

A BODILESS SPIRIT? MEANINGFULNESS, POSSIBILITY, AND PROBABILITY

Rik Peels

Abstract: The main conclusion of Herman Philipse's *God in the Age of Science?* is that we should all be atheists. Remarkably, however, the book contains no argument whatsoever for atheism. Philipse defends the argument from evil and the argument from divine hiddenness, but those arguments count only against an omnibenevolent and omnipotent God, not against just any god. He also defends the claim that there cannot be any bodiless spirits, but, of course, not all religions take their gods to be bodiless. However, because his main target of criticism is monotheism and adherents of monotheism usually claim that God is a bodiless spirit, this paper discusses Philipse's arguments against the existence of a bodiless spirit. I argue that his three main claims about religious belief in a bodiless spirit are false. First, contrary to what he says, there is good reason to think that the expression "bodiless spirit" is meaningful. Among other things, the Wittgensteinian semantic theory of psychological attribute ascription on which his argument relies turns out to be untenable. Second, Philipse's thesis that the existence of a bodiless spirit is impossible is also problematic. We can properly use the word *person* for bodiless spirits. Also, an attribute such as presence or omnipresence can be understood metaphorically without the definition of "God" thereby losing too much meaning. And we do not need any criterion for diachronic personal identity of bodiless spirits; such identity may very well be a primitive fact. Third and finally, there is no reason to think that the existence of a bodiless spirit is improbable. The fact that science has discovered a dependence relation between mental states and brain states and the fact that science has never been able to detect bodiless spirits provide no reason to think otherwise.

1. INTRODUCTION

In his recent book *God in the Age of Science? A Critique of Religious Reason*, Herman Philipse attempts to refute several arguments in favor of theism.¹ Let us assume that his attempt is successful. Philipse, however, also intends

Rik Peels, Philosophy Department, VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands

to defend a thesis that is stronger than the thesis that the arguments in favor of theism fail, namely, that we should all become atheists. The conclusion of the book, for instance, is that “if we aim at being reasonable and intellectually conscientious, we should become strong disjunctive universal atheists” (p. 346). By ‘strong atheism’ he means the thesis that one believes that there are no gods, not merely that one does *not* believe that there are gods. By “disjunctive atheism,” he means that one believes that religious doctrines concerning the existence of gods are either meaningless or simply false. By “universal atheism,” he means that one believes that *no* gods exist, not merely that this or that particular god does not exist. The conjunction of this position is common among atheists. It seems fair to say, then, that by “strong disjunctive universal atheism,” Philipse means what most of us mean by “atheism” *simpliciter*.

Clearly, from the mere fact—if it is a fact—that all arguments for theism fail, it does *not* follow that we should be atheists. For comparison, if all arguments for the view that there is extraterrestrial life fail, it does not follow that we should believe that there is no extraterrestrial life. Unless there are good arguments for the claim that there is no extraterrestrial life, we should suspend judgment on whether there is. Similarly, if all arguments for God’s existence fail, it does not follow that we should be atheists. Philipse is aware of this and, therefore, gives three arguments that he takes to count in favor of atheism: the argument from *evil*, the argument from *divine hiddenness*, and an argument (or a cluster of arguments) having to do with the idea that God is a *bodiless spirit*. I can be brief about the first two arguments. They show at most that there is no perfectly good and omnipotent God. It does *not* follow from that that there are no gods. Hence, Philipse’s entire case in favor of atheism comes down to his cluster of arguments against the idea that there is bodiless spirit. The aim of this article is to argue that these arguments are unconvincing.

Before we do so, however, we should ask ourselves whether it is indeed the case that all religions assume their gods to be without a body. And, quite clearly, this is *not* the case. Many religious believers believe in spirits or gods with a specific material body. The Indian religion Jainism, for instance, acknowledges both non-embodied gods (*Siddhas*) and embodied gods (*Tīrhanakaras* or *Arihantas*). Even certain monotheists, such as Mormons, believe that God has a physical body. Since Philipse’s arguments do not count against embodied gods, this means that, surprisingly, the book provides not a single argument for atheism, even though the conclusion of the book is a rather bold statement of atheism.

