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Russell's China Teapot
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St Thomas Aquinas has presented five well-known arguments for the existence of God, but he has also presented—although not, of course, endorsed—two arguments that might be described as "arguments to the contrary" or as "objections to belief in God." *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.2, a.3 (the "Five Ways" article, the article whose topic is indicated by the heading "Whether God exists") opens with those two arguments. The first, Objection 1, is a version of the argument from evil—the argument that since the existence of evil is incompatible with the existence of God, God does not exist. The second Objection is as follows:

> *Objection 2.* It is, moreover, superfluous to suppose that what can be accounted for by a few principles has been produced by many. But it seems that everything we see in the world can be accounted for by other principles, without supposing God to exist. For all natural things can be accounted for by one principle, which is nature; and all voluntary things can be accounted for by one principle, which is human reason or will. Hence, there is no need to suppose that God exists.

Here is a formulation of the essential point of this argument in language the modern mind may find more congenial than Thomas's talk of "principles":

The only reason we could have for believing in God would be that it was necessary to postulate his existence to account for some observed fact or facts. But we can explain everything we observe without appealing to any supernatural agency. Hence, there is no reason to believe that God exists.

Now, if you think about it, the conclusion of this argument is very unlike the conclusion of Objection 1, the argument from evil. The conclusion of the argument from evil is that God does not exist. In the article "Whether God exists," Thomas—unsurprisingly—defends the position that God exists. It is therefore easy to see why the argument from evil counts as an "objection" to the position he defends in that article: its conclusion is the logical contradictory of that position. But the conclusion of the argument presented in Objection 2 is not that it is *false* that God exists. It is, rather, that there is *no reason to believe* that God exists, which is not even logically inconsistent with the proposition that God exists. I take it that Thomas was not confused on this point. I take it that he was well aware that the conclusion of Objection 2, unlike the conclusion of Objection 1, is not the proposition that God does not exist. I take it that by calling the second argument an "Objection," he meant only that its conclusion, if true, constitutes a serious objection to belief in the existence of God.

And it is easy to see why Thomas would suppose that if there were indeed no reason to believe that God existed, that would constitute a serious objection to belief in God. For here is a very plausible general principle about belief, a principle that applies not only to religious or theological beliefs, but to beliefs about *any* subject-matter:

> For any proposition whatever, if you have no reason to accept or assent to or believe that proposition, then you should *not* accept or assent to or believe that proposition.

That this principle is "very plausible" can be easily seen by looking at a couple of illustrative examples. You, you my audience, have no reason to believe that my wife's first name is Margaret. And, obviously, you should not believe that my wife's first name is Margaret. (Which is not to say that you should believe that her name *isn't* Margaret.) Or consider the proposition that there is intelligent life elsewhere in the Milky Way galaxy. Suppose you believe, rightly or wrongly, that you have no reason to think that there is intelligent life elsewhere in our galaxy. If indeed you have no such reason, then I'm sure that you will agree that you should not answer Yes to the question, "Is there intelligent life elsewhere in the galaxy?" Your answer should rather be, "I don't know" or "I have no idea" or "Maybe so, maybe not." (Or, at any rate you should give an answer along those lines unless you believe that you have some reason to think that there *isn't* intelligent life elsewhere in the galaxy.) And, of course, the proposition that God exists is no exception to this general rule. If your friend Alice has no reason to believe that there is a God, then she should not give an affirmative answer to the question, "Is there a God?"

All this is, as I have said, very plausible. We could sum it up in these words: People who concede that they have no reason to think there is a God should not be theists. And people who concede that they have no reason to think that there is a God *and* no reason to think there isn't a God should be *neutral agnostics*—a neutral agnostic being someone whose answer to the question "Is there a God?" would be "I don't know what to think about that" or "Does God exist?—I have no idea" or "Maybe

there is a God and maybe there isn't—it's beyond me." And I believe Aquinas agreed with me on these points. He, of course, would have denied that those people who said that they had no reason to believe that there was a God were right; he would have said that they did have reasons, and very good ones, for believing in the existence of God. (This would not be in virtue of philosophical proofs like the Five Ways, which are not accessible to everyone. See, rather, St Paul's letter to the Romans 1:20 and the famous words of Psalm 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handwork.") But he would have granted that if, *per impossibile*, there were someone who had no reason to believe that there was a God, that person should not be a theist, should not believe in God. Or, to put the point impersonally, *if* there is no reason to think that God exists, then belief in the existence of God is an untenable position.

