

HUME'S STOPPER AND THE NATURAL THEOLOGY PROJECT^[1]

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§1. Introduction

A common response to natural theology arguments is to offer a rebuttal that I call “Hume’s Stopper.” It goes something like this: “Well, even if this argument is sound, it doesn’t prove theism, since the ‘god’ required by [fill in the argument *du jour*] is a far cry from the elaborate deity envisioned by traditional theism.” That is, one does not need to postulate a full-blown omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect creator and sustainer of the universe in order to satisfy the requirements of the argument (a first cause, a designer, etc.). In short, Hume’s Stopper is the accusation that any natural theology argument, even if sound, simply does not prove enough.

So, for example, Michael Martin rejects William Lane Craig’s famous version of the First Cause Argument^[2] on the grounds that it “shows [at the most] that some personal agent or agents created the universe,” and that “the creator or creators of the universe [need not be] greater than the universe itself.”^[3] And in critique of Bruce Reichenbach’s cosmological argument he charges,

Clearly the correlation of the attributes of a necessary being and the attributes of God does not make the probability of the hypothesis that God exists more probable than the contradictory hypothesis. After all, the correlations established are compatible with many rival hypotheses. Besides the alternative one of a completely evil necessary being, there is, for example, the alternative hypothesis of a necessary being that is neither completely good nor completely evil. Why should we not suppose that these rival hypotheses are more probable than the hypothesis that God exists?^[4]

Employment of the Stopper is not limited to atheistic philosophers. John Hick criticizes all versions of the Design Argument with the assertion that “the appearances of nature do not entitle us to affirm the existence of *one* God rather than many ...; nor of a wholly *good* God ...; nor ... of a perfectly *wise* God or an unlimitedly *powerful* one.”^[5] And William Wainwright charges, “Even if the design argument is successful, it shows only that the world is rooted in mind and reflects its purposes. It doesn’t show that this mind is omnipotent, omniscient, or perfectly good. The evidence may not even show that there is only one divine mind rather than several cooperating designers. Hence, the design argument doesn’t establish God’s existence.”^[6]

This objection is at least as old as Hume. In Part V of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Philo complains to Cleanthes that the Design Argument does not show God to be infinite, perfect, or even one. In a famous passage Philo muses over other possible explanations for a designed universe:

This world, for aught [Cleanthes] knows, is very faulty and imperfect ... and was only the first rude essay of some infant Deity, who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance; it is the work only of some dependent, inferior Deity; and is the object of derision to his superiors: it is the production of old age and dotage in some superannuated Deity; and ever since his death, has run on at adventures, from the first impulse and active force, which it received from him^[7]

Pamphilus tells us that Philo delivered these remarks “with an air of alacrity and triumph” (166). And the glee in his voice has echoed through the denunciations of countless philosophers over the last two and a half centuries. So natural theology, it seems to many, dies the death of a thousand disqualifications.

It is the purpose of the present volume to explore what the editors have called “The Humean Legacy” – the general mood of skepticism concerning natural theology that permeates much of philosophy of religion in the wake of Hume’s criticisms. I consider Hume’s Stopper to be a major plank in the Humean Legacy. While it may be argued that it is not altogether proper to attribute this objection to Hume,^[8] it is clearly in the spirit of the Humean Legacy and often emerges from quotations of or allusions to the above *Dialogues* passage and others similar to it.^[9] Undoubtedly, a refutation of the Stopper’s power will go a long way toward accomplishing the purpose of this volume – to show natural theology to be alive and well in the wake of the Humean Legacy.

It is the purpose of this paper to provide just such a refutation. That is, I will offer a detailed answer to Martin’s fair and important question quoted above: “Why should we not suppose that these rival hypotheses are more probable than the hypothesis that God exists?” My answer begins with the identification of an important assumption that Hume’s Stopper makes, which I will call “the ignorance assumption.” I will then argue that the ignorance assumption is unjustified, and that without it Hume’s Stopper cannot survive as a legitimate complaint against any standard natural theology argument.^[10] I conclude, therefore, that Hume’s Stopper does not deserve anything like the attention and endorsement it has received in the history of natural theology.

Two last introductory points need to be made. First, I referred above to “standard natural theology arguments.” What I have in mind is any of the arguments that one might find discussed in a reputable philosophy of religion text or a detailed study of natural theology. This includes the classical cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments, as well as many of their contemporary expressions. It also includes many of the arguments arising from contemporary

science, such as the arguments from consciousness and fine-tuning. All of the arguments represented in Part Two of this volume qualify as standard. The Ontological and Cumulative Case Arguments are special instances, since they focus on a wide variety of divine characteristics, rather than on a single characteristic, as do most of the rest. However, this makes them less, not more, susceptible to the Stopper. The more theistic characteristics an argument supports, the less effective the claim that some other entity might fill the argument's bill.

Second, there is a subtle oxymoronic irony to Hume's Stopper. The same argument is granted as sound and yet charged with a serious logical infelicity. This strange situation arises from the fact that natural theology arguments are thought of as arguments for the truth of theism, when in reality they are typically arguments for some significantly more modest claim – usually that a being (or beings) with a given characteristic exists (or has existed). Nonetheless, the arguments are traditionally treated by their proponents as reasons to accept theism. Indeed, it is this ambiguity that fuels the Stopper. The charge is that, even if the argument in question fulfills its specific purpose – proving the existence of a being with a given characteristic – it does not fulfill its broader purpose of proving the truth of theism.

To keep these specific and broader aims clearly before us, let us distinguish between the *minimal form* of a standard natural theology argument and its *extended form*. We can represent the minimal form thus:

P1) Phenomenon X requires an entity with characteristic A.

