

Rebuttals

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◆1. I want to thank Dr. Curley for his very personal and sensitive remarks. In this speech, I hope to show, however, that most of his objections are aimed at a false target, at a conception of God which I, as a Christian, reject. What Dr. Curley offers is really seven deadly objections to the Calvinistic God, not the Christian God. It is only by equating Calvinism with Christianity that his objections have any force. And I just deny that equation. I am not a Calvinist.

◆2. Now, for those who are unfamiliar with this terminology, let me explain. Calvinism is a type of theology stemming from the French Protestant reformer John Calvin. It holds that all people are enslaved to sin, but that God, in His grace, sovereignly chooses to save some of them and to leave the rest to be damned.

Those He has predestined to salvation, He irresistibly draws and imparts to them justifying faith. Thus, one's salvation or damnation is not a result of human free will, but of God's sovereign choice.

◆3. Now Calvinism is the theology of the Anglican or the Episcopalian church in which Dr. Curley was raised. But most Christian denominations don't hold to Calvinism. It's simply parochial to think that all of these other denominations are, therefore, not faithful Christians. Are Catholics, and Methodists, and Baptists, and Eastern Orthodox all on the slippery slope to heresy, as Dr. Curley alleges? I think that would be a rather narrow-minded dogmatism.

[Comment 1.](#)

◆4. My own theological views are broadly Wesleyan, named after John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. I believe in human free will and that where we spend eternity is, ultimately, the result of our choice. So let me consider specifically Dr. Curley's theological objections.

◆5. **Number 1: Predestination.** Dr. Curley presents the following argument:

- 1) Predestination is incompatible with God's love and justice. (Premise)
- 2) Predestination is taught in the Bible.
- 3) Therefore, the God of the Bible does not exist.

◆6. Now I agree with his first premise, but I deny the second, that predestination, as he defines it, is taught in the Bible. On the contrary, I think that the Bible teaches that it is God's will that every single person be saved. 2 Peter 3:9 states "God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." And 1 Timothy 2:4 says "God, our savior, desires all persons to be saved and to

come to a knowledge of the truth." So God's will is that *everyone* be saved, and the only obstacle to His will coming true is human freedom.

◆7. But then what about the biblical passages on predestination? I suggest they be understood corporately. God has predestined a group, a people, for glorification and salvation. But who is it that is a member of the group?--Those who freely respond to God's offer of forgiveness in Christ Jesus and place their trust in him. And thus I think that Dr. Curley is simply mistaken that a faithful, Bible-believing Christian, has to believe in arbitrary individual predestination.

[Comment 2.](#)

◆8. **Number 2: The argument from hell.** Dr. Curley presents the following argument:

- 1) Minor sins do not deserve eternal punishment.
- 2) The Bible teaches that God will eternally punish minor sins.
- 3) Therefore, the God of the Bible does not exist.

◆9. Now in this argument I think that both of those premises are false. But time only allows me to deal with the second. With regard to the second premise, it is far from obvious that the Bible teaches eternal punishment for minor sins. Rather what separates us from God forever is the sin of freely rejecting God out of our lives. This is a sin of infinite gravity and proportion, since it is the creature's free decision to reject God Himself. Admittedly, Dr. Curley's Calvinism has no room for this sort of sin. But on a Biblical view, it is not so much God as creatures themselves who determine their eternal destiny.

[Comment 3.](#)

◆10. **Number 3: Original Sin.** Dr. Curley gives the following argument:

- 1) Infants are damned because of original sin.
- 2) The Bible teaches original sin.
- 3) Therefore the God of the Bible does not exist.

◆11. I dispute the first premise. In fact, I challenge Dr. Curley to read me a single passage of Scripture that teaches that infants are damned because of original sin. The Bible teaches no such thing. On the contrary, Jesus took up the little children in his arms and blessed them, saying, "Let the little children come to me, for to such belongs the Kingdom of Heaven." [\[1\]](#)

[Comment 4.](#)

◆12. **Numbers 4 and 5 are lumped together: Justification by Faith and Exclusivism.** Here Dr. Curley's argument seems to go like this:

- 1) The Bible teaches that God gives justifying faith to those he arbitrarily chooses and excludes others.
- 2) It is unfair to do this.
- 3) Therefore, the God of the Bible does not exist.

◆13. I think the first premise is false. Nowhere does the New Testament teach that justifying faith is arbitrarily bestowed by God. Rather justification by faith is the wonderful doctrine that God's forgiveness and salvation are a free gift that you can't do anything to merit. This is a wonderful doctrine because it gets us off the treadmill of trying to earn favor with God and trying to merit salvation. All we have to do is freely place our trust in Him. God, therefore, excludes no one. Jesus said, whosoever will may come. [\[2\]](#) But some people freely exclude God from their lives.

[Comment 5.](#)

◆14. So, in summary of the five theological objections, I want to say to Dr. Curley--and I mean this sincerely--I have good news for you! (The word 'gospel'

means 'good news.')

You don't have to be a Calvinist to be a Christian. (Laughter)

So let me turn to the remaining philosophical objections.

◆15. **Number 6: The Problem of Evil.** Here Dr. Curley's argument seems to go something like this:

- 1) God exists.
- 2) If God is all powerful, He can create any world that He wants.
- 3) If God is all good, than He would create a world without evil.
- 4) Therefore, evil should not exist.
- 5) But, evil does exist.
- 6) So it follows, therefore, that God does not exist.

◆16. Now the problem with this argument is that Dr. Curley hasn't shown either of the two crucial premises to be necessarily true. Take premise (2), that an all powerful God can create any world that He wants. If God wills to create free creatures, then it's logically impossible for Him to make them freely do what He wants. So Dr. Curley would have to show that there is a world of free creatures, which God could create, which has as much good as this world, but which has less evil. But how could he possibly prove such a thing? It is pure speculation.

◆17. What about premise (3), that an all-loving God would prefer a world without evil? Now that premise might be true, if God's purpose were to create a comfortable environment for His human pets. But on the Christian view, we are not God's pets, and the purpose of life is not happiness, as such, but rather the knowledge of God and of his salvation, which will ultimately bring true happiness. Many evils occur in life which are utterly pointless with respect to producing human happiness. But they may not be pointless with respect to producing a deeper knowledge of God. Dr. Curley would have to prove that there is another world that

God could have created with this much knowledge of God and of His salvation but with less evils. But how could anyone prove such a thing? Again, it is pure speculation. And therefore the problem of evil, I think, is simply inconclusive and doesn't disprove Christian theism.

Comment Six

◆18. Finally, **Number 7: The Problem of Morality**. Here the argument runs like this:

- 1) If divine command morality is true, then God is liable to command almost anything.
- 2) This is destructive of morality as we normally think of it.
- 3) Therefore, divine command morality is not true.

◆19. Now, on the face of it, even if the premises of this argument were true, the argument is unsound because it's just invalid. The conclusion doesn't follow from the premises. Divine command morality could still be true even if it has the deleterious consequences that Dr. Curley ascribes to it.

◆20. But are the premises, in fact, true? Well, I think not. First, it is not the case that God is liable to command anything. God's commands flow necessarily from His own nature and character, which is essentially loving, holy, compassionate, just, and so forth. And thus His commands are not arbitrary but reflect God's own morally perfect nature.

◆21. Secondly, divine command morality is not destructive of morality precisely because God's commands are stable and steadfast. The case of Abraham and Isaac is the exception which proves the rule. I think we can safely guide our lives by the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule without worrying that God will command us to do something otherwise. And remember the alternative: if there is

no God, then everything is relative, and we have completely lost our moral compass. As Dostoevsky rightly said, ♦All things are permitted.♦ [\[3\]](#)

[Comment 7.](#)

♦22. So while Dr. Curley, I think, has given us, perhaps, good reasons to think that Calvinism is not true, he has not given us good reasons to think that Christian theism is not true. On the contrary, I think we've seen five good reasons, as yet unrefuted, for thinking that a Creator and Designer of the universe exists who is the locus of absolute value and who has revealed Himself decisively in Jesus Christ. And therefore I think that Christian theism is the more plausible world view.

