

“Atheism”: A Retrospective

Michael Martin’s *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* has the explicitly stated aim of showing “that atheism is a rational position and that belief in God is not” (24, 460).¹ Furthermore, Martin tells us that he aims “to provide good reasons for being an atheist” (24), and to “defend” and “justify” atheism. However, Martin goes on to warn the reader that “no extended theory of rationality or justification is given” (25). And, in defence of this “general philosophical limitation”, he says that:

It seems to me that any attempt to justify [the few general comments that I make about rationality and justification] by subsuming them under a larger theory would be premature, given the controversial state of general epistemological theories. It is far better, in my view, to develop certain middle-level principles of justification that are in accord with our ordinary and scientific rational practice and to argue for atheism in terms of these than to justify atheism in terms of some larger and more controversial theory. (25-6)

While one *might* grant to Martin that it is acceptable to rest content with “certain middle-level principles of justification that are in accord with ordinary and scientific rational practice”, it would then be important to ask whether the principles of rationality, justification and argumentation that Martin adopts are actually in accord with “ordinary and scientific rational practice”. And, even if one were not to grant to Martin that it is acceptable to rest content with “certain middle-level principles of justification that are in accord with ordinary and scientific rational practice”, one would likely still wish to examine the assumptions about rationality, justification and argumentation that are at least implicit in Martin’s book.

Before we can turn to the task of trying to determine whether there are serious difficulties that arise here for Martin, we need to have a broad overview of the book before us. I shall present such an overview, and then return to an examination of the assumptions about rationality, justification and argumentation upon which Martin’s “defence” and “justification” of atheism appears to rest.

1

The structure of Martin’s book relies upon the distinction that he draws between *negative atheism* and *positive atheism*. This distinction depends, in turn, upon a distinction between claims of the form (1) *X does not believe that God exists*, and claims of the form (2) *X believes that God does not exist*. According to Martin, a *negative atheist* is someone who satisfies a claim of form (1) but who fails to satisfy a claim of form (2); and a *positive atheist* is someone who satisfies both a claim of form (1) and a claim of form (2).²

The first part of Martin’s book is intended to be a “defence” or “justification” of negative atheism. This “defence” or “justification” has three parts. First, there is a chapter devoted to showing that “a case can be made that religious language is unverifiable and hence

factually meaningless when it is used in a sophisticated and non-anthropomorphic way” (77). Second, there is a series of chapters devoted to showing that “both epistemic and beneficial arguments for the existence of God fail” (249). And, third, there is a chapter devoted to showing that (all) arguments, for the conclusion that belief in God need not be based on epistemic reasons, fail (277).

The second part of Martin’s book is intended to be a “defence” or “justification” of positive atheism. This “defence” or “justification” also has three parts. First, there is a chapter devoted to showing that “there are at least three inconsistencies in the concept of God” (286). Second, there is a chapter devoted to the “development and defence of ... atheistic teleological arguments” (317). And third, there is a series of chapters devoted to the defence of “two types of ... inductive or probabilistic arguments from evil for the non-existence of God” (335).

Martin’s own assessment of the way that the parts of his “defence” or “justification” of atheism fit together is as follows:

In brief, then, the conclusion of this book is this: If religious language is cognitively meaningless, not believing in God is justified. There is good reason to think it is meaningless. So not believing in God is justified. However, supposing it is not, then not believing in God is still justified and, in addition, so is disbelief in God. (455)

Taken at face value this self-assessment suggests that Martin’s preferred position is negative atheism: one ought not to believe in God, because the claim that God exists is cognitively meaningless. However, while Martin says here that there is good reason to think that the claim that God exists is meaningless, he says elsewhere that there is only “*prima facie* justification” (77) for the contention that the claim that God exists is “factually meaningless”. Because a “commonly accepted and fully developed theory of meaning” has not yet been developed—and because the “partial theory and partial justification” that has hitherto been devised might be undermined—it is wise for negative atheists who suppose that the claim that God exists is meaningless to have a “fall-back position”.³

There might be reason to worry about the coherence of the overall position—central contention plus fallback position—that Martin here outlines. Consider the claim expressed by the sentence “the claim that God exists is meaningless”. It seems that Martin is committed to the assertion that this sentence expresses a meaningful claim; it’s the kind of thing that he says repeatedly throughout his book. But, if that’s right, then Martin is committed either to saying that the statement expressed by this sentence is analytic, or to saying that the statement expressed by this sentence is empirically verifiable (or to saying that he’s unable to tell whether the statement expressed by this sentence is analytic rather than empirically verifiable). *Prima facie*, at least, it doesn’t seem plausible for Martin to say that the statement expressed by the sentence is analytic; but, equally, it doesn’t seem *prima facie* plausible for Martin to say that the statement expressed by the sentence is empirically verifiable. (And, if there are cases in which Martin is unable to tell whether statements expressed by sentences are analytic rather

than empirically verifiable, then we've got at least *prima facie* reason for doubting that Martin is right to claim that statements divide *exhaustively* and *without overlap* into those that are empirically verifiable and those that are either analytic or self-contradictory.)⁴

Perhaps there are ways in which Martin can overcome the difficulties discussed in the previous paragraph (as well as other difficulties for his defence of the meaninglessness of religious talk that I have not begun to raise here). However, rather than worry about these issues further, I propose to set Martin's discussion of the meaningfulness of religious language to one side, and to focus instead on the case that he makes for negative atheism and positive atheism on the assumption that religious language is, indeed, meaningful. Since the bulk of the book—all but one chapter—is concerned with the making of this case, it seems not unreasonable to proceed in this way.

2

Martin's case for negative atheism is based largely upon his assessment of epistemic and beneficial arguments for the existence of God. We begin by outlining the way in which this part of Martin's case for negative atheism is constructed.

Martin begins with a discussion of ontological arguments. In particular, he considers arguments from Anselm, Malcolm, Hartshorne, Kordig and Plantinga. At the outset of his discussion of ontological arguments, Martin says:

It is impossible to discuss all of the variants of the arguments here. But a refutation of the original version and four contemporary versions should provide good grounds for supposing that all versions are unsound. (79)

While Martin is right to suggest that there are *many* different ontological arguments, it is not clear that he is right to say that a "refutation" of five of these arguments provides good grounds for supposing that all ontological arguments are unsound. It seems conceivable that, for example, while the five arguments that Martin discusses are, indeed, unsound, Gödel's ontological argument is nonetheless a successful proof of the existence of God. Indeed, since it takes only *one* successful proof to make a case, it seems clearly conceivable that the vast majority of ontological arguments are unsound, even though there is an ontological argument—perhaps hitherto undiscovered—that succeeds in proving that God exists.

