoning, and so forth to which I have been exposed. But there are no *particular* propositions that I believe about which I also believe that I ought not to believe those propositions, given the arguments, evidence, chains of reasoning and so forth to which I have been exposed.)

Furthermore, since I believe that God does not exist, I hold that I have good reasons to believe that God does not exist. It is not merely the case that I hold that I have never encountered anything—argument, evidence, chain of reasoning, or the like—that ought to have persuaded me to give up the belief that God does not exist. Rather, I hold that the sum of everything that I have encountered—arguments, evidence, chains of reasoning, experiences, and so forth—justifies me in my belief that God does not exist. Given the experiences that I've had, the evidence that I've collected, the arguments and chains of reasoning to which I have been exposed, and so forth, I am justified in my belief that God does not exist.

Some naturalists hold that there are successful arguments against the existence of God. That is, some naturalists hold that they can point to arguments that ought to persuade all of those who are not naturalists to change their minds. More generally, some philosophers hold that, wherever one believes a proposition, one is committed to the claim that one can point to an argument that ought to persuade everyone else to believe that proposition. Equally generally, though less strongly, some philosophers hold that, wherever one believes a proposition, one is committed to the claim that one can point to something—argument, evidence, chain of reasoning, accessible experience, or the like—that ought to bring everyone else to believe that proposition. I do not accept even the weaker general position. In particular, I do not claim that I *have* arguments that ought to persuade all of those who are not naturalists to change their minds; I do not claim that I

can point to something—argument, evidence, chain of reasoning, accessible experience, or the like—that ought to bring everyone to be naturalists. Nor, more weakly, do I claim that for each person, there is something that I can point to—argument, evidence, chain of reasoning, accessible experience, or the like—that ought to bring that person to be a naturalist. Perhaps I am committed to the claim that, for each person, there *is* something—argument, evidence, chain of reasoning, accessible experience, or the like—that ought to bring that person to be a naturalist; however, I think that it is an open question whether one can reasonably believe that *p* and yet deny that, for each person, there is something—argument, evidence, chain of reasoning, accessible experience, or the like—that ought to bring that person to believe that *p*. A key question here is how seriously we ought to take the notion of *intellectual judgment*: can one's belief that *p* be consistent with the further belief that there can be reasonable disagreement whether *p* on the part of one's doxastic peers? For the purposes of the present paper, it does not matter how this question is best answered.

Given the position that I have outlined to this point, it is clear that there are two major dimensions to my belief that there are no successful arguments for the existence of God. On the one hand, I claim that, for each extant argument for the existence of God, I can give good reasons for holding that it is unsuccessful (i.e., for holding that it ought not to have persuaded me to change my mind). Moreover, although I do not claim to have examined all of the arguments that have been put forward for the existence of God, I hold that, over the course of my academic career to this point, for a great many arguments, I have given good reasons for holding that those arguments are unsuccessful. On the other hand, I claim that I can make a plausible case for the claim that the sum of everything that I have encountered—arguments, evidence, chains of reasoning, experiences, and so forth—justifies me in my belief that God does not exist. In my view, if we compare various naturalistic and theistic theories, we can see quite clearly that one can reasonably believe that naturalism trumps theism, even though we will also see that there are many different naturalistic theories between which there is currently no compelling reason to maintain a preference.

In what follows, I propose to do no more than to sketch the outlines of what I claim is a plausible case for the claim that the sum of everything that I have encountered—arguments, evidence, chains of reasoning, experiences, and so forth—justifies me in my belief that naturalism trumps theism, and hence justifies my in my belief that God does not exist. I emphasise that what I am offering here is no more than a sketch, and also that what I am offering here is not meant to be a sketch for a single argument that ought to bring everyone else to believe that naturalism trumps theism.

I begin from the observation that it is common ground between naturalism and theism that there are things that stand in causal and spatiotemporal relations, and that these relations determine a maximal collection of things that are externally related to us. In the most general case, if we consider two things that belong to this maximal collection, there will be a chain of things between these two, with each link in the chain being either a causal relation or a space-like relation. If, for example, reality were exhausted by a Big Bang universe that begins with an initial space-like surface, then there could be parts of

reality that evolved from a part of that initial surface that did not overlap with the part of the initial surface from which our part of the universe evolved, and hence there could be parts of reality that bear no purely causal relation to us. On the other hand, if reality were exhausted by a Big Bang universe that begins with an initial point, then all parts of reality would be causally related to us, since all parts of reality would trace their causal origin to the very same thing. Of course, we should not just assume at the outset that causal reality is exhausted by the maximal collection of things that are externally related to *us* under causal and spatiotemporal relations; however, from here on, our interest will be restricted solely to the domain that includes all of the things that are thus externally related to us, and we shall use the word ‘reality’ to refer to this domain.

