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God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theory

ABSTRACT

Traditional secular conspiracy theories and explanations of worldly events in terms of supernatural agency share interesting epistemic features. This paper explores what can be called "supernatural conspiracy theories," by considering such supernatural explanations through the lens of recent work on the epistemology of secular conspiracy theories. After considering the similarities and the differences between the two types of theories, the prospects for agnosticism both with respect to secular conspiracy theories and the existence of God are then considered. Arguments regarding secular conspiracy theories suggest ways to defend agnosticism with respect to God from arguments that agnosticism is not a logically stable position and that it ultimately collapses into atheism, as has been argued by N. Russell Hanson and others. I conclude that such attacks on religious agnosticism fail to appreciate the conspiratorial features of God's alleged role in the universe.

EPIGRAPH

"Now what is the message there? The message is that there are known 'knowns.' There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know. So when we do the best we can and we pull all this information together, and we then say well that's basically what we see as the situation, that is really only the known knowns and the known unknowns. And each year, we discover a few more of those unknown unknowns.

It sounds like a riddle. It isn't a riddle. It is a very serious, important matter.

There's another way to phrase that and that is that the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. It is basically saying the same thing in a different way. Simply because you do not have evidence that something exists does not mean that you have evidence that it doesn't exist. And yet almost always, when we make our threat assessments, when we look at the world, we end up basing it on the first two pieces of that puzzle, rather than all three." – Donald Rumsfeld, United States Secretary of Defense (6 June, 2002)

I. INTRODUCTION

When U.S. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, uttered the passage quoted in the epigraph above during a press conference, he added to the litany of quotations

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that made him a favorite target of comedians and other absurdist commentators on popular culture.[1] However, to victimize him for this line of thought is unfair. If anything, I suspect the joke is on the commentators, as this reaction to the passage likely tells us more about the commentators than the speaker.[2] While complicated and nuanced, the idea of the passage is actually quite interesting (and deeper than the average American political sound bite that one gets these days).

The point Rumsfeld is trying to make is one of what we might call "meta-epistemology", our knowledge (and lack thereof) of what we know. Sometimes we are merely ignorant, as when I do not know the capital of the Sultanate of Brunei. I'm fairly certain that it *has* a capital, I just don't know what it happens to be. This is a different situation from somebody who has never even heard of Brunei and therefore doesn't even know she doesn't know this particular fact.[3] In cases of national defense threat assessment, Rumsfeld claims, we generally factor in the threats that we know about (the *known knowns*), as well as those threats that we know exist but of which we are largely ignorant of the details (the *known unknowns*). However, a *complete* assessment would also take into account those threats that we don't even know exist (the *unknown unknowns*). Ay, there's the rub. How does one factor in something that one does not even know one does not know? This would seem to be a paradigm case of an impossible dictum, an epistemic rule that is by definition impossible to apply in any imaginable case. That is, it is impossible to require that one take into consideration that which, by hypothesis, one does not suspect is even possibly the case.

Obviously, Rumsfeld has no answer to offer here, but he does want to claim that in the case of national security threats we do, in fact, know *one* thing about unknown unknowns: we know that it is extremely likely that unknown unknowns exist. So what? In the practical world of national security – and other areas as well – one should maintain a degree of flexibility and humility about one's current knowledge; not only are we likely to be surprised to learn things in domains where we know we are ignorant, but we should expect to be surprised in ways we cannot even presently imagine. Rumsfeld seeks to remind us that when it comes to the national security of the "world's only superpower" engaged in a War on Terror, we have extremely good reason to suppose that threats exist about which we are *completely* ignorant. Not a comforting thought, no doubt, but it is not the job of a Secretary of Defense to be a Pollyanna.

Presumably, Rumsfeld did not believe he was belaboring the obvious when he made his statement. It could be that not all instances within a given domain of knowledge have this Rumsfeldian feature of unsurprising surprise. For example, Rumsfeld is speaking from his position as the *United States* Secretary of Defense. It might well be that his opposite number in the Sultanate of Brunei has fewer grounds to worry about some completely unexpected threat. For a variety of reasons, Brunei has far fewer and much less diverse enemies than does the United States. By the same token, it might not be the case that all domains of knowledge have this feature. Knowledge of national security threats does, but does my knowledge of what's likely to be found in my local grocery store? Probably not to any significant degree.

