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Nontraditional arguments for theism

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Abstract

I propose a taxonomy of arguments for the existence of God and survey those categories of arguments I identify as nontraditional. I conclude with two general observations about theistic arguments, followed by suggestions for going forward.

INTRODUCTION

Arguments for theism have played a central role in the drama of philosophy. It wasn't until the 20th century that they were demoted from center stage to the peripheral role they now have. Their descent into philosophical ignobility has been made complete by contemporary introductory texts and courses that present them in caricatured form as dismissible curiosities, Aquinas by Russell, Anselm by Guanilo, Leibniz by Hume, Paley by Darwin, and so on. The fact is, however, arguments for theism have proven tremendously durable. Further, they seem to have a fractal-like property of generating indefinitely many iterations, making talk of "the" cosmological argument, for instance, almost meaningless.

There has also been growing interest in theistic arguments that, worse than being caricatured, are often ignored or altogether unknown, as indicated by the recent publication of the conference proceedings on Alvin Plantinga's infamous lecture "Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments" (Walls & Dougherty, 2018). In this article, I provide an overview of theistic arguments¹ that cannot neatly be considered variants of traditional arguments, which I group into seven categories:

- I. Cosmological
- II. Ontological
- III. Design
- IV. Moral
- V. Miracles
- VI. Pragmatic
- VII. Experiential

The arguments included in the first three categories should be familiar enough. I include in category (IV) arguments from objective moral facts, obligations, and duties; human dignity and worth; altruism; and arguments from evil and the nature of justice. Included in (V) are arguments from testimony to the miraculous, historical, and contemporary. Category (VI) includes wager-style arguments and (VII) arguments from religious experience and personal transformation. I group nontraditional theistic arguments into seven additional categories:

- I. Metaphysical
- II. Nomological
- III. Axiological
- IV. Noological
- V. Linguistic
- VI. Anthropological
- VII. Meta-argument

Each category is based on thematic commonality or family resemblance rather than strict criteria, so some arbitrariness and overlap are inevitable. Nevertheless, I think the proposed taxonomy imposes a sufficiently accurate and meaningful order on the vast literature of theistic arguments. “Nontraditional,” furthermore, should not be taken to imply “novel.” Some arguments are novel, to be sure, but others have quite the historical pedigree. That said, this review is limited to the analytic tradition with a contemporary emphasis.² As a final preliminary note, not included are arguments against naturalism *tout court*. Tacking on the proviso “given that theism and naturalism are the only live options ...” would expand the terrain beyond what can be traversed here.³

1 | METAPHYSICAL ARGUMENTS

The widest ranging category of nontraditional arguments take their cue from certain metaphysical entities and facts. I'll mention seven.

Abstracta generally. Properties, propositions, numbers, sets, logical laws, etc., generally referred to as abstract objects, have long been appealed to in arguments for theism, from Augustine to Leibniz (on the latter, see Adams, 1983, 1994). In what he calls “the Augustinian proof,” Feser (2017) deduces theism by eliminating the only other realist accounts of *abstracta*, Platonism, and scholastic realism. Among other problems, Platonism renders *abstracta* denizens of some epistemically inaccessible realm distinct from the mental and physical, and Scholastic realism cannot account for their necessity or infinitude. Theism avoids precisely these difficulties by locating them in the infinite intellect of a necessary being. A bit more modestly, E.J. Lowe (2013) argues that God is the best explanation of their existence. Because “objects of reason,” as Lowe calls them, are nonphysical, infinite in number, and exist necessarily, they cannot be explained by anything finite, physical, or contingent. Whatever the naturalist's putative explanation of them (if one is ventured at all), it will not be as good as the theist's, who has in God a nonphysical, necessary being of infinite rational intellect.

Sets. Menzel (2018) argues that the existence and nature of sets is confirmatory evidence for the existence of an infinite intellect. A realist about sets cannot explain why, given sets' collective iterative structure (i.e., that larger sets are formed from smaller ones, which eventually bottom out in *urelements*), the set-theoretic hierarchy is only as “high” as it is. Why can't we continue to construct more out of sets already there? In response, some philosophers suggest that the structure of the set-theoretic hierarchy reflects only what sets *could* exist were their members to exist, and so, necessarily, sets are contingent. But if what sets there are is just a contingent fact, then realism can't explain why there are exactly *those* sets in the hierarchy when there could have been others, or none at all. This is explained, however, if sets are what an intellect freely chooses to collect. But there are just too many sets with too many members for them to be the mental collections of anything but an infinite intellect.⁴

