Rational Theism:

A Paper
Presented to Dr. Mark Foreman
Liberty University
Lynchburg, VA

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
Christian Evidences
Philosophy 240-001

By
Max Lewis Edward Andrews
April 1, 2009
I. Introduction

For millennia natural theology and Christianity have been debated, rejected, accepted, and ignored. H. J. McCloskey attempts to refute Christianity and theism as a whole.\(^1\) McCloskey gives arguments against the cosmological argument, the teleological argument from design, and incorporates a problem of evil throughout his work.\(^2\) His arguments, as will be shown, fall short of being convincing. The Christian’s belief in the existence of God is the most rational philosophical position with the most explanatory scope and power of the universe and being of humanity.

II. The Cosmological Argument

The cosmological argument argues for a cause of the universe. It attempts to answer the question—Why does anything even exist? The argument is minimal and does not necessarily conclude with the all-loving trinitarian God of the Bible. McCloskey’s objections are specifically against the argument of a first cause.\(^3\) He postulates that the cause and effect relationship of the universe in no way constitutes an uncaused cause.\(^4\) Scientific, mathematical,

---

\(^1\) All of McCloskey’s arguments will be taken from his article “On Being an Atheist,” *Question* 1 (February 1968): 62-69.

\(^2\) McCloskey makes an interesting critique of the naïveté of Christians for coming to faith in God without first reasoning through the evidence and proofs. Admittedly, he passes over these points. His point, though subtle, is fallacious. It commits the genetic fallacy by trying to discredit certain people’s beliefs by where the belief derived from. One’s faith may still be valid whether or not they examine all the evidence prior to accepting Christian theism as true.

\(^3\) McCloskey’s arguments and objections based around suffering and evil will be passed over until section IV.

and philosophical evidence serve the explanatory scope and power to rightly justify the existence of an uncaused cause via the Kalam argument.

1) Whatever begins to exist has a cause.
2) The universe began to exist.
3) Therefore, the universe has a cause.

Premise (1) seems obviously true—at least, more than its negation. To suggest that things could just pop into being uncaused out of nothing is to quit doing serious metaphysics and to resort to magic. McCloskey’s objection to the cause and effect not constituting an uncaused cause is patently false because one would then run into an infinite regress, which is philosophically and mathematically untenable. His main argument, however, is against (1). Because an actually infinite number of things cannot exist, the series of past events must be finite in number and, hence, the temporal series of past, physical events is not without beginning.

There is a difference between an actual infinite and a concept of indefinite quantity. A \( \aleph \) cannot actually be formed because a series of events, \( (E) \), is formed by successive addition. A collection formed by successive addition cannot be actually infinite and therefore, a series of events cannot be actually infinite. For an actual infinite to be spatiotemporally actual \( \aleph \) would be equivalent to any set \( (E) \). To illustrate this absurdity: \( \aleph=(E) \), and \( \aleph=(E+1) \), and \( \aleph=(E-1) \) would all have to hold the same truth-value and the same actual collection of events, which is completely unintelligible.

---


7 The symbol representing the number of members in an infinite set is the Hebrew letter *aleph*: \( \aleph \). The symbol used to represent an indefinite quantity is the lemniscate: \( \infty \).
What is true is the idea of $\infty = E$. To illustrate the possibility of an indefinite quantity consider Fig. 1 above. Between A and B there exists an indefinite quantity of points. Likewise, between B and C, and A and C an indefinite quantity exists. No matter how many times the distance between any of these points are divided, it will never come to an absolute end of division. The distances between the points are indefinite, not infinite. However, consider A, B, and C as spatiotemporal physical points. The concept of infinity is still there, but one may actually travel that distance—the distance is not without end. The idea of an indefinite quantity, $\infty$, possibly existing does no justice to defeating the argument. What the atheist needs to refute the argument is to prove that $\aleph$ is actually possible. The philosophical and mathematical evidence suggest that an actual infinite is impossible, thus, the series of causes for the universe had a beginning.

