



Carl Sagan: The Skeptic's Sceptic Part 3

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In 1985, Carl Sagan, better known for his book and television series Cosmos, delivered the Gifford Lectures. The transcripts were only recently published as The Varieties of Scientific Experience. Peter S. Williams has written an extended review of the book. His review provides some excellent responses to arguments that Sagan uses and which keep cropping up today.

This is Part 3 of the review, covering arguments for theism apart from revelation. Read Part 1, Part 2, Part 4.

Carl Sagan's *The Varieties of Scientific Experience*:

A Personal View of the Search for God (Penguin, 2006)

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Part 3: Natural theology (arguments for theism aside from revelation)

Having presented some (very poor) arguments against theism in the course of examining the significance of life on Earth given modern knowledge of cosmology (covered in Part 1 of this review) and some philosophically driven speculations about the origin of life and the existence of extra-terrestrial intelligence (covered in Part 2 of this review), Sagan turns to an explicit examination of the arguments of natural theology.

The Ontological Argument

Alvin Plantinga, a contemporary defender of Anselm's line of thought, defines God as a 'maximally great being' and argues that a

maximally great being *must exist if its existence is possible* because 'necessary existence is a great making property'[80]. A great making property is one that is objectively good and admits of a logical maximum. The goodness of existing *per se* is a great making property that admits a logical maximum in necessary existence. And although - as Hume and Kant pointed out - saying that something 'exists' does not add to the list of its properties, to say that something 'exists necessarily' *does* add to its list of properties. Given the additional premise that 'the existence of a maximally great being is possible'[81], it follows that a maximally great being therefore 'exists, and exists necessarily'[82]. The ontological argument can be expressed as a logically valid syllogism:

1. By definition, if it is possible that God exists, then God exists
2. It is possible that God exists
3. Therefore, God exists

Faced with the ontological argument, the atheist does have a 'get out' clause; *but embracing this get out clause is not without its price*. The ontological argument shows that: 'the person who wishes to deny that God exists must claim that God's existence is impossible'[83]. That is, denying the existence of God is not on a par with denying the existence of the Loch Ness monster. To deny the existence of the Loch Ness monster, one needn't make the claim that its existence is logically impossible, because one can coherently claim that Nessie simply fails to exist despite being logically possible. However, to deny the existence of God one does have to make the claim that God's existence is logically impossible, because one cannot coherently claim that God fails to exist despite being logically possible. This seems to be a price that many non-theists are willing to pay, despite the fact that no independent argument has ever shown the concept of God to be incoherent. Nevertheless, Plantinga argued that his version of the ontological argument at least showed that belief in God was *no less rational than disbelief*.

'it must be conceded that not everyone who understands and reflects on its central premise - that the existence of a maximally great being is *possible* - will accept it. Still, it is evident, I think, that there is nothing contrary to *reason* or *irrational* in accepting this premise. What I claim

for this argument, therefore, is that it establishes, not the *truth* of theism, but its rational acceptability.’[84]

He has subsequently contended that the modal ontological argument: ‘provides as good grounds for the existence of God as does any serious philosophical argument for any important philosophical conclusion.’[85]

A Question of Design

I will have little to say here about the design argument, since that is a subject covered in some detail in Parts 1 and 2 of this review. However, it is worth mentioning that, in the course of discussing the pantheistic deity of Spinoza and Einstein, Sagan makes the following observation:

‘That the same laws of physics apply everywhere is quite remarkable... It represents an unexpected regularity to the universe. It need not have been. It could have been that every province of the cosmos had its own laws of nature. It’s not apparent from the start that the same laws have to apply everywhere.’ (p. 150)

The natural question, which Sagan does not ask, is of course: ‘So why are the laws the way they are?’ Since he does not ask the question, it is unsurprising that Sagan supplies no answer. I would simply note that God’s existence would explain this ‘remarkable’ fact, a fact that is basic to science and therefore in principle inexplicable by science.