My topic in this lecture is a certain argument that proceeds from the premise that there is no reason to think that God exists to a conclusion that is much stronger than the conclusion that Aquinas and I would say was the only conclusion that can be derived from this premise. I will call this stronger conclusion *strongly negative agnosticism*. I distinguish strongly negative agnosticism from atheism. Atheism is of course the thesis that God does not exist or that there is no God. An atheist, therefore, is someone whose answer to the question whether God exists is a simple and unqualified No. Strongly negative agnosticism is the thesis that, while there is perhaps some chance that God exists, it is a very remote chance—very remote indeed. A strongly negative agnostic's answer to the question whether God exists would be something along the lines of "Almost certainly not" or "I suppose I can't absolutely rule out the

possibility of there being a God, but I don't take it at all seriously" or "Well, speaking theoretically, I wouldn't say that the probability of his existence was 0, but then, speaking theoretically, I wouldn't say that the probability that I shall be trampled to death by a water buffalo in Times Square on March 11th, 2015 was 0. I regard the probability of the existence of God as like the probability of the "water buffalo hypothesis" as *essentially* 0—as 0 for all practical, if not for all theoretical, purposes." Let us sum the position of the strongly negative agnostic in this phrase: the probability of the existence of God is "essentially 0."

And there are, I assure you, people who accept both the following two propositions:

(1)   There is no reason to believe that God exists

(2)   Any one who accepts (1) should conclude that the probability of the existence of God is essentially 0.

My topic, I say, is proposition (2). I want to look at the reasoning that has been presented in support of this proposition. Before I do that, however, I must say something about what that reasoning is *not*. It is not, it cannot be, an application of the following general principle to the case of belief in the existence of God:

> Where p is any proposition or thesis or hypothesis whatever: If someone believes that there is no reason to think that p is true, that person should conclude that the probability of p is essentially 0.

I am sure that the proponents of (2) do not mean to support their thesis by an appeal to this principle, for they are no fools (at least many of them

are no fools), and if they did appeal to this principle, they would be fools. They would be fools because the principle is obviously and glaringly invalid. Its invalidity can be seen from the following simple example.

Suppose you are to be dealt a single card from a well-shuffled standard deck of playing cards, and that you have no information about the card you will be dealt beyond what is contained in that statement. Then you have no reason to believe that the card will be black: of all the reasons you have for believing anything, none of them is a reason to believe that the card will be black. Will you conclude that the probability of your being dealt a black card is essentially 0? The question answers itself, and its answer is, "No, of course not—I should conclude that it is 0.5."

Or, if you are suspicious of simple, contrived examples of this kind (the kind philosophers like), here is a more realistic example: You have no reason to think that the President is, at this very moment, engaged in a telephone conversation with the Secretary of Health and Human Services. Should you conclude that the probability that such a conversation is now occurring is essentially 0? No, of course not. (You may indeed want to say that the probability of this proposition is rather low—for, after all, there are hundreds of things that, for all any of us knows, the President could be doing right now, and we should therefore assign a *low* probability to the hypothesis that he's doing any particular one of them. Nevertheless, it would certainly be wrong to assign to this proposition a probability as low as the one we assign to the proposition that he is at this moment, oh, let's say, being mauled by a tiger.

