

Language, Being, God, and the Three Stages of Theistic Evidence

Dallas Willard

I begin with a plea of "not guilty" to Professor Nielsen's charge that my belief in God is an irrational belief. I do live in the 20th Century, I have been given a passably good philosophical and scientific education, and I have thought carefully about the matter. According to him, "for such a person it's irrational to believe in God." Since he does not here spell out what he understands by an irrational belief, it is not clear how to develop a reply. But I must say that upon due inquiry I am not aware of any true propositions which strictly imply that God does not exist, or of anything that confers significant improbability on his existence. So far as I have been able to determine, no falsehood can be deduced from the assumption of his existence, and that assumption itself is not meaningless or logically inconsistent. I have been and remain open to evidence, from Professor Nielsen or elsewhere, on these points, some of which will be considered below. I cannot say that I have a sound proof, in the strict logical sense, of the full-fledged deity in which I have come to believe, but I can point to a number of things which make a lot more sense on the assumption of such a deity; and I do believe that there is very good evidence for the existence of a being with some of his essential attributes—evidence that has not been successfully contested by those on Prof. Nielsen's side. So it seems to me, at least, that my belief in God is not irrational, though, of course, I myself may still be a wildly irrational person.

*

Before turning to the one argument which Nielsen presents to show belief in God irrational, a few general comments on the logic of the issue will, hopefully, cast light on why the discussion proceeds as it does. We are concerned with an existential proposition, and it is very difficult to prove a negative existential proposition that does not involve a highly restricted universe of discourse—as certainly the one at issue here does not. Suppose you want to prove there are no green crows. All it takes is one green crow in order to show that the proposition, There are no green crows, is false. On the other hand, you can examine many crows and find them all black without being in a position to judge whether or not there are any green crows. We will need to introduce some general considerations—e.g. all crows that exist are within a certain distance of this tree, or the number of crows there are is n—before examining particular crows can begin to suggest there are no green crows. There may, after all, be many galaxies that have many planets inhabited by crows.

A similar point is to be made with regard to the proposition, There is no God. It is a negative existential, and looking for God here or there, finding or proving this not to be God and that not to be God, does nothing to budge it one bit toward or away from the status of knowledge or even of justified belief. To make any headway at all with the atheist's project we will have to settle on some general considerations that will provide a structure within which particular facts may evidentially count for something. For example, the general consideration that if God exists suffering will not be allowed. Given this, the particular fact of this child being sexually abused by a drunken relative gains evidential significance for the existence or nonexistence of God. But then of course we have the task of securing the truth of this particular general consideration. A notoriously difficult undertaking!

The atheist's case will, then, depend upon certain "general considerations." She may decide to go right for the jugular vein and say, for example, that in order simply to exist or to be, anything must have a certain character—for example, that of a particular event or entity at a place and time, like this auto accident or that

apple or atom or force field. (I conjecture that in fact something close to this is what Professor Nielsen has in mind, though of course he couches it in more contemporary terms.) Naturalism, which attempts to link existence itself to (physical) causation plus space/time location, is much favored by the contemporary mind. A theory of being thus might serve as the general background for atheism. But that has not worked out very well, and so for the last two centuries the "general consideration" invoked is more likely to have something to do with knowledge or language. And that is certainly the case with Professor Nielsen.

**

He boldly puts all his money on one horse. An act of great courage—or desperation? The general consideration from which he will operate has to do with language. His claim is that statements about a God of the Hebrew/Christian/Islamic variety are "linguistic irregularities." He does not say that they are meaningless, no doubt because he knows that game has already been played out, with his side losing. Rather, he holds that when you speak of an immeasurably vast person of love and intelligence who produced the physical universe your statements are "so problematic and obscure that it turns out that we don't know what we are talking about." We may have a feeling that we do know, he allows, "but when we think very carefully about what these expressions mean, they are so problematic that we can't use them to make true or false claims."

It is far from clear what he has in mind. In fact, this looks awfully like warmed over Logical Positivism with superficial disclaimers. Does Nielsen mean that God talk does refer to God or something, but we can't know what it is that it refers to? That our statements are true or false, but we just can't know which? That there is a reference for the term "God," but we somehow can't get our minds around it? Or is he saying that there is no reference here, and hence no possibility of either truth or falsity? His discussions indicate to me that he means the latter, though his language is ambiguous. If so, he is adopting the heart, at least, of the old Logical Positivist position that statements about God have no truth value and hence no logical relations. Belief in God is, then, arational, not subject of canons of rationality; not irrational and somehow offensive to canons of rationality. Like a duck or a doorknob, it isn't made of the right stuff to be irrational. It can't stand in any kind of logical relation. Thus he says Moreland cannot use terms for God in premises of an argument "because we don't know what we're meaning." (Why isn't this the same as being meaningless?)