Given the above stipulation about how we are to understand talk about reality, we can now go on to ask about the global structure of reality. There are a number of different dimensions along which the global structure of reality can be assessed. First, we can ask whether there is an infinite regress of things under the causal relation: is there a chain all of whose links are causal, for which it is true that, for any element of the chain, there are elements of the chain that are anterior to the given element under the causal relation? (Relatedly, but distinctly, we can ask whether it is true that each thing belongs to an infinite regress of things under the causal relation. This latter hypothesis entails the former, but not vice versa. Similarly, again, we can also ask whether it is true that each causal chain to which a given thing belongs regresses infinitely. As before, this hypothesis entails the preceding hypothesis, but not vice versa.) Second, we can ask whether the causal relation gives rise to causal determination, and, if so, whether it always gives rise to causal determination: is the primary causal relation one under which a given thing is causally necessary for another thing, or is it a relation under which a given thing is causally sufficient for another thing? Third, we can ask whether the existence of reality is necessary or contingent: could it have been the case that there is no collection of things externally related under causal and spatiotemporal relations? Fourth, we can ask about the distribution of mental and agential properties over reality: is it the case that mental and agential properties are instantiated in reality only where there are structures that have the kind of complexity that is exhibited by, say, mammalian brains? We shall take these questions in turn.

1. *Infinite Regress*: If there is an infinite regress under the causal relation, then it seems that theists are required to say that there is an infinite causal regress of divine states. For, if there were an infinite causal regress in which there features no more than finitely many divine states, then there would be an infinite causal regress in which there features no divine states at all—and, in that case, there would be an infinite causal regress in which God simply plays no part. But, in that case, it would not be true that God causes all of the rest of reality. Thus, either we must suppose that there is an infinite initial causal chain that consists of nothing but divine states, or else we must suppose that there is an infinite initial chain in which there is infinite alternation of divine and non-divine states. Even at this early stage of analysis, it seems pretty clear that the hypothesis that there is an infinite regress under the causal relation is going to favour naturalism over theism; hence, it is unsurprising that many theists deny that it is possible for the causal relation to regress infinitely. (Much the same can be said for the hypothesis that there is a grand circle of

states under the causal relation: that hypothesis, too, would clearly favour naturalism over theism, and, hence, it is unsurprising that many theists have been concerned to make explicit denial of the claim that it is possible for there to be a grand circle under the causal relation.)

Some philosophers have claimed that there is strong empirical evidence against the claim that there is an infinite regress in the causal relation. In particular, some philosophers have claimed that there is evidence in contemporary scientific cosmology that strongly supports the claim that there is a finitely distant absolute origin under the causal relation that coincides with the coming into existence of the universe that we inhabit in an explosion from an initial cosmological singularity. These claims are based on the assumption that Einstein's general theory of relativity (GTR) gives an everywhere correct account of the causal structure of our universe. But we have very strong reason to suppose that this assumption is false. It is well-known that quantum mechanics (QM) and GTR are jointly inconsistent; and it is also widely recognised that no theory has been more widely empirically confirmed than QM. Consequently, we have good reason to think that we don't yet have an empirically well-confirmed theory that gives a correct account of the causal structure of the very early stages of our universe. Therefore, while it is true that we have very good empirical reason to think that the observable universe emerged for a very small and very dense precursor as the result of an explosive expansion, we simply do not have good empirical reason to think that there is an absolute origin to the causal relation in the immediate vicinity of that explosive expansion. Until we have an empirically well-founded theory of quantum gravity—or some other suitable successor to both QM and GTR—claims that there is strong empirical evidence in scientific cosmology against the contention that there is an infinite regress in the causal relation will amount to nothing more than whistling in the dark.

Some philosophers have claimed that there are decisive *a priori* objections to the claim that there is an infinite regress in the causal relation. In particular, some philosophers have claimed that it is simply impossible for there to be infinite collections of any kind, and that it is simply impossible for there to be infinite regresses under any ordered relations. The claims of these philosophers typically take one of two forms. On the one hand, some philosophers claim that the standard contemporary mathematical conception of the infinite is simply incoherent, and that we should embrace one of the radical alternatives to orthodox mathematics: finitism, constructivism, intuitionism, or the like. On the other hand, some philosophers claim that, while the standard contemporary mathematical conception of the infinite is not incoherent—it is logically possible that there are infinite collections and infinite regresses—it is nonetheless impossible for these merely logical possibilities to be instantiated in the *real* world.

