

Article

From Theism to Spirit Beliefs

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Abstract: I argue that arguments for the existence of God provide indirect support for the existence of other supernatural beings such as spirits. I defend three arguments: (i) the existence of spirits is more likely if there is a supernatural realm; (ii) an omnibenevolent God makes use of supernatural messengers; (iii) sacred scriptures attest to the existence of spirits. I defend all arguments and defend them against objections.

Keywords: natural theology; spirits; demonology

1. Introduction

The main focus of the philosophy of religion was and is God.¹ Most arguments defended pertain to support (or reject) the existence of God or the rationality of belief in God. Very little is written with regard to the existence of other supernatural agents, such as spirits, demons, or angels.² Often, the non-existence of other supernatural agents is (tacitly) assumed or ignored. Nonetheless, belief in such beings is widely prevalent.

My aim in this paper is not to provide direct arguments for the existence of non-theistic supernatural agents. Instead, my goal is to show that the likelihood of the existence of non-theistic supernatural agents increases if the likelihood of the existence of God increases. Therefore, evidence or arguments for the existence of God support the existence of non-theistic supernatural agents as well.

This paper is structured as follows: in the next section, I investigate what non-theistic supernatural agents are and how they are different from God. In Section 3, I briefly discuss some arguments for the existence of God and what they conclude. In Section 4, I discuss three arguments that connect the likelihood of the existence of non-theistic supernatural agents to God. I end with some concluding remarks.

2. Defining Non-Theistic Supernatural Agents

Before discussing the arguments, we first need clarity on what is meant by the term ‘non-theistic supernatural agent’ (NTSA). This section serves to delineate the term and how its referent differs from God and non-supernatural beings.

Adherents of most religious traditions hold beliefs regarding other supernatural agents besides God. Depending on the tradition, these agents go by various names such as ‘spirit’, ‘demon’, or ‘ghost’. Belief in such beings is widespread. In a survey from 2008, 68% of Americans indicated belief in the existence of angels and demons. The belief showed most dominant among Jehovah’s Witnesses (78%), evangelical Christians (61%), historically African-American protestant churches (59%), and Mormons (59%) (Miller 2008). The New Testament affirms the existence of angels (e.g., Luke 1: 26–28) and demons (e.g., Mark 5: 1–20). The Old Testament, which is authoritative for both Christian and Jews, affirms the existence of angels as well (e.g., Genesis 16: 7–11). Many Muslims accept the existence of Jinn, a class of invisible supernatural agents. Hindu and Buddhist traditions often have extensive demonologies. The existence of other supernatural beings besides God is also accepted in smaller religions such as Vodou, Santeria, Yoruba, Chinese indigenous religions, and Shinto.



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Though there are considerable differences in how angels, demons, or spirits are regarded, they share a number of common features. All are regarded as having different powers and natures than humans and are regarded as subordinated to God or the gods in most religious traditions.³ Below, I investigate these common features in greater detail.

Above NTSAAs were defined negatively in contrast to God. NTSAAs are those supernatural agents that are not gods. This raises the question of what is meant by ‘agent’, ‘supernatural’, and ‘God’.

2.1. Agent

The first element to be defined is that of ‘agent’. As Marc Schlosser notes, the hallmark of agency is the capacity to act. The capacity to act is not merely performing actions but requires intentionality or the capacity to act for reasons.⁴ Agency thus defined is usually preserved for humans and animals with high cognitive abilities. According to adherents of most religious traditions, supernatural agents (whether highly elevated or limited) display agency as well. Supernatural agents are believed to be able to respond to prayers or offerings, influence human lives, and, in some cases, take possession of human minds. They do so with a particular goal in mind (e.g., helping humans, punishing humans, or communicating with humans) and can therefore be regarded as acting for reasons.

The capacity to act goes beyond being ‘causally efficacious’. While spirits and demons are believed to bring about causal change in the world, they do so in a different way than how inanimate things cause change. A tree that falls can cause damage but does not do so to meet a pre-defined goal and likely had no intention to act. While there are reports of ‘wanton spirits’ that appear to act randomly, most NTSAAs are believed to act because they were moved by human pleas (see also below), because they were offended, or for some other reason.

2.2. Supernatural

Let us continue with defining ‘supernatural’.⁵ Spelling out necessary and sufficient conditions for delineating the supernatural from the natural is notoriously difficult. Nonetheless, a couple of sufficient conditions can be stipulated. For this purpose, it is helpful to look at when naturalists (adherents of the view that only natural entities exist) rank something among the supernatural. In the past, a lot of naturalists aligned their view with physicalism, the view that only physical entities exist. Nowadays, most naturalists are reluctant to limit the natural to the physical. However, the non-physical entities that naturalists allow for in their ontology are usually limited to entities that supervene on physical things or that are very similar to physical things we know. Examples are social institutions (e.g., money or borders) or relations between people. For example, James Ladyman excludes everything that is ‘spooky’ from a naturalist stance. Ladyman is not specific about what being ‘spooky’ amounts to, but it has an air of being unusual or out of the ordinary about it. Hardly ever do naturalists allow for non-physical beings in their ontologies.

Being non-physical, however, cannot be regarded as a necessary condition for being supernatural. There are ample examples of supernatural agents that are regarded as having some physical body or physicality.⁶ For example, during possessions, demons would take control over a human body and show themselves through its physicality. Both the Old and New Testament include reports of humans *seeing* angels with some sort of body.⁷

One could revise the condition and argue that supernatural beings need some non-physical component.⁸ During episodes of possession, a supernatural force appears to take hold of humans without any change in the human’s physical constitution. Some scholars argued that demons have an etheric body combined with an immaterial soul (cf. McCraw 2017). Again, the condition does not hold for all supernatural beings. For example, many Muslims believe that God created Jinn (see below) out of fire (Moad 2017).

