

God, Faith, and the Supernatural the Objectivist Perspective

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Most major religions espouse a supernatural realm beyond human perception and understanding, integral to the nature and cause of the universe, and which is the source of human values and purpose. This lecture gives an introduction to the Objectivist perspective on the central claims, arguments, and concerns of the religious outlook.

Opening with Objectivism's essential orientation regarding religion, the important topics of the domain are visited, going beyond typical secular analyses to show the distinctive insights that the philosophy brings to bear in issues of cosmology, knowledge, and spiritual and social values. This tour also highlights important patterns in religious belief and debate. Underscored throughout is Objectivism's positive outlook as a philosophy for living on earth, one that is full of hope that we can ever improve our understanding of the world and our prospects for flourishing.

Preface for the Skeptics Forum

This is a cleaned-up transcript of a lecture that was delivered on July 1, 2003 to an annual Objectivist conference.* I think it will be of interest to this forum because it shows how the ideas of religion are viewed from the perspective of a systematic, secular philosophy that stands apart from mainstream non-theistic thought in significant ways. For example, I've noticed that theists are often surprised to hear that there are non-theists (like me) who have no affection whatsoever for Skepticism in knowledge, or Relativism in morality, or Collectivism in politics (socialism, communism, Nazism), or any sort of Nihilism in one's view of life and purpose, and on and on. Come to think of it, I've noticed that non-theists from other traditions are often surprised, too. So either way this talk is likely to offer you a brush with some new ideas and angles.

But there's a catch: *this lecture wasn't built for you*. Sorry. It was designed for a beginner-to-intermediate audience of people who have some acquaintance with Objectivism, the philosophy of Ayn Rand. It is comprehensive and authoritative and systematically lays out The Objectivist Perspective... for an audience like that. I thought of it as an engineering challenge: find a way to cover a staggering domain, in a mere hour, making it neither so superficial nor so abstract as to be useless, yet keeping it accessible to beginners. To do that I had to lean heavily on their existing knowledge and general orientation, so there are many notions taken for granted that the intended audience accepts but which you would likely want to see explained. And I had to find the barest, most essential path through a *lot* of material, so I did not talk about, say, the science behind Intelligent Design or the historical evidence for the Resurrection—there was only time to cover the issues that Objectivism has with *all* arguments-from-design and *all* arguments-from-miracles. Indeed, that's the inside scoop I never told the audience: given the constraints, this talk was really designed to give them a basic orientation to keep in mind as *they* engage all those ideas. It is very short on fish, but they were delighted with the fishing lesson.

This orientation will likely reveal new wrinkles for you to consider, too—but it will require a little philosophic detection to look beyond those nuisances. So I invite you to roll up your sleeves and see how a significant and growing secular movement thinks about the ideas, claims, and concerns of the religious outlook.

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Religion gives people a vision of the world and their place in it. They see it as the source of certainty and security and the cultural institutions that help us live our lives—and many see religion as the only thing standing between us and a Hobbesian existence (solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short), so of course it is important to them. What we believe affects what we do, especially in broad and deep abstractions like these, and that (among other things) can spell the difference between happiness and suffering, life and death.

Religion has been around as long as we have; it shapes the lives of men and the fate of nations. And so it is reasonable to ask: what does Objectivism have to say about it?

Objectivism: Pro-Reason, not Anti-Religion

Okay, if you want the essential take on Objectivism and religion in a single line, then here is the one to remember. Rand wrote,

I am an intransigent atheist, but not a militant one. This means that I am an uncompromising advocate of reason and that I am fighting *for* reason, not *against* religion.¹

Let's unpack that a little. Notice the clear statement of atheism *and* that it is not primary. This is important. As surprising as it may seem to many believers, Objectivism is not all about the rejection of God and the supernatural. No, that is only a sort of afterthought, an effect of something that *is* important: a focus on method rather than doctrine, on reason rather than particular truths. Sure, particular truths are really important, but a truth about how we find other truths is even more important. Think of it as a variant on the idea, “give a man a fish and feed him for a day; teach him how to fish and feed him for a lifetime”. Objectivism worries about the method—reason—and the rest works itself out... in this case, atheism.

¹ *Letters of Ayn Rand*

You can see this emphasis in many places. Rand explained:

I am not primarily an advocate of capitalism, but of egoism; I am not primarily an advocate of egoism, but of reason. If one recognizes the supremacy of reason and applies it consistently, all the rest follows. This—the supremacy of reason—was, is, and will be the primary concern of my work, and the essence of Objectivism.²

Now, we learn new things all the time, and if we really do intend to follow this method and let the truths fall where they may, then the system will have to be open. And reality is an integrated whole, so we should expect our understanding of it to be integrated, too. The system needs to be both open and integrated. When we discover an important fact about us and the world, it needs to be recognized, and in a coherent way (like Newton’s physics being refined and extended to take account of facts about the very small and very large, things he hadn’t been exposed to). For today’s topic, this means that anything *objectively valuable* that religion offers or discovers or upholds should be compatible with and even desired in Objectivism.

Objectivism in a Nutshell

I want to set us up to flesh out that essential orientation, so let’s start out with a quick sketch of Objectivism’s essentials and a preview of contrasting ideas from religion.

Rand was once asked by a reporter to summarize her *entire* philosophy while standing on one foot, and she did it (but it really was only a summary and not a validation). She organized it around the traditional branches of philosophy. The three main branches address three very basic questions: what is there, how do I know, and what should I do—they focus on the study of the fundamental nature of reality (metaphysics), of knowledge (epistemology), and of morality (ethics). She said...

“Metaphysics: Objective Reality” Objectivism holds that facts are facts, things are what they are independent of our knowledge and feelings and wishes—that reality is an objective absolute and that the job of consciousness is to *grasp* the facts of reality, not to create or shape them. It means that if a Mac truck hits you,

² “The Objectivist”, 9/71

you're squashed whether or not you know it or believe it or care about it or wish it were otherwise.

“Epistemology: Reason” Objectivism holds that reason is our *only* means of knowing the facts of reality, our *best* guide to action, and our *basic* means of survival. It means that if we don't want to get squashed by Mac trucks, we have to look at the world, see the truck, understand that it may squash us, and choose wisely. Closing our eyes to facts doesn't help. Intuition or feelings or looking inward in other ways aren't good for avoiding trucks. Grasping the facts of reality and acting accordingly is what's required.