Martin next moves to a discussion of cosmological arguments. In particular, he considers arguments from Aquinas (the second and third ways), Craig (*kalām* cosmological arguments), Reichenbach (argument from contingency) and Swinburne (inductive cosmological argument). At the outset of his discussion of cosmological arguments, Martin says:

It is impossible here to consider all versions of the cosmological argument. ... The refutation of this representative sample of formulations of the argument should provide good grounds for thinking that all versions of the argument fail. (96)

While, again, Martin is right to suggest that there are *many* different cosmological arguments, it is not clear that he is right to say that a “refutation” of a representative sample of these arguments provides good grounds for supposing that all cosmological arguments fail. It seems conceivable that, even though the arguments that Martin examines are, indeed, representative of the cosmological arguments that had been put forward at the time of composition of *Atheism*, the arguments recently put forward by Koons, or by Gale and Pruss, are successful proofs of the existence of God. Indeed, since it takes only *one* successful proof to make a case, it seems clearly conceivable that, while there is a successful—though perhaps hitherto undiscovered—cosmological argument, it is highly likely that no *small* representative sample of *extant* cosmological arguments will contain a successful argument among its number.⁵

Third, Martin discusses teleological arguments. In particular, he considers arguments from Tennant, Schlesinger, Swinburne and Taylor. At the end of his discussion of teleological arguments, Martin says:

We have examined four of the strongest recent teleological arguments for the existence of God. None of them even comes close to showing that God exists. This does not mean, of course, that no existing arguments are successful, or that no future arguments will be. However, since the arguments discussed here do represent some of the best efforts of the human mind to argue teleologically for the existence of God, it seems unlikely that other arguments of this type can succeed. Further, given the long record of failures of this type of argument, it is a reasonable inductive inference to conclude that future attempts will also fail. (153)

While, yet again, Martin is right to suggest that there are *many* different teleological arguments, it is not clear that his discussion of Tennant, Schlesinger, Swinburne and Taylor gives us good reason to think that the teleological arguments of Behe, Dembski and Collins all fail. While—from our vantage point—we *might* grant that the arguments of Tennant, Schlesinger, Swinburne and Taylor were the best teleological arguments going about at the time of the composition of *Atheism*, it seems most unlikely that we should allow that the arguments of Tennant, Schlesinger, Swinburne and Taylor are the best teleological arguments that are now going about. Moreover, it also seems most unlikely that we should allow that the criticisms that Martin makes of the teleological arguments of Tennant, Schlesinger, Swinburne and Taylor provide us with good, *direct* reasons for thinking that the teleological arguments defended by Behe, Dembski and Collins all fail. Indeed, from our vantage point, it seems that the *inductive* argument that Martin makes is rather shaky; if future teleological arguments appeal to different *kinds* of considerations from those to which current teleological arguments appeal, why should we be confident that examination of considerations that bear on the assessment of currently available arguments has *any* implications for the likely success of those future arguments?

The remainder of Martin’s assessment of epistemic and beneficial arguments for the existence of God consists, principally, of an examination of Swinburne’s argument from religious experience, Swinburne’s argument from miracles, a swag of “minor evidential”

arguments—arguments from common consent, moral arguments, arguments from reward, arguments from justice, arguments from scripture, arguments from consciousness, arguments from providence, arguments from cumulative evidence—and the “beneficial” arguments of Pascal and James⁶. In all of these cases, too, Martin draws an inference from the failure of the specific arguments that he examines to the conclusion that there are no successful arguments of the kinds to which those examined arguments belong. And in all of these cases, there are at least *prima facie* reasons for wondering whether the inference in question is at all strong.

In closing this section, it is perhaps worth pointing out that it is not mere carping to worry about the different ways in which Martin tries to make an inference from the results of his assessment of some arguments of a certain kind to the likely results of assessment of other arguments of that kind: there are genuine philosophical questions that arise here. I agree with Martin’s *judgments* about the likely results of assessments of hitherto unexamined arguments for the existence of God; but that’s not because I think that there is a good *inference* from the results of assessments of arguments examined thus far to the likely results of assessments of hitherto unexamined arguments. Rather, my judgments about the likely results of assessments of hitherto unexamined arguments for the existence of God are grounded in my view of the truth-status of the claim that God exists: given that there is no God, there can be no successful arguments for the existence of God. When I examine arguments for the existence of God, my belief that there is no God grounds an *expectation* that I shall find what I take to be deficiencies in those arguments: failures of premises to adequately support conclusions; premises that I take myself not to have good reason to accept; and so forth. While it is plainly doxastically possible that that expectation be disappointed, I have not yet encountered an argument in which that expectation has been disappointed: every argument for the existence of God that I have examined has suffered from what I take to be at least one crippling deficiency: failure of premises to adequately support conclusions; premises that I take myself not to have good reason to accept; and so forth. Even if we allow that the results of my examination of arguments for the existence of God makes *some* contribution to my belief that there is no God, we certainly should not suppose that my belief that there is no God is primarily grounded in the results of that examination of *arguments*: rather, my belief that there is no God is primarily grounded in the results of an examination—in the light of everything else that I believe—of the relevant *evidence* (where there is plainly no reason at all to suppose that all of that relevant evidence has been presented to me in argumentative form).

3

Even if we set aside the preceding concerns that we have raised about the inference, from the claim that some particular epistemic and beneficial arguments for the existence of God fail, to the claim that there are no good epistemic or beneficial arguments for the existence of God, there are other questions that one might raise about the general shape of the major plank in Martin’s “defence” of negative atheism. Given that Martin tells us that his overall aim is to show that “atheism is a rational position and that belief in God is not”, it seems reasonable to suppose that, in the section on negative atheism, he aims to

establish that negative atheism is a rational position (and, perhaps, to go part way towards establishing that belief in God is not a rational position). Moreover, we may take it that Martin also aims, in this section, to show that there are good reasons for being a negative atheist, and that negative atheism admits of both “justification” and “defence”. But how, exactly, is all of this supposed to be achieved by the attack on epistemic and beneficial arguments for the existence of God?

Of course, much turns on Martin’s assumptions about what it takes for an argument to be a *good* or *successful* argument for a given conclusion, his assumptions about what it takes for a position to be *rational*, and his assumptions about the connections that obtain between rationality and the construction of good or successful arguments. A natural starting point, perhaps, is the thought that one’s position is *not* rational if it is the case that one is presented with an argument that ought to persuade one to revise one’s views and yet one does not revise one’s views; that is, said differently, one’s position is rational only if it is not the case that one has been presented with an argument that ought to persuade one to revise one’s views and yet one has not revised one’s views.⁷ Given this—apparently uncontroversial—starting point, it seems that we can conclude that one *has a (rational) defence* against an argument provided that it is not the case that one ought to revise one’s views—when one is presented with that argument—solely in virtue of the nature and content of that argument. Moreover—though this is perhaps slightly more controversial—it seems reasonable to hold that whether one ought to revise one’s views in the light of the nature and content of a presented argument depends upon the views that one already holds: if an argument establishes that, by one’s own lights, there is a logical—or probabilistic, or explanatory—inconsistency in one’s views, then clearly that argument establishes that one ought to revise one’s view; but if, for example, an argument has premises that one rejects, then *that* argument cannot possibly establish—solely in virtue of *its* nature and content—that one ought to revise one’s view.

If we adopt something like the above understanding of what it is for one to be rational in one’s responses to arguments, then we have one way of understanding what it is for a negative atheist to have rational defences against theistic arguments: a negative atheist is justified in rejecting arguments for the existence of God if it is the case that none of those arguments—in themselves, in virtue of their nature and content—give the negative atheist reason to take on the belief that God exists.