C1) Therefore, an entity with characteristic A exists.^[11]

The extended form adds to the minimal form the further premise and conclusion:

P2) The God of theism has characteristic A.

C2) Therefore, the God of theism exists.

Hume's Stopper, then, can be understood as the charge that the soundness of the minimal form does not entail or even suggest the soundness of the extended form.^[12] Put in this way, the Stopper seems virtually indisputable. Nevertheless, I intend to dispute it vigorously.

§2. The Ignorance Assumption and Alethic Evaluation

In the argument from design discussed in Parts IV and V of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Cleanthes makes much of the principle of proportionality between cause and effect, in order to argue that the design present in the universe must result from an intentional mind, just as design we find in physical artifacts results from intentional mind. However, Philo insists that this principle entails that Cleanthes "must renounce all claims to infinity in any of the attributes of the Deity" inferred by the design argument (166). The design in physical artifacts does not trace back to an infinite mind; hence, Cleanthes cannot assume that the design in nature does, either.^[13] Philo goes on to assert that Cleanthes cannot make any claims for perfection in this deity, for the same reasons. Moreover, there is no reason to assume that the designer is the omnipotent theistic God who spoke creation into existence once-for-all. Given that designed artifacts are inevitably the result of a long, slow process of attempt, rejection, and improvement, it follows that "many worlds might have been botched and bungled, throughout an eternity, ere this system was struck out ..." (167).

This line of objection is a clear application of Hume's Stopper. It is charged that the design argument fails as a proof of theism, since the soundness of its minimal form would still fall well short of proving the existence of so great and complex a being as the God of theism – that is, it gives no reason to accept the soundness of the argument in its extended form.

Moreover, Philo's retort seems irrefutable to many, atheist and theist alike. This is (at least partly) because Philo employs a presupposition in his refutation that is *prima facie* quite

plausible and would find widespread endorsement among critical thinkers. I will label this presupposition “the ignorance assumption,” and explicate it thus:

(IA) In assessing the strength of the conclusion of an argument, it is inappropriate to take into account any information not explicitly or implicitly contained in the premises of the argument.

A couple of explanatory notes are in order. First, I do not mean by “strength” the technical notion that word invokes in its usage in inductive logic. I intend IA to be applicable to inductive and deductive arguments alike, and use the word “strength” simply to refer to the appropriateness of the conclusion, given the structure and content of the argument at hand. Second, I do not mean for the expression “explicitly or implicitly contained in the premises” to have the formal force that it would have in discussions of deductive validity. I mean simply that a conclusion is proper only if it is supported in a recognizable way given only the premises and any applicable rules of deductive or inductive logic. In other words, no substantive “hidden premises” are allowed.

I have labeled the principle in focus “the ignorance assumption” because it asserts that we must, in assessing the conclusion of an argument, presume ignorance of any information not available to us via the premises. Even if we are aware of relevant information beyond those parameters, we cannot legitimately incorporate it into our deliberations. To do so is to consider “facts not in evidence” as it were – a seemingly obvious *faux pas* of any legitimate critical thinking exercise.

I have appealed to the jurisprudential concept of “facts not in evidence.” However, while such relevant information is legitimately excluded from a court of law, it is for reasons that are not applicable to the arena of pure critical debate. These venues have different goals. The goal

of criminal justice is not simply (nor even primarily) the discovery of truth. It is, rather, the enactment of justice, which includes proper consideration of the rights of the accused and the rules of evidence. The accomplishing of this goal often requires the exclusion of relevant information in order to preclude prejudicial tainting of the jury, benefit to the prosecution deriving from a violation of the defendant's constitutional rights, or other miscarriages of justice.

The goal of critical debate, on the other hand, is simply the ascertaining of truth. The parties in such a debate have no rights that need to be protected against full disclosure of all elements relevant to the discovery of truth. Furthermore, prejudice is avoided by eschewing emotional appeals and other fallacies – not by cordoning off information that bears on the truth to be sought. Hence, an appeal to “facts not in evidence” has a rather odd ring in critical debate, since such facts are by stipulation relevant to the conclusion sought, and therefore vital to the single goal of truth detection. As intuitively obvious as it may have first appeared, there seems to be something fundamentally inappropriate about IA.

This tension over IA can be resolved by noting that there are two distinct levels on which an argument can be evaluated. On the one hand, it can be evaluated as a piece of pure logical reasoning. Here the question to be answered is simply how well the argument adheres to the recognized canons of deductive or inductive logic. Let us call this the *logical* evaluation of an argument. On the other hand, an argument can be evaluated as an aid in discovering truth concerning the question in focus. Let us call this the *alethic* evaluation of an argument. It is important to note that the evaluations of a single argument on these two levels may differ wildly. An argument may fail miserably as a piece of pure logical defense of its conclusion, while nonetheless spurring us forward by great leaps toward discovering whether or not its conclusion is in fact true.

With this distinction in mind, my claims for the present section can be expressed as two-fold. First, the ignorance assumption is applicable only to the logical evaluation of an argument. Here the “facts not in evidence” must be precluded, since the purpose just is to determine the extent to which the premises (alone) support the conclusion. However, when the goal becomes not the assessment of an argument but the unhindered quest for truth, we cannot legitimately bar the door through which an argument beckons us, simply on the charge that the premises tell us nothing about what lies beyond it. The claim of Hume’s Stopper can now be spelled out much more explicitly as comprising the following claims:

- (1) Even if the minimal form of a natural theology argument deserves a positive logical evaluation, its extended form does not.
- (2) This poor logical evaluation of the extended form entails a poor alethic evaluation of the extended form as well.

