

Manchester Lit&Phil

Philosophy Forum



Is belief beyond the natural beyond belief?

Focus paper for the Manchester Lit & Phil Philosophy Forum 15 Nov 2022

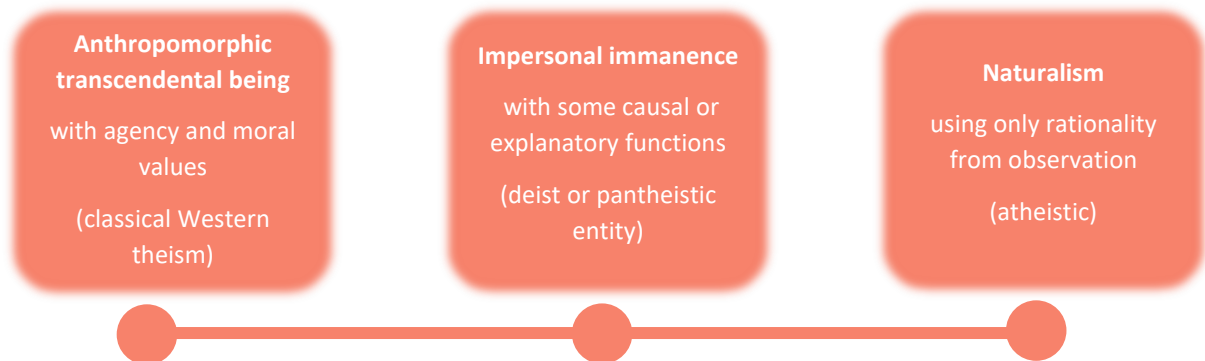
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This is a very brief **overview of metaphysical beliefs** from those requiring transcendental concepts to account for existence, and human life in particular, to those that require only naturalistic ones. It consists of a series of questions with simplified versions of the relevant arguments and accompanying notes as prompts for thought. I have attempted to classify belief systems in a simple way and assign the various for and against arguments to each, although some arguments apply to more than one position. For simplicity's sake I have omitted historical attributions. Forgive me if you detect my predispositions.

1 Natural vs transcendental (ie supernatural)?

- 1.1 Natural is non-transcendental and transcendental is non-natural! Are there **more basic definitions** that are not mutually dependent? For example: could naturalism be defined as a belief system which employs only careful observations and logical hypotheses based upon them? It is difficult to see any other definitive criterion of the transcendental other than 'non-naturalistic'.
- 1.2 Can metaphysical beliefs be placed along a **single gradated dimension** ranging from the anthropic ideas to naturalism? The example below indicates the possible extremes and mid-point. Intermediate positions can be easily identified. This might be simplistic, but it is still a useful model for our purposes.



- 1.3 What are the **pros and cons of each** of these three belief systems, both rationally and emotionally?
- **Rationally:** do they have explanatory power, ie are they coherent with some sort of supportive empirical evidence?
 - **Emotionally:** how much existential comfort and/or moral basis for living do they provide?

Sections 2, 3, and 4 below provide some pointers to addressing those questions.

2 Anthropomorphic transcendental being

- 2.1 Is an **omnigod** (ie supreme being: an omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good cosmic creator with interventionist powers) a coherent concept or must any god be constrained by at least causal/logical necessity? Obviously an omnigod such as is common in the Abrahamic religions is monotheistic, but similar questions can be asked of polytheism such as Hinduism and variants of paganism.

2.2 **First cause (or prime mover) argument for God (with a capital 'G')**

Everything must have a cause so the universe must have one called 'God'.

Note 1: If everything needs a cause, why doesn't God need one? How does God supposedly stop the infinite regress? Is *sui generis* (self-creation) plausible?

Note 2: Causation is a relation between (at least) two entities (A causes B).

The entirety of existence includes everything that exists, so there can be no other existing entity to cause it. Causation is a relation only between entities *within* a system.

Note 3: In spacetime, causation can be dispensed with because A and B can be regarded as different stages of a single event.

