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An Atheological Apologetic

by: Joyce A. Lazier

In his article, "Atheological Apologetics," Scott Shalkowski argues that there is no reason to believe that the theist necessarily has the burden of proof in the debate of God's existence. The strength of his argument lies in his assumptions about facts, knowledge, and justification, positive and negative existence claims, and the relevance of context in a debate.[1] First, Shalkowski argues against Anthony Flew who states in his book, *The Presumption of Atheism,* that general features about knowledge claims "entail the theist (who is the affirmative side of the debate) to first, introduce and defend his proposed concept of God; and, second, to provide sufficient reason for believing that this concept of his does in fact have application."[2] Flew uses his claims about knowledge and justification to support what he calls the "presumption of atheism."[3] Secondly, Shalkowski is concerned with the distinction drawn between positive and negative existence claims. He argues that there is nothing intrinsic to positive claims that saddles them with the demand for grounds that exempts negative claims from the same demand. He rests this argument on the concept of context relativity and tries to show that in certain contexts the negative existence claims have a burden for grounds that positive ones do not, and therefore concludes that there is nothing intrinsic to positive claims that suggests that they should bear the burden of argument. I will argue first, that a presumption of atheism is justified but it is not the same presumption of negative atheism that Flew argues for. I do not take Flew's presumption of atheism because Flew does not believe that context plays a role in the application of this presumption and I feel that this is a necessary ingredient to the presumption. Second, Shalkowski's parallel between positive and negative existence claims is ill-founded, and his main point about context relativity ignores the relevance of what today's context is and consequently damages his own position. Further, I will argue that in a scientific era, with

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[1] *American Philosophic Quarterly.* Volume 26, Number 1, January 1989.
[2] London: Elek/Pemberton, 1974; Part 1, p.15.
[3] *The Presumption of Atheism,* p. 13.

the help of rational tools like Ockham's Razor, the presumption for theism is irrational and a presumption of atheism in the traditional sense is justified.

What concerns Shalkowski early in his paper is why it is assumed that the theist has the burden of proof in the debate about God's existence and he is particularly perturbed by Flew's suggestion that there should be a "presumption of atheism" at the start of this debate. If we follow Flew's suggestion, both sides shouldn't assume that God doesn't exist; they just don't assume anything (existence or non).[4] Therefore, the affirmative side must start the debate by giving reasons for the assumed entity's existence in order to persuade the other that the existence of this entity should be preferred rather than not. Shalkowski argues that Flew's strategy gives the atheist an unfair advantage because if no good theistic apologetics can be argued, then by the "default strategy"[5] the theist loses and it is an automatic defense of atheism. This should make the theist nervous, and Shalkowski therefore tries to argue that the presumption of atheism is ill-founded. If the presumption is founded on the idea that the affirmative side must start that debate, there is no reason, Shalkowski argues, that atheism cannot be thus construed. Atheism can be construed as a positive claim that God does not exist, and Shalkowski cleverly suggests that if there was instead a presumption of theism, the atheist would fall into the same unsurmountable burden of proof that the theist did, the position would similarly fail, and there would be an automatic defense of theism[6]. If theism is assumed and all of the arguments for atheism fail, then by the same "default strategy," theism is the acceptable view. Shalkowski requests that Flew or someone else give some reason for assuming that it is the theist's position that must be construed as the affirmative side and must start the debate rather than the atheist.

In his essay, "The Assumption of Atheism," Flew does give reasons for his position that the theist has the burden of proof. Flew argues that the word "atheism" as he wishes to use it in the suggested "presumption of atheism" should not take on the traditional meaning of a belief that God

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[4] Shalkowski on page 4 is concerned even about the suggestion by Flew that this issue be solved in a debate setting. However, this type of setting is how many issues are solved even if the debate is going on inside your own head!
[5] Shalkowski, p. 1.
[6] Shalkowski, p. 6

does not exist. Flew argues, "an atheist becomes: not someone who positively asserts the non-existence of God (positive atheism); but someone who is simply not a theist (negative atheism),"[7] I construe this idea as similar to having an open mind without bias.[8] One must have a clean slate and therefore cannot even have a working concept of God for this is one of the items to be provided in the debate. The debate setting, as I visualize it, consists of at least one person who is arguing a point and the other in the presumption of negative atheism. The theist, in this debate, must first provide a concept of God that must be understood by the "atheist" and second must determine whether a "thing" so construed could exist. Flew argues that a person, to be in the position of knowing, must have true justified belief; she must have grounds for her belief. Flew argues that there is an "inescapable demand for grounds"[9] and therefore the presumption of atheism is justified. One who has the attitude of modest teachability takes nothing for granted and will be convinced only after sufficient grounds have been given to sway her belief either way. Is there, however, a demand for grounds?

