

Probability and the Presumption of Atheism

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Abstract

This paper reconsiders the presumption of atheism, which was initially proposed by Anthony Flew. In particular, Alvin Plantinga's response to an early form of the presumption is reviewed and found to be unsuccessful, although the reasons cited in favour of the presumption are also unsuccessful. More recently, Michael Tooley has defended the presumption of atheism using probability theory. His approach provides a straightforward way of making sense of the presumption in terms of a low prior probability for theism, but his defence of the presumption faces several serious criticisms. It is argued that, in addition to probability, explanatory considerations are also relevant in that the opponent of the presumption should be able to draw to some extent on the explanatory role that God would play. Understood in this way, it is argued that there is no good reason to believe that there is a presumption of atheism.

1 Introduction

In a famous essay, Anthony Flew argued that there is a presumption of atheism, by which he meant that the onus of proof lies with the theist to prove that God exists.¹ Following W. K. Clifford and Bertrand Russell before him, Flew essentially claimed that it was irrational to believe in God in the absence of sufficiently good evidence or arguments. Although it has usually been atheists who have defended the presumption of atheism, it is of course entirely possible to be a theist and accept it as well. A theist who accepted the presumption would agree that it would be irrational to believe in God in the absence of sufficiently good evidence, but claim that such evidence does in fact exist. This highlights an important aspect about the presumption since it must be distinguished from the claim that there is no good evidence for the existence of God.

In another famous essay, Alvin Plantinga rejected the kind of evidentialism underlying the presumption of atheism, arguing that it can be rational to believe in God even in the absence of convincing evidence or arguments.² His idea was that belief in God is properly basic and so is in the same boat as belief in other minds and perceptual beliefs. So it seems there are at least two approaches which theists can adopt to the presumption: an evidentialist approach that accepts it and tries to meet the challenge and a non-evidentialist approach that rejects it. This paper considers a third approach by asking whether it is possible for an evidentialist to reject the presumption.

Whether this third approach is possible depends on how exactly the presumption is to be understood. If it is simply the claim that one should not believe in God in the absence of evidence, then it seems that the evidentialist would accept it since evidentialism holds that belief in God should be based on the evidence. This would in effect be a presumption of

¹ Anthony Flew, *The Presumption of Atheism* (London: Pemberton, 1976).

² Alvin Plantinga, 'Reason and Belief in God', in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 16-93.

agnosticism rather than a presumption of atheism. Alternatively, if the presumption is understood as the stronger claim that one should believe that God does not exist in the absence of evidence, then it is much less obvious that the evidentialist, whether theist or non-theist, should accept it.

So, how should the presumption be understood? In the weaker sense of agnosticism or the stronger sense of atheism? It turns out that this is not a straightforward matter since there is arguably no sharp distinction between agnosticism and atheism. Is a person who believes that it is highly unlikely that God exists an agnostic or an atheist? One way of approaching the topic that avoids a sharp distinction is to think in terms of degrees of belief using probability theory. It will be argued that this provides the most natural way for understanding and evaluating the presumption of atheism. It will also be argued that explanatory considerations play a crucial role in making judgments about probabilities and in assessing the merits of the presumption of atheism.

The rest of the paper is as follows. Section 2 considers criticisms of the presumption of atheism as defended by Anthony Flew and Michael Scriven. Section 3 motivates an approach based on probability theory and presents objections to Michael Tooley's defence of the presumption which is construed in this way. Section 4 provides some reasons for taking the explanatory context into account when considering the presumption of atheism rather than trying to abstract from all evidence. Section 5 presents some conclusions.

2 Flew, Scriven and Plantinga

In his essay, Flew understands an atheist to be 'not someone who positively asserts the non-existence of God; but someone who is simply not a theist.'³ This sounds much more like agnosticism and gives the impression that he is really defending a presumption of agnosticism. If this is correct, our would-be evidentialist opponent of the presumption has little cause for concern. The reason for this is that if Flew is to be understood in this way then when he refers to the onus of proof lying with the theist this means with the theist *rather than the agnostic* and this the evidentialist is willing to accept. Furthermore, given this understanding it seems there would also be an onus of proof on the atheist (in the sense of one who believes that God does not exist) rather than the agnostic. Hence, the theist and atheist are on an equal footing. However, other parts of his essay strongly suggest that this is not what he has in mind. He thinks that the theist must provide good grounds for belief in God and that 'Until or unless some such grounds are produced we have literally no reason at all for believing; and in that situation the only reasonable posture must be that of either the negative atheist or the agnostic.'⁴ It seems clear that he believes that there is an onus of proof on the theist that is not shared by either the agnostic or the atheist.

