

# THE AVAILABILITY OF EVIDENCE IN SUPPORT OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

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## I

One of the arguments to be discussed in this paper is designed to show that from a religious point of view a great variety of theistic proofs are to be regarded as objectionable. On the assumption that elementary fairness demands that all of us ought to be equal in the eyes of God and in particular that access to the one thing that really matters to the theist, the salvation reached through a God-centered life, must not vary from person to person, and on the traditional theistic view which postulates absolute Divine fairness, it would seem that the believer more even than the non-believer, should regard it imperative to find fault with most theistic proofs. In the course of our discussion it will become clear that even if this objection were valid certain kinds of proofs are immune to it. The first few sections of this paper are devoted to the description of such a proof which also happens to be pivoted on the assumption of Divine fairness.

I shall also attempt to say something about the important general problem as to why most of the traditional theistic proofs, which at best point to the existence of some kind of a supernatural being with no more than one or two well-defined attributes, could have been taken to establish the existence of a full-fledged being endowed with all the specific attributes of the Judeo-Christian Deity.

Many people look upon agnosticism as the most rational position to be recommended to all dispassionate and enlightened people nowadays. The numerous attempted proofs throughout history and the equally numerous rebuttals are taken generally to show that theism is intrinsically an undecidable thesis and no facts are to be found anywhere through which its truth or falsity could conclusively be established. The evidence available lends itself to different interpretations; objective reality offers inherently ambiguous testimony concerning the question of its ultimate origin.

In the opinion of a wide group of thinkers, God's existence is a unique kind of fact in the sense that if it obtains no phenomena within our range carries its imprint and therefore the statement affirming it is essentially undecidable through any observation. Nor can its credibility be established through rational argument. Consequently, no feature of the accessible universe warrants anything but the



withholding of judgment concerning theism and atheism and the occupying a neutral, middle ground. The first half of this paper is devoted to the fairly detailed description of an argument showing why this widespread view is untenable.

We shall begin by considering a person *s* who may be regarded as a highly rational agent. He is to be assumed to have heard most of the proofs that have been offered for the existence of God, some of which he found more interesting than others, but none of which appeared to him irresistible enough to compel him to admit that theism has high enough probability for it to be mandatory upon a rational person to accept. At the same time he is not aware of the existence of any decisive enough argument against theism which would render anything but actual subscription to atheism irrational. To put this in symbols, what we are saying is that *s* is an agnostic, who does not find any of the theistic proofs adequate and therefore:

( $\alpha$ )  $\sim$  Bsg [ = *s* does not believe that God (who has the attributes ascribed to him traditionally) exists.]

At the same time he does not feel entitled to go far enough as to positively declare that God does not exist, that is,

( $\beta$ )  $\sim$  Bs $\sim$  g

Another important characteristic of *s* is that he is completely dispassionate and open minded and is ready to change his beliefs to accord with what seems most reasonable to hold in the light of a new and convincing argument he may learn of at any time. He is also reasonable enough not to tolerate inconsistent beliefs. In fact if he were to discover that there was an implicit inconsistency among the beliefs he holds or is committed to by implication, he will abandon some of them so as to make the set he subscribes to, consistent. Since he endeavours to be as reasonable as possible, he will not act arbitrarily but will relinquish those beliefs that objectively appear to be least justifiable.

Let us now suppose that *s*, in the course of his efforts to understand the nature of theism, learns that according to all the major versions of theism in the different periods of history, it is a central part of the Divine plan to have created human beings so that they may respond to him. Theists of different denominations believe that we have been placed upon this earth in order to dedicate ourselves to the realization of His will by observing all religious precepts. Religious acts are the means that bring us close to the source of all perfections and enable us to achieve our own perfection. Those who fail to live a Divine centered life, e.g. by denying altogether His existence, are bound to remain incomplete, truncated creatures and will ultimately suffer accordingly.

Thinking over these data leads *s* to the discovery, a discovery that has been made by many before, that theism seems to harbor a contradiction, namely, that

a being who is perfectly fair, determines unfairly His creatures' fate. The Scriptures declare 'All His ways are justice' and even in Natural Theology alone, His perfection implies that He is absolutely just. Now people with a natural sense of justice might be willing to concede that it is not unjust that persons who believe in God and His commandments, yet neglect their religious duties, should as a result be subject to suffering. But what about an honest agnostic, who has dispassionately examined all the evidence available to him and concluded that there is no sufficient rational basis for theistic belief? Surely it should be contrary to Divine Justice to punish such a person; how is it even thinkable that He would punish someone who did not sin willfully? Being an assiduous searcher of the truth, as we said he was, he seeks at the earliest possible moment to consult knowledgeable theologian T on this matter, to find out how he proposes to resolve this problem. The theologian T offers him the following, by no means startlingly novel, explanation:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God and anyone with a minimal amount of good will cannot, after having acquired some knowledge of the nature of the universe and having reflected upon the elementary characteristics of a Divine Being, hold consistently with rationality and reasonableness that anything but a full belief in the existence of God is warranted.

