

Prospects for Successful Proofs of Theism or Atheism

There are many contemporary philosophers of religion who defend putative proofs or arguments for the existence or non-existence of God. In particular, there are many contemporary philosophers of religion who set out explicit arguments that they claim to be proofs or successful arguments for the existence or non-existence of God. The aim of this paper is to examine the prospects for proofs or successful arguments for the existence or non-existence of God. I begin with an attempt to establish terms for the subsequent discussion.

1. Gods and God

A *god* is a supernatural being or force that has and exercises power over the natural world but that is not, in turn, under the power of any higher ranking or more powerful category of supernatural beings or forces. *Supernatural* beings and forces include: (i) persons and forces that do not have spatiotemporal locations while nonetheless being causally responsible for and/or having causal effects on things that do have spatiotemporal locations; and (ii) spatiotemporally located persons that bring about causal effects at spatiotemporally remote locations in the absence of spatiotemporally continuous causal processes connecting their actions to these effects (unless somehow making use of quantum entanglement or the like). Plainly enough, to be a supernatural being or force is necessary but not sufficient to be a god.

Theism is the view that there is at least one god. *Atheism* is the view that there are no gods. Consequently, theism and atheism are contradictory views: they cannot both be true, and they cannot both be false. *Monotheism* is the view that there is exactly one god. If monotheism is true, then the one god that exists is properly called ‘God’. Thus, if monotheism is true, God exists.

Generic monotheism says something like the following: God is the omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good creator *ex nihilo* of the physical universe. Of course, there are many other attributes that might be mentioned in this characterisation: eternity; personality; freedom; consciousness; simplicity; and so forth. However, the more such attributes we add to the characterisation, the more controversial it becomes among those who would describe themselves as ‘monotheists’.

Christian monotheism says something like the following: There is an immaterial, omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good creator (*ex nihilo*) and sustainer of all things who is three persons in one substance, with one of these three persons being numerically identical to a human being who died to atone for human sins; who exercises providential control over free human beings; who will bring about the bodily resurrection of all to eternal life; who allows some lives to lead to eternal bliss and other lives to lead to eternal torment; and who is the author of authoritative (and perhaps inerrant) scripture, viz. the Christian *Bible*. Of course, Christians disagree amongst themselves about the details here; but there is no question that *many* Christian philosophers will happily accept all of the above, and more.

Supernaturalism is the view that there are supernatural agents or forces or structures. *Naturalism* is the view that there are no supernatural agents or forces or structures.

Consequently, naturalism and supernaturalism are contradictory views: they cannot both be true, and they cannot both be false.

Generic naturalism says something like the following: All causes are physically constituted occupants of spatiotemporal locations; all causally—spatiotemporally—related objects have entirely physical constitutions. It should be noted that this characterisation is neutral on questions about the relationship between physical properties and the broader class of natural properties: perhaps natural properties *reduce to* physical properties; perhaps natural properties *supervene upon* physical properties; perhaps some natural properties *emerge from* physical properties. (Perhaps generic naturalism should extend to something like the following principle: in minimal natural variants of the actual world, there is no variation in the qualitative intrinsic properties instantiated in regions without variation in the qualitative intrinsic natural properties of those regions. However, I shall not attempt to argue for this further claim here.)

I am inclined to doubt that there is a position of *contemporary naturalism* that stands to generic naturalism as Christian monotheism stands to generic monotheism. However, for the purposes of the subsequent discussion, I shall suppose that we can characterise contemporary naturalism in something like the following way: Causal reality and spatiotemporal—or, at any rate, approximately spatiotemporal—reality are one and the same thing: call it ‘reality’. There is nothing that belongs entirely to the interior of reality that has neither necessary nor sufficient cause of its existence; however, anything that is part of reality but that does not belong entirely to the interior of reality has neither necessary nor sufficient cause of its existence. There are no features of parts entirely interior to reality that have neither necessary nor sufficient cause; however, features shared by *all* parts not entirely interior to reality have neither necessary nor sufficient cause.

Naturalism entails atheism; theism entails supernaturalism. However, atheism does not entail naturalism; and supernaturalism does not entail theism. Even if atheism is true, and there are no gods, it might nonetheless be true that there are supernatural structures that belong to our world, but that are no part of the natural world. Similarly, even if supernaturalism is true, it might be that there are no gods, even though there are supernatural entities that are not located in the natural world.

When we consider the prospects of proofs for theism or atheism, we do best to imagine disputes between theists and naturalists, rather than between theists and atheists. For atheism is clearly just the denial of theism: there is no generic worldview that is properly associated with atheism. And much the same can be said about supernaturalism: it is pretty clearly just the denial of naturalism; there is no generic worldview that is properly associated with supernaturalism.

Moreover, when we consider the prospects of proofs for theism and naturalism, we do better still to imagine disputes between particular, more-than-generic, versions of theism and naturalism, as, for example, a dispute between a Christian monotheist and a contemporary naturalist. If there are proofs of either theism or naturalism, then clearly those proofs ought to be such as to persuade philosophically sophisticated Christian monotheists to become naturalists, or else to persuade philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists to become theists. Of course, that’s not to say

that proofs of theism should suffice to persuade philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists to become Christian monotheists, or that proofs of naturalism should suffice to persuade philosophically sophisticated Christian monotheists to become contemporary naturalists. Rather, the point is just that philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists are proper targets for putative proofs of theism; and philosophically sophisticated Christian monotheists are proper targets for putative proofs of naturalism.

2. Mathematics and Logic

A *proof* is a derivation of a conclusion, i.e. a sequence of steps that terminates with the desired conclusion, where each of the steps in the sequence is provided with an appropriate kind of justification. In the most general case, a proof involves premises or assumptions; however, there are proofs in which there are no premises or assumptions—e.g. *reductio* proofs, conditional proofs, and so forth. In the most general case, there are four ways in which a step in a proof can be justified: the claim that features in the relevant line of the proof might be (i) a premise or assumption of the proof; or (ii) a claim that has been previously proved—either outright, or else as following from the premises and assumptions of the proof; or (iii) a claim that follows from—and hence is justified by—earlier lines in the proof; or (iv) a claim that is a ‘temporary assumption’—e.g. a claim that is assumed for the sake of a subsequent *reductio*, or as a step towards the establishment of a subsequent conditional claim, or the like.

In mathematics or logic—the natural homes of proof—the fundamental purpose of proof is to demonstrate that a given claim *can* be derived from acceptable assumptions and/or of claims that have already been proved. Of course, if one has a derivation of a claim from certain assumptions, and if one has no doubts about either the assumptions or the methods that have been used in making the derivation, then one has no doubts about the conclusion of the derivation. Moreover, if one ought not to have doubts about either the assumptions or the methods that have been used in making the derivation, then one ought not to have doubts about the conclusion of the derivation. However, it should not be supposed that the sole purpose of derivations in mathematics is to banish doubts about the conclusions of those derivations; in at least some cases, the main purpose of seeking derivations is to ease doubts about the assumptions and methods that are used in those derivations. Thus, for instance, many set theorists claim that acceptance of the axiom of choice is justified, in part, by inspection of claims that cannot be proven unless that axiom is assumed.

In mathematics and logic, there can be disputes about the methods that are used in making derivations, i.e. there can be disputes about whether a given line in a purported proof really is justified by earlier lines in that purported proof—and, in consequence, there can be disputes about whether certain purported proofs ought really to be counted as proofs. Consider, for example, disputes about classical proofs on the part of intuitionists, constructivists, and finitists. In at least some cases, what emerges from these disputes is the idea that there are different kinds of proofs: classical proofs; constructive proofs; finitistic proofs; intuitionistically acceptable proofs, and so forth. This idea allows many disputes in mathematics and logic to be quarantined: it is one question whether a claim admits of one or another kind of proof; it is a quite different question what kinds of proof ought to be countenanced.

Given agreement on the kind of proof that is being deployed, there is typically no serious dispute about which claims may appear as lines in a proof of a given mathematical or logical conclusion. That is, in mathematics and logic, given agreement on the kind of proof that is being deployed, there is typically no serious dispute about which claims are suitable assumptions for proofs—i.e. about which claims are suitable *axioms* for given domains in mathematics and logic—nor about which claims have already been proved on the basis of previous derivations—i.e. about which claims are *theorems* that might suitably be appealed to in support of the desired conclusion. As we have already noted, we need not suppose that this fact indicates that axioms and prior theorems have some special doxastic status: that they are, for example, *more* obviously true than the theorems that are derived from them; or that they are *more* certainly true than the theorems that are derived from them; or the like. However, what should clearly be remarked upon here is that the practice of providing *proofs* in logic and mathematics is essentially dependent upon the absence of serious dispute about which claims may appear as lines in a proof (at least given prior agreement about the kind of proof that is going to be accepted): if there were no stable agreement about suitable axioms and correct derivations amongst those who are serious and competent to judge, then there simply could not be a practice of constructing *proofs* for mathematical and logical claims amongst those who are serious and competent to judge.

