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# Absence of Evidence, Evidence of Absence, and the Atheist's Teapot

## Abstract

Atheists often admit that there is no positive evidence for atheism. Many argue that there is nonetheless a *prima facie* argument, which I will refer to as the 'teapot argument'. They liken agnosticism to remaining neutral on the existence of a teapot in outer space. The present paper argues that this analogy fails, for the person who denies such a teapot can agree with the person who affirms it regarding every other feature of the world, which is not the case with the atheist vis-a-vis the theist. The atheist is committed to there being an alternative explanation of why the universe exists and is the way it is. Moreover, the analogy relies on assumptions about the prior plausibility of atheism. Hence, the teapot argument fails.

## 1 Introduction

A number of atheists claim that they can give positive reasons for denying the existence of God.<sup>1</sup> My concern in the present paper, however, is with those – perhaps the majority – who think that we possess no evidence either way, but nonetheless think that atheism is a more reasonable position than agnosticism. Specifically, I want to counter a move that is often made by atheists, which consists in likening the 'hypothesis' that God exists to the hypothesis that there is a teapot orbiting the sun. The *locus classicus* for this is Bertrand Russell, and more recently it has been made by Richard Dawkins. In simplified terms, the atheist's argument runs: consider the hypothesis that there is a teapot orbiting the sun somewhere in outer space. We can't conclusively prove that there isn't one, but we possess absolutely no evidence that there is. The reasonable conclusion is not merely to suspend judgment, but to conclude that there isn't one. Similarly, we can't conclusively prove that there isn't a God, but we possess absolutely no evidence that there is. So, again, the reasonable conclusion is not merely to suspend judgement, but to conclude that there isn't a God. Russell gives concise expression to this argument in a letter of 1958:

I ought to call myself an agnostic; but, for all practical purposes, I am an atheist. I do not think the existence of the Christian God any more probable than the existence of the Gods of Olympus or Valhalla. To take another illustration:

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1. For a recent example, see Nicholas Everitt, *The Non-Existence of God* (London: Routledge, 2004).

nobody can prove that there is not between the Earth and Mars a china teapot revolving in an elliptical orbit, but nobody thinks this sufficiently likely to be taken into account in practice. I think the Christian God just as unlikely.<sup>2</sup>

Dawkins reiterates this argument more than once:

A friend, an intelligent lapsed Jew who observes the Sabbath for reasons of cultural solidarity, describes himself as a Tooth Fairy Agnostic. He will not call himself an atheist because it is in principle impossible to prove a negative. But "agnostic" on its own might suggest that he thought God's existence or non-existence equally likely. In fact, though strictly agnostic about God, he considers God's existence no more probable than the Tooth Fairy's. . . . Bertrand Russell used a hypothetical teapot in orbit about Mars for the same didactic purpose. You have to be agnostic about the teapot, but that doesn't mean you treat the likelihood of its existence as being on all fours with its non-existence.<sup>3</sup>

Agnostic conciliation, which is the decent liberal bending over backward to concede as much as possible to anybody who shouts loud enough, reaches ludicrous lengths in the following common piece of sloppy thinking. It goes roughly like this: You can't prove a negative (so far so good). Science has no way to disprove the existence of a supreme being (this is strictly true). Therefore, belief or disbelief in a supreme being is a matter of pure, individual inclination, and both are therefore equally deserving of respectful attention! When you say it like that, the fallacy is almost self-evident; we hardly need spell out the *reductio ad absurdum*. As my colleague, the physical chemist Peter Atkins, puts it, we must be equally agnostic about the theory that there is a teapot in orbit around the planet Pluto. We can't disprove it. But that doesn't mean the theory that there is a teapot is on level terms with the theory that there isn't.<sup>4</sup>

This argument is rehearsed at greater length in Dawkins' more recent *The God Delusion* (London: Transworld, 2006). It may be wondered why I am taking the time to attack a view which is part of semi-popular discourse rather than academic philosophy. The Russell quotation has the character of an expression of a view he personally finds persuasive, rather than an officially held philosophical position; and Dawkins is not – nor would he claim to be – a philosopher. However, the confusions that (I will claim) are present in this teapot argument, are based on deeper confusions about the type of question 'does God exist?' is. The teapot argument is only one particularly vivid instance of this confusion. Moreover, informal conversations with atheists have convinced me that it has an appeal even to many people who are otherwise philosophically well-informed and sophisticated.