If Nielsen does mean to say that the references, the truth or falsity, the logical relations and all, are really there in the God talk, but they are just inscrutable, he should say so, and then go on to explain what it is about just these references etc. which makes them so different from other references, e.g. those in his "Louis made pasta and cake" case. In fact, when he comes to discuss ways of establishing reference, which seems to be the same for him as identifying objects, he only discusses intra-linguistic and ostensive identification. His claim is that "God, unlike Louis, can't be identified ostensively, or extra-linguistically," and that intra-linguistic devices, especially definite descriptions, also don't succeed in picking God out. You can't see God in the way you see Louis, and when it comes to definite descriptions like "the maker of heaven and earth," "How would you identify that?" he asks. "How would you know what that...refers to?" And we are supposed to reply that of course we could not identify, and thus could not know. And this is supposed to imply that the concept of God is "incoherent," and that is supposed to show that it is irrational to believe in God. "Remember,...my basis for saying that it is irrational to believe in God because I believe the concept of God in developed Judeo-Christianity is incoherent."

Now we don't know what reference is, for Nielsen, and it is not clear what he is saying about it. We wonder how he would reply to the following argument: Reference itself cannot be ostensively defined and it cannot—at least in any generally acceptable way—be individuated by definite description. (There are plenty of people today who would agree with that!) Therefore, the concept of reference is incoherent, and his (and our) beliefs about it—including the ones upon which his reasons for atheism here depend—are irrational.

Certainly any post-Kripkian or post-Derridian thinker must be slow to accept empirical ostention and definite description as the only means of establishing reference. Possibly reference is something that, at least in certain cases, just emerges at a certain point in the development of language. The overly-simple

quasi-positivist models which, it seems to me, lie back of Nielsen's remarks surely cannot do justice to the actual performances of language. But one must be cautious in this area. The disagreements of philosophers about meaning are scarcely less striking than the disagreements people have about God. It is a well-known fact that we cannot agree on the nature of meaning. Indeed, we cannot even agree on what a theory of meaning is supposed to do. So it certainly is surprising as well as unconvincing when we find a leading atheist thinker staking his whole case on general considerations about meaning.

We should also point out that Nielsen's atheism is of a curious variety indeed. If what he says about the word "God" is true, then any claim that God does not exist is just as "incoherent" as the claim that he does. Atheism is therefore incoherent, and therefore is just as irrational as theism. This is additional evidence that he is merely restating the position of Logical Positivism. It is no accident, I'm sure, that he invokes Rudolph Carnap at the end of his talk; but Carnap and his Logical Positivism frankly embraced, even insisted upon, the incoherence of atheism as well as theism.

Now there are multiplied millions of human beings who believe that they have had a direct experience of God, or think that certain definite descriptions—e.g. the person who created the world or met Moses on the mount, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and so forth—work perfectly well. These people are not always philosophically unsophisticated. John Locke, a Christian theist and an Empiricist philosopher of considerable ability—who, however, was neither a Sensist nor a Positivist—carefully elaborated both how an Empiricist can account for ideas of infinity (Essay on Human Understanding, Book II, Chap. xvii) and can, from one's own existence and from nature, argue for the existence of an infinite God. (Essay, Bk. IV, Chap. x) Nielsen surely owes such people a bit more than the suggestion that, "Well, they think it all makes sense, but it really doesn't." Perhaps these people, many of whom are just as rational, informed and broadly experienced as he is, think it makes sense because it does make sense. In any case it's only 'tis against 'taint until we can operate from an acceptable theory of "making sense," which he certainly does not provide.

He does speak of "My argument that it doesn't make sense when you think it through... God is an infinite individual who created and sustained the world." But I don't believe he really advances an argument here, as distinguished from some rather vague assertions about meaning, based upon no plausible theory. What exactly is the argument that "God" is "incoherent" in his sense, such that statements containing it are neither true nor false? I confess I can't find in his remarks given here anything worthy of the name "argument." Actually, that may well be too much to require of a popular lecture. But perhaps he could help us out in his final remarks for this volume by just indicating the premisses and showing how they imply that statements containing the word "God" are neither true nor false. It would be especially useful to be shown how the "incoherence" of "God" in Nielsen's own sense—whatever that is, exactly—entails or renders probable the non-existence of God. Or, more generally, how an ontological conclusion can be validly deduced from any linguistic fact.

But does the case for the positive thesis fare any better? I believe it does, and along certain lines stated by Professor Moreland. However, the overall argument as I would develop it is not one which in one stroke, from one set of true premisses, purports to establish or render plausible the existence of Jehovah, understood by Christians to also be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and referred to in Islam as "Allah." Rather, the plausibility of theism, as I shall henceforth simply refer to it, emerges in three stages. These stages are not three separate arguments or "ways," each of which, supposedly, brings you to the same logical point. Three unsound arguments are not to be expected by their collective force to prove a conclusion which none can establish by themselves. Nor do the earlier stages establish conclusions which, in a straightforward manner, serve as premisses in the later stages. Instead, what is shown or evidentially supported in the earlier stages only determines a framework of possibilities within which the considerations of the later stages are carried on. For example, the first stage shows that there actually exists something which might be God in some more conventional sense.