A final important fact about proofs in mathematics and logic is that many of them are highly non-trivial. That is, it is often highly demanding to discover—and, in many cases, even to understand—the sequence of steps involved in a proof in mathematics or logic. Of course, standards for non-triviality vary from one person to the next: what novices in mathematics and logic find demanding may be entirely trivial for experts. However, even relative novices in mathematics and logic are familiar with the idea that proofs in mathematics and logic can involve long and complicated sequences of steps, and that they can require steps whose initial discovery required the exercise of quite considerable intelligence. Moreover, for any given level of mathematical or logical expertise, there is a corresponding classification of degrees of triviality of mathematical and logical proofs: a number of steps that must be distinguished for a proof appropriate for a relative novice might be compressed into a single step in a proof for someone with considerably greater expertise.

3. Proofs of the Existence of God

If we suppose that mathematics and logic provide the standards against which all proofs are to be assessed, then it seems to me that it is unlikely that there are *proofs* of the existence or non-existence of God. For, given those standards, a *proof* of the existence or non-existence of God would be a derivation, about which there is no serious dispute, that relied only on claims and preceding derivations about which there is no serious dispute, and which had as its conclusion either the claim that God exists or the claim that God does not exist.

It is uncontentious that there are philosophically sophisticated Christian monotheists and philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists who seriously dispute whether God exists. Moreover, it is equally uncontentious that there are philosophically sophisticated Christian monotheists and philosophically sophisticated

contemporary naturalists who have carefully scrutinised all of the extant putative proofs of the existence or non-existence of God. Since serious dispute between these parties has thus far survived that scrutiny, we have strong *pro tanto* evidence that none of the extant putative proofs really is a proof. For, were one of those extant putative proofs really a proof—i.e. really a derivation, about which there is no serious dispute, that relies only on claims and preceding derivations about which there is no serious dispute—then it would be an incomprehensible mystery why there remains serious dispute, between philosophically sophisticated Christian monotheists and philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists, whether God exists.

Of course, it is consistent with the claim that there are no *extant* proofs of the existence or non-existence of God that there are hitherto undiscovered or undisclosed proofs of the existence or non-existence of God. Thus, even if it is accepted that there are no extant proofs of the existence or non-existence of God, it has not yet been ruled out that there are proofs of the existence or non-existence of God that are awaiting either circulation or formulation. However, if it really is true that none of the extant putative proofs is a proof, then—given the amount of effort that has already been invested by so many talented and motivated investigators—we also have pretty strong *pro tanto* evidence that there is no proof that would be accessible to us that we have not yet managed to discover.

An examination of extant putative proofs of the existence or non-existence of God confirms the conclusions reached above. There simply are no extant putative proofs of the existence or non-existence of God for which it is true that they are derivations, about which there is no serious dispute, that rely only on claims and preceding derivations about which there is no serious dispute. All extant putative proofs of the existence of God are seriously disputed by philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists; all extant putative proofs of the non-existence of God are seriously disputed by philosophically sophisticated Christian monotheists. In saying that extant putative proofs are seriously disputed, what I mean is at least this: holding fixed the fact that they are philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists, it is entirely proper for philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists to seriously contest extant putative proofs of the existence of God; and, holding fixed the fact that they are philosophically sophisticated Christian monotheists, it is entirely proper for philosophically sophisticated Christian monotheists to seriously contest extant putative proofs of the non-existence of God. Moreover, there is simply no evidence, and no reason to think, that there are hitherto undiscovered or undisclosed yet accessible proofs of the existence or non-existence of God that might make their appearance, thereby dramatically altering the contemporary situation: there is no evidence, and no reason to think, that it will one day be the case that it is not entirely proper for philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists to seriously contest then extant putative proofs of the existence of God and/or not entirely proper for philosophically sophisticated Christian monotheists to seriously contest then extant putative proofs of the non-existence of God.

4. Arguments about the Existence of God

Even if it is agreed that, given that the relevant standards are set by mathematics and logic, it is unlikely that there are proofs of the existence or non-existence of God, it might be said that it is simply a mistake to suppose that the relevant standards are set

by mathematics and logic. After all, it might be said, there are more or less no domains outside of mathematics and logic in which there can be proofs that meet the standards that are appropriate to mathematics and logic. When people talk about ‘proofs’ of the existence or non-existence of God, what they really mean to be talking about are ‘good arguments’ for the existence or non-existence of God—and ‘good arguments’ for the existence or non-existence of God need not be derivations, about which there is no serious dispute, that rely only on claims and preceding derivations about which there is no serious dispute.

In order to determine whether this is a reasonable objection, we need to decide what is meant by the word ‘argument’. For the purposes of initial discussion, I propose to stipulate that an ‘argument’ is a set of sentences, one of which is distinguished as the conclusion of the argument, and the remainder of which are the premises of the argument. After the initial discussion is concluded, it may be appropriate to reconsider this initial stipulation.

When philosophers set out arguments for the existence or non-existence of God, they are typically careful to identify the premises of those arguments, and to set out those arguments in a standard format, looking something like this:

| | | |
|------|----------------|---------------------|
| 1. | p ₁ | (premise) |
| 2. | p ₂ | (premise) |
| . | ... | ... |
| . | ... | ... |
| N. | p _N | (premise) |
| N+1. | (Hence) C | (From 1, 2, ..., N) |

Sometimes, of course, there are intermediate steps of derivation that are inserted between the last of the premises and the conclusion; however, in most cases, it is obvious how a derivation of the conclusion from the premises might proceed (or else it is obvious that there can be no correct derivation of the conclusion from the premises).

Almost always, philosophers who set out arguments for the existence or non-existence of God suppose that the background logic is classical. However, there may well be steps in the derivation that are not justified simply in terms of classical first-order predicate calculus: some arguments for the existence or non-existence of God are couched in higher-order terms, and some involve steps of derivation that turn on the logical properties of alethic modal operators, counterfactual conditionals, epistemic operators, doxastic operators, and so forth. And, of course, there are many arguments for the existence or non-existence of God that involve steps of derivation that are not supposed to be given a merely logical justification. That is, many philosophers who propose arguments for the existence or non-existence of God suppose that there are steps in their derivations that are justified on inductive grounds, or in terms of inference to the best explanation, or the like.

Even granted this diversity in the justifications that can be provided for steps in arguments, there is no avoiding the observation that the setting out of an argument in standard format emphasises the *relationship* that hold between the premises and the conclusion of that argument. The exhibition of an argument in standard form

foregrounds the claim that the conclusion can be derived from the premises (on some acceptable construal of ‘derivation’). When someone tries to use a standard form argument to convince someone else to accept the conclusion of that argument, there is something like a presumption that the person to whom the argument is directed has overlooked the *relationship* that is thereby claimed to hold between the conclusion of the argument and the premises. Or so I now propose to argue.

5. Arguments and Inconsistency

Suppose that A and B take divergent views on the question of the existence of God: one is a philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalist, and the other is a philosophically sophisticated Christian theist. (For the purposes of our discussion, it does not matter which is which—and, indeed, it may perhaps matter that we do not know which is which.)

Suppose that A offers to B a standard form argument for her preferred conclusion: “ p_1, \dots, p_N so C”. It is clear that A could instead have said to B: “Do you accept each of p_1, \dots, p_N ?” or that A could instead have asserted the premises of the argument: “ p_1, \dots, p_N .” Indeed, we might suppose, A could just have asserted the conclusion of the argument: “C”.

It is clear that, given that A and B are each fully informed of the beliefs of the other—i.e. that the philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalist knows that the other is a philosophically sophisticated Christian theist, and vice versa—it would be utterly pointless for A to simply assert “C”. After all, A knows that B holds that not-C; and A also knows that A’s merely asserting that C does not give B any reason at all to revise opinion concerning whether C. It is, after all, also common knowledge between them that there are very many philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists and very many sophisticated Christian theists. Given this common background knowledge, B’s discovery—if it were a discovery—that he is in the company of one of the many on the other side of the dispute could not possibly give him a reason to change his view.