Consequently those who are mature enough to have become aware to some extent of the splendor of nature and the nobility of faith and yet refuse to embrace theism, must be people who find religious discipline unendurable and will therefore do everything to render their conscious mind oblivious to the basis of such discipline. Thus they are going to engage in a willful suppression of the theistic belief that has been implanted in their hearts and distort their natural thought processes so as not to see what they are reluctant to see, and regard well supported what they are anxious to have well supported. Obviously these people do not merely erase religious faith from their awareness but uproot all the traces from their minds that they have done any such erasure. These people will, of course, suffer the consequences of their disbelief, but in view of the manner in which they have promoted their state of mind, it is not to be viewed as any injustice being perpetrated upon them.

Some theologians view the attitude of this class of people in less drastic terms. They would not suggest that the members of this class have necessarily uprooted a belief that was already entrenched in their minds. But as William James has explained in his famous *The Will To Believe*, the convictions we acquire in the first place are to a considerable degree shaped by our own desires. We are selective in attending to evidence, avoid certain influences and subject ourselves to others. It is possible for a person who is loath to submit to Divine authority to direct subtly his own investigations in such a manner that he is more likely to come across evidence hostile to theism than he would otherwise, and manage

to overlook most of what may be construed as supporting religious faith.

Also, more liberal theologians will not describe the subsequent loss members of this category are to endure, as vengeance wrought upon them or as constituting well deserved Divine retribution, but rather as an inevitable outcome of their own act. The salvation in store for the righteous is by its very nature something that cannot be partaken of by those who have deliberately alienated themselves from the Divine and who have freely chosen a way of life that leads them away from where religious fulfillment is to be found.

Be that as it may, any theist should find it difficult to deny that the faithless are bound to suffer some kind of loss. After all it is the core of all religious thought that a God-centered life is the sublimest kind of existence. Hence those who fail to embrace it inevitably deprive themselves of the greatest means for self-enhancement.

The theist is bound to rule out the existence of people who with all the good will at their disposal are incapable of seeing the truth of religion. If there were such people then of necessity they would either have to endure the loss of something precious or they would not have to. The latter is ruled out, as we have said, because there is bound to be some kind of self-enrichment which can be achieved exclusively by religious worship only. But if the former were true, we would have an intolerable violation of Divine Justice. Ergo, there are no such people.

This defense of Divine Justice has been held in varying forms by traditional theologians of all generations. It is quite clearly stated for instance in *Romans* I, 18-20 where Paul says of the non-believers that "...they are stifling the truth. For all that may be known of God by men lies plain before their eyes" and warns that since there is no room for a plea of ignorance "...there is no possible defense for their conduct." The Abingdon Bible commentary explains that according to Paul one needs no revelation in order to become fully aware of God's existence, for Paul believes in natural religion and maintains that the only explanation for those who refuse to submit to Divine authority is that "Men...have been willfully blinded to the evidence of God. They have suppressed living truth with impunity."

We shall assume that *s* is capable of understanding this fairly simple theological explanation and in view of our previous description of the kind of person he is, he is bound to find it very reasonable. Let me hasten to point out that what he will find 'reasonable' at this moment is not the proposition that God exists. At any rate he is not going to find it more reasonable now than he found it before he discovered what seemed to him an inconsistency in Theism. His Agnosticism may therefore be said to remain at precisely the same degree as it was before that discovery. What he will find very reasonable is that *if* God exists then the explanation given by the Theist corresponds to the truth. The explanation seems completely successful in preserving Divine Justice. The only people who will

persevere in their disbelief are people whom it makes good sense to regard as sinners and deserving Divine retribution. Nor should it appear absurd nowadays after Freud that people hold beliefs they find too repugnant consciously to acknowledge and which they succeed in completely repressing.