So Hume’s Stopper is assumed to arrest the natural theology project because the (admittedly) negative logical evaluation of the extended form arguments is mistakenly understood to support a negative alethic evaluation of them as well. In the remainder of this paper I will argue that, despite their negative logical evaluation, the (extended form) standard natural theology arguments possess alethic power that Hume’s Stopper offers no muscle against.

§3. The Candidates Approach

I love the game of chess. And, while my play does not come close to that of fellow philosopher and contributor to this volume Victor Reppert, I have spent countless hours of sheer pleasure studying and playing the game of kings. One very important concept that any chess player must learn is the notion of the “candidate move.” At any given point in a game, there may be dozens

of legal moves one might make. Of those, there are only a handful – perhaps no more than four or five – that are *prima facie* sensible. These are the player’s candidate moves. Each one must be considered in turn to determine whether its *prima facie* sensibility survives *ultima facie*, and then to determine which of these constitutes the best move, given the position on the board.

The thought process taking one first to the candidate moves and then to the best move requires a great deal of cognitive consideration. First, it calls for *analysis* of the present board position. Analysis includes important chess concepts like king safety, piece deployment and cooperation, space control, material balance, and pawn structure. But such analysis is seldom sufficient. In fact, it is analysis that typically produces the list of candidate moves, and it hardly ever aids in narrowing them down. The player must go beyond analysis to *calculation*. This is the process of determining the candidate responses to each candidate move, the candidate counter-responses, and so on to a point where the situation resolves itself. The player must then be able to visualize the resulting position on the board and analyze it in much the same way as the original position was analyzed. It is impossible to progress from candidate moves to best move without being able to foresee and analyze the most likely outcomes of the candidate moves.

However, even calculation, essential as it is to good chess, is only a necessary condition for move selection, not sufficient. The final ingredient is *evaluation*. At any given time in the game, a good player has a *plan* – a tactical or strategic goal that she is working to accomplish. The determination of which candidate move is best often hinges on the extent to which each move furthers that plan. Judging this extent is the task of evaluation. Still, even the current plan is subservient to the overall goal of any game – securing victory or avoiding loss.^[14] It does no good to select a move that accomplishes a given plan (winning a pawn, say, or securing an open

file with one's rook) if the resulting position gives the opponent an obvious win.^[15] So evaluation works on two levels – the current plan and the overall goal. And evaluation on both levels requires more than analysis and calculation. It requires a vast storehouse of knowledge concerning what kinds of board positions typically do and do not lend themselves to accomplishing certain kinds of goals. It requires a deep understanding of the ramifications a position result may have many moves later in the game. It requires an intuitive feel that can only be developed and honed via careful study and frequent play.

So let us recap this overview of one of the most fascinating aspects of the world's most fascinating game. Simple analysis typically produces nothing more than a list of candidate moves. But the objective is not the production of such a list. It is the selection of the best move. To accomplish that objective, the player must move beyond the minimum information provided by the analysis and consider a great deal of information provided by the further steps of calculation and evaluation.

It is probably clear by now that I am setting up an analogy. At the end of the last section I distinguished between the logical evaluation and the alethic evaluation of an argument. These different approaches have different goals, and these different goals necessitate consideration of different bodies of information. The results of applying the two approaches to a given natural theology argument are analogous to the results of applying the two tasks of analysis and move selection to a given chess board position.

Analyzing a chess position is analogous to logically evaluating the minimal form of a natural theology argument. Even with a positive evaluation, one can do no better than produce a list of “candidate gods,” any one of which is *prima facie* as plausible as any other. It is this realization that leads the critic to conclude that the corresponding extended form is ludicrous – it

appears to select one candidate from the list in a totally arbitrary and unjustified manner. And it is here that Hume's Stopper has its force. Given only the premises and logical structure of the minimal form argument, there is no justification for moving beyond this candidate list to the selection of one as the best candidate for fulfilling the role required (designer, first cause, ground of morality, etc.). Just as simple analysis cannot narrow down a list of candidate moves, so logical evaluation cannot narrow down a list of candidate gods.

But like analysis, logical evaluation is only a means to an end. It produces a list of candidate gods, and simple consideration of the argument's logical merits cannot give us reason to go beyond this list. But there are other tools – there is more information to be considered. There are the “facts not in evidence,” legitimate and necessary in our quest for truth. So, just as narrowing the candidate moves to the best move requires much more than the information provided by the analysis, so moving from the candidate gods suggested by the minimal argument to the theistic god proclaimed by the extended argument requires much more than the logical evaluation of either.

But – and here is the key point of the analogy – if the consideration of this further information results in the selection of the best move, then that process vindicates not simply the calculation and evaluation, but the analysis as well. The analysis is a successful piece of analysis, even if it does not produce (on its own) the best move. So also going beyond the list of candidate gods and considering additional information to select the best god – if a successful endeavor – vindicates the original minimal form natural theology argument that produced the candidate gods. It is a successful piece of natural theology, even if it does not produce (on its own) the best god. A positive alethic evaluation of the extended argument will vindicate the minimal argument – it does not, on its own, need to narrow the candidate gods down.

This analogy then raises two questions. First, what are the candidate gods suggested by standard natural theology arguments? Second, can the case be made that the theistic God is the best candidate? Answering these two questions is the burden of the next three sections of this chapter.