Despite my use of scare-quotes in the first paragraph, I do not want to dispute the claim that 'God exists' is a hypothesis. Perhaps it is better not to think of

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2. Bertrand Russell (1958) Letter to Mr Major. In *Dear Bertrand Russell: A Selection of his Correspondence with the General Public, 1950 – 1968* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969).

3. Richard Dawkins, 'A Challenge To Atheists: Come Out of the Closet,' *Free Inquiry*, Summer 2002.

4. Richard Dawkins, 'Snake Oil and Holy Water' *FORBES ASAP*, October 4, 1999.

it as one, but it seems – to me at least – that moves in this direction lead towards a certain kind of extreme fideism – the kind that holds, not just that God's existence cannot be proven, but that we cannot even understand what it means to say that God exists. That is not the way I wish to go. Rather, I want to argue that this comparison of God with a teapot is not such a good one. The analogy in the argument fails. Many of the classic refutations (or alleged refutations) of traditional arguments for the existence of God rest on showing that those arguments contain flawed analogies. For example, it is often held that the argument from design fails because the 'design' of biological organisms is not much like that of a watch, or that the order of the physical universe is not much like that of a man-made artefact.<sup>5</sup> Atheists are in no position to complain, therefore, if someone attacks their arguments for sloppy appeal to analogy.

One tempting response to the teapot argument might be to appeal to the truism 'absence of evidence is not evidence of absence'. However, this would be the wrong response, for the teapot argument is precisely designed to deal with it. If we were to take the truism seriously, then we would have to concede that, well, maybe there is a teapot orbiting the sun after all, not to mention a host of other hypotheses (a graduate student friend of mine suggested a purple elephant at the centre of the earth). The teapot argument exploits this situation and tries to force the theist (and the agnostic) to concede: we wouldn't dream of saying there *might be* a teapot orbiting the sun just because we can't prove there isn't, so to be consistent we should reject the hypothesis that there's a God rather than merely suspending judgment. In reality, then (i.e. outside the world of fanciful bare logical possibilities) we can't either accept God's existence or suspend judgment without being guilty of double standards and performative contradiction. I have no difficulty with making the first part of this concession: making use of the principle 'absence of evidence is not evidence of absence' would lead us to suspend judgment on a host of teapot-like hypotheses, and thus into a position little different from out-and-out scepticism, once again not the way I wish to go.

In the days when theists were widely assumed to have the upper hand in the debate, it was often thought that the only arguments that cast doubt on theism simultaneously cast doubt on so many other things that no-one could ever really accept them without being guilty of double standards and performative contradiction. The thought, put crudely, was that no-one *really* doubted the external world, the existence of other minds, or the difference between living and non-living things, so we shouldn't doubt the existence of God either. The general principle being tacitly applied here appears to be: don't deny something on grounds that would require you to deny lots of other things that no reasonable person (not even you) denies, don't suspend judgment on something on grounds that would require you to suspend judgment regarding lots of other things that no

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5. Hume argued that the analogy between the universe and a man-made artefact was *no better* than that between the universe and lots of other things – e.g., a plant. See part VI of David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

reasonable person (not even you) suspends judgment regarding, and don't accept something on grounds that would require you to accept lots of other things that no reasonable person (including you) accepts. It is a bit like the principle that the cure shouldn't kill the patient. Accordingly, when I refer to it again, I will call it the 'strong medicine' principle. To put the old theist's claim another way: there is no consistent set of standards of evidence, criteria for belief-warrant, or whatever, that one could adopt that allow one to accept all those things that even the atheist accepts, while simultaneously rejecting, or even suspending judgment regarding, the existence of God. At least, that's what people used to think. However, the past is another country. Nowadays people no longer hold that doubting the existence of God is like doubting the existence of other minds. But, as we can see with the teapot argument, many people hold that believing in God is like believing in a teapot orbiting the sun, and that suspending judgment regarding the existence of God is like suspending judgment regarding that teapot.

In the first part of this paper, I want to examine the notion of evidence, as in 'there is no evidence for a teapot orbiting the sun' and 'there is no evidence for the existence of God'. I will argue that it is only the slipperiness of the notion of evidence that creates the impression that the two cases are analogous. In the second part, I want to examine the tacit assumption of the teapot argument that the two negative claims are *merely* negative claims – that is, merely the denials of positive claims. The one about the teapot is, but, I will argue, the one about God is not. My conclusion, then, is that atheists are not warranted in treating the two hypotheses as analogous, and therefore that denial of the existence of God is not required in order to avoid double standards or performative contradiction. What will emerge in the course of my arguments is that the atheist tacitly assumes that the non-existence of God is the default position, as with the presumption of innocence in criminal trials. It is only this tacit assumption that allows the atheist to draw the teapot analogy. But because the denial of God's existence is not *merely* the denial of God's existence (for reasons I will explain in section 2), this assumption is unwarranted. I will end with some proposals on how to put the debate on a less question-begging footing.