It is also clear that, given that A and B are each fully informed of the beliefs of the other—i.e. that the philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalist knows that the other is a philosophically sophisticated Christian theist, and vice versa—it would be utterly pointless for A to assert the premises p_1, \dots, p_N if some of those premises are claims that it is known that someone on B’s side of the debate rejects. If A knows—and, in particular, if it is common knowledge—that those on B’s side of the debate reject some of these premises, then A’s assertion of those premises cannot give B any reason at all to revise opinion concerning the truth of the disputed premises.

If A offers to B the argument “ p_1, \dots, p_N so C”, it might be that part of what A is doing is *asserting* the premises of this argument. However, if that is part of what A is doing, then—as we have already observed—it is clear that, if A is acting reasonably, then it cannot be common knowledge that those on B’s side of the debate reject some of those premises. Moreover, even if it is the case merely that B rejects some of the premises that A asserts, then A’s purposes in offering the argument to B will be defeated: for, of course, that the conclusion C follows from things some of which B does not accept *cannot* provide B with a reason to accept C.

Naturally, there are other possibilities here. It might be, for instance, that A asserts some premises about which B has no prior opinion—perhaps because B has not previously considered those premises—or it might be that A asserts only premises that B already accepts. In the former case, it seems implausible to suppose that A's assertion provides B with a reason to accept the asserted premises. After all, we are supposing that it is common knowledge between A and B that they stand on opposite sides of the dispute about whether C. Given that B has not previously considered the premises, or that B has no prior opinion about them, the fact—if, indeed, it is a fact—that these premises support the claim that C gives B reason to be doubtful that the premises are all true. At best, A's assertion of the premises might motivate B to investigate the premises further, to see whether there is some reason for B to accept them: but, in general, it is not even clear that B would be in violation of any epistemic duty if B simply formed the opinion—revisable in the light of *further* evidence and argument—that at least one of the premises being offered by A is likely false.

That leaves the case in which A asserts only premises that B already accepts. I think that this is the interesting case. Clearly, if A offers the argument “ p_1, \dots, p_N so C” in circumstances in which B does already accept all of the premises p_1, \dots, p_N , then a situation has arisen in which B has some work to do: for, of course, in this case, A has managed to show that there is a kind of inconsistency—logical, probabilistic, explanatory, or of some other kind—in B's beliefs. However, in this case, it is worth noting that the advantage that A gains does not depend upon A's *assertion* of the premises: it would be no less a problem for B if A did not accept any of the premises that figure in the proffered argument. For, whether or not A accepts the premises of the argument, it remains up to B to figure out whether to accept the claim that C or whether to ditch one or more of the premises p_1, \dots, p_N . But, if this is right, then the important conclusion that we wished to argue for now seems to be established: in the interesting case, when someone offers someone else an argument in standard form, the underlying presumption is that the person to whom the argument is offered has failed to notice the argumentative relationship that holds between the premises and the conclusion. In other words: in the interesting case, when someone offers someone else an argument in standard form, the underlying presumption is that the person to whom the argument is being offered suffers from an inconsistency or incoherence in belief that that person has not hitherto detected.

6. Philosophical Sophistication

We are supposing that A and B take divergent views on the question of the existence of God, that one is a philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalist, and that the other is a philosophically sophisticated Christian theist. The topic that I now wish to take up concerns the bearing of their philosophical sophistication on the possibility that they might, nonetheless, have inconsistent or incoherent beliefs.

That A and B are philosophically sophisticated does not, of course, *ensure* that their beliefs never lapse into inconsistency or incoherence. In particular, that A and B are philosophically sophisticated does not ensure that their beliefs in areas in which their philosophical expertise has no particular relevance do not lapse into inconsistency or incoherence. Even someone who is extraordinarily philosophically sophisticated might have inconsistent or incoherent beliefs about, say, the layout of streets in the

broader area in which they live: perhaps, for example, they think—though without holding all of these beliefs together in mind at once—that Street A runs north/south, that Street B runs north/south, and that Street A and Street B intersect at point C. Moreover, when we take into account other kinds of inconsistency or incoherence beyond the merely logical—e.g. probabilistic or explanatory inconsistency or incoherence—it is clear that even the most philosophically sophisticated person is likely to have *some* inconsistent or incoherent beliefs.

However, the extent to which even philosophically sophisticated people are prone to inconsistency or incoherence is likely to be more extensive than the discussion in the previous paragraphs might suggest. In particular, that A and B are philosophically sophisticated does not ensure *even* that their beliefs in the areas in which they have philosophical expertise do not lapse into inconsistency or incoherence. This is particularly clear in the case of philosophers whose expertise lies in the field of logic or mathematics: consider, for example, the beliefs held by Russell and Whitehead that led to the production of *Principia Mathematica*, or the beliefs held by Frege at the time that he had not yet received the fateful letter from Russell, or the beliefs held by von Neumann before he listened to Gödel's paper on the incompleteness of finite—or, more generally, recursive—axiomatisations of arithmetic. But no doubt the same is true in less technical areas of philosophy as well: it can be—and no doubt often has been—that philosophers lapse into inconsistency or incoherence even in some of their considered philosophical beliefs.

While it is important not to underestimate the extent to which the philosophically sophisticated are liable to inconsistency or incoherence in their considered philosophical beliefs, it is equally important not to overestimate the extent to which the philosophically sophisticated are liable to inconsistency or incoherence in their considered philosophical beliefs. If someone with philosophical sophistication has inconsistent or incoherent philosophical beliefs in an area of philosophy in which they have expertise, then it is very unlikely to be the case that there is a simple and obvious derivation of the inconsistency. It is no accident that, in the examples drawn from mathematics and logic that I mentioned above, the demonstration of the relevant inconsistency or incoherence is not a mere syllogism, or even a short sequence of syllogisms. Gödel's proof of the incompleteness of finite axiomatisations of arithmetic—the demonstration of the inconsistency in the beliefs of Russell, Whitehead, and von Neumann—is a complicated and difficult derivation that required something at least approaching genius for its discovery. Similarly, while Russell's derivation of the flaw in Frege's system is less complicated and less difficult, it is nonetheless a derivation that required something at least approaching vastly superior intellect for its original discovery.

However, when one looks at common standard form arguments for or against the existence of God—e.g. in textbooks, or companions, or histories, or the like—one immediately sees that the vast majority of these arguments are nothing much like difficult proofs in mathematics and logic. Many of these arguments have associated derivations that involve only a very small number of steps performed on claims with relatively simple logical structure. (Of course, the arguments in this company that are simply invalid have no associated derivations. But, for present purposes, we simply set those arguments aside.) But, given that these arguments have these features, it is simply not credible to suppose that these arguments might be used by either A or B to

demonstrate inconsistency or incoherence in the beliefs of the other. Moreover—given that in the interesting case, when someone offers someone else an argument in standard form, the underlying presumption is that the person to whom the argument is being offered suffers from an undetected inconsistency or incoherence in belief—it seems to me that it would almost certainly be *offensive* for either A or B to suggest to the other that one of these arguments does what arguments directed at the other are really supposed to do: i.e., to derive an inconsistency or incoherence from beliefs that the other actually holds.

7. Idealised Debate

I anticipate that some may object that the discussion to this point adopts an overly idealised conception of debates about the existence of God. Why think that the proper targets of proofs or arguments about the existence of God are philosophical sophisticates with expertise on this very question? Before I turn to address this objection directly, I want to say something about the range of ways in which one can idealise debates about a subject matter. Eventually, this discussion will take us back to consideration of more mundane debates about the existence of God, and the role that arguments and proofs might play in those debates.

Rather than suppose that A and B are philosophically sophisticated experts—one a contemporary naturalist and the other a Christian monotheist—we might suppose, rather, that A and B are *logically and probabilistically and explanatorily omniscient* and *conceptually complete* experts—one a contemporary naturalist and the other a Christian monotheist. If we make this supposition, and if we suppose that A and B are already logically, probabilistically and explanatorily *consistent*, then, I think, the only kind of dispute that there can be between them will turn on considerations about evidence that they have not yet shared. If we think about this in Bayesian terms, we have something like the following picture: It may be that A and B had different prior probabilities for various claims. Given that they are conceptually complete, they assign prior probabilities to all propositions. Given that they are logically and probabilistically and explanatorily omniscient, their views are consistent. Given that they are Bayesians, they update by conditionalising on the evidence that comes into them. Given all of this—and given that all of this is mutual knowledge—there is simply no role in any of their disputes for arguments: they share their evidence, and then each updates in the proper Bayesian way.