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Why does the domain of national security have this feature? I suggest part of the answer is that it is a realm in which conspiracies are rife and conspiracies have interesting epistemic features, as philosophers have recently begun to explore in earnest.[4] The reason why we know that there are currently unknown threats is because (a) the United States, as a result of its status in the world, its history of past behavior, and its policies, has many enemies, and (b) in order to operate more effectively, those enemies are smart enough to act in secret; in other words, it is no accident that we do not know of them – they are actively evading detection. For related reasons, we sometimes convict individuals of murder even when there is no physical evidence, e.g., a victim's body. This is done in the quite reasonable belief that murderers typically do not want to be caught and convicted, therefore they can be expected to attempt to cover their tracks and dispose of bodies in such a way that the bodies are difficult for the authorities to find. In such cases, as Rumsfeld notes, taking a line from Carl Sagan, "...the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence" (Sagan & Druyan 1995, 213).

II. FROM THEOLOGY TO CONSPIRACY AND BACK AGAIN

In previous work (Keeley 1999), I took Hume's analysis of the unusual epistemic status of the testimony of miracles[5] as a starting point for analyzing the similarly unusual epistemic nature of conspiracy theories. Put very briefly, one of Hume's chief conclusions concerning miracles is that there is never sufficient epistemic warrant for belief in a miracle on the basis of testimony because, by definition, for an event to be a genuine miracle is for that event to run afoul of epistemic principles. In other words, by virtue of their very nature, reports of miracles are literally *incredible*. As a result, there is no point attempting to investigate whether a report of a miracle is credible, because we can know *a priori* that it is not.[6]

The impetus of my investigation into the epistemology of conspiracy theories – in particular, those which seem particularly dubious: elaborate plots explaining the assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy, claims that humans never, in fact, landed on the moon, worries that the world economy was under the control of a cabal of Jewish bankers, and so on – was the question whether there might be a Humean analysis of such theories that would identify them as incredible *a priori*. In other words, can we identify a class of conspiracy theories – I call them "unwarranted conspiracy theories" (UCTs) – that were by definition incredible?

My conclusion was that, alas, such an analysis fails. The chief problem is that there is a class of quite warranted conspiracy theories about such events as Watergate, the Iran-Contra Affair, etc., and that there is no principled way of distinguishing, *a priori*, the two classes from one another. There is no "mark of the incredible," as it were (as Hume argues there is for reports of miracles).[7] As a result, contrary to being able to reject conspiracy theories out of hand, prior to any investigation, we ought to adopt an agnostic attitude with respect to conspiratorial claims. Or, initially at least – as time passes and investigation ensues, we will generally come to lump the given theory in either with the Watergates (the credible) or with the faked-lunar-

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landings (the incredible). The problem is that in the beginning it is equally credible to wonder whether the President of the United States could have ordered a burglary of his political opponents as it is to wonder whether NASA faked a lunar-landing in the context of a space-race with the Soviet Union. Further, as I discuss in Keeley (1999), it is often the case that events that appear to call for explanations in terms of conspiracies are ones in which *all* of the plausible hypotheses are conspiratorial. In the case of the Watergate break-in, even if the President were not behind it, it was still the work of *some* group of individuals carrying out *some* goal known only to themselves. It might seem highly implausible that such a break-in involved the President, but until an investigation is carried out, it is impossible to tell whether, in fact, it does.

Briefly, in Keeley (1999), I present the double-edged nature of conspiracy theories:

> Conspiracy theories are attractive, a fact demonstrated by their current popularity. But their alleged virtues are subtly flawed. I shall show how certain elements of conspiracy theory *appear* to be those of legitimate theoretical explanation, but argue that on closer analysis, they are not. Therefore, I am trying to do two things: (1) explain why it is that [unwarranted conspiracy theories] are so popular, but (2) explain why we should nonetheless fail to believe in them. They are popular, I suggest, because they exhibit several well-known explanatory virtues. They are nonetheless unwarranted because they exhibit these virtues in ways that undermine the strength of those virtues. (1999, 118–119)

For example, conspiracy theories often tie together seemingly unrelated phenomena. For example, in the case of the Oklahoma City bombing, one conspiracy theory used the date of the bombing to tie it to the Tokyo subway gas attack, whereas another conspiracy theory used that same data point to tie it to the destruction of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. (The former date connection comes from one of the more dubious conspiracy theories, whereas the latter is part of the conspiracy theory presented by the government prosecution in the case against Timothy McVeigh and his co-conspirators.) The connection of seemingly unrelated phenomena within the framework of a single explanation is one of the hallmarks of exemplary explanation, as when Newton explained both the motion of the planets and the phenomenon of the tides by the positing of gravity. However, I argue that in the case of conspiracy theories that ought not receive our assent, such explanatory virtues are pushed too far or are invoked in ways that act to undermine the very case being made. Nonetheless, it often takes time for such flaws to reveal themselves and more than a facile consideration of the apparent ludicrousness of the proposed explanation.