## 2 Evidence for the teapot and evidence for God

In what way should we understand the claim that there is no evidence for God, or for that matter the claim that there is no evidence for the extra-terrestrial teapot? Since the argument is supposed to be one of analogy, presumably the same notion of evidence is being employed in both cases. But evidence is an extremely slippery concept. We might minimally define it as 'something that makes us warranted in believing something else'. On this definition, the proof of a mathematical theorem is evidence for that theorem. But, apart from the ontological argument (which I don't accept) there is no purported proof for the existence of God which is a purely *a priori*, in the way that proofs in mathematics are generally held to be. Further, I presume that when we say there is no evidence for the orbiting teapot, it is empirical evidence we have in mind. So the analogy

is meant to be: there is no empirical evidence for either. In any event, I am – as Richard Swinburne also is<sup>6</sup> – perfectly prepared to abandon any claims to have an *a priori* proof for the existence of God. But *empirical* evidence is an extremely slippery concept. Those who place it at the centre of their epistemology tend to either give accounts that are too narrow to be realistic, or too underdescribed to do away with the slipperiness. Some of the Vienna Circle positivists are examples of the former, A.J. Ayer of the latter. Nonetheless, we can make do for present purposes with fairly rough, partial characterisations. One such might be: if we can see it, hear it, touch it etc., then we have empirical evidence – indeed the best, most direct kind of empirical evidence there is. This of course goes along with the view that the best examples of really existing things we have are precisely those things we can see, hear, touch etc. This view is common to realists and anti-realists in the philosophy of science (e.g. Ernan McMullin and Bas Van Fraassen respectively<sup>7</sup>), for their disagreement is about the status of non-observable things. And it need not imply that all we have evidence for is sense-data themselves, for it can and usually does sit perfectly comfortably with a common-sense conception of seeing, whereby we see tables and chairs, dogs and cats. In any event, ruling out the existence of God on the grounds that God is not a sense-datum would fall prey to the strong medicine principle.

When we say that there is no evidence for a teapot orbiting the sun, the most plausible interpretation is that no-one, as far as we know, has seen, or touched etc., one. But when we say (those of us who do say it) that there is no evidence for the existence of God, is this what we mean? Atheists such as Dawkins clearly think that certain features of the world – in his case the designedness of organisms – *used to* appear to be good evidence for an 'intelligent creator'. But now, he thinks, we possess a better explanation, so those features no longer appear to be good evidence. And Dawkins is no relativist regarding standards of evidence – he doesn't think that the reason it used to appear that there was good evidence was that people had different standards. Nor does he think that believers in the past were stupid. Rather, his view is that, in the absence of the theory that we now possess, it was *perfectly reasonable*, according to exactly the same standards that reasonableness people accept today, to conclude, on the evidence of the designedness of organisms, that there is a God. (Accordingly, he thinks that Hume was being unreasonable in refusing to accept the argument from design.) But, given that that is Dawkins' position, he cannot be criticising the theist or the agnostic for refusing to deny the existence of something we cannot see. On the other side, of course, there are mystics who claim to have seen or otherwise directly experienced God, and there are other theists who believe them.<sup>8</sup> But being a theist does not require one to claim that anyone has seen God. There are people who are theists on philosophical grounds, and hence do not claim

6. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Revised Edition; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

7. See the exchanges between these two in Jan Hilgevoord (ed.) *Physics and our View of the World* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

8. See for example William P. Alston, 'Mysticism and Perceptual Awareness of God', in: William Mann (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Blackwell, 2004).