One way of reading Martin’s assessment of epistemic and beneficial arguments for the existence of God is as an exhibition of his *defences* against arguments for the existence of God in something like the above sense. Setting aside cases in which the premises of arguments fail to provide—logical, probabilistic or evidential—support for, or transmission of warrant to, their conclusions, disputes about the strength of arguments comes down to disputes about premises. On the above account, where there is a dispute about the premises of an argument, mere belief (or assignment of given probability) is sufficient for rational defence *in the case of the argument in question*. Of course, the invocation of this kind of defence in the case of a given argument may prompt the launching of a *new* argument; but then that new argument is to be properly assessed in exactly the same terms as the initial argument was assessed. In his assessment of

epistemic and beneficial arguments for the existence of God, I take it that Martin does succeed in exhibiting *defences* against those arguments in the above sense. Where there is nothing else (demonstrably) wrong with the epistemic and beneficial arguments that Martin examines, it turns out that, in every case, those arguments have premises that Martin fails to believe. In providing these kinds of defences against epistemic and beneficial arguments for the existence of God, Martin succeeds in establishing one sense in which negative atheism is a rational position.⁸

Even if it is allowed that we can read into Martin's assessment of epistemic and beneficial arguments for the existence of God a *defence* against arguments for the existence of God in the sense outlined in the previous paragraph, it is clear that Martin's discussion of epistemic and beneficial arguments for the existence of God aims for more than mere defence in that sense. In particular, I think that it is pretty clear that Martin supposes that his assessment of epistemic and beneficial arguments for the existence of God tells us something (negative) about the rationality of those who do believe that God exists, namely, that the belief that God exists does not have a rational foundation or rational grounding. Martin writes:

"There is a presumption that belief in God should be based on epistemic reasons and a presumption that beneficial reasons for believing in God should have only a supplementary role. Assuming that God talk is meaningful, the first order of business in defending negative atheism is to undermine the epistemic reasons that are offered by theists. But suppose that the conditions are met for using beneficial reasons. The second order of business in defending negative atheism would be to undermine these reasons. ... In chapters three through five, I show that the classical traditional arguments for the existence of God fail to provide good epistemic reasons for belief. In chapters six through eight, I show that other arguments also fail to provide such reasons. In chapter nine, I consider some classical beneficial arguments for the existence of God and argue that they do not in general provide good reason for belief in those cases where I have allowed that their use is normally appropriate. ... Although a conclusive case cannot be made for negative atheism, if ... all the available reasons for believing in an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing being are inadequate, negative atheism in the narrow sense will be justified as much as it can be in relation to our present knowledge. (38-9)

I take it that one idea that is implicit in these remarks—and other remarks scattered throughout Martin's book—is that, if those who believe that God exists are rational in so believing, then they have available to them good or successful arguments for the conclusion that God exists. Insofar as we find ourselves inclined to judge that the *arguments* that have been offered on behalf of the claim that God exists are poor or unsuccessful, we have reason to judge that it is not *rational* to believe that God exists. Moreover, and more generally, it seems to me that something like the following general theoretical claim is implicit in remarks that are scattered throughout Martin's book: for any proposition that *p*—or, at any rate for any proposition that *p* that belongs to an appropriately wide class of propositions—one's belief that *p* is rational only if one has a good or successful argument for the conclusion that *p*. Given that there are no good or

successful arguments for the conclusion that God exists, we can use this general claim to derive the conclusion that no one has a rational belief in the claim that God exists.

Whether it is reasonable to hold that, for a very broad range of propositions, one's belief that *p* is rational only if one has a good or successful argument for the conclusion that *p*, may depend upon what one takes to be the conditions that must be satisfied by a good or successful argument for a given conclusion. If, for example, we were to say that one has a good or successful argument for the conclusion that *p* just in case there are other propositions that one accepts that provide sufficiently strong support for the claim that *p*, then it seems that the general principle is relatively uncontroversial; it amounts to little more than the insistence that rational beliefs belong to coherent—mutually supporting—systems of beliefs. However, were we to say instead that, if there could be someone—anyone—who has a defence against an argument then that argument is neither good nor successful, then the general principle would be very controversial indeed; for it would have the consequence that, for a very broad range of propositions, one's belief that *p* is rational only if there can be no coherent—mutually supporting—system of beliefs that includes the belief that not *p*. And, of course, there are other views about the conditions that must be satisfied by good or successful arguments that will yield necessary conditions on rational belief that lie somewhere between the relatively uncontroversial and the highly controversial extremes just mentioned.

In order to argue from the provision of a defence against epistemic and beneficial arguments for the existence of God to the conclusion that there can be no rational belief in the existence of God, one needs something like the strong principle that, for a very broad range of propositions, one's belief that *p* is rational only if there can be no coherent—mutually supporting—system of beliefs that includes the belief that not *p*. Since there is some suggestion that Martin does want to argue from the provision of a defence against epistemic and beneficial arguments for the existence of God to the conclusion that there can be no rational belief in the existence of God, I think that there is some reason to attribute to Martin at least tacit acceptance of the strong principle that, for a very broad range of propositions, one's belief that *p* is rational only if there can be no coherent—mutually supporting—system of beliefs that includes the belief that not *p*. Moreover, since I'm not inclined to accept the principle that, for a very broad range of propositions, one's belief that *p* is rational only if there can be no coherent—mutually supporting—system of beliefs that includes the belief that not *p*, I'm inclined to think that, in itself, Martin's assessment of epistemic and beneficial arguments for the existence of God does little to impugn the suggestion that there can be reasonable belief in the existence of God, and hence little towards establishing that negative atheism is rationally required.

In closing this section, it is perhaps worth noting that there is, of course, a well-recognised ambiguity in talk about whether it is rational to hold certain kinds of beliefs. On the one hand, there is the question whether it is rationally *permissible* to believe that *p* (given that one is suitably well-informed, reflective, intelligent, and the like); on the other hand, there is the question whether there is a rational *requirement* to believe that *p* (again, given that one is suitably well-informed, reflective, intelligent, and the like). When

Martin says that the aim of his book is to show that atheism is a rational position and that belief in God is not, he surely means that the aim of the book is to show that atheism is rationally required and that belief in god is not rationally permissible (for those who are suitably well-informed, reflective, intelligent, and the like). But it seems to me that—on any plausible account of the connection between reason and argument—criticism of epistemic and beneficial arguments for the existence of God *at most* contributes to the aim of showing that atheism is rationally permissible and that belief in God is not rationally required.

4

The remainder of Martin's case for negative atheism—i.e. apart from his assessment of epistemic and beneficial arguments for the existence of God—is based upon his examination of arguments for the conclusion that belief in God need not be based on epistemic or beneficial reasons:

Some religious thinkers have maintained that religious belief should be based on faith and that, under certain circumstances, faith is completely rational; some that religious faith should not be rational and that the use of evidence and arguments to support faith is a perversion of it; some that the religious way of life is governed by its own rules and logic and that, in the context of this way of life, religious faith is rational; and some that religious beliefs are basic beliefs, hence by definition do not rest on evidence or argument. We shall see that all of these arguments fail. (249) ... Although not all theories of faith have been examined here, the ones that were are representative enough to give us confidence that all such arguments will fail. (277)

I'm happy enough to join Martin in rejecting the claim that religious belief can be based solely on faith, i.e. that religious belief need have no interplay with epistemic and beneficial reasons; and I'm happy enough to join Martin in rejecting the claim that perfectly proper religious belief need not be rational; and I'm happy enough to join Martin in rejecting the claim that it is a perversion of religious belief to put religious beliefs to the tests of epistemic and beneficial reason; and I'm happy enough to join Martin in rejecting the claim that the religious way of life is governed by its own logic and its own set of epistemic and beneficial rules; and I'm happy enough to join Martin in rejecting the claim that religious beliefs are basic beliefs that neither have nor stand in need of support from epistemic and beneficial reasons. While I might not agree with *all* of the judgments of this kind that Martin makes in this chapter, I certainly think that the claims that I have just mentioned are *false*. Moreover, I see no reason to doubt that Martin has perfectly adequate *defences* against arguments that have been—or that might be—advanced on behalf of these kinds of claims. But, of course, to say this much is to leave lots of interesting questions unanswered, and lots of interesting issues unexplored.

