

## Is God an Unnecessary Hypothesis? Peter van Inwagen

In this talk, I am going to discuss two elaborations of the following argument (the “core superfluity argument”):

The only reason we could have for believing in God would be that it was necessary to postulate his existence to account for some observed fact or facts. But science can explain everything we observe, and its explanations do not appeal to God or to any other supernatural agency. Hence, there is no reason to believe that God exists. That is to say, the existence of God is an *unnecessary hypothesis*.

I take the statements ‘there is no reason to believe that God exists’ and ‘God is an unnecessary hypothesis’ to be very close in meaning. The difference, if any, is that an unnecessary hypothesis is, after all, an hypothesis, and it would be odd to call the proposition that the number of stars in the Milky Way galaxy with a mass greater than that of the Sun is odd (a proposition that there’s certainly no reason to believe) an “hypothesis.”

Now I ask you to consider two arguments, each of which builds on the core superfluity argument. If we add

Anyone who accepts the statement that God is an unnecessary hypothesis should believe that there is no God

to the Core Argument we obtain the *Strong Superfluity Argument*. If we add

Anyone who accepts the statement that God is an unnecessary hypothesis should suspend judgment about whether there is a God

to the Core Argument we obtain the *Weak Superfluity Argument*.

I will first consider the Strong Superfluity Argument. The following passage by the atheist Michael Scriven is typical of the reasoning that has been given in defense of Strong Superfluity.

Why do adults not believe in Santa Claus? Simply because they can now explain the phenomena for which Santa Claus’s existence is invoked without any need for invoking a novel entity. . . . As we grow up, no one comes forward to *prove* that [Santa Claus] does not exist. We just come to see that there is not the least reason to believe he *does* exist. . . . Santa Claus is in the same position as fairy godmothers, wicked witches, the devil, and the ether. . . . the proper alternative when there is no evidence is not mere suspension of belief [in Santa Claus], it is disbelief.

But this argument is simply absurd. It well illustrates my frequently voiced conviction that when highly intelligent philosophers (a description that certainly applies to Professor Scriven) who are hostile to religion discuss any question having to do with religion, their

IQs suddenly drop by about 60 points. As to this particular argument, one hardly knows where to begin. In the first place, there can be few propositions for which we have better or stronger evidence than we have for the proposition ‘Santa Claus does not exist’. In the second place, the argument depends on the following principle

If one has no reason to believe that a certain thing exists, then one should believe that it does not exist—and not simply suspend judgment about whether it exists.

(Or, at any rate, if it does not depend on this principle, I don’t see what the argument is. I concede it’s not as clear as it might be what the argument presented in this passage is supposed to be.) And this principle is simply absurd. Is there a woman living in Paris who owns two dachshunds and Russian Wolfhound? I have no reason to believe that such a woman exists; therefore, I should believe that no such woman exists. Really? No, of course not. What I should do, if I have no reason to believe that such a woman exists (and also no reason to think that no such woman exists) is neither to believe that there is a woman who lives in Paris and who owns two dachshunds and a Russian Wolfhound nor to believe that no woman who lives in Paris owns two dachshunds and a Russian Wolfhound.

It may be that Scriven will protest that he did not mean to appeal to that principle, but rather to the fact that children believe in Santa because, if he did not exist (the children suppose) the appearance of presents under the tree on Christmas morning would be inexplicable. When they discover that that phenomenon can be explained in terms solely in terms of the actions and operations of entities they needed to explain a far wider and more fundamental range of phenomena, they cease to believe in Santa—and in fact acquire the positive belief that he does not exist.

Whatever the merits of this story may be as an account of why children stop believing in Santa Claus (and I do think that even if it is right as far as it goes, it leaves a lot out), I don’t think it any implications for questions about belief in God. The parallels are just not there. Theists do not believe in God because certain explanatory hypotheses involve his existence. As Newman said, “I believe in design because I believe in God, not in a God because I see design.” (This is a point to which I shall return.) And the things that (according to atheists) God is postulated to explain—the existence of a physical world and the order it contains—have *not* been explained by science.

Some philosophers have attempted to show that God does not exist by appeals to variants on the Strong Superfluity Argument that deduce the non-existence of a thing from the lack of evidence for its existence combined with some *other* factor. For example:

If one has no reason to believe that a certain thing exists, and if its existence is *highly improbable*, then one should believe that it does not exist.

Now, of course, if this principle is to have any application to belief in the existence of God, those who apply it will have to suppose that the existence of God is highly improbable. And why should one suppose *that*? But, quite independently of that question, the principle is implausible in the extreme. Consider, once more, our Parisian woman who owns three dachshunds and a Russian Wolfhound. Let us give her a few more

individually plausible features: she was born in St Malo on March 26th, 1952, her husband's name is André, and she has a younger sister who is a forty-seven-year-old pediatrician. How probable is it that she exists—that is, how probable is it that there is a woman that has the combination of characteristics I have ascribed to my fictional woman? I'm sure you'll agree that it very improbable—very, *very* improbable. And I can assure you that I have no evidence for the existence of woman who combines them all in her person. Should I then believe that no such woman exists? Well, I certainly *don't* believe that that no such woman exists, and I can't see why I *should* believe that. I *do* believe this:

It's very unlikely—very *very* unlikely—that any such woman exists.

