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Can Science Disprove the Existence of God?

Peter van Inwagen

In one of his essays, Sartre mentions a French Marxist writer who describes atheism as a “scientific” position. Sartre comments on this description as follows: “I recognize that in denying the existence of God, I am no less a metaphysician than is the believer who affirms the existence of God.” This seems to me to be one of the few things Sartre has said that is indisputably correct. Atheism is, and must be, a metaphysical, or, at any rate, a philosophical position. And any argument for atheism will be, and must be, a philosophical and not a scientific argument. A philosophical argument can, of course, have among its premises various facts that have been established by scientific investigation. The great biologist Richard Dawkins, for example, is an indefatigable champion of atheism, and most of his arguments for atheism are based on what he knows best, the discoveries of evolutionary biology. They are, nevertheless, philosophical arguments—as much so as Thomas Aquinas’s argument for a First Mover or Descartes’s argument for the immateriality of the soul; as much so as the arguments of those scientists of the present day who see the hand of God in the values of the parameters that occur in the laws of physics.

Now why do I say that any argument for the non-existence of God must be a philosophical and not a scientific argument? Science has many times shown that various things that people had believed in did not exist: the spontaneous generation of life, the rotating crystalline spheres in which the planets were supposedly embedded, the canals of Mars, the influence of the positions of the stars at the moment of one’s birth on the course of one’s life If science was able to show that the crystalline spheres in which the planets were supposedly embedded did not exist, why should science be unable to show that God does not exist?

Let us look at the case of the crystalline spheres. How did science show that they did not exist? The answer is simple: when the orbits of certain comets were first accurately described, it was seen that these comets passed *through* the crystalline spheres—or rather through the space these spheres would have occupied if they had existed. So everyone immediately concluded that the celestial spheres did not exist—even though all astronomers from the ancient Greeks to Copernicus had assumed that they did. So: scientists made certain observations; these established the orbits of certain comets and the fact that these orbits passed through the space supposedly occupied by the celestial spheres. Of course, it doesn’t *logically* follow from this fact that the spheres don’t exist. Logic, blind as justice, demands another premise: that comets can’t pass through crystalline spheres (spheres strong enough to bear the weight of the planets embedded in them). But this premise is pretty obvious and no one seriously thought of doubting it; as far as I know, no one bothered to state it explicitly. Observations, from the austere point of view of pure logic, can never establish that something does not exist. Before she will authorize you to conclude that something-or-other does not exist, logic will demand more

than a premise about how things look; she will demand a premise of the following form: if that “something-or-other” *did* exist, things wouldn’t look the way they do. Scientific observation is a refined way of finding out how things look; scientific observations can establish that something does not exist only when they are conjoined with a premise to the effect that if that thing existed, things would not look the way science says they look. There would seem, therefore to be only two cases in which science, science *alone*, can prove that X does not exist: when the ‘if things look such-and-such a way, then X does not exist’ statement that is conjoined with the observations of scientists is itself a statement that can be established by science, or when it is so obvious that it needs no support.

Science, therefore, can establish that God does not exist only if there is some scientific observation—or scientifically established fact or experimental result—such that we can look at it and say with confidence, That’s not how things would be if there were a God. And this ‘if’ statement must either itself be scientifically established or so obvious that it doesn’t need to be “established.” But all this is rather abstract. Let’s look at a possible example. I have heard some people argue as follows. “There are major design deficiencies in the human eye and the human knee. If God existed, and were even a moderately good engineer, these design deficiencies wouldn’t exist. But, of course, if God existed, he’d be a rather better than moderately good engineer. So God doesn’t exist.” Let’s suppose for the sake of argument that the design of the human eye and knee could be improved on. This is not the only premise of the argument. There is another premise, an ‘if’ statement. Something like this:

If there were a God, human beings would exhibit optimal biological design.

What sort of statement is this? Is it a scientific statement? If it is, what science does it belong to? Theobiology? I think it should be evident that this is not a statement that has been established by any of the sciences. If the argument we are examining is to constitute a scientific disproof of the existence of God, therefore, this statement must be so obvious that everyone should just accept it—accept it without argument. Is this statement that obvious? It certainly doesn’t seem so to me. I can see myself believing this statement on the basis of some argument, but it doesn’t seem to me the sort of thing one could believe unless someone were aware of some consideration that could be adduced in its favor.