First, it is interesting that Martin here explicitly *equates* the maintenance of certain claims or theories about faith and reason with the production of arguments for those claims and theories. There are many different things that philosophers may be doing when they *maintain* certain claims or theories—asserting those claims or theories, or insisting upon

those claims or theories, or the like—that should be clearly distinguished from *arguing* for those claims or theories. In particular, if we suppose that the standards for successful philosophical argumentation are very demanding, then it seems quite implausible to suppose that all elaborations or explorations, of the suggestion that belief in God need not be based on epistemic or beneficial reasons, that have been offered by philosophers should be construed as *arguments* on behalf of that conclusion.

Second, it seems worth noting that, even if one accepted the strong claim that one is only rationally entitled to the belief that *p* if one has an irrefutable argument for the conclusion that *p*, one should not be misled into attaching too much significance to the failure of *particular* arguments that have been advanced on behalf of a claim in which one has some interest. After all, it is clearly one question whether there is an irrefutable argument for a claim or theory, and a quite different question whether a particular argumentative case for that claim or theory is successful. Indeed, given that one does accept the strong claim that one is only rationally entitled to the belief that *p* if one has an irrefutable argument for the conclusion that *p*, it seems plausible that one will be inclined to make inferences, from the evident rational entitlement that one has to certain beliefs, to the conclusion that one possesses irrefutable arguments for those beliefs, even if one is not currently able to provide precise formulations of those arguments!

Third, it is worth noting that the overall case that Martin makes in this chapter of his book once again takes the form of a simple inductive inference from a “representative” sample of “theories of faith”. As in the cases that I discussed a couple of sections back, there are good reasons here for being sceptical about the strength of a simple inductive argument of this kind. I’m happy to *agree* with Martin that rational belief in God requires some serious involvement with good epistemic reasons; but the basis for this agreement on my part lies in my endorsement of (doubtless controversial) views about the nature of beliefs, reasons, and arguments. Moreover, as I noted above, I am also happy to agree with Martin that arguments, for the conclusion that belief in God need not be based on epistemic or beneficial reasons, are all flawed; but my view that all such arguments are flawed fits together with the views that I hold about God, belief, reasons, arguments, and so forth. There is no good independent route into this systematic collection of beliefs that draws upon nothing more than a simple inductive inference from a “representative” sample of “theories of faith”.

In closing this section, perhaps I might be excused for emphasising again that there is a sense in which I wish to endorse “the case for negative atheism” that Martin makes in the first part of his book. I agree with Martin that there are no persuasive arguments for theism; there is nothing that compels reasonable, reflective, intelligent, well-informed people to believe that God exists. Moreover, the kinds of considerations to which Martin adverts in his discussion in this part of the book are just the kinds of considerations to which I would advert in trying to make the case that the arguments that are examined therein are unsuccessful. However, I certainly want to resist the further suggestion that the fact that there are no persuasive arguments for theism—no arguments that, on pain of conviction of some kind of failure of rationality, ought to persuade someone like Martin to accept the claim that God exists—somehow casts doubt upon the rationality of those

who do accept the claim that God exists. To the extent that Martin wishes to make the latter kind of claim, it seems to me that his “case for negative atheism” over-reaches what it is possible for a “case for negative atheism” to achieve.

5

Martin begins his discussion of “the case for positive atheism”—i.e. his case for the claim that it is irrational to believe that God exists—with a discussion of the ways in which “the case for negative atheism”—i.e. his case for the claim that it is rational to refrain from believing that God exists—contributes to “the case for positive atheism”. In particular, Martin suggests that there are three different ways in which “the case for negative atheism” contributes to “the case for positive atheism”.

First, Martin claims that a principle that is “justified in terms of our ordinary and scientific practice ... combined with our conclusions in Part 1 supplies us with a good reason for positive atheism—that is, with grounds for disbelief in God” (283-4). This principle—which Martin adapts from a related principle defended by Michael Scriven—runs as follows:

A person is justified in believing that X does not exist if (1) all the available evidence used to support the view that X exists is shown to be inadequate; and (2) X is the sort of entity that, if X exists, then there is a presumption that [there] would be evidence adequate to support the view that X exists; and (3) this presumption has not been defeated although serious efforts have been made to do so; and (4) the area where evidence would appear, if there were any, has been comprehensively examined; and (5) there are no acceptable beneficial reasons to believe that X exists. (283)

Perhaps I might be prepared to accept that a person is justified in believing that X does not exist if (1) that person reasonably believes that the weight of available evidence does not support the claim that X exists; and (2) that person reasonably believes that X is the sort of entity for which there is a presumption that, if it were to exist, then the weight of available evidence would support the claim that X exists; and (3) that person reasonably believes that there is nothing that defeats this presumption; and (4) that person reasonably believes that areas where evidence might be expected to appear have been comprehensively examined; and (5) that person reasonably believes that there are no acceptable beneficial reasons to believe that X exists. However, an acceptable version of the principle that runs along these kinds of lines is plainly insufficient to support the conclusion that it is irrational to believe that God exists. And, on the other hand, the appeal to the principle that Martin actually endorses seems to me to involve the same controversial views concerning relations between reason, evidence and argument that I discussed in Section 3 above. That the extant positive arguments for the claim that God exists are incapable of reasonably persuading reasonable non-believers to accept the conclusion that God exists is, it seems to me, insufficient to establish that reasonable believers cannot reasonably believe that the weight of available evidence does support the claim that God exists. A reasonable believer *might* agree that all the available evidence used to support the view that God exists has been shown to be inadequate to the task of

compelling rational assent to the claim that God exists; but it hardly follows from this that such a reasonable believer must then agree that all the available evidence used to support the view that God exists has been shown to be inadequate to the task of providing the requisite rational support in the case of those who believe that God exists. (It is also controversial whether God is the sort of entity for which there is a presumption that, if it were to exist, then the weight of available evidence would support the claim that it exists. At the very least, we need to be given more information about the nature of “available evidence” before we can make a proper assessment of this claim.)