There is no ambiguity in Michael Scriven's viewpoint. For him, atheism rather than agnosticism is the only rational belief if there is no good evidence or arguments for the existence of God. He claims that, 'The proper alternative, where there is no evidence, is not mere suspension of belief, e.g., about Santa Claus; it is *disbelief*.'⁵ In response, Plantinga notes that Scriven does not treat

³ Anthony Flew, *The Presumption of Atheism*, 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵ Michael Scriven, *Primary Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 103. See also Norwood Russell Hanson, 'The Agnostic's Dilemma', in S. Toulmin and H. Woolf (eds.) *What I do not Believe and Other Essays* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1971), 303-308. Hanson is even clearer in his assessment. He states, 'The next step for [the agnostic] is

(1) God exists

and

(2) God does not exist

in the same way and he claims that 'Scriven's claim, initially at any rate, looks like a piece of merely arbitrary intellectual imperialism'.⁶ This criticism seems a bit harsh, however. It is not obvious that (1) and (2) should be treated in the same way. After all, there are many cases, such as Santa Claus, where it does not seem appropriate to treat them in the same way. Would the onus not be on believers in Santa Claus to make their case? Of course, God is very different from Santa Claus, but arguably the theist would need to say what it is about God that enables (1) and (2) to be treated in the same way.

Plantinga also discusses a further objection to Scriven's argument. Scriven seems to think that in the absence of evidence one should believe the denial of a positive existential claim like (1), but not the denial of a negative existential claim like (2). Plantinga asks us to consider the positive existential claim,

(3) There is at least one human being that was not created by God.

Plantinga claims that according to Scriven, we should believe the denial of (3) unless there is evidence for it, i.e. that every human has been created by God. He then argues that if there are no good arguments against the existence of God, then there would be no good arguments for (3). So if there are no good arguments for or against the existence of God (1), we should believe both that God does not exist and that we have all been created by him. However, there seems to be a way for Scriven to avoid this contradictory conclusion as (3) is ambiguous since it could be interpreted to mean,

(3a) There is at least one human being that was not created by God even though God exists.

or

(3b) There is at least one human being that was not created by God because God does not exist.

Clearly, the atheist believes (3b) and not (3a), yet (3b) contains a negative existential statement and so arguably Scriven could deny that his principle of believing the denial of positive existential statements in the absence of evidence applies to it.

However, even though there seem to be problems with Plantinga's objections to Scriven, there also seem to be problems with Scriven's thesis itself. In a book co-authored with Alvin Plantinga, Michael Tooley asks us to consider the following positive existential claims,

easy: if he chooses to use his head, he will become an atheist. If he chooses to react to his glands, he will become a theist.'

⁶ Alvin Plantinga, 'Reason and Belief in God', 28.

(4) Living things now exist on a planet circling Alpha Centauri.

and

(5) Living things now exist on some planet in the universe, besides the Earth.⁷

Tooley claims that even in the absence of any evidence it is clear that (4) is much less likely than (5) and he notes that this leaves open the possibility that (5) might be more likely than not. The moral seems clear: in some cases such as Santa Claus and fairies a presumption of atheism is appropriate, whereas in other cases it is not. Logical considerations alone such as those of Scriven (and Plantinga) it seems cannot settle the issue. It depends on the nature of the entities under consideration.

3 Probability and the Presumption

As noted earlier, our would-be evidentialist opponent of the presumption is really only opposed to a presumption of *atheism*; a presumption of *agnosticism* would not cause him to lose any sleep. But what is the difference between atheism and agnosticism? No doubt we would consider someone who is completely convinced that God does not exist to be an atheist and someone who is completely neutral between believing that God exists and believing that he does not to be an agnostic. What about someone who is somewhere in between? Is someone who is almost completely convinced that God does not exist an atheist or agnostic? One way of thinking about this is in terms of probability theory. The person who is completely convinced of the non-existence of God assigns a probability of zero to God's existence, whereas the person who is almost convinced assigns a probability of 0.01, say, and the person who is completely neutral assigns 0.5. In this way there is no need to provide a sharp distinction between atheism and agnosticism since they can just be considered as two ends of a spectrum, with those who assign low probabilities for God's existence being more atheistic than those who do not.