The statement ‘If there were a God, human beings would exhibit optimal biological design’, therefore, should not be accepted in the absence of any argument. Or, if that’s too strong a statement, at least this much is true: no one *has* to accept this statement in the absence of any argument for it. No one has the right to expect that of anyone. And this isn’t true of all statements. There are plenty of statements that I have the right to expect anyone to believe. If I am trying to convince you that Alice wasn’t in Memphis at the time the crime was committed, and my argument has the (probably unspoken) premise that

no one can travel from Oxford to Memphis in ten minutes, I have the right to expect you to accept that premise without argument. If you challenged me on that point, you would simply be wasting your time and mine. But if someone asserted the thesis, 'If there were a God, human beings would exhibit optimal biological design', and if you challenged him on that point, you would not be wasting his time and yours. He might have a good answer to your challenge, but it would be perfectly legitimate to ask to hear what this good answer was.

Now if someone did offer an argument for the truth of 'If there were a God, human beings would exhibit optimal biological design', what sort of argument would it be? Well, it would be a philosophical argument. What else could it be? Here is a reasonable principle: if some premise of an argument itself requires an argument, and if any argument for that premise would have to be a philosophical argument, then the larger argument is a philosophical argument. Therefore, the argument

Human beings exhibit less than optimal biological design

If there were a God, human beings would exhibit optimal biological design

Hence,

There is no God

is a philosophical argument, not a scientific argument, despite the fact that its first premise (we have granted this) has been established by science. When it comes to classifying arguments, philosophy trumps science: if an argument has a single "philosophical" premise (a single premise that requires a philosophical defense), it is a philosophical argument. But an argument is a scientific argument only if *all* its premises are either propositions that have been established by science or else propositions so trivial that they require no defense.

I make bold to say: all arguments for the non-existence of God must be philosophical arguments. So far as I can see, any argument for the non-existence of God must be of one of two types. First, it may be an *impossibility* argument. An impossibility argument for the non-existence of a thing is an attempt to show that the concept of that thing is internally self-contradictory or conceptually impossible—as impossible as a round square, although the impossibility may be harder to see (which is why an argument is needed to show that the impossibility exists). I shall not discuss impossibility arguments; none of them has (in my view) any merit whatever, and discussions of them tend to be rather technical—that is to say, extremely yawn-inducing in people who are not professional philosophers. I note only that it is pretty obvious that any impossibility argument would be a philosophical argument.

The second sort of argument is an argument that is based on some observed fact (or facts). We have already looked at an argument of this type—the "op-

timial design” argument. The argument begins by stating the observed fact; it goes on to contend that this fact would not be a fact if there were a God, and concludes that there is no God. My thesis is that the second premise of any such argument, the *if-then* premise, will never be so evident as to require no argument and that any argument for it will have to be a philosophical argument. But why must this be? As we have seen, there are plenty of arguments for the non-existence of things that are based on observation and in which the second premise—the *if-then* premise—is sufficiently evident that it requires no defense. How can we be sure *a priori* that the case of God is different? If we can prove that the celestial spheres or astrological influences or spontaneously generated life do not exist without recourse to philosophy, how can we be confident that the non-existence of God cannot be proved without recourse to philosophy?

The answer is that there is a vast difference between God and any object or kind of thing that science has proved does not exist. Take the crystalline celestial spheres. These are really very much like the objects that we see and touch every day—it’s just that, if they existed, they’d be vastly larger than the objects that we see and touch every day. But God is not like that. The *idea* of God is not the *idea* of a being that is like that. I once saw a cartoon in which a fundamentalist preacher is informing his flock from the pulpit that God’s socks are as big as New Jersey and his tee-shirts are the size of Texas. That preacher had the wrong idea. If he had the right idea, it would certainly be possible to prove scientifically that there was no God. If there were such a being (at least if he were anywhere around here) we’d see him and we could measure his gravitational influence on, say, the orbits of satellites. And, anyway, there couldn’t be a solid, living man-shaped being of that size; not only would there be no possible source of energy for it, but the laws of physics simply wouldn’t permit it to live or even to maintain its structural integrity.

If God isn’t like that, what is God like? Or, for those who don’t believe in God, what is God *supposed* to be like? Well, to begin with, God is, or is supposed to be, omnipresent. As you might guess, this word means present everywhere. But this definition is ambiguous. Consider the luminiferous aether, that all-pervasive perfectly elastic subtle stuff that, according to nineteenth-century physics, stood to light as air stands to sound. According to the nineteenth-century theory of light, the luminiferous aether was everywhere—in a laboratory vacuum flask, inside the earth, at the center of every star—and it was therefore in the most literal sense of the word omnipresent. It was present everywhere because every region of space was filled with a *part* of it: one part of it was conterminous with the Mississippi River, another (a large ball-shaped part) occupied the same region of space as the star Arcturus, and so on. But God has no parts. The first of the Anglican Articles of Religion begins, “There is but one living and true God, . . . , without body [or] parts. . . .” So God can’t be omnipresent in the sense that one part of him is in one place and another part in another place and some part in every place. In what sense, then, is God omnipresent? This question is best answered by means of an analogy. Consider a painting—say Rembrandt’s *The Night Watch*. There is, surely, a very good sense (even if it is not the most

