

## Rationalist atheology

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**Abstract** Atheology, accurately defined by Alvin Plantinga, offers reasons why god’s existence is implausible. Sceptically reasoning that theological arguments for god fail to make their case is one way of leaving supernaturalism in an implausible condition. This ‘rationalist’ atheology appeals to logical standards to point out fallacies and other sorts of inferential gaps. Beyond that methodological marker, few shared tactics characterize atheists and agnostics stalking theological targets. If unbelief be grounded on reason, let atheology start from a theological stronghold: the principle of sufficient reason, a cornerstone of rationality. Seven rules, corollaries to that principle, are enough to show how theological arguments for god repeatedly contravene rationality by perpetuating mysteries, contradictions, begging of questions, pseudo-explanations, and the like. None of these complaints are new, nor has theology been unaware of them. Disorganized atheology has, so far, allowed theology to appear to answer them. Five major arguments for god are systematically analyzed and refuted using these seven rules of rationality, as a preliminary exercise illustrating this re-organized and re-focused rationalist atheology.

**Keywords** Atheology · Theology · Atheism · Sufficient reason · Logic

Atheology offers opposition to theology’s efforts to show the reasonableness of god-belief. Philosopher of religion Alvin Plantinga revived the term ‘atheology’ while defining “natural atheology” as “the attempt, roughly, to show that, given what we

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know, it is impossible or unlikely that god exists” (Plantinga 1967, vii).<sup>1</sup> The traditional distinction between revealed theology (from divine revelation) and natural theology (from human learning) couldn’t be found in atheology, so the ‘natural’ modifier may be omitted as redundant. Arguments—successful or unsuccessful—against the reasonableness of god-belief fall under the purview of atheology. Other sorts of criticisms and scorings of religiosity, relying on rhetorical diversions, crude fallacies, satire, humor, and the like, also deserve surveying, but they aren’t part of atheology.

What is known, that we can’t mind god? Atheology, like theology, appeals to the body of human knowledge as may prove useful to carefully consider the supernatural. Facts are in dispute, between theism and atheism; whether certain key matters are even knowable gets contested as well. Neither side questions the possibility of human knowledge, nor do they dispute that reason should help guide knowledge. Theology understands how religiosity isn’t primarily about reason or knowledge, or even ‘belief’ in just a cognitive sense, but theology has typically asserted that religiosity is at least reasonable for the convinced believer. (Those few theologies denying knowledge is irrelevant to god-belief and rejecting the answerability of god-belief to reason have little dispute with atheology, since atheology already agrees god-beliefs can’t be reasonable.) Atheism has surely made enough noise about its own grounds in reason. Theology, no less than atheology, appeals to reason and also has good reason to take human reasoning itself to be accessible in human knowledge. We know reason, in a sense, for we know it as we use it properly and we can understand how it can work well. Familiarity with forms of reasoning, such as the types of inference and forms of argument, or even a self-reflective awareness about how well or poorly one is reasoning, is by no means evenly distributed across humanity. Nevertheless, some common sense, a respect for consistency, and a preference for satisfactory explanation haven’t been withheld from most of humanity. We can recognize good reason, often enough, when we can see it, regardless of any religious or secular standpoint.

Atheology utilizes distinct methods to defend the unreasonableness of god-belief, each appealing to some component of human knowledge. Two general kinds of atheology have dominated modern debates over religion. Where good reasoning suffices to expose theological fallacies and raise skeptical doubts towards arguments for god’s existence, “rationalist atheology” is undertaken. By contrast, “scientific atheology” relies on current science to challenge theological interpretations of natural matters to infer god’s existence. Impressive atheological challenges to religions apply these two methods, the rationalist and the scientific, in cooperative concert in order to explain why god-belief turns out to be unreasonable. For example, Thomas Hobbes leaned heavily on the experimental science of his times, more frequently than logical criticism, to deny any immaterial deity. David Hume, by contrast, was primarily a rationalist atheologian in his religious skepticism. Debating whether atheologians are themselves atheists is gets clouded by semantics; atheology can stay focused on debating theology over the reasonableness of supernaturalism.

<sup>1</sup> The term ‘atheology’ goes back to philosopher Ralph Cudworth, the seventeenth century Cambridge Platonist. He applied that label to the godless Greek philosophies, such as atomism and Epicureanism, which he was attempting to refute in the course of expounding a systematic theology (Cudworth 1678, p. 61).

Atheological skepticism towards god-belief aims at showing that anyone is reasonable for disbelieving in the supernatural. Atheists seek “disproofs” of god must look elsewhere. There won’t be necessary proof that no one could ever reasonably think a god is real. Only reasoning sufficient to withhold god-belief is wielded by rationalist atheology. Exposing numerous violations of formal logic in theological arguments is the most familiar feature of rationalist atheology. Atheological skepticism has nothing to do with establishing some other metaphysical worldview. Although the “god debates” of our times has largely forgotten why, naturalism and supernaturalism are hardly exhaustive alternatives. (Phenomenalists, extreme skeptics, and idealists may be rare nowadays, but metaphysics isn’t a popularity contest.) Committing the fallacy of false dichotomy can’t be a good start. Atheology doesn’t presume the truth of naturalism, undertake a defense of naturalism, or imagine that its success establishes naturalism.

## Reason

By applying seven rules of reason, all corollaries to the principle of sufficient reason, severe criticisms can be systematically raised against five major theological arguments (and by extension, minor arguments). This schematic approach lends some much-needed organization to rationalist atheology.<sup>2</sup>

As theology can affirm, the divine may be mysterious, and it may be a mistake to ask mystery to answer to reason. Atheology agrees that reasons can’t support mystery; theology would be wise to stop offering arguments for any mysterious diety. Mystery itself doesn’t violate reason, since it is reasonable to notice when we run up against mystery, and carefully mark off unknown territory as mysterious. It is hardly unreasonable to frankly admit when matters become mysterious and beyond our present understanding. Quite the opposite: honest rationality should see where explanations stop, while deceptive rationalizations try to misrepresent mystery as familiar and reassuring. Reason cannot be satisfied by pretending that mystery explains anything. A genuine explanation should decrease mystery and confusion, not increase them. This view can be elaborated into specific rules as well. Here are seven basic rules of reason:

1. Don’t accept mere mystery: Reject an “explanation” that just puts a label on something beyond human conceptualization or comprehension.
2. Don’t accept contradiction: Reject an “explanation” that requires a logical contradiction, since that creates another mystery.
3. Don’t accept repetition: Reject an “explanation” that requires the prior truth of the explanation, since that repeats the mystery.
4. Don’t accept mysterious causes: Reject a “explanatory” causal relationship between two things that have absolutely nothing in common, since that creates another mystery.