A second sufficient condition is the capacity to be invisible. A large number of supernatural agents are considered invisible or capable of becoming invisible. Practitioners of African traditional religions claim that spirits are *felt* rather than seen. Their presences

are announced by certain bodily sensations or emotions. Most adherents of monotheistic religions believe that God remains invisible most of the time.⁹ It is hard to think of an invisible being that would be acceptable to a naturalist ontology.

Again, the capacity to remain invisible cannot be regarded as a necessary condition for being supernatural. We noted above that religious scriptures make mention of angels that are visible when they visit the earth. Some Hindu gods, such as the avatars of Vishnu, are also believed to be visible.

A third and final sufficient condition is being able to exist outside space and time. No being that is able to do so is acceptable for naturalists. For them, the whole of reality is usually confined to space and time. In a lot of religious traditions, God is believed to be the source of everything beside him and, therefore, the source of space and time itself. Having created space and time, God, therefore, is able to exist outside of it. Other supernatural agents are believed to exist outside space and time as well. Sometimes, angels are regarded as existing in a different realm of existence. The same would hold for elevated spirits.

Once again, being able to exist outside of space and time is not a necessary condition. In ancient Greek religion and contemporary folk religion, some spirits are seen as attached to rivers, trees, or caves. Since they are bound to natural phenomena, they appear to be bound by space and time as well. Some traditions also hold that some spirits are deceased humans that have not ascended up to an afterlife. These are also bound by the same spatial and temporal conditions as humans.

Summing up, I discussed three properties of supernatural agents that are sufficient but not necessary. A being is thus supernatural if it is:

- (i) Non-physical;
- (ii) Capable of being invisible;
- (iii) Able to exist outside of space and time.

The three properties can get us some way towards distinguishing supernatural agents.

2.3. *Non-Theistic*

The conditions discussed in the previous section help us distinguish supernatural agents from natural agents. For our purposes, this is not sufficient. The goal of this paper is to assess the likelihood of NTAs existing given the existence of God. We are thus interested in a subset of all supernatural agents. I noted that NTAs are defined negatively as all supernatural agents that are not gods. A useful way to distinguish such being is thus looking at how gods can be defined.

The initial problem is that various traditions appear to have different criteria for distinguishing gods from other supernatural agents. If we compare ancient Greek religion to West African Yoruba, we can note that a number of supernatural agents are attributed similar properties. For example, the Yoruba orisha (The Yoruba term for 'spirit') Ogoun is regarded as the orisha of iron and metallurgy. The Greek god Hephaistos was regarded as the god of blacksmiths and metallurgy. Both were worshipped by people active in metallurgy and called upon to aid in their endeavors. Both Ogoun and Hephaistos thus appear to have similar roles and powers and are worshipped in similar ways. Yet, Hephaistos is generally called a god, whereas Ogoun usually is not. Adherents of ancient Greek religion, therefore, appear to have had different criteria for counting supernatural agents among the gods than adherents of Yoruba do.

In western philosophy of religion, God is often defined as a perfect being.¹⁰ A perfect being is the greatest possible being. Perfection implies a number of *omni*-properties; the best known are omniscience, omnibenevolence, omnipotence, and omnipresence.¹¹ Because God is the only perfect being, perfections can serve to distinguish God from other supernatural agents.¹²

Although straightforward and easy to apply, defining non-theistic supernatural agents as non-perfect supernatural agents raises some problems. The first is that the definition of God as a perfect being is far from universally shared. Karl Barth famously argued that God is only known through his self-revelation and all human (philosophical) reflection is

always at best incomplete and at worst misguided.¹³ The view implies skepticism of the accuracy of divine properties drawn from philosophical reflection such as perfection. A less radical criticism of perfect being theology is that the view does not match the concept of God that is dominant in the Bible.¹⁴

Another problem with defining God as a perfect being is that it is not applicable to polytheistic traditions. Although perfection does not necessarily imply uniqueness,¹⁵ it does imply a similarity between all perfect beings. If there could be multiple perfect beings, they should be highly similar, sharing all perfections without subordination to one another. Polytheistic traditions commonly ascribe different properties to different gods and often have a hierarchy of gods. For adherents of Vaishnavism, Vishnu is the creator of the cosmos. They also accept the existence of other gods such as Shiva and Ganesh, but they have different cosmic roles and different impacts on human life. As Peterson et al. note, a being that is at the source of the cosmos is more perfect than one that is not (Peterson et al. 2008). Therefore, Shiva and Ganesh are not perfect beings for adherents of Vaishnavism. They are nonetheless regarded as gods. A similar line of reasoning applies to other Indian traditions, such as Shaivism and Shaktism, and to ancient Greek religion. For most ancient Greeks, Zeus was the supreme deity who held power over other gods. Although these other gods were subordinate and therefore not perfect, they were clearly considered to be gods.

Although the criteria for distinguishing gods from other supernatural agents differ depending on tradition, a majority of traditions have a (very) limited number of gods.¹⁶ Adherents of Abrahamic religions believe in the existence of one God only and sometimes a number of other supernatural agents such as demons or angels. Adherents of Hinduism accept the existence of more gods.¹⁷ However, it is a common misconception that Hindus worship as many as thousands, if not millions, of gods.¹⁸ Most strands of Hinduism accept a hierarchy of supernatural agents wherein a small number of supernatural agents is considered most elevated. For example, in Vaishnavism, Vishnu (and his avatars) is considered the Supreme Being. Other deities take a subordinate role.