How does this relate to the presumption of atheism / agnosticism? In a popular defence of what is essentially a presumption of atheism, Richard Dawkins claims that just because there is no proof of the non-existence of God it does not mean that we should be neutral between belief in the existence and non-existence of God, assigning probability 0.5 to each.⁸ Instead, he thinks that in the absence of evidence the rational viewpoint is one of disbelief, i.e. close to probability zero. To make his point, he draws on Bertrand Russell's story about a celestial teapot. Suppose it is claimed that between Earth and Mars there is a teapot orbiting the sun, but that it is too small to be observed even by the most powerful telescopes. However, its existence cannot be disproved either. Since there is no evidence either way, does this mean we should be agnostic about the existence of the teapot? In particular, should we take the view that there is a 50:50 chance that it exists? Clearly not. In the absence of evidence, it is overwhelmingly unlikely that it exists. The same, he claims, is true of God.

As we saw in the last section, arguments based on appeals to celestial teapots or Santa Claus are not good enough to establish the presumption of atheism, but probability does seem like a useful way to understand the idea of a presumption of atheism. In terms of probability theory the presumption of atheism can be expressed as follows:

⁷ Alvin Plantinga and Michael Tooley, *Knowledge of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 87-93.

⁸ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), 46-54.

- (6) There is a presumption of atheism if and only if the probability of God's existence is low (at least less than 0.5) before any evidence for or against the existence of God is taken into account.

Note that the definition has been left vague since it does not say how low the probability must be. Clearly, the probability would have to be less than 0.5. If the probability is only slightly less than 0.5, 0.49 say, we might say that there is a weak presumption of atheism. In this case it has little significance and our evidentialist opponent of the presumption will not be too concerned. But if the probability is considerably less than 0.5, the presumption becomes more atheistic and more significant. It is also worth noting that (6) has been formulated in terms of the probability *before any evidence* is taken into account. This leaves it open as to whether or not there is any good evidence for the existence of God or not. The standard approach for updating probabilities in the light of evidence is known as Bayesianism. In Bayesian terms we can refer to the probability in (6) as the *prior probability* before any evidence has been taken into account. This might be quite different from the *posterior probability* obtained after all the evidence has been taken into account.

Is there any good reason for believing (6) to be true? Note that defenders of the presumption of atheism have offered reasons for believing it to be true. And in light of the failure of straightforward approaches to establish it, it seems clear that the onus of proof lies with the defender of the presumption of atheism. In other words, even if there is a presumption of atheism, everyone seems to be agreed that there is no *presumption of the presumption of atheism*. Furthermore, the opponent of the presumption of atheism need not claim that (6) is false, nor that the prior probability of God's existence is high, but merely that there is no convincing reason to accept (6).

Michael Tooley defends (6) and in doing so claims that atheism is the default position.⁹ Taking God to be omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good, Tooley argues that *a priori* it is just as likely that an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly evil being exists. He then claims that it is reasonable to view the following three possible beings as *a priori* equally probable:

- (7a) an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being;
- (7b) an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly evil being;
- (7c) an omnipotent, omniscient and morally indifferent being.

If this is correct, then the *a priori* probability of God's existence cannot be greater than one-third. Since this is a prior probability before consideration of any evidence that might be thought to be relevant to God's existence, it would mean that (6) is true. Indeed, Tooley claims that by considering other intermediate possibilities it is plausible to argue that the upper bound on the probability of God's existence is actually much lower.

In response, Plantinga argues that Tooley's reason for assigning equal *a priori* probabilities to (7a), (7b) and (7c) is merely that we cannot see a difference between their probabilities.¹⁰ Plantinga's objection to this is that it does not follow from the fact that we cannot see a difference in their probabilities that they are equally probable. Tooley replies that in fact his

⁹ Alvin Plantinga and Michael Tooley, *Knowledge of God*, 87-93.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 164-169.

reason for the assignment of equal probabilities is related to his views on logical probability and what is correct in the classical principle of indifference.¹¹ The particular approach to probability adopted by Tooley should be taken seriously, although it should also be noted that it is far from universally accepted. More importantly, it is not obvious that it really addresses Plantinga's concern since ultimately the approach involves assigning equal probabilities unless there is a good reason not to, but this just seems to be what Plantinga is objecting to.

