LAYMAN'S LAPSE:
ON AN INCOMPLETE MORAL ARGUMENT FOR THEISM

Richard Brian Davis and W. Paul Franks

Abstract: C. Stephen Layman contends that an argument supporting theism over naturalism can be constructed based on three defensible, non–question-begging premises about the moral order. Previous critics of Layman's argument have challenged the truth of these premises. We stipulate them *arguendo* but go on to show that there is a deeper problem: a *fourth* premise introduced to complete the argument—the "completion premise," as we call it—is true only if we assume that God exists (begging the question about naturalism) or we concede that there is no afterlife (contrary to theism). We close with suggestions for how Layman's argument must be strengthened to meet with dialectical success.

According to C. Stephen Layman, although skepticism about the viability of moral arguments is "widespread among philosophers," there are nevertheless three defensible theses about the moral order that "do not beg the question of God's existence, and . . . they support theism over naturalism."[1] Previous critics have challenged the truth of Layman's premises; we stipulate them *arguendo*.[2] We go on to argue, however, that even if Layman's moral triad begs no questions, it still fails to deliver theism. The Achilles' heel of the argument lies elsewhere—with a *fourth* premise added by Layman *ex post facto* to complete the argument: the "completion premise," as we call it.

The purpose of this article is to show that Layman faces a fatal dilemma: either his "completion premise" is true only if there is a god (which begs the question against the naturalist), or he must assume (contrary to theism) that there is no afterlife in which "the long-term best interests of the morally virtuous are realized." We conclude with some specific

Richard Brian Davis and W. Paul Franks, Tyndale University College

comments on what Layman must do to complete his argument.

1. THEISM'S THREE PILLARS

Layman states his three moral theses as follows:[4]

1. In every actual case, one has most reason to do what is morally required.
2. If there is no God and no life after death, then there are cases in which morality requires that one make a great sacrifice that confers relatively modest benefits (or prevents relatively modest harms).
3. If in a given case one must make a great sacrifice in order to do what is morally required but the sacrifice confers relatively modest benefits (or prevents relatively modest harms), then one does not have most reason to do what is morally required.

Before demonstrating how these moral theses are deployed, it will be helpful to first consider Layman's defense of them. In support of 1, Layman asks us to "consider an actual case in which someone has performed an action that you initially find quite puzzling or odd. Then imagine that you become convinced the person was doing his or her moral duty. The act was morally required. Would you not assume that the action was fully justified on this basis?"[5]

Take, for example, Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. One evening, Valjean abandons his post as mayor and leaves behind a prosperous life. To the townspeople, this would have seemed rather "puzzling or odd." However, upon learning that he did so to prevent an innocent man from being wrongly convicted of recidivism, his action is no longer puzzling. Despite his reasons for remaining silent, Valjean had the most reason to turn himself in. Furthermore, if we reject 1, then nonmoral reasons for some action can override the relevant moral reasons. In such cases, doing what is moral would be irrational because it would involve "acting on inferior reasons."[6] But this, Layman presumes, is not a consequence that many readers will find acceptable.

What of 2 then? Layman aims to provide "intuitive support" for this proposition via a thought experiment. Ms. Poore, we are told, lives in "grinding poverty" and has only the bare necessities. An opportunity arises that affords her the ability to steal a large sum of money that will eliminate such stark conditions. Moreover, she knows the person to whom the money belongs is very rich and will only be minimally harmed. She's also aware of the fact that her chances of being caught are very low, while the chances of her continuing to live in these conditions if she doesn't steal the money are fairly high.

Now according to Layman, it would be morally wrong for her to steal the money, but "assuming there is no God and no life after death, failing to steal the money will likely deny her a large measure of personal fulfillment."[7] That is, if there is no God or life after death, then her long-term

best interests would not be served by her refraining from stealing the money. In Ms. Poore's case, acting morally demands a very great sacrifice that confers very little, if any, benefit. This scenario, along with the subsidiary principle—"It is always and necessarily prudent to act so as to promote one's long-term best interests"[8]—is said to provide support for 3. And with the principle in place, it is easy to see Layman's rationale for 3. Given that there is no God and no afterlife, and that acting morally confers relatively modest benefits, Ms. Poore's long-term best interests are served by stealing the money. That is, she does not have the most reason to do what is morally required.