“Ethics: Rational Self-Interest” Objectivism holds that we are all ends-in-ourselves, not sacrificial animals who exist primarily to serve the ends of others—that the pursuit of your *own* life and happiness is your highest moral purpose—that the purpose of living is, well, to *live*, and to experience all the happiness you can in your work and hobbies, in building lasting friendships and a loving family. When you step out of the way of a Mac truck, it's to maintain *your* life, leaving you to pursue *your* values and achieve *your* happiness.

Objectivism and Religion: Fundamentally Incompatible

Now for the preview of contrasting ideas from religion. I don't expect anyone to take this on faith. Even though these might not make a lot of sense or could seem rather bold right now, I want to list them up front so you'll know what to look for as we go.

With a **metaphysics** of Objective Reality, the supernatural, gods, and miracles are rejected as unhelpful speculation or simply incoherent.

With an **epistemology** of Reason, revelation and faith are rejected as arbitrary and ineffective, if not outright dangerous.

With an **ethics** of Rational Self-Interest, self-sacrifice and existing primarily for others' ends is rejected as harmful and essentially counter to genuine and sustained flourishing.

The point here is that while some aspects of religion may be wonderful and serve genuine human needs, the core philosophic ideas that are used to explain and justify them are incompatible and simply can't be integrated with the core ideas of Objectivism.

To see where all these conclusions come from (and even what they really mean in some cases), we will tour the important arguments, claims, and concerns of the religious outlook.

Important Arguments, Claims, and Concerns

For convenience we will focus on notions common to Western religions, mainly Christianity, but the Objectivist approach translates well to addressing ideas from other traditions (Buddhism, Hinduism). So we are going to visit First Causes, Intelligent Design, Miracles, Defining God, Faith and Revelation, and Spiritual and Social Values.

In each case, I'll give the essential idea and cover common points from the literature, and then we'll turn to something distinctive that Objectivism has to say about the topic. So we will see plenty of debunking, but we will also be exploring and applying generally useful ideas from Objectivism.

As we go, our method will be that of reason: base claims and arguments on facts, be logical and objective, and so on. In particular, this means respecting the Burden of Proof Principle, the idea from logic and law that the burden is on the one making a claim to make a case *for* their idea, not on the one entertaining it to prove it isn't so. The Burden of Proof is enshrined in our constitution and lived in our courtrooms every day under the heading of "innocent until proven guilty". If we didn't have this idea then every claim (whether true or not) would need to be believed until proven otherwise: every bit of speculation about fairies and UFO abductions and vast right-wing conspiracies and unicorns and the guilt of a defendant... What a mess! Even people who might want to ignore this principle for their favorite idea don't drop it when the Weekly World News gives us another Alien President or Wolf Boy story, or when a competing idea surfaces, or when they find themselves in court. I am beating on this a bit because people often neglect to shoulder their rightful burden in the heat of discussion, and while that doesn't guarantee their claim is false, it *does* mean that the reasonable response is to simply not accept it until that backing arrives.

Okay, enough preliminaries—let's jump in!

Cosmological Arguments

Ironically enough, it often starts with the argument from first-causes, called the cosmological argument. Way back when, a friend of mine who was in the seminary actually sat down and diagrammed this out for me: Here you are, and you had a cause (your parents). There's the planet, and it had a cause (planetary formation). Same thing for our solar system, and the galaxy, and the physical universe, and on and on he went, reaching back further and further to larger and larger scales. Everything and every event has a cause. So how about the whole shooting match? What's the cause of it all? Well, that's God.

Now, it's important to understand that while there may be a zillion variants on this and other arguments we will look at, that they are just that: variants. Each of them has its own particular angles and issues, but as variants they all have something in common: an essential shape or form—and when *that* has problems, all of the variants do, too.

Here, the essential form goes like this:

*Everything has a cause, so the entire natural world must have been caused;
God is that cause.*

What smart-alec little kid (maybe you?) hasn't asked, "Yeah, so what caused God?" While this is cute, it points to the real issue of an infinite regress of causes, of causes, of causes, and so on. But since we *are* here, there can't have been an infinite regress of causes—*something* had to get it all going. So, the argument goes, there must have been a First Cause or Prime Mover (God) that *wasn't* caused.

But then God is not an explanation here, because what we hunger for in understanding how the world exists would apply just as well to how God exists. And this is not simply a popularity contest over what is more satisfying to "just be", with people deciding it is fine for God to not need an explanation while it is intolerable that the World simply be... No, the argument got off the ground in the first place by telling us that there was *no* such choice, that *nothing* "just is" and *everything* requires a cause. Notice what happened here? This is like a rhetorical bait-and-switch. The argument *started* with idea that nothing "just is", which was used to introduce God as a cause, then that pesky infinite regress had to be dealt with, and it *ended* with something that "just is".

Well, the argument can't have it both ways and this contradiction is a serious problem. So the argument is flawed and the burden of proof hasn't been met here. If there is a good reason for believing in God, the first-cause argument isn't it.

Notice that in rejecting this argument, we have *not* proven there is no God. We have not proven or asserted *anything* (other than the fact that this argument has problems). The burden of proof is on the one making the claim that God exists, and all we have done is point out a failure to make the case here.

While that is technically enough to be finished with this argument, Objectivism has something to say about just *why* this argument is such a tangled mess.

Existence and Cosmological Arguments

When we push on this long enough, it really comes down to something much deeper than the Big Bang or other scientific topics. This is really about explaining *existence as such*, in the widest possible sense—or as some people wonder: Why is there Something rather than Nothing? Gods or multiverses or *anything*.

It seems like every time we try to think about a cause to turn Nothing into Something, we contradict the idea of Nothing because the cause is *something*—it exists.

The trick to finding our way through this is to see that asking for a cause of everything, or why there is Something rather than Nothing, *sounds* like a great question—it is shaped like a question and has nice grammar with ordinary words and a question-mark and everything. But in a really subtle way it isn't a question at all because meaning-wise there's a disconnect: Existence—all that is in any and every sense—is not the sort of thing that is caused; causality happens *within* existence because causes have to exist to do any causing.

It is inescapable. This is like Descartes and his famous conclusion, “I think therefore I am”—he was looking for something that was beyond doubt, and he realized that even though he could doubt everything else, he could not question his own existence because, well, there he would be, necessarily existing while busy questioning his own existence!

The problem here is that in asking for the cause of existence (or questioning our own existence), we are assuming something, and then tripping as we try to violate that assumption in some subtle way. No wonder it makes our heads hurt!