Cosmological Argument

In ‘an ecumenical spirit’ Sagan begins by examining one of seven arguments for God by the eleventh century Hindu logician Udayana, arguments that Sagan pronounces ‘in many ways are as sophisticated and certainly more ancient than the Western arguments’ (p. 153). According to Sagan, Udayana begins by reasoning that:

‘all things must have a cause. The world is full of things. Something must have made those things.’ (p. 153)

This is the notoriously unsound version of the cosmological argument, frequently but mistakenly attributed to Western proponents of natural

theology by non-theists. Sagan says that: ‘this is very similar to a Western argument that we’ll come to shortly’ (p. 153). It is similar, in that it is a causal argument for God’s existence; but it is not similar in that the Western argument does not depend upon the (false) premise that ‘all things must have a cause.’ Sagan explains that the Western cosmological argument runs as follows:

‘There are things all around us... caused by something else... Well, it can’t go on forever, an infinite regress of causes... and therefore you need to come to an uncaused first cause.’ (p. 155)

This argument is a distinct improvement upon Udayana’s proof, for few would deny the first premise: that there are at least some things around us that were caused by other things. Combined with the premise that infinite causal regresses are impossible, it certainly follows with logical validity that there must be an uncaused cause, something that halts the regress of causality by being a cause that falls outside the class of caused things. Sagan unfortunately proceeds to level a criticism against the Western argument that only applies to the Eastern argument: ‘if we say that God made the universe, it is reasonable to then ask, “And who made God?”’ (p. 155). But of course, it is *not* reasonable to ask ‘And who made God’ as a response to an argument validly deducing the existence of ‘God’ as ‘an un-caused cause’ from the premises that *some sorts of thing* are caused and that *not everything can be caused* (i.e. an infinite regress of causes is impossible). You see the Western argument relies upon the premise that *not everything can be caused*, whereas the Eastern argument replies upon the premise that everything is caused. The Eastern premise entails an infinite regress of causes, a regress flagged up by the question ‘And who made God?’, but the Western argument depends upon the negation of this Eastern premise. Hence, if the ‘And who made God?’ question is a good counter to the Eastern argument, it cannot be a good counter to the Western argument. Indeed, the function of the ‘Who made God?’ question is to indirectly endorse the Western premise that *not everything can be caused*. Yet in conjunction with this premise, the premise that something has been caused logically entails the conclusion that there *is* an uncaused cause. Hence Sagan’s ‘Who made God?’ response to the Western cosmological argument, far from

undermining it, actually supports it!

Sagan writes:

'There are two conflicting hypotheses here, two alternative hypotheses. One is that the universe was always here, and the other is that God was always here. Why is it immediately obvious that one of these is more likely than the other? ... How does saying that God made the universe, and never mind asking where God came from, how is that more satisfying than to say that the universe was always here?' (p. 155)

First of all, the natural theologian is not avoiding the question of where God came from. Rather, they are arguing that God is not the sort of being that has to 'come from' anywhere. The cosmological argument given above just is an argument for the existence of a being that didn't 'come from' anywhere, for an 'uncaused cause'. Sagan is really questioning the premise that there are 'things all around us' that were or are 'caused by something else'. But to question the contingency of things around us in the natural world is to claim that things around us in the natural world are necessary (things are either necessary or contingent – the two categories are exhaustive and mutually exclusive). However, Sagan clearly does not believe this, for he has already affirmed that the laws of physics are contingent: 'That the same laws of physics apply everywhere is quite remarkable... *It need not have been. It could have been that every province of the cosmos had its own laws of nature. It's not apparent from the start that the same laws have to apply everywhere*' (p. 150, my italics). Sagan only drops this (entirely plausible) metaphysical commitment when he critiques the cosmological argument in which it features as a premise.

Then again, (whilst noting that there is a distinction between cosmological arguments based on temporal and non-temporal causal regresses) one might simply point out that the universe was *not* 'always here'. Sagan writes:

'In modern astrophysics there are two contending views. First of all, there is no doubt in my mind, and I think almost all astrophysicists agree, that the evidence from the expansion of the universe, the mutual recession of the galaxies and from what is called the three-degree black-body

background radiation, suggests that something like 13 or 15 billion years ago all the matter in the universe was compressed into an extremely small volume, and that something that can surely be called an explosion happened... and that the subsequent expansion of the universe and the condensation of matter led to galaxies... and all the rest of the details of the universe we see around us. Now, what happened before that? There are two views. One is "Don't ask that question," which is very close to saying that God did it. And the other is that we live in an oscillating universe in which there is an infinite number of expansions and contractions.'

Sagan writes that: 'The former of these views happens, by chance, to be close to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic view, the latter close to the standard Hindu views' (p. 156). The 'by chance' in this sentence is of course a gratuitous assumption on Sagan's part.