Here it is perhaps worth noting that these theses, if true, would also substantially influence the growing debate over whether God's existence makes any axiological difference to the world. In a rather straightforward way, Layman's argument could be employed to support what has come to be called "pro-theism": the view that one should want God to exist (rather than not) because of the value his existence adds to a world.[9] Assuming that worlds including reasons sufficient for acting morally are more valuable than those without such reasons, it seems that even nontheists should want it to be the case that there is a god and life after death. This is because (in Layman's way of thinking) that is the only way we could have reasons to act morally.

How, then, does Layman's moral triad underwrite God's existence? What we have, he says, are "three premises, each of which is plausible on reflection and none of which begs the question of God's existence."[10] For argument's sake, suppose we agree. What follows? In particular, how does it follow that God exists if we at once accept 1–3? Well, as Layman notes, 2 and 3 together entail:

4. If there is no God and no life after death, then in some cases one does not have the most reason to do what is morally required.

And 1 and 4, by a familiar rule, jointly imply:

5. "There is no God and no life after death" is false, i.e., either God exists or there is life after death.[11]

That certainly seems right. But given that Layman's stated aim is to show that the conjunction of his three theses "provide[s] support for theism over naturalism" and "increases the probability of theism," we cannot say that 5 meets the mark. What it provides, at best, is support for "theism or there being life after death" over naturalism. That is, what is shown to be more probable here is not theism but instead "theism or life after death." So we are not yet in possession of a moral argument for theism, since there is a potential escape route here for the nontheist. To his credit, Layman recognizes this. He writes: "(5) could be true even if God does not exist; for it may be that there is no God but there is a life after death in which the best interests of the morally virtuous are realized."[12] In other words, since 5 is true provided that at least one of its disjuncts is, a nontheist could actually accept 1–3 but then opt for some version of life after death while still reject-

ing God's existence. Thus J. M. E. McTaggart: "Now there is a very common idea that an atheist must either be a materialist or a sceptic, and, therefore, that it is unreasonable for him to believe in immortality. But this, like many other common ideas, is erroneous."[13]

Leaving things as they are at step 5, what we have, at most, is an *incomplete* theistic moral argument—nothing like a clear and present danger to the savvy naturalist.

2. Strengthening What Remains

How does Layman propose to complete the argument, and remedy this dialectical deficiency? In short, by introducing as an additional premise

> 6. It is likely that if there is a life after death in which the long-term best interests of the morally virtuous are realized, then God exists.

His claim is this: "if it [i.e., (6)] is conjoined with premises (1) through (3), we have an argument that lends positive support to theism."[14] What this means, we take it, is that there is a deductively valid argument proceeding from 1, 2, 3, and 6 and terminating in the conclusion that God exists.[15]

Now our first problem is to get clear about this argument. How does it go? Unfortunately, Layman doesn't make it explicit, and so the argument must be reconstructed. We should begin by noting a small problem. The proposition "God exists" can't be directly deduced from 6 together with 1–3 *just as things stand*. 6 makes use of the operator "it is likely that," prefixing it to a conditional. But none of 1–3 is stated in terms of what's likely to be the case or not. This suggests that what Layman really wants to assert is that

> 6a. "If there is a life after death in which the long-term best interests of the morally virtuous are realized, then God exists"

is likely to be true. So far, then, so good.