Philipse’s main target of criticism, however, seems to be belief in the God of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. That God, he assumes from the very start, is believed to be without a body. Philipse could, therefore, weaken his conclusion and claim that we should be atheists with regard to the monotheistic God of the Abrahamic religions. Even this claim is problematic, though. First, virtually all Christians take it that God—or more specifically, the second Person of the Trinity—*does* have a body, namely the body of Jesus Christ. Before his death and resurrection, that body was a *mortal* physical body. Ever

since his resurrection, up till today, it is an *immortal*, but still physical body—as is evidenced, for instance, by the fact that Jesus Christ is told to have eaten fish and honey after his resurrection (Luke 24:42–43). Because Christ is taken to be the first of God’s new creation, Christians believe that Christ *still has* and *will always have* this glorified, physical body. It is true that many Christians take it that before Christ’s incarnation God was without a body, but most of them also believe that ever since God is embodied.

Moreover, even apart from Christ’s incarnation, there is and has always been a theological current in the Christian church claiming that the cosmos is God’s body. Among twentieth century and contemporary defenders of this position are Charles E. Hartshorne, Karl Heim, Luco van den Brom, and Marcel Sarot.² According to Sarot, for example,

Christian theology does not exclude in advance all possible forms of divine embodiment, and (...) it seems possible to develop a theory of divine corporeality that both admits of divine passibility and is compatible with the basic tenets of Christian theology.³

Let us put these considerations to the side, though. For Philipse is quite right that it is not uncommon among monotheistic philosophers and theologians to (at least partially) define God as a bodiless spirit. Richard Swinburne, for instance, defines “God” as follows:

I take the proposition “God exists” (and the equivalent proposition “There is a God”) to be logically equivalent to “there exists necessarily a person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who necessarily is eternal, perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and the creator of all things”. I use “God” as the name of the person picked out by this description.⁴

William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland, in their introduction to their recent *Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, also define God along these lines when they say:

To anyone who is not open to the notion of an immaterial mental substance distinct from a material substratum, the whole project of natural theology is abortive. For God just is such an unembodied mind, distinct from and the Creator of the physical universe.⁵

Finally, we also find this view in theistic ecclesial confessions, such as the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*:

There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible. (Article 1)

Let us, therefore, turn to Philipse’s arguments for the thesis that believing in a bodiless spirit is problematic. He provides three arguments for this thesis. First, defining God as a bodiless spirit annuls the very conditions of meaningfully ascribing psychological attributes to him. Hence, we cannot give a coherent description of God; the word *God* has no meaning. I argue that the underlying Wittgensteinian theory of psychological attribute ascription is unconvincing and that even if it were convincing, we could talk meaningfully about God. (§ 2) Second, Philipse claims that even if the

expression “bodiless spirit” had meaning, there could not be a bodiless spirit that is a person. One reason for this is that the word *person* means human being. Another reason is that bodiless spirits could not be present anywhere. I respond to each of these points (§ 3). Finally, Philipse claims that even if there could be a God, for two reasons his existence would be highly improbable. First, neuroscientific research provides strong evidence for the dependence of mental functions on neural processes. Second, on the basis of a pessimistic induction about science’s quest for immaterial spirits, we have good reason to think that the existence of a bodiless spirit is highly unlikely. I argue that these are no good reasons to think that the existence of a bodiless spirit has a low prior probability (§ 4).⁶

I conclude that whether or not Philipse’s attempted refutation of certain arguments for theism is convincing, his arguments for establishing atheism desperately fall short.

2. IS THE EXPRESSION ‘BODILESS SPIRIT’ MEANINGLESS?

The first claim of Philipse is that the expression “bodiless spirit” is meaningless. His argument in favor of this thesis runs as follows. We use psychological terms to describe people’s mental lives. Thus, we say that people are afraid, that they believe in democracy, that they desire to eat something, that they know more than we do, and that they are patient. Now, there are three (main) views on the semantics of such everyday psychological terms: Cartesian substance dualism, logical behaviorism, and the view of the later Wittgenstein. Cartesian substance dualism is the view that psychological terms refer to states, actions, and dispositions of a person’s soul, which is thought to be an immaterial entity and contingently linked to the human body. Logical behaviorism is the view that the meaning of psychological terms can be spelled out exhaustively in terms of people’s behavior and dispositions to behave. According to Philipse, however, both Cartesian substance dualism and logical behaviorism are implausible, whereas the view of the later Wittgenstein makes good sense. According to Wittgenstein, our behavior displays our mental states and we ascribe specific states of mind to human beings rather than to immaterial souls, because we cannot meaningfully ascribe mental properties to other entities in the absence of behavioral criteria. Wittgenstein concludes that one can use everyday psychological expressions only for human beings and for those entities that resemble human beings.