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Dr. Larson: Thank you. Dr. Curley.

Curley's First Rebuttal:

♦1. O.K. Well, Dr. Craig's given me a lot to talk about here, and I'm sure I won't be able to talk about all of it. But I'll do my best to cover as many of the points as I can. I've got now to respond, not just to his opening statement, but to his first rebuttal, if I can.

♦2. What's the subject of the debate? He said, in his opening statement, that it was about the Judeo-Christian God, whether that God exists. No, actually, what I had insisted on was that we talk about the existence of the Christian God. It may sound ecumenical and nice to say that Jews and Christians all worship the same God, but that's not true. Christians, because they recognize the authority of the New Testament, are committed to lots of doctrines Jews aren't committed to, most of the doctrines I talked about. I framed my opening statement specifically with Christianity in mind. Judaism and Christianity do have some common problems. Evil is hard to understand in both religions. The relation between religion and

morality is hard to understand in both religions. But most of the doctrines I discussed in my opening statement are not doctrines a Jew would feel himself committed to by his Judaism. I know that a lot of Christians don't feel themselves committed to them either. But you notice I didn't cite any Biblical passages in support of my attributions of those views to the New Testament. Look, I am perfectly prepared to admit that there are lots of passages in the New Testament that are inconsistent with the passages that John Calvin thought were a basis for ascribing predestination, and original sin, and Hell. Did he actually deny that Hell exists? You didn't deny that there is such a thing as Hell did you?

Dr. Craig: No! (Laughter)

Dr. Curley:

♦3. No, O.K.-Sorry. I know we're not supposed to talk to each other in these things. Let's see, where was I? Look, I am perfectly prepared to believe that the Christian scriptures are *inconsistent* on these various matters. I've been studying the history of this stuff for a while, and I know that there are texts on the other side, and I know that it's enormously difficult to try to work out exactly what the teachings of the scriptures are. If you would like, particularly with the issue of free will and predestination, to have a good look at what the scriptural texts are and how they used to be debated, I recommend that you read an exchange between Luther and Erasmus. Erasmus had written a work defending free will. Luther wrote a work which he entitled *On the Bondage of the Will*. Luther's work was much longer than Erasmus' because he had much more text to support him. It wasn't only Calvin who held this predestinarian view, it was also Luther. It was also Thomas Aquinas, actually. If you look at Thomas Aquinas, he holds a doctrine of double-predestination: People are predestined both to Hell and to Heaven and the

numbers are known by God in advance, as they would have to be. The basis of the doctrine of predestination is, after all, not merely scriptural, it's also philosophical.

◆4. OK. Second point: I am not here to defend atheism. I'm here to defend rejecting the Christian God. There are many ways of thinking about God; I'm not prepared to reject them all. Haven't thought hard enough about some of them. Have thought pretty hard about the Christian God and I know pretty much what I think about that.

◆5. Appeals to authority, that's my third point. Craig makes them very frequently. And they're necessary, sometimes; they're necessary a lot of the time. We live in an age when knowledge is rapidly growing, and it leads to specialization. Really understanding contemporary physics and mathematics takes a lot of work. So those of us who do not specialize in these areas must rely for our opinions, very largely, on what the people who do specialize tell us. Some degree of reliance on authority cannot be avoided by anyone trying to form an intelligent view of the world today. But reliance on authority can be tricky. Often the authorities disagree. How, then, do we, who are not knowledgeable about the field, decide which authorities to believe?

◆6. I'll take two examples of his use of arguments from authority. He mentioned David Hilbert, that great mathematician. Perhaps the greatest mathematician of the century, he said. Well, he was a great mathematician, indeed, and, he certainly didn't like the idea of an actual infinite. He built a whole program in mathematics, the formalist program, on the hope that it would be possible to allow for transfinite arithmetic without incurring the paradoxes of set theory. You don't know what transfinite arithmetic is? or [what] the paradoxes of set theory [are]? Take a course in the philosophy of mathematics. We offer one pretty regularly. (Laughter) His

hopes were disappointed, Hilbert's were, because Gödel came along and he proved his incompleteness theorem: that the formalist program could not succeed. At one stage in his life Hilbert did, indeed, say what Dr. Craig says he said; but subsequent developments in mathematics forced him to abandon that view.

◆7. Second example, Anthony Kenny, of Oxford University, is quoted on the implications of the Big Bang theory. Kenny did, indeed, say - in a book written 30 years ago, a passing remark of only a few lines, in a book about some 13th Century arguments for the existence of God by Thomas Aquinas - hardly a context in which we could expect a measured assessment of the implications of Big Bang cosmology, even as it was understood 30 years ago - Kenny's a philosopher, not a physicist, and it's just possible that he may not understand Big Bang theory very well. I don't.

◆8. Next point: Our concept of God must be coherent, if it is to play the role Craig wants it to. Craig's arguments have a common structure: invoke God as a hypothesis to explain something: the origin of the universe; the complex order of the universe; objective moral values; the resurrection; religious experience. For a hypothesis to explain a phenomenon, it must be logically consistent. So before we consider the arguments, we need to ask about the consistency of the hypothesis. If it turns out to be inconsistent, there's no need to deal with the arguments one by one.

◆9. Well, Anthony Kenny, actually, whom he quoted on the theistic implications of Big Bang theory, in a more recent book, *The God of the Philosophers*, writes as follows - this is the beginning of the concluding chapter of his book:

If the argument of the previous chapters has been correct, then there is no such being as the God of traditional, natural theology. The concept of God propounded by scholastic theologians and rationalist philosophers is an incoherent one. If God

is to be omniscient, I have argued, then he cannot be immutable. If God is to have infallible knowledge of future human actions, then determinism must be true. If God is to escape responsibility for human wickedness, then determinism must be false. Hence, in the notion of a God who foresees all sins but is the author of none, there lurks a contradiction.

Kenny, it seems to me, is moving away from Christianity, in so far as he takes that position.

◆10. But, you might, if you want to pursue this issue further, have a look at a book [called *The Coherence of Theism*] by Richard Swinburne, who's still firmly in the Christian camp - so he thinks - but who (on pages 180-183 of that book, which is the conclusion of his chapter on omniscience) argues that in order to really understand, not merely human freedom, but also divine freedom, it's necessary to restrict God's omniscience, and to assume that God does not have foreknowledge either of human actions, or of his own future actions.

◆11. My opening statement pointed out further difficulties in the coherence of the Christian concept of God. Is predestination consistent with God's justice and love? Of course, if you reject predestination, you won't find a problem here. But then you've got to make sure that you've dealt not only with scriptural arguments for predestination, but also with the philosophical arguments for predestination. Is justice consistent with making no distinction among sinners? Is justice consistent with excusing some people from their due punishment for no reason at all?

◆12. Here's one more problem of coherence. Dr. Craig holds that God is both timeless and personal; that because God is timeless he must be personal. The only way a timeless God could create an effect in time would be if God were a personal agent, freely choosing to create without prior determining conditions. Now the notion of a timeless personal agent who chooses to create an effect in time is incoherent if that agent is, as Dr. Craig's God is supposed to be, omnipotent. If an

omnipotent being chooses to create an effect, his choice should be sufficient to bring about the effect. If he is timeless, this choice must have been his will from eternity. But the effect is not supposed to be eternal. How can the will be sufficient for the effect, and the will be eternal, and the effect not be eternal? I leave that for Dr. Craig to explain.