Propositions. In addition to being necessary and infinite in number, propositions seem to actually be distinctively mental in character, making it especially easy to liken them to divine thoughts. Something of a modern classic here is Quentin Smith (1994), where Smith argues that conceptualism about propositions—the view that propositions are effects of mental causes (propositional attitudes)—entails the existence of an omniscient mind. Unfortunately, Smith says little on behalf of conceptualism other than that it is rationally acceptable.⁵ Others, such as Davis (2008, 2011) and Anderson and Welty (2011) have gone further, arguing for theism from conceptualism about propositions, laws of logic, and possible worlds. Consider the truth-bearing nature of propositions. For the proposition “Quine is wise” to be true, it must be an intentional object of or about its constituents, intentionality being a hallmark of mentality. Further, Davis contends, the constituents of propositions are best construed as ideas (e.g., the idea of Quine and the idea of wisdom), and as such need a mind not just to host them but to properly arrange them so as to accurately represent reality, i.e., being true. Even the most prominent naturalistic accounts of propositions are conceptualist in spirit, but fall prey to what Keller (2017, 2018) calls “the scarcity objection”: there are more propositions than any theory committed only to finite minds can account for. The intentional nature of propositions therefore requires an infinite mind.

Unities. God, it is argued, is necessary to explain certain unities, such as facts, composite objects, and the cosmos. Respectively, Vallicella (2000) argues that the best candidate for truthmakers are facts. For example, the truthmaker of “a is F” is a’s being F. So, facts exist. But what unites a fact’s constituents—*a* and F-ness—into one entity? Theories that do not appeal to an external unifier—whether some further constituent, or just the fact itself—are incoherent. So, facts exist and depend on an external unifier. Now, if facts exist, they possibly exist, and whatever is possible is actualizable. The possibility that some fact or other exists is actualizable in every possible world. But if some fact or other is possibly actualizable in every possible world, there must exist an external unifier in every possible world. Since such a unifier cannot be an abstract or material object, the only remaining possibility is that it is a mind—*et hoc omnes intelligunt Deum* (cf. Kronen & Menssen, 2013). Braine (1988) argues that the all contingent beings are temporal and composite. But there is nothing intrinsic to their being that explains how they persist through time: Nothing in the past or future can hold them together, so to speak. Their persistence therefore requires a noncontingent (necessary, atemporal, and incomposite) sustaining cause. Finally and most briefly, Juarez (2017) argues that only God can be the ultimate explanation of what unifies the many things in the cosmos into the orderly, systemic whole that it is. The unity cannot be explained by its parts, individually or collectively. Nor can it be attributed to natural laws. Understood descriptively, laws are not causally efficacious. Understood prescriptively, laws themselves require explanation and so cannot be the ultimate explanation of the unity of the cosmos. Only a transcendent cause would seem to be a sufficient explanation.

Limits. Rasmussen (2019) has recently advanced an argument for theism based on the nature of limits: Whatever is limited has an explanation. For example, the size of the Earth is limited, and is explained by, among other things, its mass. If whatever is limited has an explanation, then, possibly, something is unlimited. This is because the explanation of limited things cannot itself be a limited thing, lest the explanation be circular and therefore not explanatory at all. So, possibly, something is unlimited. Now, to be unlimited is to be perfect. But a perfect being, the terminus for explanations, would be necessarily existent. Per S5, if something is possibly necessary it is necessary. Therefore, there is a perfect being. (Note: This modal inference, valid in system S5, appears in a number of arguments to be discussed, so it might help to spell it out a bit more here.⁶ Something is possible if it obtains [exists in, is true in] in some possible world. Something is necessary if it obtains in all possible worlds. So, if something is possibly necessary, something is necessary in some possible world. But, by the definition of necessity, if something necessary obtains in any world, it obtains in all worlds, including the actual world. So whatever is possibly necessary is actual. Since if God exists, he exists of necessity, if he possibly exists, he actually exists.)

The Applicability of Mathematics. Nobel Prize-winning physicist Eugene Wigner (1960) famously drew attention to how mathematical concepts permit uncannily accurate models of natural phenomena. He likened the situation to a man being given a ring of keys successfully opening a series of doors on the first or second try each time. Similarly, the use of mathematical concepts to unlock the mysteries of nature seems suspiciously convenient. It at least defies a

naturalistic explanation, argues Steiner (1998), proposing instead that the user friendliness of mathematics suggests they're tailor-made for us, ready to be exploited for exploration and discovery of the natural world. Craig (2016) proposes that the happy coincidence is best explained by God modeling the world in accordance with either the mathematical structures "out there" or those he had in mind.

An interesting and novel twist to arguments in this category is Leftow (2010, 2018), who argues not from realism about *abstracta*, but from anti-realism: By showing how all *abstracta*—possible worlds, essences, propositions, hacceties, properties, sets, numbers, relations, etc.—can be reduced to God and His activities, Leftow thinks theism outstrips all rival theories of *abstracta* in theoretical virtues: It is more parsimonious in kind and number, has greater explanatory scope, and has more homely and work-efficient primitives, all without sacrificing what is so attractive about realism (namely, objectivity). Insofar as you are attracted to desert landscapes but cannot forsake the objective waters of realism, theism is the best option.