A second difficulty: 6a introduces a concept not (explicitly) present in 1–3—or even 4 or 5 for that matter: *realizing the long-term best interests of the morally virtuous*. Layman doesn't tell us what the logical connection is between *this* concept and those in the premises, which presents an initial hurdle. More than that, the presence of this concept in 6a actually obstructs the sought-after deduction. Notice, first, that the antecedent of 6a is really the conjunction of two claims, so that 6a can be more perspicuously rendered as:

> 6b. "If (there is a life after death and that post-death life is where the long-term best interests of the morally virtuous are realized), then God exists."

The problem is: from 6b, along with Layman's moral triad 1–3, we cannot deduce the proposition "God exists." That inference is invalid. Fortunately, however, it turns out that if we remove the right-conjunct in 6b's antecedent—a conjunct whose entry into the argument was somewhat peremptory anyway—we do get a "completion premise," namely,

6c. If there is a life after death, then God exists."

And 6c serves very nicely to complete Layman's moral proof. Since the validity of the inferences from 1–3 to 5 are transparent, here we need only ask whether God's existence follows from 5 and 6c. It's not hard to see that it does.

5. Either God exists or there is life after death (from 1–3).
7. If God does not exist, then there is life after death (from 5 by implication).
8. If God does not exist, then God exists (from 6c and 7 by hypothetical syllogism).
9. Either God exists or God exists (from 8 by implication).
10. God exists (from 9 by tautology).

This argument is clearly valid. And since we intend to grant the truth of 1–3, only the acceptability of 6c remains to be examined. Here we reach the heart of Layman's argument, but also, we're afraid, the heart of the difficulties.

3. *FAIT ACCOMPLI*?

Now, 6c is not an obvious truth (there are plenty who would deny it), and so it is incumbent upon Layman to argue for it. That he accepts this onus is evident from the fact that he speaks of "defending" it—or, at any rate, its ancestor 6: "In defending (6), I shall rely on two assumptions. First, I shall assume that there is no life after death given naturalism. Second, I shall assume that the two best theories of the afterlife centrally involve either theism or reincarnation."[16] Layman goes on to argue that the complexity and goal-directedness of post-death karmic laws justify an "appeal to divine intelligence"[17] and provide "good evidence of an Intelligent and Moral Designer."[18] Accordingly, "the moral order postulated by nontheistic reincarnation provides evidence for theism."[19] The details here needn't concern us. The important thing to see is that the entire discussion at this point is gratuitous. For given Layman's first assumption, together with his definition of "theism," the "completion premise" turns out to be a mere *trivial truth*: true solely by virtue of the meanings of terms. Unfortunately, securing 6c in this way is costly. Let's briefly look into the matter.

3.1 DEFINITION DIFFICULTIES

Layman's first assumption is that "there is no life after death given naturalism." This is to assert:

AP$_1$ If naturalism is true, then there is no life after death.

This proposition is a necessary truth given Layman's definition of "naturalism," which he states as follows: "By 'naturalism' I mean roughly the view that (a) whatever exists is material or dependent (causally or by

supervenience) on material things and (b) material things are entirely governed by natural laws. There is no God according to the naturalist and no life after death. When we die, our bodies decay, and we cease to exist."[20]

Here the idea is that (a) and (b) *constitute* naturalism; God's nonexistence and there being no afterlife are naturalism's *corollaries*. Since Layman casts his argument in terms of the advantages enjoyed by theism over naturalism, we should also take note of what he takes theism to be. "By 'theism,'" he says, "I mean simply the view that God exists."[21] That definition is simple enough, and permits us to assert:

DT If theism is true, then God exists.

Furthermore, since we're dealing with only two views here, we know that either theism or naturalism correctly explains Layman's moral triad. Suppose, first, that it's naturalism that is true. By AP$_1$, it follows that there is no afterlife. But if so, our "completion premise" 6c has a false antecedent, in which case given the standard treatment of material implication, 6c expresses a true conditional.