The assumptions that we have made here are very strong, and not in the least bit realistic. Human agents are not conceptually complete: they acquire new concepts—and in consequence countenance new propositions—in the course of their lives, and this requires them to make probability assignments in ways other than by conditionalisation. Human agents are not logically and probabilistically and explanatorily omniscient: as we noted previously, human agents are prone to all kinds of inconsistency and incoherence, even in areas in which they have some kind of expertise. (For instance, statisticians sometimes ignore base rates when engaged in reasoning in situations in which they are not wearing their official statistical hats.) This, too, requires them to make probability assignments in ways other than by conditionalisation. Finally, human agents are only imperfect conditionalisers: if human agents try to conditionalise on evidence, there are bound to be imperfections in

those attempts, even if (improbably) they conditionalise in a state of logical and probabilistic and explanatory consistency and coherence.

In order to arrive at a more useful and instructive conception of idealised debate, we do well to start by thinking about some of the reasons why it is that human agents are not ideal Bayesian agents. An obvious starting point is that human agents are subject to a range of non-accidental cognitive limitations. Human agents—unlike idealised Bayesian agents—have finite memories (with definite and not particularly large upper bounds). Human agents—unlike idealised Bayesian agents—have finite processing speeds (with definite and not particularly large upper bounds). Human agents—unlike idealised Bayesian agents—do not start out with prior probabilities that can be plausibly supposed to properly represent complete prior ignorance about data. Human agents—unlike idealised Bayesian agents—operate with a wide range of fast and frugal cognitive heuristics that are not universally truth-tracking. When we idealise human agents—i.e. when we form our conception of ideally rational human agents—we should keep squarely in mind that even idealised human agents have finite memories, finite processing speeds, prior probabilities—and prior beliefs—that are moulded by historical and environmental forces, and liabilities or tendencies to acquire new beliefs in ways that are—to put it mildly—not guaranteed to track the truth.

A perhaps less obvious but no less important reason why human agents are not ideal Bayesian agents is that the faculty of belief in human agents is non-accidentally subject to non-cognitive pressures. Human agents are *agents*: they are actors in the world. Because actions are products of beliefs and desires, the demands of agency often make it practically reasonable for human agents to acquire and maintain beliefs whose acquisition and maintenance cannot be justified on purely cognitive grounds. (By contrast, in ideal Bayesian agents, the faculties of belief and desire are entirely separate, and decision theoretic reasoning is all that is ever needed in order for practically reasonable action to ensue.) When we idealise human agents—i.e. when we form our conception of ideally rational human agents—we should also keep squarely in mind that this is another way in which even idealised human agents have liabilities or tendencies to acquire new beliefs in ways that are—to put it mildly—not guaranteed to track the truth.

The limitations and liabilities of idealised human agents point directly to important *social* dimensions of human cognition. Human agents can—and do—use the assertions and arguments of other human agents to update their own beliefs. In part, this is a matter of using fast and frugal cognitive heuristics: e.g., being inclined to just take on the assertions of others unless those assertions evidently conflict with beliefs that one already holds or issue from agents that one has prior reason to hold unreliable (at least in the domains to which the assertions belong). However, in part, this is also a matter of correcting for the limitations and liabilities that we recognise ourselves to have: we can sometimes see that others are better placed than we to track the truth in given domains because, for example, they have more and better evidence, or because they are smarter, or because inconsistency or incoherence in belief is sometimes more easily spotted from an external vantage point, and so on.

When we idealise debates—hence, in particular, when we idealise debates about the existence of God—it seems to me proper to separate out exchanges of evidence—

which go by way of assertion—and allegations of inconsistency or incoherence in belief—which, if necessary, go by way of supporting argument. Moreover, it seems to me to be proper to suppose that the exchanging of evidence is prior to the provision of arguments: debate turns to argument only if there is disagreement that survives the sharing of evidence. Of course, we might think—and perhaps should think—that, if only enough evidence were available, everyone would converge on the same view. But, given the evidence that we actually have—and given the disagreement that persists among those who have most thoroughly investigated the available evidence—we are in no position to make an uncontroversial identification of the view to which opinion should converge. Consequently, when we idealise debates, it seems to me to be pointless to suppose that the parties to the debate have all of the relevant evidence: making that idealisation simply brings this line of inquiry to a halt. But, if that's right, then the obvious fallback is to suppose that the parties to idealised debate are familiar with all of the currently available evidence that we suppose is relevant to the subject of the debate.

Even granted the argument to this point, it doesn't immediately follow that the best guide that we have to the outcome of idealised debate about the existence of God is to look at the outcome of actual debates between, say, philosophically sophisticated Christian monotheists and philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists. However, given the difficulties involved in forming a conception of the cognitive capacities of ideally rational human agents outlined above, it seems to me that there just is no serious alternative: a refined yet useful idealised conception of debate about the existence of God must be something like a debate between philosophically sophisticated Christian monotheists and philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists. And, in a debate of that kind, successful arguments will be arguments that point to inconsistency or incoherence in the views of one of the parties to the debate.

8. Everyday Debate

Of course, not all debates about the existence of God are debates between experts; indeed, surely, the vast majority of debates about the existence of God are debates between people who are less qualified than philosophically sophisticated Christian monotheists and philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists in various ways: perhaps they are lacking in philosophical sophistication; perhaps they are not acquainted with all—or even much—of the available relevant evidence; perhaps they do not compare well with others on counts of general intelligence, capacity to formulate arguments, capacity to draw good inferences from data, and so forth; perhaps they are unduly prone to wishful thinking or forming beliefs on the basis of untrustworthy authorities; and so on. Even if we suppose that the ultimate standard for success for arguments about the existence of God is demonstration of inconsistency or incoherence in the views about God of philosophically sophisticated Christian monotheists or philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists, might we not think that another significant standard for success for arguments about the existence of God is demonstration of inconsistency or incoherence in the views of those who do not number among the philosophically sophisticated experts?

Suppose that A and B take divergent views on the question whether God exists, and that we make no further assumptions about the acquaintance of A and B with relevant available evidence, their relative intelligence, their capacities to draw good inferences,

their philosophical sophistication, and so forth. In this case, it seems clear that it *could* be that either of A and B is liable to change in view—or at least to recognition of pressure to change view—consequent upon the provision of carefully selected further evidence or carefully tailored arguments. In particular, if A and B have ill-considered views about God, then it could certainly turn out that each has a view that is bedevilled by inconsistency and incoherence. Moreover, it could surely turn out that each has an inconsistent or incoherent view whose inconsistency or incoherence can be brought out by one or another of the extant arguments about the existence of God. Suppose, for example, that B is a naturalist who also thinks that everything that begins to exist has a cause and that the universe—i.e., the sum of natural entities—began to exist, and that A is a theist who also thinks that a good thing eliminates evil as far as it can and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do!

A view that one might take is that, if it is possible that a human agent believes the propositions $\{P_1, \dots, P_n, \sim C\}$, where this set is logically or probabilistically or explanatorily inconsistent, then the argument $P_1, \dots, P_n \text{ so } C$ is a successful argument. But that sets the bar for successful arguments extraordinarily low: given any proposition, it is *very* easy to find small sets of not-too-complicated propositions that include it and that are—not too obviously—logically or probabilistically or explanatorily inconsistent; and, on standard accounts of possibility, given any reasonably small and not too obviously inconsistent set of not-too-complicated propositions, it is possible that there is a human agent who believes all of the propositions in the set.

There are various ways in which one might respond to the failure of this initial view. One might insist that successful arguments require *actual* targets. One might insist that successful arguments require *sufficiently many* actual targets (or, at any rate, a sufficiently high percentage of targets among those who fall on the other side in the debate in question). One might insist that we impose some limits on the capacities of those involved in the debate: perhaps they should be of at least *average* intelligence, or be no worse than average in drawing inferences from evidence, and the like. One might insist that successful arguments have *succeeded* in engineering change in view in actual targets, or sufficiently many actual targets, or in targets not below average in various respects. And so on.