2 | NOMOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

Nomological arguments for theism are based on the ontological status, structure, and character of the laws of nature.⁷

There is a long history of thought on the relationship between God and laws (see brief discussion and references in Koperski, 2017), but F. R. Tennant (1924) was one of the first to highlight their potential as evidence for theism. The first to develop an analytically rigorous theistic argument from laws, however, is Ratzsch (1987), who argues that problems which otherwise beset widely-held accounts of laws as universally quantified subjunctives can be avoided by thinking of them as counterfactuals of *freedom*. But obviously, this would require a free agent with the stability of character and power to decree natural laws—viz., God.

Peterson's (1996) argument mirrors Feser's Augustinian proof discussed above, only with natural laws instead of *abstracta*, arriving at theism via elimination of competing views. Structurally similar but more sophisticated is Foster (2001, 2004). Foster argues that the regularity of nature—and, as a consequence, the justification of induction—is best explained by the existence of nomically necessary laws. But prevailing realist accounts of laws (such as Armstrong's) suffer from insuperable objections. The best explanation of laws is their being creations of a supernatural being who then imposes them on the universe to ensure its regularity. Swinburne (2006) piles on, contending that Armstrong's view, while plausibly accounting for event–event causation, cannot account for the causal powers of intentional agents, which are substances. Rather than postulate two different kinds of causation, it would be simpler to reduce the former to the latter, even simpler to reduce all causation to the causal power of a single intentional agent, and even simpler still if that agent is God, who is, Swinburne maintains, the simplest kind of person.

Interestingly, it seems to be the majority position in the literature that any realist view of laws is best explained by theism. This is the verdict reached by Cartwright (2005), who therefore thinks reducing laws to dispositional powers is the only position open to the naturalist. This is indeed a popular position, but Swinburne (2004), Dumsday (2011), and Orr (2019) argue that even powers-based analyses of laws is best explained by theism. Nontheistic analyses, for instance, still leave unanswered questions like how there can be laws such as gravity that apply across objects of different natural kinds, and how dispositions get instantiated in objects in the first place.

Gordon (2018) thinks quantum theory requires a structural realism approach to laws; in particular, one according to which reality is partly phenomenal in character. It is an indisputable result of quantum theory, he says, that there is genuine ontic indeterminacy, which, contra naturalism, entails that physical reality is not sufficient unto itself. Without something more fundamental than matter to fill the gaps, material objects are radically ontologically incomplete. But ontological incompleteness violates the principle of sufficient reason—the rejection of which destroys science and leads to self-defeating skepticism. The best explanation of what brings closure to reality is a kind of phenomenalism, which Gordon thinks is best attributed to the causal activity of God.⁸

3 | AXIOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

Axiological arguments appeal to species of value unlike that in traditional moral arguments for theism.

A surprising number of philosophers have defended the seemingly counterintuitive view that the universe exists because it *should* (Leslie, 1970, 1979; Rescher, 1984, 2010). Although the underlying axiarchic principle—that for all p , if it ought to be the case that p , then p —has been used to motivate a variety of nonnaturalistic views (e.g., Leslie, 2001; Mander, 2016; Steinhart, 2012), it has also been used in arguments for theism. Hugh Rice (2000) agrees that the principle explains why the universe exists but argues further that the principle itself is best understood as being a reflection of God's will. Kordig (1989) and Vallicella (2018) advance a theistic argument based on a modal version of the axiarchic principle: a maximally perfect being ought to exist. So, God ought to exist. Whatever ought to exist possibly exists. So, God possibly exists. Per S5, if God possibly exists, God exists. So, God exists. Something like this argument appears in nascent form in Ewing (1965).

More common in this category are appeals to beauty and aesthetics which, even by nontheist's lights, can serve as powerful evidence for theism.⁹ Yet Swinburne (2004) appeals to beauty only as strengthening the design argument (beauty in a designed universe is expected, but it isn't in an undesigned universe), and Howell (2006) argues that mathematical theories' satisfaction of aesthetic criteria further supports theism as the explanation for their applicability to the natural world.