Now let's suppose, on the other hand, that theism is true. Then, given DT, it immediately follows that God does exist. And if so, 6c has a true consequent, so that (once again) it expresses a true conditional (at least that's what the truth table for the material conditional tells us). In other words, 6c is true *no matter what*. If naturalism is true, it's true; if theism is true, it's true. In fact, then, it's a purely trivial truth just given what Layman means by the terms *theism* and *naturalism*. Thus, 6c is knowable (and indeed known) *a priori* entirely apart from *a posteriori* argument or evidence.

But then the question at once arises: What could be the point of Layman's second assumption and the attending moral-design argument? As Layman sketches it, the argument is clearly probabilistic. The complexity of karmic laws "can hardly be accepted as a brute fact." It requires an explanation. Further, "*[h]ighly complex order serving a moral end*,"[22] legitimates an "appeal to an intelligent cause" and thus "lends support to theism."[23] What we have, then, is God posited as the best explanation for certain facts about the karmic order. And that's fair enough. The point, however, is that (at best) this mode of reasoning gives one a probable conclusion. Employed in the service of 6c, it establishes only that 6c is probable or likely. (No doubt this explains Layman's "It is likely" *hedge* in his original 6.)

At any rate, it's apparent that this entire dialectical apparatus is superfluous. For given Layman's starting definitions, we know up front and *a priori* that 6c is true. It is, in fact, a close relative to one of A. J. Ayer's analytic truths: true solely by virtue of how we have decided to define our terms.[24] In that sense, the "completion premise" is a trivial necessity. To rely on Layman's second assumption (and argument) to support 6c is therefore really quite peculiar. It's rather like opting to show that $2 + 2 = 4$ by counting sticks when one has Leibniz's (or better yet Frege's) deductive proof on

hand—complete with its self-evident definitions.

3.2 Dialectical Dilemma

Obviously, then, Layman is committed to the truth of 6c: it's trivially true, and without it his argument won't finish. However, because the completion premise depends solely on how Layman has defined "theism" and "naturalism," it's hard to see how his argument really supports theism. Even worse, whatever support (if any) it might provide comes at a price. But the price is not right; it involves Layman's begging the question against the naturalist. To be sure, he attempts to avoid this—even declaring that we "can grant the possibility that God doesn't exist *for the sake of the argument*."[25] This is far from clear. For suppose that "God exists" G is false. In that case, Layman cannot say that "There is a life after death" L is true. Not only would that undercut his moral design argument, it would render 6c false, since it would then possess a true antecedent and false consequent.

Accordingly, to preserve the truth of 6c, a proponent of the argument will be forced to maintain that L is false if G is. But that seems peculiar *in excelsis*. If L is false—that is, if there is no life after death—then there is no post-death period of existence in which the long-term best interests of the morally virtuous can be actualized. But of course that is just what Layman's naturalist has said all along: if naturalism is true, there is no life after death. Whence, then, the "theoretical advantage"[26] of theism over naturalism?

So, in this case at least, holding that G is false leads to grief. Is holding that G is true any better? Not if begging the question is an epistemic vice. For it goes without saying that if you have to assume that God exists to get your "completion premise" off the ground, there isn't the slightest hope it's ever going to launch, since *that* assumption is precisely the conclusion of your argument. As Layman himself concedes: "Since I am arguing for God's existence, it would hardly be dialogically appropriate for me to begin by assuming that God cannot fail to exist."[27] It is no less inappropriate, one thinks, to begin by assuming that although God could fail to exist, he doesn't.[28]

The situation, then, is roughly as follows. Given AP_1 and DT, the "completion premise" is a trivial truth; and if so, the karmic complexity argument supporting it is pointless and unnecessary. But surely it isn't; that Layman offers it *at all* is evidence of that fact. This suggests that, for Layman, 6c expresses a *non*trivial truth, in which case he is obliged to give up either AP_1 or DT. Of course, there's no giving up DT—not unless he is prepared to say that God's nonexistence is compatible with theism. So that leaves AP_1. The fact of the matter is: that has to go if Layman wants to disentangle himself from the dialectical snares mentioned above.

