

Wilde Lecture 2: The Argument from the Denial of Scepticism

Alexander R. Pruss

Department of Philosophy
Baylor University

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- We are a moderately flourishing global community of significantly reflective moral agents.
- This implies multiple goods:
 - flourishing moral agency
 - flourishing reflectivity
 - flourishing community, etc.
- These are not independent: there is something particularly very good about them all coming together.
- This good has epistemological prerequisites: that the agents know the truth about many things.
- The obtaining of many if not all of these prerequisites can be explained naturalistically.
- But this explanation is piecemeal.
- A **unified** explanation is better, and theism provides such an explanation.

Epistemological prerequisites

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- **Flourishing moral agency** requires knowledge of many moral and everyday truths, including about the existence of other minds and a physical world, and some specifics about these minds and the physical world.
- Flourishing **significantly reflective** moral agency requires not merely knowledge of particular moral truths, but also the accessibility of knowledge of moral truths at high levels of generality, including some metaethical truths.
- Need some access to understanding of selves and place in the universe, and hence to knowledge of metaphysics and science.
- A moderately flourishing **global** community requires a high level of technology, which presupposes true belief in multiple scientific areas.
- Access to scientific knowledge requires access to mathematical knowledge.
- Knowledge of morals, science, metaphysics and mathematics has negative and positive prerequisites:
 - falsity of sceptical scenarios that threaten broad swaths of knowledge, and
 - able minds and amenable environment.

Sceptical scenarios

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- All of the following are false:
 - Demons deceive most of us about most things.
 - We are ignorant brains in vats.
 - We ignorantly exist in a computer simulation.
 - Ignorantly simulated people vastly outnumber organic ones.
 - We are ignorant Boltzmann brains.
 - Ignorant Boltzmann brains vastly outnumber normal ones.
 - We are disembodied souls having illusions of embodiment.
 - We evolved with little connection between truth and survival value in morality.
 - The probability of objects popping into existence *ex nihilo* is high or undefined.
 - The universe came into existence fully-formed five minutes ago.
 - Everybody else is a zombie.
 - There is no correlation between mathematical beauty and physical truth.
- What **explains** the fact that all these claims are false? (Not the fact that we have reason to believe them to be false.)
- And the fact that all claims **relevantly like them** are false?

Non-theistic explanations, I

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- Each sceptical claim can be given an explanation not involving God:
 - Demons don't deceive most of us about most things because there are no demons.
 - We aren't brains in vats because science isn't yet capable of vatting us.
 - We don't exist in a computer simulation because of essentiality of origins or because functionalism is false.
 - Organic people outnumber simulated ones because functionalism is false or because it's hard to simulate people or because intelligent beings have moral objections to simulating people.
 - We aren't Boltzmann brains because of essentiality of origins or because evolution is needed for proper function.
 - Boltzmann brains aren't prevalent because we don't live in a large multiverse, or because evolutionary processes are more likely to produce brains than random fluctuations are, or because evolution is needed for proper function.
 - We aren't disembodied souls having illusions because materialism is true.

Non-theistic explanations, II

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■ And similarly:

- There is significant connection between truth and survival value of moral beliefs because necessarily there are many particular truths living by which helps the survival of a community of the sort that evolved among humans.
- The probability of objects popping into existence *ex nihilo* is neither high nor completely undefined because the Principle of Sufficient Reason is true.
- The universe didn't come into existence fully-formed five minutes ago because it came into existence in the Big Bag.
- Everybody else isn't a zombie because lots of minds evolved.
- There is a correlation between beauty and truth because in fact the laws of nature are $L_1, \dots, L_m, \dots, L_n$, and L_1, \dots, L_m are beautiful (where $m/n \gg 0$).

Evaluation of non-theistic explanations

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- There are queries about some specifics. E.g.:
 - Is it likely that moral considerations would keep advanced societies from producing lots of simulations?
 - Doesn't evolution require surprisingly low entropy over a much larger region than local random fluctuations do?
 - Is essentiality of origins true?
- Some of the proposals may lead to theism by alternate paths. E.g.:
 - If functionalism is false, dualism is arguably the best theory of mind, and the best explanation of why souls exist is arguably theism.
 - If we don't have a multiverse, then that undercuts the best non-theistic explanation of fine-tuning.
 - If the Principle of Sufficient Reason is true, then the most controversial premise in the Cosmological Argument is true.

Paul Edwards' five Inuit

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Suppose I see a group of five [Inuit] standing on the corner of Sixth Avenue and 50th Street and I wish to explain why the group came to New York. Investigation reveals the following stories: [Inuit] No. 1 did not enjoy the extreme cold in the polar region and decided to move to a warmer climate. No. 2 is the husband of [Inuit] No. 1. He loves her dearly and did not wish to live without her. No. 3 is the son of [Inuit] 1 and 2. He is too small and too weak to oppose his parents. No. 4 saw an advertisement in the *New York Times* for an [Inuit] to appear on television. No. 5 is a private detective engaged by the Pinkerton Agency to keep an eye on Eskimo No. 4.