Typically, we demand of people justification for many things -- e.g., Why did you do that? What makes you think that Joe would say that? Why did you decide to go to Illinois Wesleyan? etc. We expect people to be responsible for their actions and therefore expect that their actions be based on reasonable beliefs. Furthermore, to be a rational person, our beliefs must be founded on something; a rational person does not believe that there are pink elephants existing on the ceiling for no reason at all (provided that the person is not suffering from DT's or hallucinogens). There is a demand for grounds for a person's beliefs including a belief in God and that He exists and therefore, Flew argues, the presumption of atheism is justified.

Shalkowski, however, is not convinced by Flew's presentation. He demands that Flew give some reason why the atheist in the traditional sense does not have the same demand for grounds

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[7] Flew, p. 14.
[8] Why doesn't Flew use the term, agnostic? Flew implies on page 14 that this term implies that one has contemplated the issue about God and therefore has a working concept of God, and this allowed too much for the start of the debate.
[9] Flew, p. 22.

that the theist has. Why doesn't the traditional atheist have the burden to provide some reasons for her belief that God does not exist? One could still be in a debate where there is a presumption of atheism, with one person being an atheist in the traditional sense and the other person being someone in the position of being simply not a theist, and have the atheist in the traditional sense start the debate providing grounds for her position. Why must a theist have the burden of proof? Doesn't the atheist in the traditional sense also have a demand on her for grounds regarding her beliefs?[10] Flew does not directly address this question, but it is obvious from his argument that he thinks that existence claims are to be accepted only with grounds and if no adequate grounds are provided, then one should not believe such existence claims; he flirts with a concept similar to Ockham's Razor. Flew states that "Until and unless some such grounds are produced, we literally have no reason at all for believing"[11] . Flew makes these statements to support his concept of negative atheism, however, whereas Ockham's Razor is used more to support a concept of positive atheism. Both ideas recognize the important point that there is something about taking the extra step of having to posit an existence that requires that the one positing the existence has the burden of providing grounds before the one denying the otherwise unneeded entity's existence.

The main assumption Shalkowski makes when he argues that the atheist's position can be construed as an affirmative one is that the atheist has an argument that does not involve a direct appeal to the theist's claims. Does the atheist have distinct and separate grounds for his view that do not involve the theist's claims? Typically if you are in the position of not believing that God does exist or of not believing that God does not exist, (Flew's presumption of atheism), the person who wishes to assert the existence of something must give reasons as to why the existence is claimed. Since the theist's position as Shalkowski conceives it, places God or God's effects in the world, the theist presumably has evidence for the existence of God, for the world would be different

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[10] Shalkowski, p. 5.
[11] p. 22

without the entity's existence.[12] The theist believes that certain events in the world are explainable only by God, and these events can be used by the theist as evidence. Flew suggests that to take an extra step of positing an existence that is non-physical requires that you give reasons to explain why this entity is needed; why isn't the way we explain events now sufficient without positing the existence of the entity? Both rational atheists and rational theists alike agree that physical or physically based things exist, but the theist is implying that a different kind of entity, a purely non-physical thing is needed to explain something, and Flew argues that this fact carries with it a burden for grounds.[13]