But if the reasoning that is supposed to support proposition (2) is not an appeal to this principle, what is it? The reasoning—at any rate it is

the only reasoning I have ever seen that has been used to support (2)—is an appeal to analogy. The analogy is of the kind that philosophers call an intuition pump. In abstract outline, it works like this. The proponents of proposition (2) ask their audience to consider a certain thesis or hypothesis. This thesis is usually an existential thesis—that is a thesis to the effect that a thing or object or person of a certain description exists. They point out, first, that there is no reason to believe the thesis in question and, secondly, that the probability of that thesis is essentially 0. They point out that the thesis that God exists is like their thesis in the first of these two respects: there is no reason to think that it is true. (In saying that they "point this out," I don't mean to imply that I myself suppose that there is no reason to believe that God exits. I mean only that *they* suppose that there is no reason to believe that God exists and are calling the attention of their audience to this supposed fact.) They conclude, or invite their audience to conclude, that the thesis that God exists is like their thesis in the second respect as well: to believe it would be as absurd as it would be for any of them to believe that he or she will be trampled to death by a water buffalo in Times Square on March 11th, 2015.

Here are three theses that have been used for this purpose: that Santa Claus exists; that the Great Pumpkin rises from the pumpkin patch every Halloween; that the earth and every living thing that inhabits it has been created by an invisible flying monster made of spaghetti and meatballs. (If you are unfamiliar with this last hypothesis, I invite you to Google "Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.") For example, the "Santa Claus" version of the argument goes like this:

There is no reason to think that Santa Claus exists

Similarly, there is no reason to think that God exists

Everyone should believe that the probability of the existence of Santa Claus is essentially 0.

Similarly, everyone should believe that the probability of the existence of God is essentially 0.

Sometimes this argument, or an argument that is essentially the same as this, is stated in words reminiscent of Aquinas's Objection 2:

It is reasonable for six-year-olds to take seriously the possibility of the existence of Santa Claus. But, as children get older, they see that what they had taken to be the consequences of his actions (the nocturnal appearance of Christmas presents and disappearance of milk and cookies) can be more economically accounted for by an appeal to the actions of their parents—beings in whom they already believe—, and they will gradually realize that there is therefore no reason to suppose that Santa exists. They may or may not at some point discover positive reasons to think that Santa does not exist (probably in the form of sheepish confessions by parents). Even if they don't, the realization that there is no reason to believe that he does exist will be sufficient eventually—somewhere around the age of eight in most cases—to convince any rational person that the probability of his existence is essentially 0.

There is a serious defect in this argument, however, and it is a quite avoidable defect. It is this: there are all sorts of reasons to believe that there is no Santa Claus—and no Great Pumpkin and no invisible flying Spaghetti Monster, either. The most powerful of these reasons can be summed up in these words: those things are physically impossible. One would have supposed that there could be no better evidence for the non-existence of something than that its existence would violate the laws of

physics. (With the possible exception of things or events where there is some sort of plausible story that explains *why* the thing or event was a violation of the laws of physics. For example, if someone claimed that the existence and actions of Santa Claus were miracles in the technical theological sense, it *might* make sense not to count their physical impossibility as evidence against their truth. But, whether that exception should be allowed or not, it doesn't seem to apply in the present case. It's not a part of the Santa Claus story that, e.g., his very rapid movement around the world each Christmas morning is a miracle in the sense in which Christians contend that the raising of Lazarus was a miracle.) And why is this important? For this reason: perhaps the reason we assign a probability that is essentially 0 (if not a probability of 0 without qualification) to the existence of Santa Claus and the Great Pumpkin and a flying spaghetti monster is not entirely due to the fact that we have no reason to believe that such beings exist. It seems plausible to suppose that this probability judgment may have something to do our knowledge that the existence of these beings is ruled out by the known laws of physics. (And this would undermine the intended analogy: God is not— God is not supposed by those who believe in him to be—to be a part of or inhabitant of the physical world, and he cannot therefore be physically impossible. *Metaphysically* impossible, perhaps—many have defended that position—but not physically impossible. But Santa Claus *et al.* are, or would be if they existed, tangible, visible, space-occupying beings, and are thus of necessity inhabitants of the physical world and subject to its laws.)

But this defect in the argument in the analogical argument for proposition (2) is not essential to it. It is not present in a version of the

argument that turns on an example that is due to Bertrand Russell, and to that version of the argument I now turn. Russell's example is contained in the following passage from an article he wrote at the request of a popular magazine in 1952. (In the event, the magazine decided not to publish the article, presumably on the ground that its readers would find it offensive.)