What then, are the three stages? At this late date it is extremely hard to discuss the relevant issues without getting involved in many age-old entanglements that in fact have nothing to do with the case one is arguing.

I shall, accordingly, avoid much of the traditional terminology in what follows and attempt to narrowly restrict myself to precisely those considerations upon which the evidence for theism, as I see it, depends. We begin with a demonstration that the physical or natural world recognized by common sense and the "natural" sciences is not the only type of thing in existence: that there concretely exists, or at least has existed, something radically different from it in respects to be discussed. By a "demonstration" I mean a logical structure of propositions where the premisses are true and logically imply or entail the conclusion when taken together.

The argument at stage one proceeds from the nature and the existence of the physical. Confusions, quibbles and philosophical exercises—pointless and otherwise—aside, it is true that there is a physical world, and we do know that this is true. Further—although the nature of that world may be, ultimately, a profound mystery, or turn out to have some deep kinship with what we call the mental or spiritual—there are some things about its general character which we also know to be true. One of these is as follows: However concrete physical reality is sectioned up, the result will be a state of affairs which owes its being to something other than itself.

This, I submit, is something which we know to be true of the general character of things in the physical world, and of course anyone should feel free to submit a case of a physical state of which this proposition is not true. Now it is, certainly, an extremely complex proposition, and, if we begin to take it apart, we will surely be led to many things we do not know and possibly do not even understand. But it has that in common with nearly all of the truths which we know best, both in ordinary life and in science. One of the things which I hope might be clear at this point in humanity's intellectual development is that degree of simplicity or complexity in an object has no automatic significance either for being or for knowledge. It should be equally clear that inability to say how we know something does not imply that we do not know it—although it is always appropriate to raise the question of the "how" whenever someone claims to know something, and some appropriate kind of explanation is usually required.

Now any general understanding of the dependencies of physical states would require something like Aristotle's well-known four "causes." Restricting ourselves to the temporal order, however, we find, among other things, that every physical state, no matter how inclusive, has a necessary condition in some specific type of state which immediately precedes it in time and is fully existent prior to the emergence of the state which it conditions. This means that for any given state, e.g. Voyager II being past Triton, all of the necessary conditions of that state must be over and done with at that state, or at the event of which the state is the ontic residue. The series of "efficient" causes, to speak with Aristotle, is completed for any given event or state that obtains. At the state in question, we are not waiting for any of these causes to happen, to come into being.

Moreover, this completed set of causes is highly structured in time and in ontic dependence, through relationships which are irreflexive, asymmetric and transitive. Thus, no physical state is temporally or ontically prior to itself, and if one, a, is prior to another, b, b is not prior to a. Further, if a is prior to b and b to c, then a is prior to c. This rigorous structure of the past is eternally fixed and specifies a framework within which every event of coming into existence and ceasing to exist finds its place. Most importantly for present interests, since the series of causes for any given state is completed, it not only exhibits a rigorous structure as indicated, but that structure also has a first term. That is, there is in it at least one "cause," one state of being, which does not derive its existence from something else. It is self-existent.

If this were not so, Voyager's passing Triton, or any other physical event or state, could not be realized, since that would require the actual completion of an infinite, i.e. incompletable, series of events. In simplest terms, its causes would never "get to" it. (As in a line of dominoes, if there is an infinite number of dominoes that must fall before dominoe x is struck, it will never be struck. The line of fallings will never get to it.) Since Voyager II is past Triton, there is a state of being upon which that state depends but which itself depends on nothing prior to it. Thus, concrete physical reality implicates a being radically different from itself: a being which, unlike any physical state, is self-existent.

This completes the demonstration in our first stage of theistic evidence. To sum up: The dependent character of all physical states, together with the completeness of the series of dependencies underlying the existence of any given physical state, logically implies at least one self-existent, and therefore non-physical, state of being: a state of being, or an entity, radically different from those that make up the physical or "natural" world. It is demonstrably absurd that there should be a self-sufficient physical universe, if by that we mean an all-inclusive totality of entities and events of the familiar or scientific physical variety, and unless (like Spinoza) we are prepared to treat the universe itself as having an essentially different type of being from the physical:—which then just concedes our point.

It is common to hear, in response to this argument, the assertion that there just cannot be a self-existent being, but very uncommon to hear any very strong reason for the assertion. Professor Nielsen comments on the "incoherence" (once again) of a logically necessary individual, and I want to side with him in rejecting such a being. But I have said nothing in the above about a logically necessary being. Only that, relative to the character of the physical world, it is logically necessary that there be something the existence of which does not derive from other things. So far as my argument goes, there is no reason why this should have to be a being logically necessary in itself—although of course I recognize there has been a lot of discussion about such a being in the history of our subject, and I do not discount that discussion as wholly pointless.