As I stated earlier, Flew argues that the concept of the entity, God, must be provided by the theist and then argued that it must exist. The atheist cannot try to provide reasons for anything because he is not the one who believes the entity should exist; he therefore tries to disprove the assertions of the theist.[14] If I want to argue that unicorns exist to someone who is in the position of not having grounds for belief, I must give reasons as to why I say that they do. I must give some reason as to why I believe their existence is needed. However, if I wish to argue that unicorns do not exist to someone who is in the position of not having grounds for belief, and we both understand the concept in such a way that unicorns might possibly exist, how do I do this? Imagine that a concept of an entity is produced like that of a unicorn. Presume also that the producer of that concept is able to give a description of what attributes this creature would have (e.g. it has one horn, and resembles a horse etc.). If there were then to be a debate about the existence of this thing could it start from one who did not believe it existed? Flew doesn't think so because he states that the burden to supply the concept of the entity and the burden for grounds is on the one who wishes to argue for its existence.[15]

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[12] Shalkowski only implies this view on page 13 when he implies the relevance of miracles but he does, however, later state that God may just be a creator or sustainer (page 22). Therefore it is unclear what Shalkowski takes to be theism and he never makes an argument for his specific view.
[13] p. 22
[14] p. 22-23.
[15] p. 21-22.

Flew's claim about the concept only being provided by the theist cannot be supported because it is certainly plausible, as suggested by Dr. Colter when reviewing this paper, that anyone can be in the position of entertaining whether certain entities exist. It is very possible in certain contexts for even an atheist to seriously entertain a concept of God and to be fully able to describe to someone a complete concept of this entity. He may do so just because he happens to feel particularly philosophic or because he witnesses a phenomenon that hasn't yet been explained by science. Just because he entertains an idea of God and even may wonder if such an entity exists, doesn't mean that he has become a theist. The atheist may then also have the burden of argument concerning this concept to give reasons why he feels such a concept is unnecessary or impossible. Flew does not maintain that if you entertain a concept of existence you then have the burden of argument for existence or application, and this is not what my example is pointing out. My argument is that Flew believes that the one who must supply the concept and then shoulder the burden of argument is always the theist. He argues that the presumption of atheism is procedural and not substantiative and I believe it is obvious that there are contexts where it is both. Suppose, for example, that I have lived isolated in the hills for my entire life. I have never heard of the concept of God or if I have heard of it I may believe that God does not exist. Suppose further that I happen to venture down to the valley and meet up with someone who believes in God's existence. When we begin to discuss this issue, he may demand of me to give grounds as to why I believe that God does not exist. At this point, it is totally conceivable for the atheist to be able to provide a concept of God and also to argue against it. There is nothing intrinsic in the theist's position that requires that she must be the one to provide an understandable concept of God and then consequently to defend her belief that it exists. Flew is mistaken when he assumes that the theist in any context must first provide a concept of God and then secondly argue for the existence of this "thing" thus construed and Shalkowski is correct concerning this account.

Dr. Koehn suggested that I have misread Flew and that Flew's point is that the teachable atheist or afuzz-planter[16] who is thinking of becoming a theist or fuzz planter affirmer has the burden, not as at present an atheist or afuzz-planter, but as a would-be theist or fuzz planter. The burden is to make sure that his concept can be instantiated (the existence of either is possible) and that she has sufficient evidence to make either existence affirmation necessary. The existence of either is possible, and the only argument the would-be theist can give to oneself is "I do not have sufficient strong reasons to believe that God or the fuzz planter exists."[17] The burden need not be on the theist, however, because it is possible for the would-be theist to provide an argument perhaps using scientific explanations that God does not or cannot exist which is clearly an atheistic argument to show that the concept cannot be instantiated.

Shalkowski differs with Flew on this point of burdens of proof and also on another claim of Flew's. Shalkowski maintains that there is no coherent distinction to be drawn between positive and negative existence claims and this is because burdens of proof *are* context sensitive. To support the principle, he uses the example of electrons. He states that " in the current context, someone who denies the existence of electrons must show how we can explain various phenomena without such an appeal to electrons".[18] He acknowledges that at another time, there was a burden on those who asserted the existence of electrons but it was merely a context sensitive burden. All of this is supposed to support the claim that presumptions of burdens of argument are context relative. Shalkowski wishes to maintain this point to prove that negative existence claims are not always exempt from burdens of proof as it seems Flew wants to argue. What Shalkowski fails to understand is that by his own example, he refutes his own position concerning the presumption of theism. Consider the following quote with the concept of theism in mind rather than electrons:

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[16] The concept of a fuzz-planter was introduced to me by Dr. Koehn. The scenario was conceived like this: Imagine that you find a piece of fuzz in your pants pockets and you consequently may wonder how it got there. You may entertain that a non-physical beastie exists that exists only to plant fuzz in your pockets and that is how the fuzz got there; the beastie visited you in the night. However, more rational explanations are available like the fuzz got there after being laundered or was left there after manufacturing etc. In the presence of these explanations that do not require you to posit the existence of a non-physical entity, it is more rational to not posit the existence of the fuzz-planter.