Science gives empirical evidence for (2). In 1929 Edwin Hubble showed that light from distant galaxies were systematically shifted toward the red end of the light spectrum. This
Doppler effect indicated that these galaxies were moving away from each other suggesting the expansion on the universe. Cosmologist P. C. W. Davies comments,

If we extrapolate this prediction to its extreme we reach a point when all distances in the universe have shrunk to zero. An initial cosmological singularity therefore forms a past temporal extremity to the universe. We cannot continue physical reasoning, or even the concept of spacetime, through such an extremity. For this reason most cosmologists think of the initial singularity as the beginning of the universe. On this view the big bang represents the creation event; the creation not only of all the matter and energy in the universe, but also of spacetime itself.

Fig. 2: Conical representation of the Standard Model spacetime. Space and time begin at the initial cosmological singularity, before which literally nothing exists.

A free, uncaused being is the only solution to the problem of an infinite regress and provides the best explanatory scope and power of the evidence. For as the cause of space and time, this entity must transcend space and time and therefore exist atemporally and non-spatially

---

8 Craig, *Reasonable Faith ed. 3*, 126.


10 Copan and Craig, *Creation out of Nothing*, 224.
(at least without the universe).\(^{11}\) Richard Swinburne points out, there are two types of causal explanation: scientific explanations in terms of laws and initial conditions and personal explanations in terms of agents and their volitions.\(^{12}\) The first state of the universe cannot have a scientific explanation, since there is nothing before it, and therefore it cannot be accounted for in terms of laws operating on initial conditions. It can only be accounted for in terms of an agent and his volitions, a personal explanation.\(^{13}\) Personal agent causation also provides a possible solution to Kant’s ontological leap. This may serve as an answer to McCloskey’s objection to the cause and effect relationship and the implication of an uncaused cause.

Providing (1) and (2) are true, (3) logically follows. A naturalistic atheist, surprisingly, denies even the empirical evidence. McCloskey never offers a better solution as to why the universe exists or where it came from. In the end, McCloskey readily admits that the argument can be concluded “that the cause is powerful enough and imperfect enough to have created the sort of world we know.”\(^{14}\) Interestingly, he never completely discredits the argument from causation, but conveniently stops his argument with a cause and not an uncaused cause. The explanatory scope and power of the Kalam argument provides more solutions to the evidence than the denial of an uncaused cause.

\(^{11}\) Or, alternatively, the cause exists changelessly in an undifferentiated time in which temporal intervals cannot be distinguished. On this view God existed literally before creation but there was no moment, say, one hour or one million years before creation. Craig, *Reasonable Faith ed. 3*, 152 and *Time and Eternity: Exploring God’s Relationship to Time* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001) 233-236.


\(^{13}\) Craig, *Reasonable Faith ed. 3*, 152-153.

\(^{14}\) McCloskey, “On Being an Atheist,” 64.
III. The Teleological Argument from Design

McCloskey’s answers to the argument from design are based on two unconvincing objections. First, he attempts to discredit the appearance of design by inferring natural selection and evolution as the reason for these appearances. Second, he tries to void the argument by appealing to suffering and evil, which he implies as being a lack of design. The argument should be understood to have the best explanatory scope and power by demonstrating that a being capable of intelligent design is a more probable conclusion than its alternatives. The teleological argument may be formulated as follows:

1) The fine-tuning of the universe is due to physical necessity, chance, or design.
2) It is not due to physical necessity or chance.
3) Therefore, it is due to design.

Premise (1) should be uncontroversial. These three options are not merely limited to these, but the range between necessity and chance seem to cover the spectrum of possibilities. According to physical necessity, the constants and quantities must have the values they do, and there was really no chance or little chance of the universe’s not being life-permitting. This would mean a life-prohibiting universe would be physically impossible. This claim would require strong proof, which there is none; and this alternative is simply presented as a possibility.