◆13. Even the idea of a timeless person - forget about the fact that this timeless personal agent must create effects in time - even the idea of a timeless person is deeply problematic. What is it to be timeless? Well, it means that no temporal predicates apply to the timeless entity. So no change is possible. A timeless being must be immutable. What is it to be a person? Well, that involves at least having beliefs and desires. How can a perfect being have desires? To have a desire is to be in need of something which you hope to attain in the future. But a perfect being cannot be in need of anything.

◆14. Again, a person must be capable of interacting with other people, as the biblical God does. But a timeless person could not interact with other people because that would imply that it would have to change. The whole theology is riddled with contradictions.

◆15. Well, although I don't think that I actually am required to do so by the logic of my argument - because if what I have said about the inconsistency of the concept of God is correct, there is no need really to ask further whether God is a satisfactory explanation of these various phenomena which are so mysterious - nevertheless, I think I should say something about some of the arguments that Dr. Craig made, because I know you won't be satisfied unless I do.

◆16. So, Dr. Craig thinks the universe must have a finite past because an actual infinite is impossible. If the past were infinite, there would be an actual infinite. He

owes us an explanation, I think, of how you can deny that there's an actual infinite and still believe in God, who is supposed to be, as I understand it, both infinite and actual. I'm sure he has an answer to that. I'm sure he will have an answer to every objection that I raise. Whether they will be good answers, well, that is for you to decide at the appropriate time.

◆17. Now I already discussed his strange attempt to use the authority of David Hilbert to establish the proposition that there can't be an actual infinite. But consider the question on its merits, setting aside the authority of famous mathematicians. If it were logically impossible for there to be an actual infinite, then it would be a necessary truth that Euclidean geometry does not describe actual space. But this is not a necessary truth. It is a contingent empirical issue, to be decided by determining whether the best overall scientific theory is one which incorporates a Euclidean or a non-Euclidean geometry. It used to be thought, prior to the 19th Century, that the only possible geometry for space was Euclidean. And, then, in the 19th Century mathematicians discovered that there were alternative geometries, non-Euclidean geometries which made different assumptions about space. And so it became a question, how do we decide between these? And the answer that most physicists and philosophers of physics nowadays accept, I think, is: which one works best in the context of the overall physical theory. So it can't be decided *a priori* whether Euclidean geometry describes the space in which we live. Well, let's see, How much time do I have?

Dr. Larson: You need to stop.

Dr. Curley: I need to stop now. (Laughter)

Dr. Larson: Yes, please.

Dr. Curley: I'll be back. (Laughter)

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Dr. Larson: Dr. Craig. Be quiet please, we need to proceed. Dr. Craig.

Craig's Second Rebuttal:

◆1. Now you'll remember in my opening speech I said that there were two questions we needed to decide in tonight's debate. First: Are there any good reasons to think that God does not exist? Now, as I look at my notes from what Dr. Curley said in his last speech, it seemed to me that he dropped his defense of most of his seven objections.

◆2. He said: "I'm aware that there are passages inconsistent with Calvinism, but that just shows that the Bible is inconsistent." Well, I think I gave in my opening speech a consistent interpretation of those passages. If we interpret predestination as a corporate notion primarily, then it is perfectly compatible with freedom of the will to say: "anyone who wants to be a member of that predestined body can freely do so." So until he shows some incoherence in that position, I think that all of his objections fail. He recommended a book. I'll recommend one of my own: Robert Shank wrote a book called *Elect in the Son*, [\[4\]](#) which is a wonderful study of the doctrine of predestination from the point of view that I've laid out, and I think that it is a coherent view.

◆3. In the last speech, however, we got a number of new objections to the concept of God: that the concept of God is incoherent. But notice that we got very little *argument* to support those assertions. In fact, it was Dr. Curley now appealing to the authority of Anthony Kenny and Swinburne that the concept of God is incoherent. But what is the argument here?

◆4. For example, he says foreknowledge is not compatible with freedom. Well, I think that this is simply an invalid argument. It goes something like this:

- 1) Necessarily, if God foreknows X, then X will happen.
- 2) God foreknows X.

3) Therefore, necessarily, X will happen.

◆5. Well, that simply commits an elementary modal fallacy in modal logic. It is simply a fallacious argument, and most people recognize it as such. It is possible that X not happen even though God foreknows it. What is true is that if X *were* not to happen, then God *would* not have foreknown X. And as long as that subjunctive counterfactual is true, there is simply no incoherence in God's having knowledge of future contingents.

◆6. He also presented an argument to suggest that divine timelessness is incompatible with personhood. Well, I would simply disagree with this. I think what's essential to personhood is self-consciousness and freedom of the will, and those are not inherently temporal concepts. A good study of this is John Yates' book, *The Timelessness of God*. Let me quote from Yates. He says:

The theist may immediately grant that concepts such as memory and anticipation could not apply to a timeless being..., but this is not to admit that the key concepts of consciousness and knowledge are inapplicable to such a deity◆there does not seem to be any essential temporal element in words like ◆to understand,◆ ◆to be aware,' ◆to know◆. an atemporal deity could possess maximal understanding, awareness, and knowledge in a single all-embracing vision of reality.^[5]
So I think there's no incoherence in the notion of a timeless, personal being.

◆7. Well, basically then, I don't think we've heard any good reasons to think that Christian theism is not true. Now what about my reasons for thinking Christian theism is true? First, I argued that God makes sense of the origin of the universe; and notice that the structure of the argument here is a deductive argument. I argue:

1) Whatever begins to exist has a cause.

2) The universe began to exist.

3) Therefore, the universe has a cause.

And then you philosophically analyze the concept of a cause of the universe, and you can recover several of the traditional divine attributes.

◆8. Now Dr. Curley raises a number of objections without really disputing the truth of the premises. He says, for example, I'm arguing from authority. Hilbert abandoned his formalist program. That's true, that he abandoned his formalist program. But Hilbert never abandoned the view that an actual infinite cannot exist in reality. And the very fact that, as I said, you cannot do inverse operations like subtraction in transfinite arithmetic, with infinite quantities, shows that an infinite can't be instantiated in the real world--because in the real world you can take away from things, if you want to, and, therefore, you are going to have self-contradictions. And so I don't think that that undermines my objection to the actual infinite.

◆9. He says: "Well, but then how can God be actual and infinite?" Well, I do have a good answer to that! Namely, when theologians talk about the infinity of God, this isn't a mathematical concept. In set theory, the idea of an actual infinite is a collection of an infinite number of definite and discrete finite parts. But the infinity of God isn't a mathematical concept at all. It just means God is all-knowing; He's all-powerful; He's all-loving; He's eternal; He's necessary; and so forth. It's just totally different concepts. It's not a univocal concept of infinity.

◆10. He says: "Well, if your argument were correct, then space is necessarily non-Euclidean and, surely, that's not right." Well, I have two responses here. First I would say that Euclidean space can be finite, if you adjust the topology of space; for example, if you make it into a cylinder, and then bend it into a torus or a donut shape, you can have a Euclidean space that is finite.

◆11. But, secondly, I argue that even if a Euclidean space--a flat Euclidean space that has a topology of a plane--might be logically possible, that's no proof that it's metaphysically possible. And my argument is that, in fact, actual infinities are

metaphysically impossible.

◆12. He then asks: "Well, how could you have an eternal will without the effect being co-eternal?" Well, I think, very easily. God could have a timeless intention to create a world with a beginning. Since He is omnipotent, His will is done, and a world with a beginning starts to exist. Now I actually think that at the moment of creation, when God creates the world, He does enter into time. I think God becomes temporal, so that His decision to create a temporal world is a decision as well for God to enter into time in virtue of His real relations with the universe. But I would say that without the universe God is timeless.

