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From Friendly Atheism To Friendly Natural Theology: The Case
for Modesty In Religious Epistemology

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Abstract

Philosophical theists argue with great ingenuity and sophistication that there is excellent evidence in support of the existence of the God of western theism. Philosophical atheists argue with equal skill that the evidence is negative. Both sides can't be right. But, this seems to imply that one camp is guilty of serious epistemological error. I explore in this essay a way of understanding good theological evidence that mitigates charges of intellectual error or blindness. According to a position that Rowe calls *friendly atheism*, the atheist can argue that the relevant evidence supports his or her view, but that theists are rationally justified in believing that God exists in spite of the intense suffering that manifest in this world. I will argue that friendly atheism, and more generally friendly natural theology, when articulated in more detail, and with great care, represents an important metaphilosophical insight about use of evidence in theological contexts.

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I

Philosophical theists like William Craig and Richard Swinburne argue with great ingenuity and sophistication that there is excellent evidence in support of the existence of the God of western theism. (Swinburne, R. 1991, 1996; Swinburne, R. & Craig, W. 1979). Philosophical atheists like John Mackie and William Rowe argue with equal skill that the evidence is negative. (Mackie, J. L. 1981; Mackie, J. L. & Rowe, W. 1979). Both sides can't be right. This seems to imply that one camp is guilty of serious epistemological error. I want to explore in this essay a way of understanding good theological evidence that mitigates charges of intellectual error or blindness.

According to a position that Rowe calls friendly atheism, the atheist can argue that the relevant evidence supports his or her view, but that theists are rationally justified in believing that God exists in spite of the intense suffering that manifest in this world. I

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will argue that friendly atheism, and more generally friendly natural theology, when articulated in more detail, and with great care, represents an important metaphilosophical insight about use of evidence in theological contexts.

Rowe's argument makes it appear that friendly atheism is dependant on the familiar fact that people can be rationally justified in believing things — have good evidence for them — that turn out to be false because they, plain and simple, lack crucial data.

> Suppose your friends see you off on a flight to Hawaii. Hours after the take-off they learn that your plane has gone down at sea. After a twenty-four hour search, no survivors have been found. Under these circumstances they are rationally justified in believing that you have perished. But it is hardly rational for you to believe this, as you bob up and down in your life vest, wondering why the search planes have failed to spot you. (Rowe, W. 1979, 135-6)

Based on the data at hand, your friends do have good evidence that you have died. And, if your luck runs out after forty-eight hours, it may be that no one is ever the wiser about your status at twenty-four hours. Nevertheless, while you are alive, your epistemological position seems superior to that of your friends — you possess more relevant data than they do. Thus, their beliefs about you are rationally justified, but your beliefs about your situation supercede theirs.

I am interested in exploring friendly natural theology in contexts where theists and atheists alike are in equal possession of the relevant evidence. It seems to me that there are numerous contexts, both in and out of philosophical theology, where equally bright, reflective, and concerned thinkers disagree about how to interpret the important data. The friendly atheist may conclude that opponents are rationally justified in their assessment of the evidence, but are mistaken. The friendly atheist can consistently assert the truth of atheism, that the evidence supports atheism, but that theists are rationally justified in

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seeing things differently. The position of the "friendly theist" *vis-a-vis* the atheist's belief is the mirror image of this.

II

My wife and I return from a day's outing and discover to our dismay the broken remains of her great aunt's antique vase between the couch and the end table. We know exactly what has happened. Those damn cats were roughhousing again, and one of them knocked the vase over the edge. We have good evidence in support of our recalcitrant feline hypothesis.

E_1.   My wife clearly remembers seeing the vase intact shortly before we left.

E_2.   We foolishly left the cats in when we departed.

E_3.   The vase was broken when we returned.

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T_0.   One or both of the cats knocked the vase off the table breaking it.

Our evidence is a classic example of 'abductive' reasoning, or in the more contemporary jargon, an inference to the best explanation. The cat hypothesis both explains all of the relevant data, and it does a better job of explaining this data that any other competing hypothesis. It is vital to notice that lots of other rival explanations would also account for the data. To list just a few, consider the following:

T_1.   My mother-in-law, a compulsive cleaner, decided to dust the living room while we were gone, and carelessly knocked the vase off.