Quite aside from mathematical / philosophical arguments against actual infinities that can be mounted, this is another instance where Sagan's argument is undermined by scientific progress, for Ann Druyan helpfully adds a footnote that comments: 'In 1998 two international teams of astronomers independently reported unexpected evidence that the expansion of the universe is accelerating. These findings suggest that the universe is not oscillating...' (p. 156). Which leaves, of course, only Sagan's former hypothesis.

Sagan observed that the 'oscillating universe' response is open to scientific falsification:

'this is very different from the usual theological approach, where there is never an experiment that can be performed to test out any contentious issue. Here there is one. So we don't have to make judgements now.' (p. 156)

However, after the experiment has been performed, we can no longer take refuge in such agnosticism.

Religious Experience

Sagan acknowledges:

'People have religious experiences. No question about it. They have them worldwide, and there

are some interesting similarities in the religious experiences that are had worldwide. They are powerful, emotionally extremely convincing, and they often lead to people reforming their lives and doing good works, although the opposite also happens.' (p. 162)

The question is, of course: 'What is the best explanation of this phenomenon?' Consider, first of all, in sketch form, some arguments for theism from religious experience.

Richard Swinburne defends the need of placing the burden of proof upon those skeptical of perceptual claims, including religious perceptual claims:

'It is a basic principle of knowledge... that we ought to believe that things are as they seem to be, until we have evidence that we are mistaken... If you say the contrary – never trust appearances until it is proved that they were reliable – you will never have any beliefs at all. For what would show that appearances were reliable, except more appearances?' [86]

This principle encourages us to take religious experience at face value, unless there is sufficient reason to doubt it: 'If it seems... to S that x is present, that is good reason for S to believe that it is so, in the absence of special considerations – whatever x may be.' [87] Swinburne argues that if you lack religious experience yourself, the principle of credulity means that it is reasonable to trust the reports of those with such experience:

'Since (probably) others have the experiences which they report, and since (probably) things are as a subject's experience suggests that they are, then (with some degree of probability) things are as others report... One who has not himself had an experience apparently of God is not in as strong a position as those who have. He will have less evidence for the existence of God; but not very much less, for he will have testimony of many who have had such experiences...' [88]

Other people's testimony regarding their religious experience carries, by the principle of credulity, *prima facie* validity. Hence Philip Van der Elst contends:

'the fact that large numbers of people of all

nations, types, and temperaments appear to have had some internal experience of God, should be regarded by an open-minded person as some evidence... for the truth of theism.' [89]

Moreover, philosophers such as J.P. Moreland have argued that: 'there are several reasons for holding that there is a close analogy between sensory perception and numinous [religious] perception. And since we know that the former is (usually) veridical, there is good reason to take the latter as (usually) veridical.' [90]

Finally, as William P. Alston suggests:

'one's experience of the changes in one's life that follow a conversion, or one's experience of the gradual improvement of one's character in the course of sincere attempts to open oneself up to the influence of the Holy Spirit, can be of cognitive significance, in addition to other forms of significance, as presenting *explananda* that are naturally explained theologically.' [91]

So what does Sagan have to say to rebut these sorts of argument? His primary response is as follows:

'I do not mean in any way to object to or deride religious experiences. But the question is, can any such experience provide other than anecdotal evidence of the existence of God or gods? One million UFO cases since 1947. And yet, as far as we can tell, they do not correspond – any of them – to visitations to the Earth by spacecraft from elsewhere. Large numbers of people can have experiences that can be profound and moving and still not correspond to anything like an exact sense of external reality.'

But against this – what is so terrible about 'anecdotal evidence'? Anecdotal evidence is better than no evidence at all!

The crux of Sagan's response to the argument from religious experience is to point out that people can be mistaken about their perceptual claims. Of course they can. But just because people *can* be mistaken is insufficient reason to justify the conclusion that they *are* mistaken. Sagan's attempted rebuttal of the argument from religious experience doesn't even rise to the level of an argument, because it lacks a second

premise to justify the inference that *all religious experience is delusional* from the premise that *experience can be delusional*.

Sagan's UFO analogy seems to play two roles in his argument, both of which are questionable. The first role is to support his only premise, namely, that experience can be delusional. But of course, experience of UFOs concerns directly empirical experience whereas experience of God is only indirectly related to empirical experience, if at all (it depends which type of religious experience one is considering); and one might argue that religious experience is closer to perceptual practices, such as introspection, that are actually more reliable than empirical perceptual practices. The second role of the analogy is to point out that even if many people have a similar experience, that experience can be delusional. Of course it can, but there is hardly a viable statistical comparison between one million UFO experiences and millions upon millions of religious experiences. Of course a billion people *can* be wrong, but it is still *less likely* than a million people being wrong. Hence Sagan's analogy does little to justify the conclusion that the millions upon millions of people who claim to have experienced God are more likely than not to be deluded *en masse*.