literal sense) in which Rembrandt is present everywhere in that rather sizable painting. How does Rembrandt manage that? Obviously not by having one of his parts in one section of the painting and another of his parts in another section and at least one of his parts in every section. Rembrandt, unlike God, did have parts, but he didn't manage to be present everywhere in *The Night Watch* by distributing them across the canvas. Rather, he managed it in this wise: his creative activity is present everywhere in the painting; everything, at every point in the painting is the way it is because it was Rembrandt's will that it should be that way; he *made* it that way. This bit of black here, this bit of gold there . . . they're all the way they are because those are the colors and shapes that Rembrandt's will decreed for that spot. Similarly, God is present everywhere in the physical universe not because he is a space-occupying being who happens to be big enough to occupy all space (like the aether) but rather because every space-occupying being is a product of his creative power. This rock here, that elephant there, that neutron star over yonder, all exist and have the properties they do because it is God's will that they should. Each exists from moment to moment and continues to be the kind of thing it is only because it is God's will that it should continue to exist and be that way, and if God were to stop willing that, say, the neutron star, should continue to exist, it would vanish, all in an instant. And it is not only individual created objects that have this feature, this continuous moment-to-moment dependency on the will of God; the laws of physics, the basic rules by which the physical universe works, stay the same from moment to moment only because that is what God wills.

Perhaps I should remind you that I am not making any existential or ontological or factual claim when I say this. I am telling you not how things are but rather what concept the concept of God is. I am telling you what features a being would have to have to count as God. No being who is present in the physical universe otherwise than by the continuous exercise of its creative power would be God. If it should turn out that some immensely powerful and wise and ancient being made us, and if this being has a size and occupies space and has physical properties, and if there is no greater being than this, then the atheists are right: there is no God. If the immensely powerful and wise and ancient being who made us claimed to be God, it would be either an impostor or confused. An impostor if it claimed to be omnipresent, and confused if it admitted to being a physical thing that occupied space and still claimed to be God.

Omnipresence, omnipresence in the special sense I have been laying out, is, therefore, an essential part of the idea of God. And this implies that God can be connected with our observations of the physical world in only the most indirect and subtle of ways. The medieval philosophers said that a thing that was present in a region of space by literally occupying that region, by filling it up, was "locally present" in that region. They would have summed up what I have been telling you in these words: God is locally present nowhere and totally present everywhere. (He is totally present everywhere in that the totality of his being is reflected in the sustaining power that keeps every spatial thing

everywhere in the physical universe in existence from moment to moment.) But consider. Only a locally present being can reflect light, and thus only a locally present being can be visible. Only a locally present being can exclude other beings from the space it occupies, and thus only a locally present being can be tangible. Thus, none of our sense-organs or instruments can possibly detect God, for they can detect only locally present things. Unbelievers sometimes challenge God to come out of hiding—they refer to him as “the hidden God.” But there is nothing God can do to come out of hiding, for he isn’t hidden. He isn’t the sort of being who could be either hidden or on display.

And this is why his non-existence can’t be proved by science alone. Science can prove the non-existence only of things that exhibit some sort of local presence, like the celestial spheres or the luminiferous aether. If a medieval student had asked his astronomy teachers why we couldn’t see the celestial spheres, he would have been told that they were invisible because they were perfectly transparent. But, of course, you can prove the non-existence of a locally present but invisible thing, whether it’s Wells’s invisible man or the celestial spheres. It will have to manifest its local presence in some way, and everyone agreed that the celestial spheres manifested themselves in certain regions of space by being a real solid, presence there—one that would stop a comet dead in its tracks. God isn’t like that: he’s not invisible by being locally present but perfectly transparent; he’s invisible by not being locally present at all. The luminiferous aether is locally present everywhere, perfectly transparent (by definition), and intangible—at least in the sense that we can detect no resistance when we move a physical object through it. Nevertheless, the fact that it is locally present (even if uniformly so everywhere) has observational consequences. The earth moves around the sun in pretty nearly a circle, and the constant change of direction of the earth’s motion through the motionless aether that this implies would have certain consequences for the way light behaves; when we look for these consequences, we don’t find them, and they are of such a magnitude that, even a century ago, finding them was well within the competency of experimental physics. So, because of its local presence, the aether can have its existence disproved by science. God, however, being without local presence, is not in the business of having his existence disproved by science.