that the basis for affirming God's existence is that God has been seen. Further, even among those who accept mystical experiences, there are many who think that, independently of those experiences, there are grounds for affirming God's existence. And among those, there are many who claim that there are *empirical* grounds for God's existence – as already alluded to, Swinburne is among them. So, then, it is claimed that there are empirical grounds, other than directly seeing or hearing God, for affirming God's existence. And Dawkins accepts that in the past, when we didn't know as much as we do now, it was unreasonable not to accept God's existence on the basis of empirical evidence – i.e. the designedness of animals. It might be objected (a) that, in light of evolution, the 'designedness' of animals is only a metaphor, and (b) that, even if it were not, we don't *see* the designedness of animals in the way that we see – e.g. – the animals themselves. But Dawkins and many other atheists are apparently perfectly willing to accept the designedness as real, only adding the proviso that what does the designing is blind, purposeless natural selection rather than an intelligent designer. In any event, what we observe – and what the argument from biological design takes as its starting point – is that organisms are in many of their features *relevantly like* designed artifacts. And this is accepted by Dawkins and other atheists (though, as noted earlier, doubted by Hume). Further, it is generally agreed on both sides that this being-relevantly-like-designed-artifacts is as good as self-evident. That being the case, we can consider it to be something we *see* rather than infer, just as we see rather than infer that the table is one continuous object. Even if this way of putting things is not acceptable, however, it is hard to see how one can deny the relevantly-like-designedness without violating the strong medicine principle. (That, in effect, is what both Hume's contemporaries and Dawkins accuse Hume of doing.)

### 3 Evidence and explanation

Clearly, the empirical evidence that Dawkins' thought once constituted good grounds for believing in God did not consist in seeing, hearing (etc.) God. So there is a common ground between some theists and some atheists – e.g. Swinburne and Dawkins respectively – namely the hardly controversial claim that it is reasonable to affirm the existence of something on empirical grounds other than that someone has seen, heard, etc. that thing. Not that that is entirely undisputed, of course, as there are anti-realists in philosophy of science. However, those who appeal to the teapot argument are unlikely to be anti-realists regarding unobservable entities in science. If they were, the point of the teapot argument as an argument specifically against the existence of *God* would be lost.

But once we admit that it is acceptable to conclude from evidence other than seeing (etc.) a thing, that that thing exists, then a disanalogy between the God case and the teapot case becomes apparent. For, apart from someone seeing it, what *could* count as evidence that there was a teapot orbiting the sun? Dawkins accepts that, prior to Darwin, believing in God made sense because God was the best explanation for various phenomena. But, other than sightings of something

that looks very like a teapot orbiting the sun, what would a teapot orbiting the sun be the best explanation for? There is a continuum here (something that is often perceived to cause difficulty for hardline anti-realists): if we were picking up radio signals, it might be evidence of a transmitter orbiting the sun, even though nobody had seen one. Further over towards the 'direct seeing' end of the continuum, suppose we sent out some kind of signal of our own which bounced off objects that got in its path (i.e. something like sonar, although that's impossible in outer space). Put crudely, an object that we detected by some such means need not be ascribed any causal powers above and beyond the causal powers of an object that just 'sits there' – it can be seen if anyone points their eyes in the right direction, and signals will bounce off it if they are pointed in the right direction. For all that the most reasonable inference from the evidence would tell us, it could be causally completely inert (recall that orbiting is an instance of being moved by gravity and inertia, not by any internal source such as an engine), reflecting light that hits it, so it can be seen, and so on. The transmitter, on the other hand, is at least a transmitter, and even if it only passed on signals it received from elsewhere, to explain how it did that we would have to ascribe it some kind of internal structure, some kind of causal power, above and beyond the power to just sit there.

A further difference between things that we observe and things we infer by more indirect means, is that in the latter case, we don't have to have any idea what they look like (feel like, etc.). In this respect, the case of something that is discovered by our bouncing a signal off it, may lie on the 'indirect' side of the vague divide, unless the signal we get back is very high-definition indeed. This is complicated by the fact that we may be able to make inferences about what the thing looks like by analogy with other things in our experience which have similar effects to the ones we're trying to explain. An obvious case is where we find birds' eggs and, if we know enough about birds, know what the bird who laid them would look like. More indirectly, interpretation of the fossil record often goes beyond what is seen to what the prehistoric creatures looked like, by appeal to analogies with living creatures. But the fact that this inference is more indirect is marked precisely by the fact that such inferences are less certain – there have been disagreements among palaeontologists regarding what various prehistoric creatures looked like. Further over again is the case of subatomic particles – there is nothing in our direct experience that allows us to make inferences by analogy. It is perhaps even problematic to say that such things *look like* anything at all.

In both these regards – whether we need to impute causal powers beyond those of objects that just sit there, and whether or not we can say what the object looks like – it is clear that the teapot orbiting the sun lies at one end of the spectrum (or would do, if there was any evidence for such a thing). God, on the other hand, lies at the other end. If there is any evidence for God, it is by means of what God is supposed to have done – which means that that evidence can only be accounted for by God if we impute causal powers to God far above and beyond the 'power' to just sit there. And there is nothing that allows us to say what God looks like – if indeed God looks like anything at all. So, when we say that there is no evidence

for the teapot, and when we say that there is no evidence for God, we are saying two very different things. In the first case, we are saying that there haven't been any sightings; in the second we are saying that there is nothing for which God is the best explanation.

