

God, God* and God'

One family of challenges to theistic belief derives from considerations concerning the claim that there is an omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, perfectly free, *perfectly evil* sole creator of the universe *ex nihilo*.¹ These challenges begin with the claim that a case can be made for the existence of this being—call it God*—which “parallels” the case which can be made for the existence of God. (Perhaps one might think that it would be more accurate to say that the claim is that the case for God* is just as good or bad as the case for God, and that part of the case for God* is contrived simply by mimicking or paralleling the case for God. For, *prima facie* at least, it seems that there are extra wrinkles which are needed in the case of God* to construct arguments from scripture, or revelation, or religious experience, or religious authority, etc. However, proponents of the challenges to theism which are under consideration ought to reply that the kinds of ‘evidence’ adverted to here are equally well explained on the hypothesis that God exists—where the explanation goes via God’s good intentions to help us—and on the hypothesis that God* exists—where the explanation goes via God*’s evil intentions to harm us. I shall suppose that we should allow this generous construal of the notion of a ‘parallel’ case, and that no harm will follow from this concession.)

One kind of response to this family of challenges on behalf of theistic belief would be to deny that the mimicking *arguments* are genuinely parallel—e.g. to claim that the ontological or

¹ See, for example Madden and Hare (1968), Cahn (1976), Stein (1990), New (1993), Daniels (1997). Also, compare discussions of ‘the Perverse God’ in the literature on Pascal’s wager (for references, see Jordan (1994)), and discussions of a–being–than–which–none–worse–can–be–conceived in the literature on ontological arguments (for references, see Oppy (1995)).

cosmological or teleological or ... argument for God is stronger than the corresponding argument for God*, or that the problem of evil is a weaker argument against God than the problem of good is against God*. It seems to me that the kind of response looks *prima facie* rather unpromising; in any case, I propose to proceed under the *pro tem* assumption that this kind of response won't work. (Those who disagree with my judgement here should for now take me to conducting a 'conditional' investigation: what can be said in response to these kinds of challenges to theistic belief if one concedes that the mimicking arguments for God* do genuinely parallel the traditional arguments for God?) Instead, I shall focus attention on a line of response which aims to establish that there are reasons for thinking that the concept of God* is incoherent in a way in which the concept of God is not. In particular, I shall consider the suggestion that the notion of an omniscient and perfectly evil being can be shown to be incoherent in ways which tend not at all to establish that the notion of an omniscient and perfectly good being is incoherent. If this suggestion is correct, then—other things being equal (as the proponents of the objection hold that they are!)—it seems that the hypothesis that God exists is clearly to be preferred to the hypothesis that God* exists.

I propose to argue that, even if these counterarguments do establish that the hypothesis that God exists is clearly to be preferred to the hypothesis that God* exists, this is not enough to show that theists are home free—for there are many other alternative Gods for whom 'parallel' cases could be constructed, and for which this particular counterargument is ineffective. I shall then go on to consider the consequences of this claim for the status of the debate between theists and their opponents. (I shall also argue that there are serious questions to be raised about the counterarguments against God*. However, I shall not place too much emphasis on these

questions in this paper.) In order to get to these considerations, some preliminary scene-setting is required.

1

For the purposes of this paper, I shall suppose that *theists* are those who are committed to the claim that there is an omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, perfectly free, perfectly good, sole creator of the universe *ex nihilo*. Moreover, I shall suppose that an equivalent statement of this first supposition is that *theists* are those who are committed to the claim that God exists.² Some people who choose to call themselves ‘theists’ may wish to vary the defining description which I have used here; however, provided that we agree that God is at least omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good—and that no other being has any of these properties—this disagreement will not affect any of the subsequent discussion.

At a first stab, we might suggest that to believe a proposition is to assign it a probability strictly greater than 50%; that to disbelieve a proposition is to assign it a probability strictly less than 50%; and that to suspend judgement on a proposition is to assign it a probability of exactly 50%.