As an alternative to defining God as a perfect being, God (or gods) are defined as that supernatural agent (or those supernatural agents) that enjoys a higher elevated status. The Christian God is far exalted above all other beings (natural and supernatural). The same holds for the concept of God in Islam and Judaism. Indian gods are also of a higher status than other beings such as devas or spirits. The elevated status of gods is due to them having greater powers, such as the power to create or control the course of the universe or being free from constraints that bind other beings, such as space/time or finitude.

Making a distinction between God/gods and non-theistic supernatural agents on the basis of elevated status introduces vagueness. The status of elevation allows for degrees and does not have a clear cut-off point. Some supernatural agents are regarded as highly elevated but not considered to be gods. An example is Avalokiteshvara in Mahayana Buddhism. Avalokiteshvara is one of the most revered and most worshipped bodhisattvas, yet he is not regarded as a God. Something similar can be said of Ogun in West African Yoruba.

Furthermore, not all reserve the term 'God' or 'gods' for the most elevated supernatural beings. Michael Heiser identified demons and angels as portrayed in the Bible as 'gods', even though all are clearly depicted as subordinated to God (Heiser 2015). Shandon Guthrie suggests doing the same (Guthrie 2018). Paul also refers to Satan as the 'god of this world'.¹⁹ Ranking demons and angels among the gods is, however, the exception among Christian theists.

Having a less elevated status implies greater constraints on what these supernatural agents can and cannot do. In many cases, the influence of a supernatural agent does not stretch beyond the bounds of a village or small community. Spirits and demons are also regarded as bound by moral laws or other obligations.

Another important difference between gods and NTSAs is that the latter hardly ever have a role in creating the universe. In Abrahamic religions, God is believed to be the sole creator of the universe. Angels, demons, or Jinn (see below) are part and parcel of creation.

In some strands of Hinduism, the Brahman is regarded as the primordial source of all that exists. Brahman also manifests as a host of gods that are worshipped by humans. A notable exception is the demiurge in late-antique gnostic religions and Neo-Platonist traditions. The demiurge is usually not regarded as a god yet is credited with the creation of the visible universe (see: [Fossum 2005](#)). Crediting a non-theistic supernatural agent for creating the universe is, however, very rare in contemporary religious traditions.

We can distill a number of criteria from the discussion so far:

Less elevated status;
 Less powerful. and
 Not creator.

Because each criterion has one or more counterexamples, none of them can be regarded as necessary or sufficient. The three criteria do provide sufficient ground for ranking a supernatural agent among the NTSAs or not in most cases.

More clarity on the meaning of ‘supernatural’, ‘God’, and ‘agent’ provides a better grasp of NTSAs. Before discussing arguments why an increased likelihood of God’s existence implies an increased likelihood of the existence of NTSAs, I first briefly discuss arguments for the existence of God. If the arguments discussed in Section 4 are sound, sound arguments for the existence of God imply a higher likelihood of the existence of NTSAs.

3. The Initial Outlook: Arguing for God Alone

As noted, the (non) existence of NTSAs is rarely discussed in contemporary philosophy of religion. The discussion over the existence of God, by contrast, is vast. As a result, arguments for the existence of God appear to argue for ‘mere theism’, a metaphysical view where only one supernatural being (i.e., God) exists.

Natural theology is an umbrella term that covers discussion on arguments for or against the existence of God. The arguments are numerous.²⁰ Although nearly all arguments conclude for or against the (likely) existence of God, they differ in the level of detail they allow for. Defenders of the ontological argument conclude to the existence of a perfect being ([Malcolm 1960](#)) or a maximally great being ([Plantinga 1968](#)). Being perfect implies having several properties such as omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. As noted in Section 2, NTSAs are commonly believed *not* to have these properties. Therefore, it seems as if the ontological argument is of little help or relevance in assessing the likely existence of NTSAs.

The same appears to hold for other arguments from natural theology. The most popular argument for the existence of God in recent years is arguably the design argument. In one of its most recent forms, defenders argue that the highly improbable alignment or fine-tuning of cosmological constants renders the existence of a designer God more probable than its negation (cf.: [Collins 2003](#); [McGrath 2009](#)). Unlike the ontological argument, the design argument does not directly conclude with a perfect being but with a designer. As some note, a designer God need not be perfect. David Hume famously argued that the universe could have been designed by a not-so-powerful angel who was prone to make a lot of mistakes ([Hume 1970](#)). Such a being is far from perfect. Nonetheless, design arguments appear to be of little help in establishing the existence of NTSAs as well. As noted in Section 2, NTSAs are usually *not* believed to have created the universe.²¹

It thus seems as if arguments merely establish the existence of God and do little to make the existence of NTSAs more probable. The arguments thereby raise the suggestion that there are no close links between the likelihood of God’s existence and that of NTSAs. Below I present three arguments for a closer connection. All arguments conclude that a high likelihood of God’s existence implies a higher likelihood of NTSAs existing. Therefore, if the arguments raised in the remaining sections are successful, arguments for the existence of God can indirectly lend justification to belief in NTSAs as well.