However, my purpose here is not to rehash this earlier discussion. Instead, I want to turn the tables back around again. Initially, I took a discussion in the realm of philosophy of religion and saw what light it shed on the epistemology of conspiracy theories. In the present paper, I want to view questions of religious epistemology through the lens of the philosophy of conspiracy theories. What happens when one looks at God, and the supernatural more generally, as a sort of conspiracy? Is it perhaps a domain of knowledge in which the kinds of unknown unknowns invoked by Rumsfeld are potentially at play, hence calling for a degree of epistemic humility

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on our part? If it is illuminating to consider supernatural explanation as importantly similar to conspiratorial explanation, then that would be a reason for thinking it is.

III. THE CONSPIRATORIAL ELEMENTS OF SUPERNATURAL EXPLANATION

Although this will no doubt offend some, there are some notable points of comparison between explanations of events in terms of secular conspiracies and explanations that invoke supernatural causes and the intervention of supernatural agents. For example, both call for the explanation of events in terms of intentional agents; in particular, intentional agents that are not readily available for interrogation. However, an examination of proposed "supernatural conspiracies" will immediately indicate some interesting differences between them and run-of-the-mill theories about secular conspiracies. Nonetheless, there are enough similarities, I believe, to make such a comparison fruitful.[8]

What sort of "supernatural conspiracies" do I have in mind? To my mind, the most obvious class of examples are those which can be gathered under the rubric of "God's mysterious ways," or what Boethius describes in his 6th-century *Consolation of Philosophy* (1962) as "Providence." In Book IV of that work, after having identified the constant, eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God as that which we ought to aim towards in order to achieve true happiness – as opposed to fame, wealth, health, power, and the other fickle trappings of worldly fortune – he confronts a version of the classic Problem of Evil. If the world is truly guided by such a perfect being, why does the world He oversees contain so much pain and suffering, e.g., why is it that the devout and upright Boethius himself is writing this book while awaiting a death sentence for an alleged treason he did not commit? Boethius' answer is a classic one in the history of Judeo-Christian-Islamic thought: there is no such thing as evil. What we mortal humans call "evil" is not genuinely *evil* at all. It is a kind of illusion that results from our necessarily myopic and limited perspective on the world. What we call evil is, from the Divine perspective, that which is good and necessary in the "bigger picture." This apparent evil is all part of God's plan (Providence). If we knew or could comprehend Providence, we would see the real (and good) reason behind everything that happens.[9]

Boethius is not alone in this appeal to Providence to explain the apparently evil (as well as good) events of the world. It seems as though every time a church bus full of school children plunges into a ravine or a tsunami kills hundreds of thousands of people on the day after Christmas, somebody explains this event by saying something along the lines of "God must have had some reason to let this happen. It is not for us to question, but rather to have faith in God's plan", Providence is being invoked. My contention is that this invocation of a unknown (to us) plan that explains why things have happened the way that they have has some elements of the kinds of secret plans that secular conspiracy theorists use to explain why things have happened the way that they have.

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Some supernatural conspiracies are more bald than such appeals to Providence to explain natural disasters and other accidents. For example, polls suggest that in the United States, at least, there are a significant number of people worried about the role that Satan plays in daily events. This is another relatively popular solution to the Problem of Evil: there's some evil supernatural agency at work in the world; perhaps there is even a great conspiracy of Satanists who at this very moment are helping raise the recently-born Antichrist and prepare him for his role in the Apocalypse, as foretold in the book of Revelation…

Sometimes, more traditional, secular conspiracies and what I'm calling supernatural conspiracies run together in very natural, not to mention interesting, ways. I discovered my favorite real-world example of this while listening to AM radio while driving up the San Joaquin Valley late one summer night. There is a group of scholars – Stephen Quayle, Chuck Missler and Mark Eastman are the primary proponents – who have proposed that so-called "UFOs" and "alien abductions" are, in fact, the work of fallen angels. They have explored ways in which descriptions of "close encounters" resemble Biblical and other religious accounts of encounters with angels. Further, they have generated an elaborate theory about what these fallen angels are really up to with these abductions and why these fallen angels are acting in secret to carry out their nefarious plans.[10]