So the question is not a question and existence (whatever its ultimate nature) simply exists. Explaining its nature and development (like Big Bang cosmology and multiverses and all that) is really a question for science, not philosophy. Rand captured this basic, inescapable fact in her philosophical axiom of Existence, stated simply, “Existence Exists.”

So that was the Cosmological or First-Cause Argument. It is contradictory because it starts with the idea that *everything* has to have a cause, and then offers something that *doesn't* have a cause. Objectivism clarifies the real trouble by noting that even *trying* to ask for a cause for all of existence is incoherent because existence is not the sort of thing that is caused; causality happens *within* existence, and existence simply exists.

Arguments from Design

The other popular starting place is the argument from design. This can be as simple as just looking at the splendor of the sunset and thinking, “There must be a God because this is all too wonderful to have just happened!”

People look at the complex and intricate wonders found in the biological world and draw an analogy: if you found something even as humble in complexity and intricacy as a pocket watch, you would wonder who the watchmaker was, not how *accident* brought it about!

More recently, people see “irreducibly complex” structures in biology that can’t have evolved *gradually* because several interlocking parts would have to all be in place simultaneously or none of it would work. Or, in a similar vein, they see a large and growing list of delicately balanced cosmological variables, where if *any* of them varied even a little, it would break the universe and prevent life like us.

They try to compute the odds of those variables all lining up, or the probability of chance mutations bringing about a living creature like, say, Michael Jackson. Finding impossibly slim odds, they think there *must* be an intelligent designer at work—it would be like a bomb going off in a brick factory and producing a house!

As amazing as it seems, while each has its own interesting angles and issues, they all really do have an essence in common, and all share the same basic analysis. The basic form of the argument from design is,

The world is incredibly complex and intricate, undeniable evidence of design that demands a designer; God is that designer.

We can just about hear that little kid again: “Yeah, so who designed God?” And again, while cute, it points to another infinite regress: if this is all so wonderful and intricate and deserving of a designer, then the designer would be even more wonderful and intricate and deserving of a designer, and *that* designer even *more so*, and so on without end... So, they say, God wasn’t designed, which gets rid of that pesky infinite regress.

But what happened in the first-cause argument has happened again here: the argument *started* with the idea that everything intricate and wondrous obviously has to have a conscious designer; that was used to introduce God as the designer; there was that pesky infinite regress to be dealt with; and it *ended* with something intricate and wondrous that has no designer. Just like last time, the argument can’t have it both ways and this contradiction is a serious problem.

But there is a broader logical fallacy at play here, something you might call the argument from personal incredulity: “*I can’t imagine* how that could possibly be... therefore God did it!” Which is really a variant on the argument from ignorance: “I don’t see how that could be... therefore X!” But think about it: when we watch magicians, incredible stuff happens that we don’t understand and can’t explain. We can’t imagine how it could work without violating all logic and the laws of nature, and it is a good thing most magicians are honest, because charlatans seem to have an awfully easy time using magic tricks to pass themselves off as psychics and mediums and instruments of God. We have all learned a secret and seen our wonder turn to surprise at how simple it turned out to be.

The lesson is that our lack of imagination is not a constraint on reality, and a lack of knowledge doesn’t imply anything other than not understanding. You can’t go from “I don’t know” to “therefore X” because nothing follows from ignorance.

A great example is the wonder of life. Until pretty recently it was literally *unimaginable* that these wondrous things could exist and not be a work of conscious design. But then along came Darwin, who introduced the new concept of a mindless, purposeless *algorithm* that could do design work, and now it *is* imaginable (even if people debate its scope). Our lack of imagination is not a constraint on reality.

So this argument has problems and the burden of proof has not been met. (And note that again we have not disproven God; we have only called a technical foul on the argument from design.)

But there is an underlying point that Objectivism has something to say about...

Identity and Arguments from Design

When we push at *this* issue long enough, it really comes down to understanding the source of order and regularity *as such*.

When Phil Donahue asked Rand about the Argument from Design, she responded in her characteristic way by cutting right through to the essential issue: “What would a *disorderly* universe would look like? How could our universe be anything *but* orderly?”

Let’s creep up on this. The reason this and the first-cause argument seem to have a lot in common is because they are about two sides of the same coin. In the first-cause argument we talked about Existence, and here we’ll talk about Identity.

Existence and Identity are two inseparable perspectives on the same basic fact: To *be* is to be *something*—to be something in particular—to be this rather than that—to be capable of acting in these ways and not those ways. Objectivism captures the other perspective on this basic, inescapable fact in the axiom of Identity: A is A.

It is this deep fact of Identity, a fact intertwined with Being itself, that is the source of order and regularity in nature—not the dictates of any suspiciously well-ordered cosmic personality. Existence exists, and the things that exist have to be *something* because to exist is to have identity. And humans have the capacity to look out on the world and the identities of the things in it, and discover ways to conceive of it as a simple order. But it is not easy, or automatic, or given, or obvious—until *after* someone figures it out.

In fact, it has taken *incredible* effort and genius to move us from seeing nothing but chaos and accident to seeing the order and regularity we all take for granted. Giants like Aristotle, Newton, Galileo, Bacon, Einstein, and countless others all helped us move from chaos to clarity. Take Descartes (Mr.. “I think therefore I am”)—he invented the “Cartesian coordinate system” (you know, the X/Y grid we now take as obvious), and it let us quantify spatial relationships to reason about things in a scientific way. That was a big step. Then later Newton stood on his shoulders (among others) and ushered in nothing less than a revolution in our

understanding of the world by unweaving the rainbow with his optics, and showing us how the heavenly bodies moved with his famous Laws of Motion (rather than being pushed by angels). This was a Very Big Deal to go from a chaotic and arbitrary world to such a clockwork universe. Poet Alexander Pope's epitaph for Newton brilliantly captured the amazing shift he brought in peoples' conception of the world:

Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night;
God said, 'Let Newton be!' and all was light.

So that was the Argument from Design. It suffers from a contradiction because it *starts* with the idea that everything super-wondrous obviously requires a conscious designer, but then offers something that is super-wondrous and *undesigned*. Driving that is the fallacy of the argument from personal incredulity or ignorance. But the deeper observation that Objectivism offers is that the order and regularity we see in nature is not due to any dictate, but is inherent in Being itself: to exist is to have identity, and we have the ability to find useful conceptions of order and regularity in the identities of the things we experience.