On an interesting note, this subject has gone through intense scrutiny by string theorists. Stephen Hawking states that string theory allows a vast landscape of possible universes, in which

---

15 Craig, Reasonable Faith ed. 3, 161.

16 String theory is a relatively new field of study in quantum physics. Broken down, string theory, also known as M-theory, is an attempt to reason Einstein’s relativity theory and Maxwell’s theory of electromagnetism together as a theory of everything (TOE). The theory conceives of the fundamental building blocks of matter to be, not particles like quarks, but tiny, vibrating, one-dimensional strings of energy, which may suggest eleven dimensions of the universe. String theory is so complicated and
we occupy an anthropically permitted location.\(^\text{17}\) It turns out that string theory allows around \(10^{500}\) different possible universes in the cosmic landscape. Even though there may be a huge number of possible universes lying within the life-permitting universe, region of the cosmic landscape, nevertheless that life-permitting region will be unfathomably tiny compared to the entire landscape.\(^\text{18}\) This also shows that the physical universe itself is not unique. The physical universe does not have to be the way it is: it could be been otherwise functioning under different laws.\(^\text{19}\)

The chance hypothesis is a game of sheer numbers. The argument states that given enough space and time, a life-permitting region of the universe would appear. Given that region of space, intelligent life would evolve. McCloskey focuses his primary objection to this argument by adopting an evolutionary chance view. The Anthropic Principle often supports the chance hypothesis. The argument states that we ought not be surprised at observing the universe embryonic in its development that all its equations have not yet been stated, much less solved (Craig, *Reasonable Faith ed. 3*, 137).

\(^\text{17}\) “Cosmic landscape” means the range of possible universes given they be governed by the present laws of nature. Stephen Hawking, “Cosmology from the Top Down,” a paper presented at the Davis Cosmic Inflation Meeting, U. C. Davis, May 29, 2003.

\(^\text{18}\) Craig, *Reasonable Faith ed. 3*, 163. Craig shares an illustration to understand how small this region really is. If only one universe out of \(10^{120}\) has the life-permitting value of the cosmological constant, then, given \(10^{500}\) possible universes, the number of universes with the life-permitting value will be only \(10^{500} \div 10^{120} = 10^{380}\). To the novice this may sound as if most of the worlds are then life-permitting, when in fact \(10^{380}\) is an inconceivably small fraction of \(10^{500}\), so that almost all the possible universes will be life-prohibiting. To see the point, imagine that we have a million possible universes and the odds of a life-permitting universe are one out of a hundred. So the total number of life-permitting universes will be \(1,000,000 \div 100 = 10,000\). So the total number of life-permitting universes is \(10^{6} \div 10^{2} = 10^{4}\). One sees that \(10^{4}\) is a tiny fraction of \(10^{6}\), for only 10,000 out of the one million worlds are life-permitting, while a whopping 990,000 are life-prohibiting!

\(^\text{19}\) P. C. W. Davies, *The Mind of God* (New York: Simon & Schulster, 1992), 169. Davies means the laws of physics within the actual values of the constants, not confusing there being different values of the constants with there being different laws (noted by Craig in *Reasonable Faith ed. 3*, 163).
to be as it is and therefore no explanation of its fine-tuning need be sought. Barrow and Tippler’s version of the Anthropic Principle states,

The observed values of all physical and cosmological quantities are not equally probable, but they take on values restricted by the requirement that there exist site where carbon-based life can evolve and by the requirement that the universe be old enough for it to have done so.

An observer who has evolved within the universe should regard it as highly probable that he will find the constants and quantities of the universe fine-tuned for his existence; but he should not infer that it is therefore highly probable that such a fine-tuned universe exist.

Given the improbability in the spectrum of possibility between necessity and chance, the composition of the universe seems to be more intentional than not. All the propositions given by atheism and theism are possible. However, possibility does little justice for the teleological argument; the focus is on what is more probable. Design serves as the strongest explanation for the universe’s constants and quantities that permit intelligent life, which is far more probable than its denial. In conclusion to the teleological argument, McCloskey’s objections only serve as complements to the argument, not defeaters.

IV. The Problem of Evil and the Solution

The problem of evil is McCloskey’s most underlying objection to theism. He incorporates it into all of his arguments, tracing it back to the nature and being of God.

