In Loving Memory of Russ Nelson:
A Truly Brilliant Scholar and the Epitome of Christian Faith
Is man merely a mistake of God's? Or God merely a mistake of man?

- Nietzsche *Twilight of Idols*

Small amounts of philosophy lead to atheism, but larger amounts bring us back to God

- Francis Bacon *Of Atheism*
# Table of Contents

*Foreword*  
*Preface*  
*Acknowledgments*  
*List of Contributors*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Why Believe That There Is A God?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Richard Swinburne</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Moral Culpability and Choosing to Believe in God</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>David Kyle Johnson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Theism, Atheism, and the Ethics of Hope</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jonathan Strand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Nietzsche: Master of Suspicion or Mastered by Suspicion?</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jahdiel Perez</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>C. S. Lewis on Experience, Narrative and Beliefs about Meaning: Helping Atheists and Christians to Understand One Another</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stefan James Knibbe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>“Talking about Something Else”: Richard Dawkins and Rowan Williams on God, Religion and Atheism</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stephen W. Martin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 7  Why Atheists should be Anti-Natalists: The Argument from Evil and the Ethics of Procreation  95
Matthew Small

Chapter 8  The Ontological Proof Fails for the Love of God  115
Charles Rodger

Chapter 9  The Modal Argument Against Naturalism  133
Andrew Brigham

Chapter 10  Intellectual Honesty in the Atheism-Theism Conversation: Two Popular but Unconvincing Arguments Against Unbelief  147
Jahdiel Perez

Chapter 11  The Optimal Argument for the Existence of God  161
Don N. Page

Chapter 12  Why God Allows Suffering  171
Richard Swinburne

Bibliography  187

Index  201
Foreword

Atheism is popular today. Probably most academics in both the sciences and the humanities are atheists; and the “new atheists” such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens have helped to make it widely influential. Yet this growth of atheism has been counter-balanced by a great growth of interest among professional philosophers, some of whom are atheists and some of whom are theists, in the issues of whether there are any good arguments for or against the existence of God, and of whether we need arguments or even beliefs in order to practice a religion. The Canadian Centre for Scholarship and the Christian Faith held a public conference at Concordia University of Edmonton in May 2016 on these issues, all-important for Christians; and this volume contains some of the lectures delivered at that conference.

These lectures are generally of a kind readily accessible to most readers, and do not require any knowledge of the sometimes rather sophisticated philosophical books and essays being written today. There are here lectures giving positive arguments for the existence of God, lectures purporting to refute arguments for atheism, lectures purporting to refute arguments against atheism, lectures on whether faith without evidence is ethically permissible, and a lecture claiming that what is important about religion is too big to be captured by arguments, and much else. While not everyone will find that every lecture speaks to their condition, I feel confident that almost every reader will find something of value and interest to them somewhere in this volume.

Richard Swinburne
July 2017
Preface

I am the Director of the Canadian Centre for Scholarship and the Christian faith. I also did my Ph.D. in biblical studies under an atheist. So I am very familiar with the arguments on both sides of the debate and everywhere in-between. CCSCF is outside the box, open, inclusive and tolerant, as well as highly valuing academic rigor in all its pursuits.

The theme for CCSCF’s 2016 conference was “Atheism and the Christian Faith”. This book represents the proceedings of that conference. The project is highly driven by philosophers and philosophy. This anthology is also highly eclectic—representing atheist, agnostic and theist viewpoints. So there is something for everyone here. Because I am trained as a biblical scholar and theologian (though I examined scepticism in the Book of Ecclesiastes), I was thrilled by the education that I received through editing this book—and I am sure that you will be too! I am grateful to each and every contributor of the book to this end.

Any survey of the state of affairs in the atheism-theism discussion reveals that there appears to be an impasse. Or as Martin puts it in Chapter 6: “Talking about Something Else”, i.e., both sides are not really listening and are talking past each other. This has led to misunderstanding, prejudice and bad behavior (sometimes embarrassingly so for all parties concerned). Whether we agree or disagree in the final analysis is immaterial. It is all about the academic process and truth wherever and whenever it may be ascertained. If atheists, agnostics and theists are to have genuine dialogue, then it must be truly open, honest and respectful. Part of the goal of this book is to foster such a disposition. Perez in Chapter 10 discusses “Intellectual Honesty in the Atheism-Theism Conversation”. Knibbe further assists in Chapter 5 by “Helping Atheists and Christians Understand One Another” (subtitle).