Arguments from Miracles

People also cite miracles as evidence of God's hand in the world: there are feats like Jesus raising the dead and making blind people see again; events like Mary appearing before crowds and in clouds and tortillas; strangeness like statues crying; impossibly unlikely things like lucky rescues and remissions; prophecies and signs and happenings related in the Bible; and on and on.

The essential form of the argument from miracles is:

Incredible, inexplicable, impossible things happen; this is God's hand in the world.

As our little kid grows up, he may start to notice that the same kinds of phenomena are cited by incompatible religions as evidence of their own truth. And Paranormalists and psychics cite the same stuff as evidence of their own powers. And UFOlogists cite similar things as evidence of alien life. And so on. And it hits him that hey, maybe this isn't the best way to sort out who knows what...

And there were stories of *lots* of miracles in the past—incredible things were happening left and right on every street corner! But now there seem to be many

fewer (and weaker) miracles, and they often have the feel of urban myths. And look at how *hard* the Vatican works to try to confirm miracles for their Emerging Saints Program! And so many things that started out strange ended up being explained...

But all that only raises an eyebrow. Here is the real trouble: remember the logical fallacy of the argument from ignorance? We can't go from a "don't know" to a "therefore this" because we have not ruled out other possibilities for strange happenings like space-alien technology, or something really powerful that is less than a god, or (as is most common) *future scientific understanding*.

History is just littered with examples: every gust of wind and bolt of lightning was due to a direct act of God, but then came Ben Franklin and weather men and we don't think about them like that any more. Same thing for eclipses and earthquakes—the Acts of God that insurance policies talk about used to be divine punishment, but with our current understanding, "Acts of God" is really shorthand for "stuff happens". And how about sickness and disease? You probably don't think of yourself as impious just because you caught the flu or got a nasty infection—you know it is due to germs.

This pattern is called the "God of the Gaps", where God is cited as the reason behind those things we do not understand—He lives in the gaps in our knowledge. As we grow in understanding and power over nature, more and more supernatural territory vanishes as our gaps close. But rather than freeze ourselves with a non-explanation of "God did it", why not leave it at "we don't understand—yet". Saying "God did it" doesn't give us much at all beyond a little false comfort (and later painful reversals—just ask the Vatican about Galileo and Darwin), but admitting we do not know (yet) is what moves us toward putting food in our mouths and men on the moon.

So the argument from miracles does not work, and the burden of proof is not met. Now let's shine Objectivism on it and see what scurries...

Causality and Arguments from Miracles

This is really about the hope that radically different things could happen on a whim—that events in the world can be, well, miraculous.

When we talk about how things act and what they do and why, we are talking about Causality. In the Objectivist (and more broadly, Aristotelian) tradition,

Causality is Identity applied to action. That is, things act according to their natures (their identities): they act the way they do because of what they are. Wheels roll when pushed; piles of dirt don't. Eggs break when dropped in the kitchen because that is an expression of their identity as things with a brittle shell and goo inside, bashing against a hard floor. Action is an expression of identity, and everything has identity merely in virtue of existing, not because of any dictate.

Now, if an egg broke into *song* instead of a messy puddle, then it would not be a normal egg—it would have to be something else. Because identities include actions, we know and classify things by what they do: if you can't scramble it, it isn't an egg—you would have to have some other notion for it. But if we experience an *egg miracle*, it isn't that we have just found something we thought was a normal egg that needs more study. No, the very idea of miracles *requires* violating Causality. It requires that something literally impossible happen: that a *normal* egg break into song—that a thing act against its own identity—that it have a contradictory identity, making Causality optional. But Causality is not optional because Identity is not optional: to exist is to have identity, to be this and not that, to be a goo-filled egg and not a lounge singer—independently of anyone's knowledge or wishes or dictates.

Existence, Identity, Causality—none of these are optional in Objectivism. They are all interrelated, all inescapable, all absolute, and all name deep facts of reality established outside the dictates of any will. So Objectivists use these broad, base, inescapable facts as touchstones. They shrug off talk of miracles and first causes for the same reason scientists shrug off talk of perpetual motion machines: why waste time on a dead end? If something is new and interesting and mysterious, we don't want to settle for a non-answer at the end of a blind alley—we want to find out what is really going on.

So that was the Argument from Miracles. Its essential problem is that it depends on the fallacy of the argument from ignorance. And Objectivism offers the observation that since causality is identity applied to action, the very notion of miracles requires something to have a contradictory identity—to not be what it is—which is incoherent.

Defining God

Okay, this is a great time to take a little intermission to look at what people mean by the term “God”. There are the two major ways people think about this...

On the one hand, God is *identified* as the explanation for something big or important—the world, its wonder, its workings. Basically, He is identified as the agent in these arguments we have been looking at: the first cause, the designer, the power behind miracles.

On the other hand, God is *characterized* as an ideal thing that is better than we are in every way—He is defined as infinite, unlimited, eternal, supernatural, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good.

But on the one hand, identifying Him as the agent in these arguments has troubles because those arguments have troubles—what they describe doesn't need to be. Also, it should be noted that none of them argue for any particular god from any particular religion—they argue for what is known as “the god of the philosophers”. Even if the first-cause argument worked, for example, there is nothing in there to say that He stuck around to flood the world, engineer that whole resurrection thing, and listen to our bargaining for a passing score on that test.

And on the other hand, characterizing God with these attributes has troubles because they are contradictory on many levels—what they are attributed to *can't* exist any more than a square circle.

Sometimes these attributes contradict *themselves*: How many of us have tortured the Sunday-school teacher with, “Can God create a rock so big he can't lift it?” While she may only roll her eyes, there is something to it—either way, there is something this all-powerful thing can't *do*.

And there are contradictions *among* these attributes: Being all-knowing clashes with being all-powerful—either He doesn't *know* what He'll do tomorrow, or He doesn't have the power to *do* anything differently. And then there is the classic Problem of Evil that believers have struggled with for centuries: if something is all-knowing and all-powerful and all-good, then how can bad things happen to good people and disasters happen to innocents—like a bunny rabbit being crushed in an earthquake and Ethiopian babies dying excruciating deaths as they starve... Either He doesn't *know*... or doesn't *care*... or can't *do* anything about it.

And there are even contradictions between these attributes and important ideas elsewhere in their system: something all-knowing interferes with our free will since, by definition, our choices would be known (determined) before they are made. Either God doesn't really *know* I am going to eat that chocolate ice cream, or my being able to freely switch to the vanilla is only an illusion.