There are stand-alone arguments from beauty, however. Many harken back to F. R. Tennant (1930), who argues that because things that are not the product of aesthetic intent are rarely beautiful, whereas the natural world, far from being rarely beautiful, is *in general* beautiful, the natural world is likely the product of aesthetic intent (for extended defense of Tennant, see Wynn, 1999). Forrest (1996) argues sensuous and nonsensuous beauty, like the sublime (not to be confused as with what is merely pleasant), has the resilient impression of being a gift, pointing to a transcendent, benevolent, infinitely beautiful giver. Similarly, West and Pelsler (2015) argue that natural beauty can serve as a Reidian "natural sign" that noninferentially justifies belief in God by perceiving Him through it. More recent arguments from beauty (Geivett & Spiegel, 2019; Tallon, 2018) are simply framed: The objectivity of beauty is best explained by theism. Defended at length are the central claims that beauty is, in fact, objective and that that is improbable given naturalism.¹⁰ God, by contrast, as a being in whom all truth, beauty, and goodness reside, would be an ideal ground and so the much better explanation.

The objectivity of beauty may not, however, be an essential ingredient in theistic arguments from aesthetics. As many of the argument's defenders also emphasize, the fact that we have aesthetic sensibilities at all is better explained by theism than naturalism. What we find beautiful goes far beyond, and sometimes contrary to, what might have once had survival value. This otherwise gratuitous and overdeveloped sense of the aesthetic would be expected if our cognitive faculties are the product of a being who himself has a taste for the aesthetic.¹¹

4 | NOOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

Noological (from *noûs*, mind or intellect) arguments are arguments for theism based on a variety of mind-related phenomena such as consciousness, reason, and knowledge.¹²

Let's begin with consciousness. The core idea, expressed by ancients and moderns alike, is that the seeming implausibility of matter producing mind justifies a theological alternative. The argument's most prominent contemporary defender is Richard Swinburne (2004, 2018). We know from experience that there are mental events (sensations of color, pains, beliefs, thoughts, and feelings) distinct from physical (brain) events, yet they are obviously connected in some law-like way. A naturalistic explanation for how this could be is very improbable for several reasons. First, psycho-physical laws are not generalizable the way physical laws are because the former incorporate fundamentally different kinds of things. So, second, there must be an enormous number of separate laws, and each could state only *that* some particular brain event is connected to some particular mental event, not *why* (a point emphasized by

Adams, 1987).¹³ Theism explains both: God, given that he has good reason to create embodied persons, also has good reason to ensure the relevant connections between persons and their bodies.¹⁴ Moreland (2008, 2009) focuses on the existence of nonphysical mental states rather than their connection to physical states. Naturalistic theories cannot get genuine, nonphysical mental states from their base ingredients of matter. Nontheistic alternatives, such as panpsychism, fare no better on account of not being able to explain how base material ingredients could be infused with consciousness, or why. Together, then, theism is thought to better explain the existence of mental states as well as their connection to brain states.

According to Hasker (1999, 2013), Reppert (2009), and Goetz (2013), reason points to the existence of a primordial rational intellect.¹⁵ Consider first how reasoning seems incompatible with naturalism. Reasoning requires intentionality of thought, which is notoriously difficult to give physicalist accounts of. But more importantly, reasoning requires mental causation—e.g., the propositional content of a thought causing another in a chain of logical inferences—which violates the causal closure of nature. Now if reasoning cannot be explained in terms of prior, nonrational (naturalistic) processes, a theistic explanation in terms of a fundamental rational being naturally suggests itself, even over other nontheistic views such as panpsychism and idealism, given that it is reason, and not just consciousness as such, that is to be explained.

The argument from reason has noted similarities to Plantingian-style arguments from proper function (Anderson, 2005; Barrett, 2018; Koons, 2018). On a Plantingian view, we come to know things when, roughly speaking, our cognitive faculties function properly. But the notion of proper function requires a design plan, and hence, a designer, and only the Judeo-Christian God (or one very similar, argues McNabb, 2019) seems to fit the bill of a suitable designer of cognitive faculties whose proper function is to aim at acquiring true beliefs.

A different route from knowledge to God lies in some version of the time-worn Berkeleyan thesis that *esse est percipi*, where it is God's mind that constitutes reality (see Mander, 2013 for a historical sampling of this argument). The idea that there's no such thing as a "view from nowhere"—an observer-independent reality—has, of course, been grist in the mill for anti-realists like Rorty and Putnam. If reality were truly independent of our knowledge of it, then we, or even an ideally rational knower, can never discount the possibility that we're radically mistaken. But that seems less plausible than simply saying "truth" is not independent of our noetic activity. Such anti-realist arguments have in turn been grist in the mill for theists like Plantinga (1982), Alston (1996), Rea (2000), and Dummett (2006), who can agree that truth is indeed not independent of noetic activity, but avoid the manifest absurdities of eschewing the possibility of objective knowledge by grounding truth in the mind of God instead of finite knowers. Thus, if realism is true, and knowledge and truth are somehow coextensive, then theism is true.

More direct are arguments similar in spirit to Fitch's well-known proof that if all truths are knowable then all truths are in fact known (on which see Bigelow, 2005). Emanuel Rutten (2014), for example, argues that all possible truths are knowable, and yet the proposition "God does not exist" is not knowable; hence, God exists.