<sup>2</sup> Exemplary volumes offering a great deal of rationalist atheology include Nielsen (1985), Martin (1990), Le Poidevin (1996), Martin and Monnier (2003), Sobel (2003), Everett (2004), Kenny (2004), Oppy (2006), and Shook (2010).

5. Don't accept absent justification: Reject an "explanation" where an offered reason cannot provide genuine support since it is irrelevant or unjustified, leaving only mystery.
6. Don't accept arbitrary justification: Reject an "explanation" where reasons given in its support can equally support rival explanations, since that leaves more mystery.
7. Don't permit unjustified exemptions: Reject an "explanation" that requires special exemption from a rational principle used to support the explanation, since that only increases mystery.

To illustrate what violations of these seven rules look like, suppose we want to justify convicting a woman of being a witch.

Violate Rule 1: She seems mysterious, so she must be a witch.

Violate Rule 2: It is impossible to tell clever witches from ordinary people, and she looks ordinary, so we can tell that she must be a witch.

Violate Rule 3: Ordinary people don't place illness curses on other people, but she did, so she must be a witch.

Violate Rule 4: She was born on the coldest night of the year, so she must be a witch.

Violate Rule 5: Every town suffers from a witch (don't ask us why), so she must be a witch.

Violate Rule 6: Children in the town have died from the same illness, so she must be witch.

Violate Rule 7: Unfortunate events always have unfortunate earthly causes, yet assuming that earthly misfortunes could just keep on happening by themselves seems inconceivable, so a demonic power causes some earthly events, and therefore she must be a witch.

More sophisticated logical rules and fallacies emerge from these basic rules of reason. For example, Rule 2 calls for the logical rule that a proposition and its negation cannot both be true at the same time, Rule 3 is the idea behind logical rules forbidding the fallacies of begging the question and circular reasoning, and Rule 6 accounts for the fallacy of assuming a false dichotomy.

These rules of reason suffice for exposing violations of basic rationality by core arguments for a supernatural god: the Mystery argument, the Ontological argument, the Creation argument, the Design argument, the Morality argument, and the Revelation argument. Modern theologies utilize sophisticated variations to these core arguments, so this chapter does not refute every supernaturalist system. Strategies sufficient for their refutation can be developed from the simpler tactics explained here. Any trained theologian could rightly point to a skeptical point raised in this chapter to say that a complicated theological answer gets ignored by this survey. Yes, theologians have already noticed and struggled with every single one of these skeptical challenges, since it was theologians of many religions who detected them in the course of arguing with each other over doctrinal and philosophical matters across the centuries. Rationalist atheology will stay busy examining refined theological arguments claiming to avoid violations of reason and formal logic.

Because this is a survey of several atheological strategies against primary theological arguments, readers cannot expect exhaustive or conclusive results. Any minor

tactic of just a single atheological strategy could require an entire book to develop and execute, and such books have been composed. (Just as theology is replete with volumes responding to those tactics.) Nor is every tactic mentioned here to be regarded as particularly strong just because it has received enumeration in this essay's sections. Mapping out the terrain doesn't by itself guarantee victory upon the contested field. All the same, atheology's forces should at least be in possession of a reliable map, and avoid confounding each other.

### **The mystery argument**

The mystery argument proposes that since deep mystery exists, it is reasonable to believe in god. Skepticism immediately asks the question, Why is belief in god needed here? We can all agree that it is reasonable to accept the existence of deep mystery—mystery about what lies beyond current knowledge, and what may lie beyond all future knowledge. Reasonable people can respect and even revel in the existence of mystery, and mystery stimulates curiosity which in turn arouses inquiry and learning.

The suggestion that deep mystery is god cannot be reasonable. Calling a mystery "god" is not an explanation of a mystery (violating Rule 1). Furthermore, just because you accept the existence of mystery does not mean you accept the existence of god. The supernaturalist cannot argue that anyone who accepted the existence of mystery beyond knowledge automatically admits the existence of god. Precisely because everyone admits the deep mystery, no one can claim to know that a god is out there without contradiction (violating Rule 2). It doesn't help to assign superlatives to this mystery and then proclaim that god has been discerned. For example, an age-old tactic is to argue like this: "The deep mystery around us is infinite, but God is infinite, therefore we all must admit God is real." Detect the blatant fallacy here, by considering this similar argument: "The amount of numbers is infinite, but God is infinite, therefore God is real." Projecting the label of God at something quite inconceivable and expecting a divine being to reflect back isn't reasonable at all. Also, the supernaturalist would have to prove that this mystery does not consist of just more unexplored nature. If the supernaturalist argues that an endlessly advancing science faces more mystery so a god must exist beyond nature, this argument violates Rule 6, since science's continually advancing knowledge also supports the idea that only more nature still lies beyond knowledge, so we reach a skeptical stand-off between naturalism and supernaturalism.

It cannot help the supernaturalist to argue that it must be a supernatural god out there in the mystery on the grounds that god is the simplest explanation. This argument at least respects reason. Using god to attempt an explanation is not a problem in itself; and simpler explanations should be preferred, all other things being equal. Between two explanations that can enjoy the same support from evidence, it is reasonable to prefer the simpler explanation (this is a specific variation of Rule 6). The criteria for "simplest explanation" in the supernaturalist's argument here must be a principle that a simple explanation adds the fewest things in the explanation. Adding just one god to nature does sound pretty simple, but this argument doesn't actually help. The naturalist replies that naturalism is even simpler than supernaturalism, since it proposes that there is only more nature out there in the mystery, hence adding nothing to nature. Nature

plus a supernatural god cannot be a simpler explanation than just plenty of nature out there.