◆13. Now, as far as I can see, that is all of the objections to the first argument--Oh, except for saying that Anthony Kenny perhaps didn't understand the Big Bang. Notice my quotation from Kenny was simply to show that if you're an atheist, you've got to believe that the universe popped into existence out of nothing. And Dr. Curley doesn't dispute the point.

◆14. Let me just quote from a couple of more recent authorities on this. Stephen Hawking, in *The Nature of Space and Time*, published in November of 1996, says, "Almost everyone now believes that the universe, and time itself, had a beginning at the Big Bang."[\[6\]](#) And therefore you've got to explain how the universe came to exist. Quentin Smith, a philosopher of science at the University of Western Michigan, says in *Theism, Atheism and Big Bang Cosmology* (1993): It belongs analytically to the concept of the cosmological singularity that it is not the effect of prior physical events. The definition of a singularity entails that it is *impossible* to extend the space-time manifold beyond the singularity. This effectively rules out the idea that the singularity is an effect of some prior natural process."[\[7\]](#) It can only be the result of a supernatural process, a supernatural being.

◆15. Notice that Dr. Curley hasn't yet responded to my arguments based on the complex order in the universe, the existence of objective moral values, and the historical facts concerning the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. So that I think that my case this evening is still basically intact and that we have good grounds for believing in the truth of Christian theism.

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Dr. Larson: Thank you. Dr. Curley you have 8 minutes.

Curley's Second Rebuttal:

◆1. O.K., well, let's see. I'd better say something about the complex order argument...Oh, but wait a second. I can't let this one go. He accused me of committing an elementary modal fallacy, when I inferred from God's foreknowledge that human actions are necessary. No, I don't think so, actually. I think the argument that I was relying on is pretty nicely laid out by Nelson Pike in an article in the *Philosophical Review* - about 25 years ago now, I think it was - in which he argued that the only way you could make sense of God's foreknowledge consistent with the kind of indeterministic human freedom which Dr. Craig favors is by assuming the possibility of backwards causation. And backwards causation is a pretty hard notion to understand.

◆2. Look, here's the idea - I'll try to explain it very simply - it's a complicated argument - but it goes like this: what do we mean when we say that a person acts freely when he does something? Well, on an indeterministic conception of freedom, what we're saying is that, at the point of action, the person had the power to act otherwise than he, in fact, did act. Now, 20,000 years ago - not to go too far back - God knew, if he has foreknowledge, that the person would make the choice he made. So what are we saying when we say that at that point in time he had the

power to act otherwise? Well, we seem to be saying that he had the power to change what God believed 20,000 years ago. That's backward causation and I don't think it makes any sense. So, I know about the modal fallacy he accused me of committing. It's an old story and this argument doesn't depend on it.

◆3. O.K. let's see now. So many things, so many things. O.K. here's one: this is another appeal to authority. This actually comes out of Dr. Craig's book. (Laughter) Here's what he writes on page 46 of his book, "The majority of scientists who adhere to the Big Bang model of the universe probably see no theistic implications in it whatsoever." This is an appeal to authority within an appeal to authority, mind you. I'm appealing to Dr. Craig appealing to the authority of Dr. Tinsley of Yale, Beatrice M. Tinsley. "When I asked Dr. Tinsley of Yale what relevance the model has to the question of the existence of God she replied, 'I don't see that all this has any bearing on the question. I asked your question to a group of my colleagues and their initial reactions were the same as mine, no relevance.'" I congratulate Dr. Craig on his candor in reporting Dr. Tinsley's response. I think it's admirable of him to admit that most physicists don't see that there's any theological relevance to their theories; but there you are.

◆4. On the business about the complex order of the universe. I must say something about that because those numbers that he pulls out are awfully impressive. I mean, Good Lord! (Laughter) Old habits die hard. (Laughter) Do I get some extra time now? (Laughter) Dr. Craig relies heavily on the claim that it's wildly improbable that there should be a life-permitting universe. Of all the possible universes, only a very few are of such as to permit the development of life; most are life prohibiting universes. Now, I'm very skeptical about our ability to calculate these probabilities with any accuracy. And here I'm going to quote from my colleague, Larry Sklar

who is a specialist in the philosophy of physics whom I asked about-I showed him-actually what I showed him was not the draft of Dr. Craig's opening statement for this debate but I showed him a draft from one of his previous debates. Some of his debates are available on his web-site and I was able to procure some others that weren't on his web-site. Here's what Larry said about this business of improbability:

The whole issue of the improbability of the world is a mess. The stuff about how delicately the parameters would have to be balanced rests upon very speculative cosmology. All of these arguments rest upon the dubious assumption that any legitimate sense can be given to the probability of some initial state. What is the reference sample of events from which we observe frequencies and, hence, infer to probabilities: a vast number of creations of which our kind of universe is created only rarely? Has Craig observed them? Is the probability from some *a priori* measure of chances? Who told him what that was? If one applies certain kinds of reasoning that are legitimate in the universe as it is, in specified contexts where appropriate reference classes exist, to the cosmic case, you can generate those numbers. But such wild extrapolations of probabilistic reasoning are simply not justified.

Well, that's what our local expert on these matters thinks.

◆5. I better say something about - how much time have I got? - two minutes - O.K. I'd better say something about this business of objective values, and so on. Look, I believe in objective values. I even believe - near to atheism as I am - and it is, in a way, a bit of a quibble to say that I'm not an atheist because I'm an atheist with respect to the most important kind of God that people in this society think about - I happen to think there's a decent chance that there might be some other kind of God - but most of you wouldn't recognize that kind of God as being God, because it's so remote from what you think of as God.

◆6. But for practical purposes, let's say that I'm an atheist because my own peculiar religious inclinations don't come close enough to what's normal. O.K. But I *still* think rape is wrong. In fact, I wrote an article - it's interesting that he should

have chosen that example - I wrote an article, about twenty-some years ago - I don't always work in history of philosophy and I did an article for *Philosophy and Public Affairs* - I think it was 1975 - in which I was arguing, among other things, that rape was wrong. I was also concerned, however, about the conditions under which people could be excused from raping, excused for having raped someone, because there had been a court decision which said that if the defendant believed that the woman was consenting, no matter how unreasonably, he couldn't be convicted. Look, I think an atheist, any kind of non-believer, can make a perfectly good case for the wrongness of rape. And I think Dr. Craig does morals no service by supposing that we have to believe in God in order to think that rape is wrong.

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Dr. Larson: Our speakers will now sum up, starting with Dr. Craig.

Curley's Post-Debate Comments on the Rebuttals

(originally written, August 1998; substantially revised, June 2002)

Comment 1, on Craig's introductory remarks in ¶1-3 of his first rebuttal.

I'm told that some Calvinist members of the audience were offended by what they perceived as Craig's exclusion of Calvinists from the ranks of bona fide Christians. At first I thought Craig was innocent of this charge. I thought: he merely denies the *equation* of Calvinism with Christianity, and says he is a Christian, but not a Calvinist.

The 'good news' of ¶14 is that "You don't *have* to be a Calvinist to be a Christian." (my emphasis) This leaves it open that you *can* be both a Calvinist and a Christian.

On further reflection, though, I can see why the Calvinists thought they were excluded.

Craig says that most of my objections are aimed at a false target, at a conception of God which I, as a Christian, reject. What Dr. Curley offers is really seven deadly objections to the Calvinistic God, not the Christian God. This pretty clearly implies that the God of Calvinism is not the Christian God, and that being a Christian requires rejecting the

Calvinist conception of God.