According to Philipse, it follows from this that we cannot meaningfully apply psychological expressions to God, for God is an incorporeal being who cannot display his mental states by way of physical behavior. We can at most apply such terms analogically or metaphorically to God. However, if we use words only analogically or metaphorically when we say that God is a bodiless spirit who is loving and merciful, that he is omniscient, or that he listens to our prayers, then the word *God* no longer has a clear meaning. To define God as a bodiless spirit, then, is to say something that has no meaning” (pp. 97–103).

Different things go wrong in this argument. I think that Philipse’s argu-

ments against Cartesian substance dualism fail, but I will not go into that here. Instead, let me single out four problems that Philipse's line of reasoning about Wittgensteinian semantics and the meaninglessness of the expression "bodiless spirit" faces.

First, is Wittgenstein right—if this was indeed Wittgenstein's view—that we can meaningfully ascribe psychological attributes only to human beings and to those things that resemble human beings? I doubt it. Imagine that someone were to tell you that the book on his table is in pain. Philipse is right that in such a case we would be astonished and ask what she means by that.⁸ But that is just because it is such an obviously false statement that if someone says that and we do not take that person to be a lunatic, we believe we must have misunderstood her. Or we take it that she is joking or trying to make some point in a rather vague, metaphorical way. But, again, that is just because we know perfectly well what it means to say that a book is in pain, namely, that there is a book and that that book is in pain and also know perfectly well that books cannot be in pain and that that statement is, therefore, false. This is in fact confirmed by how we would treat such a person. If someone were to stress over a longer period of time that her book is indeed in pain and that she means that literally, we would *not* keep wondering what she could possibly mean. Rather, we would perfectly well understand what she means, realize that that is obviously necessarily false, and, therefore, start being highly concerned about her psychological well-being.

This is confirmed by the fact that, after this objection of his, Philipse continues his book with a further few hundred pages about Swinburne's arguments for the existence of God. If any definition of God in which psychological properties are ascribed to God were truly *meaningless*—something like the following definition of "God": "the is no between and house long true definite indeed"—the whole topic could not be discussed. But he *does* discuss the topic. Hence, a definition of God in psychological terms, such as omniscience and omnibenevolence, is not meaningless at all. Any semantic theory that implies that it is, such as, according to Philipse, that of Wittgenstein, must be false if Philipse's own book-length treatment of Swinburne's arguments is to make any sense.

Second, Wittgenstein's theory about the attributions of everyday psychological terms—again, if this is indeed what Wittgenstein thought—confuses *semantics* with *epistemology*. It seems plausible that we normally do indeed need some kind of physical behavior or at least the results of physical behavior, such as traces and artifacts, to *know* something about some person's mental states. That does not mean that *one cannot meaningfully apply* psychological terms if there is no such behavior or output of behavior. It is perfectly meaningful and either true or false to say of someone in a coma that she can hear us. We will, as things stand in medicine and neuroscience, not *know* whether this statement is true or false unless this person displays some kind of behavior, but that is a different matter.

What if Philipse were to make the slightly weaker claim that we can only meaningfully ascribe psychological properties to someone if she can *in prin-*

ciple display some kind of physical behavior? Would this be a problem for the theist? No. For if all that is required for meaningfully ascribing psychological attributes to some person *S* is that *S* could *in principle* display some kind of behavior, then it seems that a bodiless spirit will meet this condition, for it seems that bodiless spirits—at least, if they are sufficiently powerful—could become *embodied* spirits and display some kind of physical behavior. If Philipse's Wittgensteinian semantic principle is formulated as a strong claim about *actual* physical behavior, it is utterly implausible. If it is formulated in a weaker way, as a claim about *potential* or *possible* physical behavior, God and other bodiless spirits will easily meet this condition.

Third, in the history of religion and the history of theology, thousands, if not millions of people, including brilliant minds, have talked about God and have had all sorts of conversations, discussions, debates, and literary exchanges about God. If Philipse is right about his semantic theory of psychological terms, then we would have to say that all such talk was and is meaningless. But that seems a highly problematic implication: would Philipse really be willing to say that all these people were talking *nonsense* and somehow failed to notice that? And does he want to say that these discussions were meaningless, although they seem to show certain coherences and structures and seem to display theses, arguments, objections, replies, and so forth? This is what his theory implies and that seems a good reason to reject that theory.