Let us assume that we have no explained in the case of each of the five [Inuit] why he or she is in New York. Somebody then asks: "All right, but what about the group as a whole; why is *it* in New York?" That would plainly be absurd question. There is no group over and above the five members, and if we have explained why each of the five members is in New York we have *ipso facto* explained why the group is there.

A new set of five Inuit

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- Edwards is right in that no further explanation is required.
- And there is little reason to look for a further explanation.
- But what if instead we have a group of five Inuit there such that:
 - No. 1 is visiting New York to present a paper at a chemistry conference.
 - No. 2 has read Edwards' paper and wants a selfie on the corner of 6th and 50th.
 - No. 3 is on the way to 3rd and 70th.
 - No. 4 is a teller at a bank at that corner out on lunch break.
 - No. 5 is interviewing candidates for a chemistry professor job?
- Unlike in Edwards' case, the individual explanations are disunified and make no connection with the commonality between the five: they are **Inuit**.
- Have reason to think a unified explanation has been left out, such as that five high school friends from Iqaluit are meeting up.

Unification

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- Likewise, the explanations of the falsity of the sceptical hypotheses are disunified and make no connection with the commonality between the hypotheses: they are **sceptical**.
- Even if the sceptical hypotheses didn't have an obvious commonality, we would have reason to prefer a more unified explanation.
- One can accept the disunified explanations and **still** think that we have evidence for the unified explanation, in two ways:
 - Residual Bayesian confirmation (cf. David Glass):
$$P(O_1 \& \dots \& O_n \mid E_1 \& \dots \& E_n \& U) > P(O_1 \& \dots \& O_n \mid E_1 \& \dots \& E_n)$$
 - Explanation of explanations: The unifying explanation may explain the **conjunction of the explananda** (e.g., someone who wanted to surprise five high school friends got a job for one, invited another to a conference, etc.)

A theistic story

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Conclusions

- Each of the hypotheses, when conjoined with some background claims, entails scepticism about a broad area of our epistemic life.
- Such scepticism is incompatible with the kind of moderately flourishing global community that was sketched earlier.
- Thus, **perfect being** would have reasons to create a universe where these hypotheses would all be false.
- That a perfect being acted on these reasons would explain the falsity of the sceptical hypotheses.
- This putative explanation is compatible with most if not all the earlier-offered explanations, but provides a unity by explaining the falsity of all the hypotheses by reference to their sceptical nature.
- And additionally the theistic explanation explains why no hypothesis **like these** is true—something that also calls out for explanation.

Other prerequisites

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Conclusions

- The moderately flourishing global community also has positive prerequisites besides the falsity of sceptical hypotheses:
 - There are conscious beings.
 - There are morally responsible agents.
 - Agents have access to non-physical facts, namely mathematical and moral ones.
- The theistic explanation explains those as well.
- The best non-theistic alternatives will have to add separate stories about these.

Objection: Simulations and Boltzmann brains, I

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- Recall two of the false hypotheses:
 - Ignorantly simulated people vastly outnumber organic ones.
 - Ignorant Boltzmann brains vastly outnumber normal ones.
- The claim that these are **sceptical** hypotheses depends on the contentious thesis that in these scenarios normal organic people like us would not **know** that we are such.
- I think the contentious thesis is correct, assuming we spell out the scenarios carefully enough.
- If all the beings with a relevantly similar mental life, internalistically characterized, believe themselves to have a property Q and only a minority are right, then none of them know that they have Q .
- And with vast numbers of simulated people or Boltzmann brains, we will be outnumbered by the ones with a mental life relevantly similar to ours who think they are normal organic people.

Simulations and Boltzmann brains, II

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- If half of the people in my Department were randomly chosen to be made into brains in a vat yesterday, with a continuation of their previous life being simulated, none of them would **know** they aren't brains in a vat.
- But a certain kind of reliabilist, say, might deny such claims.
- However, if we knew the statistics, in these scenarios it would clearly be irrational to think that one is one of the exceptions, namely the normal organic people.
- Thus, even if there is knowledge of normalcy and organicity, that knowledge is not robust against knowledge of the large-scale structure of reality.
- But a knowledge with this kind of robustness is plausibly also particularly valuable, and so a unified theistic explanation of it can be provided. (Theism yields value-based explanations.)

Objection: Necessary truths

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- Perhaps some of the sceptical hypotheses are false due to **necessary** truths and so theism doesn't explain their falsity at all:
 - there are no simulated people as functionalism is necessarily false;
 - there are no Boltzmann brains as proper function necessarily requires an evolutionary history;
 - objects don't pop into existence due to the PSR.
- Note that the first option makes things harder for naturalism.
- Also, one can explain a conjunction without explaining the conjuncts when the explanans **ensures** each of the explananda while explaining only some of them:
 - If I asked IT to scan both of my computers for viruses, and the scan removes the viruses from computer *A* and correctly finds none on *B*, then that both computers lack viruses is explained by my ordering a scan.
 - But the absence of viruses on *B* is not explained by my ordering a scan.
- Similarly, God's action of ensuring our knowledge can **explain** the falsity of some of the sceptical hypotheses while **ensuring** the falsity of each, and thereby explaining why they are all false.