[17] I am grateful to Dr. Koehn for his many comments and careful readings of this paper.

[18] p. 5-6.

> Further, there is no reason to think that the burden of proof borne by the advocate of a positive existence claim is absolute. Rather, it seems to be context-sensitive. Suppose someone claimed, in the context of our current scientific community, that there are no electrons (and this is not claimed for instrumentalist reasons). Clearly, in the current context, someone who denies the existence of electrons must show how we can explain various phenomenon without such an appeal to electrons. This will hold for any denial of an apparently *well-established claim of science* or ordinary experience. The one who denies the existence of trees has the burden of proof, not the one who affirms their existence. Of course, if no one ever had any of the relevant experiences, then the situation would be reversed. (Italics added) p. 5.

Shalkowski appeals in this example to the current context which he, himself, shows to be a scientific one. By his own example, he argues that the proposer of a different kind of entity has the burden of proof, but this is what Flew has argued and which Shalkowski denied earlier as germane. On the other hand, according to Shalkowski, once the theist or electronist has produced alleged grounds for his existence claim, the atheist or the aelectronist, to remain a rational atheist or aelectronist, has a burden to refute the theist's alleged grounds -- but, the only burden, is merely that of showing that the theist or electron advocate has failed to meet her burden of argument. Flew's point extended to this analogy is that in the absence of reasons to claim that electrons exist the aelectronist has no burden but the electronist does: to provide reasons for claiming that they exist, that some phenomena cannot be adequately explained unless electrons exist. In arguing that burdens of argument are context sensitive, Shalkowski concedes Flew's claim of a presumption of atheism. This statement by Shalkowski is clearly inconsistent with his criticisms of Flew, and severely weakens Shalkowski's stance. However, as I argued above, there can conceivably be a context in which the atheist could provide the concept and also have the burden of argument; the burden need not be strictly on the theist. What I find even more damaging about this particular quote from Shalkowski is his reference to context. By establishing the fact that a "scientific community is our current context,"[18] he admits to a fact that is a major premise to my argument. In a scientific era, with scientific explanations successively replacing theological explanations, there is a

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[19] p. 5.

presumption against theism. Even if we grant, then, that where the burden of argument lies is context relative, there is surely no good reason to think that in 1991 the burden lies on the atheist.

Imagine a situation where I do not believe that 3-toed gobly gooks exist. Neither does anyone else. I do not need an argument to prove their non-existence. What would the argument look like? If they don't exist there is nothing in virtue of which I can claim their non-existence. I believe that nothing exists that has these qualities, attributes or features. Shalkowski's argument, however, assumes a crucial difference for arguments concerning God and this is that some people do believe that God exist and some people do not. Therefore, there is no burden of proof. However, in this context, if I wished to assert the existence of gobly gooks or God, I must provide the person(s) in the debate with grounds that the phenomenon that needs explanation can only be explained by the proposed concept. It is still the theist's non-physical existence-laden position that bears the burden of proof to start the debate and then the atheist's burden to prove that the phenomenon can be explained without the positing of an entity. If theism had been proven without a doubt or even to the extent that electrons have been proven, it would seem contradictory that any atheists should have any weight put to their arguments and beliefs, but in fact they do. In light of science's history of an ability to provide such evidence and the continual displacement of theistic explanations by scientific ones, the burden of argument today rests on the theist. Therefore, even if the burden of argument is context relative, this provides no help for Shalkowski because the present context (which doesn't appear to be subject to retreat) is not a theistic one.