5 | LINGUISTIC ARGUMENTS

A more recent category of theistic arguments appeals to certain facts of language and semantics.

Haldane and Smart (2003) argues for God from a Wittgensteinian linguistic-communitarian view of concept formation as a *via media* between nativist and abstractionist views. Contra the nativist, we are not born with concepts like "cat"; we learn them. But contra the abstractionist, we learn them not from abstracting "cat" from our ostensive experiences with cats, but from others in our linguistic community. But then where did they get the concept? The regress is satisfactorily halted, thinks Haldane, if there is a being with intrinsic conceptual power. Perhaps Haldane's argument can be strengthened if supplemented with Johnson and Potter's (2005), according to which God's having endowed humans with an innate *ability* to acquire and use language better explains the empirical data on the origin of language than naturalism.

In order to avoid epistemological skepticism, Bonevac (2018) argues that semantic content must be a certain way—i.e., independent of finite minds, modally and temporally stable, infinitary, normative, and objective—to serve as an anchor for successful reference, and hence, knowledge. But content can be that way only if it has a transcendent ground. God is not only the perfect candidate for being the transcendent ground of content thus conceived but could also ensure our epistemic access to it.

Pruss (2018) argues that theism provides a satisfying solution to problems of semantic indeterminism, such as cases where the meaning of certain counterfactuals, knowledge attributions, and vague terms is context sensitive. A good theory will allow us to maintain that (a) there are objectively correct answers to all such cases, even if we can't know them; (b) the semantic facts are objective yet mind dependent and not brute; and (c) the meaning of many of our terms are determined by use and behavior. Unlike nontheistic solutions, the view that our communicative practices ultimately derive from a supernatural language institutor in whom is hidden the fully precise semantic facts delivers all the goods. The availability of a theistic solution with such explanatory power is evidence for theism.

6 | ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

Anthropological arguments are based on existential (in the French sense) and social aspects characteristic of human beings.

Beginning with the existential, many have expressed a kind of deep, soul-stabbing desire for something beyond this world, such as God. C. S. Lewis famously thought this was a good indication that there is something like God, for, in our experience, natural desires (generally, if not always) imply the existence of what can satisfy them.¹⁶ Tallon (2018) extends the idea to include the desire for unending play and enjoyment. The argument may strike analytic philosophers as facile, but it has been deftly defended against the most obvious objections (see Holyer, 1988; Lee, 2017). For instance, desire for impossible things like, say, morphing into a dragon, are hardly *natural* desires—i.e., common and nonpathological. Besides, if stated inductively, even a handful of legitimate counterexamples, if there be any, would not significantly deflate the argument so long as the majority of our natural desires do in fact have real satisfiers. In a modal twist to the argument, Pruss (2010a) appeals to “visceral” desires (def: A visceral desire *D* is for *x* if and only if *x* is possible to get, and, necessarily, when an agent *y* who has *D* gets *x*, *y*'s desire *D* is satisfied by *x*), such as hunger and thirst, which do not imply their intentional objects do exist, only that they *can*. But then a visceral desire for God implies God can exist. Per S5, if God can exist, God does exist. Continuing with the modal theme, Buras and Cantrell (2018) argue that our desire for a certain kind of happiness only God could satisfy is evidence that God can (and so does) exist, and Pruss (2010b) argues the fact that so many of us take God to be the motivational center of our lives is evidence that God can (and so does) exist.

To our deepest desires and motivations, Walls (2018) adds that our richest and most profound displays of love point to something beyond what can be explained as evolutionary byproducts of kin selection or reciprocal altruism. Were we created in the image of a God whose nature is love, however, it would be no surprise that our lives seem to have “a depth of meaning that vastly exceeds the severe limits imposed by naturalism” (Walls, 2018, p. 318).

Theists and naturalists alike have contended that life can have objective meaning only if a being like God exists to give it meaning (one of the better arguments is Morris, 1993). Arguments for objective meaning, then, would be arguments for theism. In this respect, Dougherty (2016) argues the fact that belief that life has objective meaning comes so naturally to us is evidence of its truth. Given that naturalism gives us no reason to expect to have true beliefs about the meaning of life, but theism does (God would want for people to have true beliefs about that), belief that life has objective meaning confirms theism over naturalism.¹⁷

Moving on to more social aspects, Neill and McNabb (2019) have recently argued that theism provides the best account of the justification for political authority. They agree with Heumer (2013) that the most prominent secular justifications are inadequate: Contractarian theories are unjustly coercive, and consequentialist theories can only justify states far too minimal than is necessary. But rather than see all political authority as illegitimate as Heumer does,

they (drawing on Wolterstorff, 2012) propose a theistic account: God delegates to mundane rulers the authority has over us in virtue of being our morally perfect creator, and that authority remains legitimate insofar as it reflects God's moral nature and the ideal of Shalom. God, therefore, is the best explanation of how exactly that amount of political authority requisite for the common good is justified.¹⁸