In any event, the doctrines I emphasized in the theological portions of my opening statement were the doctrines of predestination, hell, universal sinfulness, original sin, justification by faith, grace, and exclusivism. These doctrines are indeed characteristic of Calvinism (at least, of the Calvinism of Calvin). But they are also, historically at least, characteristic of many Christian denominations, as I shall indicate below.

The general form of the theological objections is as follows:

- 1) The Christian scriptures teach some doctrine (predestination, hell, original sin, justification by faith, exclusivism).
- 2) The doctrine thus taught is an appalling doctrine (either because manifestly false or morally repugnant or both).
- 3) Therefore, the Christian scriptures are not credible *as a revelation from God, i.e., from a personal being possessing the attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness*.
- 4) Therefore, the Christian God does not exist (i.e., if there is a god, he has not revealed himself to us in the Christian scriptures and Christianity is false).

The general form of Craig's reply is, not to defend the doctrines, but to deny either that the Christian scriptures teach those doctrines, or that they teach them in a repugnant or manifestly false form. Craig does not make it clear how many of these doctrines he rejects. Clearly he has no taste for predestination (understood as the doctrine that particular individuals are predestined either to salvation or damnation). It was unclear to me until the discussion whether or not he rejected the doctrine of hell -- he had, in rejecting predestination, quoted some scriptural passages which seem to favor universal salvation. But a careful reading of what he says about hell suggests that in his rebuttal he rejected only what he alleged to be my interpretation of the doctrine of hell, and in the discussion he conceded that he did not reject the doctrine of hell. (More about this below.) Where he stands on the doctrines of universal sinfulness and original sin is very unclear. He rejects infant damnation, but does not explicitly reject either the universality of sin or original sin, even though both these doctrines entail that, in the absence of grace, infants will be damned. The waters are very muddy here. He apparently

does not reject the doctrines of justification by faith, or grace, or exclusivism.

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Comment 2, on Craig's first rebuttal argument, in ¶¶5-7, dealing with my first argument, on predestination, in ¶¶5-7 of my opening statement.

Calvin certainly thought his doctrine of predestination was firmly based in Scripture. (For his arguments, see the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. III, Ch. xxi-xxiv.) And he was able to persuade a great many people that he was right: not only the members of the church in Geneva, but the Huguenots in France, the members of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands, the Presbyterians in Scotland, and, of course, those unfortunate Anglicans in England. Many Christians nowadays seem to think that the doctrine of predestination is a Calvinist aberration, not realizing how common it has been in the Christian tradition. Craig's reply encourages that misconception.

In my first rebuttal I cited Luther as someone who agreed with Calvin in teaching predestination. See his *On the Bondage of the Will* (tr. & ed. by Philip Watson & B. Drewery, in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, Library of Christian Classics, Westminster Press, 1969). I also mentioned that St. Thomas Aquinas held the doctrine of predestination. See *Summa theologiae*, Part I, Qu. 23. Note that Thomas clearly embraces *double* predestination, i.e., the predestination of both the elect and the reprobate. Some people are under the illusion that this is a Calvinist aberration.

I should have mentioned St. Augustine. See, for example, his treatise *On the Predestination of the Saints*. Augustine's position is complex, and some have suggested that he thought that only the elect were predestined - this in spite of several passages apparently endorsing double predestination (e.g., in ch. 100 of his *Enchiridion*, or in the *City of God* Bk. XV, ch. 1, Bk. XXI, ch. 24). For helpful discussion of these issues, see Christopher Kirwan's *Augustine* (Routledge, 1989,

ch. 7) and John Rist's *Augustine* (Cambridge, 1994, ch. 7).

So there's quite a tradition in favor of (some form of) predestination among the major Christian theologians up to the Reformation. And this should not be surprising, given the support for predestination in the Christian scriptures. The primary text is Paul's epistle to the Romans. See ch. 8-9, esp. the following passage:

Something similar happened to Rebecca when she had conceived children by one husband, our ancestor, Isaac. Even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad (so that God's purpose of election might continue, not by works but by his call), she was told, "The elder shall serve the younger." As it is written, "I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau." What then are we to say? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy. (Romans 9:10-16)

Paul is pretty clear about not leaving any room for free will here. I am skeptical that Craig's corporate interpretation of these and similar passages can be made plausible. But even if it can, it would need to be explained how God could have permitted such widespread misunderstanding of his revelation on such a central point.

It may be objected that scripture, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas (though not Luther), all say things supportive of free will. For example, scripture gives many commandments. These would seem not to make sense unless humans have the ability to obey those commandments or not, as they choose. This, of course, is true. Even St. Paul has passages which can be used in support of free will. But this does not mean that scripture, St. Augustine and St. Thomas did not really teach predestination. It means that scripture, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas are inconsistent.

In ¶5 Craig oversimplifies my argument, since I contended that there were both scriptural and philosophical reasons for believing in predestination. I did not attempt to go into the philosophical reasons, but here they are. If God is omniscient, then he

presumably knows before he creates us what our ultimate destiny will be. If our ultimate destiny is to be determined by a free act of choice (which he must also foresee), then we will need a reconciliation of divine omniscience with human freedom (a topic to be discussed later). And if there is no conflict between his knowledge and his will, then he presumably wills that we shall have the destiny we shall have. And the will of an omnipotent being must be sufficient to bring about the result it wills. Otherwise I do not know what omnipotence means. So we will also need a reconciliation of divine omnipotence with human freedom.

Regarding ♦6. Note that the passages Craig cites here do not directly contradict predestination. What they directly support is the doctrine of universal salvation. What they apparently deny is the doctrine of Hell. (This is why, in my first rebuttal, I was unclear whether Craig had denied the existence of Hell.)

Also, it appears from ♦6 that Craig understands the notion of human freedom in such a way that humans, in virtue of their freedom, have the power to frustrate the will of God. But an omnipotent being would seem to be one whose will *cannot* be frustrated. If God creates humans with Craigian freedom, does he cease to be omnipotent?

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Comment 3, on Craig's second rebuttal argument in ♦♦8-9, dealing with my second argument, on hell, in ♦♦8-13 of my opening statement.

This is a caricature of my argument. My definition of a sinner (in ♦9, when I was conceding, for the sake of the argument, that we are all sinners) was: someone who has, at least once in his life, done something seriously wrong. I pointed out that on that understanding of the term, there will still be very significant differences of degree of guilt between different sinners. Yet it appears that the doctrine of hell requires all these sinners to be treated alike (except for those lucky souls who are the beneficiaries of grace). This would follow from those texts which condemn the greater part of mankind to hell, such as

Matt. 7:13-14, 22:1-14. (The proposition that the great majority of mankind are condemned to hell is an implication, not only of the scriptural passages just cited, but also - so long as the majority of mankind do not have the necessary faith in Christ - of the doctrine that faith in Christ is a necessary and sufficient condition for salvation.)

A proper formal statement of my argument would have gone like this:

- (1) It would be unjust to punish all sinners eternally when there are so many differences in degree of culpability even among those who have done something seriously wrong at least once in their lives.
- (2) The Bible teaches that most of us, in spite of these differences in degree of culpability, will receive the same eternal punishment (we all deserve it, but a minority will not get it, because they will benefit from divine grace).
- (3) Therefore, the Bible teaches a doctrine which represents God as behaving unjustly.
- (4) If the Biblical doctrine is accurate, then God is not perfectly just.
- (5) The Bible is not credibly the revelation of a being possessing the moral attributes Christians suppose God to have.

If you wish to verify that this is a fair account of what I was saying, you can go back to the [Opening Statements](#) and click on Curley's second argument.