² This assumption about ‘equivalence’ skates over a number of tricky issues: what sense of equivalence do I have in mind? what analysis of singular terms am I presupposing? am I assuming that there can be ‘descriptive names’? and so on. For the purposes of this paper, I do not think that any harm will come if we suppose that ‘God’ is simply an

However, it is unrealistic to suppose that we always assign perfectly precise numerical probabilities to propositions. Suppose instead that the probability that one assigns to a proposition is vague over an interval (p, q) .³ Then a second stab would be this: to believe a proposition is to take p strictly greater than 50%; to disbelieve a proposition is to take q strictly less than 50%; and to suspend judgement on a proposition is to take p less than or equal to 50% and q greater than or equal to 50%. No doubt there is room for further refinement.⁴ However, supposing that this second stab will be adequate for our purposes, we shall have: a *theist* assigns a probability to the claim that God exists which is vague over an interval which is bounded below by 50%; an *atheist* assigns a probability to the claim that God exists which is vague over an interval which is bounded above by 50%; and an *agnostic* assigns a probability to the claim that God exists which is vague over an interval which includes 50%. (Clearly, there is at least one other category—namely, those who assign no probability to the claim that God exists. For want of a better term, I shall call such persons *innocents*.)

I shall assume that the primary purpose of arguments is to change minds. That is, I shall suppose that the primary purpose of theistic arguments is to convert atheists, agnostics, and innocents to theism. (Likewise, the primary purpose of atheistic arguments is to convert theists, agnostics and innocents to atheism; and the primary purpose of agnostic arguments is to convert theists,

abbreviation—hence substitutable in all non-quotational contexts—for the given description, even though in fact it seems pretty clear that this claim is false.

³ No doubt we do sometimes assign precise probabilities to propositions. We can represent these precise assignments by degenerate intervals (r, r) .

⁴ For discussion of some of the issues involved, see Hajek (forthcoming). Note that the view outlined in the main text has the resources to accommodate intuitions about ‘leanings’—e.g. the interval $(10, 51)$ represents agnosticism leaning towards atheism. Note, too, that it isn’t obvious why one should want to say that $(47, 49)$ represents agnosticism—it seems at least equally plausible to claim that it represents tentative atheism. Finally, note that the fact, that adoption of the view outlined in the main text entails that belief is not closed under conjunction, is arguably a welcome consequence (in view of problems like the lottery paradox and the paradox of the prefect). Despite all this, the view is still subject to difficulties—but not ones which will impact on the current discussion.

atheists and innocents to agnosticism. I take it that there can be no innocent arguments. I shall henceforth concentrate on the theistic case—but the same considerations will apply, *mutatis mutandi*, to agnosticism and atheism.) A really successful theistic argument would be one which required anyone, on pain of irrationality, to become a theist. However, any argument which required some reasonable people to revise up the bounds of probability which they assign to the proposition that God exists would count as having some degree of success. (An argument which forces a revision up of the bounds of probability is one which forces a revision from vagueness over the interval (p, q) to vagueness over the interval (p', q') , where either p' is greater than p , or q' is greater than q , or both.)⁵

In our assessment of arguments, we suppose that the targets of the arguments are rational belief-revisers—i.e. we suppose that the targets of the arguments are disposed to revise or update their beliefs in accordance with the canons of rational belief revision. Of course, exactly what these canons are is a matter of considerable dispute. (For example, Bayesians hold that updating must proceed by way of conditionalisation.) And an even more controversial question is whether there are further constraints to be placed upon reasonable sets of belief. (For example, some Bayesians hold that reasonable sets of beliefs are regular—i.e. do not assign probabilities vague over the degenerate intervals $(0, 0)$ and $(1, 1)$ to anything other than *a priori*, necessary, analytic falsehoods and *a priori*, necessary, analytic truths respectively. However, Bayesians are characteristically loathe to add much in the way of constraints on prior probabilities.) For my