4. From Theism to Spirit Beliefs

As noted in Section 3, arguments from natural theology seemingly provide support for the existence of God alone. The arguments usually also allow for more qualified conclusions such as the (probable) existence of a perfect being or a designer God. We noted in Section 2 that NTSA's are conceptually very different than God, the main difference being their powers and status. Therefore, it seems that Sections 2 and 3 jointly support the conclusion that arguments from natural theology do not support the existence of NTSA's. By contrast, this section argues that arguments that support the existence of God provide indirect support for the existence of NTSA's if a number of background beliefs concerning God are established. The claim defended in this section can be stated as follows (where 'B' is background knowledge):

$$P(\text{NTSAs} \mid \text{God} \ \& \ B) > P(\sim\text{NTSAs} \mid \text{God} \ \& \ B)$$

The probability of the existence of NTSA's increases if there is a God for a number of reasons, all of which are analyzed in greater detail below. They are the following:

- a. An omnibenevolent God wants to make himself known through messengers.
- b. The existence of NTSA's is more likely if there is a supernatural realm.
- c. The existence of NTSA's is more probable if sacred scriptures are reliable.

Below, I discuss each of these in more detail. In most cases, one needs to establish a number of background beliefs (B). All required background beliefs can be established by additional arguments concerning the nature or actions of God.

4.1. The Existence of NTSA's Is More Likely If There Is a Supernatural Realm

The first argument needs no additional background knowledge concerning God's nature or actions to conclude a higher probability of NTSA's. It notes that the existence of NTSA's requires the denial of naturalism, i.e., the claim that only natural entities exist. If the existence of God is supported by one or more arguments from natural theology, we gain support for the denial of naturalism, and therefore, the existence of NTSA's becomes more probable.²² The argument can be stated as (where 'N' stands for naturalism and 'SN' for supernaturalism):

$$P(\text{NTSAs} \mid N) < p(\text{NTSAs} \mid \text{SN})$$

The first reason why the denial of naturalism aids the case for NTSA's is by defusing prominent epistemic defeaters. An apparently major reason to reject the existence of NTSA's is drawn from naturalism. Adherents of naturalism deny the existence of any supernatural agent whatsoever.²³ By implication, adherents of naturalism deny the existence of NTSA's. Any argument for naturalism is, therefore, an argument against the existence of NTSA's by implication. Learning of an argument for naturalism can therefore constitute an epistemic defeater²⁴ for belief in NTSA's. Common arguments for naturalism are arguments that naturalism is more parsimonious than non-naturalism (Oppy 2020), arguments that naturalistic explanations proved more successful than non-naturalistic explanations in the history of science (e.g., Boudry et al. 2010), and arguments from the causal closure of the physical universe (Papineau 2009). Assessing these arguments falls beyond the scope of this paper. It suffices to note that if any of the arguments are sound, any subject holding beliefs in the existence of NTSA's has a defeater for those beliefs.

Arguments for the existence of God can indirectly support belief in NTSA's by defeating naturalistic defeaters. If any sound argument concludes with the existence of God, it establishes the existence of at least one supernatural agent. As a result, naturalism is shown to be false. In doing so, arguments from natural theology can defeat naturalistic defeaters and leave room for the acceptance of NTSA's. In doing so, the arguments do not aid a positive case for NTSA's beliefs but merely counter the negative case against such beliefs.

Arguments from natural theology can also do more and aid the positive case for the existence of NTSA's. If sound, arguments for the existence of God show the existence of

a supernatural realm. They show that the whole of existence is not exhausted by what is natural but includes at least something supernatural, i.e., God. The probability of NTSAs existing clearly becomes more probable if there is sound reason to believe that there is a supernatural realm than when there is not. To a subject without any evidence or reason to believe in the existence of a supernatural realm, the existence of NTSAs is what Charles Sanders Peirce calls a ‘surprising fact’ (Douven 2011). Evidence or reasons for the existence of NTSAs (such as an experience of a spirit or demonic activity) for such a subject is harder to fit with background knowledge. The existence of NTSAs fits much easier if the existence of a supernatural realm has already been accepted and naturalism was rejected.

One could object that showing the existence of a supernatural realm merely shows that NTSAs are logically possible yet not probable. The existence of highly advanced alien life forms on Mars is logically possible, yet not probable given the long history of observations on Mars. Contrary to this claim, the argument does more than merely establish logical possibility. By showing that there is a God, arguments show that there is at least one supernatural being. Accepting an NTSA aside from God then no longer requires a subject to accept a new class of beings that is different in kind. Compared before the invention of the microscope, the existence of micro-animals was not very probable. After the first observations of bacteria by Anthony van Leeuwenhoek (Lane 2015), the existence of other animals of the same class became considerably more probable.

The argument points out how the existence of God renders the existence of similar (supernatural) being more likely. A similar argument could point to the similarities between non-physical (human) minds and non-physical agents.²⁵ One could rely on evidence for the survival of human minds post-biological death to establish the existence of disembodied, non-physical minds (e.g., Lund 2009; Braude 2003). By pointing out how NTSAs are similar to those non-physical minds, one could raise the likelihood of NTSAs as well. However, establishing the existence of non-physical minds merely raises the likelihood of other non-physical agents. The argument defended in this section raises the probability of supernatural agents that, such as God, are (i) non-physical, (ii) invisible, and (iii) not bound to the spatio-temporal realm. Thereby, the argument defended here is less general and better tailored for the likelihood of NTSAs as defined in Section 2.

One must acknowledge that the probability of the existence of NTSAs gained from establishing a supernatural realm is still rather low. The argument can, however, aid in a cumulative case for the existence of NTSAs. The arguments I discuss next can provide a stronger case.

4.2. An Omnibenevolent God Wants to Make Himself Known through Messengers

The second argument does rely on background knowledge concerning the nature and actions of God. The argument states that the existence of NTSAs is more likely if there is a God who is omnibenevolent and is unable or unwilling to intervene directly in human lives.