But given that I have that belief, why should I also have *this* additional belief:

No such woman exists?

And that *would* be an additional belief—for it is one thing to believe that a proposition is of very low probability and another thing to accept its denial or negation. If a coin is about to be tossed twenty times, there is less than one chance in one million that the result will be the sequence HHTTHTHTHHTTHHTTHTTTH. But it wouldn't surprise you if that were the result—and that indicates that you didn't believe that it *wouldn't* be. If you observed that sequence of twenty coin-tosses occurring, you wouldn't say, “Gosh, I was wrong! I thought that that sequence would not occur.” The two propositions

This coin is about to be tossed twenty times; the sequence HHTTHTHTHHTTHHTTHTTTH is one of a vast number of possible and equally probable results

This coin is about to be tossed twenty times; the sequence HHTTHTHTHHTTHHTTHTTTH will not be the result.

are just that: two distinct propositions. The former does not entail the latter and there is no reason why someone who accepts the former should accept the latter.

And here is a second “variant on Strong Superfluity that deduces the non-existence of a thing from the lack of evidence for its existence combined with some other factor”:

If one has no reason to believe that a certain thing exists, and that thing, if it existed, would be *very different from* the things we know about through experience, then then one should believe that it does not exist.

I can say only that I don't find the modified principle very convincing. In my view, we should be wary of supposing that a thing's being very different from the things we know about is even a weak reason for supposing it not to exist. As the biologist J. B. S. Haldane—a staunch atheist—once said (endorsing Hamlet's well-known remark to Horatio), “Now my own suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we *can* suppose.” A similar point was made by the dying

atheist William Herrick Macaulay, who, when his pious sister (the novelist Rose Macaulay) suggested that he consider the possibility of God and an afterlife, replied, “Well, there’s nothing so rum it might not be true.” If we take ‘queer’ and ‘rum’ to apply to that which is vastly different from anything we’re familiar with, these two quotations rather support my point.

There seems, in the final analysis, to be no reason to accept the Strong Superfluity Argument or any elaboration of it. What then of the Weak Superfluity Argument?

The only reason we could have for believing in God would be that it was necessary to postulate his existence to account for some observed fact or facts. But science can explain everything we observe, and its explanations do not appeal to God or to any other supernatural agency. Hence, there is no reason to believe that God exists. That is to say, the existence of God is an *unnecessary hypothesis*. Anyone who accepts the statement that God is an unnecessary hypothesis should suspend judgment about whether there is a God

Is it actually true that science can explain everything? A moment ago, I implied that it cannot. I’ll try to provide a brief statement of my reasons for believing this. First, it would be difficult to maintain that physical science can explain the existence of the physical universe. And, secondly, *given* the existence of the physical universe, even those who suppose that that object, the physical universe, is all that there is should admit that science is a human endeavor and that we have no particular reason to believe that the physical universe will not turn out ultimately to be incomprehensible to human beings. It would be safer to leave human beings out of the picture and to say that the fundamental constituents of the physical universe obey certain laws—laws that it may or may not be within the power of human beings to discover—and that everything that happens that has any sort of explanation at all has an explanation in terms of these laws. (The qualification ‘that has any sort of explanation at all’ is to allow for the possibility that some things are due to pure random brute *chance*.) We could put this more briefly by saying that everything is either due to chance or has a natural explanation. The statement

Science can explain everything—everything that has any sort of explanation at all, everything that isn’t simply due to chance

is really no more than a way of saying

Everything is either due to chance or has a natural explanation *and* if something has a natural explanation, human beings are capable of discovering that explanation.

And the second clause of this statement adds nothing of theological relevance to the first.

The principle ‘Everything is either due to chance or has a natural explanation’ could, in theory, be used as a premise of an argument for the non-existence of God, namely,

Everything is either due to chance or has a natural explanation

If God exists, something, namely, the existence of natural things, is not due to chance and has no natural explanation

*hence,*

God does not exist.

But that wouldn't be a very effective argument, since its first premise, our principle is so very close to the statement 'God does not exist'. Such an argument would be no better than this argument:

The world is uncreated;

If God exists, the world is created;

*hence,*

God does not exist.

But suppose someone were to argue this way:

All right—I can't use the proposition 'Everything is either due to chance or has a natural explanation' as a premise in an argument for atheism. But I *can* use the fact that that proposition is true for all anyone knows as a premise in an argument for agnosticism:

For all anyone knows, everything is either due to chance or has a natural explanation

If God exists, something, namely, the existence of natural things, is not due to chance and has no natural explanation

*hence,*

For all anyone knows, God does not exist.