4. The Task For Layman

It is important to keep in mind that jettisoning AP_1 does not require giving up naturalism *in toto*. In fact, while it is defined quite specifically, naturalism

actually appears in two very different guises in the argument. The first of these is what we might call "wide-scope naturalism" (WSN)—the thesis that everything whatsoever is material. It is WSN that requires AP_1 and is rendered false if 5 is true. However, as Plantinga notes, although many naturalists are materialists, "it isn't just obvious that naturalism implies materialism"[29]; thus Layman recognizes, rightly, that one could reject G while embracing L. Those who do, like McTaggart, appear to be committed to a more restricted metaphysical thesis: "narrow(er)-scope naturalism" (NSN), which rejects God's existence but denies that *absolutely* everything is material.[30] It is this latter version of naturalism Layman has in his sights as he defends the truth of 6. (Of course, as we said earlier, it's not 6 that's needed to complete the proof; it's 6c. But let that pass.)

Now because one committed to NSN is no closer to theism than those committed to WSN, Layman's moral argument must rule out both to positively support theism. How, precisely, might it do that? The most promising way forward, perhaps, would be to argue that all nontheistic conceptions of the afterlife are unsatisfactory. This would nicely complete the argument, since then the naturalist couldn't then fall back on NSN. The problem: Layman's moral design argument only gives us reasons for thinking that karmic accounts of reincarnation reduce to theism; he doesn't even begin to consider accounts of the afterlife, like McTaggart's, that are neither theistic nor karmic.[31] But it is precisely these accounts that the recalcitrant naturalist is likely to reach for if pressed with the likes of 5.[32] The point here is not to defend McTaggart but simply to point out that nothing Layman has said undercuts such a view.

The problem here goes deeper than the mere conceptual possibility of a McTaggart afterlife. Confronted with the truth of 5, a savvy naturalist will no doubt reason that one's rational obligation is to accept NSN and not theism. After all, NSN requires the naturalist to take only L on board, whereas theism requires that both G *and* L be adopted[33]; as we all learned at our mother's knee, conjunctions are less probable than their conjuncts.

A naturalist who opts for NSN here isn't thereby committed to giving an account of what life after death would be like; he or she can remain mostly agnostic about its details. Nonetheless, he or she might contend that, *for all we know*, in a McTaggart-style, non-karmic afterlife one's best interests are realized—perhaps in the same way that they are in this life. Until Layman decisively eliminates this possibility, he's left with an incompletely supported "completion premise," in which case it cannot be said that he's furnished positive support for theism. As theists we would, of course, be only too pleased to see Layman bring this novel moral argument to completion. We're not saying it can't be done. At this point, however, the scale of the philosophical work required to do so strikes us as a rather tall and daunting order.

NOTES

1. C. Stephen Layman, "God and the Moral Order," *Faith and Philosophy* 19 (2002):

304; reprinted in *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 258–66. Layman has defended his argument against objections in "God and the Moral Order: Replies to Objections," *Faith and Philosophy* 23 (2006): 209–12; and "A Moral Argument for the Existence of God," in *Is Goodness without God Good Enough?: A Debate on Faith, Secularism, and Ethics*, edited by Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 49–65.

2. See, for example, Peter Byrne, "God and the Moral Order: A Reply to Layman," *Faith and Philosophy* 23 (2006): 201.

3. Layman, "God and the Moral Order," 313.

4. Ibid., 304.

5. Ibid., 306.

6. Ibid., 306–07.

7. Ibid., 307.

8. Ibid., 308.

9. For more on pro-theism and anti-theism, see Guy Kahane, "Should We Want God to Exist?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 82 (2011): 674–96; Klaas Kraay and Chris Dragos, "On Preferring God's Non-existence," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 43 (2013): 157–78; and Morgan Luck and Nathan Ellerby, "Should We Want God to Not Exist?" *Philo* 15 (2012): 193–99. On the connection between questions about God's existence and questions about the *value of* God's existence, see T. J. Mawson, "On Determining How Important It Is Whether or Not There is a God," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4 (2012): 95–105.