Fourth, what makes Philipse think that, according to the Abrahamic religions, God does not display any physical behavior? Let us take Christianity as an example. First, there is of course the cosmos with its specific features—it is vast, it permits life, it is beautiful—and that cosmos is believed to be the product of God's creative activity. The cosmos itself is, presumably, not a piece of behavior, but Christians believe that it is the *product* of God's behavior and from that we can (easily) derive facts about God's behavior and about God's mental states, namely, that God created this universe and that he intended to do so. That an entity is immaterial does not imply that it cannot produce physical entities and thereby display certain behavior. Second, many Christians have had religious experiences during which, they claim, they have *seen* God. Now, most of these were mystical experiences, such as dreams and visions, rather than instances of, say, visual perception. But why not think that people have the ability for mystical perception? God is seen in such visions to act in a certain way or speak certain words. There seems no problem with applying psychological terms to God on the basis of such mystical religious experiences. Third, quite a few religious believers, including certain key-figures, claim to have heard the *voice* of God and a few people, such as Moses (Exodus 33:18–23), are thought to have perceived a physical appearance of God. Clearly, uttering sentences and walking or passing by count as behavior on the basis of which we can apply everyday psychological terms to God.⁹

Philipse addresses something along the lines of this fourth objection when he deals with Swinburne's point that a bodiless spirit could make marks on sand to convey a message to someone:

Can we say without metaphor that a bodiless person may very well express its mental states by making marks on sand, for example? It does not seem so, because in the ordinary sense of the words, 'making marks on sand' means that someone produces these marks by bodily behaviour. (p. 104)

Here, Philipse's adherence to Wittgensteinianism turns dogmatic. Clearly, if we say that someone makes marks on sand, we do not *mean* that that person makes those marks by bodily behavior. If someone were able telekinetically to make marks on sand, we would say exactly that: that that person can telekinetically make marks on sand. To say that someone makes marks on sand simply means that that person *makes marks on sand*, no matter precisely *how* he or she does that. We have strong evidence for thinking that people are not able telekinetically to make marks on sand, but that very fact actually confirms my point: our very rejection of the thought that we have such an ability implies that it is perfectly meaningful to speak of people making marks on sand without displaying any bodily behavior.

3. IS THE EXISTENCE OF A BODILESS SPIRIT IMPOSSIBLE?

3.1. First Argument: The Concept of a Person

Philipse not only thinks that talk about a bodiless spirit is meaningless but also that theistic descriptions of such a bodiless spirit are contradictory and that such a spirit is, therefore, impossible.¹⁰ A first presumed contradiction has to do with the idea that God is a person:

How can theists claim without contradiction that God is a person and yet bodiless? In the ordinary non-analogical sense of 'person', persons are human beings, and human beings are bodily entities. When we say that we cannot attend the meeting 'in person', what we mean is that we cannot be physically present. So it seems that to define God as a bodiless person is contradictory, unless one uses the term 'person' analogically in Swinburne's sense. (p. 108)

Let me make one minor point before we consider this argument in some more detail. We should note that this argument shows at most that a *personal* bodiless spirit is impossible. Contrary to what Philipse suggests, it does *not* show that a bodiless spirit is impossible. But let us put that to the side and see whether there is a problem for those who claim that God is both a person and a bodiless spirit.

Unfortunately, Philipse does not actually defend his claim that the word *person* just *means* human being. This rather bold assertion can be verified—or, in this case, falsified—fairly easily by having a look at English dictionaries. Dictionaries give the literal senses of words and sometimes, under a separate heading, the metaphorical senses of words. The *Oxford English Dictionary* does indeed mention the following as the first meaning of the word *person*: "a human being regarded as an individual." But it also mentions the following meaning, without indicating that this is merely a metaphorical or analogical sense of the word, and it is not even under the heading "technical

uses”: “in a general philosophical sense: a conscious or rational being.” Well, surely God, if he exists, satisfies the criterion of being a conscious or rational being. Moreover, the *Oxford English Dictionary* explicitly mentions as one of the meanings of ‘person’ the following theological meaning: “each of the three modes of being of God, namely the Father, the Son, or the Holy Ghost, who together constitute the Trinity.” Something similar applies to other Latin languages: we find the same option for the French *personne* in the *Grand Larousse de la langue française*, for the German *Person* in *Duden: Das große Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, and for the Dutch *persoon* in *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche taal*. Even sticking to mainstream dictionaries, then, we have good reason to think that we can perfectly well literally (rather than analogically or metaphorically) say that God is a person, even if he is a bodiless spirit.