20 Craig, Reasonable Faith ed. 3, 165.


22 The Anthropic Principle does no service to increase the probable fine-tuned universes previously discussed. Craig, Reasonable Faith ed. 3, 165.
McCloskey has developed two objections stating that, A) An omnipotent, omnibenevolent God exists and B) The quantity and kinds of suffering in the world exist are either logically inconsistent or improbable with respect to each other.\textsuperscript{23} With respect to McCloskey’s argument, the two objections will be examined followed by a counter argument, the moral argument, to assert that no one can even claim the existence of evil without God.

A. The Logical, Probabilistic, and Evidential Problems of Evil

McCloskey argues that there can be no God because evil exists.\textsuperscript{24} No being who was perfect could have created a world in which there was suffering.\textsuperscript{25} The problem with McCloskey’s assertion is that he never shows the explicit contradiction between (A) and (B). The burden of proof lies with the objector and there is no proof, or case, that they are inconsistent.

From a more serious objection, he then turns to the probabilistic/evidential problems of evil. His argument may be summarized as:

1) If God exists, gratuitous evil does not exist.
2) Gratuitous evil exists.
3) Therefore, God does not exist.

The problem with this argument is the truth claim behind (2). Most people will recognize that apparent gratuitous evil exists, but (2) must assert gratuitous evil genuinely exists.\textsuperscript{26} There are

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{23} This summary is formulated in the words of Craig in “The Cambridge Companion to Atheism,” ed. M. Martin. Cambridge Companions to Philosophy. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 65-85.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} It should be noted that evil should be defined as anything that is not consistent with the perfected goodness of God and, thus, the absence of good.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} McCloskey, “On Being an Atheist,” 65.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
two reasons why the inference is weak. First, We are not in a good position to assess with
certainty the probability that God lacks morally sufficient reasons for permitting the suffering
in the world. As finite beings we are not capable of assessing reasons behind suffering. Hence,
we possess a cognitive limitation. Some suffering may seem to be pointless, but we are in no
position to make this assessment.

Second, Christian doctrine entails an expectation of evil. During the period of Freedom, or pre-fall, Adam was without sin. Adam freely chose to disobey God, and as a result inherited a
depraved mind since he then had the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3.23-24). Now that man
knows evil, sin has an allure that causes slavery to it (Jn. 8.34; Rom. 6.6-20). Might God have
very easily so have arranged the world and biased man to virtue that men always freely chose
what is right? Here McCloskey objects to God based on human freedom and God’s sovereign
decree to order such a world we find ourselves in. First, human freedom can be affirmed
experientially by the ability to change the priority of volitions. The following is a counter
argument for his probability objection:

27 Ibid.

28 This point may also be argued on the grounds of a moral Chaos Theory. Every action, or cause
and effect relationship, may have an effect that may not be known within one’s finite bounds. Secondly,
the causes for these effects may have purposes that may not be known within one’s finite bounds. The
littlest action may cause a purposeful, huge effect later in space and time. This would be inclusive of both
moral evil and natural evil. God may allow certain causes with generated effects outside one’s finitude,
while maintaining moral perfection.


30 There are plenty of arguments to affirm some type of human freedom but because McCloskey
does not argue against freedom I will not build a strong case on a minor point of agreement.
P1) There is a possible world in which all free creatures willingly and freely choose to do right.
P2) There is a possible world in which all free creatures willingly and freely choose to do wrong.
P3) Thus, it is possible that every world God could create containing free creatures would be a world with sin and evil.

God’s omnipotence does not include the ability to create a contradiction since it is the only impossibility. God cannot force a free agent to freely do anything. In summary, this argument demonstrates that sin is not necessary and given human freedom to be true, it is possible that every world in which God could actualize contains evil. With this possibility, it would then follow that the probability of there being evil in the actual world greatly increases.

Ironically, the problem of evil is not with God, the real problem is the problem of our evil. Evil comes in many levels like genocide, death, rape, lying, and even in thought. Is the atheist arguing for an elimination of all evil or just some evil? What level should God cease evil? Should He stop it at the death level of the lying level? If the argument is for some evil then this is a subjective preference that does no justice. If the argument is against all evils then that would mean the elimination of everything all together, even the objector. If that is true, we should be eliminated. In the end, the problem of evil is not how can God be justified before us, rather, how can we be justified before Him?
C. The Moral Argument

1) If God does not exist, objective moral values and duties do not exist.
2) Objective moral values and duties do exist.
3) Therefore, God exists.