Rationality can recognize the existence of mystery, but that is quite different from irrationally trying to discern anything divine (or anything else) within that mystery.<sup>3</sup>

### The ontological argument

The ontological argument for god proposes that one highly specific god must exist—that “god” which is conceived as having an essential characteristic for “necessarily existing.” Denial of this specific god is supposed to violate reason, according to kind of argument, so the only rational course would be to accept the truth of this god’s existence. Different versions of this argument select different essential characteristics of this special god, but they all basically argue that the possession of this characteristic makes the existence of this god necessary and undeniable. Quite different arguments, relying on no godly characteristics but logic alone, also get labeled as ontological arguments, but few theologians attempt them and even fewer theologians rest god-belief on them.<sup>4</sup>

Since selecting “existence” or “necessary existence” or “not a contingent being” as the essential characteristic obviously violates Rule 3, by begging the question and assuming the very thing to be proven, ontological arguments cleverly select other characteristics (maximal greatness, perfection, and the like) to attempt to show how such a god must exist. Philosophers and theologians sharply disagree amongst each other over whether these sorts of purely conceptual and logical arguments ever demonstrate that something must actually have a real existence anywhere. We cannot settle that issue here. For our purposes investigating supernaturalism, we can instead ask the narrower question of whether anything supernatural could be proven to exist in this manner.

Suppose that a successful ontological argument specifying some essential characteristic (label it ‘C’) demonstrated the existence of one necessarily existing thing (call it ‘G’). If C is “supernatural” then this argument concerns the existence of one supernatural G, but no successful argument would actually use “supernatural” since there is nothing in the concept of “supernatural” permitting an inference towards “necessary.” The term “supernatural” could be redefined as “having no contingencies” on the grounds that the “natural” only consists of contingent things, but this strategy violates Rule 6 (why must nature arbitrarily contain only contingent things when, for all we know, the supernatural could contain contingencies too?) and also Rule 3 (defining “supernatural” as “not contingent” causes an ontological argument to beg the question).

<sup>3</sup> Agnostic philosopher Schellenberg (2009) infers that just an aspirational faith in the ultimate remains reasonable for any religious person. Lacking any concrete conception of this ideally ultimate reality, he offers an utter mystery as an explanatory ideal, allowing people to faithfully imagine whatever meaningfully elevates their lives. But people will fancy and adore what they will, and no agnostic could judge their convictions. Where every attractive religious idea is ‘reasonable’, nothing about god could be.

<sup>4</sup> For an atheological survey of ontological arguments, including modal logic arguments, see Oppy (1995) and Rundle (2004).

On the other hand, if characteristic C doesn't mean "supernatural" then an additional argument, after the ontological argument, is needed to show why C implies "supernatural." But what would that additional argument look like? "Greatness" does not logically confirm "supernatural," nor does "perfection." None of the typical ontological arguments use a C that guarantees that G must be supernatural. For all we know, the greatest, maximal, perfect, or self-sufficient being could be all of nature, or some core feature or component to nature, or some other sort of natural being totally unlike anything any theology would bother concerning itself with. A theology violates Rule 6 if it tries to arbitrarily explain that only by being supernatural could something achieve necessity and self-sufficiency. A theology violates Rule 3 if it tries to presumptively explain that a god would ensure that believers can comprehend what the supernatural is. Religions themselves often denigrate nature and refuse to see anything divine in the worldly realm just because it is worldly (violating Rule 5), but this convenient presumption against nature is prejudicial, not rational. Just because some religions could never regard nature as worthy doesn't help any ontological argument demonstrate that something supernatural must exist.

An interesting variation on the ontological argument for god begins by claiming that a person can possess and comprehend the concept of a perfect being. It must first be proven that a person can truly possess and comprehend the concept of a perfect being. Such proof is impossible. Merely putting words together does not guarantee the full possession of a concept, including "an infinite being." If I say, "I have an idea of the distance between the earth and the sun," that hardly means that I am successfully conceiving that entire distance. Trying to fully comprehend any sort of immensity or perfection generates only mystery (violating Rule 1). Presuming that god would ensure the innate possession of an adequate conception of god violates Rule 3, and trying to account for a way that god could implant a perfect idea in people's finite minds violates Rule 4. Asserting that the very inadequacy of an idea of a perfect god is a good sign that it is indeed of a perfect god (who ought to be inconceivable, after all) is a violation of Rule 5, and arguing that an inadequate idea of god can only be delivered from a perfect god violates Rule 6 (since worldly inspirations could be responsible instead). Furthermore, people do not agree on what they specifically have in mind when they think of perfection. Christian theology had to categorically define a small set of perfections for god just to get Christians focused properly, which assumes what is to be proven (violating Rule 3) or relies on a suspiciously arbitrary method favorable to just Christianity (violating Rule 6). Also, even a careful list of things such as omniscience, omnipotence, and benevolence generate conceptual contradictions when a single entity is imagined as possessing all of them (violating Rule 2).<sup>5</sup> Because of these problems, this version of the ontological argument collapses into a revelation argument, by insisting that people have perfect ideas of a perfect god,

<sup>5</sup> For an introduction to theism and perfections of god, see [Hoffman and Rosenkrantz \(2002\)](#). Individual philosophers and critical examinations of their ontological arguments can't be listed here, yet Descartes can't be avoided; one may begin by consulting [Marion \(1986\)](#). Atheological arguments exposing paradoxes of divine perfection are collected in [Martin and Monnier \(2003\)](#). Any large treatise on Christian theology can explain typical responses to these venerable arguments.

due to divine inspiration or interaction. This simplified approach suffers from all the problems concerning revelations, discussed in its section below.

A successful argument that a necessary and self-sufficient being can't be natural would require theology to directly deal with what it means to be natural, and figure out whether evidence from the natural world can assist with understanding anything supernatural. Other theological arguments, such as those discussed next, head in these directions, but such efforts go beyond anything attempted by an ontological argument. Ontological arguments for something supernatural fail to survive tests against standards of reason.