Not only are there perfectly literal philosophical and theological meanings of the word *person* that Philipse completely overlooks, there is also a general and plausible understanding of the word *person* that covers both the meaning distinguished by Philipse and the meanings I just sketched, namely, that a person is someone who can, under normal circumstances, feel, think, will, and act. If some entity cannot do that, not even under normal circumstances, we would strongly doubt to describe that entity as a person. Also, as soon as some entity meets this criterion, we are strongly inclined to call that entity a “person.” Imagine, for instance, that one day extraterrestrial beings visit planet Earth. They are vastly more intelligent than we are and have already deciphered all our languages, so that they address us in our own language. In our conversations with them, it becomes quickly clear to us that they have thoughts, feelings, desires, and so forth. Still, they are radically different from any human beings. For one thing, upon scientific investigation, which they kindly permit, it turns out that their bodies are constituted by clouds of a particular gas that is made of molecules that are unknown to us. Clearly, one would say something false if one called them human beings, but, equally clearly, one would *not* say something false—in fact, it seems one would say something true—if one called them “persons.” Thought experiments like these, then, show that the meaning of the word *person* is not restricted to “human being.”

3.2. Second Argument: The Presence of Bodiless Spirits

Philipse’s second argument for his claim that there cannot be any bodiless spirits is that, since bodiless spirits are immaterial, they cannot be present at some place in the normal sense of the word *present*, let alone be omnipresent (omnipresence being an attribute that is traditionally ascribed to God) (p. 108). And he adds:

Clearly, a bodiless being cannot resemble the standard examples of persons in the respects in which and to the degrees to which they resemble each other, so that the similarity rider for literal uses of the word ‘person’ excludes God. Equally clearly, many of the syntactic rules have to be dropped if we want to apply the term “person” to a bodiless being. (p. 110)

The argument is clear: because deities and demons are bodiless, they cannot be present anywhere and, hence, cannot be omnipresent.¹¹ But this means that we have to use the word *present* in its analogical rather than literal sense and that is something, Philipse has argued, the theist should avoid at all costs.¹²

It seems to me that this second argument for the presumed impossibility of bodiless spirits also fails. First, Philipse has only argued that the theist should not introduce *too much* analogy in his definition of God. This leaves it open to use *some* analogy. Thus, the theist could say that God is perfectly good, omniscient, omnipotent, and eternal in the literal senses of these words and omnipresent in the (or an) analogical sense of the word. Hence, if Philipse is right that omnipresence should be understood analogically, that as such provides no problem for the theist.

Second, why precisely should we think that bodiless spirits cannot be present somewhere in the literal sense of the word? What is the argument? In fact, Philipse provides no argument for this claim whatsoever. He just makes the bold assertion that a bodiless spirit cannot be present in space. But why precisely should we think that? Of course, bodiless spirits cannot be *materially* extended in space. But why should we think that it follows from that that they cannot be *present* in space? Why not think that they can be present without having a body that occupies a certain region of space? Since Philipse addresses this whole issue to provide an argument for atheism, the burden of proof is clearly on his side here: if his argument is to come through, he should provide us with good reasons to think that immaterial concrete entities cannot be present in space.

3.3. Third Argument: No Criteria for Diachronical Personal Identity

Finally, Philipse seems to endorse an argument against the possibility of there being a bodiless spirit that has to do with *personal identity*. Here, Philipse seems to adopt some kind of empiricist theory of personal identity: some person *S* at some time *t* is the same person as some person *S** at some later time *t** if and only if *S* at *t* and *S** at *t** satisfy the criteria of bodily continuity, continuity of character, and continuity of memory (pp. 114–117).

We can be quite brief about this argument. Theists believe that God is continuous in character (he is in some sense immutable after all) and continuous in memory (he is omniscient after all). Hence, everything comes down to the claim that bodily continuity is a necessary condition for diachronic identity. But this claim is problematic. First, it is hard to see whether this thesis is even remotely plausible before it is spelled out in some detail (which Philipse does not). As we now know, all the cells our body is composed of are replaced every seven years. Strict bodily identity, then, cannot be a plausible criterion for personal diachronic identity. Even the shape of the body can change rather drastically; some people have lost part of their brain, but continue to live and are still the same person (even though such events might affect their *personality*). Philipse has not even started to spell out a plausible interpretation of the controversial claim that bodily continuity is necessary for diachronic personal identity. Second and even

more important, such a claim, of course, begs the question. Obviously, if bodily continuity is a necessary criterion for personal diachronic identity, then there cannot be any bodiless spirit (or at least not spirits that exist during some *period* of time). But then what makes him think that such a criterion is correct? Rather than criticizing Swinburne's critique of such a criterion, he should defend it—which he does not—in order to convince us on independent grounds that such a criterion is plausible.