This method of debate is common. Shalkowski, himself, states that "we do not tend to assert positive existence claims without reasons." This is a good tool to have to avoid false beliefs concerning contingent existence. However, Shalkowski then states that it is of "little consequence (because) all of this can be said regarding negative existence claims".[20] It is true that we normally do not run around claiming that things like trees do not exist without good reason, but Shalkowski does not give any reasons supporting his claim that we do not assert negative existence claims

[20] p. 5.

without reason. Again, what he fails to see is that some contexts require that first a thing must be asserted to exist with reasons before someone needs to deny existence with reasons and that our scientific context is an example of such a context. Therefore, things like electrons and God must first be asserted to exist and the burden for grounds is not on the denier. If someone does deny the existence of something that has not been asserted and argued to exist this is of little consequence because most of us would agree and it would be of little effect to our set of beliefs -- lots of things do not exist and we pay little attention to this; there would be no point to the exercise. Flew would argue that the parallel that Shalkowski tries to draw between positive and negative existence claims fails because positive existence claims have one requirement that negative claims do not; they require that the burden of proof is ultimately first upon them because they must provide the concept to be debated regardless of the context. Shalkowski, however, successfully argues the relevance of context but it ends up damaging his own position. In the present scientific context, Shalkowski is right when he suggests that today the burden would be on the one who wishes to assert that they do not exist because the evidence is so contrary to this belief that it would be necessary to provide an explanation of how certain events occur without the need of electrons. With regards to theism, however, today's context is one where science is so established and is constantly replacing explanations once provided only by theism. The burden is surely on the theist, therefore, to provide grounds for her belief in the presence of such overwhelming counter evidence that science can explain the phenomena that caused the apparent need to posit the existence of God to begin with.

To make my point more clearly, suppose, for example, a primitive culture that is isolated from surrounding cultures, passes down traditions from generation to generation, has little education except in the form of the basics to survive and its unquestioned religion is a natural theism. Let us suppose that the culture acquired this religion as a means to explain certain scary and unexplainable phenomena such as earthquakes or volcanos erupting. In this context, it seems that a person's theism is justified because the existence of a God or Gods is assumed to be needed in order for the

culture to make sense of its surroundings.[21] Koehn claims that the atheist, to convince such a person in such a culture that her theistic beliefs are mistaken, would have the burden of argument. Shalkowski argues in this direction when he asks his readers to suppose that we were in the context of a theistic society where "the reigning intellectual and social predisposition is to think that theism is the liberal view which frees one from the shackles of narrow, atheistic explanations of the cosmos, human history and the meaningfulness of life."[22] This context like the primal one seems to justify a presumption of theism with the burden of providing grounds on the atheist. However this primal context is not a description of the world today, and moreover, is not even a reasonable one. If the people involved have made no effort to provide rational grounds for their theism, it seems as if the "intellectual predisposition" for theism is merely that it makes them feel better.[23] Beliefs should be rationally grounded and with the help of science, we are constantly replacing theological explanations with the scientific; phenomena are no longer scary, but explainable. In our context, it is up to the theist to provide grounds for her belief that is contrary to the evidence.

Shalkowski suggests that there is no reason to suppose that either explanation, scientific or theological, is the preferred explanation for there are clearly problems with how science explains phenomena (non-universality of laws of nature, etc.). Since neither explanation can be preferred, there is no reason why the theist rather than the scientist should have the burden to give grounds.[24] This argument may seem plausible at the first glance, but if we apply the concept of Ockham's Razor, we see that the more rational stance is to believe the scientific claims over the theological.

If we recall the concept of Ockham's Razor, it states: Never multiply entities beyond necessity. If there are acceptable explanations available to explain events, it is irrational to posit the existence

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[21] I am grateful to both Dr. Koehn and Dr. Colter who helped me elaborate on this example.
[22] p. 9.
[23] Dr. Colter helped me with this section and we both believe that these people did not have any effort to provide rational grounds for their theism.
[24] Shalkowski briefly discusses this on page 12 when he states that he has been too easy on the atheist and that there are plenty of events which do not fit with current theories.

of an entity to explain it. If we return to the example of the beasty who plants fuzz in my pockets we can see the force of this tool of rationality. There was a plausible explanation available to explain the fuzz in my pockets that did not require the positing of extraneous, non-physical entities and it is more rational to accept this explanation over one that makes a non-physical existence claim. Therefore, with the availability of widely accepted, plausible, physical, scientific explanations for "mysterious" phenomena, it is more rational to accept these than the theistic route that requires the positing of a non-physical entity. The whole purpose behind tools like Ockham's Razor is to keep a grasp on rationality ; If our rational systems did not function using such tools, our grasp on reality would become obscured. We would have an unlimited number of unneeded beasties running around all over.