### **The creation argument**

The supernaturalist believes that a supernatural god created nature. "Nature" here refers not just to our small world or vast universe, but to everything natural that may exist. Simplistic creation arguments equate our universe with nature, ask how anyone can imagine that nature didn't have a cause, add that nature can't cause itself, and conclude that only something besides nature caused the big bang. But nature should not be equated with our universe, since that begs the question against the possibility that more nature is responsible for our universe. If theology can prove that this possibility must in fact be impossible (not merely unknowable), that demonstration hasn't been produced. The creation argument for a supernatural god attempts to infer the existence of a supernatural god from the existence of all nature as understood by the best cosmology available. If cosmology suspects that there may be more to nature than whatever came out of the big bang, it is not creation theology's place to object.

Even if all of nature should be treated as something contingent, what should god's status be? The supernaturalist typically prefers to define god so that god is exempt from explanation. The reasonable demand for explanation would call for an explanation for god's existence (yet another higher god?) and so on, so theology does not fail to require a special exemption for god from such explanation (violating Rule 7). Supernaturalist theology can try to define god as precisely that unique thing which has no characteristics calling for further explanation. However, defining a god, as we have discussed, is not the same thing as proving such a god really exists. This supernaturalist definition for god is simply a convenient way to distract the issue towards nature, which allegedly needs an explanation for existing in a way that god shouldn't. This distraction cannot divert logic, however. The supernaturalist must first prove that nature requires explanation, before producing a conveniently unexplainable god to supply that explanation.

This creation argument therefore depends on the supernaturalist first proving that nature as a whole (including whatever caused the big bang) is not timeless, necessary, or self-sufficient. How could the supernaturalist establish this? Why nature would be as contingent or dependent as its parts is a question left unexplained by theology, violating Rule 4. Cosmology hasn't supplied a definite answer one way or the other, and theology has no resources of its own to figure it out either. Although individual things within nature do exist in time, have origins, and are not self-sufficient, nature as a whole may not have the same properties. For example, time might not be a real

property of the universe or all of nature, taken as a whole. Time might only exist within a universe, so that there cannot be a “time” before the big bang. Multiple conceptions of time—continuously linear, discontinuous, or even nonlinearly disjointed—may get utilized by cosmology for distinct levels or phases of nature. Time might not even be physically real anywhere at all, so that passing time is only an effect for conscious organisms. Science has no firm conclusions about these possibilities yet, but theology has no way to confirm matters either, so for all we know, nature may not be an event. On the other hand, if time is a real property of not just our whole universe but all prior universes as well, then nature could be infinitely old (but not eternal, in that supernaturalist sense of having no duration. If nature were infinitely old, then it had no beginning and no cause, and once again nature eludes the scrutiny of the rules of reason. Unless it can be first proven that nature as a whole is the sort of thing requiring an explanation, the rules of reason do not apply, and the creation argument for a supernatural god cannot even get started.

Theology could try to argue why nature as a whole cannot be infinitely old. A prominent argument to that conclusion argues that since it is impossible to imagine how an infinitely long nature could really exist, therefore nature cannot actually be infinite in duration. This argument can seem plausible, but any line of thinking involving infinity must be handled carefully. A definition of infinity requires that conceiving its completion must be humanly impossible—if conceiving such a completion were possible, infinity isn’t involved. Mathematics is well aware of the many paradoxical consequences that arise from fitting infinity to intuitive expectations. This theological argument against actual infinities therefore misuses the concept of infinity. Our human inability to conceive nature having an infinite duration cannot imply that nature can’t really have an infinite duration. For all we can know and understand, if nature really is actually infinite in duration, we shouldn’t be able to fully conceive that infinity. Our failure of imagination is logically and realistically compatible with both possibilities: nature being finite and nature being infinite. When this theological strategy presumes that the human ability to conceive nature’s infinite duration can only be compatible with nature’s finitude, not only is mathematics ignored, but Rule 6 is violated.<sup>6</sup>

Theology can argue that even a thing of infinite extent can be imagined to not exist, so that some explanation is required for why nature exists as a whole instead of absolutely nothing at all. If some explanation is indeed required, then a supernatural god can be the explanation. The justification for believing that nature might not have existed is that we can conceive of absolute nothingness, and where we can conceive of absolute nothingness, some explanation is required for why that absolute nothingness isn’t real instead of actual existence. This justification violates Rule 1, since conceiving absolute nothingness is not within the possibilities of human imagination, and hence even trying to conceive of absolute nothingness yields only mystery, not a conception capable of explaining anything else. Even if we could conceive of absolute nothingness, this theological strategy violates Rule 2 or Rule 7. This strategy replies on the principle that when we are confronted with a stark choice between

<sup>6</sup> William Lane Craig runs afoul of this difficulty in his modern version of this Kalām argument (1979). His later versions don’t fare any better; see e.g. Craig and Sinclair (2009). Graham Oppy (2006, pp. 137–154) details rationalist atheology criticisms, expanding objections over infinity along with additional problems.

conceiving something existing and conceiving nothing existing, some explanation is required for why such absolute nothingness prevails instead of actual existence. The supernaturalist offers the existence of god as the explanation for the difference: god created nature and hence prevented absolute nothingness. But wait—if god must be conceived as existing in this situation of absolute nothingness, then a contradiction ensues, and Rule 2 is violated. The theological reply here is that god is just always real anyways. However, why should god be real, instead of just absolute nothingness, since that absolute nothingness remains conceivable? Applying the same principle again, we see how something is needed to explain why god is real rather than absolute nothingness, and so something else besides a god must be involved. We are looking at an emerging infinite regress: no matter what is postulated to explain what is real, that very thing requires an additional explanation for its reality, and so on. When the supernaturalist tries to break this infinite regress of non-explanation by saying, “god is the one exception to the principle that a real thing requires an explanation for being real instead of absolute nothingness,” then Rule 7 is violated. Theology is better off abandoning this principle, but then the conceivable alternative to god can never be eliminated: nature itself may be the one absolutely real thing requiring no further explanation.