There are also other ways of responding to Tooley's argument. It is possible to draw on Richard Swinburne's argument that God's perfect goodness follows from his omnipotence and omniscience assuming that God is also perfectly free and that moral judgments are true or false.¹² Briefly, Swinburne argues that agents act for a reason, which amounts to seeing the action as being in some way a good thing. If an agent has overriding reasons for performing some action and is not influenced by non-rational factors, i.e. is perfectly free, he will perform the action. If God is omniscient, his moral judgments will be true and so he will perform any action that is morally obligatory for him. The same applies to not performing any wrong action. Tooley claims that 'to be perfectly good one must possess a trait of character that *ensures* that one will never do what is wrong, regardless of whatever circumstances may arise.'¹³ In effect, Swinburne has argued that God does possess such a trait. If Swinburne's argument is correct then the probability should be zero for (7b) and (7c) and so Tooley's argument fails.

A different line of response is basically to accept Tooley's approach, but deny that it amounts to a presumption of atheism in any meaningful sense. True, the beings identified in (7b) and (7c) are not consistent with the God of theism, but they do not fit very well with atheism either. Someone who believes in an omnipotent, omniscient and morally indifferent being who created the universe would be unlikely to characterise herself as an atheist. One approach here would be to consider what we might call *weak theism*, the belief that there is an intelligent being who is not part of the physical universe and who created the universe. Atheism would then be understood as the denial that there is any such being. Accordingly, the beings described in (7a), (7b) and (7c) would all be consistent with weak theism. If these were the only three options, then the probability of weak atheism would be one. Clearly, however, there are other options including atheism. The defender of the presumption of atheism would then need to say something about the probability of atheism and show that it is greater than that of weak theism. It is far from clear how this could be done.

Overall, it seems that Tooley has not established the case for a presumption of atheism. This does not mean that the prior probability of God's existence is greater than one-half, but just that there is no compelling reason to think that it is less. One of the difficulties, however, is to say anything meaningful about these probabilities in the absence of any evidence whatsoever. In an attempt to address this issue, we will now turn our attention to explanatory considerations.

4 The Explanatory Context

Although the arguments for a presumption of atheism are not persuasive, intuitively it may still seem appealing if *no evidence* is taken into account at all. If, for example, the universe had not existed, it seems plausible to suppose that the most natural state of affairs be that nothing, not even God, would have existed. Of course, if God is a metaphysically necessary being, then the

¹¹ Ibid., 233-237.

¹² Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, revised ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 97-102.

¹³ Alvin Plantinga and Michael Tooley, *Knowledge of God*, 92.

answer is 'no', but our would-be evidentialist opponent of the presumption of atheism might not be convinced by this response. He may well accept that if the presumption of atheism requires us to abstract from *all* our evidence about the universe (including its existence), then there is some merit to it. But he will argue that since something does in fact exist, there is no reason to think that atheism is more plausible than theism. Granted, atheism may be simpler in the sense that it postulates nothing external to the universe, but for this reason it seems to have to take the existence of the universe as a brute fact. By contrast, he will claim, theism at least offers an explanation for the existence of the universe.

The idea here is to think of the presumption of atheism in an explanatory context. By way of analogy, consider the following murder-mystery scenario. A dozen guests are staying at a country mansion for the weekend and during this time one of them is found dead. The deceased was a young, apparently healthy man called Albert, but apart from that there is not much evidence to go on. Fortunately, there is a famous sleuth among the guests, who soon arranges for the body to be taken away for a post-mortem and begins to speculate about the death. Did someone intend to take the life of the deceased, which we shall call the intentionality hypothesis, or is there a more benign explanation? Clearly, further evidence will be required before this question can be answered, but what about the prior probability of the intentionality hypothesis before any additional evidence is acquired? Should there be a presumption of disbelief in the intentionality hypothesis? Under the circumstances, a presumption of agnosticism seems more plausible. Of course, one might argue that the body itself is a piece of evidence and so if we are going to consider the presumption of disbelief seriously we should not take even this piece of evidence into account. If Albert had not died, the intentionality hypothesis could still have been true, but let us suppose that there is no other evidence for it apart from the body. In such a case, a presumption of disbelief would seem reasonable although trivial. The fact is that there is a body and the intentionality hypothesis offers an explanation of it. Even if there would have been a presumption of disbelief had no body been found, given that it has been found, the presumption now seems much less plausible.