Swinburne opens this anthology in Chapter 1 on “Why Believe That There is a God?”. A more specific argument is offered by astrophysicist Page later in Chapter 11 on “The Optimal Argument for the Existence of God”. These are countered by other chapters in the book.
The problem of evil and suffering has been used to argue against theism and for atheism. Johnson employs that argument vigorously in Chapter 2 on “Moral Culpability and Choosing to Believe in God”. But this too is something that Swinburne addresses in the last chapter on “Why God Allows Suffering”.

There are also chapters which deal with problematics in the atheism-theism discussion. Perez very much challenges some of the hermeneutical underpinnings of atheism in Chapter 4 on “Nietzsche: Master of Suspicion or Mastered by Suspicion”. Brigham in Chapter 9 welcomes the reader to World 5 and articulates “The Modal Argument Against Naturalism”. Small argues in Chapter 7 for “Why Atheists should be Antinatalists”. Ethics and Ontology are explored by Strand and Rodgers respectively in Chapters 3 and 8.

Unfortunately, the atheism-theism discussion has been plagued by misrepresentation and misunderstanding. There has been close-minded dogmatism and intolerance from every party. But let us put this issue to rest as represented by this book: There are intelligent, well-educated and reasonable representatives on all sides of the discussion—all of whom should be taken seriously.

As Elder and Paul point out in Critical Thinking, the highest level of scholarly competency is when one has the ability to situate oneself in another’s shoes in order to think and feel like them (why I did a Ph.D. under an atheist). This allows one to understand where others are coming from and fosters an attitude and conduct which is fair and respectful with arguments and positions with which one disagrees. I hope that the reader, regardless of one’s disposition or beliefs or unbelief, will be open to learning from a variety of different people and positions in a critically engaged but fair way. This will insure a common goal for many atheists, agnostics and theists alike—namely the dignity of all human beings—as well as tolerance and appreciation for differing views.

William H. U. Anderson
July 2017
Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the assistance and advice of two of my colleagues from the Philosophy Department here at Concordia University of Edmonton, Dr. Jonathan Strand and Dr. Travis Dumsday, without whom this book would not have come to fruition. My research assistant, Christopher Legerme, compiled the bibliography and index for this book. I am grateful to the Executive Board of the Canadian Centre for Scholarship and the Christian Faith who provide me with endless support and encouragement to think outside the box, be creative with rigorous scholarship, and produce “Cutting Edge Theology”. The Government of Canada Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) made this project possible through grants made to CCSCF.
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Chapter 1

Why Believe That There Is A God?

Richard Swinburne

St. Paul famously claimed that pagans who did not worship God were “without excuse”, because “ever since the creation of the world [God’s] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things which he has made”.\(^1\) Inspired by this text, many Christian thinkers from the second to the eighteenth centuries put forward arguments from premises “evident to the senses” to the existence of God. To adduce such arguments is to do “natural theology”. My own natural theology is inductive, i.e., it seeks to show that the evident phenomena are best explained by supposing that a God causes them, and that makes it probable that there is a God. In this chapter I shall have time to consider only the inductive force of four very evident general phenomena: that there is a physical universe; that it is governed by very simple natural laws; that those laws are such as to lead to the existence of human bodies; and that those bodies are the bodies of reasoning humans who choose between good and evil. For reasons of time I shall not be able to discuss arguments against the existence of God here, such as the argument from the existence of pain and other suffering; though I will address them in the last chapter of this book.\(^2\)

The Nature of Explanatory Hypotheses

Theism, the claim that there is a God is an explanatory hypothesis, one which purports to explain why certain observed phenomena (i.e., data or evidence) are as they are. There are two basic kinds of explanatory hypothesis—personal and inanimate (or scientific) hypotheses. A personal hypothesis explains some phenomenon in