> Many orthodox people speak as though it were the business of sceptics to disprove received dogmas rather than of dogmatists to prove them. This is, of course, a mistake. If I were to suggest that between the Earth and Mars there is a china teapot revolving about the sun in an elliptical orbit, nobody would be able to disprove my assertion provided I were careful to add that the teapot is too small to be revealed even by our most powerful telescopes. But if I were to go on to say that, since my assertion cannot be disproved, it is intolerable presumption on the part of human reason to doubt it, I should rightly be thought to be talking nonsense.

Let us call a china teapot that revolves around the sun in an elliptical orbit between the Earth and Mars a *Russell Teapot*. If we substitute the existence of a Russell Teapot for the existence of Santa Claus in our analogical argument, we have:

> There is no reason to think that a Russell Teapot exists
>
> Similarly, there is no reason to think that God exists
>
> Everyone should believe that the probability of the existence of a Russell Teapot is essentially 0.
>
> Similarly, everyone should believe that the probability of the existence of God is essentially 0.

The "Russell Teapot" argument is superior to the "Santa Claus" argument (and to the corresponding "Great Pumpkin" and "Invisible Flying Spaghetti Monster" arguments) in this important respect: Santa and the Great Pumpkin and the Spaghetti Monster are obviously physically impossible and the Russell Teapot is, just as obviously, physically possible. Therefore, an important objection to those three arguments does not apply to the Teapot Argument. Let us therefore, turn our attention to the Teapot Argument.

The first of the three premises of the Teapot Argument is obviously true. I will stipulate the truth of the second premise—as lawyers use the term "stipulate." That is, I will not dispute it, but my decision not to dispute it should not be taken to imply that I accept it or even that I regard it as so much as faintly plausible. I am, as they say, granting it for the sake of argument. And, finally, the third premise is obviously true. The question that remains is: is the argument *valid*—that is, does its conclusion follow from its three premises?

The argument is an analogical argument. The question of its validity, therefore, is essentially this: Is theism, the proposition that God exists, sufficiently similar to the proposition that a Russell Teapot exists that the fact that we assign a probability that is essentially 0 to the latter should lead us to assign a probability that is essentially 0 to the former?

Let us first ask: Why *do* we assign a probability that is essentially 0 to the "Teapot Hypothesis" (as I will call the proposition that a Russell Teapot exists)? Not because, or at any rate not simply because, we have no reason to accept the Teapot Hypothesis—for we have seen that the fact that one has no reason to accept some proposition does not imply that one should assign it a probability that is essentially 0. I have no

reason to think that the number of Douglas Firs in Canada is odd, but I of course assign a probability of 0.5 to that proposition, a probability that can hardly be said to be "essentially 0."

Why, then, do we assign this vanishingly small probability to the Teapot Hypothesis? Well, let's begin with this point: if there is a china teapot in orbit between Mars and the Earth, it would have got there somehow. And not by any natural process, since china is an artificial material, a stuff that does occur in nature. Here is one "origin story" (as they say in the comic books) for a Russell Teapot.

> Extraterrestrial visitors to our planet, in pursuit of some unknown agenda, acting in disguise or through human agents, at some point in time prior to 1952 (the year in which Russell invented the Teapot Hypothesis) purchased, or otherwise acquired, a china teapot of human manufacture. They transported it into space, to some point that lay in the plane of the ecliptic and was about one hundred and seventy-five million kilometers from the center of the sun. They imparted to it—carefully, owing to its fragility—a velocity with a magnitude of 27.6 km/sec in a direction lying in the plane of the ecliptic and at right angles to a line connecting that point and the center of the sun. And then they departed, leaving the teapot to its own devices.

I take it that this is a story to which we would all assign a probability that is essentially 0. There are of course many such stories, many possible "origin stories." The teapot might have been placed in orbit not by extraterrestrials but by a secret cabal of Nazi rocket scientists, unknown to history, who had achieved a level of rocket technology that the US and the Soviet Union would not reach for several decades. Or we might suppose that the orbiting teapot was the work of a supernatural agency— God or a god or Satan or St Michael. We might even suppose that the

teapot emerged (with exactly the right velocity vector) from a smallish black hole as it was giving up its intrinsic energy in a last, sudden, violent burst of Hawking radiation. (This last story, however, is *vastly* more improbable than the "extraterrestrial visitors" story and the "Nazi cabal" story.)