Returning to the question of God's existence, perhaps our evidentialist opponent of the presumption of atheism will argue that if all our evidence is discarded a presumption of atheism, even if correct, would be trivial. Of course, if the presumption is to have any meaning we cannot take all our evidence into account either, but perhaps a compromise is possible. One suggestion would be that the existence of the physical universe corresponds to the body in the analogy. Of course, features of the universe other than its mere existence would be relevant in reaching a final decision just as further evidence would be helpful to the sleuth. These would include the order and fine-tuning of the universe, the existence of life within it, the existence and extent of suffering, etc. It should be added that the analogy should not be taken too seriously. The proponent of the presumption of atheism may well argue that the body makes the intentionality hypothesis plausible, but that the existence of the universe does not make God's existence plausible. This is not the issue, however. The only point is that the presumption of atheism might be better understood in the context of the existence of the universe rather than being divorced from all evidence.

According to this way of thinking the presumption of atheism, previously defined in (6) would become,

- (8) There is a presumption of atheism if and only if the probability of God's existence is low (at least less than 0.5) when the existence of the universe is taken into account but any other evidence for or against the existence of God is not.

Is this a reasonable way to think about the presumption of atheism? Arguably this is closer to Flew's way of thinking about the presumption in some respects than Tooley's since Flew did not attempt to abstract the issue from all the evidence. Rather, Flew's attitude seemed to be that we should simply take all the evidence into account; his presumption of atheism then amounts to the claim that in the absence of any convincing reason for believing that this evidence supports belief in God, belief in God is irrational. In terms of what evidence should be taken into account, the current approach lies between Flew and Tooley. One objection to this approach would be to say that taking the existence of the universe into account is to introduce one of the theist's main pieces of evidence since it provides the starting point for the cosmological argument. However, as we shall see, to reject the presumption of atheism will not require accepting the cosmological argument.

Is there any good reason for believing (8) to be true? In order to answer this question we need to consider Bayes' theorem,

$$(9) \quad P(G|U) = \frac{P(U|G)}{P(U)} P(G),$$

where $P(G)$ is the prior probability of God's existence before any empirical evidence is considered (as discussed in the previous section), $P(G|U)$ is the posterior probability of God's existence given the existence of the physical universe, $P(U)$ is the probability that the universe would exist and $P(U|G)$ is the probability of the universe given God's existence. The presumption of atheism as expressed in (8) amounts to the claim that,

$$(10) \quad P(G|U) < \frac{1}{2},$$

where we will assume for simplicity the value of $1/2$. It turns out that this is equivalent to

$$(11) \quad P(U|G)P(G) < P(U|\neg G)P(\neg G),$$

where $P(\neg G)$ is the probability that God does not exist and $P(U|\neg G)$ is the probability of the universe existing given that God does not exist. In order to show that there is a presumption of atheism in the sense defined in (8) it is necessary to show that the inequality in (11) holds.

In section 3, we saw that Tooley's argument for a presumption of atheism in the sense of (6) fails. Hence it does not provide a convincing reason for believing that $P(G) < P(\neg G)$, but let us grant that this inequality holds nevertheless. We can now think of the two sides of (11) in terms of explanations of U , the existence of the universe. On the left hand side is the theistic explanation which takes God as the stopping point for explanation and explains U as being brought about by God. The probability that God exists in the first place is given by $P(G)$ and how likely it is that he would bring about our universe is given by $P(U|G)$. On the right hand side is the atheistic hypothesis where the universe itself is the stopping point for explanation and so we can consider $P(U|\neg G)$ to be the probability that the universe exists as a brute fact uncaused by God. This term is then multiplied by $P(\neg G)$.

Since we are assuming that $P(\neg G)$ is greater than one-half, the key question is how $P(U|G)$ and $P(G)$ compare with $P(U|\neg G)$. It seems reasonable to believe that $P(U|\neg G)$ is very low, i.e. it is reasonable to believe that it is improbable that the universe should just exist

as an unexplained brute fact. Of course, explanation has to stop somewhere, but the existence of such a complex universe does seem improbable if there is no further explanation for it. Many atheists will grant that this is indeed the case. What about $P(U|G)$? How well does God's existence explain the universe? How likely is it that he would bring it into existence? Arguably, it is not particularly likely. According to theism, God was under no obligation to create anything and if he did, there is nothing to guarantee that he would create a universe like ours. So arguably $P(U|G)$ is also quite low, but it seems likely that it is considerably greater than $P(U|\neg G)$. If God exists, however improbable that might be, there would be an explanation of the universe in terms of a being with the power capable of bringing it into existence. By contrast if there is no God, the universe would be an unexplained brute fact. So there seems to be reason to believe that $P(U|G)$ is much greater than $P(U|\neg G)$.