Both claims can be established through rational argumentation. The claim can be stated as:

$$P(\text{NTSAs} \mid \text{God} \ \& \ M) > P(\sim\text{NTSAs} \mid \text{God} \ \& \ M) \text{ (where } M = \text{use of/preference for messengers.)}$$

The argument resembles an argument made by the Neo-Platonist philosopher Apuleius. Apuleius argues that intermediary beings are indispensable to transmitting divine communications to the human realm. Apuleius’ argument presupposes an ancient worldview wherein there exists a hierarchy of gods and other supernatural agents that exist in different spheres of existence. Before investigating whether his argument can be adapted to a contemporary worldview, I first discuss his original argument.

Apuleius’s argument hinges on two claims:

1. The most elevated beings are too far removed from the human sphere to interact with humans.

2. The most elevated beings are moved by human pleas.

Both claims are defended by Apuleius but not stated in this way. As noted, Apuleius's argument assumes a Neo-Platonist, ancient worldview (Mortley 1972). In this view, there are different spheres of existence. All these spheres are inhabited by supernatural agents or 'gods'²⁶. His argument can be regarded as defending the need for supernatural agents in the lower realms because they act as a bridge to the gods of higher realms.

Concerning (1), Apuleius writes:

You have, then, in the meantime, two kinds of animated beings, Gods entirely differing from men, in the sublimity of their abode, in the eternity of their existence, in the perfection of their nature, and having *no proximate communication* with them; since those that are supreme are separated from the lowest habitations by such a *vast interval of distance*; and life is there eternal and never-failing, but here decaying and interrupted, and the natures are there sublimated to beatitude, while those below are depressed to wretchedness. What then? Has nature connected itself by no bond, but allowed itself to be separated into the divine and human parts, and to be thus split and crippled, as it were? For, as the same Plato remarks, "No God mingles with men." But this is the principal mark of their sublime nature, that they are not contaminated by any contact with us. (Apuleius 2001)

Apuleius here argues that communication between the gods of higher spheres of existence and humans is impossible because of their different nature and the vast distance between them. Gods of higher realms are perfect, whereas humans are far from perfect. None of these gods want to 'mingle' with imperfect beings. Apuleius does not explicitly argue why this is the case, but probably gods would refrain from doing so for fear of contamination or because it does not befit their perfect status.

Apuleius also points to the vast difference between gods and humans. He likely did not have geographical distance in mind but rather pointed to the different spheres of existence wherein the gods and humans abide. Since both groups do not share the same realm of existence, communication is impossible.

Concerning (2), Apuleius writes:

No God, you say, interferes in human affairs. To whom, then, shall I address my prayers? To whom shall I make my vows? To whom shall I immolate victims? Whom shall I invoke throughout my whole life, as the helper of the unfortunate, the favorer of the good, and the adversary of the wicked? And whom, in fine, (a thing for which necessity most frequently occurs) shall I adduce as a witness to my oath? (Apuleius 2001)

Here, Apuleius points to the problems raised by (1) for common religious practices of his time. Common Greek religious practices such as praying, making vows, offerings, invocations, and making oaths all involve some kind of communication to the gods.²⁷ The practices listed by Apuleius all involve communications from humans towards the gods.

Both claims (1) and (2) jointly raise a problem. Humans feel a need to send communications by means of various religious practices to the gods, but because of their vastly different natures and vast distances between them, such attempts appear to be futile. The same holds for communications in the opposite direction, from the gods to humans. Divine messages to humans are rendered impossible for the same reasons.

The problems raised by (1) and (2) can be solved by intermediary beings that act as a bridge between gods and humans, according to Apuleius.²⁸ He affirms that there are beings that are placed as messengers between humans and the gods. These beings can carry messages from humans to God and from God to humans (in the forms of prayers, invocations, revelations, etc.) and can act as interpreters (Apuleius 2001).

The intermediary beings are capable of their bridge function because they have a 'middle nature'. They are not quite of the same elevated nature as the gods and not quite of the same earthly nature of man but are "composed of a mixture of both" (Apuleius 2001).

The middle nature of intermediary beings not only pertains to their natures but also to their “place of habitation” (Apuleius 2001).

The polytheism and Neo-Platonist ancient worldview affirmed by Apuleius have since left debates in the philosophy of religion. Nonetheless, Apuleius’s argument can be updated to fit a contemporary worldview.²⁹ Below, I discuss how Apuleius’ two central claims can be adapted for this purpose.

Let us begin with claim (2). Some support for (2) in contemporary monotheistic traditions is gained from their sacred Scriptures.³⁰ An additional argument for (2) is inferred from God’s omnibenevolence. Adherents of all three large contemporary monotheistic traditions affirm that God’s interventions in human life are good. Christians pray for God’s help in their struggles and ask for divine guidance. Jews and Muslims do likewise. Both ancient Greek practices and contemporary practices thus give testament that divine interventions can be of aid for humans. The mere fact that humans want and need divine interventions does not imply that God will be moved by human needs. It does, however, if God is omnibenevolent. A God who is morally perfect will be inclined to act on human pleas because doing so constitutes a moral good. God’s omnibenevolence is affirmed by Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike.

The discussion so far strongly suggests that Apuleius’s second claim can be accepted by most contemporary theists. More problems arise concerning (1). Both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament affirm that God can reveal himself to humans without the need for any intermediary being. For example, the Old Testament narrates how God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush. The New Testament affirms that God took on human flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. The examples show that contemporary Jews and Christians do not share Apuleius’s ideas about an unbridgeable gap between God and humans or about God’s nature preventing him from showing himself directly to humans.