It seems evident to me that the aggregate probability of all these origin stories (the probability that at least one of them is true) is very low indeed. It seems to me that this aggregate probability is, like the individual probabilities of the members of the aggregate, essentially 0. I say "it seems to me," but it's very hard to turn the intuition behind this judgment into an explicit argument. The best I can do by way of providing an argument for that conclusion is to apply simple arithmetic to some made-up numbers. (I can say this much in defense of my employment of made-up numbers: the cogency of my argument is not very sensitive to the values of the quantities—the quantities measured by those made-up numbers—that figure in it.)

Suppose, then that there are 1000 independent origin stories— 1000 stories of the coming to be of a Russell Teapot, each of them consistent with all we know, each them containing about the same amount of narrative detail as that contained in my examples (whatever exactly I mean by that), and any two of which are logical contraries. That number—1000—is the first of the made-up numbers I promised you. But, for all it is made up, it seems to me to be not only plausible and reasonable, but generous: I'm inclined to think that the actual number must be a lot lower than 1000. (But how reliable are my intuitions, the intuitions of a human being, on this point? The stories I'm counting must include all possible stories, a class that no doubt includes stories that are

inaccessible to the human intellect. After all, the "black hole" story was inaccessible to the human intellect till quite recently. I can only say that, although it is no doubt true that there are origin stories I am unable to comprehend, I cannot believe that the number of possible stories is very many orders of magnitude higher than 1000—and, as I've said, the cogency of my argument is not very sensitive to my choice of made-up numbers. If there were a billion possible independent origin stories (each containing about the same amount of narrative detail as my "aliens" story), that would not affect any essential feature of the argument. I would also say that, even if there are vast numbers of origin stories that I cannot comprehend, it still seems to me to be evident that the probability of *any* given story that entails the Teapot Hypothesis, let that story be as far beyond human comprehension as you may care to suppose, must be essentially 0. I mean—why a *china teapot*?; why not an earthenware teapot or a china giraffe or an earthenware giraffe?)

All right: there are 1000 independent origin stories, and the probability of each of them, taken individually, is essentially 0. Let's assign a made-up number to be the upper limit of the class of probabilities that are essentially 0. Let's say—just to have a number— that a probability is essentially 0 if it is 10 exp -20 or lower (that's 1 divided by 100 billion billion). Again, I think that the choice of this number, although arbitrary, is plausible, reasonable, and in fact constitutes a generous estimate of the upper limit of "essential zero-hood." I would guess, if I had to guess—if my welfare somehow hung on the correctness of this guess—that the probability of my being trampled to by a water buffalo in Times Square on March 11th, 2015 isn't a lot higher than 10 exp -20.[1]

Now, given these made-up numbers, what is the aggregate probability of all the origin stories, the probability that at least one of them is true? Our made-up numbers do not provide an answer to this question, but they do assign an upper limit to the aggregate probability. Any one of the origin stories, since its probability is essentially 0, must have a probability equal to or less than 10 exp -20. So let us suppose that each of them has the highest probability that is consistent with this constraint—that probability of course being 10 exp -20. Then the aggregate probability of the origin stories is 1000 times 10 exp -20 or 10 exp -17 or 1 divided by 100 million billion or a decimal point followed by sixteen zeros followed by a lonely '1'. This is not, by the strict terms of our arbitrary definition, a probability that is essentially 0, but don't attach any philosophical significance to that fact, which is no more than a logical consequence of our having assigned to each individual origin story the highest probability that a proposition whose probability was essentially 0 could have. However we describe it, it's a very low probability, fairly close (as those things go) to the probability of a tossed coin's landing "heads" fifty-six times in a row. (I hope I did the powers-of-10 to powers-of-2 conversion right. If not, my mistake doesn't affect my point. If my number is wrong, the right number would have the same philosophical implications.)