Thus, according to T it is inherent in the very meaning of *g* by virtue of its reference to an absolutely perfect being who among other things must be assumed to be completely fair, that this being is not one to condone anyone suffering loss through no fault of his own. T is not unaware that some people have been singled out to endure poverty, disease and pain during their earthly passage but that does not present for him the same kind of problem. These bodily afflictions, (as well as such spiritual ones as the failure to be anointed to the High Priesthood or entrusted with a prophetic mission), he believes, amount to no more than temporary setbacks. In the final count T is convinced that everything will balance out perfectly. One who believes in an afterlife is in a position to postulate that whatever inconveniences an individual may have to put up with here and now, he will be duly compensated for in the world to come. T may well insist that no permanent loss is involved by whatever one is deprived of during one's brief sojourn in this shadowy place in which we are destined to spend the first stage of our existence. But on the other hand, when we are talking about losing what is ultimately in store for the righteous that is, about being deprived of a proper afterlife itself, then of course we are talking about a final, irrevocable loss.

In order to avoid the possibility of this kind of real loss by anyone inculpable T is forced to postulate that the just being he worships can be relied upon to make His existence known to all well-disposed people. Our friend *s* hearing this is bound to realize that  $(\gamma) (g \ \& \ Ws) \rightarrow Bsg$  must be true. In other words, T's explanation directly implies that in case *g* is true as well as *Ws*, that is, *s* is well-disposed, then it inevitably follows that *s* believes that *g*.

It will be seen at once, however, that  $(\alpha)$  in conjunction with  $(\gamma)$  implies by Modus Tollens that  $\sim (g \ \& \ Ws)$  or that  $\sim g \vee \sim Ws$ . In other words one must conclude either that *g* is false or that *Ws* is false. In the first case the Deity as conceived by T (who is absolutely perfect thus absolutely fair) does not exist and  $(\beta)$  is to be withdrawn. In the second case hard as it may be for *s* to swallow, he must abandon  $(\alpha)$  realizing that the reason he could find no evidence for theism is that he forced himself to overlook everything that pointed toward its truth.

## II

We began our discussion by stating that *s*, like many enlightened people nowadays, thought our universe warrants no other position but agnosticism since

objective reality offers no clear evidence indicating the existence of a supernatural being. Now, however, T is in the position to prove to *s* that his attitude is untenable. He can show that there is no basis for claiming that theism is inherently undecidable by rational means based on objective features of the world. T may well insist that our surroundings are replete with facts through which the status of religious belief may conclusively be established.

Now it goes without saying that ( $\gamma$ ) cannot be the subject of any dispute. Its truth is guaranteed by definiton; T interprets *g* in such a manner that it entails that God ensures that all well-disposed people believe in him. Assuming absolute fairness  $W_s \rightarrow B_{sg}$ , and thus *s* realizes that since in fact  $\sim B_{sg}$ , either  $\sim W_s$  or else  $\sim g$  is true.

The crucial point is that whichever disjunct turns out to be true it is decidedly not the case that reality is neutral concerning the status of theism. For in case  $W_s$  is false there must be plenty of evidence all around us pointing conclusively to the truth of *g* but *s* is not the well-disposed person he thought he was, thus failing to see what was in front of his eyes. He is intelligent and open-minded enough to understand that it is characteristic of all those who suppress any favorable clue from their consciousness that they genuinely lack all memory traces of such clues or of the act of its erasure. Such mental episodes are not detectable in principle. An avowedly loving husband can be made by a skillful psychiatrist to be confronted with indirect evidence to convince him that he harbors very well suppressed hostile sentiments towards his wife.

The alternative is to say that  $W_s$  is true in which case the reason why *s* could find nothing decisive in favor of *g* is because indeed no such evidence exists anywhere. In the present context, however, this fact must not be construed as the neutrality of the universe with respect to the truth of religion. T is committed to the view that if contrary to his existing conviction, the universe did not contain conclusive evidence in support of *g* that itself amounted to decisive evidence that *g* was false. It is his conviction that Divine justice is incompatible with the creation of a universe that did not contain sufficiently convincing evidence available to all testifying to His existence. It follows from the theological explanation leading to ( $\gamma$ ) that a universe devoid of easily accessible observational data affirming God's existence is a universe which bears positive testimony in support of atheism. Thus *s* is left with the problem to ponder as to what the objective nature of reality is: does it in fact speak clearly and loudly of a Divine creator except that he has shut his ears so as not to hear the distinct message, or does it decisively confirm atheism by its glaring omission to offer clear evidence for theism?