⁵ Of course, there are further distinctions which could be drawn here. The strongest successful argument would require everyone to assign probability $(1, 1)$ to the claim that God exists. (Some proponents of ontological arguments have thought that their arguments did this.) Perhaps the weakest successful argument would be one which required some reasonable persons to revise up ever so slightly one of the bounds on the interval which represents their doxastic attitude towards the probability that God exists. (Of course, being a weakly successful argument in this sense might not be much of a recommendation of an argument—particularly if we don't insist on much in the

purposes, I shall suppose that we do not need to worry about further constraints on sets of beliefs: if a person who is disposed to revise or update their beliefs in accordance with the canons of belief revision has an unreasonable set of beliefs, then there are considerations which can be presented to them which will force them to revise or update their beliefs (in ways which remove the unreasonableness). Of course, there is bound to be some idealisation here: actual people are reasonable to a greater or lesser extent at different times, and reasonableness is perhaps only one amongst several desiderata which actual belief sets aim to satisfy. So we idealise the targets of the arguments in some ways: we demand that they care about the reasonableness of their beliefs (at least with respect to the questions at issue), etc. However, we are also bound to use the actual judgements of what we take to be reasonable people—including, no doubt, ourselves—as a guide to the responses of our ‘ideal’ reasonable agents (for what else could we use?).

Various potential pitfalls loom. Sometimes when you disagree with me, I take this as evidence that you are subject to failings of rationality. Other times, when you disagree with me, I just say that this is one of those things about which reasonable people can differ. It is hard to say how we draw the line between these kinds of cases. I am inclined to think that, at least *pro tem*, it should be conceded that there can be reasonable atheists, agnostics, theists and innocents (even under certain kinds of idealisations). Certainly, my own experience suggests to me that clever, thoughtful and insightful reasonable people can belong to any of these categories. At any rate, I shall begin by supposing that one should think that the dialectical situation is something like this: reasonable theists present arguments for the existence of God to reasonable non-theists, who

way of constraints on reasonable prior probabilities.) And there is a wide range of possibilities in between. It is beyond our current concerns to pursue this kind of taxonomy here.

then offer the parallel arguments involving God* in reply. All parties to the debate are presumed to be dispositionally rational, i.e. disposed to be revise their beliefs in accordance with the canons of belief revision. We shall perhaps need to rethink this conception of the dialectical situation later on. But, for now, we can turn our attention to the details of the arguments given by the participants in the debate.

2

Various recent authors have contended that there are difficulties for theism which arise from consideration of the claim that God*—an omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, perfectly free, *perfectly evil* sole creator of the universe *ex nihilo*—exists. These alleged difficulties are of at least two quite different kinds, which need to be carefully distinguished.

One suggestion is that there is an argument *against* belief in God—i.e. an argument against theism—which can be based upon consideration of God*. Roughly, this argument goes as follows: There is no more reason to believe in God than there is to believe in God*. (Every consideration which can be adduced in favour of God counts equally in favour of God*; and every consideration which can be adduced against God counts equally against God*). But, in circumstances in which there is no more nor less reason to believe in God than there is to believe in God*, it would be positively irrational to believe in God. So it is wrong to believe in God—there ought to be no theists.

Another suggestion is that there is a *reply* to theistic arguments for belief in God which can be based upon consideration of God*. Roughly, this reply goes as follows: Every argument for God can be paralleled by an equally compelling argument for God*. So no one who is not already a theist has any more reason to believe in God than they do to believe in God*. But, in these circumstances, it would be irrational to come to believe in God on the basis of theistic arguments. So no non-theists should be persuaded by theistic arguments to change their minds and come to believe in God.

Since God* is typically invoked by non-theists in discussions in which they are replying to theistic arguments, there is often uncertainty about just what the arguments involving God* are intended to establish. After all, one very good way to reply to your argument for the conclusion that p is to provide a compelling argument that not p. So, even though it would suffice for the purposes of replying to theistic arguments to show that non-theists ought not to be persuaded by theistic arguments to change their minds and come to believe in God, it would also be (more than) enough for these purposes to show that there ought not to be any theists. In any case, even if actual debates sometimes involve confusion about these issues, the theoretical points are clear enough: there are two quite different contexts in which arguments involving God* appear—and different considerations must be appealed to in the assessment of these arguments in these different contexts.