And surely the success of science establishes the first premise of this argument? Repeatedly in the history of science, it has turned out that things people thought had personal explanations had impersonal explanations. The dethronement of the Design Argument by the Darwinian theory of evolution by random mutation and natural selection is only the most salient case of this. One could also cite, among many other examples, Newton's belief that the planetary orbits were unstable and required periodic correction by God – a belief that Laplace and Lagrange showed was false. Isn't it at least a very reasonable hypothesis, in the light of these examples, that no irreducibly personal explanation is required by any observed fact of nature, that every observed fact of nature either has an explanation that is

ultimately impersonal – or else has no explanation? If the answer to this question is Yes, we should be agnostics (at least in the absence of a proof or disproof of the existence of God that was based on some consideration unrelated to explanation).

But if one accepts that argument, why should not one accept the following more straightforward argument?

For all anyone knows, everything that has any explanation at all has an explanation that does not involve the actions of God

If God exists, it is false that everything that has any explanation at all has an explanation that does not involve the actions of God

*hence,*

For all anyone knows, God does not exist

The second premise of the latter argument is obviously true.

Moreover, anyone who accepts the first premise of the former argument will accept the first premise of the latter—for a natural explanation, whatever else it may be, will be an explanation that does not involve the actions of God. And every theist will say that a world in which nothing had an explanation that involved the actions of God *and* in which there existed beings like you and me would be a world in which those beings were uncreated. And anyone who speaks of such a world as possible—a world, that is, in which God exists alongside *other* uncreated beings—simply does not understand the concept of God.)

And if that more straightforward argument, why not the following even more straightforward argument:

For all anyone knows, the world is uncreated

If God exists, the world is created

*hence,*

For all anyone knows, God does not exist.

Imagine, finally, that the proponent of the Weak Superfluity argument falls back and regroupes and says, “I think I may have expressed myself badly. Let me try again. Here is the Second Weak Superfluity Argument:

We know of no consideration that forces us to believe that anything we observe requires a supernatural explanation of any sort. We should believe in God only if something we observe forces us to postulate a supernatural being. Hence, we should not believe in God.

Agnosticism is the result of a straightforward application of Occam's Razor, that is, of the principle that postulated entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity. You theists believe in what we agnostics believe in and more besides. You and we both believe in the world of natural things. *We* stop there. We don't deny that there *may* be more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy, but we do not affirm the existence of anything outside the natural world. *You* don't stop there. You go on to believe in a supernatural Creator. But believing in the world of natural things is belief enough. To go on to postulate a Creator is to multiply entities beyond necessity—to adopt an unnecessary hypothesis."

There are many things that could be said about the Second Superfluity Argument. I'll say just one of them. The argument exhibits in very pure form a presupposition of all superfluity arguments: that belief in God is an explanatory hypothesis. The idea is this: we observe certain phenomena (the existence of a World, for example, or the vast amount of order to be found in the the world), and we postulate God to explain it—as if we had noticed irregularities in the orbit of Uranus and had postulated a trans-Uranian planet to account for them.

But listen to what those who believe in him and serve him and worship him say about this "explanatory hypothesis"—just a few things out of many, many thousands. Speaking for the Jews, David sings

The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the Lord and his anointed, saying,  
"Let us burst their bonds asunder,  
and cast their cords from us."  
He who sits in the heavens laughs;  
the Lord has them in derision.

Among the Christians, the Apostle to the Gentiles condemns the pagans who have divided deity and portioned it out among many different beings (which some of them represent in their temple art as having the heads of beasts):

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.

And in the Holy Quran, words are ascribed to God which may be translated into English as follows:

It was We who created man. We know what he whispers in his soul, and We are closer to him than the pulse in his throat.

The God revealed in these passages is no explanatory hypothesis! I earlier quoted Cardinal Newman: "I believe in design because I believe in God, not in a God because I

see design.” Precisely. Since I believe in God, I am free to explain things by reference to his actions. Why is the value of the inverse fine structure constant 137.036? Because God decreed that it should be that. But I would never suggest that because life would be impossible if the number were much different, we must believe that there is a God who set it at that value so that there could be living things. (For one thing, can I be sure that the number is the same everywhere and always? Perhaps it varies from place to place or from time to time and that only a few relatively small regions in an immense physical reality are suitable for life.)

“Well,” says the agnostic, “if the reason you theists have for believing in the existence of God is *not* that that one needs to postulate his existence to explain some observed phenomenon, why *do* you believe in him? What other sort of valid reason could there be?” That is a large question. But I would remind the agnostic who asks it that the task I have undertaken is not to show that the conclusion of the superfluity argument is false. I have rather undertaken to show that the superfluity argument fails to establish that conclusion. One of the premises of that argument was

We should believe in God only if something we observe forces us to postulate a supernatural being.

In the present dialectical context, it is not up to me to show that this premise of the superfluity argument is false. It is, rather, up to the proponents of the superfluity argument to convince those to whom the argument is addressed that that premise is true.