All of these cases have features that would seem to make them very different from traditional, secular conspiracy theories.[11] Therefore, I ought to say more about why I believe there is a deep affinity between these kinds of religious explanation and conspiracy theories. In my 1999 paper, I define a "conspiracy theory" thus: "A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons – the conspirators – acting in secret" (116). This points to the first – and perhaps the most stark – difference between secular conspiracy theories and the kinds of religious explanations often given. A human conspiracy is, by definition, the act of a *group of agents* working in concert to carry out some kind of plan or working towards some kind of goal. While religious conspiracies involving groups of fallen angels fit such a requirement, God working on His own, does not. Hence, it can be argued, that God's actions can never be accurately described as a "conspiracy" because He works alone. Providence is His plan and His plan alone.

This response is clearly true, strictly speaking, but it's also pedantic. I propose that the reason that conspiracies engage our attention is because of the necessarily limited scope of power of an individual human being. The only way humans can carry off the kind of interesting and noteworthy conspiracies that motivate and worry conspiracy theorists is by acting in concert with others. Even somebody as powerful as a Bill Gates or a President Nixon would need to operate as part of, or to lead, a larger conspiracy in order to have a significant effect on the world. God, on the other hand, is by hypothesis omnipotent. As a result, He has no need to conspire with anybody to bring about Providence according to His wishes. Therefore, I suggest that our normal definition of a conspiracy is relativized to non-omnipotent agents. Even an extremely powerful

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– but nonetheless *finitely* powerful – agent (e.g., Satan) would seem to need to act as part of a conspiracy to carry out significant events in the world. An omnipotent agent would be a special case.

In my 1999 paper, I also claimed that the goals of conspiracies are invariably nefarious: "I am aware of no popular conspiracy theory according to which some group of powerful individuals is secretly doing good but desperately hopes its schemes will not be revealed" (117). This point is useful for setting aside such things as conspiracies to throw surprise birthday parties and the like. Others (for example, Clarke 2002, 138) have noted that "nefarious" seems too strong a requirement. My response is to follow Charles Pigden (2006, 157), when he argues that an important proviso on the definition of conspiracy theories is that the conspiracies they posit must at least be morally suspect, although not necessarily morally wrong. This proviso allows us to include what Hume called "conspiracies of public interest" or what we might more generally refer to as "conspiracies of goodness." If anything qualifies as a "conspiracy of goodness," then one imagines Providence does! At the same time, the whole point of presenting Providence is to present it as the opposite of morally wrong. Nonetheless, it qualifies as morally suspect, especially to those of us mere mortals who are in the position of trying to figure out why bad things happen to good people. That the world *apparently* contains evil necessarily renders suspect any plan that involves these events.[12]

There is a final issue that arises when one tries to consider the kinds of supernatural explanations mentioned above in terms of conspiracy and that is the issue of *secrecy*. One clearly central element of secular conspiracies is their secrecy. Indeed, it is a defining feature; a plan carried out in full public view with its goals explicitly stated with nothing hidden seems the very antithesis of a "conspiracy."[13] However, on the Providential account, God's plans are not so much *secret* as they are *inscrutable*. These clearly aren't the same thing. If Boethius is correct, God is not hiding his intentions from us; we are constitutionally incapable of understanding His motivations and plans, due to our necessarily limited, temporally bound perspective. I can accept this, but if anything, it only makes the bigger point more pointed. If the interesting feature of conspiracy theories is – as my discussion of Rumsfeld suggests – that they point to a realm where "unknown unknowns" are to be expected, and if we are dealing with a hypothetical realm of phenomena that are necessarily *inscrutable* to those of us that are trying to understand what is really going on, then his point is all the more compelling. Indeed, this is essentially Boethius' point: we cannot know much about the kind of God he believes he has determined to exist, but we can know at least one thing about this God: We can know that there is much about this entity that we simply cannot know. This is not simply the case of a "known unknown," that with a little epistemic elbow grease we can come to know that of which we were previously ignorant. This unknown – the nature of Boethius' God – is necessarily unknown to us is a much deeper way. God, as a Providential entity, is the ultimate unknown unknown.[14] However, that very feature of God is the very thing that makes some suspicious of this explanatory posit. Let us now turn to this brand of skepticism.