If we adopt one of the radical alternatives to orthodox mathematics, then we incur various costs: for example, there are many theorems of orthodox mathematics that have no counterparts in finitistic, or constructivist, or intuitionistic mathematics, and hence which must simply be forgone by those who take this approach. Moreover, *theists* who would adopt one of these alternative approaches face the very difficult task of reconciling their belief in God's omniscience with the typical foundations that are provided for finitism, or

constructivism, or intuitionism: one of the standard complaints about orthodox mathematics that issued from the intuitionist camp is that orthodox mathematics is a branch of theology. Of course, naturalists who accept orthodox mathematics won't agree with intuitionists that orthodox mathematics requires belief in an omniscient God; rather, the point on which they will insist is that it seems rather plausible to suppose that belief in an omniscient God requires acceptance of orthodox mathematics. I have elsewhere argued at length (from a naturalistic perspective) on behalf of the claim that the case against the coherence of the standard contemporary mathematical conception of the infinite is very weak—see Oppy (1996a).

If we adopt the view that there is an important distinction between merely logical possibility and real possibility, then we incur the obligation of providing an account of the ontology and epistemology of real possibility. While we might think that judgments about merely logical possibility can be grounded in ideal imagination—or ideal conceivability, or the like—it seems that judgments about real possibility would need to be grounded in metaphysical speculation, and that justification for such judgments would turn on considerations about the virtues of competing metaphysical theories. When I feel positively disposed towards the notion of real possibility, I am most attracted to a metaphysical theory on which there are very few real possibilities: the only ways that things *really* could have diverged from how things actually are is in the outcomes of objectively chancy events (and the consequences thereof)—and, if there are no objectively chancy events, then there are no other ways that things really could have been. Whether this view allows the real possibility of infinite collections and infinite regresses plausibly depends entirely upon whether there actually are infinite collections and infinite regresses—and that, I think, is then not a matter that can be decided on *a priori* or philosophical grounds.

The upshot of these considerations, I think, is that there are no good grounds for ruling in or ruling out the hypothesis that there is an infinite regress under the causal relation. Setting aside minority views in the philosophy of mathematics, we should allow that it is logically possible that there is an infinite regress under the causal relation. However, if we are prepared to accept that there are logical possibilities that are not real possibilities, then we cannot immediately conclude from this that it is really possible that there is an infinite regress under the causal relation. And, indeed, on what seems to me to be the most attractive account of real possibility, whether or not it is really possible that there is an infinite regress under the causal relation seems to turn entirely on whether or not it is actually the case that there is an infinite regress under the causal relation. But empirical evidence and scientific theorising currently give no clear answer to the question whether that actually is an infinite regress under the causal relation. So, after exhausting all avenues of inquiry, it seems to me that we are simply left in the dark: we can't even make a justified assignment of a probability to the claim that there is actually an infinite regress under the causal relation.

2. *Causal Determination*: I think that it is plausible to suppose that causation plays a foundational role in the constitution of reality: non-initial parts of reality are only parts of reality because they have antecedent causes that are also parts of reality. In other words,

there is no non-initial part of reality that does not have antecedent causes that are also parts of reality. This formulation is neutral on the question whether there are initial parts of reality: of course, if there are initial parts of reality (under the causal relation), then those initial parts of reality cannot have antecedent causes that are also parts of reality. We shall return to the question of whether there are initial parts of reality in the next subsection.

If we suppose that causation plays a foundational role in the constitution of reality, then we are bound to ask questions about the nature of this foundational role. In particular, we are bound to ask whether or not the causal relation is deterministic. On the one hand, we might suppose that the causal relation is deterministic: given the earlier nature of causal reality, there was no other way that subsequent parts of causal reality could be. On the other hand, we might suppose that the causal relation is indeterministic: given the earlier nature of causal reality, there are various ways that the subsequent parts of causal reality could be, and it is simply a matter of objective chance which of the various ways that subsequent parts of causal reality could be turns out to be the way that causal reality subsequently is.