Sagan secondarily notes that:

'religious experiences can be brought on by specific molecules. There are many cultures that consciously imbibe or ingest those molecules in order to bring on a religious experience. The peyote cult of some Native Americans is exactly that, as is the use of wine as a sacrament in many Western religions... This suggests that there is some molecular basis for the religious experience and that it need not correspond to some external reality.' (p. 163)

Of course, for this to even count as an attempted rebuttal of the argument from religious experience, Sagan must mean that the existence of a molecular basis for religious experience must imply that there *is no* correspondence to any external reality, not merely that there 'need not be' such a correspondence.

Having tightened up Sagan's argument for him, what can we say in response? First of all, Sagan's analogy between religious practices such as the

peyote cult on the one hand and sipping tiny quantities of communion wine in church on the other hand is patently tissue thin. One cannot seriously imagine that Christian religious experience is all brought about by alcohol – if it was then more alcoholics would no doubt be Christians! More importantly, Sagan's attempted rebuttal is actually self-contradictory: If the mere existence of a molecular basis for an experience is sufficient to imply that the experience in question is unreliable, then it would follow that all human experience is unreliable – including the experience that leads us to think that molecules, brains, and religious experiences exist! Are we to conclude that roses do not exist simply because the correct brain-manipulation could (in theory at least) cause someone to mistakenly believe that they smelt or even saw one? In other words, Sagan needs a premise that restricts the implication of delusion to religious experiences in the presence of a molecular trigger, but not only does he fail to provide such a premise (making his argument a *non sequitur*), but it seems hard to imagine any such premise that wouldn't strike us as being *ad hoc*.

The Problem of Evil Again

Sagan raises the problem of evil once again; but once again he correctly observes that it is not an argument against theism *per se*, but rather an argument against a specific form of theism in which God is considered to be the perfect being:

'Grant for a moment that evil exists... And grant also that there is a God that is benevolent towards human beings, omniscient, and omnipotent... Well, it was understood by the pre-Socratic philosophers that all four of these propositions cannot simultaneously be true.' (p. 163)

Unfortunately for Sagan, it is understood by the majority of contemporary philosophers that all four propositions can be true; that is, that there simply is no logical contradiction between the existence of evil and the existence of God so defined. As Craig argues:

'there is no reason to think that God and evil are logically incompatible. After all, there is no *explicit* contradiction between them. And if the atheist means that there is some *implicit* contradiction between God and evil, then he must be

presupposing some hidden premise to bring out this implicit contradiction. But... no philosopher has been able to identify such premises... But more than that, we can actually prove that God and evil are logically compatible. You see, the atheist presupposes that God cannot have morally sufficient reasons for permitting the evil in the world. But this assumption is not necessarily true. So long as it is even *possible* that God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting evil, it follows that God and evil are logically consistent.' [92]

It is now widely accepted that: 'philosophers of religion have cast serious doubt on whether there even is any inconsistency involving the appropriate propositions regarding evil and God's alleged properties.' [93] Alvin Plantinga reports that: 'most [non-theists] have conceded that in fact there isn't any inconsistency between the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good God and the existence of the evil the world contains.' [94] For example, agnostic Paul Draper concedes:

'it is possible that there is some good reason (perhaps a reason too complicated for humans to understand) for God to permit tragedies. So tragedies don't conclusively disprove God's existence.' [95]

Failure to specify propositions making the essential theological doctrines of theists incompatible with the existence of evil led atheist J.L. Mackie to admit: 'the problem of evil does not, after all, show that the central doctrines of theism are logically inconsistent with one another.' [96] Fellow atheist William L. Rowe observes that few modern philosophers think there is any logical contradiction between the existence of God and the existence of evil:

'Some philosophers have contended that the existence of evil is *logically inconsistent* with the existence of the theistic God. No one, I think, has succeeded in establishing such an extravagant claim. Indeed, granted incompatibilism, there is a fairly compelling argument for the view that the existence of evil is logically consistent with the existence of the theistic God.' [97]

The 'Not Enough Evidence' Argument

Sagan concludes that:

'the alleged natural theological arguments for the existence of God, the sort we're talking about, simply are not very compelling... And yet it is perfectly possible to imagine that God, not an omnipotent or an omniscient god, just a reasonably competent god, could have made absolutely clear-cut evidence of His existence.' (p. 165)

The implied conclusion, of course, is that no reasonably competent god exists. Of course, I dissent from Sagan's conclusion that the argument of natural theology are not compelling – but what else can be said in response to his argument?