It is a sociological fact that most people believe in God.¹⁹ Is this (defeasible) evidence for the truth of theism? Basic insights in epistemology, such as the evidential value of testimony, make it hard to resist an affirmative answer here, despite *argumentum ad populum* concerns (on which see Meierding, 1998; Réhault, 2015). Thomas Kelly (2011) agrees, pointing out that it is demonstrably the case that we commonly treat the beliefs of others as evidence of their truth, and properly so. Zagzebski's (2011) view explains why: The reasons we have for trusting ourselves to form true beliefs are reasons for likewise trusting others to. Further, one's credence in a belief increases the more widespread it is. The evident naturalness of belief in God, which some argue is itself evidence of theism (e.g., Barrett & Church, 2013), strongly suggests we shouldn't expect major sociological shifts in this regard. Widespread belief in God, therefore, is a *prima facie* reason to believe God exists. The ultimate value of the argument, as its expositors point out, depends on whether there are better explanations of widespread belief in God other than that it's being probably true. Interestingly, Dobrzeński (2018) thinks the argument need not depend on the prevalence of belief at all. A more modest version can be run by restricting it to just the consensus of those whom we regard as epistemic authorities on the question.

7 | META-ARGUMENTS

That there are so many arguments for theism is a remarkable phenomenon, especially considering that most substantive philosophical theses hang on epicycles of just one or two main arguments. Theism can therefore benefit from cumulative case arguments in ways most other views cannot. If we take each individual argument for theism—or rather, the *explanandum* of each argument—as independent pieces of evidence, even if each only modestly confirms theism, their cumulative force could result in significant confirmation of theism (i.e., raise the intrinsic probability of theism to well above .5). But even if that's not the case, their cumulative force could still significantly confirm theism over naturalism. These are the kinds of broad meta-arguments for theism we're most familiar with (e.g., Swinburne, 2006). According to Poston (2018), we can be more precise by estimating likelihood ratios for each independent argument, then sum them up—the sum being their approximate cumulative evidential force. Doing so shows that even a handful of modestly good arguments can cumulatively amount to very strong evidence, indeed.²⁰

Briefly, here are two further ways one might advance a meta-argument for theism. First, if a theory were true, we should expect there to be multiple, independent lines of evidence supporting it. Since we do have multiple, independent lines of evidence supporting theism, that is itself evidence for theism. Second, arguments that God exists are *ipso facto* arguments that God possibly exists. Having so many theistic arguments, then, should significantly raise one's credence in the main premise of the ontological argument (Arbour, 2019). And per S5, if we're justified in believing God can exist, we're justified in God does exist.

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude with two general observations about contemporary theistic arguments. First, it is striking how many of them have as a premise some form of realism—about *abstracta*, unities, laws, morality, beauty, and so on. Second, it is also striking how many exploit the convenient fiction that theism and naturalism are the only live options. Taking these observations together, we should expect theistic arguments—to the extent that they have any force—to push nontheists in one of two directions.

In one direction is the wholesale denial of all realisms thought to support theism, affirming instead the hardcore reductionism and eliminativism theists argue naturalism entails (Baker, 2013; Craig & Moreland, 2000; Rea, 2002;

Smith, 2012). Few, however, seem to have taken this route (exceptions are Ladymann & Ross, 2007; Rosenberg, 2011), though I suspect this is because naturalists tend have their heads in the sand. At any rate, theists should work on developing more arguments that do not depend on realisms.

Academic winds seem to be blowing more in the other direction: Rejecting the convenient fiction that theism and naturalism are the only live options. Philosophers who are not ostrich naturalists are exploring alternatives to theism such as panpsychism (e.g., Nagel, 2012; Alter & Nagasawa, 2015; Buckareff & Nagasawa, 2016; Goff, 2017; Bruntrup & Jaskolla, 2017). In response, besides directly critiquing such views, theists should work on strengthening the tie between the *explanandum* and theism as the *explanans* in their arguments. Doing so would also address the specter of God-of-the-gaps reasoning that haunts many of the arguments discussed in this article.²¹

ENDNOTES

¹By “theistic argument” I mean an argument for existence of, or for the rationality of belief in, God. By “God,” I mean a supernatural personal being with one or more attributes traditionally associated with divinity, such as maximal knowledge, power, goodness, necessity, transcendent creator, designer, etc.