Apuleius’ first claim must therefore be adapted to fit an omnipotent God. Despite the possibility of God revealing himself to humans and therefore sending divine messages himself, the sacred Scriptures of the three largest contemporary monotheistic traditions (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) all affirm a role for intermediary beings that carry messages from God to humans. The Hebrew Bible frequently mentions appearances of the Angel of the Lord to deliver messages from God or to lead the Israelites.³¹ The New Testament also mentions a role for angels in delivering divine messages. The most famous is the Annunciation of the birth of Jesus by the Angel Gabriel.³² According to Islamic tradition, the divine message contained in the Quran was dictated to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel. Therefore, despite being able to send messages himself, adherents of all three monotheisms affirm that God sometimes chooses to send intermediary beings.

A contemporary theist could rely on divine skepticism to answer why God sometimes uses angels to deliver messages and delivers messages himself on other occasions. Some excerpts give a hint as to why God would do so on some occasions. After his encounter with the Angel of God, Gideon is smitten with fear because he believes he saw God face-to-face (see: Judges 6). Divine self-revelations are fewer in number in the Old and New Testament than messages sent by angelic messengers. Self-revelations only occur at the most important of times. God reveals himself to Moses to begin the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt and reveals himself in Jesus of Nazareth to deliver mankind of sin. Both acts are beyond the power of angelic messengers. When God’s goal is merely to provide information to humans, messages are usually sent by angels. Unless the circumstances exceed the power of angels, angelic messengers may be less awe-inspiring or trigger milder emotional responses than divine self-revelations. Therefore, messages delivered by intermediary beings might be easier to process by humans.

One might object that the first argument only shows how an increased likelihood of the existence of the Christian or Abrahamic God increased the likelihood of NTAs. Apuleius’s original argument, however, also shows that a god who lacks the power to deliver or receive human messages has an even stronger need for intermediary beings. Something similar might hold for traditions where the Supreme Being or supreme reality is not easily

accessible to humans. For example, adherents of West African Yoruba accept the existence of a supreme being who possesses many perfections called Olodumare. Olodumare is, however, far removed from the human realm of existence and therefore relies on other supernatural beings (Orisha's) to answer human concerns (Bewaji 1998).

The second argument connecting God's existence to the existence of NTAs thus states that NTAs likely exist if God exists because God is moved to intervene in human lives, and God has reasons to use angelic messengers for that intervention. Those reasons might be that encounters with angels are less fear-inducing or emotionally charged than encounters with God or a reason unknown to men.³³ Caution must be made that the argument only holds if God is seen as omnibenevolent and unable or unwilling to intervene in human lives personally. The last point prevents one from making a connection between the likely existence of NTAs and a deistic God or gods who putatively intervene more often themselves.

The arguments so far focused on establishing that God is unable or unwilling to intervene himself and therefore makes use of NTAs as messengers. Another element of background knowledge that needs to be established is God's omnibenevolence. A large number of arguments for the existence of God merely conclude to a creator or designer (see above) and do not allow for more conclusions about God's nature. Some arguments, however, do. For example, the ontological argument concludes with a perfect being or a maximally great being. The argument discussed in this section can therefore be joined with the ontological argument to raise the probability that NTAs exist.

4.3. *The Existence of NTAs Is More Probable If Sacred Scriptures Are Reliable*

The next way in which the existence of God can support belief in NTAs is by providing support for the reliability of sacred texts.³⁴ The argument adds the reliability of sacred texts as an extra intermediate step in arguing from a higher probability of the existence of God to a higher probability of the existence of NTAs. This can be stated as follows, with 'RST' signifying the reliability of sacred texts:

1. $P(\text{RST} \mid \text{God}) > P(\text{RST} \mid \sim \text{God})$
2. $P(\text{NTA} \mid \text{RST}) > P(\text{NTA} \mid \sim \text{RST})$
3. $P(\text{NTA} \mid \text{God}) > P(\text{NTA} \mid \sim \text{God})$

The first premise seems almost trivially true. If there is no God, a lot of the information contained in sacred scriptures should be judged false since the vast majority of sacred scriptures assume the existence of God. Solid evidence for the non-existence of God would therefore constitute an easy defeater for the reliability of sacred scriptures. Apart from trivial support by avoiding this clear defeater, evidence for God's existence can support the reliability of sacred scriptures in different ways as well.

Some have argued that we can expect God to reveal himself if God exists. Richard Swinburne argues that since humans stand in need of guidance concerning proper religious and moral behavior, we can expect God to give propositional information with regards to these in the form of a revelation. He adds that if there is sufficient evidence for the existence of a God who is all-powerful and all-good, there is good evidence that God will answer this need (Swinburne 2007). Elsewhere, Swinburne famously argued that there is more than sufficient evidence for an all-powerful and all-good God (Swinburne 2004).

Swinburne's argument merely concludes with divine revelation and not with reliable sacred scriptures. His argument can, however, be expanded for this goal. Divine revelation is usually very limited in scope. In Christianity, God is believed to have revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth. Direct contact with Jesus was reserved for his immediate followers and people living in the region and age where he lived. The vast majority of Christians never had direct access to this revelation. Revelation is even more restricted in Islam. According to the Islamic tradition, God delivered his message solely to the prophet Muhammad. Others besides Muhammad never heard the message directly. In both traditions, the content or nature of divine revelations is transmitted to others through written reports collected in sacred scriptures. If humans stand in need of information from a divine source as

Swinburne argues, an all-powerful, all-good God will not limit this information to subjects with direct access to his revelation. God would likely want reports of the revelation to be disseminated to as many people as possible. Written reports provide the best means of doing so.