T_2.   An earthquake in the early afternoon knocked it off.

T_3.   Burglars entered while we were gone and broke the vase.

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Inference to the best explanation presupposes that there are innumerable contexts in which normal intelligent human beings discover intersubjectivity in their judgments about the best explanation. Much of the philosophical criticism of this approach to good evidence quibbles about the criteria for a "best" explanation, or worries that the *best* account may yet turn out to be *untrue*. Both concerns are legitimate, but don't really damage inference to the best explanation as a quasi-psychological account of what goes on during the assessment evidence. The best explanation at some particular stage in the investigation way well not be the true one; our Hawaii-bound plane disaster already showed that people can have very good evidence for false hypotheses. And it's quite true that attempts to state formal criteria for explanatory adequacy are doomed to distressing level of generality and abstractness.

> There is, of course, a problem about how one is to judge that one hypothesis is sufficiently better than another hypothesis. Presumably such a judgment will be based on considerations such as which hypothesis is simpler, which is more plausible, which explains more, which is less ad hoc, and so forth. (Harman, G. 1965, 89)

III

Atheists believe that there is good evidence that God does not exist. The evidential case is an inference to the best explanation. There are at least three distinct kinds of relevant evidence.

E_1.   This world contains vast amounts of moral evil; human pain, suffering, and misery caused by the actions, choices, and oversights of other human agents engaging in (free) human actions.

E_2.   This world contains vast amounts of natural evil; human pain, suffering, and misery caused by non-human natural occurrences like disease, genetic defects, and natural disasters.

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E_3.   This world contains, and has contained for hundreds of thousands of years before the evolution of humans, vast amounts of animal pain.

This kind of data constitutes the relevant evidence in the "evidential argument from evil." It may seem overly fastidious to distinguish the kinds of pain, suffering, and misery described in E_1 through E_3. It is necessary, however, since very different explanatory strategies are required for an adequate account of this diverse fact about the natural world.

The atheist takes this as evidence that God does not exist. This negative existential hypothesis, however, does not look that much like an explanatory account, and therefore, is usefully stated in terms of Paul Draper's "Hypothesis of Indifference."

T_0.   Neither the nature nor the condition of sentient beings on earth is the result of benevolent or malevolent actions performed by non-human persons. (Draper, P. 1989, 13)

Draper's discussion makes it clear that the positive explanation of human and animal pain and suffering is to be articulated in terms of a purely naturalistic account of the world, with particular focus on natural selection. Draper's Hypothesis of Indifference counts as atheism — "inconsistent with theism" — because "if supernatural being do exist, then no action performed by them is motivated by direct concern with our well-being." (Draper, P. 1989, 13)

The atheist's case beautifully answers what Larry Wright has recently called the argument's "implicit question." (Wright, L. 1995) The religious skeptic is responding to a question in a theistic context — "western theism presupposes that God is infinitely powerful, and infinitely good; why, therefore, is there so much intense suffering?" The evidential argument from evil lays out a recommended answer to this question — there is no omnipotent and morally perfect being who is in a position to do anything about the

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vast amount of pain and suffering pervasive in this world; the answer must be found the natural sciences, particularly modern evolutionary biology.

Inference to the best explanation requires a comparison of alternative explanations, or rival answers to the atheist's implicit question. Philosophical atheism, the hypothesis of indifference, is suggested as the favored account. To test this we must see how it stands up to rival explanations, or theistic answers to the implicit question. An abstract rival answer is easy enough to articulate. Why would an omnipotent and morally perfect God allow all of the manifest pain, suffering, and misery? Why is there so much evil? Theists believe that a better answer is contained in what might be called the Generic Theodicy.

T_1.   God exists, and has a morally sufficient reason for allowing moral evil, natural evil, and animal pain.