2.3 Ontological argument for God

This is a bit complicated (for a fuller exposition cf eg <https://www.allaboutphilosophy.org/ontological-argument.htm>). The argument requires the 'extrapolated possibility axiom': 'if the truth of a proposition is possible, then it is possible in all worlds'. The logic is formally summarised by philosopher Alvin Plantinga as follows:

- A being has maximal excellence in a given possible world W if and only if it is omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good in W; and
- A being has maximal greatness if it has maximal excellence in every possible world.
- It is possible that there is a being that has maximal greatness. (Premise)
- Therefore, possibly, it is necessarily true that an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good being exists.
- Therefore (by the above axiom) it is necessarily true that an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good being exists.
- Therefore, an omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly good being exists.

Note 1: Is the 'extrapolated possibility axiom' plausible? Is the counterfactual (ie alternative worlds) a plausible concept to use in this case?

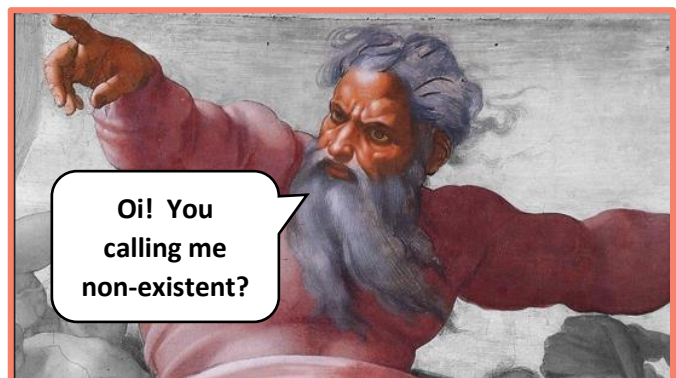
Note 2: The argument is based on the 3rd premise that an omnigod is a possibility, which seems circular because that is exactly what the argument purports to justify. Such an argument could be used to 'prove' the existence of anything.

2.4 Cosmic sin intuition against God

The world is too evil for there to be any morally good God. So either God doesn't exist or is amoral or immoral.

Note 1: Could evil be necessary to facilitate good?

Note 2: Is it feasible to attribute such a quintessential human attribute as ethics to a transcendent, and thereby *superhuman*, being?



With apologies to Michelangelo

2.5 With God on our side

Does the notion of a commanding God have beneficial/deleterious social effects?

Note 1: Encourages moral good, eg sociality and charity. But are these not the natural attributes of any social animal and therefore can better be accounted for by evolutionary benefit?

Note 2: Does a commanding God normally lead to religious exceptionalism, dogmatism and authoritarianism? Or indeed worse: pogroms, crusades, fatwas? Voltaire wrote: "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities."

Note 3: But is that inevitable or fair? Do not godless quasi-religions like Nazism, Maoism, etc, also cause holocausts, ethnic 'cleansing', genocide, etc?

2.6 Argument from authority

This relies on the imprimatur of some sacred text, such as the Tanakh, Bible or Quran. However the justification for the authority of these texts is contained within the texts themselves!

Note 1: Adherents are inevitably selective in the use of sacred texts, picking out specific parts as justifications for their particular morality. But what is the moral basis for their selection? The ethical criteria used to choose bits of the text cannot come from the text itself, thus raising questions about the alternative origins of morality.

3 Impersonal immanence

3.1 The anthropic argument: the fine-tuning of cosmic constants

The values of cosmic constants have to be so critically precise to facilitate life that it is hugely improbable they occur by just chance alone. They must have been set by some sort of intelligence which chose them so that humans could exist.

Note 1: If there is a multitude/infinity of universes, one of them is highly likely/certain to have the requisite values.

Note 2: Even with one universe, probabilistic calculations are based on the likelihood of possible outcomes. How can anyone assess the likelihoods of specific values?

Note 3: Universes could have evolved to their current cosmic constant values. However it is problematic to envisage what could be the evolutionary environment determining advantageous 'fitness for survival' testing.