If what I have said is right, it does not mean that the existence of God can’t be disproved. What it means is that the proof will have to be something other than a scientific disproof (though it may indeed include premises that have been established by scientific investigation). It will have to be a philosophical disproof: God’s not being a locally present being means that the question of the relation between any observation and any statement about God will have to be a philosophical question. If anyone ever presents any argument of the form

We observe so-and-so, and not such-and-such

If there were a God, we should observe such-and-such, not so-and-so

hence,

There is no God

that person has to be offering a philosophical argument because the second premise, the premise that tells us what we should observe if there were a God, will never be so self-evidently true that it doesn't need any defense (this is because a being who is not locally present is so different from the kinds of beings our mental reflexes are used to dealing with), and the defense will have to be a philosophical one (because science, the only other possible source of a defense, deals only with locally present beings). I say this not because philosophy is above science, grander, made of finer intellectual clay, but simply because philosophy is the final home of all those questions about the general nature of things that we don't know how to deal with in any decisive or compelling way. Science cannot, therefore, disprove the existence of God. I have now answered the question that is my title. But I have more to say. I want to go on to discuss the implications of inability of science to disprove the existence of God.

If science cannot disprove the existence of God, then any disproof of the existence of God must be philosophical—must take the form of a philosophical argument. This is what I have been trying to convince you of. But to what end? Why am I concerned to try to convince you that any successful argument for the non-existence of God must be a philosophical argument? Let me approach this question by means of a definition. Let us say that an argument for some conclusion is a *compelling* argument for that conclusion if any human being who carefully considered the argument, and who understood its premises and the reasoning by which the conclusion was derived from the premises, and who did not accept the conclusion would be positively *irrational*. This definition is not so stringent as to be useless. There are compelling arguments for certain conclusions. Mathematics is full of them; one famous example would be Euclid's proof that there is no greatest prime. Here is a non-mathematical example. The great crackpot Emmanuel Velikovsky (there can be greatness in crackpottery) sets out in his book *Worlds in Collision* a theory according to which the earth has changed its direction of spin during the span of recorded human history. (His position is not that this reversal was a miracle; he contends that it was an event in the natural order.) Now anyone who has even the most elementary knowledge of physics will know that this is impossible. But let us leave physics aside. If such an event were to occur, the very least we could expect is that, at the moment of the reversal of the direction of the earth's rotation, there would be violent earthquakes on every point on the surface of the earth. (Those who are not willing to leave physics aside will realize that this statement is comparable to the statement that if a hydrogen bomb were to go off in your bedroom, the very least you could expect is that the bedroom windows would be blown out.) So, if Velikovsky is right, there was some moment in, say, the last ten thousand years at which there were violent earthquakes all over the surface of the earth. But there is a compelling argument for the conclusion

that this thesis is false. (The argument is due to Isaac Asimov.) At many places in the world there are limestone caverns decorated by nature with those remarkable structures called stalactites and stalagmites—and these structures are as delicate as they are remarkable. A violent earthquake would cause them all to come crashing down. And they take hundreds of thousands of years to form. It follows that, at least at those places at which there are stalactites and stalagmites, there has been no earthquake during the last ten thousand years. And so Velikovsky is refuted. And this argument is my sense compelling. Anyone who understands it and does not reject at least Velikovsky's thesis that the earth changed its direction of spin in the last ten thousand years is simply being irrational. (Strictly speaking, I suppose, the scientific reasons for thinking that stalactites and stalagmites take hundreds of thousands of years to form would have to be included in the reasoning for it to be truly compelling. But I think it would be irrational to reject expert testimony on this matter, and that is what geologists tell us.)

There are, therefore, compelling arguments—against there having been ubiquitous earthquakes in the last ten thousand years, against the existence the celestial spheres, against the existence of astrological influences. All these examples are arguments for the non-existence of various things. I have chosen them as examples because it is non-existence arguments that are our primary interest here. But, of course, I don't mean to imply by my choice of examples that there aren't also compelling arguments for the *existence* of various things. There is, for example, a compelling argument for the existence of a causal link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer.