It is to be noted that we do not admit a third possibility, namely, ( $\sim g$  &  $\sim W_s$ ). It would be irrational to declare  $W_s$  false, given that *s* holds entirely honestly the firm conviction that he is well-disposed. It is only when no other

alternative is left that it is reasonable to assert that  $\sim Ws$ . Now if  $g$  is true, then, as has been argued, it follows that conclusive evidence in support of  $g$  must be readily available. Hence  $s$  has no option but to concede that his failure to see this can in no other way be accounted for but reluctantly postulating  $\sim Ws$ . However, if  $\sim g$ , then there is no good reason for saying that, contrary to significant *prima facie* evidence, that is contrary to  $s$ 's very strongly held belief, he is not well-disposed.

### III

It is not possible to take our next step before we have clarified to some extent an important consideration that should enter into one's deliberations as to which one of the many religious hypotheses to adopt.

Let  $g^*$  = a supernatural, but not fully perfect, being exists, while 'g' stands for traditional Theism postulating the existence of an absolutely perfect being. I should like to begin first by citing briefly a few reasons why if everything else was equal, then upon being confronted with the choice between  $g$  and  $g^*$  the first should appear preferable.

Various traditional arguments for the existence of God, notably the Argument from Design, the Cosmological Argument and Pascal's Wager, succeed at most in showing that there is some being behind the physical universe, without showing that he has the attributes ascribed to him by the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Argument from Design, for instance, tries to impose upon us the belief in a very powerful (but not necessarily omnipotent) and intelligent (but not necessarily omniscient) being, but seems to carry no implications concerning such questions as to whether he is merciful, forgiving or just. The fact that nevertheless these proofs have played such a large role in theological discussions shows that it was always assumed that if they yield any result at all they are bound to yield a belief in a Divine being with the characteristics of traditional theism. Thus a survey of the history of Theistic proofs show that at least *as a matter of fact* 'g' has always been regarded as superior to 'g\*' and that is why the proof of the existence of a mere supernatural being as such, if it were to succeed, would be regarded adequate.

Another point worth remarking upon concerning  $g$  and  $g^*$  is the attitude of the various opponents of theism and attempted theistic proofs. There have been many objections, for instance, against the Argument from Design. One objection has been based on the claim that there is no justification for postulating a designer when from an objective point of view the universe cannot be said to display any design, apart from the design we subjectively ascribe to it. Another objection has been that the argument gratuitously assumes that the universe in its entirety which of course is a unique system, may be compared to the various physical

systems contained in the universe many of which are known to be the results of intelligent design and may be ascertained to be such through certain characteristics they display. Virtually all the objections to the argument question one or another of the assumptions of the theist. Surely a more effective way of attacking the argument would have been to grant the theist all the presuppositions he deems reasonable and point out that even then his conclusion does not follow. Thus the most powerful attack would have been not to question whether there is actual design displayed by the universe itself or any of the other assumptions, but to point out that even if all the premises needed are conceded to be reasonable, nothing follows to help us to decide between  $g$  and  $g^*$ . Interestingly enough this happens not to be the most commonly adopted line of attack, which seems to show that many simply take it for granted that  $g$  is preferable to  $g^*$ . In other words, in general the atheist is prepared to concede that should all other alternatives be proven incredible and the sole question that remains to be decided whether we are to adopt  $g$  or  $g^*$ , then we are to adopt  $g$ .

Someone who is of the opinion that the methodology applicable when faced with the need to choose a religious hypothesis is essentially similar to the methodology employed by scientists, might offer a plausible explanation to account for the attitude just described. In science, generally the situation is such that no matter how large our body of observational data, if we can find some hypothesis accounting for all the data, we shall also be able to find an indefinitely large set of alternative hypotheses, capable of accounting just as well for the same data. To escape indecision we adopt the principle of simplicity and we adopt the simplest of all such hypotheses. There exists a vast literature concerning this basic issue, many aspects of which are yet to be settled. There is no agreement among philosophers, for instance, whether it is correct to assume that the simplest of all hypotheses that are identically related to all the observations is actually of higher probability or that our preference is based on some other consideration. Nor is there agreement on the question of the correct application of the notion of simplicity. However, very few people would wish to deny the overall validity as well as the universal importance of the principle.