However, it seems to me that there are quite general reasons for being dissatisfied with any proposal of these kinds. On the one hand, in saying that an argument is a successful argument about the existence of God, it seems to me that we ought to be saying something of *normative* philosophical significance: it just feels wrong to say that there are successful arguments that are reasonably *rejected* by some, or many, or almost all people. And, on the other hand, it seems to me that if A and B take divergent views about the existence of God but fall short of expertise in one way or another, then it *should* be part of their view that they are prepared to defer to the experts on the side of the debate that they favour if circumstances require such deference. If it is common knowledge—as I suppose that it is—that we do not now have any arguments that ought to persuade philosophically sophisticated participants in debates about the existence of God to change sides, then it is common knowledge—available to both A and B—that, at least if relevant impediments were removed, each could maintain the same view on the question of the existence of God and yet not be vulnerable to arguments raised by the other.

Even if it is conceded that the above discussion gets debates between naturalists and theists right, it might still be thought that there are other kinds of debates in which standard arguments can play a successful role. In characterising the participants in everyday debate as ‘naturalists’ and ‘theists’, I have been supposing that these participants have resilient tendencies to maintain naturalistic or theistic beliefs. That is, I have been supposing that these participants lean heavily towards naturalism or theism, and that any inconsistency or incoherence in their beliefs would properly be resolved in favour of these leanings. But suppose that we consider someone who is either initially undecided between naturalism and theism, or someone who has a highly confused and balanced mixture of leanings towards both naturalism and theism. What should we say about the prospects for change in their views consequent upon exposure to standard arguments?

The case of the undecided is easier, so let’s start there. If we suppose that our undecided person knows that we do not have any arguments that ought to persuade philosophically sophisticated participants in debates about the existence of God to change sides then—granted just a modicum of reason—it seems that our undecided person also knows that we do not have any arguments that ought to persuade the philosophically sophisticated agnostic to change view. Of course, the acquisition of evidence *might* give the undecided person reason to change view—but the reasonable undecided person should be wary about changing view until they reasonably think that they have *all* the relevant available evidence in hand. (Here I am supposing that the undecided person has no leanings towards either theism or naturalism: no tendencies—and hence, in particular, no resilient tendencies—to believe either.)

What of the confused person who has some leanings towards theism and some leanings towards naturalism? If we suppose that these leanings are equally balanced, then it seems that we are in the same situation as the undecided person. To the extent that one leans towards theism, one knows that there are no arguments that ought to persuade one to become a naturalist; but, to the extent that one leans towards naturalism, one knows that there are no arguments that ought to persuade one to become a theist. However, if we suppose that the leanings are not equally balanced, then we are supposing that the person is either a confused theist (owing to the greater leanings towards theism) or a confused naturalist (owing to the greater leanings towards naturalism)—and, in these cases, we are really back to imagining that we are confronted with people who have resilient tendencies to resolve in one way or the other.

Drawing together the various strands of the discussion in this section, I conclude that consideration of cases of everyday debate does not give us any reason to resile from the view that successful arguments about the existence of God are required to point to inconsistency or incoherence in the views of philosophically sophisticated Christian theists or philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists.

9. Other Purposes for Arguments

To this point, my discussion has taken for granted the assumption that the point of argumentation is to trigger change in view in those to whom arguments are directed. Even if it is granted that, given this assumption, it is true that successful arguments

about the existence of God are required to point to inconsistency or incoherence in the views of philosophically sophisticated Christian theists or philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists, it clearly remains open that this assumption itself might be contested. In this section of my paper, I canvass alternative suggestions that might be made about the point of argumentation. These alternative suggestions are proposed in Plantinga (2007: 209), and elsewhere.

It is sometimes said that learning of derivations, from premises that you already believe, to conclusions that you already believe, can—or perhaps must—increase the worthiness of those beliefs. Perhaps the possession of such derivations can increase the confidence with which beliefs are held. Perhaps the possession of such derivations can make the beliefs more resilient, and less liable to defeat by new evidence or new counter-arguments. Perhaps the possession of such derivations can make the system of beliefs more coherent and less liable to disturbance by new evidence or objections. Perhaps the possession of such derivations makes the system of beliefs a more reliable base from which to launch arguments aimed at bringing others to share the central beliefs in the system. Perhaps the possession of such derivations leads to an increased understanding of the system of beliefs to which the particular beliefs involved in the derivation belong. Perhaps the possession of such derivations can increase the *warrant* of the various beliefs involved. And so forth.

None of these claims seems to me to be plausible. To illustrate some of the difficulties here, consider the following simple case. Suppose that I believe two propositions: p and q . Given that I believe p and q , and given that my beliefs are consistent, there is no question that I am also committed to the truth of $(p \rightarrow q)$ and $(q \rightarrow p)$, at least given the truth-functional interpretation of ' \rightarrow '. So, although I may not have noted this originally, I am also committed to the soundness of the following two arguments: p , $(p \rightarrow q)$ so q ; and q , $(q \rightarrow p)$, so p . However, it is surely absurd to think that my learning of these derivations somehow increases the worthiness of the beliefs. After all, p and q were just arbitrarily selected from among the beliefs that I hold: there is no reason to suppose that one has any relevant connection at all to the other.

Of course, on its own, this case does not establish that it *cannot* be that learning of derivations, from premises that you already believe, to conclusions that you already believe, increases the worthiness of those beliefs (though it surely does establish that it *need not* be that learning of derivations, from premises that you already believe, to conclusions that you already believe, increases the worthiness of those beliefs). However, there are more telling considerations. In particular, it is worth recalling that a derivation of a conclusion c from a set of premises p_1, \dots, p_N , establishes the *inconsistency* of the set of claims $\{p_1, \dots, p_N, \sim c\}$ but it does *not* establish the consistency of the set of claims $\{c, p_1, \dots, p_N\}$. If we suppose—as I think we should—that the two main threats to systems of belief are inconsistency and evidential defeat, then it is very hard to see how learning about derivations, in which all the premises and the conclusion belong to a given system of belief, makes any contribution at all to the alleviation of worries about inconsistency or vulnerability to new evidence in that system of belief, or to providing defence against inconsistency or vulnerability to new evidence in that system of belief, and so on.

It is sometimes said that learning of derivations, from premises that you already believe, to conclusions that you already believe, can provide insurance against dark

days in which you come to have doubts about your beliefs. The thought here must be something like this. Once you've seen that c can be derived from p_1, \dots, p_N , where p_1, \dots, p_N and c are all things that you currently believe, then, if you come to have doubts about whether that c , you will be able to overcome those doubts by relying upon your beliefs that p_1, \dots , and that p_N . This thought seems to me to be evidently forlorn. Given that c can be derived from p_1, \dots, p_N , we have it that the set $\{p_1, \dots, p_N, \sim c\}$ is inconsistent. If we come to have doubts about whether that c , then all that our derivation tells us is that we should look again at p_1, \dots, p_N . If our doubts about whether that c are well-founded, then it seems that we have well-founded doubt that all of p_1, \dots, p_N are true. Even if we had not already reached the view that it is doubtful that learning of derivations can increase the worthiness of beliefs, we would now be in a position to insist that learning of derivations clearly can increase the vulnerability of systems of belief to the spread of doubt: once you've seen that this belief is derivable from those, and you've come to have doubts about this belief, then you're in a position to come to have doubts about those beliefs as well.

It is sometimes said that learning of derivations, from premises that you already believe, to conclusions that you already believe, can contribute to the broader project of philosophy by suggesting good ways in which to think about particular topics. In particular, it might be said, such derivations can reveal interesting and important connections between the elements of particular worldviews. I think that there are various reasons to be sceptical about this suggestion. First, it is clear that many derivations connecting premises and conclusions that all belong to given worldviews do not depend upon any interesting and/or important connections between the elements of those worldviews. Second, it is clear that many—perhaps even most—of the best-known extant derivations concerning the existence of God do not depend upon any interesting and/or important connections between the elements of underlying worldviews. Third, even if there are cases in which derivations do depend upon interesting and/or important connections between the elements of underlying worldviews, it is a large step from there to the claim that those derivations *reveal* the connections upon which they depend. As we have already had occasion to note, in typical arguments about the existence of God, the derivational steps are few and simple. Consequently, if anything at all is revealed in these arguments, it is typically only what is disclosed in assertion of the premises of these arguments, in those cases in which there are premises that are asserted.