But are there any compelling *philosophical* arguments? If so, what would they be? Let us look at a philosophical argument that I will use as an example simply because I think it's a pretty good argument. First, a bit of stage-setting. Let's say that one has *free will* if, when one is faced with a decision between two or more alternatives, one is at least sometimes able to choose either of them: each of them is *open* to one. Suppose, for example, that I'm trying to decide whether to admit to the offence the police have charged me with (and of which I'm indeed guilty) or to try to brazen it out. If I'm both able to confess and able to try to brazen it out, if both alternatives are open to me, then I have free will—at least on this particular occasion. And let's say that *determinism* is the thesis that the past determines a unique future, that given the past and given the laws of nature, there's only one way for things to go on. It seems pretty obvious to most people that determinism implies that no one has free will. It comes as a surprise to most undergraduate students of philosophy that many great philosophers have denied this—that many great philosophers have affirmed that one can have free will even if the past determines a unique future. (Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, and John Stuart Mill are examples of great philosophers who have affirmed this.) But here's a philosophical argument, which I think is pretty good, for the conclusion that these great philosophers were wrong—that their thesis is, as another great philosopher, Immanuel Kant, put it, “a wretched subterfuge.” Consider the case in which I'm trying to decide

whether to confess or to try to brazen it out. If determinism is true, one of the two alternatives I'm trying to decide between belongs to that one future that is determined to occur by what has already happened. Let's suppose that the determined alternative is confession, that the past determines that I'm going to confess. If I have free will, then, although I'm in fact going to confess, it must be the case that I'm *able* to try to brazen it out. That is to say, a future in which I attempt to deceive the police must in some sense be *open* to me. But, given the past, such a future can occur only if there is a violation of the laws of nature. And how can a future in which a violation of the laws of nature occurs be *open* to me? How can I be *able* to do something such that, before I do it, a violation of the laws of nature must occur? It just seems evident that, if it was determined a million years before I was born that when a certain moment rolls round I'll confess my crime to the police, it isn't open to me to do anything else—I'm not *able* to do anything else. And it just seems evident, therefore, that Hobbes and Hume and Mill were wrong.

Well, there's a philosophical argument. As I say, to me it seems to be a pretty good argument. But is it a *compelling* argument? That is, if someone understands it and continues to believe that one can have free will even in a world in which determinism rules, must we conclude that that person is simply *irrational*? If anyone one thinks this, he has to deal with an awkward fact: many very able philosophers reject this argument. I'd like to believe that the argument is compelling because, if for no other reason, I've spent a large part of my professional career defending various rather more technical versions of it. But if I am tempted to believe this, I have to consider an awkward fact: my great contemporary, the late Professor David Lewis of Princeton University, was aware of this argument and rejected its conclusion. And I am convinced that Lewis understood the argument perfectly. And, although he once asked me not to say this, he was smarter than I am, and a technically more able philosopher to boot. I have simply *enormous* respect for Lewis; I cannot adequately convey to you the depth of this respect. I once heard a philosopher say, after hearing one of Lewis's lectures, "Lewis is so smart it's scary." And I agree. Am I to believe that Lewis was irrational—for that's what I must believe if I'm to believe that the argument I've laid out is compelling? I find I can't believe that. In fact, I find that trying to believe that is like trying to believe that the sun is green or that pigs can fly. I can only conclude that the argument I've spent a large part of my professional life defending, whatever its merits may be, is not compelling. And, I must add, Lewis is not the only philosopher I respect who rejects this argument; there have been, and are, lots of others.

Our subject is arguments for the nonexistence of God—which, as I've tried to show, must be philosophical arguments. Let me lay *those* arguments aside for the moment. I'll make a generalization: with the possible exception of some arguments for the nonexistence of God, there are *no* compelling arguments for any substantive conclusion in philosophy. I offer the following argument for this generalization (and if you're waiting to catch me out in a contradiction on this point, I'll tell you right now that I don't regard this argument as

compelling; I just think it's a pretty cogent argument): on both sides in *every* important philosophical dispute there are extremely able philosophers. Are there objectively true moral principles, or is morally an entirely subjective matter? Can a purely physical thing be conscious? Do we really know anything, or is knowledge an illusion? Has the state the right to compel us to do things that benefit others but not ourselves? Is it in principle possible for science to explain why there is anything at all? For each of these questions, you can find able philosophers who will answer it Yes, others who will answer it No, and some who will say Maybe.