If God is concerned with providing humans guidance by handing information through written reports, God would also want to make sure that the reports are reasonably accurate. He would therefore make sure that the reports are written down carefully and transmitted without many errors. Therefore, sacred scriptures should have certain ‘virtues of divinity’, such as truthfulness, as Thomas McCall argues (McCall 2009).

Now how does the reliability of sacred scriptures support the existence of NTSAs? The vast majority of sacred scriptures across traditions attest to the existence of NTSAs. The Hebrew Bible affirms the existence of angels (e.g., Exodus 33: 2). The New Testament affirms the existence of angels and demons (e.g., Mark 5: 1–20). The Quran affirms the existence of angels and Jinn, a class of supernatural, invisible beings.³⁵ The Hindu Mahabharata and Ramayana epics affirm the existence of a large number of demons and spirits such as Ravana.³⁶ The Sikh Guru Granth Sahib mentions demons that drive humans towards evil inclinations. The Japanese Kojiki largely consists of the exploits of Kami, which take on many characteristics of spirits. The Buddhist Pali Canon mentions the demon Mara who attempted to distract Siddhartha Gautama.³⁷ If sacred scriptures are reliable, we have reason to believe that the information they provide regarding the existence of NTSAs is reliable as well.

Against the argument, a number of objections can be raised. A first objection echoes a claim made by Rudolph Bultmann (1984). Bultmann argues that sacred scriptures³⁸ were written down in an era and cultural setting wherein a discarded metaphysical view was dominant. Around the time when sacred scriptures were composed, various superstitious beliefs that are now widely rejected were commonplace. For example, the authors of the books that make up the Old and New Testament accepted a pre-modern cosmological view wherein the earth was separated from the heavens by a firmament. Various texts such as the Genesis creation story attest to this cosmology. Now that the old cosmology has been discarded by scientific advances, sacred scriptures should be ‘demythologized’ and be cleansed from traces of discarded beliefs.

With Bultmann, one could argue that the existence of various NTSAs is a remnant of a by-gone ontology that is widely discarded as well. Therefore, just like sacred scriptures should be cleansed from references to old cosmologies, they should be cleansed from references to NTSAs as well. Passages that do refer to NTSAs should then be translated to fit with a modern view of the world. For example, the exorcism of the Gerasene demon (cf. Mark 5: 1–20) should be translated as Jesus delivering a man of some psychiatric disorder rather than exorcising him from a demon. The argument does not deny the reliability of sacred scriptures but argues that regardless they do not support the existence of NTSAs. The mention of demons and spirits is merely an outdated means of stating that people suffered from various illnesses and does not affirm the existence of supernatural beings.

As a counter-argument, referring to demythologizing is question-begging. The argument defended above aims to establish the existence of NTSAs by pointing to the reliability of sacred scriptures. The counter-argument replies that sacred scriptures support no such claim because NTSAs do not exist (according to a modern worldview). The counter-argument thereby assumes the non-existence of NTSAs, the very claim the argument aims to deny. On the surface, there is no reason to believe that the authors of sacred scriptures refer to anything else than NTSAs when discussing spirit or demonic activities. Without accepting that such beings, in fact, do not exist, the Bultmann-style argument presents few reasons that they do not.

A second counter-argument refers to diversity regarding sacred scriptures. One could argue that sacred scriptures provide no evidence for the existence of NTSAs because many mutually conflicting sacred scriptures abound. Christians have the Bible, Muslims the

Quran, and Hindus the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Vedas. All are regarded as sacred scriptures within a particular tradition and rejected outside.

The argument is not so much an argument against drawing evidence for NTAs from sacred scriptures but rather a general argument against the reliability of sacred scriptures. Several authors argued that merely pointing to diversity in revelations (d'Costa 1996) or testimonial chains (Baker-Hytch 2018) does not undermine the reliability of one revelation or testimonial chain. Applied to sacred scriptures, the mere fact of diversity does not show that one set of sacred scriptures is not more reliable than others. Assessing the reasons for preferring one lies far beyond the scope of this paper. Given that most sacred scriptures affirm the existence of NTAs, it does not matter which sacred scriptures are on a better epistemic footing. One can conclude the existence of NTAs if either the Bible, Quran, or Mahabharata were shown to be the most reliable. Establishing the reliability of one set of sacred scriptures would, however, require additional arguments. Assessing these lies beyond the scope of this paper.

One could argue from the fact of diversity that some parts of sacred scriptures are more reliable than others. Some authors, such as John Hick, advocated a focus on commonalities across religious traditions and rejecting particularities (Hick 1997). As noted in the previous paragraph, others have argued against the charge of diversity. Even if one would grant the charge and agree that conflicting parts in sacred scriptures should be rejected in favor of similarities, sacred scriptures still favor the existence of NTAs. As noted, a lot of sacred scriptures affirm the existence of NTAs. They disagree over the identities of NTAs and some of their natures. These differences are, however, not the focus of the argument. Therefore, it is likely that the sacred scripture that ends up being the most reliable one is one that affirms NTAs. That there are many scriptures does nothing to decide which ones are reliable, only that they all cannot be reliable together.

Like the previous argument, the third argument relies on God's omnibenevolence, a divine attribute that is already supported by a number of independent arguments such as the ontological argument.

5. Concluding Remarks

I argued that the existence of non-theistic supernatural agents is more probable if God exists. I defended three reasons in favor of that position: the existence of a supernatural realm given the existence of God; the use of intermediary beings to accomplish interaction between God and humans; and the reliability of sacred scriptures which attest to the existence of NTAs. If any of the three arguments is sound, accepting the existence of God can lend justification to the existence of NTAs. As a result, arguments for the existence of God indirectly support the existence of NTAs.