In the case of hypotheses postulating the existence of a deity it might be argued that the less it takes to offer a complete statement of a particular hypothesis the simpler that hypothesis is to be regarded.  $g^*$  of course refers to an infinitely large number of hypotheses, some very encumbered, but even the least encumbered cannot be as briefly stated as  $g$ . The remarkable idea that 'absolutely perfect' is a unique predicate since it implies all the other predicates traditionally regarded as constitutive of the definition of God—one of the most strikingly simple and also great ideas produced in the whole history of western civilization—is of course due to St. Anselm. Thus, the brief statement  $g$  offers a complete description of the Deity it postulates. On the basis of  $g$  alone it is possible to determine for

any property P, whether the being in question does or does not possess it. If having P adds to the excellence of its possessor then an absolutely perfect being has P, otherwise He does not have it. On the other hand, even the simplest member of  $g^*$ , for example one which postulates an absolutely perfect being except that He is not absolutely just, would not be a complete statement without some further description specifying the precise sense in which he may be unjust.

It might seem for a moment that this argument fails since one is forced to admit that it is by no means obvious with respect to every property whether it adds to or detracts from the excellence of its possessor. It is usually assumed for instance, that omniscience is an admirable quality. Some might, however, argue that a being whose knowledge is forever incomplete and who is constantly seeking to increase it and thus never ceases from inquiring and learning, is to be more admired than one who needs no studying at all and is hence of higher excellence and perfection than the former, and so on. A follower of St. Anselm, however, could reply to a given property P whether it is an advantage or a liability to possess it, but not that in fact it is not fully determined what the true nature of P is. He might even go further and contend that it is even *knowable* in principle whether P is of positive or negative value. He might claim that a careful, thorough analysis would reveal that in the light of the various value judgments to which a person is already committed, it is required for the sake of coherence that he should ascribe a positive or negative value to P. Irrespective of whether one finds this contention plausible or not, it will have to be conceded that it is not easy to think of how one might go about refuting the contention.

On the Anselmian view then it would have to be agreed that  $g$  could be reasonably regarded as the simplest of all the hypotheses postulating a supernatural being who created and keeps looking after our universe. Sound methodology may be claimed to demand that if everything else was equal,  $g$  is to be preferred to all its rivals.

A somewhat more profound argument would begin by posing the question: what are the factors that are relevant in determining the degree to which it is rational for a person to commit himself to the existence of a given deity? It seems that the rationality of one's commitment is the function of two variables; first of all the higher the probability of the statement asserting the deity's existence, the more rational it should be to commit oneself to that deity's existence. Secondly, the reasonableness of one's commitment should also increase with the greater excellence and hence worshippingability of the deity in question. The situation is comparable to the one obtained in ordinary betting events. The degree of rationality of betting on a given outcome depends not only on its probability but also on the price associated with that outcome. The gambler's objective is monetary gain; consequently the amount of prospective gain as well as the degree of likelihood of a favored outcome play a role in determining the reasonableness

of a certain bet. Indeed the degree of attraction of a given bet is measured by the expectations associated with it, which is the product of the probability of success and the reward it carries. Therefore in the special case where several outcomes are equiprobable, the outcome carrying the highest reward is to be rationally preferred.

In a parallel fashion an individual seeking a deity to worship aims at gaining some great religious benefit. Consequently the answer to the question of which deity should attract more one's commitment is determined by the likelihood of that deity's existence as well as by His capacity of granting greater religious value to the worshipper. The magnitude of that value is a function of the worshippability he possesses. *g* clearly postulates a being with maximum worshippability. In the present context too, in the special case where different hypotheses are supported by identical evidence the outcome carrying the greatest satisfaction is rationally to be preferred. Thus reason dictates that *g* is to be preferred to any of its rivals.

It should be emphasized that the foregoing argument does not pre-suppose a mercenary attitude on the part of the religious seeker toward the choices confronting him. After all the value to be gained in the present context is of a sublime nature and only a highminded person would endeavor to pursue it. The benefit our agent is supposed to be after is nothing but the deeper satisfaction that comes from the knowledge that the object of his worship highly deserves to be worshipped.

We may thus enunciate a straightforward principle that should govern all rational agents in quest of religious faith, that is parallel to the principle governing rational behaviour in common betting situations. In the latter case, as we know, we have:

Expectations associated with *h* = Probability that *h* × Reward in case *h* turns out to be true.

The appropriate parallel expression is:

(W): Degree of justified inclination to worship D = Probability that D exists × Degree of Worshippability of D

The particular collorary of Principle (W) that is of special interest for our purposes involves the situation in which reason requires us to assign equal probabilities to the existence of, say,  $D_1$  and  $D_2$ , as when the relevant evidence is precisely the same in both cases. It is clear that in such a situation, regardless of whether the probabilities are small or large, as long as they do not equal zero or one, since the value is determined solely by the second factor, a person's attitude will be shaped entirely by the relative degrees of worshippability of  $D_1$  and  $D_2$ .