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IV. AGNOSTICISM WITH RESPECT TO THE SUPERNATURAL

Although he is better known as a philosopher of science,[15] Norwood Russell Hanson also wrote on the credibility of metaphysical claims of God's existence.[16] He articulates an argument that he calls the "Agnostic's dilemma" – which seeks to demonstrate that agnosticism with respect to God's existence is not, upon close consideration, a logically stable position. In essence, he argues that the very evidence (or lack thereof) that is often taken to support agnosticism is better taken as supporting atheism.

On the one hand, the agnostic agrees with the atheist that there isn't sufficient evidence to reasonably support the claim that God exists. All parties agree: there *could* be such evidence – Hanson (1971a, 305–6; 1971b, 313–4) presents an amusing thought experiment in which the clouds part and all the world's inhabitants hear an apparition of God thunderously dress him down: "I've had quite enough of your too-clever logic-chopping…in matters of theology. Be assured, N. R. Hanson, that I do most certainly exist." That is just to say the claim of God's existence cannot be settled *a priori*; one has to consider the factual evidence.[17]

On the other hand, the agnostic agrees with the theist that there isn't sufficient evidence to reasonably support the claim that God doesn't exist. Hanson rehearses the oft-heard retort to atheists that they cannot prove that God *doesn't* exist. Such a universal negative claim cannot be established. That is just the nature of such universal negative claims.

At this point, though, Hanson calls "foul," on the grounds that the agnostic is illegitimately changing the rules of the game when switching from the analysis of the atheist to the analysis of the theist argument, the resolution of which puts the agnostic in a dilemma:

> He [the agnostic] begins by assessing 'God exists' as if he were a fact-gatherer. He ends by appraising the claim's denial not as a fact-gatherer, but as a pure logician. But consistency demands that he either be a fact-gatherer with both the claim and its denial, or else play logician with both. If he would do the former, then he must grant that there is factual reason for denying that God exists – namely that the evidence which purports to favor his existence is *just not good enough*. If he would play the latter game, however – if he would make logical mileage out of 'It is not the case that God exists' by arguing that it can *never* be established – then he should treat 'God exists' in precisely the same way. He must say not only that the present evidence is not good enough fully to establish the claim, but that it never could be good enough (Hanson 1971b, 326, emphases in original).

Of course, you'll note Hanson goes beyond simply castigating the agnostic for the inconsistency of the position; he also presents what he thinks is the correct way out: atheism. "When there is no good reason for thinking a claim to be true, *that* in itself is good reason for think the claim to be false!" (1971b, 323, emphasis in original). He notes that the agnostic's policy of demanding formal proof of the case of non-existence claims leads to absurdity: "There is no proof… that a blue Brontosaurus does not exist in Brazil. There is no proof that the Loch Ness monster does not exist" (1971b, 309–10). And so on, for any number of wild possibilities. But, extrapolating the agnostic's stated

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policy for analyzing the claim for the non-existence of God would seem to force us to the absurd conclusion that we ought to remain agnostic about the existence of the Loch Ness monster, blue Brazilian Brontosaurs, etc. Hanson points out that it is much more reasonable in such cases to believe these beasts do not exist:

> 'How can you be so sure' comes the retort to which the response must be: I *am* so sure because
> (1) people have looked, and they have not [been] found, and
> (2) there is no good reason for supposing that there are still good reasons (circumstantial evidence independent of looking and not finding) for supposing that such things do exist. We infer beyond appearances to the existence of gravity, the positron and life on Mars. But what appearances require us to infer beyond them to monsters and unicorns? Indeed, what possible reason could *you*, dear retorter, have for supposing there to be the slightest chance that such creatures do exist? Science now possesses the best factual grounds for denying precisely this. (Hanson 1971b, 324, emphases in original)

Such is Hanson's scientific and overwhelmingly common sense analysis of where the agnostic and the theist both go wrong (although the agnostic suffers the further charge of being logically confused in addition to being simply wrong on the basis of the facts).[18] Thomas Morris (1985), defends agnosticism against what he calls the "Hanson-Scriven[19] Thesis", which nicely formalizes Hanson's point in this discussion:

> HST: For any rational subject S and any positive existence claim P, if S is in possession of no good evidence or any other positive epistemic ground for thinking that P is true, then S ought to adopt the cognitive relation to P of denial. (219)

My complaint with the HST is succinctly put: It is a great epistemic rule of thumb, but in the kind of cases under consideration, it begs the question. When attempting to answer questions concerning the existence of God, it presupposes that we fully understand what constitutes "any other positive epistemic grounds." When it comes to cases such as whether a lake contains an dinosaur-like creature, the positive epistemic grounds are apparent. In the case of both God and secular conspiracy theories, however, these are part of what is at issue. If the entity that is being posited is powerful and secretive, or fundamentally inscrutable to us, then what constitutes "any other positive epistemic ground" is something that needs to be determined prior to being able to apply the rule that Hanson wishes to apply.