But should not the theist come up with a criterion for personal identity of bodiless spirits? According to Philipse, “positing an entity without specifying criteria of identity does not make sense” (p. 119). But this is clearly false. We all believe that there are human beings, but many philosophers suspend judgement on what the criteria of identity for human beings are, since all criteria they know of fail (which is not to deny that there are good evidential criteria for *thinking* that some person *S* at *t* is the same as some person *S** at *t**). In fact, there are quite a few philosophers who believe that personal diachronic identity is a *primitive* thing, something that does not supervene on such things as continuity in memory or anything else. What makes some person *S* at some time *t* the same as some person *S** at some time *t** is simply the fact that it *is* the same person (what John Duns Scotus called *haecceitas*). One might provide criteria for *thinking* that it is the same person, but there are no criteria for its being the same person apart from its being the same person. And if that applies to human beings, then why would not it apply to bodiless spirits?

4. IS THE EXISTENCE OF A BODILESS SPIRIT IMPROBABLE?

4.1. *First Argument: Mental Functions Depend on Neural Processes*

Phlipse's first argument for his thesis that the prior probability of the existence of a bodiless spirit is low, is that neuroscientific research shows that mental functions depend on neural processes. But if that is true, then it is unlikely that there are bodiless spirits, for bodiless spirits are presumed to have mental functions, but, by definition, no neural processes occur in them. Here is what he says:

both research in animal biology and advances in the neurosciences have shown ever more convincingly that the mental life of animals and of man depends on brain processes. Although perhaps we cannot always claim that our mental life has been *explained* by neural research, all empirical investigations suggest that mental phenomena cannot *exist* without neural substrata. In the light of this growing reservoir of empirical background knowledge, the theistic hypothesis becomes ever more implausible, since it presupposes that mental life can exist without a corresponding neural substratum. (p. 208)

I do not think that this argument is convincing, though. The following analogy helps to bring forward the central problem with the argument. Humanity has discovered many planets in the course of time. Some of those planets have been studied in detail but on none of them have we found any signs of life. There are thousands or maybe millions of planets that we know

to contain no life whatsoever and there are no planets (apart from Earth) that we know to contain life. Thus, we have strong evidence that there is no extraterrestrial life. Hence, the probability that there is extraterrestrial life is rather low. This means that, unless we have good arguments for the claim that there is extraterrestrial life, we should disbelieve that there is such life.

Clearly, something has gone wrong in this argument. For all we know, there is extraterrestrial life. In fact, it may be highly probable that there is extraterrestrial life; we just do not have sufficient evidence to judge the probability of there being extraterrestrial life. True, we have investigated many planets, but that gives us no reason to think that there are *no* planets apart from Earth on which there is life. That conclusion would be warranted only if we had investigated the majority of the planets in our universe and if we had good reason to think that conditions on the planets that we have not investigated do not differ considerably from those on the planets that we have investigated. Similarly, the fact that all the mental life we have investigated depends on neural processes is no reason to think that *all* mental life depends on neural processes.

Now, Philipse might object that this example fails to be relevantly analogous. After all, we *know* that there are billions of planets that we have not yet investigated and that might contain life. But we do *not* know that there are beings with mental lives that are bodiless, for all the beings with mental life that we have encountered have bodies. This line of reasoning is problematic, though. Imagine that we have investigated the entire universe and found no extraterrestrial life. Imagine also, however, that there are plausible cosmological theories implying that there might be other universes than the one we live in. There might be other universes, and there might not be, we do not know. Should we think that extraterrestrial life—I mean, life outside of Earth, whether or not in this universe—is unlikely? No, because there might be other universes and they might contain life, even though we will never be able to verify whether there is life in those universes. One cannot go from one universe to the other, given that they are spatiotemporally isolated. Similarly, for all we know there are bodiless spirits. The fact, if it is a fact, that we have not encountered any bodiless spirits, does not render it likely that there are no such spirits. (Below, I will mention two further problems for this argument.)