Now we come to the point of this section, which is T's argument that *s* is

obliged to abandon the middle position he has taken up and move toward embracing theism. Let  $g_1^*$  = An almost perfect being exists who (in particular) lacks complete justice.

Suppose  $s$  is agnostic with respect to  $g^*$  as well and hence the counterparts of  $(\alpha)$  and  $(\beta)$  are also true i.e.

$$(\alpha^*) \sim Bsg^* \text{ and } (\beta^*) \sim Bs \sim g^*$$

Does it inevitably follow that he has to accept also

$$(\gamma^*) (g^* \ \& \ Ws) \rightarrow Bsg^*?$$

Clearly the answer is no. We recall that we are forced to accept  $(\gamma)$  because it was incompatible with perfect justice that His existence should not be evident to well-disposed individuals. But  $g^*$  refers to a being who is not absolutely just and thus  $(\gamma^*)$  need not be postulated in order to render  $g^*$  consistent.

Now it seems reasonable to claim that before being apprised of T's account concerning the availability to evidence in support of religious belief  $s$  was able to hold the following views concerning what theism actually amounts to:

- (a) It requires a person to hold on to his faith even without being able to resolve the difficulty concerning Divine fairness and in spite of it.
- (b) Theism is in fact correctly expressed by one of the propositions belonging to  $g^*$  in which case no puzzlement arises in the first place.

In case (a): the fact that the problem of fairness continues to be hanging over religious belief affects to some extent its credibility of theism. Given however Principle (W) and that the evidence relevant to  $g$  is identical to that which is relevant to  $g^*$  and thus they are confirmed precisely to the same degree, it is reasonable to have higher inclination to accept  $g$  than  $g^*$ .

It is plausible to suggest that if  $s$ , like many other people unfamiliar with T's thesis, has regarded himself earlier to be occupying a position equidistant from the two extremities involving religious belief, then T's explanation should cause him to shift somewhat in the direction of theism, regardless of whether his previous position was (a) or (b). After all, had (a) been the case then the first of the factors of the right-hand side of (W), the credibility of theism, would have been lower than what it has become now, and if (b) had been true then the second factor, the degree of worshippability of the Divine being postulated, would have been less than it is now.

#### IV

The foregoing argument is clearly of a somewhat restricted scope. Our friend  $s$  clearly subscribes to certain presuppositions are not shared by everyone.

Relevant to our argument among these is his belief that in the context of the commonly known evidence rationality should place a person in a position that is precisely midway between theism and its definite denial and that Divine perfection presupposes equal and readily available access to evidence in support of religious belief. Clearly our argument does not work for an individual who is not willing to make these assumptions. In addition to that, and more importantly, some might conclude that even given all of *s*'s assumptions the conclusion I have reached is of little interest. After all what I could claim is no more than the seemingly weak assertion that a person with *s*'s attitude is obliged to be slightly more inclined toward an acceptance of *g* than its complete rejection. Does anything much follow from this?

It is crucial to realize, however, not only in the present context, but indeed in the context of great many other theistic arguments as well, that one may reasonably contend that the conclusion I have reached is by no means weak.

It is a basic principle of epistemology that in general a person is not justified in positively embracing *p* or affirming the truth of *p* unless the likelihood of *p* can reasonably be claimed to be very high. While it may not be obvious how much support is required for *p* before a rational person is permitted or required to subscribe to *p*, one would hardly claim that in the context of such weak evidence makes the probability that *p* only slightly more than half, *p* is acceptable. Thus, in general there are three possibilities—first when the probability of *p* is higher than *n* (where *n* is according to most people closer to 1 than to ½), in which case reason requires the acceptance of *p*. Second, when the probability that *p* is false is more than *n* which is a situation that demands the acceptance of not-*p*. Third, the remaining cases in which one is to stay neutral with respect to a commitment either to *p* or to not-*p*. Staying neutral means withholding judgments and implies not merely that one neither asserts *p* nor not-*p*, but that one refrains from all actions the success of which presuppose the truth of *p* or the falsity of *p*. This means that one should avoid situations in which one must act either on assuming *p* or on assuming not-*p*.