It is sometimes said that arguments can move people closer to the positions that embed the conclusions of those arguments—perhaps, for example, by showing that acceptance of a given position is a legitimate intellectual option. This suggestion also seems to me to be forlorn. Suppose that I think that a given position is not a legitimate intellectual option, either because I think that it is inconsistent, or because I think that it is plainly evidentially defeated. Producing derivations involving nothing but claims that belong to the position cannot possibly move me to revise my view: for, on the one hand, producing such derivations does nothing to alleviate my concerns about evidential defeat; and, on the other hand, producing such derivations does nothing to alleviate my concerns about consistency. In the face of these considerations, a key question to ask is: to whom might it be *shown* that the view in question is a legitimate intellectual option? Since no one could sensibly suppose that doubts about the intellectual legitimacy of a position can be met merely by producing *derivations*

involving nothing but claims that belong to the position, it seems that the answer to this question must be: *no-one!*

Perhaps there might be other useful purposes for arguments, apart from those canvassed here. However, I do not know of any other purposes that might be suggested; and, in particular, I do not know of any more plausible purposes that might be suggested. Given that we have good reason to be sceptical about the range of alternatives that have been proposed hitherto as goals for successful arguments, and given the conclusion that we reached at the end of the previous section of the present paper, it seems to me that we have very good reason to think that *the* goal of successful arguments about the existence of God is to point to inconsistency or incoherence in the views of philosophically sophisticated Christian theists or philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists.

10. Practical Arguments

Thus far, our discussion has been focussed entirely on theoretical arguments, i.e. on arguments that operate exclusively in the domain of belief. If the conclusions that have been argued for in previous sections of this paper are accepted, then we have reached the view that the sole goal of successful arguments about the existence of God is to point to inconsistency or incoherence in the *beliefs* of philosophically sophisticated Christian theists or philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists. However, even if it is granted that this is all that theoretical arguments can do—and even if it is further granted that, given this conception of the role of theoretical arguments, it is very plausible to think that the prospects for successful theoretical arguments about the existence of God are very dim—it might still be claimed that there are other kinds of arguments—practical arguments—that aim to draw attention to inconsistencies or mismatches in the wider class of *attitudes* of philosophically sophisticated Christian theists or philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists, and that the prospects for these practical arguments are somewhat brighter.

In order to investigate this suggestion, we need to think about the kinds of inconsistencies or mismatches in attitudes that might be at issue. On the one hand, there is inconsistency or incoherence within a single attitude: perhaps, for example, one might have inconsistent or incoherent desires. On the other hand, there are what might be described as mismatches that cross attitudes: perhaps, for example, one might believe that *p* and yet wish to believe that not *p*.

The case of inconsistency or incoherence within a single attitude is irrelevant to our present concerns. At best, inconsistency or incoherence in, say, desire, might give one reason to try to amend those desires; it could hardly give one reason to revise some or other of one's beliefs. Thus, if there is to be an interesting practical argument, it must aim to draw attention to mismatches between attitudes: it must aim to draw attention, for example, to the fact that there is some kind of tension between the belief that *p* and the desire to believe that not *p*.

If someone does believe that *p* but desires to believe that not *p*, then there are a number of ways in which that person might respond to this “mismatch” between belief and desire. In particular, they might: (a) try to remove the desire without

attempting to satisfy it; or (b) try to accept that they have a desire that is not going to be fulfilled and learn to live with it; or (c) try to make it the case that not p (thereby both satisfying the desire and obtaining reason to amend belief); or (d) set out on a path of looking for reasons to believe that not p (with the aim of coming to believe that not p, thereby satisfying the desire to believe that not p). Perhaps one might think that there is a fifth option: (e) form the belief that not p on the basis of the desire to believe that not p. But there is no such fifth option: one cannot form the belief that p solely on the basis of the desire that one has to believe that p (and, in particular, one cannot *reasonably* form the belief that p solely on the basis of the desire that one has to believe that p). Even if such blatant wishful thinking were psychologically possible—which seems highly doubtful to me—it is clear that it would violate the canons of proper belief formation: *beliefs* can only be properly responsive to truth-conducive reasons. (If you think that it is psychologically possible to believe solely on the basis of desire, try the following thought experiment. Suppose that someone offers you a sizeable sum of money if you can form the belief that there is a wild tiger prowling around in the room where you are reading this text. While you can *pretend* to have acquired the belief—as evidenced, perhaps, by your running screaming from the room, or barricading yourself in a cupboard—it is obvious that, in the absence of reasons and evidence, you can't just take on the belief *given* your strong prior belief that there is no wild tiger in the room.)

When we consider the case of practical arguments about the existence of God, then, we are considering the possibility that someone might learn, on the basis of being given an appropriate argument, that they are subject to a mismatch in their attitudes: for example, they believe that p, and yet desire to believe that not p. Setting aside the plainly irrelevant cases—none of us can make it the case that God exists, or that God does not exist, and none of us can or should form beliefs about the existence of God solely on the basis of what we would like to be the case—it seems that such an argument would leave an appropriate target of such an argument with three options: (i) try to remove the desire without attempting to satisfy it; (ii) accept that one has a desire that is not going to be fulfilled and learn to live with it; or (iii) set out on a path of looking for reasons to believe that not p (with the aim of coming to believe that not p, thereby satisfying the desire to believe that not p).

Given this much, it seems possible that there might be people who find it psychologically impossible to carry out either of the first two options: i.e., they find it psychologically impossible to try to remove the desire without attempting to satisfy it, and they find it psychologically impossible to accept that they have a desire that is not going to be fulfilled and learn to live with it. If there can be such people, then it seems that there can be people for whom the only psychological possibility is to set out on a path of looking for reasons to believe that not p (with the aim of coming to believe that not p, thereby satisfying the desire to believe that not p). However, even if it is agreed that there could be such people, it is important to recognise how rare the situation that is here being envisaged is likely to be. In particular, it is worth noting that, in order to justify the provision of an *argument* to the person in question, it needs to be the case that that person has not hitherto noticed that there is a mismatch between belief and desire when it comes to his or her attitude towards the existence of God. While it is not altogether implausible that one's beliefs about the existence of God might be liable to some inconsistency that another might detect and point out to one (by means of an appropriate argument), it seems to me to be *highly* implausible to

suppose that one might suffer from some other kind of mismatch in attitude about the existence of God that another detects and then points out to one (by means of an appropriate argument).

In short: the above considerations strongly support the claim that, if the prospects for successful theoretical arguments about the existence of God are dim, then there is no reason at all to suppose that the prospects for successful practical arguments about the existence of God are any brighter. It is, perhaps, worth adding, that an examination of extant practical arguments about the existence of God bears out the claim that there is no reason at all to suppose that there are successful practical arguments about the existence of God: extant practical arguments about the existence of God are multiply deficient; and there is no reason to suppose that there are better, hitherto undiscovered practical arguments about the existence of God that await discovery. (For further discussion of practical arguments about the existence of God, see, for example, Oppy (2006).)

11. Objection: No Reasonable Agreeing to Disagree among Experts

In the remaining sections of this paper, I propose to examine some objections to the view that I have developed to this point. I begin with some worries about possible implications of the view that has been developed about arguments about the existence of God for views about the reasonableness of competing expert positions on the question of the existence of God.

If the view that has been developed in the earlier sections of this paper is correct, then there are philosophically sophisticated Christian theists and philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists, none of whom is in possession of arguments that ought, on pain of conviction of irrationality, to bring philosophical experts on the other side of the debate to reconsider the views that they hold. But, if that's right, then—whether they realise this or not—it might seem that philosophically sophisticated Christian theists and philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists ought to allow that there can be reasonable—rational—disagreement on the question of the existence of God among intelligent, well-informed, reflective, well-intentioned philosophically sophisticated experts. After all, one might think, if one reasonably believes that someone else is not reasonable or rational in his beliefs, even though that one is intelligent, well-informed, reflective, well-intentioned and philosophically sophisticated, then surely there ought to be some argument that one has in one's possession that lays bare the unreasonableness or irrationality of that other's beliefs. In particular, one might think, if that other is not reasonable or rational in his beliefs, then surely one ought to be able to point to some logical—or probabilistic, or explanatory—inconsistency or incoherence in that other's beliefs; and, if one can do that, then one surely ought to be able to construct an argument that lays bare the inconsistency or incoherence in question.