§4. The Candidate Gods

It is my contention that the “candidate gods” approach – utilizing the “facts not in evidence” to conduct an alethic evaluation of the extended form of the argument – is the proper way to carry out the alethic evaluation of any extended form natural theology argument. After all, the search for truth does not take place in a vacuum, a sterile laboratory, or the anal retentive confines of a criminal court. A standard natural theology argument is not a “whodunit” mystery to be solved using only the information provided in its formulation. Rather, the argument shows the need for an entity displaying a given crucial property. When we ask the question, “What or who might that entity be?” there is nothing in the canons of rationality or fair discourse that limits us to the entailments of the thought process that got us to the question. To switch analogies, once the resumés of the job applicants are submitted, *all* information in those resumés becomes relevant. The rational thing to do is hire the most highly qualified candidate – not simply one who can do the job. This is the genius of the “candidate gods” approach.

So who are the candidate gods? There is, of course, the God of theism. I will divide the other options into two exclusive groups: the gods of other religious traditions, and what we might call “gods without portfolio” – divinities not touted by any religion but certainly within the realms of epistemic possibility. The whimsical fancies of Philo’s imagination enumerated in the quotation in §1 above are prime examples of such stipulated deities. The strategy for the theist is now clear. Given this list of candidate gods, it must be argued that the God of theism is

the best move, the best applicant for the job. The next two sections will argue that the theistic God is preferable as the entity satisfying the need revealed by a standard natural theology argument – preferable first to the gods of other religions, and then to the gods without portfolio.

§5. Theism and Other Religions

I will begin with the more difficult case to make: that theism is a preferable alternative to other established religions. My case here is threefold: (i) the enormous philosophical scrutiny under which theism has been placed compared to other world religions, (ii) the amount of natural theology work theism does; and (iii) the non-ad hoc nature of theism.

First, I submit that no other religious tradition has undergone the philosophical scrutiny that theism has. The only traditions that come close in terms of philosophical heritage are certain strains of Hinduism and Buddhism. However, those philosophical traditions have been intentionally and understandably sympathetic to the relevant worldviews, and little in the way of confrontive challenge to fundamental claims or basic apologetic argumentation are to be found there, at least not much analogous to the rigorous, analytical framework of Western thought's encounter with theism.

True, the sympathies of the Western intellectual tradition were firmly with theism throughout the Middle Ages, but the situation is disanalogous for at least two reasons. First, even in the officially safe confines of scholastic philosophy, rigorous challenges to and careful philosophical explications of the most fundamental theistic claims still abounded. The constant charges of heresy and official banning of books throughout this period are sufficient testimony to the constant presence of academic challenge to dearly held beliefs. Second, we have not been anywhere near the relative security of the High Middle Ages for many centuries. The challenges to theism just since the Enlightenment have easily outpaced the scrutiny afforded any other

tradition through its entire existence. (It should be noted, given the theme of the current volume, that much of the very best this scrupulous attack has offered is a product of the Humean Legacy – not just in reference to natural theology, but on many other levels, e.g. miracles, the nature of the soul, the case for naturalism, etc.)

Yet throughout two millennia of critical examination and over three hundred years of top flight antagonistic criticism, there have not arisen refutations sufficient to compel all thinking people to reject them. Indeed, at every historical period there have been enumerable scholars, fully appreciative of the best criticism of theism their day had to offer, who nonetheless retained their conviction and offered defensible responses to the criticism. This history of survival and thriving in the face of intense criticism sets theism apart from all other world religious traditions.^[16]

Here I must be clear about what I am and am not saying. I am not saying that other religions are irrational or that one cannot rationally reject theism in favor of some alternative view. I am not even saying that one cannot rationally reject theism in favor of atheism. What I am saying is that, after many centuries of debate, it is possible for one to consider fully the very best criticisms that have been offered and still rationally accept theism. Furthermore, no other religion has even *undergone* such scrutiny, much less survived it.

Second, one of the most remarkable features of traditional theism is the fact that it can be used to answer so many classical philosophical problems without significant alteration. So, for example, in the version of the Cosmological Argument known as the Contingency (or Thomistic) Argument, the existence of contingent beings is seen to require the existence of at least one necessary being. Theism provides such a being. Also, in the First Cause Argument, the fact of cause/effect chains seems to require an uncaused cause to escape an embarrassing regression.

Theism has long held that God is uncaused (or perhaps self-caused). The design argument requires an intelligence sufficiently knowledgeable and sufficiently powerful to call the complexities of the physical universe into existence. Theism comes readymade with a God who displays both omniscience and omnipotence. And so on throughout the standard natural theology arguments. Theism provides a tidy answer to a wide range of metaphysical questions. When one tradition answers so many different questions, the virtues of metaphysical parsimony and explanatory simplicity give us great reason to prefer it to its alternatives.^[17]

This preference is undergirded by the fact that no other religious tradition can provide a concept of deity that so neatly dovetails with the problems of philosophy. Granted, this may partly be a result of the point argued above that no other religious tradition has undergone the philosophical scrutiny theism has. Nonetheless, theism is able to boast a “theological solutions to philosophical problems” track record unique in the annals of world religions. Besides, it seems clear that many of the problems theism so neatly responds to *could* not be similarly answered by other traditions. For instance, the design argument clearly requires a god (or gods) with intention, will, and intelligence – which entails personality. J. P. Moreland has argued impressively that the first cause argument also requires a personal god.^[18] Any tradition for which deity is impersonal will not fill either bill.

It is often suggested by apologists that the theistic notion that God is both personal and infinite sets the tradition apart from every other religious tradition in history.^[19] So, for example, the gods of the Western polytheistic pantheons were personal but finite, while the gods of Eastern pantheism are either personal and finite or impersonal and infinite. Whether such a distinction is ultimately helpful or not, it is quite arguable that the unique character of God as conceived in the Western theistic tradition is a necessary condition for the virtually effortless

way in which it answers the continual challenge of philosophical problem after philosophical problem. It is, therefore, not surprising that no competing conception of deity is so fruitful.

