

# Four Secular Arguments for Theism

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Questions about the existence of God have engaged humans since antiquity. Opinions have ranged from complete and willing acceptance of the notion of a higher power to outright rejection. Richard Swinburne, a professor at the University of Oxford, rhetorically asked why anyone should believe that there is a God. His answer in the broadest context was that it made sense that there was a God to explain why we have the world that we do, including the development of highly cognitive animals and the realization of scientific laws. In his essay, "The Justification of Theism," he presents four major types of arguments to support his assertion that God does exist.

The first type of argument that Swinburne presents is that of induction. An inductive argument is one in which premises provide justification for supporting the probable<sup>1</sup> truth of the conclusion. With an inductive argument, the author of the contention does not think that the truth of the premises definitively establishes the veracity of the conclusion, but nonetheless believes that their plausibility provides good reason to believe that the conclusion is true. Inductive arguments can appeal to any consideration that might be thought relevant to the probability of the truth of the conclusion. Inductive arguments, therefore, can take very wide ranging forms, including arguments pertaining to statistical data, generalizations from prior experiences, appeals to authority, and relationships of a causal nature.

Swinburne believes that each little clue leading to the existence of God is considered a bit of evidence, and all evidence mounts up cumulatively making the hypothesis believable. To be believable, he wrote that arguments must satisfy three different criterions. First, what is observed must not be very likely to occur in the normal course of events. Secondly, what is observed is much more likely to be expected if the hypothesis were true. Thirdly, the hypothesis should not

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<sup>1</sup> In contrast, a deductive argument is one in which premises provide justification for guaranteeing the conclusion.

be complex; simplicity is valued in that it allows focus on a viable argument. The satisfaction of these collective criteria is sufficient for making an inductive argument worthy of belief.

The second main category of arguments for the existence of God that Swinburne describes is that from the existence and order of the universe. There are natural laws for describing various parts of the universe, but there is no law which explains those other natural laws. Science can never fully explain the universe since it requires the scientific method, and some things like the Big Bang theory are simply not provable by some ultimate and comprehensive natural law. The concept of God would help explain why there are natural laws in the first place, and would help us take into account that despite an apparent orderly universe, we don't necessarily know about all natural laws that may exist.

Instead of a scientific explanation, a personal explanation may be proffered. Words are used as tools between people to facilitate communication (Nagel 44). A personal explanation is the type used to explain many ordinary events, such as explaining to a friend that the reason that the car is so clean is that it just came back from the car wash and had a detailed cleaning. That type of explanation doesn't require a scientific explanation, yet is entirely valid in its purpose---to inform. Each personal view is valid in its own right, since it is, by definition, personal. Excluding delusional individuals, a personal view might be just the way to explain God since each individual can react differently to God from a personal viewpoint.

Natural laws of the universe help explain the matter in the universe, and scientists can make observations of natural laws of phenomenon that are consistent over distances of countless light years. Millions of years pass by over time, but the laws of nature still maintain their functional properties. While scientists can understand many natural laws through theories based on observable and measurable phenomenon, they can't and won't have a scientific explanation

for the universe that can be proven in a strict scientific sense. So, according to Swinburne, there must either be a personal explanation of the universe or none at all.

Swinburne also states that a hypothesis of God is one of simplicity. In other words, it is simple to describe God as omnipotent, omniscient, and unlimited in freedom. It is more difficult to describe God as an entity with limited powers, because then the discussion would require explanations as to why there are limitations, and of what type(s) are those limitations. It makes sense that there is order in the universe, and that there are regularly observed phenomenon, and it is easier to explain the universe if God is the causal factor. Without the God part of the equation, the universe would be much more difficult to explain.