And, of course, the probability of the Teapot Hypothesis is equal to the aggregate probability of all the possible "teapot origin" stories. Or at any rate it is if we count "The teapot came into existence, uncaused and *ex nihilo*, at just the right place with just the right velocity" as an origin story. If stories of that kind count as origin stories—and why shouldn't they?—, then the proposition that every physical object has an origin

story is, as we used to say, an analytic proposition, and the teapot hypothesis and the proposition that some teapot origin story is true entail each other—or they do if we don't take the Teapot Hypothesis to specify the length of time for which the teapot is in orbit between the earth and Mars (and let's not)[2].

The bottom line is: I have as good reason to think that the probability of the Teapot Hypothesis is essentially 0 as I have to think that the hypothesis that a coin that I know has just been tossed fifty-six times has fallen "heads" every time is essentially 0. That is to say, this is the case given our made up numbers. But any even marginally plausible way of making up the numbers will yield a result with the same philosophical import: ". . . has just been tossed forty-two times has fallen 'heads' every time," ". . . has just been tossed seventy-eight times has fallen 'heads' every time," and so on.

So: we have found a reason to assign a vanishingly small probability to the Teapot Hypothesis, and that reason is contained in an argument *a priori*—an argument that, although it may appeal to some of our factual knowledge is at any rate appeals to no facts that might count as evidence for or against the Teapot Hypothesis (and so it must be, since we *have* no evidence for or against the Teapot Hypothesis). We may therefore say that the "initial probability" that we assign to the Teapot Hypothesis is essentially 0—the initial probability that one assigns to a proposition being the probability that one assigns to it before one considers any evidence for or against it. Note that we did not assign this probability to the Teapot Hypothesis because we had no evidence for it, for the probability assignment was made prior to any considerations pertaining to evidence. And yet, as we have seen, many people assume that the low

probability we assign to the Teapot Hypothesis is somehow connected with the fact that there is no evidence for it.

Why do they make this assumption? I think that certain things we say when we make use of the concept of probability in everyday life encourage the assumption. I think that the assumption is due to a misinterpretation of this everyday language. Let me give an example.

> Jack has suddenly and mysteriously disappeared, and the police are looking into the matter. A neighbor says, "I know he wanted to leave his wife and run away to the South Seas to paint. He always said that the only thing stopping him was lack of funds. And I happen to know that he was addicted to playing on-line poker. Maybe he won a large sum on line, collected his winnings, and ran off to follow his dream." A police officer replies, "That's a pretty improbable story. There's no reason to think that anything like that happened."

But, surely, the police officer's very sensible statement means something along these lines: The initial probability of that story is very low (prior to considering any evidence we may have for or against the hypothesis that Jack was the recipient of the windfall his neighbor has imagined, we know an on-line gambler's winning a sum sufficient to underwrite a Gauguin-style life in the South Seas is a very rare occurrence indeed); to take the possible truth of the story seriously, we'd need to be in possession of evidence for it (that is, some reason to believe it) that raised its probability significantly; and since we have no evidence for it at all, *a fortiori* we have no evidence that raises its probability significantly. In short, the initial probability of the story is low, and in the absence of supporting evidence, it retains that low initial probability.

And, of course, much the same thing is true of the Teapot Hypothesis —and with a vengeance. Its initial probability is essentially 0,

We can imagine evidence that would raise that probability (an actual sighting by astonished astronauts of a china teapot in orbit between the earth and Mars, for example, would raise it to 1). We can *imagine* such evidence, but in fact we have none. We examine such evidence as we have at our disposal, all the evidence we have for anything, and find that none of this evidence is so much as relevant to the Teapot Hypothesis. We therefore *continue* to assign to it a probability of "essentially 0." As one might put it: since we can find no evidence that is relevant to the Teapot Hypothesis, the probability that we assign to it *on consideration of evidence* is identical with the probability that we assigned to it *prior to the consideration of evidence.*