The arguments defended imply that belief in NTAs deserves more epistemic credit than it is often given. Arguments for the existence of God are commonly regarded as serious endeavors to gain justification for belief in God. If the arguments in Section 4 are sound, justification gained from such arguments allows for justified belief in NTAs.

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Notes

- ¹ I thank three anonymous reviewers for exceptionally helpful comments on earlier drafts.
- ² Some notable exceptions are: (Guthrie 2017; Johnson 2017; Wiebe 2004).
- ³ As noted by an anonymous reviewer, this does not hold for non-theistic religions such as some forms of animism and Theravada Buddhism.
- ⁴ Although this account of agency is dominant, alternative accounts have been defended (see (Schlosser 2015) for an overview). Discussing these in detail lies beyond the scope of this chapter. The same holds for account of what counts as a 'reason'. For an overview of the discussion on 'reason', see: (Alvarez 2016).

5 The discussion on defining ‘supernatural’ is drawn from (Van Eyghen 2018).

6 This also holds for views on God. Adherents of the Church of Latter Day Saints tend to believe that God is a material being. Most adherents of Christianity believe that God took on human flesh when incarnated as Jesus of Nazareth. In both examples, God cannot be regarded as non-physical.

7 See, for example, Luke 1: 26–28, Exodus 23: 20–23.

8 I thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

9 E.g., Hebrews 11: 1. I noted above that a large number of Christians believe that God became visible when incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth. This, however, attests to the claim that the Christian God has the capacity to remain invisible even though he showed himself at some times.

10 Perfect being theology has its roots in the works of the 12th-century philosopher Anselm of Canterbury.

11 For an in-depth discussion, see: (Peterson et al. 2008, chp. 4).

12 Some authors distinguish the Christian God from ‘limited deities’ (Baker-Hytch 2018).

13 For a discussion of Barth’s view on divine attributes, see: (Titus 2010).

14 For a critique of this view, see: (Stump 2018).

15 It seems logically possible that there be two or more beings that are equally perfect, sharing omniscience, omnibenevolence, and other perfections.

16 A majority of religious traditions only appear to accept one god and regard all other supernatural agents as inferior. A few notable exceptions are Hinduism and ancient polytheisms. Hinduism, however, also accepts one primordial supernatural agent called Brahman, which is the source of everything (see below).

17 Some argue that (most) Hindus are monotheistic. Ian Kesarcodi-Watson notes that Hindus commonly accept that Brahman is the supreme being manifested in personalized form as Isvara (Kesarcodi-Watson 1976).

18 See, for example, (Dasa 2012).

19 See: 2 Corinthians 4.4.

20 For overviews, see: (Craig and Moreland 2009; Manning et al. 2013).

21 There is a subtle difference between being a designer and a creator. Concluding to a designer merely concludes to a being that brought order to the universe. The designer could have operated on pre-existing material or chaos. Concluding to a creator usually means that the creator was the cause or origin of the universe. In most discussions, however, the distinction between designer and creator is not drawn sharply.

22 As an anonymous reviewer noted, a similar argument can be made relying on pantheism. Establishing the (likely) truth of pantheism would also imply the denial of naturalism and leave more room for NTSAs.

23 Adherents of naturalism usually also deny the existence of other entities or things besides supernatural agents. They also deny the existence of supernatural forces such as karma or Dao and immaterial souls.

24 Epistemic defeaters are distinguished by rebutting and undercutting defeaters (cf. Pollock 1986). Learning of an argument for naturalism provides evidence for a proposition opposed to the existence of NTSAs and therefore constitutes a rebutting defeater.

25 I thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

26 Apuleius appears to use the term ‘god’ as interchangeable with ‘supernatural agent’.

27 This is less clear for the practice of making offerings. However, making offerings is a way of showing reverence or respect and addressing the gods in this regard. Therefore, subjects who make offerings are also addressing the gods in some respect and therefore also communicating with the gods.

28 Apuleius calls these intermediary beings ‘daemons’. As Benjamin McCraw and Robert Arp note, the term ‘daemon’ did not have an intrinsic connection to evil according to the ancient Greeks (McCraw and Arp 2017).

29 The monotheistic worldview discussed in the remainder of this section is common among adherents of Abrahamic faiths. Most of the examples are drawn from these faiths.

30 See, for example, Matthew 7: 8, Job 22: 27.

31 See, for example, Genesis 16: 7–14, Numbers 20: 16.

32 See: Luke 1: 26–28.

33 An anonymous reviewer argued that using messengers to avoid inducing fear foregoes the fact that some intermediary beings, such as demons or fallen angels, induce a lot of fear in humans. While some NTSAs can surely induce fear, a defender could respond that this was never the intention of an omnibenevolent God. NTSAs causing fear may be the result of God allowing NTSAs freedom, or they may have some other purpose.

34 Peter Williams made a similar argument in favor of the existence of angels. He argues that the authority of Jesus and the Bible provide positive reasons to accept the existence of angels (Williams 2006). Unlike the argument defended here, his argument relies on the faith-based authority of the Christian Bible.

35 See, for example, Sura 72.

- ³⁶ E.g., Ramayana. Book 3, chp. 31.
- ³⁷ The last two examples may be problematic, as not all strands of Shinto and Buddhism have clear beliefs in God. It is also not clear whether both can be regarded as reports of revelations.
- ³⁸ Bultmann defended his claim as applied to the Bible. The idea can, however, be expanded to other sacred scriptures as well.

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