Although supernaturalism cannot get the creation argument going in the first place because nature may need no explanation, adding a supernatural god to explain nature violates reason in several more ways. Suppose a single supernatural god is postulated as nature’s cause. Either this god created nature from itself, or god created it *ex nihilo*, “from nothing.” If god created nature out of itself, god would have to create basic natural properties (mass, physical energy, space-time dimensions, etc.) from divinely supernatural characteristics, yet these things by definition have nothing in common, violating Rule 4. If god is supposed to have created nature from nothing, that notion ends up violating several rules no matter how such a creation is imagined. Simply appealing to creation “from nothing” as if it were self-explanatory, or as if god created without any cause, violates Rule 1. Imagining that god had a causal relationship with nothingness violates Rule 4. Saying that “god’s will” or “god’s word” created nature do not supply sufficient explanations either, however much they may appeal to the human imagination. We understand how things happen because we “will” them to happen, but we also have to have a causal relationship with what happens to (after I will that I stand up, my muscles actually have to forcefully stand me up). Similarly, my words can have effects in the world, because I transmit them with sounds or symbols that affect other people. Supposing that a mere ‘will’ or ‘word’ alone, even if divine, has causal powers only violates Rule 5. Claiming that god created nature from nothing is not the same thing as claiming that divine creation happened for no reason, but it does amount to an admission that a causal act of special creation must be forever mysterious.

Supernaturalist religions can try to depict divine creation in humanly comprehensible terms, resorting to anthropomorphic characteristics of god to make divine reasons for creation understandable. However, partially reducing god to humanly understandable dimensions risks more violations of reason. For example, if this supernatural god has existed for an infinite amount of time, then the unanswerable question arises about

why god waited an infinite amount of time before creating the world (violating Rule 1). On the other hand, if god is timelessly eternal, then there is no point in time when god creates the universe, leaving the universe's origin in time as a mystery (violating Rule 5). Furthermore, if this god is timelessly eternal and created nature in that timeless state, then the origin of nature was caused at no time and in no time (violating Rule 1 and Rule 2). Some theologians have resorted to claiming that instantaneous causes and creations are conceptually possible, but even if they are, theology must still prove that they can be real, yet nature supplies few clear examples. The creation argument proceeds from what we know about nature, not what we don't know about nature. Other theologians have claimed that god switched from an eternal to a temporal status just "in time" to create a temporal world with temporal causes, but proposing that god could make such a switch simply appeals to more mystery (violating Rule 4 and Rule 5).<sup>7</sup> When a supernaturalist theology ultimately admits that divine creation is a mystery that will never conform to expectations of reason, skepticism is happy to hear this confirmation of what it has been saying all along.

This confirmation can be heard in the most unexpected of places. The prominent Christian philosopher Richard Swinburne has insisted upon reasonable religious explanations as much as anyone. His book *The Existence of God* offers demonstrations of god's explanatory power. He first says that a proper explanation of something must include not only what made it happen, but why that cause was able to make it happen. This view of explanation captures the spirit of explanatory reason indeed. However, later in the book when Swinburne wants god to ultimately explain the world, explanatory reason has vanished:

... we have an ultimate explanation of some phenomenon E if we can state not merely which factors C and R operated at the time to bring E about, and which contemporaneous factors made C and R exist and operate at that time, and so on until we reach factors for the contemporaneous existence and operation of which there is no explanation; but also state the factors that originally brought C and R about, and which factors originally brought those factors about, and so on until we reach factors for the existence and operation of which there is no explanation. (Swinburne 2004, pp. 78–79)

It is unclear whether Swinburne intended to so generously permit any belief system to suspend a requirement for reasonable explanation where convenient. The skeptical standoff between naturalism and supernaturalism is the inevitable destination yet again.

A supernatural "explanation" cannot reasonably explain nature's origin. The alternative remains, that nature as a whole needs no external explanation, and only more nature can explain nature. There is more work for theology to undertake, of course. Theology can turn its attention to processes within nature, to seek signs of divine creativity there.

<sup>7</sup> Theological discussions of divine creation are discussed in such works as May (1994), Copan and Craig (2004), and Burrell (2010).

## The design argument

The design argument (also labeled as the teleological argument) proposes that a creator god is responsible for our universe's structure as understood by the best natural knowledge available. In our modern era, that means trying to account for such things as the universe's particular arrangement of physical laws and energies, the specific way the universe has developed into galaxies of stars and planets, and the emergence of life in its impressive complexity. The design argument hence presumes that anything having some distinctive regular order (and our universe, along with many things within the universe, surely qualifies there) calls for a reasonable explanation.

This rule that order must happen for some reason or purpose is a variation on the idea of explanatory reason that something contingent must be the responsibility of something else. The more regular order something has, the more it seems dependent on some particular cause for its existence. Something having very little regular order, like a lump of randomly arranged particles none of which are uncommon, strikes us as easily brought together under any number of prior conditions, so that no particular cause, and definitely no intentional cause, is needed to explain it. Something possessing a structure of patterned arrangements to uncommon parts, on the other hand, strikes us as an unusual thing requiring some highly specific sort of cause to bring just that special thing into existence. Things in the world come in degrees of order, so there is a range for explanation, from no particular explanation to specific explanation. The world does not strike us as divided sharply into two categories of things needing explanation and things needing no explanation, because all natural things deserve explanations, as explanatory reason demands. Thanks to the natural and life sciences, we understand how natural processes produce natural things, such as geological processes producing mountains and forests producing new trees. Cosmology describes how stars condensed from the early universe's first atoms and then formed into galaxies, and physics is now describing how the first atoms formed from the earliest particles out of the big bang.

As far as theology is concerned, the argument from design is only concerned with those natural things possessing an order so highly structured and improbable that no natural process could be responsible, but only a supernatural creator must be involved. What would those natural things be? Let's set aside pseudo-design arguments rejecting sound science (such as the biological evolution of organisms) and weak design arguments supposing that some things in nature will never be explained by science (how could theology know this in advance?). Responsible design arguments acknowledge science's impressive powers and only ask whether a few things still reasonably seem to require an explanation from beyond nature. Retrograde theologies around the world haven't given up on attacking evolution, of course, and pseudo-scientific creationist postures like 'intelligent design' call for scientific and atheological refutation.<sup>8</sup> Conceding science's vast capacity for explaining matters within the universe, modern theology has turned its attention towards the whole universe itself. This 'universal'

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<sup>8</sup> On intelligent design, consult [Behe \(2007\)](#), [Dembski and McDowell \(2008\)](#), and [Monton \(2009\)](#). Atheological rejections of intelligent design are included in [Pennock \(2001\)](#) and [Edis and Young \(2006\)](#).

design argument for god begins by making two claims: that the universe's regular order is so highly structured that it is naturally improbable, and that anything that improbable requires a supernatural designer rather than just a natural explanation. If these two claims are indeed reasonable, believing in the existence of a supernatural god may be reasonable. The overall skeptical strategy counter-argues that the first claim is not sufficiently justified by either reason or science (violating Rule 5), and that the second claim is weak because it relies on a principle saying that "order cannot come from disorder," leaving the argument in violation of several rules.