A more serious and perhaps more "common sense" objection to my position, but one that is, I think, answerable, is contained in the child's question: "Mommy, where did God come from?" (He's just been told that God made trees and clouds, you know.) In our terminology: "Where did this self-existent being come from?" And the answer is that He (She, It) didn't come from anything because He didn't come at all.

One will have trouble with that answer only if they have already assimilated existence to physical existence. Then and only then does the perfectly general question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" make sense. Without that assimilation the answer is: "Why shouldn't there be?" And it turns out there is no good reason to suppose that everything that exists resembles physical existents in coming to be "from" something other than themselves. It should be pointed out that such a supposition, in any case, directly begs the question of God's existence. For you certainly could not know it to be true if the question of God's existence is yet to be decided. Efforts in the history of thought to tie the concept of being to that of the physical have proved resounding failures, it seems to me, although certain epistemological programs—e.g. "Science is restricted to the physical (to Physics and its derivatives), so 'knowledge' and therefore(!*?!) being is restricted to the physical"—are still widely favored. The lack of a conceptual connection between being and the possibility of knowledge continues to plague such programs, as it has most philosophers from Hume and Kant to our time.

One has, I think, to go through a conceptual turn-around in general ontology somewhat like the one Newton executed for physics. Aristotelian physics made motion problematic and rest unproblematic. The question then was: "Why is there motion (here, or there, or at all) rather than rest? Newton saw that motion was no more problematic than rest. What had to be explained was change: from motion to rest, or conversely. Similarly, in general ontology one has to understand that existence is, in general, no more problematic than non-existence. Existence isn't somehow "harder" or inherently less likely than non-existence.—Unless, once again, we are obsessed with physical existents, which, because of their specific nature as dependent beings, are admittedly always more or less hanging on by the skin of their teeth and inevitably tending toward disintegration. (Aristotle, in his theory of motion, seems to have been obsessed with "forced" motion, such as donkeys pulling carts and persons hauling water out of a well.)

In fact there are two interesting (by no means philosophically unproblematic) candidates other than God for the status of self-subsistent being, or something similar: Universals (Plato's "forms") and free human actions. With reference to universals the question of origin in time does not arise, since they—as distinct from their exemplifications—are not temporally located at all, and since they lack any sort of adjacency or contiguity with other entities which would make sense of their being "produced" by them. Free actions also, it has been argued, involve at least an element of self-subsistence, lacking in their nature as free actions a sufficient, but not (at least on some accounts) necessary conditions.

Finally, it will be objected by some that, though the series of causes for any physical state is finite, the first physical event or state in the series could have come into existence without a cause, could have, in short, originated "from nothing." Many discussions today seem to treat the "big bang" in this way, though of course that would make it totally unlike any other "bang" of which we have any knowledge. "Big bang" mysticism is primarily attractive, I think, just because "the bang" has stepped into a traditional role of God, which gives it a nimbus and seems to lift the normal questions we would ask about any physical event. That "bang" is often treated as if it were not quite or not just a physical event, as indeed it could not be. But what then could it be? Enter "scientific mysticism." And we must at least point out that an eternally self-subsistent being is no more improbable than a self-subsistent event emerging from no cause. As C. S. Lewis pointed out, "An egg which came from no bird is no more 'natural' than a bird which had existed from all eternity." (God in the Dock, p. 211)

Now I am prepared to grant Hume's point that there is no logical contradiction in the supposition that something could come into existence without a cause. This, however, does not entail that Locke was wrong in his claim that "man knows by an intuitive certainty, that bare nothing can no more produce any real being, than it can be equal to two right angles." (Essay, Book IV, Chap. x) There are, after all, general laws about how every type of physical state comes about. If we keep clearly before our minds that any "something" which comes into existence (including a however big "bang") will always be a completely specific type of thing, then we see that for that "something" to originate from nothing would be to violate the system of law which governs the origination of things of its type. To suppose that an apple, for example, could come into existence without any prior states upon which it depends for its existence is to simply reject all the laws we know to hold true of apple production. They are no longer laws. And it is not a matter of discovering further conditions under which apple-laws apply, for the hypothesis is one of no conditions whatever. The counter-intuitiveness of this is, I imagine, what Locke is referring to, and I certainly agree with him if it is. But even if it were neither self-contradictory nor counter-intuitive to suppose that something originated without a cause, the probability of it relative to our data would be exactly zero. There is, so far as I know, not a single case of a physical state or event being observed or otherwise known to originate "from nothing." And if anyone has observed such a thing, I am sure that our leading scientific journals and societies would like very much to hear about it. In fact, the idea is an entirely ad hoc hypothesis whose only 'merit' is avoidance of admission of a self-subsistent being:—which it achieves precisely by claiming an entity of a type which in every other case is admitted to be dependent to be, "just this once," itself self-subsistent.