Now, these issues are not new, and a common response is to call these sorts of paradoxes and contradictions *mysteries* and praise those who have the strength of faith to embrace or at least tolerate them. The more intimidating version simply suggests: who are *we* with our limited, human understanding, to claim to *know* what these characteristics really mean and how they *have* to fit together—to claim to *know* what is ultimately good and bad and to *judge God*? As He thundered in the book of Job, “Where were *you* when I laid the foundations of the earth?” ...But we didn’t ask God what He is (that would be assuming the conclusion): we asked *believers* what they meant by the term and all we got was a square circle. It is not reasonable to ask us to assume the conclusion, to know our place, to embrace the mystery. No, they need to go back to the drawing board and think about what they mean.

That’s about where the usual analysis stops, but Objectivism has more to add...

Concepts and Defining God

Notice that in defining God, all we are really given is what He is *not* (often relative to what we are): We are natural, but God is supernatural (which really means *not* natural, *not* of this world, *not* bound by time and natural law); we are finite and limited and know some things, but God is infinite, unlimited, and omniscient (which really means: *not* finite, *not* determinate, *not* fallible, *not* limited in understanding)...

*God is not short and God is not tall—
God is not shaped like a tree or beach ball.
Nope, not a hat, and no, not a cat—
He’s not a thing like this one or that.
God is not cold and God is not hot...
Well, let’s just go with: He’s simply not.*

Now, while it’s fun to channel Seuss, many theologians think that God being definable and susceptible to proof would *destroy* religion by making Him open to human logic, rational understanding, and scientific study. He would be delimited, defined, circumscribed, and subject to scientific law... just another thing in the natural world, another sample for the scientist, and not a transcendent power

running the universe.³ So maybe it is no accident that identity is avoided with these sorts of definitions.

But that's a problem, because we use concepts to help us identify and organize what we experience by abstracting patterns in their characteristics. Without an identity, there is no identification, and no abstracting.

Worse still, there is something to struggling with these characteristics (or lack) and concluding "He's not." Recall that existence and identity are intertwined—to exist is to have identity—to *be* is to be *something*—to be particular and determinate, to be able to act this way and not that—all the things that aren't allowed for God! But you can't have your cake and eat it, too: to not have identity is to not exist at all.⁴

Rand commented on this negative way of defining things in one of those really long speeches in *Atlas Shrugged*:

They keep telling you what it is not, but never tell you what it is. All their identifications consist of negating: God is that which no human mind can know, they say—and proceed to demand that you consider it knowledge—God is non-man, heaven is non-earth, soul is non-body... perception is non-sensory, knowledge is non-reason. Their definitions are not acts of defining, but of wiping out.⁵

So trying to define God has serious problems: He is not required as an explanation for the world, its wonder, or its workings—and the characteristics He is given are deeply contradictory. Further, Objectivism notes that if people avoid identity to try to keep God from being limited and analyzed, then they run into the trouble that existence and identity really are two sides of the same coin: no identity means no existence.

So let's get back to reasons to believe—next up is faith and revelation!

³ Paragraph adapted from Peikoff's "Religion vs. America", p3

⁴ This includes the more technical angle of God's infinite attributes. An infinite amount or infinite size is a contradiction in terms: infinity is no particular amount, no particular size—infinities are abstract potentials, not existing concretes. To describe God as actually infinite in any way violates Identity and thereby removes the possibility of His existence.

⁵ *Atlas Shrugged*, in Galt's speech, p951

Arguments from Mysticism (Revelation & Faith)

Now, if we are looking for a reason to believe, then revelation sounds like our best bet yet, and not just because all those other reasons had problems. Revelation looks so promising because it involves *direct* experience with the object of belief. And we're not just talking seeing-is-believing, here. We're talking WHAMMO!—there it is in your head—not by using your eyes or ears or thinking or anything like that. With revelation, it is *automatic and effortless*. You know God like the guys in the Matrix know kung-fu. It boils down to:

Sense evidence and reason are not needed—I have direct contact with God (revelation). Or I trust that someone has or does (faith).

Our curious kid may notice that faith and revelation are used to support conflicting religions (we've had some 10,000 and counting), which does not inspire confidence in mysticism as a way to know what is real and right. But that is only circumstantial evidence that raises an eyebrow...

The first real problem to notice is that faith is trust in someone else's mystical vision/intuition/God-pronouncement/inspiration/whatever. As such, it is an appeal to authority, which is high on the list of logical fallacies. Authorities can be wrong or conflicted and by themselves leave us open to error... *especially* if they are not in a good position to know what is claimed. Sure, some try to equate this with trust in the intellectual division-of-labor, like the sort of trust we have in scientific authorities. But a crucial difference is that we can, at least in principle, retrace their experiments and reasoning and see what they see for ourselves, firsthand.

Now, religious experience definitely happens—people hear voices, feel presences, lose all distinction between themselves and the universe, have intense religious feelings where things take on cosmic significance, and so on. But to have these mysterious, incredible, compelling experiences and conclude divine contact does not follow: this relies on the fallacy of the argument from ignorance—something happens that we don't understand... therefore it was God! But again, we cannot go from an "I don't know" to a "therefore" because nothing follows from ignorance.

In fact, researchers have recently identified something that causes these kinds of experiences: temporal lobe microseizures or transients. When they happen, people report experiencing all those things. There is even a helmet that can induce these experiences with electromagnetic stimulation: God on tap! People vary in their capacity to experience them, and it is interesting to note that the conditions that

make these transients more likely are central to many religious practices designed to bring about religious experience: sleep deprivation, meditation, fasting, polyrhythmic music and dancing, various drugs. Another interesting result is that the interpretation of these experiences is conditioned by background culture and current context or expectations: *believers* connect with God, while *skeptics* may only see an interesting hardware failure; people *hoping* for an answer from beyond find it, while someone simply on the way to the corner store may only find reason to see a doctor.

The bottom line is that since faith is an appeal to authority and revelation depends on the argument from ignorance, this line of argument has real problems.

Okay, so what's the super-cool Objectivist angle on faith and revelation?

Objectivity and Arguments from Mysticism

This is really about trying to introduce ways of knowing that are not based on reason—for a connection to reality that doesn't come through the senses and whatever we can derive from them.