#### 4 A world without God and a world without the teapot

All that I have said so far might leave the atheist completely unperturbed, however. For, even if the concession is made that in denying that there's evidence for God's existence one is not just denying that we can see God, the atheist will simply restore the analogy, and hence the teapot argument, by arguing that we have no indirect evidence for God's existence either. Thus the argument would run: we have no evidence, direct or indirect, either for the teapot or for God, and everybody admits that it would be unreasonable to suspend judgement regarding the existence of the teapot. So, it is only reasonable and consistent to deny the existence of God as well. Indeed, the point frequently made by Dawkins and others that evolution provides a better explanation of the designedness of animals, might be thought to address precisely the question of whether there is indirect evidence for God in the form of observable things for which God provides the best explanation. Hence, the atheist might be thought to have already fully taken into account the question of indirect evidence.

That does not bring the question to a close, however. This can be seen if we pursue the differences between God and the teapot a little further. There is, I want to argue, a significant difference between denying the existence of a teapot orbiting the sun, and denying the existence of God. When two people disagree over whether or not there is a teapot orbiting the sun, they are disagreeing over whether the world includes that particular item or not. For all that that particular disagreement implies, the two people agree about every other feature of the world: the tea-ist believes in a world that is exactly the same as the one the a-tea-ist believes in, with the single difference that it contains one item that the a-tea-ist's world doesn't contain. Since, as I have argued in the previous section, the only thing that could count as evidence for the teapot orbiting the sun is that someone has seen it, it is in one way analogous to a situation where one person says: 'there's a postbox at the end of the high street' and the other person says 'no there isn't, go and have a look', and the first person goes and looks and doesn't see one. If that person is reasonable, that will be the end of the argument. The two situations are not quite analogous, however, in that no-one has gone and looked to see whether there is a teapot in outer space. But the situations are disanalogous in a second way too, and a way which helps to illuminate why, in the absence of evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that there is no such teapot. That is, that there is nothing *manifestly far-fetched* in the idea of there being a postbox at the end of the high street. In the absence of seeing one (leaving aside the possibility of more indirect evidence, such as seeing a map of where all the postboxes are at the GPO) one is hardly being unreasonable if one doesn't come down on one side or the other. And this difference between the postbox and the teapot tells us something about why it

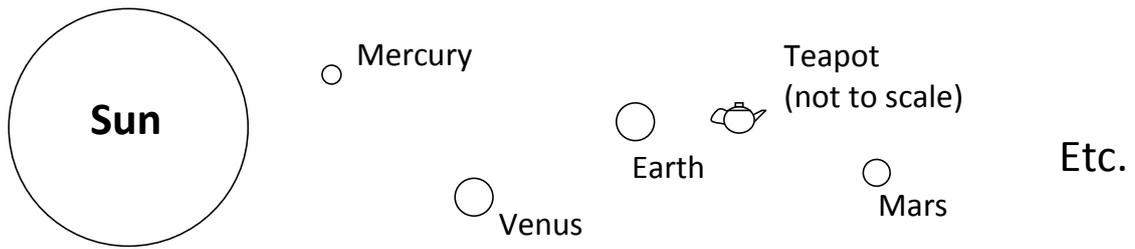


Figure 1: The tea-ist's worldview

*is* unreasonable to suspend judgement regarding the teapot, even though we have not only failed to see one, but failed to carry out anything remotely approaching an exhaustive search. Because of its manifest far-fetchedness, or what amounts to the same thing, because it's reasonable in the absence of prior evidence on the specific hypothesis to estimate that it's highly unlikely, we can say that, when it comes to teapots orbiting the sun, absence of evidence *is* evidence of absence. The atheist's argument attempts to gain persuasiveness by ignoring this issue of prior plausibility. It is true that we cannot (at present) conclusively prove that there's no teapot in outer space in the way that we could conclusively prove that there's no postbox on the end of the street by going there and looking. But part of the reason why, despite not being able to do this, it is still reasonable to conclude that there isn't, is that prior to any investigation the hypothesis is manifestly far-fetched. In the postbox case it is not, and thus we can see that absence of evidence, as far as rendering it reasonable to deny something's existence goes, has different force depending on the case in hand. Unless the existence of God is taken to be also manifestly far-fetched, the argument to the effect that if we don't suspend judgement regarding the teapot then we shouldn't suspend it regarding God, doesn't get off the ground.