²Obviously, the arguments to be discussed should also be distinguished from those that no rational person would take seriously. For instance, suppose I offer the following novel, nontraditional argument for God’s existence: the Dixie argument. (1) Either my cat is named Lucifer or God exists. (2) My cat is not named Lucifer. (3) Therefore, God exists. The argument is valid, and I believe sound (my cat is named Dixie, and I accept (3)). Plantinga says of a similarly structured argument that it “is in some way question begging, or at least dialectically deficient.” See *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 217–218. I’m not sure it begs the question, but I am sure no rational person would take it seriously. The question of what distinguishes any argument, even a sound one, from a *good* argument is difficult, and of course not unique to theistic arguments. Suffice it to say that the arguments of concern here have the distinction of being taken seriously by rational people, unlike the Dixie argument.

³Nor will I discuss arguments of so-called ramified natural theology: arguments intended to point to a specifically Christian conception of God. Further, it should also go without saying that there is not the space here to cover rejoinders, surrejoinders, etc.

⁴Menzel does with set theory what Richard Otte does with epistemic probability. See Otte’s “A Theistic Conception of Probability,” in Michael Beaty (ed.), *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy* (Notre Dame, 1990), pp. 92–117. Unfortunately I remembered Otte’s article as this one was in its final stages, so could not incorporate its insights.

⁵Interestingly, according to a former student of his, Smith said he is “51% theist” due to considerations about abstract objects.

⁶The characteristic modal axiom of S5, $\Diamond p \supset \Box \Diamond p$, is logically equivalent to our ubiquitous theistic modal inference $\Diamond \Box p \supset \Box p$. In fact, $\Diamond \Box p \supset p$ is provable from the much weaker modal system B, so technically theists don’t need S5 to license the ubiquitous inference. That said, S5 is the favored system among modal logicians and metaphysicians as regards to the question of what best captures our intuitions about metaphysics of modality. For defenses of S5 as the correct system of absolute or metaphysical modality, see Alexander Pruss, *Actuality, Possibility, and Worlds* (Continuum, 2011), pp. 13–17; Bob Hale, *Necessary Beings: An essay on Ontology, Modality, & the Relations Between Them* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 127ff; Timothy Williamson, “Modal Science,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 46(4–5), pp. 453–492; and Alexander Pruss and Joshua Rasmussen, *Necessary Existence* (Oxford, 2018), ch. 2.

⁷Not to be confused with design arguments, which focus on what is empirically the case posterior to natural laws, such as an intelligence-friendly universe, irreducibly complex biological organisms, or whatever.

⁸While writing this article, I overlooked Bradley Monton’s fine contribution to Walls & Dougherty (2018), in which he gives a new argument for theism based on thermodynamics and the nature of induction.

⁹See quotations in Tallon, 2018. Paul Draper, for example: “I agree that beauty supports theism but maintain the overall pattern of good and evil in the world is more probable on naturalism than on theism... So the ability of theism to explain beauty and our enjoyment of it is a relatively small advantage for theism. Arguments from evil against theism are much more powerful than the argument from beauty in favor of theism.”

¹⁰Several authors lean heavily on Eddy Zamach, *Real Beauty* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1997). I cannot resist quoting this wonderful passage from Forrest (1996, 133–134): “How ugly the stars are tonight! How trivial the pounding of the waves on the beach! And is it not crass to be thrilled by mountains? The rain forest and the wild-flowers are quite repulsive. And as for sunsets...! If a full-blown relativism in aesthetics was correct, then those responses would be unusual but not in any way improper. But my reaction is that anyone who fails to appreciate the beauty of this universe is defective.”

