

# Mr. Lowder's Opening Statement

## *Introduction*

Good morning, good afternoon, and good evening! I'd like to thank Justin Schieber for organizing and hosting this debate. I'd also like to thank Kevin Vandergriff for agreeing to participate.

## **Definitions**

In this debate, we've been asked to assess where the evidence points: to naturalism or to Christian theism. Before we can answer that question, we need to have some idea of what we're talking about, so let me begin by defining some terms.

First, by "evidence" I mean something which makes something else more probable than it would have been otherwise. Let me give you an example.<sup>1</sup> Imagine you have two jars of red and blue jellybeans. In the first jar, 90% of the jellybeans are blue and the rest are red. In the second jar, 90% of the jellybeans are red and the rest are blue. Now imagine you are handed a jelly bean from one of the jars, but you don't know *which* jar it came from. If it's a blue bean, that's evidence it came from the first jar, not the second. Although it's possible it came from the second jar, it's more likely that it came from the first because there are more blue jellybeans in the first than in the second. Similarly, if it's a red bean, that's evidence it came from the second jar. While it's possible the red bean came from the first jar, it's more likely that it came from the second because it has many more red beans.

Secondly, by "naturalism," I mean the view that the physical world explains why anything mental exists. If naturalism is true, then there are no purely mental beings which can exist apart from a physical body and so there is no God or any person or being much like God.

And thirdly, by "supernaturalism," I mean the view that the mental world explains why anything physical exists. If supernaturalism is true, then there is no purely physical matter which can exist without some sort of ultimate mental creator. "Theism" is a type of supernaturalism; it's the belief that there is an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good personal mind called "God." "Christian theism" is a type of theism; it says that God has revealed Himself decisively in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> I owe this jelly bean analogy to Paul Draper. Draper's full analogy also includes an equal number of yellow jelly beans in both jars, where yellow signifies something that is equally likely to have come from either jar and hence is not evidence that it came from either jar. I have omitted the yellow jelly beans solely in the interest of time.

Now the question before us is: when you weigh the *evidence* for Christian theism against the *evidence* for naturalism, which way *on balance* does the evidence point?<sup>2</sup>

In support of a naturalistic answer to that question, I'm going to defend two basic contentions:

(1) Naturalism is a *simpler* explanation than Christian theism.<sup>3</sup>

(2) Naturalism is a *more accurate* explanation than Christian theism.

### ***First Contention***

Let's look, then, at my first basic contention: *naturalism is a simpler explanation than Christian theism*.

Naturalism and supernaturalism are symmetrical claims: naturalism claims that the physical explains the mental, while supernaturalism claims that the mental explains the physical. Both claims are equally modest and equally coherent. *Before examining the evidence*, both positions are equally likely to be true.<sup>4</sup>

But now compare naturalism and Christian theism. Theism says everything that supernaturalism says, but adds on several additional claims: (a) that the non-physical mental entity which explains the natural world is a *person*; (b) that person created the world for a *purpose*; and (c) that person is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good. Christian theism adds on even more claims to the claims of theism. Because Christian theism entails supernaturalism but could be false even if supernaturalism is true, then, prior to examining the evidence, Christian theism is less likely to be true than supernaturalism (and so Christian theism is also less likely to be true than naturalism).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This sentence is a modified paraphrase of a sentence William Lane Craig often uses in his debate opening statements.

<sup>3</sup> I'm using the word "simplicity" here in a slightly non-standard way. I'm not defining it the way Swinburne does; rather, I'm using it to describe the combination of *modesty* and *coherence*, as defined in the Draper paper cited below. By "simpler," I mean "more intrinsically probable."

<sup>4</sup> Paul Draper, "God and the Burden of Proof," *Secular Outpost* (July 21, 2014), <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2014/07/21/new-by-paul-draper-god-and-the-burden-of-proof/>

<sup>5</sup> Paul Draper, "More Pain and Pleasure: A Reply to Otte" in *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil* (ed. Peter van Inwagen, Eerdmans, 2004), 41-54 at 49.

## ***Second Contention***

Let's turn then, to my second basic contention: *naturalism is a more accurate explanation than Christian theism for many facts*. Here I'd like to present nine lines of evidence that are more probable on naturalism than on Christian theism.<sup>6</sup>

### **Physical Matter**

*(1) Naturalism is the best explanation for the fact that physical matter exists.*<sup>7</sup>

I want to be very clear. The existence of physical matter is logically compatible with theism; God *could* have created matter. But God could have also chosen to create other minds without physical bodies, such as angels. Or God could have chosen to create nothing at all. In other words, God's existence doesn't entail physical matter.