Readers of Dante's *Divine Comedy* will be aware that medieval Catholic Christianity developed a doctrine to deal with this problem: although the wicked are all punished eternally, there are still degrees of awfulness in their punishment. The wicked may be sent to different circles of hell, depending on their degree of culpability. They also developed the doctrine of purgatory, according to which there is a middle ground between heaven and hell, in which people who don't make it to heaven on the first round, but aren't wicked enough to be immediately consigned to hell, get a second chance. This more complicated theory of the afterlife seems to me less blatantly unjust. But Protestants who believe in hell have generally rejected it, on the ground that it has no scriptural basis. And I think they're right about that.

¶9 of Craig's first rebuttal is pretty astonishing. It was not part of my argument to claim that "Minor sins do not deserve eternal punishment" (though of course I think that's true). So Craig had no need to rebut that proposition. Nevertheless, he goes out of his

way to reject it. Apparently he thinks minor sins *do* deserve eternal punishment. (I suppose the view is that even a 'minor' sin constitutes a rejection of God, which is a sin of infinite magnitude.) I can understand why he would not want to defend that view in a public forum, but it's curious that he would nevertheless commit himself to it in public. I think this is symptomatic of a strain of perfectionism in Christian thought, illustrated by Jesus' injunction: "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt. 5:48) Cf. Matt. 19:16-30 (a story told also in Mark 10:17-27 and Luke 18:18-30). More about this below.

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Comment 4, on Craig's third rebuttal argument, in ¶¶10-11, dealing with my argument about original sin, in ¶¶14-18 of my opening statement.

¶10. The argument Craig attributes to me looks obviously invalid. The conclusion doesn't follow from the premises, whatever you may think of the truth of the premises.

But I think the argument I actually offered was a better argument:

- 1) The doctrine of original sin holds that, since the fall of Adam, all human beings come into the world tainted by his sin (where this 'taint' is understood to be serious enough that, in the absence of grace, the sinner would receive eternal damnation).
- 2) The Christian scriptures teach the doctrine of original sin.
- 3) The doctrine of original sin, so understood, is an appalling doctrine (the idea that one man's sin might be transmitted to all his descendants, making them guilty before they have even had the opportunity to do anything, is morally repugnant - the doctrine that all humans are sinners in the requisite sense seems manifestly false).
- 4) Therefore, the Christian scriptures are not credible as a revelation from God.
- 5) Therefore, the Christian God does not exist (i.e., if there is a god, he is not the God of the Christian scriptures).

If you wish to verify that this is a more accurate statement of my argument, you can click on [Opening Statements](#) and go to Curley's Third Argument.

¶11. Craig informs us that he rejects the first premise of the argument he ascribes to me; he does not believe in *infant damnation*. I am gratified to learn that. But I wish he had addressed the central issue I raised: whether someone who is committed to the Christian

scriptures as an authoritative revelation from God is obliged to accept *original sin*? It's worth noting that Craig does not explicitly reject the second premise, that the Christian scriptures teach the doctrine of original sin. He limits himself to denying that the Christian scriptures teach infant damnation.

Now I know of no passage in the Christian scriptures which *explicitly* teaches infant damnation. Nevertheless, the principal text which teaches original sin (Romans 3-5, esp. 5:12-21) is sufficiently explicit about *the universality of sin* that most Christians, historically, have taken it to *imply* that, in the absence of a special act of grace, infants will be damned, just like any other sinner: "Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned..." (Romans 5:12) After all, how could it be that *all* men are sinners if people start life with a clean slate? If people were born morally neutral, neither good nor evil, but with the power to choose good, wouldn't you think that at least someone would succeed in using his free will to live (if not a totally blameless life, then at least) a life which involved no serious wrong-doing? And wouldn't this be particularly likely in the case of those who die very young, and haven't had many opportunities to do something seriously wrong? So the doctrine that sin is universal seems to require the doctrine of that sinfulness is inherited from the sin of our first parents, in order to explain how sin could be universal. Historically, it has proven hard to avoid accepting original sin without falling into the heresy of pelagianism. For the benefit of those who are not familiar with the history of the early church, I cite the following passage from the article on pelagianism in the *Columbia Encyclopedia*:

Pelagius thought that St. Augustine was excessively pessimistic in his view that humanity is sinful by nature and must rely totally upon grace for salvation. Instead Pelagius taught that human beings have a natural capacity to reject evil and seek God, that Christ's admonition, "Be ye perfect," presupposes this capacity, and that grace is the natural ability given by God to seek and to serve God. Pelagius rejected the doctrine of original sin; he taught that children are born innocent of the sin of Adam. Baptism, accordingly, ceased to be interpreted as a regenerative sacrament. Pelagius challenged the very function of the church, claiming that the

law as well as the gospel can lead one to heaven and that pagans had been able to enter heaven by virtue of their moral actions before the coming of Christ. The church fought Pelagianism from the time that Celestius was denied ordination in 411. In 415, Augustine warned St. Jerome in Palestine that Pelagius was propagating a dangerous heresy there, and Jerome acted to prevent its spread in the East. Pelagianism was condemned by East and West at the Council of Ephesus (431). A compromise doctrine, Semi-Pelagianism, became popular in the 5th and 6th cent. in France, Britain, and Ireland. Semi-Pelagians taught that although grace was necessary for salvation, men could, apart from grace, desire the gift of salvation, and that they could, of themselves, freely accept and persevere in grace. Semi-Pelagians also rejected the Augustinian doctrine of predestination and held that God willed the salvation of all men equally. At the instance of St. Caesarius of Arles, Semi-Pelagianism was condemned at the Council of Orange (529). I believe that many contemporary Christians are heretical by the standards of these early church councils. Craig himself certainly sounds like a semi-pelagian, at the least. But this is not merely a matter of early church councils. Consider the agreement recently reached between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation, as reported in their joint declaration:

All persons depend completely on the saving grace of God for their salvation. The freedom they possess in relation to persons and the things of this world is no freedom in relation to salvation, for as sinners they stand under God's judgment and are incapable of turning themselves to God to seek deliverance, of meriting their justification before God, or of attaining salvation by their own abilities. Justification takes place solely by God's grace. (*New York Times*, 26 June 1998, pp. 1 & 12.)

So the teachings of the early church councils seem to be alive and well in the world's largest Christian denomination, as well as its younger (and smaller) brother. [III](#) ♦ It may be, of course, that many modern members of those denominations are not in agreement with their leadership, and so would be heretical by the standards which have operated throughout most of the history of Christianity. I think this is very often the case on this and many other issues. [Back to Craig's Rebuttals](#)

Comment 5, on Craig's rebuttal ¶¶12-13 of my fourth and fifth arguments (on justification by faith and exclusivism) in ¶¶19-22 of my opening statement.

In retrospect I can see why Craig ran my fourth and fifth arguments together. They are not clearly separated in my opening statement. Nevertheless, I think there are two distinct arguments to be made; it will be conducive to clarity to separate them out and state them more explicitly.

Argument four:

- 1) Suppose pelagianism is false. I.e., suppose we cannot achieve salvation merely by using our own natural abilities, but require a special act of divine grace to assist us in doing whatever it is that is necessary for salvation. (Augustine was fond of citing John 15:5, ¶Apart from me you can do nothing.¶)
- 2) What in fact enables us to achieve salvation is faith. (Cf. John 3:16-18, ¶For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life¶ those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.¶)
- 3) We acquire faith, not by using our natural abilities, but by a free act of divine grace. (This would seem to follow from 1 & 2, but also to be affirmed in Ephesians 2:8, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...")
- 4) If God grants us faith as a free act of grace, then faith is not something we have somehow merited. ("Grace is God's unmerited favor." *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, commentary on Ephesians 2:5)
- 5) If faith is not something we have somehow merited, then it is granted arbitrarily. (As Paul says in Romans 9:18, ¶He has mercy on whomever he chooses, and hardens the heart of whomever he chooses.¶)
- 6) If it is faith which enables us to achieve salvation, and faith is granted arbitrarily, then salvation is granted arbitrarily.
- 7) So (according to scripture) God grants some people salvation arbitrarily, and condemns others to eternal punishment arbitrarily.
I conclude that
- 8) The scriptural conception of God is not the conception of a morally perfect being, as Christian theology typically supposes God to be.
- 9) So the Christian scriptures are not credible as the revelation of a morally

perfect being.