Second, Martin gives the following argument:

The arguments presented in Chapters 13 to 18 are basically *a posteriori* and, like all such arguments, are non-demonstrative in that they show on the basis of certain evidence that belief in God is improbable. Unless the arguments given for believing in God are refuted, the ones for disbelief may not outweigh those for belief. Furthermore, if we refute all the arguments for the existence of God, the positive case against God does not have to be as strong as it would otherwise. Refuting the arguments for God will show that there is no powerful case for theism that atheists need to overcome. ... Now, in Part 1, we saw that the case for belief in God based on the arguments that are usually given is not strong; indeed, these arguments taken by themselves are not strong enough to persuade a rational person to believe in God. In order now to establish positive atheism, it should not be necessary for us to produce as strong an *a posteriori* argument to make our case as it would be otherwise. In fact, however, *a posteriori* argument can be made that are more than strong enough to establish positive atheism. (284)

There are various comments that one might wish to make about this argument; but, here, I shall just focus on considerations concerning what is often called “the total evidence requirement”. In this passage, Martin seems to be relying upon a principle of aggregation for “non-demonstrative” arguments for a given conclusion: in order to assess the strength of the case for the claim that God exists, we play off the arguments for the conclusion that God exists “on the basis of certain evidence” against the arguments for the conclusion that God does not exist “on the basis of certain evidence”. Moreover, he seems to be suggesting that the arguments on one side—the arguments for the conclusion that God exists—can be “refuted” without giving any consideration to the arguments on the other side. However, while it may be true that one can divide the total relevant evidence into several separate sub-bodies of evidence, the primary question of interest concerns the probability that is assigned to the claim that God exists on the total available evidence. When we play off the arguments for the conclusion that God exists “on the basis of certain evidence” against the arguments for the conclusion that God does not exist “on the basis of certain evidence”, we obtain a result to which it is worth paying attention *only if* the sum of the “certain evidence” that forms the basis of these arguments is our total available evidence. Moreover, in order to obtain a result, concerning the rationality of those who believe that God exists, to which it is worth paying attention, we also need to find some way of taking into account the range of reasonable prior probabilities that can be attributed to the proposition that God exists. Since Martin

provides no reason for thinking that the “certain evidences” that are discussed in the various parts of his book sum to the total relevant evidence, and since Martin provides us with no framework for assessing the range of reasonable prior probabilities that can be attributed to the proposition that God exists, we have good reason for being sceptical about the suggestion that “the case for negative atheism” contributes to “the case for positive atheism” in the manner currently under consideration.

Third, Martin notes that, although he has provided good *a priori* arguments in Part II of his book,

I must be cautious. My *a priori* arguments might be refuted, and if they are, I have the *a posteriori* arguments to rely on. And, as we have seen, the *a posteriori* arguments for the non-existence of God presume that there are no strong *a priori* or *a posteriori* arguments for the existence of God. Thus, my work in Part I provides an essential part of the alternative *a posteriori* refutation of the *a priori* refutations attempted in Part II (285).

I think that it is quite hard to understand the claim that the *a posteriori* arguments for the non-existence of God presume that there are no strong ... *a posteriori* arguments for the existence of God. Given that—as we have already seen—Martin supposes that the *a posteriori* arguments are constructed “on the basis of certain evidence”, it seems that *a posteriori* arguments that appeal to other evidence simply have no bearing on the argument in question. Of course, the existence of other evidence is important for the question of the assessment of the conclusion of the argument in the light of the total evidence; but, at least in my view, this point simply serves to diminish interest in *a posteriori* arguments that appeal to anything other than total relevant evidence. (Naturally, I do agree with Martin that proponents of *a posteriori* arguments for the non-existence of God typically do presume that there are no successful *a priori* arguments for the existence of God: if there were a successful ontological argument, then empirical evidence would simply be beside the point.) Once again, I conclude that Martin has not provided us with compelling reason to think that “the case for negative atheism” makes a significant contribution to “the case for positive atheism”.

6

In Chapter 12—“Divine Attributes and Incoherence”—Martin claims to show that “there are at least three inconsistencies in the concept of God: one connected with God’s omniscience, another with His freedom, and still another with his omnipotence” (286).⁹ However, he immediately goes on to note that:

The present attempt to show that the concept of God is inconsistent ... requires analyses of such attributes of God as omniscience, omnipotence, moral perfection, and freedom. Since there are different accounts of these concepts and little agreement even among theists, they cannot all be considered here. However, I examine some of the most sophisticated accounts and where necessary supply my own. Of course, theists can challenge this project by rejecting the analyses that I adopt. If they do,

however, the onus is clearly on them to supply ones that do not have similar problems. As I proceed I sometimes point out strategies for avoiding my conclusions. But, as I also argue, such avoidance comes at a price. (286)¹⁰

I agree with Martin that there are serious difficulties that confront the task of arriving at acceptable and agreed analyses of the various traditional divine attributes: omniscience, omnipotent, moral perfection, divine freedom, etc. There are extensive literatures that are concerned with the analysis of each of these traditional divine attributes; in each of these literatures, there is no agreed analysis that has been shown to be free from difficulty. In particular, all extant analyses are vague, or circular, or only dubiously intelligible, or ill-formed, or beset by technical problems, or subject to clear counterexamples, and so forth.

However, I do not agree with Martin that there is an onus on theists to supply acceptable and agreed analyses of these traditional divine attributes, on pain of conviction of irrationality if they otherwise persist in their theistic beliefs. For, of course, what goes for the project of analysing the traditional divine attributes goes for the project of analysing folk concepts more generally. It is a truism of the extensive literatures on knowledge, causation, personal identity, works of art, and possible worlds, to take just a few examples amongst many, that there are also no acceptable and agreed analyses of any of these things. But, despite the fact that there are no acceptable and agreed analyses of these things, we do not typically suppose that the rationality of those who have commerce with these concepts is somehow called into question thereby. Perhaps it might be conceded that there is some kind of onus upon us to seek for acceptable and agreed analyses of knowledge and causation; but it would be absurd to insist that, as matters now stand, those who makes positive claims about, say, knowledge or causation are shown to be irrational by the failure of attempts to this point to find such acceptable and agreed analyses.

Doubtless some non-theists will wish to reply that there is something especially problematic about the traditional divine attributes: while we can be confident that there is sense to be made of folk concepts that we employ in our regular interactions with the world, we have no similar grounds for confidence that there is sense to be made of the traditional divine attributes. Without supposing that this is a matter that can be settled briefly, it seems to me that theists do have at least one pretty immediate response to this suggestion. Suppose that it is granted that it is intelligible to suppose that the universe was created by a very good, very powerful and very intelligent agent. Then, it seems that we can make sense of the suggestion that the universe was created by an agent that is as good as it can be (consistent with its other attributes), as powerful as it can be (consistent with its other attributes), as knowledgeable as it can be (consistent with its other attributes) and as free as it can be (consistent with its other attributes). Given that this much makes sense, we can then introduce the expressions “omniscience”, “omnipotence”, “moral perfection” and “divine freedom” as labels for the knowledge, power, goodness and freedom of this being: omniscience is God’s knowledge; omnipotence is God’s power; moral perfection is God’s goodness; and divine freedom is God’s freedom. At the very least, it seems to me that it remains to be shown that there is an inconsistency that

arises in the understanding of one or more of the traditional divine attributes on this approach.