In contrast, naturalism *entails* physical matter. In other words, if naturalism is true, then physical matter must exist. Since naturalism entails that physical matter exists whereas theism does not, it follows that physical matter is evidence favoring naturalism over theism.

### **Cosmic Hostility**

*(2) Naturalism is the best explanation for the fact that so much of the universe is hostile to life.*<sup>8</sup>

Discoveries in astronomy have revealed that the vast, vast majority of the universe is incredibly hostile to life: it contains vast amounts of empty space, temperatures near absolute zero, cosmic radiation, and so forth. Given that life exists in this universe, the fact that so much of our universe is hostile to life is more probable on naturalism than on theism.

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<sup>6</sup> Let N stand for naturalism, CT for Christian theism, and F for any of these facts. Using the symbol "Pr(F | H)" to stand for the epistemic probability that F is true conditional upon H, then the claim that some fact is evidence favoring naturalism over Christian theism should be understood as the claim that  $\text{Pr}(F | N) > \text{Pr}(F | \text{CT})$ .

<sup>7</sup> Jeffery Jay Lowder, "Potential Objections to Swinburne's Cosmological Argument," *The Secular Outpost* (March 17, 2014), <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2014/03/17/potential-objections-to-swinburnes-cosmological-argument/>. Note that here I am using the word "matter" as a way to provide a concrete example of something "physical."

<sup>8</sup> Jeffery Jay Lowder, "Hostility of the Universe to Life: Understated Evidence about Cosmic Fine-Tuning?" *The Secular Outpost* (January 22, 2013), <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2014/07/21/new-by-paul-drapeer-god-and-the-burden-of-proof/>

## Biological Evolution

(3) *Naturalism is the best explanation for the fact that all life, including conscious life, evolved from a common ancestor.*<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, biological evolution is logically compatible with theism; God *could* have used evolution to create life. But God could have *also* used many other methods to create life, methods which are impossible if naturalism is true. In contrast, if naturalism is true, evolution pretty much has to be true. Furthermore, since theism entails that, if a physical world exists it was created by a mind, theism leads us to expect that minds are fundamentally nonphysical entities and therefore that conscious life is fundamentally different from nonconscious life. But this in turn would lead us to expect that conscious life was created independently of nonconscious life--that evolution is false. Thus, the scientific fact of biological evolution is more likely on the assumption that naturalism is true than on the assumption that theism is true.

## Pain and Pleasure

(4) *Naturalism is the best explanation for the biological role (and moral randomness) of pain and pleasure.*<sup>10</sup>

Suppose you are inside a building that has caught on fire, and all the exits are blocked. The fire gets closer and closer to you until you are actually in pain because of the intense heat. Suddenly, a group of firefighters arrive and are able to rescue you. Your pain in this case was *biologically useful* because it contributed to one or two biological goals: survival and reproduction. The naturalistic explanation for this is obvious. If human beings are the products of evolution by natural selection, we would expect physical pain and pleasure to motivate human behavior in ways that aided survival and reproduction.

But not all physical pain and pleasure are biologically useful. Consider, for example, the physical pain felt by a person *killed* in that same fire I just told you about. That pain was not biologically useful because it did not contribute to survival or reproduction. But it was biologically appropriate because it is biologically useful that humans in general feel pain when they come in contact with fire. Now, if naturalism is true, humans are the byproducts of evolution by natural selection, which is indifferent to human suffering. Thus, pain and pleasure that is biologically useless but appropriate is what we would expect if naturalism is true.

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<sup>9</sup> See Paul Draper, "Evolution and the Problem of Evil" in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology* (3rd ed., ed. Louis Pojman, Wadsworth, 1997), 219-230; cf. Louis P. Pojman, *Philosophy of Religion* (Mayfield, 2001), chapter 6.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Draper, "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists." *Nous* 23 (June, 1989), 331-350.

But if theism is true, God could "fine tune" humans so that they only experience physical pain and pleasure when it was *morally necessary*. So theism leads us to expect that pain and pleasure are fundamentally *moral* phenomena, *which just happens to be connected to the biological goals of survival and reproduction*. That's a huge coincidence that naturalism doesn't need.