The difficulty for faith in this role is that it is a wonderful means to *belief*, but belief and knowledge are not the same sort of thing. Actually, they are categorically different, even though they are related. Belief is basically agreement-with or assent-to a statement (I believe *that* it is raining). But knowing something is not just believing it (we have all believed wrong things, a pretty clear indication we did not know them), and it is not a belief with a really good reason tacked on, or even one that is true to boot. Knowledge is not a kind of belief at all—it is *awareness*, the *grasp of a fact* (I am actually aware of *the rain falling*).

The essential distinction is that beliefs are *internal* (your agreement with a statement, all between your ears), while knowledge is *between you and reality* (your grasp of a fact—*out there*). That's a big difference. They are not the same kind of thing. But they are related: knowledge results in true beliefs, but beliefs (even true) are not themselves a source of knowledge.

Maybe that saying should go, “seeing is *knowing*, and so believing.”

Now, one of the challenges we have in trying to connect with reality is that we can make mistakes—so objectivity requires knowing *how* we know what we know, letting us be sure we haven't slipped up. And doing this is not effortless or

automatic. It is not effortless because we have to initiate and maintain effort to grasp a fact. And it is not automatic because we have to be able to introspectively monitor and guide our awareness to maintain a connection to reality through the evidence of the senses (something which *is* automatic and effortless and not subject to errors of judgment).

Our faculty of reason works this way, so objectivity is possible—we can know *how* we know what we know. But revelation does not, which is why Objectivism rejects it as a way of knowing. And *this* is why faith as an appeal to the authority of someone's religious experience is particularly dangerous: they are not in a position to know.

So that is the Argument from Mysticism. Its major problems are that faith is an appeal to authority and revelation relies on the argument from ignorance. More important, Objectivism notes that faith and revelation can't meet the requirements of objectivity and are therefore ruled out as a potential means to knowledge.

Arguments from Spiritual and Social Values

And now for something completely different! Okay, maybe not *completely*, but this last stop on our tour of reasons people believe will have a different kind of character than the previous ones. In a certain sense it's bigger and harder and a lot more important than first-causes and miracles and all that, because it is less about abstract conclusions people have come to for whatever reasons, and more about real values that actually support our lives.

This last argument amounts to noticing the many spiritual and social values provided or supported by religion and concluding that we need God and religion to get them.

It is true that "Man does not live by bread alone." Just as we have genuine material needs, we also have genuine nonmaterial needs—spiritual needs.

Some of these needs are filled by friendship and culture and art and love and other wonderful things in our lives that sustain us and give us mental and emotional fuel—spiritual fuel. Beyond these kinds of spiritual values, people get a great many others via religion, including:

- A view of the world and their place in it
- A moral code to guide their choices and actions
- A feeling of meaning and purpose in their lives
- A sense of being at home in the world, of being “right” with the universe
- A feeling of certainty about all these things

And there are social values attributed to religion, like:

- The institutions that keep society from turning ugly and chaotic

And many more, I’m sure.

So the thinking goes, if people get these incredibly important things via religion and see no other possible source, then the obvious conclusion is that we *have to have God and religion to get them*.

Folk Remedies and Active Ingredients

Let’s take a little detour to build up an instructive analogy...

Think about folk remedies. Everything from witch doctors with their poultices, herbal teas, leeches, and dances that have been collected over the eons—to current-day supplements that people use to stave off colds, to the magnetic inserts they put in their shoes, and even the hangover cures people pass around. Folk remedies are found by chance and trial and error by perceptive people. Sure, some are total bunk and any effectiveness they have is due to the placebo affect. But many really do help, sometimes dramatically.

The downside is that folk remedies are narrow and brittle: they are not well understood, so they are often inconsistent in their results, and they can have severe side effects. This is all because we do not have a real *causal understanding* of how they work.

But when we do isolate the active ingredient or ingredients (the part that actually does the work, the causal factor) we can be much more effective. We can reduce side-effects and be more precise because we only use the part that does the work, leaving aside other parts that might be poisonous or trigger allergic reactions or have nasty interactions. We can produce it in greater supply and deliver it in greater concentration. And best of all, we can study it and solve a wider array of

problems. A causal understanding strengthens and extends our control and understanding over more than just the original, narrow solution.

Finding aspirin by studying willow bark is a great example, but let's skip to something a little more metaphorical. People noticed the patterns of heritable traits in offspring—mixing eye and hair color, and similarity in features. Mendel even quantified it by carefully breeding peas, and he figured out the rules of dominant and recessive traits. We were able to breed and crossbreed plants and animals to suit our purposes. And we could understand some of the patterns in heritable diseases. That is a *lot* of value. But then came Francis and Crick who discovered the active ingredient—the causal factor of DNA, the double helix—and the world has not been the same since. This is an active ingredient so powerful, so instructive, *so deep*, that it is now the very cornerstone of our current understanding of life. It is allowing us to do amazing things with medicine, understanding and treating illness like never before, and contemplating truly astounding solutions like genetic therapy and nanorobots to fix defects. We can create organisms to produce useful chemicals and build microscopic structures. We have the power to design genetically modified crops, saving millions from disease and starvation. We have genetic fingerprinting, and cloning, and on and on with incredible solutions sprinkled all around.

Think about how powerful that is to go from simply getting by with a couple of particular folk-remedy-style solutions like crossbreeding animals and plants, to understanding biology in the deepest sense and producing incredible solutions all over the place that make our lives better. Understanding the active ingredient can be incredibly powerful.

Spiritual Values and Causal Understanding

Now let's put the analogy to work. The idea that God and religion are the only source of important spiritual and social values we see really amounts to arguing that there is *no way* we could ever find their active ingredients and understand just what makes these things work here in the world—that the incredible power of a causal understanding is just not available to us here—that *for spiritual and social values* there can be no Newton to light up our understanding and make the mysterious obvious.

Well, that's just arbitrary. It's based on the logical fallacy of the argument from ignorance. And as always, our lack of knowledge or imagination implies nothing

about the world. So here, as in the other ways people argue for God and religion, the burden of proof hasn't been met.

But let's stay with this a little longer. History is filled with cases of God being thought directly responsible for something, only later to be replaced with a causal explanation that was much more powerful and useful and instructive. From gusts of wind to the movements of the planets, from patterns in peas to the mechanism of life itself, the God of the Gaps is consistently being crowded out by a real, causal understanding of the world and how it works.