Asked what he would say if he found himself standing before God on the judgement day and God asked him, 'Why didn't you believe in me?', Bertrand Russell replied: 'I'd say, "Not enough evidence, God! Not enough evidence!" There is an interesting difference in *attitude* on this point between Russell and Sagan on the one hand, and H.L. Mencken on the other hand, who answered essentially the same question by saying: 'If I do fetch up with the twelve apostles, I shall say, "Gentlemen, I was wrong".' [98] In this context we should not shy away from the fact that non-theists may (and note that I say *may* rather than *will*) fail to appreciate genuine evidence for theism due to non-rational factors. As Piers Benn acknowledges:

'since some theistic religions teach that sin can impair our thinking, we risk begging the question against those religions if we assume that *if* we can see no good reason for believing them, then they are almost certainly false.' [99]

Aside from calling upon concepts such as sinful wish-fulfilment (e.g. Freud's Oedipus complex) to explain why people may be expected to fail to perceive God or to hide from what they do perceive of God, the theist can question the premise that we are in a good epistemic position to rationally warrant the expectation that God's existence should be more obvious to us than is the case. As J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig explain:

'the absence of evidence is evidence of absence only in cases in which, were the postulated entity

to exist, we should expect to have some evidence of its existence. Moreover, the justification conferred in such cases will be proportional to the ratio between the amount of evidence that we do have and the amount of evidence that we should expect to have if the entity existed. If the ratio is small then little justification is conferred on the belief that the entity itself does not exist... But if this is correct, then our justification for atheism depends on (1) the probability that God would leave more evidence of his existence than what we have and (2) the probability that we have comprehensively surveyed the field for evidence of his existence... Suddenly the presumer of atheism, who sought to shirk his share of the burden of proof, finds himself saddled with the very considerable burden of proving (1) and (2) to be the case.' [100]

Ignoring such complexities, Sagan helpfully attempts to provide some examples of things a competent god could do to proclaim his existence. He could, for example, reveal truths in ancient times that the people of that time would not otherwise know, and ensure that they faithfully preserved this revelation until such time as humanity independently discovers such truth for themselves and is then in a position to 'deduce the existence of God' (p. 166). One of Sagan's examples revolves around revealing scientific truths such as: 'A body in motion tends to remain in motion. Don't think that bodies have to be moved to keep going. It's just the opposite really. So later on you'll understand that if you didn't have friction, a moving object would just keep moving' (p. 166). But, of course, Sagan either overlooks or dismisses the fact that God has done something along these general lines – not concerning truths of physics, but concerning truths of history.

The prophet Isaiah laid down the following verification challenge to other religions: 'Bring in your idols to tell us what is going to happen... declare to us the things to come, tell us what the future holds, so we may know that you are gods' (Isaiah 41:22). Isaiah clearly sets up a distinction between idols, who cannot and so do not reveal the future, and God, who can and does. As Robert C. Newman explains:

'Fulfilled predictions are one type of miracle that can be tested centuries after the event took place. All we need is good evidence (1) that the text

clearly envisions the sort of event alleged to be the fulfillment, (2) that the prophecy was made well in advance of the event predicted, (3) that the prediction actually came true and (4) that the event predicted could not have been staged [or infallibly known in advance] by anyone but God. The strength of the evidence is greatly enhanced if (5) the event itself is so unusual that the apparent fulfillment cannot be plausibly explained as a good guess.' [101]

If and when these criteria are met, prophecies are instances of 'specified complexity' (cf. Part 2 of this review) meriting (as Sagan acknowledges) a design inference. Mathematician Peter Stoner analyzed 48 specific predictions about the Messiah in the Old Testament that were fulfilled by Jesus, and concluded that the chances of anyone fulfilling them by chance was 1 in 10157! As Robert D. Culver argues:

'Even by using the most extreme tactics it is impossible to date a large number of the Old Testament prophecies so late that they may be considered mere historical accounts rather than predictions. And once we conclude that many of these prophecies are truly prophetic, the whole narrative of human history becomes a vast account of their fulfilment and a vast demonstration of the power and foreknowledge of God and the truth of His Word.' [102]

The thought that came into my mind whilst reading Sagan's suggestion for how God should go about revealing himself was this: 'What would Sagan *really* say about the evidence he recommends if it actually existed?' My guess is that he would say the same sort of thing that he would say in the face of the evidence of fulfilled prophecy. That is, I suspect he wouldn't actually be convinced; and I think that this would say more about his 'skeptical' attitude than it would about the evidence.