Towards the end of the chapter, Martin takes up the question of the difficulties that confront any theist who accepts the challenge of meeting the onus of supplying acceptable analyses of the traditional divine attributes. In particular, Martin notes there: (1) that it is difficult to find a sentence which entails that God exists that would be more clearly consistent to critics that the claim that God exists; and (2) that, because there is no strong inductive reason to believe that God exists, it is hard to see how there could be an indirect inductive proof of the consistency of the claim that God exists. (315) While I agree with Martin that it might be very hard for theists to find arguments that will persuade those who are convinced that there is an inconsistency in the traditional conception of God to change their minds about this matter, I do not think that we can draw any interesting conclusions about the rationality of theists from this observation. I'm inclined to think that it is hardly any less plausible to suppose that it is very hard for non-sceptics to find arguments that will persuade those who are convinced that there is an inconsistency in the traditional conception of an existent external world to change their minds on this matter; but I certainly wouldn't want to infer from this result that there is some failure of rationality in those who do believe in the existence of an external world.

Of course, nothing that I have said in this section is inconsistent with the claim that Martin has telling criticisms to make of extant analyses of omniscience, omnipotence, moral perfection and divine freedom. Indeed, I would insist that Martin has some excellent critical points to make against the analyses that he discusses. But it is beyond the compass of the present investigation to try to pursue those matters here.

7

In Chapter 13—"Atheistic Teleological Arguments"—Martin argues that "Hume's [teleological] arguments, if properly understood, can be used to support positive atheism in the narrow sense. In other words, they can be used to support disbelief in the existence of a theistic God" (317). The "general form of Hume's argument" looks something like this (I have amended Martin's formulation to repair some minor deficiencies):

1. In terms of our experience, created entities of kind K that have been examined are always (or almost always, or usually) created by a being (or beings) with property P.
2. If the universe is a created entity, it is of kind K.
3. (Therefore) If the universe is a created entity, then, probably, the universe was created by a being with property P.
4. If the theistic God exists, then the universe was not created by a being with property P.
5. (Therefore) If the universe is a created entity, then, probably, the theistic God does not exist.
6. If the universe is not a created entity, then the theistic God does not exist.
7. (Therefore) Probably, the theistic God does not exist.

By replacing the expressions “created entities of kind K that have been examined” and “created by a being (or beings) with property P” with suitable specifications, we obtain particular versions of this argument. Thus, for example, by substituting in the expressions “created entities of the kinds that we have so far examined” and “created by one or more beings with bodies”, we obtain “the argument from embodiedness”; and by substituting in the expressions “large and complex created entities of the kinds that we have so far examined” and “created by a group of beings working together”, we obtain “the argument from multiple creators”; and so forth.

About “the argument from embodiedness”, Martin says: “Since the argument from embodiedness has the form of a strong inductive argument, the premises are well-supported, and objections to it can be met, we conclude that it is a strong argument for the non-existence of God” (324). About “the argument from multiple creators”, Martin says: “We must conclude, then, that there is strong inductive reason to suppose that if the universe was created, it was created by multiple beings and, consequently, that the theistic God does not exist” (326). And Martin has similar claims to make about “the argument from apparent fallibility (of creators)” (328), “the argument from finiteness (of creators)” (329), “the argument from pre-existing materials (used by creators)” (330), and a slightly different form of argument for the conclusion that the universe is not a created object (333).

I see no reason for thinking that theists ought to find instances of the general form of Hume’s argument persuasive, nor any reason for thinking that instances of this argument form make a contribution to “the case for positive atheism”, i.e. to the case for the claim that it is irrational to believe that God exists. Consider, for example, the following argument:

1. In terms of our experience, paintings are almost always produced by artists who lack Da Vinci’s genius.
2. The *Mona Lisa* is a painting.
3. (Therefore) Probably, the *Mona Lisa* was produced by an artist who lacks Da Vinci’s genius.

Since the premises of this argument are well-supported, and since objections to these premises can plainly be met, it seems that, if we agree with Martin’s implicit claim that this argument has the form of a strong inductive argument, we shall be led to the conclusion that this is a strong argument for the conclusion that the *Mona Lisa* was not painted by Da Vinci. (Here, we rely on the—surely incontestable—further assumption that Da Vinci is not an artist who lacks Da Vinci’s genius.) Perhaps we can live with that conclusion—depending upon what we take to be the requirements that must be satisfied by a *strong* argument; but surely we should not go on to suppose that this argument actually makes a significant contribution to the case for the claim that it is irrational to believe that the *Mona Lisa* was painted by Da Vinci.

Perhaps Martin might think to object that, in this case, the argument is not strong, because we have independent reason to think that the *Mona Lisa* was painted by Da Vinci. But, of course, theists typically suppose that they have independent reason to think that the universe was created by God. So it seems that we do not have an avenue here to drive a wedge between the two cases. And it is quite hard to see where else we might look to find such an avenue: the claim that the general form of Hume's argument makes a significant contribution to "the case for positive atheism"—i.e. to the case for the claim that it is irrational to believe that God exists—seems to me to be entirely without foundation.

Of course, that's not to say that I think that there is *nothing* to be salvaged from "the general form of Hume's argument". If I were asked to articulate my reasons for refusing to accept that God—an omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect, infinite sole creator *ex nihilo* of the universe—exists, I would certainly make mention of the fact that it seems to me that there is no more reason for supposing that there is one creator of the universe than there is for supposing that there is more than one creator of the universe; and I would make mention of the fact that it seems to me that there is at least as much reason to suppose that there is a fallible creator of the universe as there is to suppose that there is an infallible creator of the universe; and I would make mention of the fact that it seems to me that there is at least as much reason to suppose that there is a finite creator of the universe as there is to suppose that there is an infinite creator of the universe; and so forth. Thus, rather than suppose that there are considerations here that support the claim that it is irrational to believe that God exists, I would merely insist, instead, that there are considerations here that support the claim that it is rationally permissible to believe that God does not exist.

8

Martin's discussion of arguments from evil begins with a very quick dismissal of "deductive arguments from evil" (335). Next, he provides two different "inductive arguments from evil", one "direct" and one "indirect", each of which "justifies belief in God". Finally, he provides a lengthy discussion of theodicies which is required to support one of the premises in the "indirect inductive argument from evil". While, in my view, Martin's dismissal of "deductive arguments from evil" is far too quick, I propose to focus here on what he says about allegedly successful "inductive arguments from evil".

Martin's successful "direct inductive argument from evil" is a formulation of a Rowe-style evidential argument, along the following lines:

1. If, in the light of the evidence, X appears to be Y, and there is no positive reason to suppose that X's appearance is misleading, there is it reasonable to suppose that X is Y.
2. In the light of the evidence, the fawn's suffering appears to be pointless.
3. There is no positive reason to suppose that it is not.
4. (Therefore) It is reasonable to suppose that the fawn's suffering is pointless.

5. (Therefore) Probably, there exist evils that God could have prevented, and had God prevented them, the world as a whole would be a better place.
6. God would have prevented the occurrence of any evil God could prevent, such that had God prevented it, the world as a whole would have been better.
7. (Therefore) Probably, God does not exist.