Although the inference

> There is no reason to accept the Teapot Hypothesis
>
> *hence,* We should assign a probability of "essentially 0" to the Teapot Hypothesis

is invalid, the inference

> The initial probability of the Teapot Hypothesis is essentially 0.
>
> There is no reason to accept the Teapot Hypothesis
>
> *hence,* We should assign a probability of "essentially 0" to the Teapot Hypothesis

is valid. I would suggest that anyone who—engaged in the practical affairs of everyday life, but for some reason employing the jargon of the philosophers—presents an argument of the form

> There is no reason to accept the hypothesis that *p*

> *hence,* We should assign a probability of "essentially 0" to the
> hypothesis that *p*

should be understood as presenting an enthymeme, the suppressed

premise of the enthymeme being something like 'The initial probability of

the hypothesis that *p* is essentially 0'.

Let us now return to the analogical argument I have called the

Teapot Argument:

> There is no reason to think that a Russell Teapot exists
>
> Similarly, there is no reason to think that God exists
>
> Everyone should believe that the probability of the existence of a
> Russell Teapot is essentially 0.
>
> Similarly, everyone should believe that the probability of the
> existence of God is essentially 0.

I think we are now in a position to see that this argument is very weak

(which is a charitable way of saying, "no good at all") unless the initial

probability of the existence of God is, like the initial probability of the

existence of a Russell Teapot, essentially 0. And if it is granted that the

initial probability of the existence of God is essentially 0, the defenders of

strongly negative agnosticism can dispense with the Teapot Argument—

they can dispense with analogical arguments altogether—and present

instead this much simpler and more straightforward argument:

> The initial probability of the existence of God is essentially 0
>
> There is no reason to think that God exists

hence, Everyone should believe that the probability of the existence of God is essentially 0.

This argument is valid—the conclusion follows from the two premises—, but are both those premises true? Well, I have said that I'm not, in this lecture, going to dispute the second premise. I am, as they say, stipulating it, or accepting it for the sake of argument. But what about the first premise, the premise that the initial probability of the existence of God is essentially 0? Why should anyone be expected to accept it? You may well ask. *I* certainly see no reason to accept it. I *certainly* see no reason to accept it that in any way resembles the reason—presented in the form of an extended argument—I have given for assigning a low initial probability to the Teapot Hypothesis. (I have no idea what a "parallel" argument would look like—a parallel argument, that is, for the conclusion that one should assign a low initial probability to theism, to the existence of God. I have given an argument for the conclusion that, prior to the consideration of such evidence as there may be for or against the Teapot Hypothesis, we ought to assign it an vanishingly small probability, a probability that nevertheless could in principle be raised by the acquisition of evidence for the existence of a Russell Teapot. I see no way to construct an argument, an argument that employs reasoning that even superficially resembles my reasoning anent the teapot hypothesis, for the conclusion that, prior to the consideration of such evidence as there may be for or against the existence of God, we ought to assign a vanishingly small probability to theism.)

I conclude that the strongest "theologically negative" conclusion that one can possibly deduce from 'There is no reason to believe that God

exists' (and, of course, no reason to believe that God does not exist) is neutral agnosticism—the thesis that the proposition that God exists and its denial should be accorded precisely the same epistemic status. (In probabilistic terms: one should either assign to each a probability of 0.5 or else should decline to assign any probability to either.)

But if neutral agnosticism can be validly deduced from the premise that there is no reason to believe that God exists (and no reason to believe that he does not exist), that premise may nevertheless be false. Whether there is evidence of the existence or the non-existence of God is a question I have not addressed in this lecture. My only purpose has been to consider the question: Assuming, as many people indeed suppose, that there is no evidence for the existence of God (or no reason to think that God exists), what follows from this? I will close by distinguishing this question from another question that it bears some superficial similarity to.

There is an argument for the non-existence of God one of whose premises is just that proposition that I have been granting for the sake of argument in this lecture: that we have no evidence for the existence of God (or have no reason to think that God exists). The argument goes something like this:

> We have no evidence for the existence of God
>
> If God existed, we should have evidence for his existence—for he would take care to provide us with such evidence
>
> *hence*, God does not exist.