V. THE IMPLICATIONS OF GOD AS CONSPIRACY

We are now in a position to see what value comes from looking at God, and the supernatural more generally, through the lens of conspiracy theory. Hanson is first and foremost a philosopher of science, and his scientific leanings reveal themselves at the end of the last quotation I took from him above. *As science has shown us*, entities that we do not find evidence of when we make an effort to look for them ought to be considered non-existent. However, as I have noted previously (Keeley 1999, 121–3), when reasoning about conspiracies, this observation is not as self-evident as science

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would lead us to believe.[20] It is perfectly reasonable in situations where – as in the case of blue brontosaurs and the Loch Ness monster – the target of investigation is unaware of our investigation, and further, does not have the cognitive resources and motivation to outsmart us in that investigation. The Loch Ness monster is allegedly a shy beast, and therefore hard to find, but is it reasonable to suppose that it is listening in on the radio transmissions of the searchers and building cloaking devices to deceive our sonar? This being unreasonable means, as Hanson notes, that we have very good grounds for denying the existence of such things.

When analyzing the posits of conspiracy theories, using the same rule of thumb is ill-advised. The reason is that, by hypothesis, we *always* have some "other positive epistemic ground for thinking that [that conspiratorial posit] is true". We human investigators are fallible (and we know this to be the case) and history is rife with credible conspiracies. This is one upshot of the Rumsfeld epigraph: Because (I argue) of the conspiratorial nature of the world, we know that there are not only national security threats that we know we do *not* know about (what a known terrorist group is currently planning) but we also know – with as much certainty as we know anything else about the sociopolitical realm – that there are threats about which we do not even know we are ignorant. By their very nature, these *unknown unknowns* are impossible to factor into any kind of a calculus of threat assessment, but there is a lesson to be drawn here, and that is a significant degree of humility with respect to our threat assessments. Further, the point is not simply that we should acknowledge our ignorance and fallibility of reasoning; surely we should *always* take our reasoning with a grain of salt. The point here is to make it very clear that in some select domains and under certain conditions, we would be prudent to be *especially* skeptical, more so than normal.

Now the question before us is whether existence claims about God and the supernatural are more like the kinds of existence claims that natural science is in a good position to assess or more like situations that cannot presume a neutral target of investigation. Hanson fails to note any distinction here, so he lumps existence claims about God in with blue Brazilian brontosaurs. However, I believe there is a distinction to be made. Unlike with the brontosaurs, by hypothesis, an omniscient God knows what we would consider evidence for His existence and an omnipotent God could certainly leave only the evidence He wished to be found. Looking for a God that does not wish to be found would be a quite futile task. If God can be thought of as a kind of conspirator, He would surely be the ultimate conspirator.

As with Rumsfeld's unknown unknowns, the issue here is not the nature of the existence claim itself, but rather with the domain or target of that existence claim. Positrons and brontosaurs are one sort of thing; secretive terrorist groups and supernaturally powerful beings are another. Although we should always be skeptical, in certain domains we have good reason to believe that we ought to be especially humble about our reasoning. My suggestion is that the domain of beings whose power and knowledge far outstrip our own are precisely the kind of domain where we ought to be especially careful in trusting the outcome of our reasoning. I believe it is that humility which is the basis for agnosticism with respect to God.

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Notice the conflicting epistemic claims being made here. Rumsfeld and Carl Sagan declare that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Hanson's point is quite clearly the opposite; for him, if we have investigated and unless we have reason to think otherwise, absence of evidence *precisely is* evidence of absence, and pretty good evidence at that. Why the different claims? The answer is that sometimes the former claim is more appropriate and in others the latter. When one is dealing with conspiratorial elements – especially potentially powerful conspiratorial elements – then one always has a reason for at least being worried that the mere fact that you are not finding any positive evidence does not necessarily lend much credence to the claim that the existential claim in question is false. Then again, it does not give us positive evidence for the posit either. Hence, the proper response is a humble agnosticism in the face of such situations.