If there is a god, he is not the God of the Christian scriptures.

To verify that this is a fair restatement of my argument, click on [Opening Statements](#) and go to Curley's Fourth and Fifth Arguments.

Craig's response to this argument in ¶13 seems bizarre. He grants that faith is bestowed as a free gift, which the person who receives the gift has done nothing to merit. This is the wonderful doctrine which gets us off the treadmill of trying to win favor with God. But if the person who receives the gift is not distinguished from the person who doesn't by some difference of merit, then favoring the one over the other seems to be exactly what I meant by an arbitrary action. I can only suppose that Craig is rejecting step 5 of the argument given just above. But I can't imagine on what grounds he could do that.

Suppose I, as a teacher, have two students whose work is equal in merit. To preserve the theological parallel, let's suppose they both deserve to fail. As an act of mercy, I give one student an A; but I show no mercy to the other, and give him the failing grade he deserves. If that's not acting arbitrarily, I don't know what is. I can understand the student who gets the A being grateful for my mercy, and thinking that I'm treating him wonderfully well. But I would not like to defend my actions to the student whom I failed.

Argument five (now stated much more fully than in my opening statement):

- 1) If the Christian scriptures are to be believed, then God makes faith in Jesus both a necessary and a sufficient condition for salvation. (John 3:16-18, cited above)
- 2) Most people, even after centuries of evangelical work, do not believe in Jesus in the requisite way (e.g., though those who are well-informed will acknowledge his historical existence, most people do not accept Jesus as their savior, believe that he was the only son of God, etc.).^[2]
- 3) Many people who are in this position (i.e., do not believe in Jesus in the way

requisite for salvation) are tolerably decent people; some might even be saints in their own religious traditions.

4) Many people who lack the required faith do so after having fairly examined the evidence and decided in good conscience that traditional Christian doctrine is incredible.

5) Others who lack the required faith have never heard the gospel preached, and have never had a fair opportunity to examine the evidence in favor of Christianity, because they may have been born in the wrong time or place.

6) Still others may have heard the gospel preached and had an opportunity to examine the evidence for it, but not a fair opportunity, because they have been trained from early childhood to accept a doctrine inconsistent with Christianity, and they are incapable of imagining that the doctrine their parents and ministers have taught them could be wrong.

7) It would be unfair to punish any of the people in the groups referred to in 4 - 6 for their lack of faith, particularly if they are also in the group referred to in 3, and particularly if the punishment is to be eternal.

8) The scriptural conception of God is not the conception of a morally perfect being, as Christian theology typically supposes God to be.

From this point the argument continues as before. In reformulating my argument here,

I've amplified it considerably, but not changed the basic thrust of the argument. To

verify that click on [Opening Statements](#) and go to Curley's Fourth and Fifth Arguments.

In responding to this argument in ¶13 Craig writes: ¶All we have to do is freely

place our trust in [God]. God, therefore, excludes no one. Jesus said, ¶whosoever

will may come.¶ But some people freely exclude God from their lives.¶ Here Craig

seems to revert to pelagianism. There is something we can do to achieve salvation: freely

place our trust in God. And if we freely reject him, presumably we deserve damnation. I

do not see how this is to be reconciled with Craig's statement, in response to the fourth

argument, that faith is a free gift of God. [Back to Craig's Rebuttals](#)

Comment 6, on Craig's sixth rebuttal argument (in ¶¶15-17) of what I had said about the problem of evil in ¶¶24-36 of my opening statement.

Again I reject Craig's representation of my position. He seems to have confused me

with John Mackie here. He represents me as posing the problem of evil in what

philosophers of religion call its 'logical' form, i.e., as holding that the existence of any evil at all is logically incompatible with the existence of a God having the attributes Christians normally attribute to God (specifically, being all powerful, all-knowing and all good). The classic article here is Mackie's "Evil and Omnipotence" (*Mind* 1955, pp. 200-12, and widely reprinted, e.g., in the collection *The Problem of Evil*, ed. by Marilyn and Robert Adams, Oxford, 1990). Many people believe that Alvin Plantinga effectively refuted Mackie in his book *God, Freedom & Evil* (Eerdmans, 1974). Mackie himself eventually abandoned the argument in the form in which he had given it in that early article, though he did not accept Plantinga's defense. See his *Miracle of Theism*, 1982, ch. 9.

Since I agree with the Mackie of 1982 that the 1955 version of the argument is flawed, I never asserted either of the premises Craig labels as crucial (2 & 3). Nor does it seem to me that I assumed them without stating them. In fact, I conceded the essential point in Plantinga's reply to Mackie, viz., that God's existence is not logically incompatible with the existence of evil, since it is *logically possible* that an omnipotent, omnibenevolent being might have a morally satisfactory reason for permitting evil, might need to permit evil in order to achieve some greater good. (See my discussion of the greater goods defense.)

My version of the argument emphasized that the good which Plantinga and Craig suggest might justify the occurrence of evil - human freedom - does not look as though it can justify much of the evil which occurs. In particular, it does not look as though it can justify the great suffering of animals *before* the emergence of humans or the frequently inequitable ways good and evil are distributed in the world *after* the emergence of humans. (This is all, of course, on the assumption that human freedom really is consistent with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient being. At this stage I'm conceding that for the sake of the argument, though I

would insist that it still remains to be shown.)

Apparently Craig's strategy is: if you can't respond to the argument which your opponent actually makes, then reformulate it as an argument you can respond to. My argument might better be summarized as follows:

- 1) There is a great deal of evil in the world (undeserved suffering and sin being the two most interesting cases).
- 2) It may be possible to justify the existence of *some* of this evil as being *logically* necessary in order to realize some greater good (perhaps: human freedom, and the moral goodness which it makes possible, or character development, or acquiring a deeper knowledge of God, or what have you).
- 3) But a great deal of the evil which exists in the world has no discernible connection with any of the goods theologians allege in its defense (e.g., the suffering of animals, particularly prior to the emergence of man, or when caused by purely natural causes, like a flood).
- 4) And even if it were possible to justify all the innocent suffering by showing that it is a necessary condition for some greater good, there would still be a question about the distribution of the costs and benefits.
(Suppose it were possible to bring about a great good for one person -- saving his life from a fatal illness, perhaps -- by doing substantial, though not equally great, harm to someone else -- say, removing an organ which is not essential to life, but whose removal will seriously diminish that person's ability to function. Would it be fair to impose such a sacrifice on the person whose organ is to be removed?)
- 5) In cases where one person's innocent suffering results from another person's misuse of their free will, it will not be sufficient to justify the suffering to show the person who misused his free will got a good greater than the evil the first person suffered.

I conclude that the free will defense does not really resolve the problem of evil. To verify that this is a more accurate statement of my argument, go to [Opening Statements](#) and click on Curley's Sixth Argument. To go back to Craig's Rebuttals, click on [Back to Craig's Rebuttals](#).

Comment 7, dealing with ¶¶18-21 of Craig's first rebuttal, which in turn deal with ¶¶37-40 of my opening statement.