This leads to my third point in favor of theism over the gods of other religions. Theism answers this variety of philosophical conundrums with little if any alteration of the basic mold within which it has been cast for many centuries. There is no ad hoc flavor to theism's solutions. Theism is what it is, independent of the metaphysical considerations that give rise to these problems, and many have accepted theism without any knowledge of or concern for said problems. Theism was not created or altered significantly in order to solve them. It is there, doing lots of work in lots of areas and lots of lives, *and* it happens to handle quite neatly many perplexing problems of philosophy.

This is not to say, of course, that theism has not evolved or expanded in its understanding of God's qualities as a result of its encounter with such problems. But making the implications of a theory explicit or committing it to one of a number of alternatives with which it was previously consistent is hardly the same thing as making up out of whole cloth doctrines or dimensions of doctrines that did not exist or suggest themselves prior to consideration of certain puzzles.

§6. Theism and the Unknown Gods

I turn now to the claim that theism is preferable to the gods without portfolio – i.e., the claim that it is more rational to assume that the God of theism is the “best move” than to assume that it is some god or gods hitherto unimagined in the annals of religious conviction. I will consider two subcategories of such undocumented deities – those such as Philo imagines in the quotation in §1 above, which I will call the “Keystone Gods,” and those virtually manufactured out of consistent characteristics, which I will call the “Generic Gods.” Prominent among this latter type is that

god who possesses precisely and only those characteristics needed to fill the bill of the natural theology argument in focus, which I will call the “Minimal God.”

The Keystone Gods stumble over each other in Philo’s imagination like so many of their namesake oafs in a Mack Sennett silent short. They include a toddler deity for whom this universe is but so much modeling clay clumsily constructed and long forgotten, an imbecile god whose compatriots laugh into scorn at his feeble creation efforts, and an elderly divinity whose best creation days are far behind him. Moreover, only space considerations and the threat of dialectical overkill halt Hume’s speculations. It is clear that such superhuman buffoons could be manufactured *ad infinitum aut nauseum*, whichever comes first.

But why shouldn’t these products of Hume’s fancy be just as seriously considered as the theistic God when shopping for the best solution to a natural theology puzzle? Well, to begin with, because they are so obviously just that – products of Hume’s fancy. Neither Philo nor Cleanthes nor Hume nor any reader over the past two hundred years has ever seriously considered the suggestion that the world was created as the initial feeble effort of a god not yet out of diapers or any such thing. These suggestions are, and were clearly intended to be, nothing more than rhetorical mockeries.

But, one might protest, this is precisely the point. The Keystone Gods are clearly not the right solution to the mystery in question, yet we have every bit as much reason to think they are as we do to think that the theistic God is. My point is that we do *not* have every bit as much reason. I refer to the discussion above. The theistic God has behind it an impressive history of weathering intellectual scrutiny, solving philosophical problems, and undergirding rational worldviews. This God was not manufactured in idle speculation over a curious philosophical

riddle. In contrast, the Keystone Gods are the very essence of ad hoc solutions – so much so that not even their inventors took them seriously.

Here we see the power of the candidates approach in full force. Remember that our task is the *alethic* evaluation of a standard natural theology argument, not its *logical* evaluation. Were we interested only in the latter, the Keystone Gods alternative would carry much more weight. Granted, most natural theology arguments give little if any reason *as exercises in pure logic* to prefer the theistic God to any of his boorish competitors. However, when our quest is for truth, we are permitted – even required – to look beyond the confines of the argument at hand to ask what broader reasons there are to choose among the candidates. Armed with this panoramic perspective, the choice between the God of theism and the gods of slapstick is a philosophical no-brainer.

Besides all this, any Keystone Gods hypothesis is subject to that most feared of contemporary postulation pummelers, Ockham's Razor. Given the long, rich history of the theistic tradition and its widespread success in offering defensible responses to many historical problems of philosophy, the conjecture of a Keystone God with no other dialectical purpose to serve than the filling of a slot already tailor-made for the God of theism smacks of the most egregious of philosophical profligacy. If ontological parsimony is a theoretical virtue at all, there can be no serious consideration of such obvious ad hoc solutions at all.^[20]

I turn now to the Generic Gods – conceptions of divinity manufactured by the piecing together of consistent characteristics into a deity that would clearly answer the call of the natural theology argument on trial. Martin proposes such generic candidates in his responses to Craig and Reichenbach quoted at the beginning of this chapter. He speaks of “some personal agent or agents” who need not be “greater than the universe itself,” of “a completely evil necessary

beings” and of “a necessary being that is neither completely good nor completely good nor completely evil.” But these gods seem to have nothing to offer above their Keystone counterparts, other than a certain lack of faracical genesis and a more appropriate concentration on the functionality of the concept in solving the philosophical puzzle at hand. But the constructions are clearly ad hoc, clearly without prior problem-solving pedigree, clearly subject to dialectical elimination by the swift application of Ockham’s mighty razor.

One interesting Generic God strategy would be to start piecing together a composite deity using consistent properties that would solve a wide variety of problems tha creep up in philosophy. The only problem is that such an exercise would likely produce a composite sketch so reminiscent of the God of theism as to convince any impartial jury of the identity. This would be, to say the least, an embarrassing result for the antagonist of theism ,and an impressive victory for the legitimacy of the candidates approach.

