

OBJECTING TO GOD

The growth of science, and a correspondingly scientific way of looking at evidence, have for the last three centuries slowly been gaining ground over religious explanations of the cosmos and mankind's place in it. However, not only is secularism now under renewed attack from religious fundamentalism, but also it has been widely claimed that the scientific evidence itself points strongly to a universe deliberately fine-tuned for life to evolve in it. In addition, certain aspects of human life, like consciousness and the ability to recognise the existence of universal moral standards, seem completely resistant to evolutionary explanation. In this book Colin Howson analyses in detail the evidence which is claimed to support belief in God's existence, and argues that the claim is not well founded. Moreover, there is very compelling evidence that an all-powerful, all-knowing God not only does not exist but cannot exist, a conclusion both surprising and provocative.

COLIN HOWSON is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto, and Emeritus Professor, London School of Economics and Political Science. He is the author of *Hume's Problem: Induction and the Justification of Belief* (2000), *Logic with Trees* (1997) and, with Peter Urbach, *Scientific Reasoning: The Bayesian Approach* (3rd edition, 2006).

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The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.
Psalm 14:1

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Preface

As its title suggests, this is a book about God. More precisely, it tries to answer two highly topical questions about God. One, to which I have devoted the most space, is whether the arguments in the contemporary literature for believing in an all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving Creator of the universe are good ones. The question isn't of merely theoretical interest: there is a widespread preoccupation that morality cannot survive a loss of religious faith, with many echoing Ivan Karamazov's famous claim in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* that without God everything is permitted. So the other question is: was – is – Ivan Karamazov right? Despite an understandable reluctance to give anyone an excuse for not reading further, I will compromise and reveal now that my answers to these two questions will be 'no' to both, but leave it to the rest of the book to explain why. If you want to find out more, start at Chapter 1 and keep going.

At the end of each chapter there is a little section marked 'Exercise' (not compulsory!). This consists of a quotation from an actual person of a certain standing, either academic or theological, among them one the latchet of whose shoes I, like John the Baptist, am not worthy to stoop down and unloose. Each quotation consists of a claim or argument to which the material in the chapter is relevant, and the reader is invited to consider how they would respond to it.

Acknowledgments

I have received much help in writing this book from various people. More than anyone else I would like to thank my wife Margie Morrison for providing me with many and invaluable suggestions for improvement, both in style and content. While she did her best, she was dealing with recalcitrant material and I must take final and full responsibility upon myself. Matt McCormick also gave me invaluable help in the way of friendly criticism of the manuscript. I am also grateful to Adam Harmer for his hard work editing the final draft, and compiling the bibliography and index. Others to whom I am indebted are Sorin Bangu, Pierre Bouffier, Hao Hu, my old friends and erstwhile collaborators Allan Franklin and Peter Urbach, and the members of TBB 199, my first-year seminar on God and science at the University of Toronto, all of whom did so much to help me get my own ideas straight (if they are straight). My thanks also to the Department of Philosophy at the University of Toronto for financial assistance in the form of an SSHRC Institutional Grant.

I would also like to express my gratitude for their constant encouragement and help to Hilary Gaskin, Joanna Garbutt and Anna Lowe of Cambridge University Press, and to thank Rose Bell for her extremely scrupulous copy-editing, as well as two anonymous reviewers for that Press and last but not least Tom O'Reilly of the Press for his remarkable efficiency during the production process. Other press personnel whom I would like to thank are the translators of the King James Bible. All the Biblical quotations are from their translation on which, like most people of a certain age in the UK, I was brought up. The Devil doesn't always have the best tunes.

I would like to give special thanks to Nicholas Beale. He and I were jointly going to write a book about God and science, and in particular the way Bayesian ideas illuminate the discussion. It is well known, however, that Bayesian methodology depends to some extent on prior probabilities, and unfortunately for Nicholas's and my joint project it quickly became

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evident that ours were pulling us too far apart for there to be any realistic hope of an agreed final manuscript. But Nicholas did provide me with a great deal of insight into the questions addressed in this book, and at all the points where I have gained from it I have, I hope, given him full acknowledgment.

Finally finally, as a recent incumbent of the US Presidency might have put it, I am grateful to Dr Jill Marrington and my Toronto colleague Professor Brad Inwood for improving my understanding of what 'telos', or rather 'τέλος', meant to Aristotle.