The first theological claim, that the universe is so highly structured that it is naturally improbable, cannot be demonstrated by theology. The naturalistic possibility that our universe originated from a prior universe, or some portion of a prior universe (like a black hole), or some interaction between prior universes, and so on, cannot be ruled out by theology. The fact that science does not yet favor one origin account over another is not relevant here; theology must concede that its universal design argument must firmly assume that no natural origin to our universe is conceivably possible. Yet several cosmological theories are already conceiving natural origins for universes, and although they are highly speculative at this early stage of inquiry, there may be no necessary reason why cosmology must forever fail. Unless theology can prove that cosmology must forever fail, so that a supernatural explanation is needed, theology cannot conclude that a god is the only sufficient explanation. The design argument probably fails to supply a sufficient reason to conclude that a god exists, and it may never be able to demonstrate that a designing god is a necessary explanation.

The most generalized form of the design argument starts from the fact that our universe displays a regular structure, a structure describable (to a high degree) by mathematical tools. Regardless of whether we would ever be able to tell how probable or not this structure happens to be, there is one unquestionable fact: our universe has structure. Why does mathematics apply to the universe at all? This generic design argument judges that the best explanation for structure is a designer god who selected a structure. Presumably the alternatives to our actual universe would either be no universe at all (so this argument degenerates back to the creation argument), a created universe with no structure (but why would a god bother to create such a useless thing), or an uncreated eternal universe without any regular structure (a universe of sheer chaos) that eventually produced universes with structures. Setting the first two options aside, theology would have to rule out the third option, and also rule out naturalism's fourth option, that universes with structure have always existed, requiring no divine creator. The third option is an odd metaphysical notion, but philosophers have contemplated it—American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce even attempted to mathematically demonstrate its plausibility. And theology can't rule out the fourth option, as explained in the previous section. If this generic design argument insists that the only cause for a structured universe is something itself having a structure, the naturalist can agree, and point out that the theist gives no reason (thus violating Rule 5) for preferring a supernatural creator over a natural creator. The question, "Why does mathematics apply to our universe?" can be answered with the naturalistic option that eternal nature always had structure, and that structure produced the actual structure of our universe through the big bang.

A version of the universal design argument, the “fine-tuning” argument, attempts to depict our universe as so improbably ordered that it becomes unreasonable to think that prior natural processes could be responsible. This fine-tuning argument points to the delicate arrangement of basic universal laws permitting such things as the universe growing to its present scale, or the universe developing conditions permitting life to arise. Supposedly, to get a theological argument started, it must be believed that any small divergence from these basic laws would forbid the universe from looking the way it does now. What could ensure that just the “right” physical laws prevail in our universe, when they seem so terrifically improbable that even an endless amount of prior natural processes (including anything natural capable of causing the big bang, for example) couldn’t be responsible? This theological argument proposes that only a super-intelligence could have selected and crafted such an otherwise improbable result.<sup>9</sup>

We have to keep in mind that the fine-tuning argument is based on current scientific knowledge about the fundamental laws of nature. How much weight can be placed on today’s cosmology? Science’s understanding of the big bang and the fundamental forces and energies of our universe is in its infancy; any calculations for the “probability” of our universe’s laws are highly speculative and quite revisable. Recent excitement over the improbability attached to the “cosmological constant,” for example, presumes that cosmology now has the correct account of matters and won’t make large theoretical revisions in the future, but that’s even less likely. It may turn out that just about any universe’s origin that manages to reach the big bang stage must have more or less the natural laws that we observe with our own universe, so that our universe’s laws look more probable than improbable. It may also turn out that life could have arisen even if our universe were considerably different. Our kind of life emerged as it did to survive within this universe, and if the universe had been different, other life-forms might have emerged differently. There may be nothing special about our form of life, and getting this universe “just right” for us does not need to be viewed as anything special requiring explanation. Besides, it is very easy to imagine a more hospitable universe for our kind of life, so a design argument’s explanation that our existence is a good reason to believe in a creator violates Rule 5, since our existence could also be due to the universe naturally creating us without any plan or protection.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, there is no justification for presuming that naturalistic alternatives

<sup>9</sup> Many aspects to the design and fine-tuning arguments are discussed in [Manson \(2003\)](#). Recently formulated versions of this fine tuning argument, cognizant of scientific research, are presented by [McGrath \(2009\)](#) and [Barrow et al. \(2012\)](#). Several of the skeptical criticisms presented in this section are indebted to [Stenger \(2011\)](#).

<sup>10</sup> The universe’s harmful indifference initiates the “problem of evil” argument against a personal caring god who intended to create us. Theodicies try to reconcile a preconceived notion of god with the observed world, claiming that their god would design this world no matter what. Theodicies lack clear and comprehensive explanations why observed evils are actually good, leaving matters in mystery (violating Rule 1), requiring the same thing to be both evil and good (violating Rule 2), treating something as supremely good without proving a divine existence first (violating Rule 3), regarding evil as the responsibility of a perfectly good god (violating Rule 4), implying divine involvement without actually explaining it (violating Rule 5), blaming evil on a bad deity but leaving no reason for a good deity (violating Rule 6), or claiming that evil is necessarily from god but god is the singular being able to let evil happen without losing perfect goodness—unlike humanity (violating Rule 7). See recent surveys by [Drees \(2003\)](#) and [O’Connor \(2009\)](#).

are impossible. The fine-tuning argument's assumption that we must forever regard our universe's structure as incredibly implausible only violates Rule 5.