Of course, the key question is deciding whether one is in a situation that calls for the Sagan rule[21] or in one that calls for a Hanson-Scriven rule. Rumsfeld argues that in the case of the existence of national security threats to the United States in the year 2002, absence of evidence tells you something, but not as much as one might wish. Do not become too complacent; there are always the unknown unknowns. However, in this paper, I am arguing that the existence of the supernatural *also* calls for the Sagan rule. But are there reasons for taking the existence of God seriously that parallel Rumsfeld's reasons for taking seriously the existence of his unknown unknowns (e.g., the enmity of many groups in the world to United States foreign policy)?

Hanson does not think so. He states his assumption about as clearly as one can in a philosophical paper, with what he calls his "Belief missile": "THERE IS NO GOOD REASON FOR BELIEF IN THE EXISTENCE OF GOD" (Hanson 1971b, 309, capitalization in original). In his papers, Hanson does not canvas any of the reasons given by theists and agnostics for their beliefs. He takes it that these reasons are no good and uses this to motivate the quandary that he claims the agnostic is in. However, there are some reasons (although, how good they are is another question). For example, for those motivated by the arguments of the Intelligent Design movement, the apparent difficulty of explaining the current form of life on earth using the purely natural forces of natural selection is going to at least somewhat motivate the belief that there must exist some supernaturally powerful "designer" of life. I am not personally motivated in this way, but there are plenty who are. More motivating for me is the lack of consensus concerning how to answer the metaphysical question "Why is there something rather than nothing?" Then again, if one counts the realm of supernatural entities as "something," then one is hardly in a position to call on God as a solution to this deepest of metaphysical questions.

In the end, I think probably the most reasonable potential generator of a reason to take the existence of God as potentially plausible is what Piers Benn (1999) calls the "problem of reasonable theists" (176–78).[22] He notes that theological reasoning is particularly vexed because so much is up for debate and actively debated. Not only is there great dispute about the facts, there is also significant disagreement between

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intelligent and reflective folk about the rules of argumentation, who has the burden of proof, and how to understand the very questions at issue.

Benn notes that just because reasonable people take a position that varies from one's own is not necessarily grounds for changing one's mind. They must give us sound reasons for changing. Further, we note that even reasonable and reflective people can be mistaken about the very fundamental issues that are at stake in religious discussion. Benn continues:

> So why might agnosticism retain its attraction? One reason is that although the agnostic admits that it may be perfectly rational to retain a firm conviction despite knowing that it is disputed by people of good judgement, he may still attach some *evidential weight* to the fact that there are intelligent people who take a theistic stance. It is not that he thinks we should suspend judgement even after we have investigated all the evidence; it is that the fact that reasonable people have such beliefs is part of the evidence, if only indirectly. This is a watered-down version of familiar arguments from authority and consensus, and although these are unsound as proofs, they may still retain some weaker evidential force. Shouldn't the fact that people of generally sound judgement believe these things, at least give non-believers pause for thought? (178, emphasis in original)

I agree with Benn's sentiment here and note that this evidential weight is something that can motivate the notion that God's existence is a serious possibility that we should keep in mind.

At the very least, I believe I have shown that this is all grist for the mill, that considering theological questions about the existence of God in the light of the strange epistemology of conspiracy theories enriches the discussion in interesting ways. God's alleged mysterious ways are not unlike the alleged secret and mysterious activities common to secular conspiracy theories. And just as it is impossible to reject even the more dubious secular conspiracy theories *a priori*, requiring us to adopt an agnostic stance until such time as the evidence begins to roll in, similarly it is prudent to adopt an agnostic attitude with respect to God. At the very least, considering belief in God as the ultimate conspiracy theory indicates that agnosticism is not the logically bankrupt position folks such as Russell Hanson worry it is.

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NOTES

1 See, for example, Hart Seely's *Pieces of Intelligence: The Existential Poetry of Donald H. Rumsfeld* (2003, 2). Seely created a poem, "The Unknown," which originally appeared in a piece in Slate.com (Seely 2002). His poem was taken from a press conference on 12 February 2002. The passage I quote as the epigraph comes from a later press conference in which Rumsfeld spells out his idea less telegraphically and, in my opinion, more coherently.
2 Although it is no doubt snarky to say this, people who have laughed at this quotation from Rumsfeld remind me of the occasional student essay author who quotes some "obviously" nonsensical passage from, say, Kant or Frankfurt only to have me point out that the problem is not the confused author but rather the lazy reader.
3 The Sultanate's capital is Bandar Seri Begawan, by the way.
4 See, for example, my (1999), which is collected along with many other interesting papers in Coady (2006).