Something which originates from nothing is, precisely, self-subsistent. It is dependent on nothing and exists in its own right. The editors of the Time-Life book Cosmos (appearing in 1989) gravely remark that "...no one can say with certainty why the universe popped out of the void." (p. 13) They along with many sober cosmologists who ponder this question seem oblivious to the fact that in the nature of the case there can be no why for its "popping out," since it is precisely the void, the "empty," out from which it popped. There is nothing to be uncertain or uncertain about.

Of course there are many other points of interest and disagreement to be discussed with reference to my first stage argument. It doesn't prove that there is only one self-subsistent being. It doesn't show that the uncaused being or beings which lie at the foundation of the world causal series still exist—though, certainly, we would like to know of any reason, beyond the mere empty logical possibility, which might be offered for them ceasing to exist. (Admittedly, their not being dependent and contingent in the sense of physical states and events does not immediately imply inability to dissipate themselves in some fashion.) Finally, this argument does not show that the self-subsistent first cause is a person.

All of this I cheerfully grant. Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of the atheist's enterprise, we now have an ontologically haunted universe. It is haunted by unnerving possibilities. If I am right, there has got to be something more than the physical or "natural" universe: and something obviously quite different in character—though also essentially related to it, for from this "something more" the physical universe ultimately derives. If this is established, it is not clear to me that very much of a point is left to atheism, which in the contemporary world surely draws most of its motivation from a desire to tame or naturalize reality—all hope of which is now lost. (Again: If I am right.) Of course many important points about the

exact character of this "more and different" aspect of the universe are still left to be determined. In particular, religion as a human institution, and certain kinds of God's, can be effectively attacked by the atheist. But the theist is concerned with this no less than the atheist, and perhaps even more so. Early Christians were sometimes called atheists by the Romans whose gods the Christians denied. Later Christians called Spinoza an atheist. And so forth. But I think there is an obvious sense in which the atheist in the current, standard philosophical understanding, can never feel comfortable in a universe which supplements the physical in the manner demonstrated by my first stage argument. The possibility of there being a god, even in the full theistic sense, has now become significantly more substantial. There is an ontological "space" for it to be realized which just would not be there in a strictly physical universe.

The second stage in my development of the case for theism corresponds to what has traditionally been called the teleological argument, or the argument to design. The latter is the correct designation for what I take to be the essence of the point here. Many will be astonished at the suggestion that teleology actually has nothing at all essentially to do with the case, and has in fact only resulted in an incredible amount of confusion and arguing beside the point on both sides. Theists have, I believe, brought this upon themselves by fixing upon such striking cases of order as the human eye or the degree of inclination of the earth's axis in relation to the possibility of life on the planet. But—especially since the emergence of evolutionary theory—they in so doing open themselves up to massive and sophisticated, though often logically quite misguided, 'rebuttals', every case of which purports to show how the cases fixed upon by the theist at least could, with some degree of probability, have originated, come into existence, by a lawlike process from a pre-existing condition of the physical universe without assistance from what one recent practitioner of this routine smugly calls "a Great Spirit in the sky with a tidy mind and a sense of order" or "A blessed miracle of provident design." (Richard Dawkins, The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design, New York: Norton and Co., 1986, pp. 43-44) The "rebutters" with almost no exceptions quite conveniently manage to forget that evolution, whether cosmic or biological, cannot—logically cannot!—be a theory of ultimate origins of existence or order, precisely because its operation presupposes the existence of certain entities with specific potential behaviors and an environment of some specific kind that operates upon those entities in some specifically ordered fashion. It is characteristic of the thoughtlessness and ignorance which plagues the discussion of these issues that Darwin's book On the Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection is often thought, by theists as well as anti-theists, to be an explanation of the origin of life and of living forms generally—when of course nothing was farther from Darwin's own mind. (I hasten to exempt all parties to the present discussion from any such misunderstanding!) Let us quite generally state, then, that any sort of evolution of order of any kind will always presuppose pre-existing order and pre-existing entities governed by it. It follows as a simple matter of logic that not all order evolved. Given the physical world—however much of evolution it may or may not contain—there is or was some order in it which did not evolve. However it may have originated (if it originated), that order did not evolve. We come here upon a logically unsurpassable limit to what evolution, however it may be understood, can accomplish.

We should pause to notice that the order from which cosmic and biological evolution takes rise must have been one of considerable power and complexity, since it provided the basis of, precisely, cosmic and biological evolution. Evolution itself is a process that exhibits order of stunning dimensions, diachronic as well as synchronic, especially if given the scope customary among anti-theists. That specific type of structure found in evolution did not itself come about through evolution, any more than, as Leibniz pointed out, the laws of mechanics were instituted by the laws of mechanics. It is important to take note of this, because some partisans of evolution hold before us the image of being without order as that from which being with order emerged. Thus we find Dawkins, in the book mentioned above, discussing the non-random arrangement of pebbles of various sizes on an ocean beach. Clearly the pebbles seem sorted and arranged. But, as he points out, this "arranging was really done by the blind forces of physics, in this case the action of waves. The waves...just energetically throw the pebbles around, and big pebbles and small pebbles respond differently to this treatment so they end up at different levels of the beach. A small amount of order has come out of disorder, and no mind planned it." (p. 43) Big-bang mysticism is, I find, usually accompanied by an "order out of chaos" mysticism.