Such an attitude of neutrality is possible with respect to a large set of propositions. For example, in the case of 'Fred is a suitable candidate for the chairmanship of the board of directors' if I positively embrace it then it may be reasonable that I should vote for Fred. On the other hand, if I have sufficient reason to believe that the proposition is false, I ought to vote against him. Otherwise I should withhold judgment, which in this case amounts to refraining from any vote. Or if '*p*' = '*i* is a reasonably priced useful product,' then positive acceptance implies that whenever I should be in the need of that kind of product I should not refrain from buying it, while the rejection of *p* may imply among other things, that upon being requested to sign a petition to ban *i* from the market I should not feel obliged to refuse. A position of neutrality in this case should

imply my abstaining from all such positive and negative acts with respect to *i*. It may in general be claimed that toward any *p* that is a down-to-earth empirical statement concerning a limited segment of reality the three attitudes mentioned are possible, but not toward very basic propositions, propositions that are all embracing, affecting every aspect of existence. I have claimed elsewhere for instance that with respect to the claim concerning the validity of induction it is impossible to remain completely neutral. It is impossible to withhold judgment about all empirical statements and refrain from relevant acts accordingly since it is impossible for an inhabitant of the universe to abstain from all actions presupposing an empirical hypothesis, e.g. avoid standing here because of the uncertain security of this place, and at the same time also avoid standing anywhere else too.

Similarly, *g* is very different from the two propositions considered earlier. The basic epistemological principle I have mentioned does not apply to *g*. If *g* is true then a vast number of special activities must occupy the central part of every person's life. One either engages in these activities as demanded by *g* or one fails to do so and thereby positively violates the implications of *g*. There just is no middle way in which one neither positively practice what is demanded by *g* nor positively violates it. The epistemic principle which recognises three possible attitudes toward a given proposition cannot apply in the context of a proposition like *g*. Thus given that there exists no way of action which would reflect a truly neutral position the theist may therefore reasonably claim that here the rule must be that positive acceptance is rationally required either of *g* or *-g* as soon as there is any evidence or argument pointing more in one direction than the other.

## V

Further brief reflection upon T's argument, which led to the formulation of (δ) should reveal a basic objection that may be levelled against most attempted theistic proofs. This is an objection one comes across from time to time, yet for some reason a fully articulated statement of it is hard to find anywhere in the literature. Remarkably enough, the objection is such that it is not even necessary to examine in full detail a given proof in order to raise the objection against it. Furthermore, strange as it may sound initially, the more ingenious and the more convincing the proof the stronger the objection seems to apply.

As we saw, T is committed to the commonsense view that it would be incompatible with Divine justice if any individual suffered a loss due to his failure to conduct himself religiously, in case his lack of faith was not entirely a result of his freely willed choice but due to accidental, external circumstances. This implies that all human beings are entitled to be given the same opportunities and

that access to convincing evidence for theism should be equally available to all, and not vary with an individual's accidental circumstances. Suppose I am a non-believer who has hitherto resisted all the theistic arguments that I could lay my hands on; however, there exists a particular superior theistic proof which I could grasp and which I would find entirely convincing, but it just so happens that I shall never have the opportunity to learn about it. Is it fair that I should lose everything that according to a theologian really matters simply because of such unfortunate circumstances that are not my doing? Furthermore, should any of the truly convincing proofs be particularly ingenious and complex—like some contemporary versions of the ontological proof that require a good mastery of modal logic—then it requires a high degree of intelligence to understand it. It is very hard to reconcile with an elementary sense of fairness—no less than *s* found it hard to accept the fact that anyone is to suffer the consequences of his non-belief—that those capable of mastering elaborate logical arguments stand a much better chance of attaining spiritual salvation than their less fortunately endowed fellow beings. In addition, of course, concerning any novel proof that may have been lately constructed we may well wonder about all the previous generations who were not lucky enough to survive and have the chance to be informed of such proofs which could have saved them?

In the light of these objections T may point out that his argument has the unique advantage of not being involved in any such difficulties. It is central to T's argument that the real evidence for theism be constantly present in front of our eyes and that it speak clearly so that every individual is capable of understanding it irrespective of his innate logical talents or the amount of training he has had or the knowledge he happens to possess. All that T's argument sets out to demonstrate is how an individual who has willfully suppressed his belief that *g*, maintaining that the universe contains no firm evidence in favor or against it, can be made aware of the error of his position. But then to a person who in fact has certain beliefs in his subconscious mind and is genuinely desirous to bring those to the surface of his conscious awareness, indefinitely many ways are available to achieve this end. Different psychologists will recommend different approaches depending on the patient's personal history, temperament and predilections. T's argument is of special interest only because it provides a general, logical method of changing a person's beliefs which does not require a personal acquaintance with that person and is entirely independent of his individual data and the circumstances of his life.