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1 Letter to the Romans 1:20.
terms of it being caused by a substance (i.e., a thing), a person, acting with certain powers (to bring about effects), certain beliefs (about how to do so), and a certain purpose (or intention) to bring about a particular effect, either for its own sake or as a step towards a further effect. I (a substance) cause the motion of my hand in virtue of my powers (to move my limbs), my belief (that moving my hand will attract attention) and my purpose (to attract attention). An inanimate (or scientific) explanation is usually represented as explaining some phenomenon in terms of it being caused by some initial state of affairs and the operation on that state of laws of nature. The present positions of the planets are explained by their earlier positions and that of the Sun, and the operation on them of Newton's laws. But I think that this is a misleading way of analyzing inanimate explanation—because “laws” are not things; to say that Newton's law of gravity is a law is simply to say that each material body in the universe has the power to attract every other material body with a force proportional to $Mm/r^2$ and the liability to exercise that power on every such body. So construed, like personal explanation, inanimate explanation of some phenomenon (e.g., the present positions of the planets) explains it in terms of it being caused by substances (e.g., the Sun and the planets) acting with certain powers (to cause material bodies to move in the way codified in Newton's laws) and the liability always to exercise those powers. So both kinds of explanation explain phenomena in terms of the actions of substances having certain powers to produce effects. But while personal explanation explains how substances exercise their powers because of their purposes and their beliefs, inanimate explanation explains how substances exercise their powers because of their liabilities to do so.

The Four Criteria for Judging an Explanatory Hypothesis to Be Probably True

I suggest that we judge a postulated hypothesis (of either kind) as probably true insofar as it satisfies four criteria. First we must have observed many phenomena which it is quite probable would occur and no phenomena which it is quite probable would not occur, if the hypothesis is true. Secondly, it must be much less probable that the phenomena would occur in the normal course of things, i.e., if the hypothesis is false. Thirdly, the hypothesis must be simple, i.e., it must postulate the existence and operation of few substances, few kinds of substance, with few easily describable properties correlated
in few mathematically simple kinds of way. We can always postulate many new substances with complicated properties to explain anything which we find. But our hypothesis will only be supported by the evidence if it is a simple hypothesis which leads us to expect the various phenomena that form the evidence. And fourthly, the hypothesis must fit in with our knowledge of how the world works in wider fields—what I shall call our “background evidence”.

I now illustrate these criteria at work in assessing postulated explanations. I begin with a postulated personal explanation. Suppose that there has been a burglary: money has been stolen from a safe. A detective has discovered these pieces of evidence: John’s fingerprints are on the safe, someone reports having seen John near the scene of the burglary at the time it was committed, and there is in John’s house an amount of money equivalent to the amount stolen. The detective puts forward as the explanation of the burglary the hypothesis that John robbed the safe, using his normal human powers, in the light of his belief that there was money in the safe, with the purpose of getting the money. If John did rob the safe, it would be to some modest degree probable that his fingerprints would be found on the safe, that someone would report having seen him near the scene of the crime at the time it was committed, and that money of the amount stolen would be found in his house. But these phenomena are much less to be expected with any modest degree of probability if John did not rob the safe; they therefore constitute positive evidence, evidence favoring the hypothesis. On the other hand, if John robbed the safe, it would be most unexpected (it would be most improbable) that many people would report seeing him in a foreign country at the time of the burglary. Such reports would constitute negative evidence, evidence counting strongly against the hypothesis. Let us suppose that there is no such negative evidence. The more probable it is that we would find the positive evidence if the hypothesis is true, and the more improbable it is that we would find that evidence if the hypothesis is false, the more probable the evidence makes the hypothesis.

But a hypothesis is only rendered probable by evidence insofar as it is simple. Consider the following hypothesis as an explanation of the detective’s positive data: David stole the money; quite unknown to David, George dressed up to look like John at the scene of the crime, Tony planted John’s fingerprints on the safe just for fun; and,

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3 For a full account of the nature of simplicity, see my Simplicity as Evidence of Truth (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997); or my Epistemic Justification (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), chapter 4.
unknown to the others, Stephen hid money stolen from another robbery (coincidentally of exactly the same amount) in John's house. If this complicated hypothesis were true, we would expect to find all the positive evidence which I described, while it remains not nearly as probable otherwise that we would find this evidence. But this evidence does not make the complicated hypothesis probable, although it does make the hypothesis that John robbed the safe probable; and that is because the latter hypothesis is simple. The detective's original hypothesis postulates only one substance (John) doing one action (robbing the safe) which leads us to expect the various pieces of evidence; while the rival hypothesis which I have just set out postulates many substances (many persons) doing different unconnected actions.