Summing up so far, the design argument's first claim rightly demands explanations for structural order, but claiming that the universe's order is too highly improbable to have a natural cause fails to satisfy reason. The second claim of the design argument goes on to offer a supernatural god as the alternative explanation for such a highly improbable universe, but this explanation fails to satisfy reason as well. To make a supernatural god more useful than nature for explaining a highly ordered universe, an additional principle besides "order requires explanation" is required to tip the balance in favor of the supernatural. The design argument traditionally relies on a rule that "order cannot come from disorder" in order to render it implausible that our universe's structure just arose from whatever accidental natural processes were available before the big bang. Perhaps there were natural "raw materials" around, some physical ingredients useful for universe creation, but maybe that's not enough, at least not enough for a complex universe like ours.

This second phase of the design argument proposes that complexity requires not just a special prior cause, but more specifically, some sort of intelligent design, by appealing to the principle that anything sufficiently complex must be created by something of even greater complexity. Of course, we have plenty of natural evidence that complex things can create similarly complex things. However, this principle that highly complex things require even more complex creators does not follow from any of the rules of reason, and science can't support it either, so it remains an unjustified explanation (violating Rule 5). Science has discovered numerous ways that greater order can be produced by much disorder over time, and how highly complex things can arise from long natural processes involving lesser complexity. Religion appeals to our intuitive sense that highly complex things are made by intelligences, and we have this intuitive sense because we grow up in social world where complex artifacts have human designers. However, just because we have good reason for applying rules about design to our social world does not automatically mean that this kind of complexity reasoning infallibly applies beyond that social world. Theology would have to claim that we can only be reasonable if we apply this complexity principle everywhere. No theological argument has successfully justified this claim (violating Rule 5 again), and theology only violates more rules of reason by staunchly relying on it. If we must always apply the complexity principle in every context, then it presumably applies to this proposed creator god as well. Since the creator of our highly complex universe must be even more complex, then the complexity argument applies to this god as well, and we must infer that some even more complex god created the god that created our universe, as so on.

Avoiding this regress problem is impossible. Proposing a "maximally" or "perfectly" complex god violates Rule 1 (what we are supposed to be imagining is a mystery beyond human comprehension) and it also violates Rule 6 (for all we know, this "maximally" complex thing might simply be the entirety of nature). Theologians are aware of these problems, and some instead propose that the one creator god is actually quite simple, so that the complexity principle can't apply to god. However, trying to imagine a perfectly simple god also stretches the human imagination beyond its limits (violating Rule 1) and leaves god far too simple to be able to explain anything

as complex as the universe (violating the “order requires explanation” version of Rule 5). And if simplicity could actually create our universe, then a relatively simple and disordered natural cause to our universe can be the alternative explanation, making a creator god an unnecessary proposal (violating Rule 6). If theology tries to avoid all these problems by making the arbitrary claim that this lone creator god is one thing exempt from the complexity principle, then Rule 7 is violated.

All the versions of the design argument are unreasonable failures, so supernaturalism is halted by another skeptical impasse. Perhaps it’s understandable why most theologies today look not to the stars, but within ourselves.

### **The revelation argument**

Supernaturalism proposes that the best explanation for revelations about a god is that a supernatural god actually exists. Skepticism finds many problems for revelations having any explanatory role. Revelations often yield no information (violating Rule 1), they contradict each other (violating Rule 2), they just repeat the belief “god exists” (violating Rule), their causal relation to a god must be mysterious (violating Rule 4), or they yield beliefs that different gods exist (violating Rule 6). Each religion could claim that only their own revelations are valid, but that violates Rule 3 and Rule 6. Even taken singly, a lone revelation cannot be checked for veracity without verifying god caused it (violating Rule 3 and Rule 4), checking it against other approved revelations (violating Rule 6), or assuming it carries its own self-evident character (violating several rules).

Revelation is usually taken to be a direct encounter with something having divine character. Rather than enumerating all the different sorts of events and things taken to be revelatory (miraculous signs and visions, profound experiences, prophetic pronouncements, holy scriptures, and so on), we can simplify matters by taking all of them to be putative revelations. The issue is not whether people can take them to be direct encounters with the divine and appear as evidence of the divine; people around the world evidently do so. The issue is whether they are actually divine encounters. The revelation argument claims that the best explanation for a genuine revelation is that a supernatural deity is involved. There are three principal forms to this argument. The first considers all revelations taken generically, without discriminating among them by who has them or what religion they lean towards. The second considers only the collective experiences of a specified group of people. The third considers only individual personal revelations, taken singly.

Revelations taken generically across all humanity exhibit immense variety. Revelations too mysterious in themselves can’t indicate how any god is involved, so relying on them for evidence of the supernatural violates Rule 1. The revelations so indescribable that mystics are left speechless can’t serve as evidence for a single inconceivably transcendent reality. Expecting these information-less revelations to be pretty much the same, or similarly about the same mysterious god, violates Rule 1 and Rule 4.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Scholars of religion no longer blithely assume that all religious experiences are homogeneously alike, or have similar orientations to the same trans-experiential reality. Ineffability is just too convenient, and too

Revelations that do convey some information often contradict each other across religions, and even within the same denomination or church, so relying on them all for evidence pointing to a supernatural god violates Rule 2. Revelations amounting to just “god exists” can’t count as evidence without violating Rule 3. Taking revelations to be supernatural things themselves also violates Rule 3, but if revelations are entirely natural (as brain states, say) then the revelation argument mysteriously connects two things having nothing in common, violating Rule 4. Revelations often yield beliefs by different people about very different gods, so taking revelations as explanations for just one supernatural god violates Rule 6. Excluding revelations that appear to be about different gods and elevating low-information mystical experiences to the status of ‘truly’ being about the one genuine mysterious god violates Rule 6. All these violations lead skeptics to judge that the argument for god from generic revelation is a failure.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than respect all revelations, religious believers typically claim that only some collective experiences supply revelation evidence: just those similar experiences of the same sort of god. Indeed, many religions are based on a small set of near-identical experiences about the ‘same’ god by a small group of people, in order to avoid the violations of reason already noted. This special set of revelations can serve as an authoritative guide to proper religious beliefs, useful for instruction in the religion and for testing any new revelations for validity. However, there is insufficient reason why just this group’s set of similar experiences should count as the only valid revelations. The group should not claim that no explanation exists or that tradition must be blindly obeyed (violating Rule 1). They should not claim that god approves of just this set, since that assumes that god exists (violating Rule 3). If the group claims that no other experiences belong because they are too different from the basic set, this justification is circular by first assuming this group’s validity (again violating Rule 3). If the group claims their set of revelations seem like the best about god to them, any other group could appeal to the same justification for their revelations and their god as well (violating Rule 6).