Premise (1) is based on God being the foundation for what moral values and duties are to be grounded in.\(^\text{31}\) By objective it means that they are valid independently of our apprehension of them and that it has a foundation.\(^\text{32}\) The grounds cannot be a social contract or biologically constructed. The problem with a social contract is that morality is still subjective. There is a conceptual difference between something’s being good (or bad) and something’s being right (or wrong).\(^\text{33}\) With God as the foundation for objective morality there really is an objective distinction between good and evil and between right and wrong. On the biological level, philosopher of science Michael Ruse explains,

The position of the modern evolutionist…is that humans have an awareness of morality…because such awareness is of biological worth. Morality is a biological adaptation now less than are hands and feet and teeth…considered as a rationally justifiable set of claims about an objective something, ethics is illusory. I appreciate that when somebody says “Love they neighbor as thyself,” they think they are referring above and beyond themselves…Nevertheless…such reference is truly without foundation. Morality is just an aid to survival and reproduction…and any deeper meaning is illusory.\(^\text{34}\)

\(^{31}\) The advocate of objective morality cannot turn to Platonic thought, which would be unintelligible at this point. The Platonist argues that objective morals just exist. The thought is nearly incomprehensible. If these morals are objective they are necessary, otherwise being arbitrary and subjective. Absent of any being or situation, can justice and mercy just exist? Someone or something can be just and merciful, but without anything they cannot just exist and therefore Platonism does not solve the problem in grounding objective morality nor does it result in moral obligation.

\(^{32}\) McCloskey seems to affirm that something’s being right and wrong, good and evil are objective. He affirms that some things are just wrong. His problem is that he has nothing to ground them in.


The problem with a naturalistic, socio-biological, evolutionary view is that it does no justice to objective morality. If the film of evolutionary history were rewound and shot anew, very different creatures with a very different set of values might well have evolved.\(^{35}\)

Premise (2) is hardly ever contested. McCloskey is a staunch advocate of objective morality, and must be in order for his arguments to work since he bases each objection solely on the problem of evil. Premise (2) asserts that objective moral values and duties really do exist. The way moral theorists test competing ethical theories is by assessing how well they cohere with our moral experience.\(^{36}\) Actions like rape, torture, child abuse, and brutality are not just socially unacceptable behavior—they are absolutely wrong. If (~2) were true, then there would be no difference between torturing children for fun and wearing flip flops with a formal suit—it is merely socially unacceptable or biologically handicapped. Atheist naturalist Ruse confesses, “The man who says that it is morally acceptable to rape little children is just as mistaken as the man who says, 2+2=5.”\(^{37}\)

By affirming the need for having a foundation in morality to make it objective, (1), and affirming that moral values and duties really exist, (2), (3) logically follows. Interestingly, anyone who affirms evil actually affirms God. Without there to be a God to ground the objectivity of good and evil, we would not be able to even assert there being a problem of any kind of evil! Evil actually begs the question of there being a God. In turn, Christian theism has a better answer to the problem of evil by asserting that without God there can be no objective

\[^{35}\text{Craig, } \textit{Reasonable Faith ed. 3.} \text{ 175.}\]

\[^{36}\text{Ibid., 179.}\]

\[^{37}\text{Michael Ruse, Darwinism Defended (London: Addison-Wesley, 1982), 275.}\]
morality. It also has more explanatory scope and power for why it is we recognize the objectivity of morality and why we are obligated to follow it.

V. Conclusion

McCloskey offered many objections to Christian theism, none of which he offered a plausible solution to the proposed problems. His naturalistic position actually creates more problems than it attempts to solve. The cosmological evidence gives a strong argument for an uncaused first cause to the universe. The teleological argument from design deems the universe we live in to be more probable to be a product of design than not. McCloskey’s biggest objection, the problem of evil, actually serves as evidence for the existence of God based on the objectivity of morality. Thus, the Christian’s belief in the existence of God is the most rational philosophical position with the most explanatory scope and power of the universe and being of humanity.
VI. Bibliography