Granted, science cannot yet explain everything fully, but as Philip Kitcher insightfully points out in his essay, "Believing Where We Cannot Prove," "science is not a body of demonstrated truths. Virtually all of science is an exercise in believing where we cannot prove. Yet, scientific conclusions are not embraced by faith alone."[25] His point is that although both positions, scientific and theological, seem shaky, science is more rational because it rests on grounds other than just faith. Science has a certain degree of predictive power, it helps us to solve problems, when it fails it has an ability to correct itself.[26] Faith, however, does not have these qualities, faith does not predict but explains away occurrences after they have happened. Imagine a situation where you come upon a huge boulder in the middle of the desert and you have no idea how it got there because there are no other stones around and it seems unlikely that this boulder grew there! A theological explanation might suggest that God planted it there because he has a plan for it or that it is a sign to you. A scientific explanation would probably suggest that the rock was encased in a huge chunk of ice and during the ice-age was carried and left there. The scientific explanation not only explains the phenomena, but offers future reference to problems of a similar sort (say another

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[25] p. 57.

[26] Kitcher discusses these concepts in more detail on pages 59-72 claiming (successfully, I think) that these are the most pertinent reasons to take scientific claims as more rational than claims of faith.

boulder in the middle of a suburban lot you wish to buy). The scientific explanation that does not rely on faith expands our understanding of the world and enables us to rationally explain future events. The point, however, behind the argument is that today's context requires us to accept more and more scientific explanations and it is in such a context that a belief in theism must have the burden to provide grounds. As Shalkowski fears, theism is unable to provide such grounds and therefore atheism is justified.

Shalkowski devotes the rest of his article to criticizing several atheistic apologetics that have been offered to support atheism. He does so because he believes that he has shown that the debate is context relative and if the atheist thinks it acceptable that he can demolish the theist's position by refuting their arguments for the belief that God exists, then it is acceptable for the theist in another context to do the same. He concludes that since no good atheistic apologetics can be defended, a presumption of theism is justified (this reasoning has to be accepted by the atheist because he thinks it rational to use the same method to refute theism by showing that no good theistic apologetics can be defended and therefore a presumption of atheism is justified).[27] However, since it has been shown that even if the debate can in some primal context be construed as context relative, in the present scientific context (where theism is not considered the reigning intellectual climate) the burden is on the theist to give grounds for her belief in the presence of such contrary evidence. Therefore, the remainder of Shalkowski's argument is invalid and proves nothing for the current context of the debate.

Shalkowski fails to provide good reason to believe that the presumption of atheism in the traditional sense is unjustified. He successfully refutes Flew and shows that there is nothing intrinsic to positive existence claims that requires that they have a burden of proof, but his examples of context to support this claim do not consider what he, himself, regards as the current context. In this "current scientific community," the burden of argument is on the theist for the same reasons that Shalkowski argues that the atheist has the burden in a theistic revolutionary society; "what reasons

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[27] pp. 9-14.

do we have to think otherwise?"p.9. The theist in today's context has the burden of argument to explain why we need to posit a non-physical entity to explain phenomena that could be scientifically explained. Science has been successful in its predictive power and ability to correct itself and its explanations have repeatedly replaced theological ones. This fact along with the use of rational canons like Ockham's Razor is detrimental to the theist's position. Shalkowski fails to prove that in today's scientific context that a presumption of atheism is unjustified, on the contrary, as I have argued, it is precisely because today's context is a scientific one that a presumption of atheism is justified if we are to keep hold of our rational grasp on our beliefs.[28]

May 10, 1991

[28] I am indebted to both Dr. Koehn who helped me choose this topic of discussion (and who is the originator of the famous fuzz-planter!), and to Dr. Colter who spent many hours with me making suggestions to improve this paper. Both professors have contributed time, effort and cigarettes to my cause and I am truly grateful.