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5 "Of Miracles" (Section X of *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding*, (Hume 1748)), reprinted in Tweyman (1996, 1–20).
6 Hume's analysis of the epistemic situation of miracles is not without its critics, cf. Earman (2000).
7 Although, see Mandik (this volume).
8 Lee Basham (2006) has also made similar observations: "Though sexual betrayals and the Machiavellian aspects of family, business and career loom large here, perhaps the most grand and sustained examples of mass conspiracy theory are traditional theistic religions" (135).
9 One important implication of Boethius' solution to the problem of evil is that it generates a further philosophical problem, namely the Problem of Free Will: If everything that happens is necessarily part of God's plan, how can it be that we have any free choice as we act in the world? Boethian Providence would seem to leave no room for freedom of the will. Never fear, Boethius recognizes this problem and offers a solution in the final Book V of the *Consolation*.
10 It is also interesting to note how this supernatural conspiracy, in which these fallen angels are using the ruse of extraterrestrials to cover their actual identity and plans, is not unlike the number of secular conspiracy theories that suggest that what the public identifies as the work of extraterrestrials is in fact a cover for acts related to government espionage or top secret military research and design projects.
11 Let me explicitly note that in this paper I am clearly not talking about everybody's notion of the supernatural. I do not wish to claim that every notion of God is conspiratorial in nature, indeed there are plenty of explanations of worldly events that invoke God as anything but a conspirator; if you want sufficient evidence of God, they say, all one has to do is look with an open heart and the evidence is apparent. Then again, I cannot help but note that very much the same sort of thing come out of the mouths of the most fringe-dwelling of secular conspiracy theorists: "The truth is out there," all one has to do is look with an open mind and all will be revealed. In any case, accounts of the supernatural are legion and it would be foolish for me to claim that all such accounts are covered by my discussion here.
12 The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists one archaic, non-nefarious definition for "conspiracy": "Union or combination (of persons or things) for one end or purpose; harmonious action or effort... (In a good or neutral sense)." Curiously, this definition and its examples apparently does away with the normal property of secrecy. (My thanks to Michael Green for bringing this to my attention.)
13 This is highlighted by the etymology of "conspire": to "breathe together" as in the quiet whispering of conspirators. (My thanks to Pete Mandik for pointing this out.)
14 Then again, there's another one of those wrinkles that always arise when thinking about the kind of perfect entities Boethius is invoking: If God is genuinely omnipotent, should not it be within his power to make us comprehend anything He wishes us to comprehend?
15 I discuss the significant influence of Hanson's work on at least one important contemporary philosopher of cognitive science in my introductory chapter to *Paul Churchland* (Keeley 2005, 1–31).
16 Two of the papers he wrote on this subject, "What I Don't Believe" and "The Agnostic's Dilemma," were published near the time of Hanson's unexpected demise in an airplane crash in 1967. Of the two, the former essay is the more comprehensive. Both papers are collected in the posthumous collection that I cite here (Hanson, Toulmin, & Woolf 1971).

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17 So Hanson on God's existence breaks with Hume on the credibility of miracles.

18 Concerning this last argument, McLaughlin (1984) presents a related line (about the existence or non-existence of Hippogriffs on the fifth planet of the Vega system), the gist of which is that we ought to apply Occam's razor in the case of such otiose claims. By the same token, Occam's razor significantly undermines agnosticism, McLaughlin argues.

19 Hanson-*Scriven* after Michael Scriven, whom Morris credits for making much the same type of argument in (Scriven 1966). Incidentally, Morris' paper defends agnosticism against both the HST and McLaughlin's related arguments. I see my own discussion in the next section as consistent with Morris, although he doesn't mention conspiracy theories.

20 *Natural* science that is. The explanatory difficulties that arise when trying to explain the behavior of human animals may be one of the key features marking the difference between the natural and the social sciences.

21 I'll resist the temptation to call it the "Sagan-Rumsfeld rule."

22 And, he notes there is also a converse problem for theists, hence motivating his case for agnosticism.

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