Consider the following catalogue of somewhat more detailed theistic rival explanations that have received some serious discussion in the last twenty years or so. There is no pretense here that this is anything approaching an exhaustive list:

T_2.   Free will — The pain, suffering and misery we see is the result of freely chosen actions on the part of human (and perhaps angelic) agents. God can intercede in the choices of free agents only at the expense of turning their genuine freedom into pseudo, or puppet, freedom.

T_3.   Soul-making — The evil of this world is a necessary part of challenging environment that allows for genuine spiritual growth. God desires eventual spiritual communion with fully formed human souls; there is no other way for these souls to be produced.

T_4.   Causal and epistemological regularity — The pain, suffering, and misery of this world is the result of its operating under consistent and understandable causal laws. God could intercede, but only at the expense of interfering with the causal

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regularity, and more importantly, at the expense of allowing free human agents the opportunity to learn about their world, and perhaps thus interfering with their freedom of choice.

T₅.   Afterlife and infinite redemption — The evil experienced by human beings is of a relatively short duration. It is more than compensated for by an infinite existence in some afterlife context that is free from pain and suffering.

Peter Van Inwagen makes an important theological, as well as epistemological, point in the following:

> It seems to me that the theist should not assume that there is a single reason or a tightly interrelated set of reasons for the sufferings of all sentient creatures. In particular, the theist should not assume that God's reasons for decreeing, or allowing, the sufferings of nonrational creatures have much in common with His reasons for decreeing, or allowing, the sufferings of human beings. (Van Inwagen, P. 1996, 157)

The best explanation of a case of cancer may well include genetic history, viral infection, and a person's life-style. Certainly, adequate explanations in theology may be every bit as complicated as in medicine.

T₆.   God's morally sufficient reason is a complicated set of reasons, each appropriate to particular kind of suffering.

IV

The theist may at this point present positive evidence in support of God's existence. This also can be presented in the form of an inference to the best explanation. Richard Swinburne very succinctly gives us the outline of what such evidence will look like:

> [T]he view that there is a God explains everything that we observe, not just some narrow range of data. It explains the fact that there is a universe at all, that scientific laws operate within it, that it contains conscious animals and humans with very complex intricately organized bodies, that we have abundant opportunities for developing ourselves and the world, as well as the more particular data that humans report miracles and have religious experiences. In so far as scientific causes and laws explain some of these things (and in part they do), these very causes and laws need explaining, and God action explains them. (Swinburne, R. 1996, 2).

The evidence for and against the existence of God is often presented piecemeal, in separate articles, chapters, or books. But it is clear that all of the data are relevant. The atheist cannot present the data about suffering, and simply ignore any facts that prove embarrassing or inconvenient. Thus, a full articulation of evidence will at least include the facts about human and animal suffering, E1 through E3, as well as the more positive evidence contained in the quotation above.

E_4.   There is a universe.

E_5.   Scientific laws operate within it.

E_6.   It contains complex intricately organized bodies.

E_7.   It contains conscious humans and animals.

E_8.   Humans have abundant opportunities for developing themselves and the world.

E_9.   Humans report miracles.

E_{10}.   Humans have religious experiences.

What best explains all of these data? Theists insist that all of this is best accounted for by what I have called the generic theodicy.

T_T.   God exists, and has a morally sufficient reason for allowing intense suffering.

The atheist preferred the Hypothesis of Indifference, but I think it will be useful here to sort out the two sorts of atheism that are embedded in T_0. One can deny the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, morally perfect being — the God of theism — yet believe "in the existence of some sort of divine being or divine reality." (Rowe, W. 1990, 126) Let us call this wider sort of theism, which is really a form of narrow atheism, 'pluralism', in honor of John Hick's hypothesis that there exists a single divine reality that underlies all of the world's great religions. (Hick, J. 1989)

T_P.   There exists some sort of divine reality, but the idea that there is an omnipotent and morally perfect being who can do anything about the intense suffering is merely an interpretive construction on the part of theistic religious traditions.

The atheist in a wider sense denies the existence of anything supernatural, and believes that the adequate account of all of this data will eventually come from secular natural science.

T_N.   The natural universe is all that exists; any account of the world's suffering must come from the natural and social sciences.