It should seem therefore possible for T to maintain that his proofs cannot be a source of unfair discrimination with respect to the success in obtaining religious enlightenment. The reason is that three kinds of individuals are possible: those for whom any sort of proof like T's is superfluous; those for whom his proof may be of help but then for those people many other means at least as effective are

available as well and finally those who will find it entirely useless. The first category consists of well disposed people who require no help from any philosopher or theologian since they can clearly hear "the heaven speak of His glory and the firmament His handiwork." The second category contains individuals who are anxious not to see God's existence proven to them but who are open-minded enough to entertain the thought that they may be victims of self-deception and are prepared to make genuine efforts to discover whether or not they have any suppressed beliefs. Members of this category resemble those of the first category in that T's proof is dispensable to them since these people do not need T's proof in particular as there are any number of therapeutic methods whereby a person becomes aware of suppressed thoughts, many of which may be self-administered and require no more than an honest, thorough-going interpretation. The third category consists of really resolute non-believers who are not willing genuinely to contemplate the possibility of self-deception. These people will not subject themselves to a painstaking self-scrutiny and therefore T's argument will be of no help to them either. Presented with  $(\alpha)$  and  $(\delta)$ , and hence with the disjunction that either  $\sim g$  or  $\sim Ws$  they will insist on being in a position of knowing for sure that they have no suppressed beliefs and that they have constantly kept their eyes wide open for possible evidence and have dispassionately examined all arguments they have heard.

It should be added that T's proof need not be looked upon as the one and only proof in existence that escapes the objection based on Divine fairness. Advocates of the Argument from Design for instance might make a good case for saying that even some of the most recent and highly sophisticated versions of their proof creates no problems as to how God could have permitted that an argument beyond the reach of so many should see the light of day. They may well contend that even in its most elaborate form the argument is ultimately no more than a rigorous, detailed articulation of reasoning available to the most primitive mind. It requires no sophistication at all, defenders of the argument would contend, to see that the wondrous phenomena surrounding us cannot but be the design of a Supreme being. It is only that the more sophisticated a person, the more he may be capable of explaining the logical reasons for why those phenomena may be legitimately taken as confirming Divine design.

I am not sure, however, that a more radical reply to the objection from Divine fairness may not be available, a reply which will permit the construction of any sort of theistic proof at any time. The reply would be based on the shared presupposition that elementary fairness demands that everyone should be given the same chance to obtain religious salvation and that in particular the amount of good will required in order to see the truth of theism should not vary from individual to individual. At the same time one need not agree that this implies that every evidence and proof must therefore be equally available to everyone.

We must remember that different people have been created with different temperaments and what rationally appeals to one person does not necessarily do so to another. Some people are greatly impressed by arguments based on concrete tangible and visible evidence even if the argument is not one hundred percent rigorous; others have a special predilection for abstract reasoning. Also the amount of persuasion required very much depends on the general climate of opinion in which an individual may find himself. In a generation in which certain presuppositions made by all in earlier times are no longer taken for granted, a proof may be required for that for which in the past no one required a proof. To put it briefly therefore: the different availability of proofs for theism need not be interpreted as signs of discrimination, since it may be necessary to compensate for the initial differences that may exist in the mental and emotional facilities of different individuals and in the conditioning he has inevitably undergone in the society of which he is a member.

### *CONCLUSION*

We have seen that a sufficiently open-minded person in the sense of one prepared to admit that one can have no guarantee that one does not have certain suppressed beliefs too repugnant to him to hold consciously, may be shown that the assumption that complete fairness is a necessary property of a perfect Divine being gives rise to an argument that should make him lean toward theism.

We have also seen that the traditional, Anselmian theistic proposition is unique among the infinitely many propositions that postulates a supernatural creator and supervisor of human affairs and that by virtue of its very meaning rationality demands that one's tendency to embrace that particular proposition i.e. to embrace *g*, should be greater than the tendency to embrace a belief in any other kind of deity.

Finally, we have had a brief discussion of an argument as to why the theist himself may have good reasons, based on the assumption of complete Divine fairness, to try to invalidate most of the alleged proofs for the existence. Strange as it may sound at first, according to this argument, the more persuasive and the more decisive the proof is claimed to be, the more reason for the theist to want to find fault with it. However, we have seen that the argument can be resisted.<sup>1</sup>

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### NOTE

1. I am indebted to Professor T. V. Morris for the enlightening discussions we have had on the subject of this paper.