Perhaps it might be said that there are forms of doxastic irrationality or unreasonableness of belief that are not manifested in inconsistency or incoherence, and that are not amenable to correction by successful argument. However, if there are such forms of doxastic irrationality or unreasonableness of belief, it seems to me that they are unlikely to be displayed by intelligent, well-informed, reflective, well-intentioned philosophically sophisticated experts. For instance, it seems reasonable to

allow that certain kinds of widespread and fundamental cognitive malfunction might not be corrigible by successful argument; but it seems to me incredible to suppose that intelligent, well-informed, reflective, well-intentioned philosophically sophisticated experts are liable to that kind of cognitive malfunction. And, in any case, it is not entirely clear that widespread and fundamental cognitive malfunction would necessarily be properly described as irrationality or unreasonableness. Intelligent, well-informed, reflective, well-intentioned philosophically sophisticated experts might be blind, or tone deaf, or prone to depression—but it seems at the very least implausible to suppose that they might affirm the consequent, or reason counter-inductively, or mean quus when they say “plus”, or the like.

If we agree that there are philosophically sophisticated Christian theists and philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists, none of whom is in possession of arguments that ought, on pain of conviction of irrationality, to bring philosophical experts on the other side of the debate to reconsider the views that they hold, then, given the view about arguments about the existence of God that has been developed to this point, it does seem that we are committed to the claim that there can be reasonable disagreement amongst reasonable experts who take conflicting views on the question whether God exists. But there has been some weight of opinion in recent years against the suggestion that there can be reasonable disagreement amongst reasonable experts who take conflicting views on any matter. So some comment on this recent discussion is in order here.

First, it is undeniable that there can be no agreeing to disagree for sufficiently ideal agents. As we noted above, ideal Bayesian agents have no use for arguments: disagreements between them resolve entirely into differences in prior probabilities, once evidence has been shared. Consequently, there can be no agreeing to disagree amongst ideal Bayesian agents who do not differ in their priors, provided only that they have shared their evidence, or that their posterior probabilities are common knowledge, or the like. (See, for example, Aumann (1976) and Lehrer (1976).) However, it is not clear that anything substantive follows from these observations. After all, we are not ideal Bayesian agents, let alone Bayesian ideal agents with common priors; and there is no straightforward way of obtaining conclusions about us from observations about ideal Bayesian agents with common priors.

Second, when we move to consider non-ideal human experts, it seems very natural to suppose that there can be reasonable agreement to disagree. Consider, for example, the following claim from Rosen (2001: 71):

It should be obvious that reasonable people can disagree, even when confronted with a single body of evidence. When a jury or court is divided in a difficult case, the mere fact of disagreement does not mean that someone is being unreasonable. Palaeontologists disagree about what killed the dinosaurs. And while it is possible that most parties to this dispute are irrational, this need not be the case. To the contrary, it would appear to be a fact of epistemic life that a careful review of the evidence does not guarantee consensus, even among thoughtful and otherwise rational investigators.

What Rosen claims here seems so evidently correct that one might wonder how it could possibly be disputed.

Third, when we are talking about non-ideal human experts, it is important not to lose track of the limitations and liabilities to which they are subject. Often, in contemporary discussions of the epistemology of disagreement, there is talk about “total evidence” and “sharing of total evidence” (see, for example, White (2005) and Feldman (2007)). But if evidence is sharply distinguished from prior beliefs, then it is clear that human beings—even the best of them—typically do not remember much of their evidence: rather, they update the beliefs in the light of incoming evidence, and then forget the evidence that led to the updating of beliefs. Moreover, it is also clear that human beings—even the best of them—typically do not remember much about their prior states of belief: certainly, I can’t tell you much at all about the content of my beliefs about the existence of God when I was fifteen years old (even though this is a topic that I recall thinking about quite a bit back then).

Fourth, it is not relevant to the present topic to suppose—what may very well be true—that, for any reasonable person, at any point in time, for any particular piece of evidence that that person acquires, there is just one reasonable response for that person to make to that piece of evidence. Of course, if this claim is false—if it is true that sometimes, for some people, in the face of some evidence, there is a range of different rational responses that that person can make to that evidence—then it is clear that there are no good grounds for thinking that there cannot be reasonable agreeing to disagree. But the truth of this claim can do nothing at all towards establishing that there cannot be reasonable grounds for agreeing to disagree: for, even given that the claim is true, it can be that, at some point in time, for some particular piece of evidence, there are *two* people each of whom has a different rationally mandated response given that piece of evidence.

Fifth, when we bear in mind the limitations and liabilities of non-ideal human experts, it just seems wrong to suppose that, except in very special cases, the discovery that another disagrees with one provides both of you with reason to converge on a single intermediate state of belief or degree of credence. In the general case, we both know that we have had very different histories, and that, no matter how hard we try, we can neither share the evidence nor track the prior belief states that led us to our present views. Moreover, given that the goal of belief is to track the truth, we must take account of the fact—cf. Genest and Zidek (1986) and Shogenji (2007)—that there is no method open to us for aggregating our beliefs that we have reason to believe will increase the probability that we have true beliefs (though, of course, if we are prepared to be sceptical, there is a way in which we can avoid having false all-or-nothing beliefs by refraining entirely from all-or-nothing belief). In matters—such as the question of the existence of God—where expert credences are distributed everywhere from *zero* to *one*, there just is nothing that recommends any particular revision of the credence of any given expert in the light of the credences of all of the other experts.

Sixth, none of the above is intended to deny the more or less equally evident truth that there are special cases in which expert disagreement does provide people with reason to amend their beliefs. In particular, in cases where (a) beliefs depend fairly directly on relatively encapsulated cognitive skills, and (b) it can readily be common knowledge that people are more or less equally competent with respect to the encapsulated skills, and (c) it can also readily be common knowledge that people

sometimes go wrong with respect to the encapsulated skills, it can be quite easy to see that expert disagreement can give people reason to moderate their credences. (See cases in Christensen (2005), Elga (2007), Frances (forthcoming), Kelly (2005) (2009), and Lackey (2009a) (2009b).) However, it is just a mistake to suppose that there is an interesting inference from these kinds of cases to the kind of case in which we are primarily interested here.

While the matters raised here can be given a more extended discussion—see, for example, Oppy (forthcoming)—I think that it is fairly plausible to suppose that a natural and correct view about the nature of expert disagreement sits comfortably with the claims that I have made about the nature of, and prospects for, arguments about the existence of God. Rosen is right that it is intuitive to suppose that experts can agree to disagree in the kind of case in which we are primarily interested; and there is nothing in the recent literature in the epistemology of disagreement that gives us reason to resile from his view.

12. Objection: No Opposing Experts

The argument of the paper to this point has taken it for granted that there are *both* philosophically sophisticated Christian theists and philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists: i.e. that there are experts on both sides of the debate about the existence of God who are intelligent, well-informed, reflective, well-intentioned and philosophically sophisticated. However, there are many people on both sides of the dispute who will wish to contest this assumption, i.e. there are many people who suppose that there is no one on the other side of the dispute who is intelligent, well-informed, reflective, well-intentioned and philosophically sophisticated.

There are many ways in which my assumption can be contested. Some suppose that there isn't really anyone at all on the other side of the dispute: sure, there are people who *say* that they believe that *p*, but they don't *really* mean it. Others suppose that, while there are others on the other side of the dispute, there aren't any experts on that other side: those who profess to hold the competing opinion are not intelligent, or not well-informed, or not reflective, or not well-intentioned, or not philosophically sophisticated, or some or all of these things at once.

Now, of course, in a dispute of this kind, you can always find people on the other side of the dispute who are not intelligent, or not well-informed, or not reflective, or not well-intentioned, or not philosophically sophisticated, or some or all of these things at once; and it is not all that implausible that you can find some people on the other side of the dispute who don't really believe what they profess to believe. But it seems to me that it is not really credible to suppose that *everyone* on the other side of the dispute is not intelligent, or not well-informed, or not reflective, or not well-intentioned, or not philosophically sophisticated, or some or all of these things at once; and nor is it credible to suppose that everyone on the other side of the dispute fails to believe what they profess to believe. In some cases, this does not need argument: there is simply no denying that there are people on both sides of the dispute who are intelligent, reflective, well-intentioned and philosophically sophisticated. In other cases, perhaps there is room for some more argumentation (though not, I think, very much room).