Some philosophers have claimed that there is strong empirical evidence against the claim that the causal relation is deterministic. In particular, some philosophers have claimed that, because one of our empirically best-supported physical theories—quantum mechanics—is an indeterministic theory, we have good empirical reason to think that at least our part of reality is not deterministic. While it is true that there are interpretations of quantum mechanics on which it is an indeterministic theory, it is worth noting that there are also interpretations of quantum mechanics on which it is deterministic (e.g. versions of Bohm's interpretation). Moreover, even if it is true that, on the best interpretations of quantum mechanics, it is an indeterministic theory, it is unclear that this gives us particularly strong reason to think that our part of reality is indeterministic: as we noted earlier, we have good reason to think that quantum mechanics will eventually be supplanted by successor theories, and it is not clear that we have compelling reason to hold that those successor theories are bound to be indeterministic. Equally, however, it seems doubtful that the current state of physical theory gives us compelling reason to hold that developments in physics are bound to confirm the claim that our part of reality is deterministic: rather, given the current state of physical theory, it seems most reasonable to claim that, in the light of the empirical evidence, the question is just a wash.

Of course, there has been perennial dispute amongst philosophers about whether the causal relation is deterministic. Some philosophers have supposed that there are decisive *a priori* arguments on behalf of the claim that the causal relation is deterministic; other philosophers have supposed that there are decisive *a priori* arguments on behalf of the claim that the causal relation is indeterministic. Moreover, there is division amongst theists, and division amongst naturalists, on the question whether the causal relation is deterministic: some theists and some naturalists have supposed that the causal relation is deterministic; and some theists and some naturalists have supposed that the causal relation is non-deterministic. I suspect that there is currently more support amongst theists for the claim that the causal relation is non-deterministic, primarily on the basis of

considerations about libertarian free human agency; however, I would not even try to hazard a guess about the preponderance of naturalist opinion. My own view, here, is that, even if one thinks that the balance of probability favours one position over the other, one ought to reserve some probability for the view that one rejects: currently, there just is no clear-cut resolution of the question whether the causal relation is deterministic.

3. *Necessity and Contingency*: Given the account of real possibility outlined in the earlier discussion of infinite regress under the causal relation, it would seem to follow that, if the causal relation is deterministic, then the actual world is the only *really* possible world: for, on that account of real possibility, the only ways that things really could have diverged from how things actually are is in the outcomes of objectively chancy events (and the consequences thereof), and, if the causal relation is deterministic, then there are no objectively chancy events. Moreover, this result seems to be independent of considerations about the global shape of causal reality: it holds if there is an infinite regress under the causal relation, and it holds if there is a grand circle under the causal relation, and it holds if there is an initial part of reality under the causal relation (i.e. a smallest part of reality that is not preceded by other parts of reality under the causal relation, but which precedes all other parts of reality under the causal relation).

The account of real possibility outlined in the earlier discussion of infinite regress under the causal relation can be given a slight amendment so that it does not entail that, if the causal relation is deterministic, then the actual world is the only really possible world: we can say that, in addition to divergences from how things are in the outcomes of objectively chancy events, the non-existence of causal reality is also a real possibility. That is, we could say that: it might have been that there was nothing at all that either did or could stand as a term under the causal relation. On this account, if there is an initial part of reality under the causal relation, then the coming into existence of that initial part of reality is *really* contingent: it *really* might have been the case that that initial part of reality did not come into existence. (Perhaps it is worth pointing out here that, on the account of real possibility outlined in the earlier discussion of infinite regress under the causal relation, if there is an initial part of reality under the causal relation, then it is the *sole* really possible initial part of reality under the causal relation.)

If we suppose that there was an initial part of reality, and if we favour a very austere theory of real possibility, then it seems to me that it is unclear whether we should allow that it might have been that there was nothing at all that either did or could stand as a term under the causal relation. On the one hand, the theory of real possibility is simpler if we deny that it might have been that there was nothing at all that either did or could stand as a term under the causal relation. On the other hand, it is quite difficult to get an intuitive handle on the question whether we should suppose that the existence of causal reality is *really* contingent. Of course, theists are typically committed to the claim that the existence of causal reality is really contingent: but, theistic commitments aside, it is hard to find anything that speaks clearly to this point. In particular, it seems to me that naturalists can quite reasonably suspend judgment on the question whether we should think that the existence of causal reality is really contingent. Moreover, it seems to me that naturalists who prefer less austere accounts of real possibility—perhaps, for example,

because they allow that causal reality might have had any of a number of different initial states, or because they allow that the causal evolution of reality might have obeyed different causal laws—can also suspend judgment on this question (though perhaps those naturalists might have some reason to give more credence to the claim that it could not really have been the case that an initial part of reality did not come into existence).