So what about the Minimal God? Perhaps this is the appropriate response, given the minimalist empiricist spirit that motivates the Humean Legacy. Perhaps the most rational response to the alleged soundness of a (minimal form) standard natural theology argument is to postulate a god that is nothing more than the argument requires. So, for example, perhaps the best candidate for the first cause argument is a god that is nothing more than an ultimate cause – a cosmic jumper cable that sparks the battery of reality into existence, but serves no other purpose thereafter. Isn’t the only god permitted by the first cause argument one so small in scope and influence as to make an 18th century deist blush?

By this point my response should be easily anticipated. The Minimal God fares no better than the Keystone Gods or the other Generic Gods when the standard to which the candidates are held is upgraded from that of logical evaluation to that of alethic evaluation. The Minimal God

is clearly ad hoc and carries no other credentials than its ability to solve a given philosophical problem. If anything, it is *more* ad hoc than the others, since the only dialectical function such speculation could ever hope to perform is the solving of the single problem on the table.

Furthermore, to cover the gamut of natural theology issue, a whole stable of Minimal Gods would be needed, since many different problems are uncovered by the various arguments. This is a clear violation of the ontological parsimony so deeply cherished by post-Enlightenment thinkers, and a betrayal of the minimalist sentiments appealed to above.

§7. And the Winner Is ...

So we seem to have our winner. Analysis, calculation, and evaluation have done their work, and the task of move selection is accomplished. It is possible that other candidates could be offered, but it is hard to see how any could escape the criticisms raised against the gods without portfolio here considered. A good friend of mine, from whom I have learned much chess, often advises me, “Once you’ve dismissed a move from your list of candidates, never go back to it. Invariably, it’ll look deceptively attractive the second time, and you’ll forget why you rejected it until you’ve made the move and it’s too late. Study it carefully, but once you’ve decided it won’t work, never give it a second chance.” The advice is superb in chess. One day I hope to be able to follow it consistently.

But despite its applicability over the board, this advice may appear at first blush to be completely counter to the dialectical modesty that, ideally, should dominate philosophical reflection. Shouldn’t we always remain open to new ways of thinking about old ideas, always ready to give a second, third, and fourth chance to a notion we once determined to be untenable? As a rule, yes. However, the grounds for rejecting the candidate rivals to theism over the past two sections do not smack of reasoning that leaves room for further reflection.

The history of theism and the history of other world religions is not going to change. Even if antagonistic philosophical scrutiny of other traditions develops and grows, it will be centuries before they produce any kind of dialectical pedigree worthy of comparing to that of theism. The ad hoc and prodigal nature of the gods without portfolio option likewise seems closed to critical alteration. The histories of competitive religious traditions are what they are. The histories of the stipulative deities aren't what they aren't. They have no history, no philosophical lineage, no reason at all to consider them in the face of living, vibrant candidates. Unless someone begins the Infant Deity Cult soon, that, too, is unlikely to change.

§8. Three Objections

Before closing, I want to consider three important objections to my “candidate gods” approach to natural theology: (1) the charge that this is nothing but the Cumulative Case Argument in a new garb; (2) the charge that this is not really natural theology, but somehow exceeds the acceptable boundaries of such an enterprise; and (3) the charge that I have not included the null hypothesis among my candidates.

The idea behind the Cumulative Case Argument is that the various natural theology arguments can be combined into a single case for theism. Like my own argument, the Cumulative Case Argument typically utilizes the correlation between the characteristics of the theistic God and the wide ranging problems raised by the various natural theology arguments, combined with the concept of ontological parsimony, to make its case. So it is easy to understand why one might think that my refutation of Hume's Stopper amounts to nothing more than a rehashing of this argument.

I must admit that I am undecided myself about whether or not the candidate gods approach constitutes a Cumulative Case Argument. However, I believe that, regardless of the

answer, the approach still represents a defensible refutation of the Stopper. In the first place, I am not as convinced as many philosophers of religion of the illegitimacy of a cumulative case approach. Since Doug Geivett's chapter in this volume presents and defends this argument admirably, I will not attempt any summary defense here. I will say, however, that the association of my argument with the Cumulative Case Argument should not be seen as a casting upon my offering of the shadow of the various problems often thought to plague that approach. Rather, the natural and intuitively pleasing appeal of the candidate gods approach should be seen as lending renewed strength and power to the Cumulative Case Argument. In other words, the mere fact (if it is a fact) that mine is a Cumulative Case Argument does not entail or even suggest that my argument is flawed. It more likely demonstrates that the Cumulative Case Argument has even more going for it than we suspected.

However, I believe there is a very important difference in emphasis between the candidate gods approach and traditional expressions of the Cumulative Case Argument, and if I had to venture an opinion concerning whether the former is best understood as a version of the latter, I would have to say no. This key difference can perhaps best be seen by returning to my distinction between logical evaluation and alethic evaluation of arguments.

The Cumulative Case Argument could be construed in the following way:

- P1) Natural Theology Argument 1 requires a being with characteristic A.
- P2) Natural Theology Argument 2 requires a being with characteristic B.
- ...
- P_n) Natural Theology Argument *n* requires a being with characteristic Φ .
- P_{n+1}) Theism acknowledges a God with characteristics A, B, ..., Φ .
- C) Therefore, theism is true.

Call This Argument “CC.” It is quite conceivable that CC receive a favorable logical evaluation. But, as we have seen, any given extended form natural theology argument (call it “NT”) will receive a negative logical evaluation. The positive logical evaluation of CC gives no reason to consider NT to be of any help to theism at all. It is perfectly consistent with CC to acknowledge that NT’s poor logical evaluation renders it ineffective as a tool of natural theology – a verdict that Hume’s Stopper is designed to elicit.