- ¹¹Also relevant here are Nozick's (1981, 594-610) arguments for a being of unlimited value and meaning. But his arguments have not yet been formally massaged into arguments for theism explicitly.
- ¹²I borrow the term "noological" from William Lane Craig, *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), which he uses to refer to the argument from consciousness. But the term seems more fitting for this broader category of arguments, as it captures the variety well (e.g., better than "epistemological"), especially considering the full etymology of *noûs* and *logos*. Because arguments for theism from free will seem to ultimately appeal to consciousness or the soul, I would include them in this category as well.
- ¹³Adams (1987), and Swinburne (2018) following him refers to this aspect of the argument from consciousness as the argument from flavors and colors, which is really just the explanatory gap problem (on which see Joseph Levine, *Purple Haze: The Puzzle of Consciousness* (Oxford, 2001)) with a theistic solution. There is a different nontraditional theistic argument properly from flavors and colors that is at once moral, noological, and aesthetic, the gist of which can be gathered from this passage from William Paley, *Natural Theology* (Cambridge, 1803; ed. 2009), pp. 518-519: "Assuming the necessity of food for the support of animal life; it is requisite, that the animal be provided with organs, fitted for the procuring, receiving, and digesting of its food. It may be also necessary, that the animal be impelled by its sensations to exert its organs. But the pain of hunger would do all this. Why add pleasure to the act of eating; sweetness and relish to food? Why a new and appropriate sense for the perception of the pleasure? Why should the juice of a peach, applied to the palate, affect the part so differently from what it does when rubbed upon the palm of the hand? This is a constitution which, so far as appears to me, can be resolved into nothing but the pure benevolence of the Creator. Eating is necessary; but the pleasure attending it is not necessary: and that this pleasure depends, not only upon our being in possession of the sense of taste, which is different from every other, but upon a particular state of the organ in which it resides, a felicitous adaptation of the organ to the object, will be confessed by any one, who may happen to have experienced that vitiation of taste which frequently occurs in fevers, when every taste is irregular, and every one bad." Unfortunately I know of no contemporary defenses of this argument.
- ¹⁴With Swinburne and Adams, Kimble, and O'Connor attack materialistic accounts of the correlation between physical and mental states, but, contra Swinburne and Adams, see the unlikely emergence of consciousness as buttressing the fine-tuning argument rather than its own argument for theism. See their "The Argument from Consciousness Revisited," in J. L. Kvanvig (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 3 (Oxford, 2011), 110-141.
- ¹⁵Reppert dithers on the argument's formulation as an argument just against naturalism or also one for theism. He also doesn't distinguish, as I and others do, the argument from reason from other arguments (from consciousness, proper function, abstract objects, etc.). My exposition follows Goetz most closely.
- ¹⁶The argument from desire, or at least the central sentiment, predates Lewis by centuries, going back at least to Augustine.
- ¹⁷Nevermind the egregious gaffe in Dougherty's rendering of Bayes' theorem on p. 83.
- ¹⁸Remarks made by Jay Richards in his *Money, Greed, and God* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 217ff suggest the makings of a different kind of political argument. From free markets emerge irreducible properties that have mystified economists for centuries: order and harmony from chaos, general welfare from individual self-interest, increasing amounts and kinds of value (i.e., capital) created *de novo* just from the practice of free trade, etc. What best explains these irreducible emergent properties of free markets? As economists like Hayek have pointed out, the problem parallels historic bemusement at how random, chaotic naturalistic processes could produce such highly complex yet orderly functional systems we see in biological organisms. Is there an economic equivalent of the explanatory mechanisms of natural selection and chance? Or was Adam Smith's admiration at how the market seems to be guided by an "invisible hand" more than metaphorical? It is rather remarkable that since many national economies and, to a large extent, the global economy began operating according to free market principles, global abject poverty rates have fallen a staggering 80%. See Pinkovsky and Sala-i-Martin, "Parametric Estimations of the World Distribution of Income," *The National Bureau of Economic Research* no. 15433 (2009). See also Max Roser and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, "Global Extreme Poverty," *Our World in Data*, March 27, 2017, <https://ourworldindata.org/extreme-poverty/>.
- ¹⁹Thomas Kelly cites, probably with some amusement, Phil Zuckerman, "Atheism: Contemporary Rates and Patterns" in Martin (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): "Zuckerman (a sociologist of religion and an atheist, one of whose avowed purposes is to show that non-belief is more common than is typically claims) estimates that approximately 88% of the world's population believes in God." See Kelly (2011), 146n18.
- ²⁰Poston uses Royall's case to illustrate the standard of "pretty strong" evidence: you have two urns, one containing only white balls and the other half black, half white. Pick a ball, note its color, put it back, shake and stir. Successively drawing three white balls is equivalent to a likelihood ratio (LR) of 8, or pretty strong evidence that you're drawing from the urn with only white balls. By comparison, medical professionals routinely make diagnoses based on LRs within that range, 10 being uncommonly strong. If we had two dozen (or so) theistic arguments, as Plantinga suggested, each would need only a meager LR of 1.1 (that is, barely any evidential value at all) to amount to pretty strong evidence for theism. But there

are actually *much more* than two dozen arguments for theism. Throughout the course of my article, some 50 (or so) non-traditional arguments for theism are cited. Suppose only half are independent. Now, assuming there are also at least 25 traditional theistic arguments, the cumulative effect of having 50 arguments each with the stingy LR of 1.1 puts their total LR at a staggering 117. And the reality is that many, perhaps even most, of the arguments deserve a much higher LR than 1.1; yet even a slight increase to 1.25, evenly distributed across the lot, has dramatic results: 25 arguments = LR of 265, and 50 = just over 70,000. It's hard to imagine what that evidential force practically amounts to if not certainty.

²¹Thanks to Benjamin Arbour and Elizabeth McIntosh for many helpful discussions. Special thanks to William Vallicella for kindly mailing me an off print of his article "From Facts to God," and to the authors who confirmed with me that I have summarized their arguments correctly. Finally, thanks to Yujin Nagasawa's commissioning and editorial guidance of this article.

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