This kind of argument has been much discussed since the publication of Martin's book. For our purposes, the main point of interest is Martin's observation that:

Rowe is aware that even if evil does tend to disconfirm theism, arguments for the existence of God may tend to confirm theism more than evil disconfirms it. For this reason, an essential part of any argument for the non-existence of God is the refutation of arguments for the existence of God. Unless these arguments are shown to be worthless, the theist may well accept the fact that evil, taken in isolation from other evidence, tends to disconfirm theism without rejecting theism. So if Rowe's argument is to be used to establish the non-existence of God, it is important to combine it with refutations of the arguments for the existence of God. (341)

As we noted earlier, this kind of concession seems not to go far enough. What we really need—if we are to “establish” the non-existence of God—is an “objective” assessment of the hypothesis that God exists in the light of the total evidence that is available to us. While considerations about evil should surely play some role in such an assessment, it is quite unclear why we should think that such an assessment is feasible—both because of the problems involved in the identification of “total evidence” and because of the problems involved in an “objective” assessment of that total evidence. If we really wish to make the case that it is not rational to believe that God exists, we do not get very far at all with the considerations that Martin advances in his “direct inductive argument from evil”, even when those considerations are paired with the arguments that are advanced in Part 1 of his book.

Martin's putatively successful “indirect inductive argument from evil” is cast in the following form:

1. If (a) there is no positive evidence that p; and (ii) unless one makes assumption A, evidence E would falsify that p; and (iii) despite repeated attempts, no good reason has been given for believing A, then, on rational grounds, one should believe that p is false.
2. There is no positive evidence that God exists.
3. The existence of apparently pointless evil would falsify the existence of God unless one assumes either that God has morally sufficient reason for allowing the existence of such evil or that it is logically necessary.
4. Despite repeated attempts to do so, no one has provided a good reason to believe either that God has morally sufficient reasons to allow such evil to exist or that it is logically necessary.
5. (Therefore) On rational grounds one should believe that God does not exist.

Martin claims that this argument is “sound in the sense that it has the form of a strong inductive argument”. However, he also insists that:

[M]ore needs to be done. In particular, this argument assumes that theodicies produced today and in the past do not work and that there is no positive evidence for God’s existence. ... [A]lthough the latest is not always the best, theistic philosophers, like everyone else, learn from their mistakes. Thus, there is a presumption that recent work constitutes the most sophisticated and best effort to date to justify God’s ways to humans and to demonstrate His existence. If the most recent versions of theodicies produced by the best philosophical minds of our time in response to the problems of earlier versions can be refuted, one can have confidence that earlier versions fail as well. (361)

And so what we get in the remainder of the book is a very extensive discussion of a range of contemporary theodicies: free will theodicies (Chapter 15); theodicies for natural evil (Chapter 16); soul-making theodicies (Chapter 17); and minor theodicies (Chapter 18).

Martin justifies the first premise of his “indirect inductive argument from evil” by appeal to examples, and then goes on to claim that “countless other examples of the same mode of inference can be found in everyday life and in science” (345). That is, I take it, Martin supposes that the first premise is one of those “middle-level principles of justification that are in accord with ordinary and scientific rational practice” to which reference is made at the outset of the book. While it seems clear to me that reasonable theists can reasonably reject premises 2 and 3 (and perhaps also 4) in his argument, I also suspect that the first premise is not unassailable.

Consider the following kind of case. You tell me that you dealt a perfect hand in bridge last night, and the other three parties to the deal corroborate your story. Now, of course, unless I assume that your testimony is veridical, I have *very* good reason to reject the claim that you produced a perfect deal: in the relevant sense, my past experience—or, at any rate, the result of my facility in mathematical computation—falsifies your claim. Moreover, there is *no positive* evidence that the perfect deal occurred; there is your say-so, and that’s it. (In case it is thought that this testimony is, in itself, positive evidence for the occurrence of the perfect deal, add in the assumption that it is known to me that none of the four witnesses, yourself included, is a reliable informant.¹¹) Suppose, further, that I try very hard, on repeated occasions, to elicit independent reason for believing that your testimony to the occurrence of the perfect deal is veridical, but without success. In this situation, does rationality *require* of me that I believe that the perfect deal did not occur? Or could it be, instead, that I am rationally *permitted* to suspend judgment on the question of whether the perfect deal occurred?

No matter what view is taken of the case discussed in the preceding paragraph, it seems clear to me that Martin’s “indirect inductive argument from evil” fares no better than the “direct inductive argument from evil” as an argument for the conclusion that it is irrational to fail to believe that God does not exist. While I am perfectly happy to allow that the kinds of considerations to which Martin appeals here can contribute to the task of

showing that it is rationally permissible to believe that God does not exist, I do not think that these kinds of considerations can bear the weight required in Martin's "case for positive atheism".

9

The central project of Martin (1990) is to argue that atheism is a rational position and that belief in God is not. While it is not entirely clear how to construe the overall case that Martin makes, it seems that what he contends is something like this: either it is irrational to believe that God exists because religious language is cognitively meaningless, or it is irrational to believe that God exists because (a) all arguments for the existence of God fail, (b) there are logical inconsistencies in the concept of God, and (c) there are successful arguments for the conclusion that God does not exist. If we suppose that religious language is cognitively meaningless, then we are rationally required to be negative atheists. However, if we suppose that religious language is cognitively meaningful, then what we are rationally required to believe depends upon how much of (a)-(c) we accept. If all we accept is that all arguments for the existence of God fail, then perhaps we are rationally required to be negative atheists (though, maybe, the failure of these arguments makes it rationally permissible to be a positive atheist?). However, if we accept either that there are logical inconsistencies in the concept of God, or that there are successful arguments for the conclusion that God does not exist, then we are rationally required to be positive atheists.¹²

While Martin notes quite explicitly that he gives no extended theory of rationality and justification, he claims that it is sufficient for his purposes to make occasional appeal to middle-level principles of justification that are in accord with ordinary scientific and rational practice, and to eschew involvement with controversial wider epistemological issues. As will have become quite clear by now, I think that Martin's project is seriously damaged by its neglect of wider considerations about rationality, justification and argumentation. On the one hand, the middle-level principles of justification to which Martin does make explicit appeal are mostly controversial (at best); and, on the other hand, there are implicit assumptions about the connections between rationality, justification and argumentation that are plainly controversial, and that cry out for further examination.

I have suggested that, while the various different parts of Martin's case can all be successfully pressed into service in support of the claim that negative atheism and positive atheism are rationally permissible, there are no parts of Martin's case that suffice to establish that either negative atheism or positive atheism is rationally required.¹³ However, for present purposes, the main point that I wish to emphasise is that there are not *prima facie* outrageous views about the connections between rationality, justification and argumentation that support that view that negative atheism and positive atheism are both rationally permissible, but that neither is rationally required. Even if my assessment of the merits of the case for the claim that negative atheism and positive atheism are merely rationally permissible is mistaken, it seems clear (to me, at any rate) that there is

no hope of making progress in this area without paying serious attention to general questions about the connections between rationality, justification and argumentation.¹⁴

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¹ Unless otherwise noted, all page numbers in the present paper refer to Martin (1990).

² At p. 467, Martin writes: “Since negative atheism by definition simply means not holding any concept of God, it is compatible with neither believing nor disbelieving in God.” While I agree that, if one does not possess the concept of God, then it must be the case that one fails to believe that God exists, it seems to me to be a mistake to suppose that only those who fail to possess the concept of God can fail to believe that God exists while also failing to believe that God does not exist. Given Martin’s characterisation of positive atheism and negative atheism at p.26 and p.464—i.e. given the characterisation expounded above—it is surely obvious that failing to possess the concept of God is just one way among many of being a negative atheist.