But as well as the evidence of the kind which I have illustrated, there may be “background evidence”, i.e., evidence about matters which the hypothesis does not purport to explain, but comes from an area outside the scope of that hypothesis. We may have evidence about what John has done on other occasions, for example evidence making probable a hypothesis that he has often robbed safes in the past. This latter evidence would make the hypothesis that John robbed the safe on this occasion much more probable than it would be without that evidence. Conversely, evidence that John has lived a crime-free life in the past would make it much less probable that he robbed the safe on this occasion. A hypothesis fits with such background evidence insofar as the background evidence makes probable a theory of wider scope (e.g., that John is a regular safe-robber) which in turn makes the hypothesis in question more probable than it would otherwise be.

The same four criteria are at work in assessing postulated inanimate (or “scientific”) hypotheses. Consider the hypothesis that Newton's theory of gravitation explains many phenomena known in 1687 when Newton proposed his theory: evidence about the paths taken (given certain initial positions) by our moon, by the planets, by the moons of planets, the velocities with which bodies fall to the earth, the motions of pendula, the occurrence of tides, etc. Newton's theory consisted of his three laws of motion and his inverse square law of gravitational attraction. These laws were such as to make it very probable that previous observed phenomena, such as the positions of the Sun and planets five hundred years ago, will be followed by various present observed phenomena, such as the present positions of the planets. It would be very unlikely that the latter phenomena would occur if Newton's theory were not true. There was no significant negative evidence. The theory was very


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Bibliography


Index

A

a priori reasoning, 168
accountability, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 142, 144, 145
actual world, 111, 133, 134, 136, 142, 144, 145, 146, 161, 163, 164, 169, 178
actualizing, 164
Adams, 100, 104, 105
Adorno, 117
afterlife, 23, 110, 112
allegoria, 65
Allison, 115
anthropic, 167
anti-natalism, 98, 106, 107, 114
Apathy, 47
apologetics, 147, 148, 159
appreciation for elegance, 167
Aquinas
proofs for the existence of God, 69
argument, 136, 161, 164, 165, 168
Argument from Evil, 95, 96, 97, 98, 100, 102, 103, 110, 111, 114, 174
Aristotle, 36, 101, 116, 117, 175
atheism, 11, 13, 22, 53, 54, 63, 65, 69, 70, 71, 76, 77, 81, 83, 88, 91, 92, 93, 94, 98, 114, 125, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161
Atheism
as imperative, 91
as useful for religion, 94
New, 87, 150, 160

B

balance, 24, 135, 145, 146, 168, 181, 182, 183
Balmer Spectrum, 162
Bayesian analysis, 162
belief-modification, 45
Benatar, 83, 95, 98, 102, 103, 106, 107, 109
Best Possible World, 161, 163, 164, 169
Bible, the, 28, 57, 65, 69, 96, 128, 148
Big Bang, 9
Blind Faith, 12, 13, 14, 16, 151
Brigham, 133

C

Clifford, 17, 34, 35, 37, 47
collapse, 125, 166
collapses the wavefunction, 166
Collins, 86
conditional probabilities, 162
conformity condition, 134
conscious or sentient experiences, 163
Consciousness, 10, 54, 56, 57, 58, 59, 82, 101, 122, 123, 124, 131
Cosmological Proof, 117
coupling constants, 167
Creation, 1, 88, 90, 101, 104, 105, 107, 124, 128, 129, 132, 175, 182
creaturely happiness, 166
Crucifixion, 167
cruelty, 76, 163, 174