The third type of argument for God is the argument from the evolution of animals and humans. It is essentially an argument based on the adaptability of life. Charles Darwin offered his theory of evolution by natural selection to explain how organisms evolved over millions of years. Adaptation allowed species to improve upon certain qualities over time. Swinburne agrees with Darwin's theory, but recognizes two matters that are beyond its scope. First of all, certain evolutionary laws are in place that describe how organisms evolve with regards to genetics and environment, but there is no explanation as to how these laws became the laws of nature in the first place. It is more sensible for there to be an intelligence of some sort that is behind these laws.

The second point beyond the scope of Darwinian theory is that it explains only the physicality of life. It does not explain the ability of humans to have thoughts, beliefs, feelings and to make decisions based on the availability of often numerous choices. We do have chemical events happening in our brains that are a part of the process of thinking, but Swinburne distinguishes these from mental happenings--- those that are beyond the function of the chemical

processes in the brain. The brain functions chemically, but there is no explanation to describe the function of the mind. God, as mind, works perfectly as an explanation in that it takes us beyond brain chemistry to describe a noncorporeal state. So Darwin's research might explain why some animals evolve, and why others go extinct, but it will not be able to explain all of the unknowns beyond physicality.

The fourth argument presented by Swinburne for theism is that based on miracles and religious experience. Miracles are not simply events that are not explainable by science. Many unusual things eventually are explained by science. Rather, miracles are events that seem to violate laws of nature. They beg an explanation beyond what science can offer; theism most certainly will accommodate.

Individual religious experiences are, by definition, subjective in nature. It is wondered how there can be so many different religious experiences without an explanation that unifies them all. Many individuals have felt the presence of God throughout their lives on one or on many occasions. It manifests as a feeling of a higher power that is beyond us. Since many others also feel this on occasion, there are groupings (viz., churches) that represent communities of those who are so affected. Experiences are shared in such communities and increasing credulity is experienced by all believers as a result. An individual view is legitimized when others have experienced similar views. An argument for theism is therefore a sufficient argument for belief in God. No one is saying that just because the masses believe in something that they are therefore correct. Many beliefs that the majority holds dear can easily be shown to be fallacious. However, sharing religious experiences using reasonable descriptions of such is enough to give credence to the belief in God.

Not every single unexplainable phenomenon should be rushed to explanation as being attributable to God. Many things are simply unknowns in the field of science. They may be eventually explained by science. Other things, especially those beyond the physical, will never be able to be explained by science. But a cumulative acquisition of bits of evidence can explain the underlying presence of God, that which is behind, under, around, within, without and through all things. According to Swinburne (Burr and Goldinger 125), we should believe in God unless there is contradictory evidence. It answers so much, especially a case for the existence of an intelligence and order beyond us that may be satisfactorily argued using all four of Swinburne's major types of arguments.

The idea of God (is) the idea that can explain everything else ... (but not) itself" (Nagel 99). One potential problem that critics may have with faith-based beliefs in God can be overcome with the removal of anthropomorphic qualities of God. It should not be assumed that God would behave as a human would, and would punish and reward people as a human would. Traditional references to God in the male gender can be confusing and decidedly misleading. The removal of gender and other human characteristics from the concept of God might actually make that concept more acceptable. God can be described as omniscient and omnipotent, but we are obviously not in possession of those qualities and therefore cannot comprehend what having them entails. We are finite beings, and we cannot think that we could understand an all-knowing and all-powerful intelligence. But proof of the existence of God in the form of the scientific method is not necessary. W. T. Stace<sup>2</sup> wrote, "To ask for a proof of the existence of God is on a par with asking for a proof of the existence of beauty. If God does not lie at the end of any

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Terrance Stace was an empiricist, and a philosophy professor. James Ward Smith, a colleague, has said that Stace's basic position was that "empiricism does not require the confinement of belief to propositions that are in any strict sense demonstrable" (Leitch).

telescope, neither does he lie at the end of any syllogism...” (Leitch). By carefully considering all four of Swinburne’s arguments, we have the most pragmatic secular case for the existence of God. Individuals can then decide for themselves if they want to add a religious component to enhance their personal understanding.

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