The atheists might not leave it there, however. It is open to them to simply reply: 'the existence of God *is* manifestly far-fetched.' This seems to leave us in a meta-stalemate – that is, a situation in a contest in which it is impossible to decide whether the outcome is a draw or not. The outcome of the argument so far seems to be meta-agnosticism – that is, the suspension of judgement regarding whether or not one should suspend judgement. But the argument does not end there. For the far-fetchedness of the teapot hypothesis is *by comparison with an alternative* – the alternative that there isn't one. As I have already pointed out, accepting this alternative is nothing more than denying that a particular entity exists. To be analogous, the atheistic alternative would have also to be merely denying that a particular item exists. However, as I now want to argue, it is not.

## 5 Atheism and a-tea-ism

Let us look at a picture of the world as the tea-ist sees it (fig. 1), and at a picture of the world as the a-tea-ist sees it (fig. 2).

As we can see, these worlds are absolutely identical apart from one item. Where tea-istic picture contains a teapot, the a-tea-istic picture contains nothing.

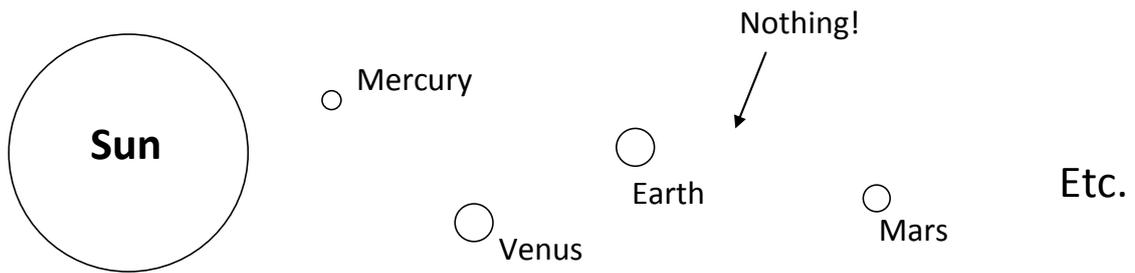


Figure 2: The a-tea-ist's worldview

To be analogous, there would have to be a situation where, where the theistic picture contains God, the atheistic picture contains nothing. However, the atheist and the theist are not disagreeing over the presence or absence of one particular entity, but over something that is fundamental to the universe as a whole. As already argued in section 2, the teapot is not the explanation for anything. The hypothesis attributes no actions to it than just sitting there. So, as far as the entire rest of the universe goes, it might as well not be there as be there. So leaving the teapot out of our picture of the world does not require us to explain anything in any way other than the way we would have explained it anyway. This is not the case with regard to God. For God is invoked as an explanation for (for example) why the universe exists at all, why it is intelligible, why it is governed by laws, why it is governed by the laws it is rather than some other laws, and doubtless many more things. The atheist is thus committed to more than just the denial of something's existence, he is committed to there being *some other* explanation for all the things that that thing might be invoked to explain. This does not mean that the atheist is committed to *one particular* explanation, and neither does it mean that the atheist can't simply say 'I don't know'. But it does mean that the question immediately raises itself, and that the atheist is committed to there being *some* non-God-involving answer.

To make this point clearer, look again at figures 1 and 2. One shows the world-view of the tea-ist, the other that of the a-tea-ist. The two pictures are *identical* apart from one particular item. Each contains the Sun, Mercury, Venus, and so on, and the big 'Etc.' on the right-hand side indicates all the other planets, and so on out into the rest of the Universe. Now compare this with the following table, which contrasts the theist's world view with the atheist's:

<p>The theist's worldview: Particular states of affairs are explained by laws, which are explained by more general laws, (etc.) which are explained by the most general laws, which are explained by God.</p>	<p>The atheist's worldview: Particular states of affairs are explained by laws, which are explained by more general laws, (etc.) which are explained by the most general laws, which are explained by . . . something other than God</p>
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At first it looks as though the two world-views are again identical apart from one item. But the difference is that in the two figures, where the tea-ist has a teapot