Having noted these two different uses to which non-theists might put arguments involving God*, I shall now put this distinction aside. (It would only needlessly complicate the discussion to try to take it into account here.) However, we shall return to it later.

3

In the face of the challenges raised by God*, one might be tempted to argue in something like the following way: Suppose we grant that there is such a thing as moral knowledge (and hence that there is such a thing as moral belief, properly so-called). Suppose we grant further that there is a necessary connection between moral belief and motivation—moral beliefs are necessarily motivating in such a way that one can only believe that an action is good or right if one is inclined to do or to approve that action, other things being equal. Then it seems that we have the basis for an argument that there can be no such being as God*. On the one hand, God* is supposed to be omniscient. Hence, in particular, if there is moral knowledge, then God* knows—and hence believes—every moral truth. But then, if moral beliefs are necessarily connected to motivation, it follows that God* is motivated to pursue the good and the right—and that is inconsistent with the claim that God* is perfectly evil.

An argument which bears some resemblance to the one just given is provided by Daniels (1997). Daniels argues in the following way: It is a conceptual truth that everyone most wants what is good—and hence it is also a conceptual truth that everyone most shuns what is bad. But it

follows from this that no-one can knowingly do what is bad—and from this it follows that God* cannot exist.

Daniels' argument is subject to some immediate difficulties. In particular, it seems that there are many different ways of understanding the claim that everyone most wants what is good; but it is far from clear that there are ways of understanding this claim on which it is both true and yet also entails that God* cannot exist. First, there are questions about how to understand 'most wants'—does the claim concern the strength of first-order desires, or the content of all-things-considered desires, or the content of interests objectively conceived (so that one can be completely oblivious to what it is that one 'most wants')? Second, there are questions about how to understand 'good'—does the claim concern what is good by one's own lights ('what seems to one to be good', 'what seems to one to be good now'), or what is good by some more objective standard ('what is good from the standpoint of eternity')? Putting together these claims in different ways yields statements of quite different standing, ranging all the way from ostensible tautologies—'what one wants most now all things considered is what one wants most now all things considered'—to obvious falsehoods—'what one most strongly desires is (and must always be) what is good from the standpoint of eternity'.

In order to get an objection to the existence of God*, it seems that what Daniels needs is the claim that 'what one desires, all things considered, is (and must always be) what is good from the standpoint of eternity'. After all, if the requirement of perfect goodness is to have any bite, it must require conformity to some kind of objective standard (I am not perfectly good just because I always do what is good by my lights!). But mundane considerations about weakness of will and

our moral failings show immediately that it is not true that what we desire, all things considered, is (and must always be) what is good from the standpoint of eternity. Perhaps there is some further difficulty with the idea that there might be a being which always desired, all things considered, that which is worst from the standpoint of eternity—but it is not at all obvious what this difficulty is (and there seems to be no way of repairing Daniels' argument in order to demonstrate it). Henceforth, then, I shall concentrate on the argument from moral cognitivism which I outlined above.

4

The argument against God* presented at the beginning of the previous section has some controversial premises. Not everyone agrees that there is moral knowledge, moral truth and moral belief. (Some philosophers have held that knowledge does not entail belief. Given this implausible claim, and the further implausible claim that it is only moral belief, and not moral knowledge, which is essentially motivating, one could claim that the argument is invalid—God* might be omniscient and yet have no moral beliefs! Other philosophers have held—on independent grounds whose nature need not concern us here—that God* has no beliefs at all. Again, one might try to use this view to undermine the argument against God* while not disputing the truth of the premises of the argument. However, it seems to me that, if one is disposed to think that moral beliefs are essentially motivating, then one ought also to think that moral knowledge is essentially motivating, even if one holds that knowledge does not entail

belief. At any rate, it seems to me that the prospects for this kind of reply to the argument against God* are not very bright.)