It gets worse. Some pain (like the suffering endured by people trapped in burning buildings or people with terminal illnesses or injuries) and some pleasure (like the sexual pleasure enjoyed by the man who rapes an infertile woman), is biologically *gratuitous*—it does not contribute to survival or reproduction. On naturalism, this is just what we would expect: blind nature has no way to "fine-tune" organic systems to prevent such pain and pleasure. On theism, however, this is extremely surprising. So this evidence is *very* much more probable on naturalism than on theism.

### **Flourishing and Languishing**

(5) *Naturalism is the best explanation for the flourishing and languishing of sentient beings.*<sup>11</sup>

Paul Draper explains:

The majority of living things, including the majority of sentient beings, never flourish, many more flourish for only a very small portion of their lives, and almost none who live a full life flourish for all of it. A naturalistic, Darwinian explanation of this sad fact is readily available. If populations of organisms increase geometrically and this leads to a competition for the resources necessary to survive, then inevitably a large percentage of all living things will not survive long enough to thrive, many more will barely survive and thus languish for all or almost all of their lives, and even those organisms that do flourish for much of their lives will, if they live long enough, ultimately languish in old age. A Darwinian, naturalistic world is inevitably cruel, especially to the young, the old, and the genetically less fortunate.<sup>12</sup>

But if theism is true, then facts about the flourishing and languishing of sentient beings are exactly the opposite of what we would expect. If God exists, then God would allow sentient beings to suffer or languish only if he had good *moral* reasons for doing so. In other words, think about the following question: is there a moral justification for using natural selection to produce a world in which most living things never or rarely flourish because they compete with each other for survival? If naturalism is true, the answer to that question could be "yes" or "no." But if theism is true, the answer *has to be* "yes." And that's a really big coincidence that naturalism doesn't need.<sup>13</sup> So the flourishing and

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Draper in Paul Draper and Trent Dougherty, "Explanation and the Problem of Evil," *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil* (ed. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder, Oxford: Blackwell, 2013), 71-73.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Draper, "Darwin's Argument from Evil" in *Scientific Approaches to the Philosophy of Religion* (ed. Yujin Nagasawa, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 49-70 at 61.

<sup>13</sup> Draper 2012, 66.

languishing of sentient beings provides independent evidence for naturalism and against theism.

## Triumph and Tragedy

(6) *Naturalism is the best explanation for known facts about triumph and tragedy.*

There are three additional facts about good and evil which favor naturalism over theism. First, to paraphrase Paul Draper, our world contains much horrific suffering and relatively little glorious pleasure. As he puts it, "Indeed, triumph is the exception and tragedy the rule on our planet, where the deepest and the best aspirations of human beings are routinely crushed by a variety of circumstances beyond their control."<sup>14</sup> Second, horrific suffering often destroys a person, at least psychologically, and prevents them from growing morally, spiritually, and intellectually.<sup>15</sup> Third, many people do not seem to feel God's comforting presence during tragedies.<sup>16</sup>

Now, ask yourself: if God exists, why is there so much horrific suffering and so little glorious pleasure? Even after thousands of years of theological reflection, theistic philosophers still have no idea. They just *assume* that there must be a reason for God allowing evil. For example, Alvin Plantinga, one of the most influential theistic philosophers of our time, admitted, "Many of the attempts to explain why God permits evil ... seem to me shallow, tepid, and ultimately frivolous."<sup>17</sup> Naturalists, on the other hand, have a plausible explanation: there is no all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing being to intervene. Therefore, facts about triumph and tragedy are much more likely on naturalism than on theism.

## Mind-Brain Dependence

(7) *Naturalism is the best explanation for the fact that human minds are dependent upon the physical brain.*<sup>18</sup>

Scientific evidence shows that human consciousness is highly dependent upon the brain.<sup>19</sup> In this context, nothing mental happens without something physical happening. That strongly suggests that the mind cannot exist independently of physical

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<sup>14</sup> Draper 2013, 73.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Draper, "Evil and Evolution," unpublished paper. Cf. J.L. Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 243-69. Marilyn McCord Adams, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God" in *The Problem of Evil* (ed. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 209-221.

<sup>16</sup> William Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder, Indiana University Press, 1996), 276.