After letting him enjoy a small moment of triumph, we can only say to this highly qualified scientist: "You gotta be kidding! No mind (directly) planned it, but nothing whatsoever 'has come out of disorder' in this case." The interaction of the waves and the pebbles in this case is a perfectly orderly process, even if our comprehension of that order can only be statistically expressed. Moreover, we know for sure that Dawkins himself knows this. What afflicts him at this point can be very simply described: He is in the grip of the romanticism of evolution as a sweeping ontological principle, bearing in itself the mystical vision of an ultimate Urgrund of chaos and nothingness of itself giving birth to the physical universe. — Which is all very fine as an aesthetic approach to the cosmos, and vaguely comforting. But it has nothing at all to do with "evidence of...a universe without design," as the sub-title of his book suggests.

So at this second stage we have a challenge to offer the atheist similar to the one of the first stage. At the first stage we said that the probability, relative to our data, of something (in the physical universe, at least) originating from nothing was zero, and we invited the atheist to find one case of this actually happening, to raise the probability a bit above zero. Now we urge him to find one case of ordered being—or just being, for, whatever it is, it will certainly be ordered—originating from being without order.

Over against this challenge we point out that the force, the power to convince, which most people seem to feel in the face of the existing physical order surrounding us undoubtedly comes from the simple fact that we all have experience—perhaps even a quite direct, first-hand experience—of order entering the physical world from minds—our minds as well as from that of others. Not as if the physical world were totally disordered before our plan or "design" surfaced there. Of course it is not. We have no experience of ex nihilo creation, and the second stage of theistic evidence does not aim to establish such creation. But, to go back to Paley's classical example of finding a watch in the wilderness, we clearly know that the order that is in a watch first presented itself to the human mind without being present in physical reality, and only because of that did it later emerge within the physical world. We know that locomotives, bridges, and a huge number of other things exist in the physical world because the "design" for them previously existed in a mind. Some person designed them. Only the kind of scepticism that gives philosophy a deservedly bad name can suggest otherwise. That is why if we stepped on an apparently uninhabited planet and discovered what, to all appearance, was a branch of the May Company or Sears—or even a coke bottle or a McDonald's hamburger wrapper—it would be both psychologically impossible as well as flatly irrational, in the light of our available data, to believe that they came into existence without a design and a mind 'containing' it. The extension of this conclusion to cover eyes, DNA structures and solar systems, by appropriate modifications of premisses, is only slightly less coercive.

That, surely, is why David Hume, in the "Introduction" to his The Natural History of Religion, states that "The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion." And he puts in the mouth of Philo, at the end of his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, the somewhat more modestly formulated conclusion "That the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence." Now I am aware of the carefully weighted meaning which Hume assigned to these words, and, indeed, I accept them in that meaning as an adequate formulation of the results of my stage two. But it is necessary at the same time to insist that he really did mean what he did say in these two passages. (I take Philo to speak for him.) Hume was a minimal or stage-two theist. He believed that the physical universe rationally required a mind or mind-like being as its source, and for the reasons I have indicated above. His further views, to the effect that the world offers no rational support for the full-blown God of Christian theism, do not diminish this one bit.

We should occasionally think about the fact that all of the "great" philosophers—the ones which, up to very recently, all of the better graduate programs in philosophy thought you had to know something about before professional respectability could rest upon you (Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas, 'St. Occam', Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkely, Kant and Hegel)—accepted either second stage theism or (Spinoza, Kant, Hegel) something stronger. Kant, who along with Hume is generally credited among professional philosophers with destroying any possibility of significant theistic evidences, said that "belief in a God and in another world is so interwoven with my moral sentiment that as there is little danger of my losing the latter, there is equally little cause for fear that the former can ever be taken from me." (Critique

of Pure Reason, B 857) At the very least, he held, it is impossible to prove "that there is no such being and no such life." (B 858) His belief was that if the moral life is possible, there is "another world," the "intelligible world," which alone makes the moral life possible. And he indeed believed the moral life to be possible. So here is an argument which, to his own mind, secured the existence of a person-like transcendental being with its world. That it is in some sense a "moral argument" does not mean that it is not as logically serious as any other argument. Kant did not regard the moral world as nebulous or non-existent, in the contemporary manner.

Now I do not cite these great philosophers as authorities on the points here at issue, though it is about time that the actual role of authority in professional philosophy and in the intellectual world generally got a candid and thorough re-examination. ("There's a whole lot of faking going on.") It is just that the general impression that philosophers—especially the "real" ones—are explicit or closet atheists, needs occasionally to be brought over against certain historical facts. And the often suggested idea that, if Aristotle or Descartes or Locke had only lived today, they too would have been atheists needs to be faced with the challenge to point out exactly what it is that we now know or can do that would have modified the arguments upon which they based their theism. (I have even heard it suggested that these philosophers were just hypocrites, and only seemed to accept theism from fear of their society!)