I think we must admit, therefore, that a pretty strong—but not, of course, compelling—case can be made for the conclusion that there are no compelling arguments in philosophy (with the possible exception of arguments for the non-existence of God)—no *proofs*. Now someone may point out that *proof* is a very strong word, and that in the practical business of life (and in science as well) we are often satisfied with something a good deal weaker than proof. If I am apprehended walking out of a jeweler's shop with thousands of dollars' worth of the shop's diamonds in a concealed pocket in my overcoat, that doesn't *prove* I'm a jewel thief. Maybe the concealed pocket is there for some innocent reason, and perhaps someone slipped the diamonds into the pocket to frame me. It happens all the time in the movies. Still, as Thoreau said, "Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk"—meaning that that's very good evidence that the dairy is watering the milk. The evidence I have imagined may not constitute a *proof* that I am a thief, but it would probably be enough to get me convicted of theft in a court of law, and it would provide anyone who knew about it with a very good reason for thinking that I was a thief.

Has philosophy produced any good reasons for thinking that anything of philosophical interest is so? In one sense, at least, the answer to this question must be Yes. But let us be careful about what we mean. Suppose that Fred's Aunt Alice has been found strangled, and that it's well known that Fred hated her; that (despite his feelings towards her) she had named him as the sole heir to her entire, very large, fortune; that Fred is deeply in debt, and that he is a large, powerful man, twice convicted of assault with intent to do bodily harm, while Aunt Alice was a feeble old woman; and, finally, that Fred is unable to account for his whereabouts at the time the murder was committed. Do these facts together constitute a good reason for thinking that he murdered her? Well, they certainly constitute some sort of reason. If the police detective in charge of the investigation, in full possession of all these facts, said, "There's no reason whatever to believe that it was Fred who strangled Alice," this would probably cause his colleagues to wonder whether he might be losing his professional grip. On the other hand, the existence of all these reasons for believing that Fred is the murderer is perfectly consistent with the existence of reasons for believing that he isn't. Suppose, for example, that the police have found the fingerprints of an unknown person—definitely not Fred's—on several articles in the room in which Alice was murdered, that there are shreds

of cloth under Alice's fingernails that match none of Fred's garments, and that there are fresh footprints under one of the windows of the room in which Alice was murdered that were made by shoes too small for Fred to squeeze his feet into. If these were all the relevant facts, it would seem to be reasonable to say that, although there are reasons that support the hypothesis that Fred is the murderer, there are reasons that count against this hypothesis, too, and that neither set of reasons is self-evidently strong enough to outweigh the other. It would seem reasonable to say this, but, human nature being what it is, people may still have opinions. One can imagine a detective saying, "Well, of course we haven't yet got anything we can take to court, but I always bet on motive and opportunity. I think Fred did it. He could have bought a jacket at some second-hand clothiers and discarded it afterwards. Maybe the footprints are a trick—he could have split open a small pair of shoes and then taped the split shoes so that they'd stay on his feet. Just the kind of trick someone who knew he would be the one obvious suspect might use to try to throw us off the track. And as for the fingerprints—well, I've seen enough cases to know that there are often unaccounted-for fingerprints at the scene of a crime. Mark my words, we'll pin it on him sooner or later." And one can imagine another detective weighing the evidence *pro et contra* differently and coming to just the opposite conclusion. One can imagine interminable arguments between the two detectives about these different ways of weighing the opposing bodies of evidence. If one did, one would be imagining a conversation a lot like a conversation in which two philosophers are disputing about the objectivity of morality or the freedom of the will or the relation of consciousness to the physical events in the brain.

Sadly, there is no uniformity of opinion in philosophy. A German aphorism defines a professor as someone who thinks otherwise, and this aphorism certainly applies to professors of philosophy. The historian Peter Geyl said that history—the academic field—was "argument without end." This description fits philosophy better than it fits history. The German general Ludendorff told Clemenceau that the historians of the twenty-first century would say that the Great War was the fault of Britain and France. Clemenceau replied that he didn't know what the historians of the twenty-first century *would* say, but he did know what they *wouldn't* say: they wouldn't say that Belgium had invaded Germany. The lesson of this well-known anecdote is that even in history there is a great deal that is beyond dispute. But in philosophy, there is really very little that is beyond dispute. If you want an argument for that thesis, I offer this one: there is very little that isn't disputed. It is indeed possible in philosophy to advance good reasons for one's views; unfortunately, in every case I know of in which one can do this, it is equally possible for the opponents of one's views to advance good reasons for *their* views—and it never seems to be the case that the good reasons that can be advanced in support of a view decisively outweigh the good reasons that can be advanced in support of the opposing view. Of course, philosophers commonly think that their *own* views *do* have this feature: a philosopher who, for example, thinks that there is an objective morality will