Objection: Knowledge of falsity of sceptical hypotheses

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- Knowledge is not closed under entailment, and so even if we know that we know that we have two hands, it need not follow that we know the relevant sceptical hypotheses to be false.
- Nonetheless, I take it that we are confident that the sceptical hypotheses **are** false.
- We only have an objection to the argumentative strategy if Inference to Best Explanation (IBE) and similar principles require **knowledge** of the explanandum in order for us to get evidence for the explanans.
- But this is an implausible requirement.
- A high probability of the explanandum seems good enough to get IBE off the ground.
- If evidential force covaries with $P(H \mid E)/P(H)$ as Bayesians say, knowledge of the explanandum isn't required for us to get evidence for the explanans.

Objection: Negative facts do not call for explanation

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- Many of the sceptical hypotheses are positive existential claims: e.g., there are lots of computer simulations. Their denials are thus negative claims.
- If we are to look for explanations of negative claims, we have an endless task: e.g., why are there no flying pigs?
- **Response 1:** Substantively explaining a large class of negative claims is still an achievement.
- Why are there no elephants, sheep, bats, or pigs in this room?
- Because non-human mammals that aren't assistants for the disabled are forbidden from lecture rooms. (Better explanation than going kind by kind.)
- **Response 2:** Some of the sceptical hypotheses aren't positive, e.g., the one about no correlation between moral truth and survival value.
- **Response 3:** Explaining negative hypotheses becomes a particularly worthwhile task when plenitude theses, like multiverse ones, are epistemically relevant. But plenitude theses are one of the main alternatives to theism with respect to fine-tuning.

Objection: Best physics (O'Connor)

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- The whole of the best physics together with physicalism will explain the falsity of all the sceptical hypotheses.
- For this to be a **unified** explanation, the best physics needs to be unified.
- The laws may not be unified due to a variety of fundamental constants.
- The explanations will require various constraints on the boundary conditions.
- Detail is likely to be needed even beyond, say, the Past Hypothesis (e.g., a version of the Past Hypothesis is compatible with the Five-Minute Hypothesis).
- A physicalist story will probably violate the PSR at the beginning of time, so it can't rule out objects popping into existence *ex nihilo*.
- If we add that such popping is very rare, our explanation becomes less unified—and it gets an undefined or low prior probability.
- The best physical explanations of the existence of intelligent life are plenitude stories, which are apt to generate sceptical hypotheses (e.g., Boltzmann brains). It is difficult to calibrate the plenitude.
- Can still give a residual explanation argument.

Objection: Improbability on theism

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Conclusions

- Theism as such is very simple and not gerrymandered:
 $\exists x \forall Q (\text{Perfection}(Q) \rightarrow Q(x))$.
- But the probability that God would make an at least moderately flourishing community such as described is arguably not all that high, as there are many other goods that God could make.
- **Response 1:** As far as we know, such community goods are among the highest of goods.
- **Response 2:** Add the existence of human-like beings to the background knowledge.
 - Given the existence of human-like beings, it is likely that God would make them form such a community as that is proper to their flourishing.
 - The considerations based on “Other prerequisites” are then separately considered as part of fine-tuning types of arguments.
 - But we still keep the unique considerations based on the falsity of sceptical hypotheses.

Objection: Epistemic evil

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- If God values our access to the truth, we would expect God to ensure that few of us have much in the way of false beliefs.
- **Response:** There is a value in a search for the truth rather than having it handed to us.
 - And search for the truth requires lots of false beliefs along the way.
 - Toy example:
 - We are investigating ten independent hypotheses H_1, \dots, H_{10} that are in fact true.
 - Our reasonable priors for each are $1/2$.
 - Credence of 96% is sufficient for belief.
 - Then our priors for $\sim(H_{i_1} \& \dots \& H_{i_n})$ will be $1 - 2^{-n}$, so as long as $n \geq 5$, we will *a priori* believe.
 - This yields $\sum_{n=5}^{10} \binom{10}{n} = 638$ false beliefs at the start of our search for truth.

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- The hypothesis that God has good reason to aim for a moderately flourishing global community of the sort described thus provides a unified explanation of the falsity of many sceptical hypotheses, and the truth of some additional prerequisite hypotheses.
- The main competing explanations are not unified.
- Moreover, the prerequisites for knowledge are unified in a way that makes a non-unified explanation especially unsatisfactory.
- The unified theistic explanation is not in competition with most of the non-unified explanations.
- Furthermore, it is plausible that there are plenty of other actually false sceptical hypotheses whose falsity can be explained by the same hypothesis.
- All this makes it appear reasonable to accept the theistic hypothesis absent sufficiently strong arguments to the contrary.
 - Main candidate: Non-epistemic evil.