³ At p.42, Martin outlines a “logical positivist theory of meaning” which consists of the following three claims: (1) a statement has cognitive or literal meaning (i.e. is either true or false) iff it has either formal meaning or factual meaning; (2) a statement has formal meaning iff it is either analytic or self-contradictory; (3) a statement has factual meaning iff it is empirically verifiable. Martin’s discussion focuses on attempts to explain and defend (3); (1) and (2) are more or less accepted without comment. Moreover, Martin takes it for granted that the claim that God exists is not formally meaningful; hence, for Martin, the question where the claim that God exists is cognitively meaningful just turns on whether the claim that God exists is factually meaningful. However, one might well be given to wonder whether (1) is acceptable given (2) and (3): why should we suppose that statements divide *exhaustively* and *without overlap* into those that are empirically verifiable and those that are either analytic or self-contradictory?

⁴ Of course, the objection being mooted here is a version of one of the standard objections to logical positivist theories of meaning, viz. that difficulties arise when we try to apply those theories of meaning to the pieces of language in which those theories are themselves formulated. It is interesting that, when Martin considers objections to logical positivist theories of meaning, he only considers (1) problems that confront the formulation of a precise criterion of empirical verifiability—i.e. a criterion that is neither too restrictive nor too broad; and (2) problems that arise in the provision of good reasons to accept the theory (42). Martin’s response to the second of these worries is principally to insist that one can give an account of factual meaning that is reasonably consonant with intuition. But one of the principal grounds for worrying

about the provision of good reasons to accept the theory is precisely that the theory seems to be self-undermining; and that worry is not addressed at all by further massaging of the account of factual meaning.

⁵ At the end of his discussion of cosmological arguments, Martin says:

It would be unwarranted to suppose that the cosmological argument has been shown to be unsound in any final way, for I have not covered all existing versions of the argument, and in any case new sound versions may yet be created. But our sampling of versions of this argument both ancient and contemporary should give us some confidence that no existing one is sound. Furthermore, since the best philosophical minds down through history have failed to construct a sound version of the argument, it is unlikely that one will be constructed. (124)

We shall take up the question, of whether Martin is right to suggest that there is a strong inductive argument in the offing here, in the next paragraph.

⁶ In the case of “beneficial” arguments, Martin writes: “I have found reason to reject the claim that there are general beneficial arguments for belief in God. Both Pascal’s and James’s arguments fail, and to my knowledge, these are surely the best ones available” (248). Once again, one might raise worries about the implicit inference here. Certainly, if the arguments of Pascal and James are the best “beneficial” arguments, and these arguments fail, then there are no successful “beneficial” arguments. But whether there is a good inductive inference from the failure of the arguments of Pascal and James to the conclusion that there are no successful “beneficial” arguments surely depends upon the security of the claim that there are no radically different *kinds* of “beneficial” arguments that we have not yet discovered. It is interesting to think about the case of recalcitrant mathematical proofs in this context. Not so long ago, it was true that a host of very able mathematicians had expended vast effort in the search for a proof of “Fermat’s Last Theorem”, but without success. Was it a reasonable inductive inference at that time that there *is* no proof of “Fermat’s Last Theorem”? Is it a reasonable inductive inference *now* that there is no proof of Goldbach’s conjecture?

⁷ Actually, the formulation in the main text is not quite right. Sometimes, when one discovers an (apparent) contradiction in one’s view, it takes a long time to figure out what to do in order to deal with the (apparent) contradiction. It may well be that one has been presented with an argument that ought to persuade one to revise one’s views, and one has recognised that one has an at least *prima facie* obligation to revise one’s view, and yet one has not, to this point, revised one’s view. Perhaps, then, it would be better to say that something like the following is pretty evidently true: one’s position is rational only if it is not the case that one has been presented with an argument that ought to persuade one to revise one’s views and yet one has not recognised that one has even a *prima facie* obligation to change one’s view.

⁸ Strictly, it seems that what Martin succeeds in establishing is that, if we reject his views about the meaninglessness of religious talk, then *positive* atheism is a rational position in the sense outlined above. After all, to say that positive atheism is a rational position in the sense outlined is just to say that positive atheists can *defend* themselves against all of the evidential and beneficial arguments for the existence of God that have hitherto been constructed. Since there is no relevant difference between negative atheism and positive atheism on the score of the availability of defences against evidential and beneficial arguments for the existence of God, Martin’s arguments serve as well to defend the latter as they do to defend the former. We may return to this point later.

⁹ Cf. “We have seen that there is very good reason to suppose that the traditional concept of God is incoherent and, consequently, that God does not exist. Therefore positive atheism in the sense of disbelief in a being who is omniscient, omnipotent, morally perfect, and completely free is indeed justified.” (315)

¹⁰ Cf. “As I have suggested, there are ways of escaping from this conclusion, but these are purchased at a great price. My argument turns, of course, on analyses of the traditional attributes of God such as omniscience, omnipotence, moral perfection and freedom, which might be rejected by theists. If they do reject my analyses, then the onus is on them to supply an analysis that does not have similar problems.” (315)

¹¹ I don’t think that this further assumption is needed. Martin doesn’t tell us what he means by “positive evidence”, but he clearly can’t include affirmative testimony in this category: for it is quite clear that there is plenty of affirmative testimony for the claim that God exists. To meet the demands of the “indirect inductive argument from evil”, Martin must be conceiving of “positive evidence” in a way that excludes affirmative testimony (or, perhaps, affirmative testimony whose reliability is somehow open to question).

¹² The formulation in the latter half of this paragraph is not entirely satisfactory. I take it that Martin is genuinely committed to the claim that, if religious language does turn out to be cognitively meaningful, then it is irrational to believe that God exists because (a) all arguments for the existence of God fail, and (b)

there are logical inconsistencies in the concept of God, and (c) there are successful arguments for the conclusion that God does not exist. So there is no question that we might reasonably accept only some of the conjuncts in the conjunctive reason—e.g. that we might only accept (a) while rejecting (b) and (c). However, I take it that what Martin wants to claim is that (a), (b), and (c) bear differentially on negative atheism and positive atheism: (a) alone would only be sufficient to establish negative atheism.

¹³ For a much more elaborate defence of the claim that an examination of extant arguments for the existence of God supports the claim that negative atheism and positive atheism are rationally permissible, see Oppy (2006).

¹⁴ Lest it be thought that I am being unduly harsh in my assessment of Martin's book, I should perhaps point out that the faults that I claim to find are not unique to his book. Standard non-theistic texts on arguments about the existence of God—e.g. Everitt (2004), Le Poidevin (1996), Mackie (1982), Sobel (2004)—typically pay insufficient attention to general considerations about the general theory of rationality, justification and argumentation. Moreover, the same is true of the standard neutral and theistic texts on arguments about the existence of God—e.g. Gale (1991), Swinburne (1979), Yandell (1999)—and even more so of anthologies that have some coverage of arguments about the existence of God—e.g. Quinn and Taliaferro (1997), Taliaferro and Griffiths (2003). I'd like to think that some of the heat would be taken out of discussions of arguments about the existence of God if more attention were paid to questions about the proper goals of argumentation, and to the connections between rationality, justification and argumentation.