D

Darwin, 69, 77, 84, 86, 159
Dawkins, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 94, 95, 98, 150, 151, 153

cultural Anglicanism of, 94
debates with Rowan Williams, 94
naïve optimism of, 83
on God, 84
on Religion, 81
death, 15, 112, 113, 138, 181
defense, 8, 108, 111, 137, 174, 176, 181
Deleuze, 127
denial, 46, 48, 49, 87
Dennett
crane and skyhook idea, 83, 86
desires, 8, 39, 40, 41, 42, 44, 45, 46, 47, 49, 50, 56, 57, 59, 97, 105, 171, 175
despair, 45
deterministic evolution, 165
Dirac equation, 162
disasters, 163
disease, 15, 48, 163, 167, 176, 177, 184
displeasure, 168
divine, 1, 8, 27, 92, 93, 96, 97, 101, 104, 105, 106, 108, 109, 111, 112, 113, 128, 168, 175
divine and human happiness, 168
Dostoyevski, 79, 136

evidential argument, 95, 103, 113
Evidentialist, 35
Evolution, Theory of, 80, 159
existence, 1, 2, 6, 8, 10, 13, 17, 18, 19, 50, 69, 85, 87, 89, 93, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 102, 103, 104, 106, 107, 111, 113, 115, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 126, 127, 130, 131, 132, 134, 147, 161, 164, 172, 173, 174, 178
explanatory hypothesis, 1, 6
four criteria, 2, 4, 5
extrinsic good, 40, 41, 43, 44

F

Faith
and certainty, 92
as basic trust, 91
two kinds, 12
fideism, 116, 125
fine tuning, 167
foreknowledge, 106
Foucault, 55, 57, 58, 64, 65
free will, 8, 128, 172, 174, 177, 180
Freud, 53, 54, 55, 56, 58, 65, 66, 93, 148, 152, 154
Fundamentalism
and moderate religion, 82

G

global warming, 15, 16, 70, 71
God
Abrahamic Tradition, 13, 14, 26, 88, 125, 152
action of, 88
and being, 89
and the whole, 88
as a brute fact, 118
as cosmic, 84, 90
as Creator, 10, 89, 116, 143, 161, 164, 169
as love, 90, 101
as trinity, 6, 53, 90, 91

electro-magnetism, 165
elegance, 161, 163, 164, 165, 166, 168, 169
eclipses, 162
eternal, 1, 59, 90, 101, 110, 111, 112, 127, 131
eternals past, 127, 131
Ethical Platonism, 140, 141
Everett, 164, 166
Everett Multiverse, 166
God Hypothesis, The
(Dawkins), 85, 86, 91

goodness, 6, 7, 8, 36, 69, 71,
92, 97, 99, 100, 104, 140,
145, 146, 172, 173
gratuitous, 109, 110, 113

gravity, 2, 38, 165
guilt by association, 17, 19,
20, 25

H

happiness, 44, 134, 141, 163,
164, 167, 168
harm, 8, 14, 17, 25, 27, 31, 91,
102, 103, 106, 136, 174, 178

Hegel, 53, 121, 122, 123, 124,
125
Hermeneutic of Suspicion,
53, 54, 56, 57, 58, 59, 61,
62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68

Hick, 99, 100, 108
Higton, 55, 90
historical evidence, 162, 166
Horgan, 87
human good, 95, 98, 102, 103,
113, 175
human sins, 167
human suffering, 95, 96, 97,
99, 101, 102, 103, 108, 109,
110, 111, 113, 141, 166
Hume, 34, 35, 100
hydrogen, 162
hypothesis, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8,
10, 84, 88, 91, 161, 164

I

idolatry, 65, 91, 93
ignorance, 82, 105, 106, 122,
129, 178
inanimate hypothesis, 10
Incarnation, 152, 167
inductive, 1, 177
intrinsic value, 72, 163, 164,
165, 166
Islam, 27

J

Jesus Christ, 14, 59, 60, 65,
155, 162, 167, 168, 183
Johnson, 11
joy, 163, 168
justification, 22, 26, 28, 37,
105, 106, 107, 113, 137, 141