4.2. *Second Argument: A Pessimistic Induction*

A second and closely related argument for the improbability of the existence of bodiless spirits is that we have never been able to find any convincing evidence for them:

We have never been able to find convincing evidence for the existence of bodiless spirits, such as poltergeists, incorporeal angels, demons, ghosts, human souls surviving bodily death, and so on, in spite of extensive research. (p. 208)

But what precisely does Philipse have in mind here? About 85 percent of the

world's population is religious. Millions of people believe that they have had religious experiences and that, therefore, they have convincing evidence for the existence of bodiless spirits. Apparently, Philipse has *not* had such religious experiences and does *not* have any convincing evidence for the existence of bodiless spirits. But how is this piece of biography supposed to make the existence of bodiless spirits unlikely? I think one of Philipse's footnotes to this passage makes clear what is actually going on here:

The fact that many people hear strange voices very clearly, which in the old days was considered convincing evidence for the existence of spirits and demons, is now explained as a hallucination that frequently occurs in cases of psychosis and schizophrenia. Similarly, many other facts that were once adduced as evidence for the existence of such supernatural persons have now been explained on the basis of empirical and secular science. (p. 208, n.)

What Philipse has in mind, I guess, is that *science* has never been able to find any convincing evidence for the existence of bodiless spirits. Many of the facts that have been brought forward as evidence for the existence of God have been explained by science in a way that does not presuppose the existence of God.

And that is, of course, true. But what follows from it? Not much. First, *of course* science has never detected any bodiless spirits. Science is confined to the physical world: by its very nature it *cannot* detect any bodiless spirits. True, it *is* in principle possible to scientifically detect the physical effects of bodiless spirits in our world. But, according to mainstream religions, such effects are rare (we are talking about such things as miracles) and given the almost negligible percentage of events in the world investigated by science, it is not at all remarkable that science has not been able to provide convincing evidence for the existence of bodiless spirits.

Second, the hidden, scientific assumption here is that only those things exist for which science has given sufficiently strong evidence. But this is plainly false. We have good reasons for acknowledging the existence of things for which science can provide no evidence whatsoever. Here, we can think of such things as human consciousness. We know from our own experience that we have consciousness—the subjective experience of being an individual person—but no matter how many brains, molecules, atoms, protons, or synapses science studies, it has never been able to detect or even give evidence for the existence of consciousness. But without this false assumption, the argument does not come through.

As soon as we acknowledge nonscientific evidence, things quickly change. About 80 to 85 percent of humanity is religious, and a large number of religious, people claim to have had religious experiences or other evidence for the existence of bodiless spirits (apart from the philosophical arguments there are for the existence of God). If God—a perfectly good and omnipotent bodiless spirit—exists, then it is indeed likely that some people have had religious experiences of God. If we cut out the untenable scientific assumption from Philipse's argument, then, the fact that science has never been able to find any convincing evidence for the existence of bodiless spirits is irrelevant to the

(im)probability that there are such spirits.

One might want to say that *psychology* has provided evidence for the existence of human consciousness. This seems mistaken to me. Psychology *assumes from the very start* that human beings are conscious beings and takes their testimony about their mental states seriously. It does not provide any empirical evidence for the thesis that people are conscious beings—apart from people’s testimony about that, but we do not need psychology for that.

5. CONCLUSION

The main aim of Philipse’s *God in the Age of Science?* is to defend atheism. However, there is good reason to think that, quite surprisingly, he provides no argument whatsoever for atheism. He only provides two arguments against a perfectly good and omnipotent God and an argument (or a series of arguments) against the idea that there is a bodiless spirit. In this paper, I have nonetheless discussed his arguments against the existence of a bodiless spirit in detail.

I have argued that his three main claims about bodiless spirits are false. First, contrary to what he says, there is good reason to think that the expression “bodiless spirit” is meaningful. Among other things, the Wittgensteinian semantic theory of psychological attribute ascription on which his argument relies turns out to be false. Second, Philipse’s thesis that the existence of a bodiless spirit is impossible is also problematic. We can properly use the word *person* for bodiless spirits. Also, an attribute like presence or omnipresence can be understood metaphorically without the definition of “God” thereby losing too much meaning. And we do not need any criterion for diachronic personal identity of bodiless spirits; such identity may very well be a primitive fact. Third and finally, there is no reason to think that the existence of a bodiless spirit is improbable. The fact that science has discovered a dependence relation between mental states and brain states and the fact that science has never been able to detect bodiless spirits provide no reason to think otherwise.