Note 4: As a puddle said to itself: "This is an interesting world I find myself in — an interesting hole I find myself in — fits me rather neatly, doesn't it? In fact it fits me staggeringly well, must have been made to have me in it!" (Douglas Adams, 2002, *The Salmon of Doubt*)

3.2 Cosmic purpose

The intuition that the universe is not just aimless.

Note 1: Are the feelings that induce this intuition a valid form of evidence?

Note 2: What could the cosmic purpose actually be?

Note 3: Didn't Darwin present a more plausible alternative to this sort of teleological belief? (Teleological means purpose-driven or deliberately designed.)

Note 4: Do such transcendental concepts have any explanatory power?

4 Naturalism

4.1 **Naturalism** is the belief that there is no need for transcendental concepts in any account of the universe and life. Transcendental concepts have no explanatory powers and no evidential basis. Careful inferences from empirical observation, such as scientific hypotheses, are either sufficient or at least the only valid epistemic possibility.

Note 1: Is naturalism a necessary and sufficient account? If it is not, is it nevertheless the best attempt humanity can make?

Note 2: Is naturalism an arrogant claim about our intellect being able to provide some sort of explanation of existence or a humble acknowledgement of our limitations?

Note 3: Does the discovered natural grandeur of the observable cosmos induce 'spiritual' awe without recourse to the transcendental?

4.2 **Occam's Razor** (aka the **Parsimony Principle**) is the principle that explanations should be as simple as possible.

Note 1: Without it, aren't theories prone to be fanciful? Anything goes!

Note 2: Is naturalism the only belief system which wields Occam's Razor?

4.3 **Inverse Gambler's Fallacy** is the false assumption that an infrequent favourable outcome is likely to have occurred frequently.

Note 1: Is not naturalism guilty of a version of this fallacy because it assumes that our universe might be nothing special (ie just natural) when it could be exceptional?

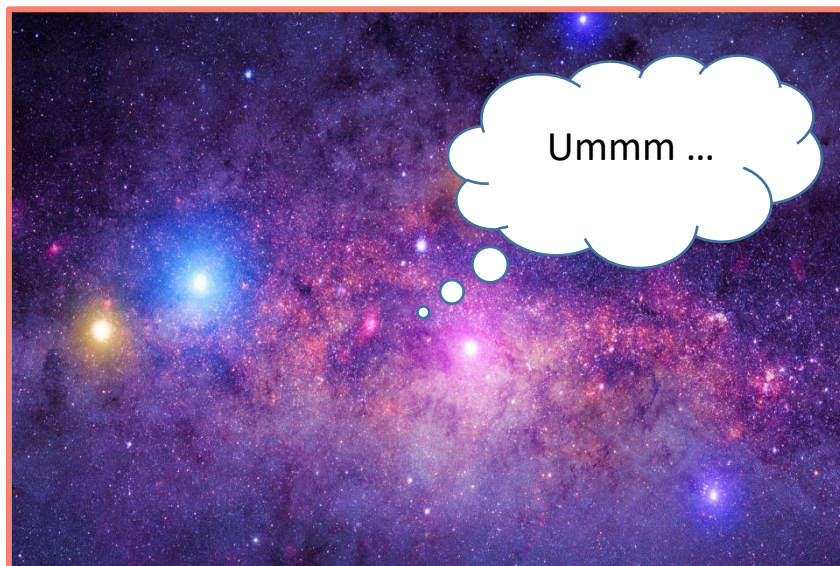
4.4 **If the Enlightenment had not happened** and transcendental belief systems were still culturally dominant, would we have gained **the understanding we have now**?

Note 1: Are empirico-rational beliefs such as naturalism compatible with transcendental belief systems?

Note 2: Why did Copernicus, Galileo and Darwin have to struggle so hard for acceptance?

5 The beginning and the end?

There is a delightful irony in the symmetry of the belief systems at the opposite ends of our single dimension of metaphysical belief. In Genesis, the first chapter of the Bible, the Christian God started off the cosmos with the command “Let there be light!”. According to the second law of thermodynamics – central to modern cosmology – increasing entropy implies that the universe will eventually decay into a cloud of photons. So at its beginning and its end, the universe is apparently enlightened! Can the same be said for the period in between?



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