Now consider $P(G)$, the prior probability of God's existence. Even if $P(G)$ is less than one-half, there are reasons for believing that it is much greater than the probability of the universe existing as an unexplained brute fact. First, there are various reasons for thinking that if God exists, he does so necessarily. Although Hume claimed that the universe's existence could be necessary, there do not seem to be any good reasons for believing this to be the case. Second, if God exists, he is necessarily uncaused and unexplained by anything external to himself, whereas this is not the case for the universe. This suggests that God is a more suitable stopping point for explanation. Third, if God exists, he necessarily had no beginning, whereas this is not true of the universe. This relates to probability because if had a beginning it seems reasonable to believe that it is highly improbable it would have come into existence uncaused out of absolutely nothing. Fourth, there are certain respects in which God might be thought to be simple in a way in which the universe is not. Consider God's infinite qualities. Richard Swinburne argues that, for example, a being of infinite power is simpler than a being with a particular finite quantity of power. His point is that we would need an explanation as to why it had that finite value as opposed to any other.¹⁴ The universe by contrast is a complex entity composed of multiple parts.

Various reasons have been offered for thinking that $P(U|G)$ and $P(G)$ are considerably greater than $P(U|\neg G)$. Of course, it is possible that $P(U|G) > P(U|\neg G)$ and $P(G) > P(U|\neg G)$ and yet that the inequality in (11) also holds. But recall that the proponent of the presumption of atheism as defined in (8) needs to provide arguments in favour of the inequality in (11). The low value of $P(U|\neg G)$ and the arguments presented here give us reason to doubt that there is a strong case to be made. It is important to point out that I am not claiming to have demonstrated that (11) is false, but merely to have shown that there do not seem to be convincing arguments for believing it to be true. Hence, these arguments are not intended to show that the existence of the universe makes it more probable than not that God exists, but only that there is no good reason to believe that the probability of God's existence is less than one-half.

In effect, it is God's explanatory role that is relevant in undermining the presumption of atheism. This highlights what is wrong with appeals to celestial teapots and fairies as motivations for the presumption of atheism. These examples just postulate one more entity or class of entities in the universe that have no explanatory role to play. Contrast this with the Higgs boson, which many physicists believe exists even though it has never been detected (like the celestial teapot) despite numerous attempts (unlike the celestial teapot). Why does it seem acceptable to presume atheism with respect to the celestial teapot, but not the Higgs boson?

¹⁴ Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 93-96.

Obviously the difference lies in terms of its explanatory role since its existence would help to make sense of other things given its key role in the standard model of particle physics.

5 Conclusions

One way of rejecting the presumption of atheism is to adopt a non-evidentialist approach, but the goal in this paper has been to investigate whether an evidentialist should accept or reject it. If it is to be understood as a presumption of agnosticism with the onus of proof equally distributed between the atheist and the theist, the evidentialist has no objection.

Several attempts to defend a more robust presumption of atheism have been considered. Although Plantinga's criticisms of Scriven's case were problematic, alternative criticisms seem to count decisively against it. Several criticisms have also been offered against Tooley's attempt to show that the prior probability of God's existence before any evidence is taken into account is less than one-half.

It has also been argued that a more plausible way to think about the presumption of atheism is in an explanatory context, where God is considered as a possible explanation for the existence of the universe. There are some merits to this approach since it avoids having to abstract the discussion from all evidence. Ignoring *all* the evidence, including the existence of the universe, makes the presumption of atheism more plausible, but also somewhat trivial since few theists would be worried by the claim that in the absence of the universe atheism would be more probable than theism. When the existence of the universe is taken into account, it has been argued that the improbability of a universe like ours existing as an unexplained brute fact constitutes the main objection to the presumption of atheism.

Even if there were a presumption of atheism, it is still quite possible that the evidence could overturn it and so overall theism might be more probable.¹⁵ If the arguments in this paper are correct, however, there is no good reason to accept a presumption of atheism. Of course, this does not mean that good arguments cannot be provided for atheism. The theist and atheist can both present their cases, but in doing so there is no reason why the onus of proof should lie with the theist.

¹⁵ Indeed, Anthony Flew himself seems to have reached this conclusion. While still maintaining that there is a presumption of atheism, he thinks that atheism should be rejected because of the evidence.