V

What is the best explanation of all of these important and relevant data? Is theism, pluralism, or secular naturalism, the most plausible account? The position I am calling friendly natural theology insists that these are meaningful questions. People can be strongly committed to there being an answer to these questions, and further, they can strongly endorse one of these answers. What would qualify them as friendly natural theologians — theists, pluralists, or secular naturalists — is the willingness to concede that equally reflective and intelligent thinkers would be entitled to disagree with them

about what the best explanation was. A friendly secular naturalist will believe that her theory best explains all of the data; she will believe that secular naturalism is true, and that she possesses good evidence that it is true. She will not insist, however, that her pluralist or theist colleagues are not rationally justified in their different takes one the same evidence. Friendly theists are in exactly the same situation. They believe their theory is correct, and has good evidence in its support, but are willing to allow that atheists, of either the secular naturalist or pluralist bent, are equally well rationally justified in their beliefs.

Agreement — intersubjective assessments of explanatory plausibility — is the foundation for inference to the best explanation. If there were not countless circumstances in which normal thinkers could be pretty much counted on to agree with one another, this model of evidence would be of little theoretical use. From everyday communication, to more specialized contexts like jury trials and scientific research, we count on the fact that shared background, language and culture, to say nothing of biological heritage and brain hardwiring, guarantees huge amounts of consensus about how to rank order explanatory hypotheses.

Just because agreement is both the norm, and the ideal, there is no reason to suppose that it will predominate in every intellectual context.

There are at least four different situations where we might expect some breakdown in the intersubjectivity of explanatory judgments. The first is when the explanatory candidates are very close to one another in terms of initial plausibility. The car is dead in the morning. It could be a dead battery, a blown fuse, a short in the ignition switch, or something else altogether. Who's to say? All three hypotheses seem relatively plausible. This little example also illustrates a second source of potential disagreement. One of the reasons that the hypotheses all seem to be in the same ballpark in terms of relative likelihood, is that we are operating with insufficient data. We need a bit more investigation before we are in a position to say what's really going on. Do the lights work? What do we see when we take the panel off the fuse box?

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The two other obvious contexts in which routinely expect explanatory disagreement is when there is some breakdown in intellectual competence, or lack of specialized expertise. The problem may be an inability to completely understand the data being offered as evidence, or the competing hypotheses offered as explanations, or, undoubtedly, there are contexts where we insufficiently understand both the data and the differing theories. Juries pretty much understand the concepts of murder and embezzlement, but may well need tutoring in the fine points of DNA tests, or details in cost accounting. Most of us have some concept of red-shifted galaxies, background radiation, and an expanding universe. Few of us, however, really understand inflationary and non-inflationary models of the big bang.

All four of these sources of potential disagreement complicate the assessment of explanatory theories within natural theology. Consider, for example, the issue of technical expertise. One of the strengths of classical natural theology [1] was that it by and large appealed to data that were straightforward, non-technical, and easily understandable by most any intelligent thinker. The most interesting and potentially compelling evidence for the existence of God on the contemporary scene, however, requires a good deal of specialized background knowledge to even begin to appreciate. Theists can point to theoretical and empirical results in modern physics and astronomy to articulate a version of the teleological argument — one that is completely immune from criticism on Darwinian grounds. (See Johnson, J. L. 1993) The problem is that only a handful of the philosophers and theologians who have a vital professional interest in these data possess anything like the theoretical and mathematical training necessary to completely appreciate these remarkable findings. Most of us are completely at the mercy of non-technical popular science writing to get any kind of intuitive feel for all of this. [2]

Hume's character, Demea, is usually dismissed as the weakest participant in the *Dialogues*. He represents, however, an intellectual position that is directly relevant to our discussion. Demea argues that the positive evidence presented by Cleanthes — a very strong pre-Darwinian version of the teleological argument — and the negative evidence

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presented with equal vigor by Philo — the argument from evil — are equally incapable of being appreciated by finite human intelligence:

> [I]s there not some danger, too, in this very circumstance, and may it not render us presumptuous, by making us imagine we comprehend the Deity and have some adequate idea of his nature and attributes? When I read a volume, I enter into the mind and intention of the author; I become him, in a manner, for the instant, and have an immediate feeling and conception of those ideas which revolved in his imagination while employed in that composition. But so near an approach we never surely can make to the Deity. His ways are not our ways. His attributes are perfect but incomprehensible. And this volume of nature contains a great and inexplicable riddle, more than any discourse or reasoning. (Hume, D. 1970, 37-8)

It is well-known, of course, that this line of reasoning is very dangerous for traditional theism. If the ways of the Deity are not our ways, if the divine attributes are perfect but incomprehensible, it is hard to see, as Hume's character Cleanthes eloquently argues, why this counts as theism. If we have no knowledge of God's attributes, how can the theist claim to believe in Him, rather than some other supernatural force? At the same time, the gulf in characteristics — moral, intellectual, and agency — between an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being, and normal human thinkers and actors is obviously relevant to answer evidential questions like "why is there evil?" Wykstra suggests that our intellectual perspective for questions of this sorts is so poor that we will never truly understand God's morally sufficient reason(s) for allowing evil:

> [T]he outweighing good at issue is of a special sort: one purposed by the Creator of all that is, whose vision and wisdom are therefore somewhat greater than ours. How much greater? A modest proposal might be that his wisdom is to ours, roughly as an adult human's is to a one-month old infant's. (Wykstra, 1984, 155)

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Far from being modest, Wykstra's metaphor for our intellectual competence is radical and cynical. If we have no more understanding of God's potential reasons for allowing evil than a one-month old infant does of her parents' motive for their dealings with her, then the whole project of natural theology seems doomed from the start.

Peter Van Inwagen describes himself as skeptical toward any reliable mechanism for making judgments of modal possibility, normative superiority, or explanatory plausibility when we are dealing the level of abstraction that is part and parcel of natural theology:

> [I]f the value judgment we are considering is to be trusted, then human beings possess a faculty that enables them to correctly judge the relative values of states of affairs of literally cosmic magnitude, states of affairs, moreover, that are in no way . . . connected with the practical concerns of human beings. Why should one suppose that one's inclinations to make judgments of value are reliable in this area? . . . God or evolution has provided us with the capacity for making judgments about size and distance that is very useful in hunting mammoths and driving cars, but which is of no use at all in astronomy. It seems that an analogous restriction applies to our capacity for making modal judgments. How can we be sure that an analogous restriction does not also apply to our capacity for making value judgments? (Van Inwagen, P. 1996, 162)

The friendly natural theologian is willing to accept most of van Inwagen's premises, but not his conclusion. Considerations of cosmic scale, extreme abstraction, potentially unreliable judgments of value, and the other aspects of contemporary natural theology, should make us modest, not skeptical. We do, both everyday people and professional academicians, make judgments of explanatory plausibility when confronted with the massive suffering around us. Rather than lament this fact, or argue that is somehow intellectually illegitimate, the friendly natural theologian embraces it. Evolution, or God, or both, have given us the ability to assess evidence, and the natural curiosity to wonder about, and present evidence relevant to, abstract questions in theology and philosophy.

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We are foolish if we don't concede that these questions are very hard; we are arrogant if we believe that rational thinkers can arrive at only one answer; but, we are overly cautious if we argue these issues completely exceed our intellectual competence.

VI

I want to close by contrasting friendly natural theology from other possible positions that bear some similarity to it. First of all, and certainly most important, friendly natural theology is not a version of radical "anything goes" relativism. The concept of a single "theological," though perhaps thoroughly naturalistic, objective reality, and some means of presenting relevant evidence as to its nature, remains the theoretical goal. There is a truth to the matter, and theists, pluralists, and secular naturalists disagree with one another as to its nature. Such a theological realism was explicit right from the start in Rowe's friendly atheism.