And Philosophy is no different than physics in this regard. Philosophy is itself a huge spiritual value because it supplies a vision of the world and our place in it (metaphysics, theory of reality), an account of knowledge and certainty (epistemology), the meaning of good and evil and right choice (ethics), and so on.

In fact, let's look more closely at the case of morality because it's so important...

Grasping the Key to Morality

Morality it is objectively valuable to humans—we really do need abstract principles to guide our choices (even to have our attention drawn to the choices to make). So it is not an accident that the longstanding religions all end up with huge overlap in their moralities (be honest, don't take people's stuff, don't murder them—even if they cut you off in traffic). That is because they really do help people live their lives. Good moral principles have tremendous value. In contrast, moral principles that do not help people that way tend to die off (we don't see many celibacy cults, do we?).

So there is something valuable here—and *then* there is the explanation for it:

- *Traditional Religion* conceives of morality as received wisdom for a life of proper service. Good and evil are defined by dictate; commandments are to be obeyed. Morality is to *stop* you from actualizing your low nature and to help you best serve something higher than your own life.
- *Another tradition* going back to Greek times conceives of morality as *discovered* principles to guide us in serving our life and happiness. Morality is to *enable* you to achieve *your* values.

Now suppose you want to sort it out. Which conception is right—or closer? Well, look for the active ingredient—the causal factor that explains the real value on

display in history and peoples' lives—the key that clarifies and strengthens our understanding of what is really going on. Rand did just that, firmly grounding the Greek tradition in the objective facts of man's nature and the nature of the world, and that is how she was able to make such a powerful case for the Objectivist ethics.

The result is what happens elsewhere when we find the active ingredient. We move from narrow discoveries that work okay to a causal understanding. So rather than the dark pit of despair people imagine when gods and religion are out of the values game, we can actually have a wonderful, deep conversation as we develop and refine our understanding of morality and the construction of character.

We get to look at the internal structure of morality to see how it works, where it works, and exactly why. We can...

- Clarify virtues that are real (honesty, productiveness, integrity—what really makes them so valuable in serving our lives);
- Highlight supposed virtues which aren't (self-immolation, suicide bombing—the general notion of sacrificing your values for nothing);
- Tease apart “package-deals” that really mix both false and genuine virtues into one idea (like benevolence and altruism); and
- Discover the virtue of supposed vices (like self-interest and valid pride).

By finding the active ingredient in morality, we can increase potency, reduce ideological side effects, and best of all: we have the chance to gain huge benefits outside the brittle and narrow solutions we originally stumbled across.

The Benevolent Universe Premise

Now, you may have noticed a general attitude running through this talk, almost Pollyanna-mode. That is because I *am* hopeful, but not blindly. What I have been projecting is the final notion I would like to highlight in Objectivism, the Benevolent Universe Premise. No, this isn't saying the universe is conscious and knows and cares about us—it isn't the sort of thing that *can* care—it just is. But it is auspicious to human life: the fundamental human condition is a positive one, and the fundamental human outlook should be hopeful.

Rand paints a picture of this in *Atlas Shrugged*, where at one point she has the heroine wake up to see a remarkable face—a face without pain or fear or guilt—a face that epitomizes life a benevolent universe.⁶

The face shows *no pain* because happiness is possible to us. Suffering is not the essence of life but the exception. Accidents are just that—*accidental*, not the norm.

It shows *no fear* because control of our environment and of ourselves is possible. We are not victims of unknowable or uncontrollable forces.

There is no pain and no fear because we can achieve our values and flourish. Not just in the theory of looking at our nature and faculties and their suitability to the task—but in practice, and the evidence to be seen in the sweep of mankind's history. Just look at the trend-lines: across the board we're on an exponential curve of improvement in understanding and control of our environment—with longer lives, cleaner environments, more and better food, more and cheaper energy, more safety and security, an explosion in productivity, and on and on.⁷ It's just astounding to think of how successful we are.

Finally, the face shows *no guilt* because moral virtue is possible to us. We are worthy of happiness and not saddled with original sin. We have the capacity to develop the virtues required to achieve our values and live great lives.

It's this general outlook that gives us hope and confidence that success is possible—that we are worthy and up to the task—that we can fruitfully pursue science and medicine and technology, and yes, *spiritual values*—on a *rational* basis.

So that is the Argument from Spiritual and Social Values. Its basic problem is that it relies on the fallacy of the argument from ignorance. But what drives it is the very real spiritual and social needs people have, and here Objectivism offers the notion of what we could call a *spirituality of reason*, where people can find the active ingredient and receive these kinds of values with greater precision and potency, and fewer ideological side effects—and best of all: open us up to the possibility of using a real, causal understanding to find even more ways to make our lives better.

⁶ Literary parallel from William Thomas' lectures, *The Essence of Objectivism*

⁷ See for example Julian Simon's *The Ultimate Resource 2*

Patterns in How We Debate

Okay, I would like to take a step back now because we have actually ground our way through the entire spectrum of popular arguments for God and religion—and we've looked at definitions to boot! So let's relax for a second and look at some patterns in the way people talk about these things.

Did you notice the order of topics in our tour? It started in metaphysics with first-causes and orderliness, then moved to epistemology with designers and mysticism, and then moved to spiritual and social values with morality and so on. This series is actually typical. You can have fun talking with people, or listening while they talk, ticking off all the arguments that go by. An acquaintance noticed me laying out a little of this talk and the poor guy made the mistake of asking what I was up to—soon we were visiting everything on the list, topic by topic.

That is fun and all, but the deeper point is to understand just *why* that happens in the first place. I was at a debate staged by a Christian group between a prominent skeptic and a popular theist. After a wonderful presentation of the delicately-balanced cosmological variables argument from design by a fellow sporting a Ph.D. in astrophysics and citing scientific paper after scientific paper, the audience was very impressed. Then the skeptic stood up and asked how many believers were there (hundreds of hands went up, the overwhelming majority of those present). Then he asked if—somehow—they saw that argument collapse because of some error or new discovery or way of thinking of things, how many would *stop* believing in God? All the hands went down, including the one attached to the guy who gave the argument.