In particular, some people will undoubtedly say that there are people on the other side of the dispute who are not well-informed. One thing that might be meant by this, I guess, is that there are people on the other side of the dispute who hold *false* beliefs. But, clearly, that claim is of no current interest: it is a platitude that there can be misleading evidence, and so it is a platitude that there can be reasonable false belief. In consequence, there is no justified inference from the mere falsity of the beliefs of another to the unreasonableness or irrationality of those beliefs. However, once we set this false start aside, it seems clear that it would be a very hard saying to insist that there are not well-informed experts on both sides of the debate about the existence of God. After all, it cannot be disputed that there are intelligent, reflective, well-intentioned and philosophically sophisticated people on both sides of the debate who have devoted their lives to the study of questions about the existence of God, and who have acquainted themselves with as much relevant material as it is possible for people to do: on what grounds could it be reasonably maintained that, among these people, only those on one or other side of the debate are well-informed?

Perhaps it might be said: even conceding everything that you've said to this point, it remains true that only those on one side of the dispute can truly have *insight*, or a *righteous inner glow*, or the like. But then, if *real* or *genuine* expertise can only be possessed by those with proper insight or an appropriate righteous inner glow, it can still be true that there are only experts on one side of the dispute.

There are two kinds of things to say in response to this sort of suggestion. *First*, there is good reason to be suspicious about claims to insight and righteous inner glows when there is no evidence or argument to back those claims. Once we have overcome the temptation to think that we *need* to appeal to insight or righteous inner glow in order to justify expert maintenance of belief in the face of expert disagreement, it seems to me that we have simply lost any motivation to postulate such things. An expert can think: "I've done as well as any person can do in coming to my view; that's enough to justify my maintaining my view even though other people who have done just as well as any person can do have come to contrary views. In particular, I don't need further to suppose, in order to justify my continuing to hold my views, that I have some insight or righteous inner glow that the others all lack." (Compare with van Inwagen (1995), who feels compelled to self-attribute a special insight that those who disagree with him lack.)

Second, even if it is supposed that there is unequal distribution of insight and righteous inner glow, this supposition won't touch the main contentions of this paper. For, when we supposed that the view about argument that I have been developing has important consequences for views about rational disagreement, we in effect took it for granted that considerations about insight and righteous inner glow are properly ignored. Given that insight and righteous inner glow are simply beyond the range of argument, it follows that they also fall beyond the bounds of reasonable or rational disagreement, in the sense of the earlier inquiry that I pursued. In particular, it is worth recalling here my earlier claim that, if one reasonably believes that someone else is not reasonable or rational in his beliefs, even though that one is intelligent, well-informed, reflective, well-intentioned and philosophically sophisticated, then there must be some argument that one has in one's possession that lays bare the unreasonableness or irrationality of that other's beliefs. Supposing that one has insight or a righteous inner glow does not constitute possession of an appropriate argument.

While there is doubtless more that could be said on the present topic, it does seem to me that experience very strongly supports the view that there are *both* philosophically sophisticated Christian theists and philosophically sophisticated contemporary naturalists: to say otherwise is simply to deny the obvious.

13. Objection: Self-Defeat

A third objection that I shall consider is that there may be some way in which the position that I have been defending in this paper is self-defeating. In particular, it might be thought that I have been arguing for the view that there are no successful arguments about the existence of God: yet, surely, if my argument succeeds, then it counts as a successful argument about the existence of God. So isn't it right to draw the conclusion that my position is self-defeating?

No. There are at least two reasons why this objection fails. *First*, it is important to recall the account of arguments that was introduced above. Throughout my discussion, I have supposed that an 'argument' is a set of sentences, one of which is distinguished as the conclusion of the argument, and the remainder of which are the premises of the argument. I claim that, given *this* sense of 'argument', there is no successful argument about—i.e. for or against—the existence of God. While it is true that there is a sense of 'argue' in which what I have done in this paper is to argue for the conclusion that there is no successful argument about the existence of God, I have certainly not attempted to show, say, that this claim follows uncontroversially from claims that are themselves uncontroversial. Much of philosophy is 'argument' in a sense that does not conform to the notion of argumentation that has been operative throughout the above discussion: most philosophical discussion is far more a matter of assertion, and much less a matter of demonstrating inconsistency or incoherence amongst collections of claims.

Second, even if what I have done does amount to the provision of an argument—in the sense that I have adopted for the purposes of the preceding discussion—for the conclusion that there is no successful argument about the existence of God, it seems that it would just be a confusion to suppose that I think that that argument constitutes a successful argument about the existence of God. An argument about the existence of God has as its conclusion either the claim that God exists or the claim that God does not exist. But, if I have provided an argument, then that argument has as its conclusion that there is no successful argument about the existence of God—and so it is not itself an argument about the existence of God.

I suppose that there might be some other way in which it could be claimed that the position that I have argued for in this paper is self-defeating; however, I cannot imagine how such a claim might be defended. More cautiously: if there is some way in which the position that I have defended in this paper is self-defeating, it has certainly not yet been shown that this is so. Doubtless there is much more to be said to fill out the epistemology that is implicit in some of the claims that I have made—but I see no reason at all for supposing that the implicit epistemology is self-defeating. (For some discussion of the kind of epistemology that I am inclined to favour, see the discussion in the first and last chapters of Oppy (2006).)

14. Objection: Proves too much!

A final objection that I anticipate to the case developed in this paper is that it proves too much. After all, there is very little in my paper that bears specifically on the prospects for successful arguments about the existence of God. At the very least, it seems that a similar line could be given in a vast range of cases in which there is substantial disagreement between intelligent, reflective, well-informed, well-intentioned and philosophically sophisticated people. To begin with, it seems that something similar might be said about any instance of perennial philosophical disagreement: do I really want to say that it is highly likely that there are no successful arguments awaiting discovery in any cases in which there is perennial—or, at any rate, deep and widespread—disagreement amongst intelligent, reflective, well-informed, well-intentioned and philosophically sophisticated people about significant philosophical claims? Moreover, it seems that something similar might be said about many instances of disagreement beyond the bounds of philosophy: do I also want to say that it is highly likely that there are no successful arguments awaiting discovery in cases in which there is perennial—or, at any rate, deep and widespread—disagreement amongst intelligent, reflective, well-informed, well-intentioned and appropriately sophisticated people concerning politics, art, sexual mores, and so forth?

Well, yes! If it is true that there is disagreement about a given claim amongst intelligent, reflective, well-informed, well-intentioned and appropriately sophisticated people that spans the full range of credence—from zero to one—and if it is also true that there has already been investment of an immense amount of effort by many talented and motivated investigators in searching for successful arguments that would dissolve the disagreement about that claim, then, it seems to me, we do have good reason for holding: first, that there are no extant successful arguments concerning the claim; and second, that it is pretty likely that there are no accessible successful arguments concerning the claim. But, if I'm right about this, then, of course, it isn't true that the argument of this paper proves too much.

Periodically, people have announced that it is a scandal of philosophy that philosophers cannot be brought to agreement on central philosophical claims; and, often enough, the people who air this complaint have made radical proposals that would dramatically alter the nature of philosophical inquiry—think: Kant, the Logical Positivists, Ordinary Language philosophers, and so forth. Although I can't argue properly for this claim here, it seems to me that imputations of scandal are utterly premature: there is no reason to suppose that the unavailability of arguments—and evidence—that would resolve perennial philosophical disputes shows that there is something wrong with the conduct of those who engage in investigations of perennial philosophical concerns. On the contrary: when one takes proper account of human cognitive limitations and the drive towards truth, it is not implausible to suppose that the persistence of perennial philosophical dispute is a more-or-less inevitable and not unwelcome outcome. Or so I am tempted to suppose.

15. Conclusion

In this paper, I have set out reasons for thinking that there are no successful arguments for or against the existence of God. The case has two main components. On the one

hand, the persistence of disagreement between experts is compelling evidence that we do not have successful arguments. On the other hand, careful analysis of extant arguments bears out the claim that they are not successful. Of course, this case is consistent with the claim that there are successful arguments that have not yet been discovered. The persistence of disagreement—and the failure to find successful arguments—despite the amount of effort that has already been invested by so many talented and motivated investigators is at least *some* reason to suppose that this state of affairs is likely to persist. But it should certainly be conceded that the case that there are no extant successful arguments about the existence of God is rather stronger than the case that there are no successful arguments about the existence of God that remain awaiting discovery. I am sceptical about the prospects for discovery of such arguments—but I have not done much to explore the grounds of my pessimistic induction here. I think that there is more that can be said on behalf of this scepticism—adverting, in particular, to (a) the central location that beliefs about the existence of God typically have in people’s webs of belief, and (b) the ways in which centrally located beliefs are properly not very responsive to pressures to revise—but further exploration of these matters will need to wait for another day.

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