> If no one can be rationally justified in believing a false proposition, then friendly atheism is a paradoxical if not incoherent position. But surely the truth of a belief is not a necessary condition of someone's being rationally justified in having that belief. So in holding that someone is rationally justified in believing that the theistic God exists, the friendly atheist is not committed to thinking that the theist has a true belief. What he is committed to is that the theist has rational grounds for his belief, a belief the atheist rejects and is convinced he is rationally justified in rejecting. (Rowe, W. 1990, 8)

Friendly natural theology may appear to be a version of a much more sophisticated kind of relativism. It is plausible to argue that theists and secular naturalists approach the issues of natural theology — the relevant evidence or data — from such different perspectives that it is as though they inhabited different intellectual cultures. It is very tempting to diagnose the problem as one of incommensurability. Theists, it might be argued, play one "language game," operate from within a specific "paradigm," or inhabit

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an isolated "interpretive community." Secular naturalists, of course, would then be seen as pursuing their arguments within a different language game, a different paradigm, a different interpretive community. [3] What is attractive, here, is the idea that thinkers from differing intellectual perspectives evaluate the evidence according to different standards, standards authenticated from within those perspectives. Gerald Doppelt offers such a reading of Kuhn's incommensurability thesis.

> [T]his argument maintains (1) that any physical theory can only be evaluated relative to its own standard of adequacy, and (2) that successive physical theories in the development of science embody different, indeed, incompatible standards of scientific valuation. On this view, every historical system of scientific theory turns out to satisfy its own standards of knowledge more adequately than rival or alternative systems of theory. Each theory is thus 'best' in its own terms, and there are no other terms by which theories can be evaluated (hence, relativism). (Dopelt, G. 1982, 130)

Although there is superficial descriptive plausibility to such an account of contemporary natural theology, such an interpretation of the debate pays a high theoretical price. Incommensurability implicates meaning. Any serious suggestion that theists and atheists are speaking different languages, or even talking past on another, makes these issues much less interesting. We care about the disagreement, not about idiosyncratic statements of positions that are not even contradictory, but actually to have nothing to do with one another. And even as a descriptive account, such a view looks less attractive when the careful work of atheists like Rowe and Draper is compared to the equally careful work of theists like Swinburne, Alston, Wykstra, and van Inwagen. There's not much of a hint of linguistic or conceptual breakdown in this discussion. They seem to understand one another very well. And, although they disagree about what the best explanation is, it doesn't really seem that they are applying different standards for explanatory plausibility, but rather simply disagreeing about what the best one is.

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The theorist who, in my judgment, comes closest to articulating the correct metaphysical and epistemological basis for friendly natural theology is the academic lawyer, Ronald Dworkin. Dworkin's theory of hard cases asserts the following:

> [E]ven when no settled rule disposes of the case, one party may nevertheless have a right to win. It remains a judge's duty, even in hard cases, to discover what the rights of the parties are, not to invent new rights retrospectively. I should say at once, however, that it is no part of this theory that any mechanical procedure exists for demonstrating what the rights of the parties are in hard cases. On the contrary, the argument presupposes that reasonable lawyers and judges will often disagree about legal rights, just as citizens and statesmen disagree about political rights. (Dworkin, R. 1977, 81)

Realism about legal rights, of course, is very different from the theological realism at stake in friendly natural theology. Each raises difficult metaphysical issues. But notice how naturally Dworkin's epistemological recommendations could be utilized by the friendly natural theologian. It remains the natural theologian's duty, even in hard theological cases, to discover the best explanation. It is no part of the argument that any mechanical procedure exists for demonstrating what the best explanation is. Indeed, reasonable natural theologians will often disagree about what the best explanation is.

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[1] I am intentionally ignoring the jargon of "natural theology." As I am using it, "natural theology," is the attempt to bring evidence to bear on religious questions, regardless of whether the answer defended is theism, pluralism, or secular naturalism.

[2] This should in no way be taken to disparage the quality of the non-technical discussions. See, for example, John Gribbin and Martin Rees, *Cosmic Coincidences*, Bantam Books, 1989, Paul Davies, *The Mind of God*, Simon and Schuster, 1992, and, of course, the classic, Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, Bantam Books, 1988.

[3] The notion of a language game, of course, comes from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Macmillan, 1953. The equally familiar concept of a scientific paradigm comes from another contemporary philosophical classic, Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, 1970. Finally, the "relative to" perspective that I believe comes closest to the theist/atheist debate, the idea of an interpretive community, is developed in Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?*, Harvard, 1980.

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