The candidate gods approach, on the other hand, gives reason to believe that NT *by itself* is a useful tool for the defense of theism, despite its poor logical evaluation. This is because its alethic evaluation will take into account the kind of reasoning presented in §5 and §6 above. So, while the Cumulative Case Argument approach attempts to avoid the bad logical evaluations of the various arguments by combining them into one large argument that will receive a favorable logical evaluation, the candidate gods approach points out the dialectical limitations of the logical evaluation and points beyond it to the more critical alethic evaluation. This difference might be construed as a new and better way of thinking about the Cumulative Case Argument, and I would have no real qualms with such a perspective. However, I am inclined to think that it is better to consider it a new way of evaluating natural theology, importantly distinct from the Cumulative Case.

The second objection I wish to address is that the candidate gods approach abandons the natural theology project all together. The goal of natural theology is to demonstrate the truth of theism by appeal only to the kind of evidence commonly acknowledged among philosophers regardless of religious conviction – the universally recognized and non-controversial evidence bases of empirical data and the truths of reason.^[21] By introducing theism as a postulate to be considered prior to the drawing of a conclusion from this neutral evidence base, the approach

ceases to be natural theology at all and becomes only so much devotional theology or apologetics at best and thinly veiled question begging at worst.

If the distinguishing characteristic of natural theology is the exclusive appeal to universally accessible and acceptable evidence, then the candidates approach is completely above reproach. The existence of theism as a religious viewpoint and its dialectical history are empirical facts about the world we live in. So are the existence of its competitor gods from other religious tradition, and the comparative histories of those traditions vis á vis theism. Addition of the gods without portfolio is an exercise in rational conceptualization, and their logical possibility is a claim open to rational review. The reasons offered to reject the undocumented deities is also grounded in pure reason and open to rational challenge. Finally, while the reasoning narrowing down this list to the theistic God as the best move may be open to rational criticism, it appeals to nothing more than standard patterns of reasoning and displays no nuances that require previous religious commitment to appreciate or accept.

So, despite the appeal to religious concepts in defense of the alethic power of natural theology, the candidate gods approach does not constitute a departure from the philosophical appeal of a publicly accessible evidence base. Consideration of theism as a possible solution does not violate the rules of critical reasoning any more than consideration of any substantive and controversial hypothesis as the possible answer to an observational conundrum in science. It is the conjecture of such potential explanations and the narrowing of them to a single preferred postulate that is the very heart and soul of inference to the best explanation. (In fact, it seems to me that the candidates approach just *is* the application of abductive reasoning to the findings of natural theology, though I am not at this time prepared to defend that claim.)

This appeal to scientific reasoning in defense of the candidates approach segues to the final objection I want to consider. Any good list of hypothetical explanations for a scientific phenomenon will include what is often called the “null hypothesis” – the possibility that none of the candidate hypotheses is correct, and that something hitherto unconceived provides the sought for explanation. Yet my list of candidate gods contains no such hypothesis.

Without a null hypothesis escape clause, one might object, the disjunctive elimination structure of my argument is deceptive. I argue thus: “Either A or B or C; Not-B; Not-C; therefore A.” But if I had included the null hypothesis as I should have, the resulting conclusion would be “Either A or D,” with at best no better reason to accept theism than to accept that we simply don’t know the answer.

While this objection has significantly more merit than the first two, it is not decisive against my argument. After all, Hume’s Stopper implies a dialectical concession to the soundness of the (minimal form) argument in focus, insofar as it demonstrates the existence of an entity with a given characteristic. And for several standard arguments, the requirement seems clearly to be for a personal entity. This certainly is the case for the Design Argument, and most likely for the Moral Argument and the First Cause Argument as well.^[22] If this is the case, then the null hypothesis is limited to personal solutions, and the list of candidate gods looks much more like the exhaustion of viable options. The cautionary note, “It’s always possible that you’re wrong, that the answer is something you’ve never even thought of,” while certainly appropriate, is no more a barrier to rational acceptance of the sole surviving hypothesis than is the acceptance of any experimentally confirmed hypothesis in science (for which such a cautionary note is also always in order). And, of course, renegeing on the Stopper’s concession

renders the entire discussion moot, since it amounts to a recension of the Stopper objection and pronounces this chapter patently unnecessary – a result I am more than happy to live with.

§9. Conclusion

I began this paper with a challenging and completely fair question from atheistic philosopher Michael Martin: “Why should we not suppose that these rival hypotheses are more probable than the hypothesis that God exists?” In retrospect it is important to note that Martin himself saw fit to couch the problem before us in the language of scientific method. In essence, he is providing us with an outline for the candidate gods approach. His challenge is, “List the competing hypotheses for me, then defend your claim that the God of theism is the preferable hypothesis.” Of course, his question is rhetorical; he does not suppose that there is any way to defend such a claim.^[23] It has been the burden of this paper to challenge that supposition. Once it is clearly understood just what the candidates are, the philosophical defense of theism as the best move is a surprisingly straightforward task.^[24]

NOTES

^[1] This paper expands and generalizes many ideas originally presented in “Stopping Hume’s Stopper: A Rejection of a Traditional Attack on Natural Theology,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 5 (2002): 207-16. I have adopted and adapted some portions of that paper in sections 1, 4, 5, and 6 of this paper. I am grateful to the editor of the *Stone-Campbell Journal* for permission to incorporate them here.

^[2] William Lane Craig, *The Kalām Cosmological Argument* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

^[3] Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), p.103. Emphasis mine.

^[4] *Ibid.*, 142.

^[5] John H. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983), p. 26. Emphasis his.