I agree that the argument Craig formulates in ¶18 is invalid. But as usual, I don't see that argument as a fair restatement of my own. A better summary of my argument would be the following. Suppose, for the sake of the argument, that:

1) If God does not exist, it is impossible to make sense of objective moral values. (Many Christians, including Craig, believe this. It's common to quote

Dostoevsky's character Ivan, who said that if God does not exist, everything is permissible.)

2) But if God does exist, then objective moral values make sense: morality has an ultimate foundation in the will of God.

(This is most common way of attempting to make sense, theistically, of the existence of objective moral values. What is objectively right, or obligatory, is what God commands.

What is objectively wrong is what God forbids. This gives us a universal standard, transcending the commandments of human law, which are unfortunately apt to vary from one time and place to another.)

3) If the ultimate basis for morality is the will of God, then our fundamental moral obligation is to obey God, no matter what he commands.

4) If our fundamental obligation is to obey God, no matter what he commands, then anything whatever might turn out to be obligatory, depending on what he chooses to command.

5) If anything whatever might turn out to be obligatory, then the common view that there are some things (like killing innocent children, or rape) which are simply wrong, and strictly impermissible, is false.

6) But that common view is not false.

7) Therefore, the fundamental moral obligation is not to obey God, no matter what.

8) Furthermore, the Christian scriptures, to the extent that they teach that we have an unconditional duty to obey the commands of God, no matter what they are, are not credible as divine revelation.

To verify that this is a fair statement of the argument, click on [Opening Statements](#) and go to Curley's Seventh Argument.

I think Craig would accept steps 1-3 of this argument, but object to step 4. I assume he would accept the antecedent of that conditional (our fundamental obligation is to obey

God, no matter what he commands), but would reject the consequent (anything whatever might turn out to be obligatory, depending on what God chooses to command).

Craig's idea here seems to be:

1) God is essentially a morally perfect being (loving, holy, compassionate, just, etc.).

2) A being who is essentially morally perfect *cannot* command anything which is inherently immoral (i.e., God *necessarily* commands acts which are at least consistent with morality).

3) Therefore, God is not liable to command anything whatever.

The basic problem with this response is that if things don't have any inherent moral value independently of God's command, then morality can't act as a constraint on

God's will: whatever he wills will be right, simply in virtue of the fact that he wills it.

So God might well command the slaughter of the innocent, without detriment to his moral perfection, since his commanding the slaughter of the innocent would make it right to slaughter the innocent, and right to command it. Conversely, if certain actions are inherently immoral (that being the reason why we can be confident that a morally perfect being would not command them), then it does not look as though we need God's prohibition to make them immoral.

(Some people might also raise the following difficulty: if you assume that God's commands flow necessarily from his nature, then it looks as though you may be compromising God's freedom. We need to have it explained how God's actions can be both free and necessary. I don't think this is an insuperable obstacle, but it might require Craig to embrace a conception of freedom he would find uncongenial.)

When I first heard, and then subsequently read, Craig's #21, I was quite mystified by it. I'm still puzzled. What does Craig mean when he says that the case of Abraham and Isaac is "the exception that proves the rule"?

At first I thought: Craig is in Abraham's dilemma. (I take the concept from Robert Adams's *Finite and Infinite Goods*, ch. 12, but have modified the statement of the

dilemma.) Craig would like to accept each of the following three propositions:

- 1) God commanded Abraham to kill his son, Isaac, who was innocent of any wrong-doing which might have justified this act.
- 2) God never commands anything wrong.
- 3) It would have been wrong for Abraham to kill his innocent son, Isaac, even at God's command.

As stated, these three propositions are mutually inconsistent. You can't accept any two of them without being required by logic to reject the third. Craig's way out of Abraham's dilemma, I initially thought, is to accept (1) and (3) and reject (2), replacing (2) with

- 4) God hardly ever commands anything wrong.

So the Abraham/Isaac story proves the rule that God is morally perfect because God so rarely commands us to do something wrong.

But on further reflection, I think Craig can't have meant that. That would be too bizarre. The rule to which Craig thinks the Abraham/Isaac case is an exception must be the rule that God does not issue inconsistent commands. At the beginning of Genesis 22 God commands Abraham to kill Isaac, and then in the middle of the chapter he commands him not to. But Craig says: God's commands are stable and steadfast. He must mean: God never, or at least, hardly ever, issues inconsistent commands.

I'm not sure how much consolation the Christian philosopher can take from this. For if God does *sometimes* issue inconsistent commands, what becomes of the maxim that God never commands anything wrong? I suppose it can be saved by saying: when God forbids the killing of the innocent, then the killing of the innocent is wrong; but when he commands the killing of the innocent, then failing to kill the innocent is wrong. I am at a loss to see how this preserves the objectivity of morals. If the fact that human laws vary from one time and place to another is a strike against their objectivity, then why is not a similar variability a strike against the alleged objectivity of divine law?

And how would Craig get out of Abraham's dilemma? I don't think he will reject the historical claim that God made the command reported in (1). I feel sure now that he does

not want to reject the theological claim in (2). So I suppose he would reject (3), arguing that it would not have been wrong for Abraham to kill his innocent son, since God had commanded him to do so. But this does seem to be destructive of objective morality. One of the ten commandments forbids killing. Apparently this should read: thou shalt not kill, unless God explicitly tells you to.

If the Abraham/Isaac story were an isolated case, it might be preferable to reject the historicity of the story, as some liberal Christians do (e.g., Robert Adams in the book cited above). But I do not think Craig will be willing to play that freely with the text of sacred scripture. For commands to kill the innocent are not uncommon in the Hebrew Bible. Consider the prescriptions in Deuteronomy as to how the people of Israel are to treat the Canaanites when they succeed in conquering them: "you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy." (Deut. 7:1-2; see also the more detailed commandments in Deut. 20:1-20)

The subsequent history of the chosen people reveals with what diligence they obeyed these rather barbaric commands (e.g., by slaughtering non-combatants, including women, the elderly and children - see Joshua 6:15-21, 10:28, 11:10-11). Observe also what divine penalties they suffered when they rebelled against the commandments (1 Samuel 15).

There is a stimulating discussion of these matters in Gerd L♦demann's *The Unholy in Holy Scripture* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1997). If we purged the Bible of all the morally dubious commandments it contains, a great deal would have to go.

It does seem to me that Craig is in an awkward situation: either (i) he questions the historicity of much of the Hebrew Bible, or (ii) he abandons his claim that God never commands anything wrong, and admits that God might command anything at all (abandoning with it his argument that postulating the existence of the Christian God helps to make sense of morality), or (iii) he concedes that actions like the genocide which the Israelites inflicted on the Canaanites are permissible (abandoning the idea that our

common views about right and wrong are correct). I don't see a good alternative for him here.

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Craig's Endnotes

[1] Mark 10.14.

[2] See Mark 8.34; Revelation 22.17.

[3] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. C. Garnett (New York: Signet Classics, 1957), bk. II, chap 6; bk. V, chap. 4; bk. XI, chap. 8.

[4] Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election*, with an Introduction by William W. Adams (Springfield, MO.: Westcott Publishers, 1970).

[5] John C. Yates, *The Timelessness of God* (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 1990), p. 173.

[6] Stephen Hawking and Roger Penrose, *The Nature of Space and Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 20.

[7] William Lane Craig and Quentin Smith, *Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 120.

Curley's Endnotes

[1] It's hard to be sure you're getting reliable religious statistics, but it would appear from the data on [adherents.com](#) that, although the Roman Catholic Church still has many fewer adherents in the U.S. than do the Protestant denominations collectively, world-wide it has a huge lead over all other branches of Christianity.

[2] Though Christians are a majority of the population in the U.S., by a large measure (about 85%), if you take the world as a whole, they are only about 33% of the population. Again see [adherents.com](#)