K

Kant, 36, 115, 120, 138
Knibbe, 69
Kraay, 164

L

landscape, 166
laws of physics, 163, 164
Leibniz, 172
Letters to Malcolm, 75
likelihoods, 162, 163
logical argument, 99, 102, 103
logically necessary, 163
loss of information, 165
Love, 28, 38, 48, 59, 60, 61, 90,
93, 94, 95, 99, 100, 101,
102, 103, 108, 116, 132,
164, 167, 168, 169
love of knowledge, 116

M

many-worlds, 166
Martin, 79
Marx, 53, 54, 58, 65, 93
masters of suspicion, 53, 66,
93
Mathematical Simplicity,
163, 168
mathematical theories, 168
maximizing total good, 167
maximizing value, 167
maximum value, 163, 164
meaningful beliefs, 70, 72, 73,
74, 77
Meme, memeplex
religion as, 83, 84, 86, 91,
94
Mendel, 86
Mere Christianity, 74, 75, 77
miracles, 84, 89, 152, 166, 169
and natural laws, 84, 89, 152, 166, 169
Modal Realism, 163
Moore, 118
moral obligations, 100, 104, 105, 113, 186
moral weakness, 105, 107
morally sufficient reasons, 96, 99, 103, 104, 105, 111, 113
multiverse, 10, 166, 167, 169

N
Nagel, 168
Narnia, 77
natural disasters, 24, 167
Natural Evil, the Problem of, 12, 13, 176
Natural Selection, 84, 86, 90, 91
Natural Theology, 1
Naturalism, 11, 54, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146
naturalistic, 48, 54, 110, 112
nature of God, 164, 165
necessary, 7, 83, 84, 107, 109, 119, 120, 121, 122, 126, 134, 135, 150, 155, 157, 161, 177, 178, 180
negative theology, 125
new earth, 168
New Testament, the, 29, 66, 90, 183
Newton, 2, 4, 86, 162
Nietzsche, 53, 54, 55, 56, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 93

O
observations, 161, 162, 163, 166, 167, 168
observership, 167
Old Testament, the, 29, 65, 85, 86, 92
omnibenevolent, 161, 164, 169
omnipotence, 6, 7, 8, 90, 95, 96, 99, 104, 105, 107, 109, 112, 161, 164, 169, 171, 172, 183
omniscience, 6, 7, 8, 96, 99, 105, 106, 112, 161, 164, 169, 171
ontological, 17, 56, 69, 86, 100, 104, 115, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 124, 125, 126, 128, 130
Ontological Proof, 115, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 124, 125, 126, 128, 130
Optimal, 161, 164, 165, 167, 168, 169
Optimal Argument for the Existence of God, 161, 164, 168, 169
optimal values, 167
Optimism, 33, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 83, 84
original position, 143
Origins, cosmic and God, 88
Origins, human, 80
over/under belief, 39, 40, 50

P
Page, 161
parenthood, 20, 21, 96, 97, 105, 106, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113
Pascal, 12
Pascal's wager, 12, 34
Penelhum, 115, 117, 118, 119, 120
Penner, 88
perceived value, 45
personal hypothesis, 1, 6
philosophical, 12, 40, 53, 75, 83, 117, 118, 128, 129, 144, 159, 166
Plato, 89, 116
plausible hypothesis, 168
Index

pleasure, 107, 108, 163, 168, 185
possible world, 92, 111, 133, 134, 135, 136, 143, 172
posterior probabilities, 162, 163
Principle of Sufficient Reason, 115, 117, 118, 119, 120, 125
prior probabilities, 162, 163
Problem of Evil, 98, 103, 168, 172
procreation, 95, 97, 98, 99, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 110, 113
pro-natalism, 111
psychological pain, 38, 39, 46

Q
qualified world, 164, 165
quantum amplitude, 166
quantum outcomes, 166
Quantum Theory, 165, 166, 179

R
Radical Evil, 116, 129, 131, 132
rational, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 19, 22, 30, 85, 93, 116, 125, 126, 127, 129, 130, 132, 133, 134, 135, 138, 139, 140, 141, 144, 145, 146, 177
Realism, 45, 46, 47, 48
reality, 14, 46, 49, 53, 57, 58, 73, 74, 76, 83, 84, 88, 91, 92, 133, 154, 166
Religion
as ‘cop out’, 81
as ‘disturbance’, 91
as ‘skyhook’, 86
as ‘useless’, 92, 181
as binding, 91
as communal activity, 81
as critical activity, 81
as threat, 82, 146
as virus, 83
definition of, 81

ressentiment, 88
Resurrection, 162, 166
Resurrection of Jesus Christ, 162, 166
Ricoeur, 53, 54, 55, 56, 58, 64, 66
Robinson, 82
Rodger, 115
Rosenzweig, 125, 132