Famously, Humeans deny that there can be essentially motivating beliefs—it is desires which are essentially motivating states, but beliefs and desires are distinct existences—and hence they either deny that moral beliefs are essentially motivating, or else they deny that there is any such thing as moral belief (properly so-called). If one accepts that moral beliefs are not essentially motivating, then the argument against God* collapses—why shouldn't God* prefer the destruction of the world to the scratching of his little finger, even though he knows perfectly well that this is wrong? And if one accepts that there is no such thing as moral belief (properly so-called), then of course there is no such thing as moral knowledge (properly so-called)—and hence there is no reason why there should not be an omniscient yet completely immoral being.

There are other routes to the claim that there is no (such thing as) moral knowledge. It is a commonplace that many philosophers have been error-theorists or non-cognitivists about moral discourse. If there are no moral propositions or properties—or if there are moral properties and propositions, but the properties are necessarily uninstantiated and the propositions are necessarily false—then there can be no question of moral knowledge. If what we take to be expression of moral knowledge is merely the expression or projection of our emotions or desires or preferences, then there is no truth-apt content to ground talk of moral truth and moral knowledge. From a number of currently occupied and often-defended standpoints in meta-ethics, the argument against God* is plainly mistaken.

Of course, these meta-ethical questions are enormously controversial. If the point of the arguments involving God* is to persuade theists to change their minds, then that argument can only be sustained if these controversial views can also be defended. (It seems plausible to me to think that theists are unlikely to be error-theorists or non-cognitivists about ethics. Perhaps, indeed, we have here an argument that they ought not to be error-theorists or non-cognitivists about ethics.) On the other hand, if the point of these arguments is simply to respond to theistic arguments for God, then the controversial status of these views is less pressing. (If one is firmly persuaded of the correctness of an error-theoretical or non-cognitivist treatment of ethics, why shouldn't one rely on this persuasion in replying to arguments for the existence of God?) Perhaps it would be nice to have a response which relied on less controversial assumptions, but it seems perfectly satisfactory nonetheless.

5

The argument involving God* is only one of a family of arguments (or challenges) which can be made to theism. Suppose we accept—on the basis of the argument given above, together with our allegiance to moral cognitivism—that there can be no such being as God*. There are still other beings which raise problems for theism. Consider, for example, God'. God' is a being who is as much like God as can be, except that God' is perfectly evil. Given the concessions just made, God' is neither omniscient nor omnipotent—there is moral knowledge which God' does not possess, and moral actions which God' is unable to perform. (Perhaps there are moral

questions which God' is unable to answer. Whether or not this is so depends on tricky questions about the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral which I shall not consider here.)

Nonetheless, God' is *very* powerful and *very* knowledgeable—and so the question arises whether there is a substantially stronger case to be made for the existence of God' than there is to be made for the existence of God.

It seems to me to be plausible to suggest that the case for God' which parallels the traditional case for God is about as good as the corresponding parallel case for God*. Given the concessions which we have made concerning moral cognitivism, it seems plausible to claim that God' is a perfectly evil being (a being than which none more evil can be consistently conceived).

Consequently, it seems clear that we can develop parallels to familiar ontological, cosmological and teleological arguments for God. In the case of other familiar theistic arguments—moral arguments, arguments from religious experience, arguments from scripture, arguments from testimony to religious miracles, and so on—the arguments are not so much 'parallel' arguments as they are competing arguments of comparable cogency. (So, for example, if there really is religious experience as of a perfectly good God, this is just the kind of deception in which you would expect a perfectly evil being to engage.) There are many details to be argued over here—just as in the case of the arguments for God*—but I shall proceed under the assumption that the case for God' is pretty much as good as the case for God*.

Perhaps there is some 'flaw' in the case for God' which resembles the difficulty that moral cognitivism raises for God*. It seems doubtful that non-theists who wish to run the kind of line which is being pursued here ought to be very concerned about this possibility. After all—as

Hume observed in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*—there are clearly many, many alternative hypotheses which one could formulate about the attributes of a sole creator of the universe (especially if we allow that a ‘sole creator’ can be a committee, or a body corporate, or the like). For many of these conceptions, one can construct a case which parallels—or at least robustly competes with—the traditional case for God. So, even if the case for God’ fails, there are plenty of standbys waiting in the wings. (Perhaps you might think that it is obvious that the case for these standbys cannot be as strong as the case for God* or God’. However, we haven’t yet seen what kind of objection might be made to the case for God’; as things stand—contrary to what one might have initially expected—the case for God’ might be stronger than the case for God*. Perhaps there are other Gods out there for which the case is stronger still.) And, in any case, we have yet to see whether there is any comparable objection to the case for God’.