probably think that the reasons he or she has for thinking that there is an objective morality decisively outweigh the reasons that other philosophers have for thinking that there is no objective morality. But this philosopher will find it *easy* to believe this only if he ignores a very important question, to wit, If there are these good reasons for believing that there is an objective morality, and if they decisively outweigh the reasons that other philosophers have for thinking that there is no objective morality, and if they are the very reasons that you are in possession of and which convince you that there is an objective morality—why don't they convince *everyone*, or everyone that can understand these reasons, or failing this, *almost everyone*? Shouldn't reasons for believing something that decisively outweigh the reasons that support the opposing position have that power? We can confront our philosopher with this challenge: Why don't all, or almost all, philosophers agree with you? What is it with these philosophers who take other positions than yours? Are they just stupid? Is it that they don't understand the reasons you say decisively support the position you take? Are they intellectually dishonest? Are they psychologically weak—do they get some sort of psychological thrill or comfort from believing that there is no objective morality, and therefore hold on to this position even though it isn't rationally defensible? Are they perhaps simply wicked? If you think any of these things—well, isn't that convenient for you. If you're right, then you're smarter or nicer or more rational than a lot of other people in the same profession as yourself. Aren't you lucky that it was *you* who turned out to be the smart or nice or rational one? And, of course, that there is an objective morality isn't the only philosophical position you hold. You probably hold dozens of philosophical positions, all of which, you think, are decisively supported by the reasons you advance in support of them. And in each of these dozens of cases, there are other philosophers who hold positions inconsistent with yours. What an amazing coincidence: there is *one* person who holds the *right* position on *dozens* of questions, probably the *only* person who holds that particular combination of positions, and it just happens to be *you*.

If any philosopher is willing to answer all these questions by saying, "Yes—it certainly is amazing. I'm the only one who is right on these dozens of philosophical issues, and it's because I'm either smarter or more rational or nicer or more intellectually courageous than the philosophers who disagree with me," then what can we say to that philosopher? I know what I would say. I would tell that philosopher that he or she was a comic figure. Of course, few philosophers would make the little speech I've imagined. Of all the philosophers I've forced to confront the fact of pervasive philosophical disagreement—and there have been quite a few—only one has said anything like it. And yet philosophers do continue to hold and defend philosophical positions, and they regard the arguments they present in support of these positions as having decisive advantages over the arguments of those philosophers who hold opposing positions. (I have met only one philosopher who claimed to take no position on any philosophical question.) And I cannot except my-

self from this charge. I take positions on many philosophical questions, and I think that my reasons for holding them decisively outweigh the reasons that those philosophers who disagree with me have for holding the positions they do. I really cannot say what justifies me in taking this position. If you force me to try to justify it, I will say something like this: The arguments I can give in support of, say, the thesis that free will is incompatible with determinism (a philosophical position I hold) cannot be the totality of my reasons for accepting this thesis. If they were, and if they really outweighed, outweighed decisively, all the arguments for the compatibility of free will and determinism, then I ought to be able to convert at least a goodly number of those philosophers who think that free will is compatible with determinism to my own view simply by presenting them with my arguments. After all, that's what Einstein was able to do with respect to his revolutionary views on motion, light, mass, inertia, and gravity. He published some arguments, and after a few years of thinking it over, the community of physicists saw things his way. I think that some of my reasons for thinking that free will is incompatible with determinism must be inarticulable and hence incommunicable—unlike Einstein's reasons for the theses that are associated with his name—which could be written down and passed on to others. A pretty feeble response, you may say, and I'll have to admit that you're right. It's just that I can't think of anything non-feeble to say in defense of holding a philosophical position on which so many able philosophers who perfectly understand my published arguments disagree with me. I have only two consolations. The first is that all other philosophers—with the exception of the fellow I mentioned who, or so he says, accepts no philosophical theses—are in the same boat. The second is that there are other passengers in this boat than philosophers—quite a lot of them, in fact. For example, the name of almost everyone who holds political views of any sort is to be found on her passenger list.

Suppose, just to simplify matters, that there are only two political positions: call them Left and Right. Suppose you are an adherent of one of these positions—let us say the Left. Your position, that of the Left, will be an amalgam of various theses. For example: That people are, in general, better off when the Left party is in power than when the Right party is in power. That the policies of the Right party, although publicly defended by appeal to abstract principles, in reality reflect the interests of large multi-national corporations. That members of the political Left are, in general, more intelligent, better educated, and more compassionate than members of the political Right. That capital punishment is an ineffective deterrent to murder. That a three-month old fetus is not a human being. That there would be less use of hard drugs if they were legal and under strict control. And so on and so on. (In giving these examples of theses of which the political position of the Left is an amalgam, I have deliberately not used moral terms like 'should' or 'unfair', despite the fact that most people will immediately begin to talk in moral terms if you ask them to describe their politics. I have avoided these terms because I wanted to present what are uncontroversially a set of *theses*, and many philosophers believe