However, the final knock-out blow to Sagan's argument comes in the appendix of Q&A with his audience, where, in reply to the question: 'why do you think any omnipotent being would want to leave evidence for us', Sagan says:

'There is no reason I should expect an omnipotent

being to leave evidence of His existence... And I hope it is clear that the fact that I do not see evidence of such a God's existence does not mean that I then derive from that fact that I know that God does not exist. That's quite a different remark. *Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.*' (p. 237)

Hence Sagan himself decries the argument he seemed to be making in his lecture!

The Moral Argument

Sagan writes: 'Then there is the moral argument for the existence of God, generally attributed to Immanuel Kant... It's just that we are moral beings; therefore God exists. That is, how else could we know to be moral?' (p. 159). Sagan is clearly confused about the moral argument. The argument he gives as representing this strand of argument is neither the argument defended by Kant, nor the argument popularised in the twentieth century by the likes of C.S. Lewis, H.P. Owen and William Lane Craig. For a start, I know of no natural theologian who defends a moral argument consisting only of one premise and a conclusion! And Sagan's comment that 'The degree to which humans can be said to be moral beings without the existence of some police force is open at least to debate' (p. 159) is a red herring plain and simple, as is his suggestion that moral behaviour and feelings might plausibly be thought to evolve. What if they did? The question of concern to the moral argument is not the process by which humans come to know about moral values, nor how it is that humans behave as well as they often do, but rather whether an objective distinction between right and wrong really exists, and if so, how its existence is to be explained. Hence the moral argument can be expressed in one logically valid syllogism:

- 1) Objective Moral values exist
- 2) Objective Moral values require the existence of a god
- 3) Therefore, a god exists

If Sagan really means to suggest that moral values are 'nothing but' feelings and / or behaviour caused by a wholly naturalistic evolutionary process, then he is in effect calling into doubt the first premise of the moral argument – translating away talk of moral values into talk of contingent

historical events and subjective feelings and 'survival value'; but the pragmatic material calculus of 'survival value' in a naturalistic scheme cannot amount to the qualitative reality of *moral value*. Sagan says he is all for 'taking care of children', but does he really want to reduce this claim to the claim that 'Natural selection can make us do it, and almost surely did' (p. 159) – a claim that must of course apply with equality to the mother who smothers her child, or the father who rapes his own progeny? If nature is all that there is, then there is nothing above and beyond what nature is, nothing transcendent by which to judge, to praise or to condemn its out-workings. As for the second premise: On the one hand, for morality to be objective, by definition it cannot be rooted in finite persons but must transcend individual and corporate humanity. On the other hand, because objective morality prescribes and obligates our behaviour, it must be rooted in *something personal*, since only persons can prescribe and obligate behaviour. Moral intuitions are about duties; but we can only have a duty to a person. In the moral law we meet objective prescriptions we are obligated to obey, but only persons make prescriptions (when did you last hear a banana demand anything?) or obligate us (can you be obligated by a banana?). Therefore, there must be a personal moral-law prescriber and obligator beyond individual and collective humanity. If a moral value is an objective command that humans receive, there must be an objective and personal moral commander. As H.P. Owen argued:

'On the one hand [objective moral] claims transcend every human person... On the other hand... it is contradictory to assert that impersonal claims are entitled to the allegiance of our wills. The only solution to this paradox is to suppose that the order of [objective moral] claims... is in fact rooted in the personality of God.' [103]

What about the first premise? I do not have room here for anything like a proper defence of the objectivity of moral values. Rather, I will simply note that anyone who wants to rebut the above moral argument by denying its first premise thereby gives up any right to using the problem of evil as an argument against traditional monotheism, for the problem of evil is of course the argument that because objective evil exists an objectively perfect being cannot exist. I have

already indicated that contemporary philosophers have largely abandoned the claim that the existence of evil contradicts the existence of God (the second premise of the problem of evil argument), but anyone granting the first premise of the problem of evil thereby grants the first premise of the moral argument.

It seems to me that the arguments of natural theology are quite able to withstand Sagan's attempted dissection intact, and that even those who think there is something to the problem of evil must be prepared to weigh this against the positive evidence for theism.

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