6

Once God’ and his ilk appear on the horizon, one might wonder whether it was such a good idea to pursue the moral cognitivism objection to God*. If there is to be a defence of God against the proliferating alternatives, it seems likely that it will not proceed piecemeal. (Of course, there might be a mixed strategy—knock out virtually all of the alternatives with a general argument, and then mop up the very small number of recalcitrant cases which remain. However, I shall start from the optimistic standpoint which supposes that there is a pure general strategy which can succeed.)

What kind of general defence might there be? I suspect that the best bet at this point is to invoke some kinds of considerations concerning simplicity, or opposition to scepticism, or insistence on believability, or the like. The hypothesis that God exists is simpler than the hypothesis that any of the alternative Gods exists, and this is a reason to prefer it to them, other things being equal (as they apparently are!). The hypothesis that one of the alternative Gods exists is a kind of sceptical hypothesis, which is doxastically parasitic on the hypothesis that God exists.

(Whenever one has an explanation or theory, one can cook up alternative explanations or theories which ‘work’ equally well. Consequently, one can only avoid scepticism if one is prepared to accept that these cooked-up theories and explanations can be set aside.) The hypothesis that God exists is a live and believable hypothesis, unlike the hypotheses concerning the alternative Gods; since no-one could take these alternatives seriously, we are warranted in setting them aside. And so on.

Of course, the above list of considerations is rather heterogeneous: it may be that God* is not ruled out by the simplicity test even though it is ruled out by the others. Moreover, none of the considerations has been developed in any detail. (There are notoriously difficult questions about criteria for simplicity, criteria for determining when explanations and theories have been gerrymandered, reasons for thinking that unbelievability is a good ground for ruling out hypotheses, and so on.) However, I shall suppose that we have enough to be going on with.

At this point, I think that we need to recall the two different uses to which non-theists might put arguments involving God*, God', and their ilk. Suppose, first, that non-theists are only interested in defending themselves against theistic arguments—i.e. they have no (immediate) interest in persuading theists to give up their belief in God. In this case, it seems to me, it is clear that the invocation of God*, God' etc. does make prosecution of the theistic case much more difficult. On the one hand, a much more substantial burden is incurred if one undertakes to persuade non-theists to give up on ethical non-cognitivism (and other ostensibly acceptable philosophical views which must be advanced in order to construct arguments to defeat particular alternative Gods). And, on the other hand, the claims about simplicity, gerrymandering, etc. seem unlikely to have much force since, in an important sense, simplicity and the appearance of gerrymandering are very much in the eye of the beholder. (More exactly, judgements about simplicity, gerrymandering, etc. are sensitive to what else it is that one believes.) It seems to me, at any rate, that the claims about God, God*, God', and many other Gods besides, are pretty much on a par as far as simplicity, absence of gerrymander, and believability are concerned—and it also seems to me that most reasonable non-theists are likely to agree.

(Perhaps a useful point of comparison here is with what I shall call 'tools for prognostication'. It seems to me that hypotheses about the possibility of predicting the future using tea-leaves, crystal balls, sheep entrails, the constellations of the heavens, the writings of prophets, the utterances of trees, and so on are pretty much on a par as far as simplicity, absence of gerrymander, and believability are concerned. Adverting to these various different tools for

prognostication is one good move to make in defending oneself against the arguments of someone who wishes to argue that one—but only one—of these tools yields reliable information about the future. Of course, one might well point out that this move is parasitic on the further assumption that there is no good evidence for—nor plausible mechanism which could be used to explain how one comes by—knowledge of the future (via the listed mechanisms). But exactly the same point can be made by non-theists against theists: by the lights of non-theists, there is no good evidence for—nor plausible mechanism which could be used to explain how one comes by—knowledge of God. It seems entirely natural to think that one who is disposed to claim that there is no good evidence for the existence of God will also be disposed to say that one might as well believe in God*, or God', or given the available evidence. While these two claims are distinct, there is a clear sense in which they fit naturally together.)