Note that this argument, despite its having an "epistemological" premise, the first, is not an epistemological argument. At any rate, its conclusion is

not an epistemological thesis, for that conclusion is not a proposition about our *knowledge* concerning the existence of God or about what we should *believe* about the existence of God or about what *probability* we should assign to the proposition that God exists. It is, rather, the proposition that God does not exist. It is not about our knowledge of reality but about reality—reality period, reality full stop. In this respect, it is like Aquinas's Objection 1, the argument from evil, and not like his Objection 2. It is, as one might call it, a "moral/causal" argument. It turns on the idea that, since God is good (or would be good if he existed), he would be constrained by his goodness to provide his creatures with all good things; and one of the good things for rational creatures like ourselves would be knowledge of his existence. In this respect, too, the argument resembles the argument from evil—for the argument form evil is also a moral/causal argument. This argument, in fact, can plausibly be regarded as a special case of the argument from evil, a version of the argument that makes reference to an evil of a certain specific kind. For, or so one might plausibly contend, if God exists then the existence of rational creatures who have no reason to believe that he exists is a bad thing.

Since this argument is a moral/causal, rather than an epistemological, argument, it is in no way related to the argument that has been my topic in this lecture. I concede that the two arguments have a common premise: that we have no reason to think that God exists (or have no evidence for his existence). But the argument I have been speaking about depended on the suppressed premise that the initial probability of the existence of God is essentially 0, and the moral/causal argument does not depend on that premise. The moral/causal argument,

moreover, depends on the quite explicit premise that God, if he existed, would provide us with evidence for his existence, and the argument that is the topic of this lecture does not depend on that premise.

The moral/causal argument may *suggest* an epistemological argument, an argument whose conclusion has implications for the epistemological status of belief in God:

> There is no evidence for the existence of God
>
> If there is no evidence for the existence of something, that very fact is (conclusive) evidence for the non-existence of that thing.
>
> *hence*, There is (conclusive) evidence for the non-existence of God.

I have in effect presented a stronger and a weaker version of the argument—the stronger contains the parenthetical word 'conclusive' and the weaker does not. But the second premise of even the weaker version of the argument is so obviously false (it's a case of the notoriously wrong principle "absence of evidence is evidence of absence," a principle *so* notoriously wrong that people cite it only when they are accusing others of employing it) that no one, as far as I know, has ever endorsed this argument. The essential idea of the moral/causal argument is that the second premise of this obviously unsound argument, though false as a general principle, gets matters right in the case of one being, God. Absence of evidence for the existence of, e.g., intelligent life in the Andromeda galaxy is not evidence of the absence of intelligent life in the Andromeda galaxy, but absence of evidence for the existence of God, *is* evidence for the absence of God—for God could be *expected* to provide us with evidence for his existence, and there is no reason to think that if

there were non-human intelligent life in the Andromeda galaxy, we'd have any evidence of its existence. And we know this (proponents of the moral/causal argument allege) because we know it's a consequence of features we know God would have if he existed, his perfect goodness and his unlimited power.

I conclude that the moral/causal argument depends on a premise about God, about his nature, about how his nature constrains him to act (or would constrain him to act if he existed). And the question whether that premise is true belongs to theology or to philosophical theology or to the philosophy of religion. Whatever field of study it belongs to it, it does not belong to epistemology and is thus not relevant to an evaluation of the Teapot Argument. And, as we have seen, the Teapot Argument is very far from being cogent.

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[1] Note on infinite universe, closest 10 exp 20 planets that perfectly duplicate the earth up to this point in respect of your consciousness. "Closest" represents arbitrary choice of 10 exp 20 planets that have this feature out of the infinite totality. (`outline of point to be made in note`)

[2] Not that it would make any difference if we did. The proposition "One of the teapot-origin stories is true" and the proposition "A china teapot in orbit between the orbits of the earth and Mars existed for some period of time" entail each another. And, e.g., the proposition "There is now a china teapot in orbit between the orbits of the earth and Mars and it has been in that orbit for ten years" must have a probability equal to or lower than that of "A china teapot in orbit between the orbits of the earth and Mars existed for some temporal interval.