<sup>17</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "Epistemic Probability and Evil" in *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 70.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffery Jay Lowder, "The Evidential Argument from Physical Minds," *The Secular Outpost* (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2012/06/13/the-evidential-argument-from-physical-minds-apt/>), June 13, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Tooley, "Dr. Tooley's Opening Statement," *A Classic Debate on the Existence of God*, (<http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/docs/craig-tooley2.html>), November 1994.

arrangements of matter. In other words, we do not have a 'soul.' And this is exactly what we would expect if naturalism is true. But if theism is true, then it's possible for minds to exist without physical brains. Also, theism entails the existence of at least one unembodied mind, God. (God's mind is not in any sense dependent on physical arrangements of matter.) So the dependence of human minds on brains is evidence against the existence of any being who is supposed to have an unembodied mind, including God. Therefore, the physical nature of minds is evidence favoring naturalism over theism.

### **Nonresistant Nonbelief**

(8) *Naturalism is the best explanation for nonresistant nonbelief (in God).*<sup>20</sup>

Imagine you're growing up in an orphanage and I told you I had met a man who claims to be your father and who really wants a relationship with you. Days, weeks, even months go by but you never actually meet your father. You never get a card, letter, phone call. In fact, the only evidence that your father is alive is *my claim* that he exists. Why haven't you heard from him? Perhaps your father is ashamed for abandoning you. Or maybe he's a prisoner of war and his captors won't even let him write you. Although you hope your father is alive and wants to meet you, you remain skeptical.

Just as you do not believe your father is alive and wants to meet you, there are people who do not believe that God exists.<sup>21</sup> But notice that, whatever reasons we might invent to explain your *earthly* father's absence do not explain their *heavenly* father's absence.

At least some of the people who deny God's existence are "nonresistant" nonbelievers. As John Schellenberg explains, their nonbelief is "not in any way the result of their own emotional or behavioral opposition towards God or relationship with God or any of the apparent implications of such a relationship."<sup>22</sup> Such nonbelievers are open to having a relationship with God—in fact, they may even *want* it—but are unable to have such a relationship. But why, if God exists, does that happen?

On naturalism, blind nature doesn't care whether anyone believes in God and so the fact of nonresistant nonbelievers is hardly surprising. On theism, however, this fact is *very* surprising. On theism, we would expect a perfectly loving God to always make a meaningful relationship available to those He loves.

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<sup>20</sup> J.L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); *idem*, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> This sentence, of course, assumes that at least some (if not most) professions of atheism are genuine. Those familiar with intra-Christian debates on apologetic methodologies will notice that I have just ruled out the claim of some (or all?) presuppositionalists, namely, that there are no atheists and instead there are only *professed* atheists. I agree with John Schellenberg: "it would take something like willful blindness to fail to affirm that not all nonbelief is the product of willful blindness (even if some of it is)." See J.L. Schellenberg, "What Divine Hiddenness Reveals, or How Weak Theistic Evidence is Strong Atheistic Proof" *God or Blind Nature? Philosophers Debate the Evidence* ([http://infidels.org/library/modern/john\\_schellenberg/hidden.html](http://infidels.org/library/modern/john_schellenberg/hidden.html)), 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Schellenberg 2008.

## Ethical Disagreement

*(9) Naturalism is the best explanation for ethical disagreement.*

Another aspect of “divine hiddenness” is ethical disagreement. The philosophical discipline of ethics is notorious for its controversy. Not only do philosophers disagree over general ethical theory (such as utilitarianism vs. deontological ethics), they also genuinely disagree about the morality of specific acts, like war, abortion, the death penalty, gun control, and sexual behavior.

The problem is not just that people disagree about morality. The problem is also that *theists, including Christians*, disagree about morality. Now this tends to be very awkward for the Christian. A Christian, at least if he admits there is genuine ethical disagreement, has to believe *both* that God wants humans to behave morally *and* that He has left them in the dark about whether specific kinds of behavior are morally acceptable.

On naturalism, however, there is no God, just impersonal nature. And impersonal nature gives us even less reason to expect moral agreement than theism does. So ethical disagreement is more probable on naturalism than on theism.

## Conclusion

So, in sum, we've seen nine lines of evidence that naturalism is true. If Mr. Vandergriff wants us to believe Christian theism instead, then he's first got to provide evidence of his own *for* Christian theism, and then show that it somehow *outweighs* all of the evidence for naturalism.<sup>23</sup> Unless and until he does that, the naturalist can hardly be blamed for agreeing with philosopher Delos McKown: “The invisible and the non-existent look very much alike.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> People who are familiar with William Lane Craig's debates will notice that this sentence is the naturalistic parallel to a sentence he routinely includes in his debate opening statements.

<sup>24</sup> Delos B. McKown, *The Mythmaker's Magic* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1993), 39.