So what do we have at the second stage of theistic evidence? We have established that not all order is evolved and that relative to our data there is a probability of zero that order should emerge from chaos or from nothing into the physical world. In addition, we have experience of order emerging from minds (our minds) into the physical world. Under the limited conditions of human existence, we know what this is like and that it does happen. Now what is the effect of all of this? Certainly no demonstration of God in the full theistic sense. But, similarly as with stage one, the possibility of there being such a God has become significantly more substantial. The existence of something significantly like him has been given some plausibility, and the theist may now invite the atheist to show why the self-existent, mind-like entity of minimal theism—the god of the philosophers, shall we call him—could not in reality be the same as the subject of praise and prayer and devotion in religion—the "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." There is now a somewhat broader ontological "space" for the God of religion which would not be there in a universe without "design."

Once we are clear about this, we return to the more familiar cases associated with the "teleological" argument, some of which were discussed by Professor Moreland. The intricate cases of adaptive order found about us in the world are said by the atheist to have resulted from trillions of tiny increments of order. ("We do the difficult immediately," the US Marines say. "The impossible takes a little longer.") That is logically possible, once we free it, as discussed above, from the logical confusions and sweeping ontological pretensions which have encumbered the idea of evolution. On the other hand, once it becomes clear that order is not self-generating and could not all have originated from evolution, and in the light of the fact that order does, at least in some limited sense, upon some occasions actually enter the physical world from mind, we would want to know exactly why—given all of this—we should rule out some fairly direct role of "larger minds," shall we say, in the production of eyeballs and planetary orbits. And the theist, for her part, must take seriously the question of "how" such a role is to be conceptualized—lacking interesting responses to which the whole idea of "creation science" must remain as vacuous as it is today. That is a tough assignment. But it may be that human history, the realm of action and personality, more readily exhibits a direct role of larger minds in the course of worldly events. And that brings us to the third stage of theistic evidences, as I understand them.

In this third stage we look at the course of human events—historical, social and individual—within the context of a demonstrated extra-naturalism (stage one) and of a quite plausible cosmic intellectualism (stage two). Thus human life is to be interpreted within the ontological space of the actualities, with their attendant possibilities, hewn out in stages one and two. Further things which we know about some minds (ours) and their creations at least put us in position to face the atheist with an urgent "why not," and to test the basis of any knowledge claims she may make about cosmic minds in relation to human history and

experience. We know, most importantly, that human minds standardly create for a purpose, and that they retain an active interest in, feel intimately invested in, what they create—and all the more so the greater the originality or "creativity" involved. Intervention in human affairs by God need not, as in Deism, be regarded as a sign of imperfection in the original creation. ("Another factory recall?") Creation might, after all, be an ongoing affair with God, including what is usually called "redemption" in the language of theology. Intervention appropriately conducted could plausibly be seen as a loving will to communicate and to help, or to secure the purposes in creation, which is at least not radically foreign even to personality as we know it under human conditions. And, given all the preceding, we would like to know why the same should not be true of cosmic intelligence—all the while unequivocally conceding that we have not demonstrated it to be true, or even strongly probable. While unexcluded possibilities do not imply truth or probability, they are nonetheless not irrelevant to rationality.

More important in our third stage than these rather speculative extensions of minimal theism toward a more full-blown personal God, is the examination of the actual course of human history and the actual contents of human experience to determine, as honestly and thoroughly as possible, what can and what cannot be understood in terms of "natural" events verifiable within objectively established methodologies of science. These methodologies are to be distinguished, as clearly as possible, from philosophical speculations about them, of course. But, to put it simply, we should always assume that particular events and experiences might be scientifically understood; and the theist should usually if not always give any benefit of any honest doubt to the naturalist in any particular question of fact (though, I think, not in matters of philosophical speculation). If there is anything to what the theist believes, we surely can afford to be generous.

But we must also be thorough, and we have every right to require the same of our atheist co-investigators and to ignore their objections if they refuse. Faith is not restricted to religious people, nor is blind prejudice and dogmatism. The atheist who can't be bothered to pay serious attention to the facts claimed for religious histories and religious experience is twin brother to the churchman who refused to look through Galileo's telescope because he already knew what was and was not to be seen. Of course the way is often paved for this in the life of the individual atheist by an equal prejudice and dogmatism on the theist side. Also the (hopefully) sound argumentation laid out in stages one and two above may have been dismissed because it was presented as proving the existence of the God of religion, when it obviously does no such thing. Thus the individual atheist may recognize no context of possibilities within which the miraculous events of religious history and the experiences of sainthood and the devout can be taken seriously for the purposes of knowledge.