Suppose, on the other hand, that proponents of the arguments involving God*, God' and their ilk are interested in attacking theists, i.e. in trying to persuade theists to give up their theism. Then it is much less clear that the invocation of God*, God' and their ilk adds substantially to the attack. After all, reasonable belief in God will fit into a network of beliefs which very likely conspire to produce the judgement that the hypothesis that God exists is simpler, less gerrymandered and more believable than the hypotheses about the existence of alternative Gods. At any rate, it seems to me that I have more reason to trust the verdicts of those theists whom I deem to be reasonable—i.e. more reason to suppose that the fact that these people make those judgements shows that those judgements can reasonably be made by reasonable people—than I have to insist that reasonable theists take on my judgements about the simplicity, etc. of various hypotheses. (Moreover, I can note that those who are disposed to believe in God given the available evidence

will naturally judge that it is much more plausible to suppose that God exists given the available evidence than it is to suppose that God*, or God', or exists given the available evidence.)

By this point, readers are bound to have noticed that I have now committed myself to the claim that theists will not (and indeed ought not to) concede that the case for God can be paralleled by the case for God*, or God', or ..., if what is meant by this is that they have no more reason to believe in God than there is reason to believe in alternative Gods given the available evidence. By the lights of theists, 'the case for God' must seem much superior to the case for alternative Gods—else, they would not be theists. So the *prima facie* appearances to which I alluded at the beginning of this paper are deceptive—there is a clear sense in which reasonable theists can and must deny that the case for God*, God', etc. is as good as the case for God.

8

There are many problems here. The main one which we are now confronting is how to think about the epistemological and dialectical context in which the arguments under consideration are to be located. It is perhaps natural to think in the following way. A representative reasonable theist presents the case for believing in God to a representative reasonable non-theist. The non-theist responds by providing a parallel to the case just provided but which supports the existence of some alternative deity: God*, or God' or The theist then is faced with the challenge of finding some difference between the case for God and the cases for the alternative Gods.

I suggest that one ought to be very suspicious about this talk of ‘the case for God’. In the case of many things which we believe, the grounds which we have for those beliefs far outrun our abilities to articulate those grounds. (For example, it seems that it is no requirement of rationality that one ought to be able to recall the grounds for any belief which one has come to hold.⁶) Moreover, even in cases in which this is not so, it is often the case that the process of articulation could be extended indefinitely (there is always more which could be said). Consequently, talk about ‘the case for God’ too readily leads to confusion of epistemological and dialectical (‘dialogical’?) questions which ought to be kept distinct.

I conclude—albeit tentatively (and without in any way supposing that the forgoing constitutes either an adequate discussion or defence)—that it may well be the case that theism and non-theism are both reasonable responses to the evidence which people have, and yet that any case which theists put forward for the existence of God can be ‘paralleled’ by cases for the existence of other Gods about which: (i) theists reasonably judge that the cases are not genuinely parallel (but often for reasons which they have not yet, and perhaps which they shall never have, successfully articulated); and (ii) non-theists reasonably judge that the cases are genuinely parallel (where this judgement is typically a natural expression of—or companion to—their view that there is insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of God).⁷

⁶ See, e.g., Harman (1986) for further discussion of this kind of consideration.

⁷ Two points in particular which need further work: (1) I do not think that my line of argument could be adapted to defend the reasonableness of belief in any hypothesis (e.g. I do not think that reasonable and suitably informed persons can believe in astrology). My judgement, that there are reasonable theists whose belief in God is reasonable, is crucial to my argument. (2) There is a distinction between descriptive and normative conceptions of ‘reasonableness’ which might have important consequences for my argument. (Why suppose that my intuitions about the reasonableness of my friends have any normative significance?) I hope to consider these issues elsewhere.

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