^[6] William J. Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Albany, N.Y.: Wadsworth, 1999), 50-1.

^[7] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947), p. 169. All subsequent quotations from the *Dialogues* will be from this edition, and will be cited by page numbers in parentheses in the text.

^[8] As have both Terence Penelhum and John Castelein in independent written comments. Penelhum points out that the objection was raised before Hume by both Aquinas and Pascal. Castelein correctly points out that the objection is more accurately labeled “Philo’s Stopper,” since it is not altogether clear throughout the *Dialogues* just who is speaking for Hume – and it is likely that his voice is in the mouths of different interlocutors at different times. (However, David O’Connor has recently argued that, while Hume’s voice is indeed heard from time to time in each of the main characters, it is overwhelmingly prominent in Philo. See *Hume on Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 214-6.) See also note 10 below.

^[9] See, for example, William Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1993), 51f.

^[10] In private conversation Todd Furman offered one other reason why “Hume’s Stopper” may not be a legitimate name for this objection (see note 8 above) – namely, that Hume never intended the point to stop anything. The Stopper may be read throughout the *Dialogues* as simply a point of logic and clarification about what the arguments as they stand prove, and what work they leave undone. That is, Hume may be read as claiming that the traditional arguments at best get us to Martin’s question, and it is now up to theistic philosophy to offer a defensible

answer to that question. While Hume (like Martin) would likely be quite skeptical regarding the possibilities for such a defensible answer, he does not, by employing the Stopper, mean to suggest that it is impossible. If this is the case, then the present paper can, ironically, be considered a *continuation* of the Humean project, rather than a rebuttal of it.

Furman may well be right. (My history of interaction with him on Hume interpretation leads me to suspect that he is.) But again I choose to retain the moniker “Hume’s Stopper,” since it is clear from its employment by philosophers of religion that it is most widely viewed as a reason to abandon natural theology, rather than a corner to be turned in its development.

^[11] For sake of simplicity, I will omit the understood qualifiers “entity (or entities)” and “exists (or has existed).”

^[12] Though many natural theology arguments are most naturally expressible in inductive forms, I will (for the sake of simplicity) speak only of the argument’s soundness, understanding this as metonymous for “soundness or cogency.”

^[13] Prior to his charge, Philo extracts from Cleanthes the concession that the latter knows of no minds other than those “like the human.” This is a subtle move, emphasizing the fact that the move from human to divine mind is an enormous leap, straining the bounds of legitimate analogical inference, which is nonetheless required if Cleanthes’ argument is to succeed. See O’Connor, *Hume on Religion*, 110ff.

^[14] These are not the same goal. Players often find themselves in positions where victory is beyond reach, but continue playing with the aim of achieving a draw.

^[15] At a recent tournament a young novice showed me with great glee a game he has just played against an expert level player in which he worked a combination that resulted in winning his opponent’s rook for a bishop (a maneuver in chess known as “winning the exchange” – generally a very strong advantage). Of course, the achieved position was one in which the expert forced checkmate in the next three moves (in fact, he never even recaptured the bishop after it took his rook) – a fact which seemed not to diminish the novice’s delight one iota!

^[16] Indeed, it sets *Christian* theism apart. The tradition of scholarly scrutiny just elucidated is almost exclusively a Christian phenomenon. In fact, much of the most scrupulous apologetic work done by the Scholastics was in direct response to the work of Muslim scholars. The flourishing of Christian philosophy after Thomas as opposed to the virtual extinction of Muslim philosophy after Averroes is one of the great disappointments of intellectual history. Nonetheless, I will in the text retain the general focus on theism, since my point is only that the Natural Theology project does make a case for the truth of theism, despite Hume’s Stopper.

^[17] This raises the question of whether or not my approach is simply a version of the Cumulative Case Argument. See §8 below.

^[18] J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), pp. 41-42. Moreland offers a version of the first cause argument virtually identical to William Lane Craig’s (see note 1 above), plus the premise “The cause for the beginning of the universe was personal,” (18-42). Craig offers a similar expanded version of his argument in “Philosophical and Scientific Pointers to *Creatio ex Nihilo*,” in *Contemporary*

Perspectives on Religious Epistemology, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 185-200. See especially pp. 197-8.

For an explication of Moreland's defense of his personality requirement and its ramifications for the application of Hume's Stopper to the Craig/Moreland Argument, see my "Stopping Hume's Stopper."

^[19] This point has worked its way into contemporary evangelical apologetics, primarily via the work of Francis Schaeffer. Schaeffer particularly employs the implications of the infinite/personal conception of God in his apologetic trilogy *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1968), *Escape from Reason* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1968), and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1972).

^[20] I do not mean to suggest that theism is a theory or a hypothesis in the scientific sense. This is, of course, a matter of great debate. However, even if one denies the theoretical status of theism, it is nonetheless clear that there are concepts utilized in theory evaluation that are also useful and even vital to the evaluation of theism. See my "Theism and Other Minds: On the Falsifiability of Non-Theories," *Topoi*, 14.2 (1995): 149-160. This whole issue of *Topoi*, edited by Paul Draper, is dedicated to the question "Is Theism a Theory?"

^[21] And so it turns out that the term "natural theology" is in fact a misnomer, since the project is best construed as an exercise in philosophy, not theology.

^[22] See note 18 above on the First Cause Argument. For a famous argument that the existence of morality requires a personal deity, and most likely the God of theism, see Book I of C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (published in numerous editions, most recently San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

^[23] A view that he likely shares with Hume (see note 10 above).

^[24] Acknowledgements: Todd Furman, Stephen T. Davis.