So I completely agree with Professor Nielsen's comment, at the opening of his "Rebuttal," that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, even if he stood by and saw it happen, "wouldn't show there was an infinite intelligible being." He knows there are lots of weird things in the world, and, as he says, "It would be just a very strange happening." (So what else is new, in a universe where nothing bangs big and order 'congeals' out of chaos?) Jesus himself, according to the record, agrees with us on this matter. In the story he told of Lazarus and Dives (Luke 16), Dives asked Father Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his brothers of their fate in Hades, saying that "if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!" But Abraham replied: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead." (vss 30-31) (You can imagine the fine, witty actions and comments to be heard around the dinner table had Lazarus reappeared on the scene! Just think how Monty Python or Bill Cosby or Woody Allen would do it, and you've got it. Abraham didn't fall off the turnip truck.)

Jesus' approach to these matters was, I believe, expressed in his statement: "You believe in God, believe also in me." (John 14:2) That's the right order. The religious ideas, history and context back of His life as an Israelite, together with his own teaching and action and character, provided for those who absorbed themselves in them something close to a logical demonstration, not of the existence of Jehovah, which was never in question for them, but of His specific nature. And this is third stage work. It will have no epistemic weight whatsoever except within an appropriate historical context, or some other arrangement which for the individual settles the first and second stage questions. Of course occasionally some people will just be overwhelmed by a historical or personal event. But a philosophically thoughtful person will never be

convinced, much less someone operating from prejudice—even if they decide that they "had better give in to God"—unless they have found some intellectual satisfaction on stage one and stage two issues, which clearly the Bible, for its part, presumes is quite accessible and important. (Psalm 19, Romans 1:19-20)

Historical events and individuals—real or imagined, rigorously reported or mythologically elaborated—do in fact provide the specific content for beliefs about the gods of religious devotion. But it is always a mistake—regretfully very common, I'm afraid—to simply place the weight of proving the existence of God upon them, although they may always serve as appropriate points of challenge to dogmatic unbelief, and although they in fact will lead some people to belief in God. It is the task of theistic evidences at stage three to subject these contents to appropriate rational tests to determine, so far as possible, the more specific nature of the mind-like causal ground of the physical universe. There is no reason whatsoever why recognized religious activities, such as prayer or ritual and meditative practices, should not serve along with rational analysis, experimentation and historical research to that end. In every domain, the subject matter ultimately must determine the suitability of the methods for its study.

My own conviction is that a properly worked out inference in terms of "the best explanation"—but "best" in the full light of the results of stages one and two—will show it quite plausible that some extra-natural mind or minds of, roughly, the full theistic variety are causally present in human events: that there is "a power working for righteousness," as Matthew Arnold called it, at work in human history and available for interaction with individuals under certain circumstances. The real force back of such a conclusion can never be felt in the abstract, but only comes from the patient, highly motivated examination and comparison of details, which simply can't be engaged in here—and, really, can't be done for another person. But, to nevertheless speak generally, the existence of the Jewish people and of the Christian Church, when one goes into the fine texture of the history, personalities, thought and experience which make them up, seems to me by far best explained by the existence of, roughly, the type of deity that Christians and Jews, among others, worship. I by no means suggest that God is responsible for everything in these traditions, nor do I restrict the action of God in history to them alone. Indeed, if he is the sort of being they themselves present him as, then he is present with and makes himself known to all peoples. Every religious culture and experience should be deeply respected, even if not adopted and even if regarded as mistaken in important respects. Christians above all should know of God's habit of turning up in the wrong company, where according to the official view he absolutely could not be. What further inferences are to be drawn from this is another matter: one which must be handled with the utmost care. But the partisan of one religion must extend the same generous openness and hopefulness to the practitioners of other religions as he would want them and the atheist to extend to himself. The rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," also extends to inquiry with others.

I have attempted in these pages to clarify some points about the structure into which theistic evidences must be arranged if they are to be properly appreciated. Failure to understand the limitations and the interrelations of what I have called the "three stages" of theistic evidences seems to me a great hinderance both to philosophical treatment of the question of God's existence and to the individual's efforts to come to terms with what is, after all, a major issue in dealing with life. Given the very best possible exposition, theistic evidences never replace a choice as to what kind of universe we would have ours to be, and a personal adventure of trust, living beyond what we can absolutely know. Nevertheless, I believe that the structure of evidence outlined—in spite of its far too simple discussions of the nature of the physical, causation, order, etc.—indicates that the basic doctrine of God present in the historically developed theisms of the major world religions is most likely true and is certainly capable of being rationally accepted. With that much secured, and yet mindful of the vast amount we do not know about that God, we here give the last word to Philo (Hume), that: "...the most natural sentiment, which a well-disposed mind will feel on this occasion, is a longing desire and expectation, that heaven would be pleased to dissipate, at least alleviate, this profound ignorance, by affording some more particular revelation to mankind, and making discoveries of the nature, attributes, and operations of the divine object of our faith."

*I am greatly indebted for comments on an earlier draft of this paper to David W. Edwards, Doug Geivett, Gregory Jesson, Brendan Sweetman, and Duane Willard, who do not necessarily agree with the views here expressed.