An argument from scriptural testimony for god runs into several violations in a similar manner. Theology cannot claim that scripture is so mysterious that god must be involved (violating Rule 1), or that all the world’s contradictory scriptures still point to the same god (violating Rule 2), or that god approves scripture (violating Rule 3), or that god creates scripture (violating Rule 4), or that scripture simply must be divinely inspired (violating Rule 5). Theological defenses of one religion’s scripture as the only

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Footnote 11 continued

tempting. Religions dictate appropriate language and understandings for unusual mental episodes, which then turn out to support just their creeds. Psychologists can apply a crafted set of criteria they define as a ‘mystical’ core and promptly find plenty of phenomena satisfying that set (Hood 2001; Paloutzian and Park 2005). Neither religions nor mystics are wrong about finding just what they seek. The actual diversity to spectrums of atypical states of awareness is undiminished all the same, while the import of such experiences remains radically underdetermined. Respect for pluralism has accordingly revived (Proudfoot 1985; Harmless 2007).

<sup>12</sup> It’s a rare book which systematically commits every one of these violations; coming close is Hick (2007). Hick had many predecessors seeking that elusive revelatory core to all religions; see for example Ward (1994).

truth about god runs into additional violations. Claimed that the one true god approves just this one scripture violates Rule 3. Simply claiming that a successful religion must be based on a true scripture has no justification, violating Rule 5. Claiming that any flaws in scripture are due to human ignorance or error, leaving the ‘true’ scripture (whatever that was) so perfect that god must be responsible, violates Rule 1 (where is this mysterious perfect scripture?), Rule 3 (why is a god assumed here?) and Rule 5 (what is the justification for assuming there ever was a ‘perfect’ scripture?). Pointing to a justification that any successful religion must have the most impressive scripture, and hence the most valid scripture, avoids violating Rule 5 but runs into a violation of Rule 6, since there have been many impressive scriptures and many successful religions about entirely different sorts of divine realities.

Arguments from scripture are a specific version of the general strategy of arguing from others’ testimony about revelation for god’s existence. That general strategy is just as unreasonable. Supposedly, the best explanation for people’s testimony about their revelations is that god has delivered these revelations to them. Since this argument relies on the existence of genuine revelations, already refuted, arguments from testimony automatically fail. Furthermore, the way that people testify or witness to some revelation or another cannot serve as adequate justification for taking their claims about god to be verified. We rarely take personal testimony to be very reliable even under the best of conditions concerning mundane matters, so it is unreasonable to accept testimony about extraordinary events or unearthly matters.<sup>13</sup>

The third kind of revelation argument focuses on individual personal experiences. By what method could it be shown that a strange experience is a genuine revelation of an existing god? Perhaps there can’t be any method at all, since theology is now considering only lone experiences taken singly, and comparisons against standard criteria or other experiences are not available here. There are very few options now. Verifying an alleged revelation of god could consist of checking to see if god is actually present during the revelation, but independent checking would require someone else having another experience of god, violating Rule 3. Perhaps verification of a revelation could try to track a causal relationship between god and the person having the revelation, but that violates Rule 3 again, and it also violates Rule 4. Admirers of revelation often argue that humanity would be lost without occasional contact with god, but no justification is supplied for why we shouldn’t simply consider ourselves as living without god (the naturalistic option), so Rule 5 is violated. Perhaps verification could consist of checking it against other revelations already verified, but that appeals to an arbitrarily selected group of revelations, violating Rule 6.

Theologians are well aware of all these problems. Some suggest that genuine revelations do not need any verification, because they have the special character of “self-verification” or “self-evidence” or “veracity”. Religions have all sorts of ways to express this special character. Revelations can “shine by their own inner truth” or “carry the stamp of divinity on them” or “transport one beyond the world,” and so forth. Appealing to some special character relieving an experience from external judgment leads to violations of rules of reason, however. Since only some revelations can have it,

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<sup>13</sup> Sophisticated versions of these points against hearsay about revelations and miracles are discussed in Fogelin (2003).

how does one distinguish between experiences truly possessing this special character and those lacking it? Claiming that revelations are the experiences having a uniquely mysterious quality which establishes a mysterious divine cause violates Rule 1 and Rule 3. Claiming that self-evident revelations are those that go unchallenged by common sense does appeal to a valid meaning for “self-evident,” yet alleged revelations about god are almost always challenged, so this explanation violates Rule 5. Plenty of religions can claim that revelations of their particular god possess the character of self-evident verification, so arbitrarily selecting only one religion’s revelation leads to a violation of Rule 6. When a theology is compelled to describe what this “self-evident” character actually consists of, it is driven towards some mysteriously indescribable trait they are always driven back to favorably comparing a revelation with other prior approved revelations (violating Rule 3) or comparing a revelation with an approved prior conception of god (violating Rule 3 again).<sup>14</sup>

All three forms of the argument from revelation—generic, collective, and individual—suffer from many violation of reason. Even if naturalism could not account for alleged revelation experiences, reason dictates a skeptical stance against their ability to prove that a supernatural god exists. Scientific atheology can undertake the task of showing how alleged revelations have naturalistic explanations, but rationalist atheology is more than sufficient to skeptically doubt theological efforts to infer a god’s existence from religious experiences.

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<sup>14</sup> Compendiums of arguments from collective and individual revelations, committing about every one of the violations recounted here, are in Alston (1991), Yandell (1994), and Swinburne (2004, chap. 6). Wider perspectives on the diverse roles for religious experience within religion are offered by Bagger (1999) and Taves (2009).

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