that statements couched in moral terms, statements like ‘The state should, before all other things, ensure the fair distribution of goods and services’, are not properly speaking *theses*, but rather the expressions of attitudes.) Now do you think, as a member of the Left, that there are reasons that support these theses to which you subscribe, reasons that decisively outweigh the reasons the members of the Right could adduce in support of their own—of course contrary—theses? If you really are an adherent of the Left, it is very probable that you do. But if you spend any time arguing with someone of your own level of intelligence and education on the Right, you will find that the exchange of arguments bears a disquieting resemblance to the arguments of the philosophers about free will or materialism or the objectivity of morality. That is, neither of you will convince the other: the reasons that seem to you to be decisive arguments in favor of your position will seem to the other to be answerable and he or she will be happy to give you the answers. Of course, you won’t think that these answers are effective answers to your arguments, but it will be quite plain that your opponent will think they are. In fact, if both of you have any capacity for abstract thought, you will see that what you are arguing about is just exactly philosophy—political philosophy. And if you have any capacity for self-doubt—a very big *if* indeed—you will begin to wonder whether the arguments you can advance in favor of the theses you hold really do decisively outweigh the arguments that your colleague on the Right has advanced for the contrary positions. But all this about politics is an aside—an attempt to convince you that it isn’t only in philosophy that people believe things without having compelling arguments for them. My point is that—with the possible exception of arguments for the non-existence of God—all philosophical arguments for any position are less than compelling.

Now, what about this possible exception? Is it indeed plausible to hold that philosophy is capable of providing a compelling argument for exactly one substantive thesis? Is it plausible to hold that philosophy can provide a compelling argument for the non-existence of God, even though she is unable to provide a compelling argument for any other substantive thesis? I have to say that this seems implausible to me. It seems antecedently highly improbable that philosophy, in whose house there have been debated scores (at least) of important questions, should be able to provide a decisive answer to *exactly one* of them. It is implausible to suppose that philosophy should be able to answer the question ‘Do we have free will?’—but no other substantive philosophical question. It is implausible to suppose that philosophy should be able to answer the question ‘Are thoughts events in the brain?’—but no other substantive philosophical question. It is implausible to suppose that philosophy should be able to answer the question ‘Does mathematics treat of an objective reality that exists independently of the physical world?’—but no other substantive philosophical question. One would expect that either philosophy would be able to answer lots of the questions that philosophy has posed or else would be able to answer none of them. There is something suspicious about the number one, about uniqueness. It is implausible to suppose that philosophy should

be able to answer the question ‘Does God exist?’—but no other substantive philosophical question. Still, highly implausible things, or things that at one point in the history of thought *seemed* highly implausible, have turned out to be true. It seemed implausible at one point in history to suppose that the solid earth beneath our feet was in rapid motion, but it turned out to be true. Further investigation of this question would require a detailed examination of the available arguments for the non-existence of God—the argument from evil, for example. But such further investigation would be beyond the scope of this essay. My hope is that reflection on my two conclusions—that any argument for the non-existence of God must be a philosophical argument, and that philosophy has so far failed to establish any *other* substantive conclusion—will at least raise substantial doubts about whether it is possible to prove the non-existence of God. Perhaps someone will be eager to point out to me that if the line of reasoning I have presented is cogent, a parallel line of reasoning, equally cogent, would establish the impossibility of proving the *existence* of God. But this I concede. I believe in God, but I think it entirely implausible to suppose that there is or could be an argument that *proves* his existence. The impossibility of such an argument in no way troubles me, since I believe in lots of things whose existence I can’t prove. I think, in fact, that everyone—or at least every normal person—believes things he or she is unable to prove. Everyone who is willing to affirm any substantive philosophical or political thesis, for example. I think, to mention one important case, that all atheists believe things they are unable to prove—and I don’t criticize them on this ground, for I see nothing wrong *per se* with believing things one is unable to prove. But I do think that there is an asymmetry between theism and atheism in the matter of opinions about proof. If I may judge from reading the controversial writings of atheists, and by my correspondence and conversation with atheists, most of atheists think—at any rate, a great many of them think—that there is some scientific or philosophical argument that proves that God does not exist. The proportion of present-day theists who believe that the existence of God can be proved by some sort of scientific or philosophical argument, however, seems to me to be much smaller. It seems to me, therefore, that theists are generally more realistic about the epistemic status of theism than atheists are as regards the epistemic status of atheism.

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