4. *Mind and Agency*: Given what we know about mind and agency, it seems to me that it is overwhelmingly plausible to suppose that mental and agential properties are (and really can be) instantiated in reality only in creatures that exhibit the kind of natural complexity that we exhibit. Of course, there are controversial questions concerning exactly *how much* of the kind of natural complexity that we exhibit is required for mind and agency: but, for present purposes, it won't matter what suppositions we are inclined to make about exactly where in the animal kingdom the dividing lines actually fall. The key naturalist contention is that there really cannot be instantiation of mental and agential properties except in complex natural entities—in particular, there really cannot be ghosts, or spooks, or gods, or immaterial souls that have mental and agential properties even though they are not complex natural entities—and maintenance of this contention is consistent with considerable uncertainty about exactly which complex natural entities have mental and agential properties.

Some people—including some philosophers—have claimed that there is good empirical evidence for the claim that we are, in part, immaterial souls: in particular, some people—including some philosophers—have claimed that there are well-attested parapsychological phenomena that provide good evidence for the claim that we have immaterial souls that are capable of existing quite independently of the existence of any complex natural entities. I think that all claims of this sort are bunk. On the one hand, some of the alleged evidence—based on near death experiences, out of body experiences, and the like—can be given much better naturalistic explanation. On the other hand, the rest of the alleged evidence—based on purported communications with the afterworldly dead facilitated by mediums, etc.—is utterly poisoned by fraudulence, gullibility, and so forth. The sober truth is that there just is no good empirical evidence for the claim that we are, in part, immaterial souls. Moreover, the abundance of good empirical evidence for the claim that our mental and agential properties are intimately dependent upon our natural properties—displayed, for example, in the ways that mental and agential properties change consequent upon neural insult and neural injury—at the very least provides strong *prima facie* reason for thinking that we are not, even in part, immaterial souls.

Of course, many philosophers have supposed that there are good philosophical arguments that defeat our strong *prima facie* evidence that we are not, even in part, immaterial souls. That our mental and agential properties are intimately dependent upon our natural properties is no *proof* that we are not, at least in part, immaterial souls: it remains conceivable—a logical possibility—that, although our mental and agential properties are intimately dependent upon our natural properties, we would continue to have mental and agential properties in the absence of all natural properties. But, of course, even if it is a logical possibility that we would continue to have mental and agential properties in the

absence of all natural properties, it hardly follows that it is a *real* possibility that we would continue to have mental and agential properties in the absence of all natural properties. Moreover, I think, there simply *aren't* any good arguments on behalf of the claim that it is a *real* possibility that we would continue to have mental and agential properties in the absence of all natural properties.

Given the previous discussion of infinite regress, causal determination, necessity and contingency, and mind agency, we now have the ingredients that, when suitably combined, reveal the basis of my claim that naturalism trumps theism. In my view, it is an open question whether reality conforms to Infinite Regress, or to Circle, or to Contingent Initial State, or to Necessary Initial State. However, on any of these models, naturalism is preferable to theism: in every case, naturalism fits all of the empirical data at least as well as theism, and, in every case, the sum of the ontological and theoretical commitments of naturalism is less than the sum of the ontological and theoretical commitments of theism. So, it seems to me, on general theoretical grounds, naturalism does indeed trump theism.

Of course, there is an important sense in which the preceding account is clearly incomplete: for it is obvious that I haven't discussed *all* of the allegedly relevant empirical data here (religious experience, revelation, scripture, historical record, etc.) However, given the preceding discussion, I think that it should be pretty obvious how I think that the remainder of the account will go. (Some of the details of this further account can be inferred from the discussion in Oppy (1996b), especially in Chapter 7.)

In closing, perhaps it is worth noting that, on the preferred account of real possibility, we have a *very* short way with the argument from the alleged fine-tuning of cosmological constants, even granting the assumption that we have good reason to think that ultimate physics will still invoke a bevy of such fine-tuned constants. On the one hand, it could be that the fine-tuning of the constants is a ubiquitous feature of reality: but, in that case, it turns out that the fine-tuning of those constants is *really* necessary, and hence not in need of any further explanation. On the other hand, it could be that the fine-tuning of the constants is the result of some objectively chancy process: but, if so, then, again, we have all of the explanation that there is to give, and that is so no matter how unlikely the outcome of the objectively chancy process turns out to be. Of course, this short way is consistent with claims that the fine-tuning arguments are also faced with fundamental problems of formulation, and the like: in advance, we have no reason to rule out the suggestion that the failure of fine-tuning arguments is over-determined.

References

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 Oppy, G. (1996b) *Arguing about Gods* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press