10. Ibid., "God and the Moral Order," 309.

11. The right disjunct in Layman's original 5 includes the suffix "(or both)." We have dropped this in the interests of economy. Nothing in Layman's argument turns on this point.

12. Ibid., 313.

13. J. M. E. McTaggart, *Some Dogmas of Religion* (London: Edward Arnold, 1906), 279.

14. Layman, "God and the Moral Order," 313.

15. Objection: "You represent Layman's argument—subsequent to step 5—as proceeding *deductively* to its conclusion. But is that really clear? Perhaps the final stages of the argument are *nondeductive*. After all, he does talk in terms of likelihoods and best explanations when he introduces 6—the premise to complete his argument."

Reply: as we note below, the final *premise* of Layman's argument is indeed supported probabilistically. It doesn't follow, however, that the final *stages* of the argument are nondeductive or probabilistic. For instance, Layman speaks of *conjoining* his "completion premise" to 1–3, resulting in an argument "that lends positive support to theism" ("God and the Moral Order," 313). But *that* conjunction, given what Layman says, doesn't even probabilistically imply that God exists. By contrast, if we read the "completion premise" along the lines of 6c—see below—we charitably represent Layman as having presented a perfectly valid deductive argument, along with a valiant attempt to undergird its key premise with nondeductive considerations.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 314.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 305.

21. Ibid., 304.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. See A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Penguin Books, 1936), 73.

25. Layman, "God and the Moral Order," 313.

26. Ibid., 304.

27. Ibid., 312–13.

28. Objection: "Your criticism would render any *modus ponens* argument—'If P then Q; P; therefore, *Q*'—either question begging or unsound. For consider the conditional 'If P then Q.' If we say this premise is true because Q is true, then we beg the question, since Q is our conclusion. On the other hand, if we say that it's true because Q is false, then P

must also be false; otherwise, our conditional won't come out true. But in that case our second premise, P, would come out false, thereby rendering the whole argument unsound."

Reply: this is an *epistemic* matter, not a logical one. To be sure, a conditional is true just if either its consequent is true or its antecedent false. It doesn't follow, however, that the way to *show* a conditional is true is (say) by showing it has a false antecedent. That does sometimes lead to grief. Instead, to beg no questions and undermine no premises, one attempts to forge a logical connection between antecedent and consequent *without appealing to their truth values*. The problem in Layman's case is that he says quite plainly that he will "rely on" AP_1 in "defending" the truth of the conditional *If there is a life after death, then God exists*. That is, he is relying on the fact that (on naturalism) the "completion premise" is true *because* it has a false antecedent.

29. See his "Against Naturalism," in Alvin Plantinga and Michael Tooley, *Knowledge of God* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 51.

30. As Plantinga observes, metaphysical naturalism "comes in several varieties," some of which might conceivably "endorse Leibnizian monads, or immaterial thinkers." See Alvin Plantinga, "Naturalism, Theism, Obligation, and Supervenience," *Faith and Philosophy* 27 (2010): 250–51. Layman himself concedes that an atheist could embrace moral Platonism, holding that moral truths are abstract objects—with some being "necessary (whether or not God exists)" ("A Moral Argument for the Existence of God," 51). But then surely there is room in NSN for a McTaggart afterlife as well.

31. This failure is likely due to Layman's overlooking the distinction between WSN and NSN. When he assumes that "there is no life after death given naturalism" (313), that assumption only relates to WSN, whereas 6c is introduced to rule out NSN. With regard to this more restricted naturalism, it's not at all clear that Layman can help himself to that same assumption.

32. In fact, McTaggart goes even further arguing that "far from the existence of God rendering my immortality more probable, it seems to me that it makes it less so" (*Some Dogmas of Religion*, 277).

33. In this case, accepting G while rejecting L is not an option because even if G is true, if L is not also true, then the "long-term best interests of the morally virtuous" would still not be realized.

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