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NOTES

1. See Herman Philipse, *God in the Age of Science? A Critique of Religious Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). All references are to this book, unless indicated otherwise.

2. See Charles Hartshorne, *Man’s Vision of God and the Logic of Theism* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1964), pp. 174–211; Karl Heim, *Glaube und Denken*, 4th ed.

(Berlin: Furche Verlag, 1938); Luco J. van den Brom, "God's Omnipresent Agency," *Religious Studies* 20 (1984): 637–55; Marcel Sarot, *God, Passibility and Corporeality* (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok, 1992).

3. Sarot, p. 244.

4. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 7.

5. William L. Craig and J.P. Moreland, "Introduction," in William L. Craig and J.P. Moreland, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. x. See also Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, eds. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 20–21.

6. Philipse also discusses a *proof* for the possibility of the existence of a bodiless spirit, one provided by Richard Swinburne (see pp. 109–13). I will not discuss Philipse's response to Swinburne's argument, since here I am solely concerned with Philipse's positive case for atheism. If he fails to show that the existence of a bodiless spirit is meaningless, impossible, or improbable, then he has failed to make atheism sufficiently likely, whether or not proofs for the coherence of saying that there is a bodiless spirit are convincing.

7. Philipse is not the first philosopher to make this point. Bede Rundle makes a similar point when he says:

Someone who insists that God, though lacking eyes and ears, watches him incessantly and listens to his prayers, is clearly not using "watch" or "listen" in a sense we can recognize, so while the words may be individually meaningful and their combination grammatical, that is as far as meaningfulness goes: what we have is an unintelligible use of an intelligible form of words. God is not of this world, but that is not going to stop us speaking of him as if he were. It is not that we have a proposition which is meaningless because unverifiable, but we simply misuse the language, making an affirmation which, in the light of our understanding of the words, is totally unwarranted, an affirmation that makes no intelligible contact with reality. Rundle, *Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 11 (116–128).

In fact, quite a few philosophers have provided an argument along these lines (see, for instance, Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy* [New York: Hutchinson, 1966], pp. 31–40; Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979], pp. 123–26; Kai Nielsen, *Contemporary Critiques of Religion* [London: Macmillan, 1971], pp. 116–28).

8. According to Philipse, "if we attribute fear to a thing of a kind that completely lacks the behavioural repertoire of expressing fear, such as a chair or a mountain, what we say has no sense" (p. 103).

9. Let me stress that I am formulating this as an objection to Philipse's argument, *not* against Wittgenstein's semantic theory of psychological attribute ascription. Remember that Wittgenstein says that we can only apply psychological terms to human beings and to those entities that *sufficiently resemble* human beings. (See Ludwig, *Philosophische Untersuchungen / Philosophical Investigations*, ed. P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed. [Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell 2009], for instance, 103e, [§ 281]). I think this leaves open the option of applying such psychological terms to God, since, at least on mainstream Christian theological anthropology, human beings have been created in the image of God (*imago Dei*). This means that there will be important similarities between God and humans: they have free will, they are rational, they have emotions, and they can act in the physical world. This means that my fourth argument counts primarily against the conclusions that Philipse draws on the basis of Wittgenstein's theory and some further assumptions. As such, it does not count against Wittgenstein's theory of psychological attribute ascription.

10. In the previous section, I already hinted at the tension between claiming that "x" is meaningless and making further claims about x, such as the claim that x is impossible, when I pointed out that Philipse claims that the expression "bodiless spirit" is meaningless, but he nonetheless continues discussing the existence of God as a bodiless spirit for a further few hundred pages.

11. Note that, again, this counts at most against a particular kind of god. For only *some* gods, such as the Christian God, are supposed to be (omni)present. If Philipse is to defend an argument for atheism, his arguments should apply to *all* gods. And it is surely

no definition of *all* gods that they are supposed to be omnipresent or even merely present at some particular place. Hence, the whole issue of presence is irrelevant to Philipse's case for atheism.

12. Says Philipse: "I endorse Swinburne's claim that if theists cannot articulate their religious view except by using the key terms in an irreducibly analogical manner, theism cannot be a theory or hypothesis, which is confirmable by empirical evidence. As he rightly stresses, '[i]f theology uses too many words in analogical senses it will convey virtually nothing by what it says'" (pp. 95–96).