S
sacrifices, 167
Schelling, 116, 117, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 132
Science
and religion, 87
and truth, 152, 153
as ‘crane’, 86
Christians in, 86
dark side of, 82
self-deception, 57, 59, 61, 63, 66, 67
self-explanatory, 118, 119
self-interested, 103
semainon, 65
simple faith, 12, 13, 16, 17, 19, 21, 30, 31
simplicity, 3, 5, 86, 90, 162, 168
Small, 95
Snobelen, 86
soul-making theodicy, 108, 109, 111
Spinoza, 122, 123, 125
Stoicism, 47, 48, 49
Strand, 33
strawman fallacy, 28
Stump, 95, 97, 99, 101, 102, 104, 108, 111
subjective, 57, 74, 76, 121, 162
substance, 2, 4, 6, 8, 123, 124
Suffering, 1, 72, 76, 83, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 102, 103, 104, 105, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 164, 165, 168, 169, 172, 176, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186

ressentiment, 88
Resurrection, 162, 166
Resurrection of Jesus Christ, 162, 166
Ricoeur, 53, 54, 55, 56, 58, 64, 66
Robinson, 82
Rodger, 115
Rosenzweig, 125, 132

S
sacrifices, 167
Schelling, 116, 117, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 132
Science
and religion, 87
and truth, 152, 153
as ‘crane’, 86
Christians in, 86
dark side of, 82
self-deception, 57, 59, 61, 63, 66, 67
self-explanatory, 118, 119
self-interested, 103
semainon, 65
simple faith, 12, 13, 16, 17, 19, 21, 30, 31
simplicity, 3, 5, 86, 90, 162, 168
Small, 95
Snobelen, 86
soul-making theodicy, 108, 109, 111
Spinoza, 122, 123, 125
Stoicism, 47, 48, 49
Strand, 33
strawman fallacy, 28
Stump, 95, 97, 99, 101, 102, 104, 108, 111
subjective, 57, 74, 76, 121, 162
substance, 2, 4, 6, 8, 123, 124
Suffering, 1, 72, 76, 83, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 102, 103, 104, 105, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 164, 165, 168, 169, 172, 176, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186
superstring, 167
*Surprised by Joy*, 72, 73, 76
Swinburne, 1, 51
syllogism, 164, 165

**T**

Taylor, 86
Templeton, Prize, 87
*The Abolition of Man*, 70
The Criterion of Simplicity, 5
The Fall, 67
*The God Delusion*
  religious responses to, 80, 82, 83, 84, 85, 87, 94, 98, 150, 153
*The Screwtape Letters*, 74, 76
Theism, 6, 8, 11, 16, 19, 20, 21, 22, 26, 31, 95, 98, 160, 161, 171
New, 81
Theodicy, 95, 97, 98, 100, 111, 161, 174
theological, 64, 65, 80, 89, 90, 95, 109, 152, 166
Theories, 162
Thomistic, 95, 101, 102, 103
*Till We Have Faces*, 76
Twain
  on faith, 81

**U**

unhappiness, 163
unitarity, 165
universe, 1, 2, 6, 8, 10, 76, 80, 83, 84, 85, 88, 90, 91, 92, 104, 161, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 171
unwanted consequence, 167
Utilitarianism, 139, 140, 141

**V**

valuational denial, 49
valuational duties, 45, 48
valuational truth, 49
valuing, 168
variety, 94, 168
vices, 37, 41
Virtue, 2, 8, 36, 109, 112, 113, 152, 172, 175, 177
virtues, 37, 41

**W**

wavefunction, 165, 166, 169
wavefunction collapse, 165
Williams, 55, 79, 81, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91
debates with Richard Dawkins, 94
on atheism, 93
Wise, 87