the a-tea-ist has nothing. But in the table, where the theist has God, the atheist has *something* (even if it's a 'something we know not what') *other than God*. That something is whatever it is that explains why the Universe has the properties (e.g. the laws) it has. It need not be strictly speaking an *entity* – and atheists have sometimes suggested that the universe is self-generating. Still, if we go that way, there must be – even if we don't know what it is – some explanation of how it is that the universe is self-generating, and more specifically how a self-generating universe comes to have the laws that it has. The worldview that excludes the orbiting teapot, however, does not lack an explanation for anything that the worldview that includes the teapot has an explanation for. When I presented an earlier version of this paper as a talk, it was objected that the teapot could not possibly be completely causally inert as – even apart from being detectable by direct inspection or radar-like devices – it would exert a gravitational pull which would, albeit to miniscule degree, perturb the orbits of the other planets and, for that matter, of the sun. Thus, the objection runs, the disanalogy I am trying to draw between tea-ism and theism cannot be drawn on the basis of the teapot's not explaining anything. However, any perturbations in these orbits caused by a teapot would be so small as to be undetectable by even our most advanced measuring instruments – assuming it's a teapot of normal size and density. In any event, as the teapot argument is stated, *ex hypothesi* there is no evidence for the teapot – so no sightings, indirect detections or gravitational perturbations of which we are aware.

In the table provided above, we can see that one of the things we might invoke God to explain is why the Universe has the laws it does. Indeed, to a theist, since God is the cause of and reason for everything (the freely-willed acts of some of his creatures excepted, possibly), then God *must* be the ultimate explanation for those laws. This points to what I suspect may be the source of confusion among those who accept the teapot argument. The argument seems to rest on the assumption that the existence of God is a question *for science* – or at least sufficiently similar in the relevant respects that the methods of scientific enquiry are appropriate to it. However, I want to finish up the main body of this paper by arguing against that notion. The issue I have been emphasising is that of explanation. Science is in the business of explaining things, and indeed the vast majority of philosophers of science these days are of the view that good science is not simply what we can deduce from what is observed, but what provides the best (however we cash *that* out) explanation for what is observed. We explain the boiling of water in terms of the motions of molecules, we explain the properties of chemicals in terms of atomic theory, and so on. These explanations can be deep or shallow – in the sense of going back to more or less fundamental laws. And it is a general feature of science – arising from its reasonably-well-fulfilled aspiration to unity of explanation, that less fundamental laws, ones of more restricted application, are themselves to be explained in terms of more fundamental ones, ones of more general application. This process reaches its limit (which I am not presuming to have been reached by present-day science) at a most fundamental set of laws, which apply to absolutely everything in the universe. If we end up with a theory in which there are many different universes, with

different laws in each one, we would presumably need a still more fundamental set of laws, distinct from the ones that are local to each universe, which explain how there come to be these different universes, and how they come to have the different local laws they have. Failing such an explanation in terms of 'super-universal' laws, we would simply have to say that the different universes and their local laws were simply 'brute facts'. That is to say, facts we cannot explain and – crucially – facts which cannot be given a scientific explanation. For scientific explanations, no matter how deep, reach a terminus at the most fundamental laws we can discover – and scientific inquiry reaches its ideal (not yet reached) terminus at the most universal laws there are. This means that the question 'why *that* set of fundamental laws?' is beyond the scope of science.

I do not intend this as a 'God of the gaps' argument – firstly and most obviously because I do not intend it as an argument *for* the existence of God at all. Secondly, because GOOG arguments take some feature of the world which one would expect science to be able to explain, because such features do not appear to lie beyond the ideal terminus of scientific inquiry. E.g. a perennially popular GOOG argument appeals to the design of animal parts, but, after all, animals are merely a part of one small corner of the universe. Hence, GOOG arguments appeal to a(n alleged) gap in scientific explanation. Scientific explanation, it is alleged, takes us up to this gap, and down from it, but not across it. GOOG arguments urge us to use God to plug the gap, thereby treating God as a hypothesis to be treated by scientific inquiry – exactly one of the things that I am denying. What I am suggesting is that scientific explanation has a terminus, where we should not expect to find scientific explanation at all, so that we cannot speak of a 'gap' in science beyond that terminus. Note that I am not claiming that we will be able to recognize that we have reached that terminus – the most fundamental universal (or super-universal, or super-duper-universal . . . ) laws if and when we ever do. So it will always be legitimate for science to ask 'why *those* laws?' But science will always have to appeal to yet more fundamental laws if it is to explain at all, so it can never explain whatever the *actually* most fundamental laws are.