Now, that is pretty interesting because when *I* argue for something, I am giving an account of *why* I think it's true, of *how* I know it—usually so someone else can know it, too. Suppose I were to lay out an actual account of the active ingredient behind morality (I skipped it for lack of time). If someone pointed out a fundamental problem, then I would have some serious thinking to do. I *couldn't* just shrug it off—my ethics would be on probation until I sorted out what the heck happened! But this is not what typically happens with arguments for God. When a fundamental problem is pointed out, it is shrugged off and another argument is tried. And another, and another, and another—until the believer runs out of arguments, or the listener runs out of patience. The role of reason seems to be different here. Believers can't be giving an account of *why* they believe—of *how* they know—otherwise they would behave differently: it would *matter* when an

argument is knocked down. So these arguments are not accounts, they are only a *defense* or a *bolstering* of what's believed for some other reason.

So it is natural to wonder: why *do* people believe?

Patterns in How We Believe

The skeptic at that debate was a fellow named Michael Shermer, and he wrote a book called *How We Believe*. There was a lot of interesting information in it, but I want to focus on three general patterns he writes about.

The first is that religion is correlated with place and time, and most of all with parents. If you grow up in current-day America, you are pretty likely to be a Christian. In India, Hindu. In Tibet, Buddhist. And so on. And the correlation is even tighter with parents than general culture. You would not expect this pattern if people were really out there evaluating a range of religions and going with one based on logic and evidence.

And in fact something *else* happens when people shop around. The second pattern is that religiosity is inversely correlated with education. In general, the *more* people learn about the world, the variety of religions, and our growing understanding of and power over nature, the *less* their religiosity (though it is still very prominent in even the most educated and scientific segments of humanity).

Finally, by far the most interesting pattern is what he learned by (get this) actually *asking* people about why they believe. An asymmetry emerged: when asked, people were most likely to say *they* believe for logical and empirical reasons, but most likely to say that they think *others* believe for emotional, psychological, and social reasons.

As to which is closer to the truth, the Pattern of Debate we've toured here can give us a clue: when the empirical and logical reasons people cite end up having problems, it almost never matters to them.

Reviewing Our Tour

Okay, let's wind down now by reviewing what we covered in our tour, beginning with **metaphysics**. Objectivism holds that facts are facts; things are what they are independent of our knowledge and feelings.

In examining the first-cause argument from cosmology, we saw that Objectivism notes there is no need to explain the existence of the world as being caused by God or anything else—that, indeed, even *trying* to ask for the cause of *everything* depends a deep disconnect because causality happens *within* existence, not the other way around. The fact that existence simply exists is absolute and independent of anybody's knowledge, wishes, or dictates.

In examining the arguments from design and miracles, we learned that the intricate wonders we find and the incredible things we see happening do not imply a supernatural hand in the world. Objectivism notes that in fact, everything has to be *some* way—to exist is to have identity—and it is *identity* that is the source of order and regularity in nature. Further, causality is simply identity applied to action—what things are determine the ways they can and cannot act. These ideas are also absolute and independent of anybody's knowledge, wishes, or dictates—these are facts inherent in Being itself.

Finally, in looking at what God might be, we found deeply contradictory attributes and an avoidance of identity. Something with a contradictory identity can't exist any more than a square circle, and Objectivism notes that avoiding identity does not solve the problem because existence and identity are inseparable: no identity means no existence.

How about what our tour covered in **epistemology**? Objectivism holds that reason is our *only* means of knowing the facts of reality, our *best* guide to action, and our *basic* means of survival.

In examining definitions of God, I talked about how God's characteristics are deeply contradictory, and that they're essentially negative in nature—both of which interfere with identity and identification, seriously frustrating our conceptual faculty.

And in examining faith and revelation, I talked about how:

- Faith is problematic because it depends on an appeal to authority (someone else's religious experience);
- Revelation is problematic because religious experience does not imply revelation (that would be the logical fallacy of the argument from ignorance—a mysterious experience does not have to be God's doing);

- And Objectivism notes that faith and revelation can not be a means to knowledge because they can not, even in principle, meet the basic requirements of objectivity: a connection to reality that is initiated, built, and maintained by an active, introspective faculty that can monitor for mistakes and adjust accordingly.

How about what our tour covered regarding **values**? In examining spiritual and social values that people associate with religion, we found that they *can* be objectively valuable, but that even if people can't *imagine* any possible secular source, it does not follow that these values come from some other realm.

And in fact, a growing list of these values that *used* to be associated only with religion are being provided by philosophy, like a view of the world and our place in it (metaphysics), how we can have certainty (epistemology), a moral code to guide our choices and actions (ethics), and so on. Placing these on an objective basis parallels the ever-growing list of phenomena in the material world that used to be in the exclusive domain of the supernatural.

And gaining a real, causal understanding of things (whether material or spiritual), is what gives us incredible power and lets us move beyond narrow, brittle, folk-remedy-style solutions. The general pattern is an ever-shrinking domain of the supernatural in both material and spiritual matters, and this agrees with the imperative to not fall for the logical fallacy of the argument from ignorance, no matter what it's about.

And finally, I explained that Objectivism holds that we have every reason to be positive and expect success and fulfillment because we live in a benevolent universe—one that is open to our achievement, one where we can flourish and live happy lives.

A Philosophy for Living on Earth

And I would like to close where we began, with the essential idea that Objectivism is staunchly nontheistic, but that it is not primary. Objectivism is not *all about* the rejection of God and the supernatural—all of that is almost an afterthought, an effect of what *does* matter in the philosophy: reason. Objectivism is pro-reason, not anti-religion.

This focus means that Objectivism is more about method than doctrine, more about reason than particular truths. The result is an open and integrated system,

encouraging new discoveries and the subsequent refinement and extension of what we already know.

Finally, and most important, Objectivism is *a philosophy for living on earth*, and as such it is always looking for the active ingredient in *whatever* might help us live better lives... and expecting to find it here, in the world.

Resources

This transcript and the lecture slides are available online at www.eCosmos.com/religion. Please email comments and questions to “greg AT ecosmos.com” (just replace the “AT” with a “@”).

Objectivism

Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*

Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: the Philosophy of Ayn Rand*

Tara Smith, *Viable Values*

Atheism and Belief

George H. Smith, *Atheism: the Case Against God* and *Why Atheism?*

Michael Martin, *Atheism: a Philosophical Justification*

Michael Shermer, *How We Believe*

** This lecture was delivered at The Objectivist Center's annual conference in 2003, but since then my opinion of TOC has plummeted dramatically as ever more organizational and then philosophical problems became clear (please see the diligent and helpful work of my friend Diana Hsieh at <http://www.dianahsieh.com/misc/toc.html>). As it stands now, I cannot support TOC and encourage those interested in the study and promotion of Objectivism to look elsewhere.*