It is of course, logically possible, that there is *no* reason for those laws – that is, that they are a brute fact. But we could not know this even if it were true, and in any event the claim that it is a brute fact is still a *positive alternative* claim to the claim that God or some other thing is the explanation for it. It would be analogous to a situation in which there were gravitational perturbations, radar-like detections etc. that suggested the existence of something between Earth and Mars causing them, but in fact they were not caused (or explained) by anything. If this were the case, the perturbations and so forth would be brute facts, but for this to be the case, such brute facts to be would have to be possible, even if we didn't know how they were possible. Thus the person who was an a-tea-ist *despite the perturbations* etc. would be doing something more than just denying an existence that the tea-ist affirmed. The a-tea-ist would in addition be committed to something that the tea-ist was not committed to – namely, that all these perturbations and so forth are not caused by a teapot – either they are caused by something else, or not caused at all. Similarly, the atheist is not just denying an existence that the theist affirms

– the atheist is in addition committed to the view that the universe is not the way it is because of God. It is either the way it is because of something other than God, or there is no reason it is the way it is.

Whether the universe is the way it is because of God, or because of something other than God, or for no reason at all, is a question that lies beyond the scope of science, because it is a question about things that lie on the far side of the terminus of scientific explanation. This is so even if, as the 'brute fact' approach has it, there is nothing beyond that terminus, for the fact that there was nothing beyond that terminus would itself be inaccessible to science. It is impossible to detect any difference between a fact that in reality has no explanation, and one whose explanation we are unable to discover.

## 6 Concluding remarks

At this point, theistic readers are likely to have become somewhat impatient with the whole line of argument – assuming, that is, that there are any who didn't stop reading at the part about God's existence being a 'hypothesis'. They might feel that it is not worth debating the issue in this way at all, that the issue between atheism and theism cannot be settled by argument, that the atheist simply starts with assumptions that the theist need not accept, and that consequently the theist should simply refuse to engage with the atheist. I agree with the second of these – that the issue cannot be settled by argument – and possibly with the third as well. However, many atheists – especially those of the teapot-wielding variety – do not see things in an analogous way. That is, they do not see the issue as one that cannot be settled by argument. And this is so even though they admit that there is no evidence against God's existence. For the teapot argument *is meant to be an argument*: it is meant to show that, in the absence of evidence either way – something they hold that reasonable theists and reasonable atheists will agree on – it is reasonable to conclude that there is no God rather than suspend judgement. Leaving aside the fact that some theists think there is evidence for God's existence, what I have been trying to argue here is that even if we accept the atheists' assumptions – if we play on their home ground as it were – and accept that there is no evidence either way, the atheist does not win.

In philosophy of science, the issue between realists and anti-realists can be characterized as whether or not the unobservable entities posited in our best current scientific theories should be understood as being real. There is a further question, however, of whether, if they are real, there is a more fundamental region of reality, as it were beyond or beneath the region of the most fundamental of the entities described by science. What I have been suggesting in the last part of the foregoing is that this question is, and will forever remain, beyond the scope of science. That is, even if there is no such region, science is not competent to tell us this. Moreover, since, if there is a God, then God belongs to this more fundamental region of reality, the question of God's existence is similarly beyond science's scope. It may be thought that this ought to be obvious, but it is possible for people to be wrong-footed on the question of God's existence by approaching

it as if it were a scientific question. I see the atheist's teapot argument as an instance of just such wrong-footedness.

The idea of a 'more fundamental' region of reality is ultimately the idea of a region of entities that are *more real*. This idea may seem foreign to analytic philosophers, many of whom would insist that something is either real or it is not. The idea would not, however, have been foreign to Heidegger, who explicitly speaks of 'more beingful being' and of the related concept of degrees of truth: In his 1931-32 lectures *The Essence of Truth*, he at one point exclaims: 'What is admits of *degrees!*'<sup>9</sup> And a little further on in the same lecture he says:

Above all we must be clear that beings separate out into those that are more and those that are less *beingful*. There are 'beings that are more beingful' [*seiender*].<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, Heidegger claims that these ideas can be found in Plato, and not just in some obscure corner of Plato, but in what could plausibly be claimed to be the very centre of his work, and indeed of the western philosophical canon – the allegory of the Cave in *The Republic*. I will not attempt to elucidate Heidegger's claim here, though I am sympathetic to it. The task of elucidating it, and of developing its relevance for our appreciation of the limitations of science, would be – and hopefully will be – the task of a whole other paper. I will finish up by simply saying that a similar thought is detectable in a passage from G.K. Chesterton's great religious allegory *The Man who was Thursday* (chapter 14):

"Listen to me," cried Syme with extraordinary emphasis. "Shall I tell you the secret of the whole world? It is that we have only known the back of the world. We see everything from behind, and it looks brutal. That is not a tree, but the back of a tree. That is not a cloud, but the back of a cloud. Cannot you see that everything is stooping and hiding a face? If we could only get round in front——"

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9. Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*. Translated by Ted Sadler (New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 25.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 26.