

Phil 1140 Review

Arguments for/against God

- “Scientific” arguments
 - Cosmological argument (God is/isn’t needed to explain why there’s something rather than nothing)
 - Design argument (God is/isn’t the best explanation of evolution, origin of life, origin of universe, natural laws)
- Moral arguments
 - God is/isn’t needed or useful for morality
 - Evil is/isn’t strong evidence against God
 - God is/isn’t needed for logic, rationality and truth to be objective

Cosmological Argument(s)

1. The claim that every being is dependent is self-contradictory. Hence something exists without a cause. (God?)
2. Ordinary natural explanations are conditional, as in nature one thing is necessary only *given* another thing. An *ultimate* explanation requires a necessary being (God?).
3. (Kalam) Everything *that begins to exist* has a cause. The cosmos began to exist (at the Big Bang). Hence the cosmos has a cause (God?)

Replies

- *Why God?*
- Isn't the whole notion of a *necessary* being silly anyway? How can the absence of a being leave behind a contradiction?
- Can we really trust our intellectual judgment about such abstract matters as infinite causal regresses?

Ontological argument(s)

- Tries to prove the existence of a *necessary* being.
- **Traditionally** (St. Anselm, Descartes) it is argued that the conception of God, as a maximal being, ensures that God must exist. (Non-existence is a defect.)
- **Modal version:** existence isn't a property, but *necessary* existence is.
- **My version:** Suppose that logical truths exist, and are transcendent. Then a perfectly rational mind necessarily exists, to provide an ontological basis for them.

...BUT WOULDN'T A GOD
WHO COULD FIND A FLAW IN
THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT
BE EVEN *GREATER*?



Design Arguments

- (**Analogy** – ancient Greeks) Biological systems resemble machines. Similar effects probably have similar causes. Machines are intelligently designed. Hence biological systems are designed.
- (**Inference the best explanation**, e.g. Paley) Complex mechanisms with functions, purposes, etc. are obvious in nature, and are best explained by an intelligent cause. Matter doesn't spontaneously form itself into such structures.

Design Arguments

- Information conservation – (Dembski, Marks, Gödel, Johns)
 - Naturalistic theories of evolution implicitly assume that the laws of physics somehow are strongly biased toward functional structures.
 - The laws of physics we have seem incapable of such bias, due to their various symmetries and causal locality.

Kurt Gödel: “The formation within geological time of a human body by the laws of physics (or any other laws of similar nature), starting from a random distribution of elementary particles and the field, is as unlikely as the separation by chance of the atmosphere into its components.”

Design Arguments

- Cosmological Fine Tuning
- The cosmos we observe is defined by many “parameters” (fixed numbers) whose values seem arbitrary, yet fine tuned for life.
 - i. Due to God?
 - ii. Due to the fact that we could never observe any other type of universe?
 - iii. Due to multiple universes? (and ii)

Design Arguments

- Replies:
 - Hume: self-organisation might be possible
 - Hume: why not an infant deity or committee?
 - Darwin: natural selection makes design unnecessary
 - (Ancient) vestigial organs, design flaws, etc. make design unlikely, or the designer evil/incompetent
 - Hume, Dawkins: the designer is complex, and hence just increases the explanatory burden.

Moral Arguments

- Does morality require more than human preferences, reactive attitudes, social instincts, etc. as a foundation? (Is human nature, divine nature necessary?)
- Can morality be based on God's nature and commands, without absurdities?
- Can rationality and logic be timeless and objective, in a godless universe?
- Is there any reason why a good and omnipotent creator would make a world like this, with so much horrific and apparently pointless suffering?

Miracles

- **Hume** argued that, given our uniform experience of natural laws, it's very unlikely that these laws are ever violated. Hence, when one hears reports of such violations, it's more likely that the witnesses are mistaken, lying, etc. Moreover:
 - Witnesses to miracles are never credible (they're few in number, uneducated, biased, barbaric, mentally unstable, etc.)
 - People *love* to believe in miracles
 - Miracles claimed by contrary religions invalidate each other

- A. R. Wallace replies that
 - Our experience of natural laws isn't quite uniform, simply because there *are* reports of miracles.
 - Witnesses to miracles are sometimes numerous, scientific experts, unbiased, sane people of high rank in society.
 - In discussing such credible witnesses, Hume changes the premises of his argument by assuming that miracles are impossible *a priori*, rather than merely not supported by evidence.
 - Miracles aren't necessarily all from God. There are many other supernatural beings in the universe.
 - Eye witnesses are more reliable than Hume thinks, especially when numerous independent witnesses agree.

Should we believe that God exists?

Theists say:

1. There are some arguments for God's existence.
2. These arguments have some force (according to most theists) but aren't totally convincing.
3. Even to the extent that they work, they don't reveal everything about God, but only glimpses (e.g. God is uncaused, necessary, intelligent, rational, morally good).

The Evidentialist Challenge

- Non-theists often respond that (as theists admit) the arguments are unconvincing.
- And, in the absence of evidence, *it is not rational to believe in God*. (Rational belief is proportioned to the evidence.)
- Of course we cannot prove that God *doesn't* exist. But that's not the point. Neither can we prove that there's no teapot in orbit around Mars. It's not rational to believe that there's a teapot orbiting Mars, in the absence of evidence.

The Evidentialist Challenge

- Evidentialists often appeal to *Ockham's Razor*, the epistemological principle that simpler explanations, those that appeal to fewer causes, are better than complex explanations (other things being equal).
- If God is not needed to explain the data, then one *shouldn't* believe in God.

The Evidentialist Challenge

- Note how the evidentialist challenge separates the questions of whether theism is (a) true, vs. (b) a rational belief.
- Alvin Plantinga (a theist) wants to tie these questions together again. He argues that *if theism is true then it is rational*.

Plantinga on evidentialism

- Suppose theism is true, says Plantinga. In that case, our brains were designed by a person who wanted us to flourish in the world, and who desired a relationship with us.
- Such a creator would give us *a priori* (i.e. innate, hard-wired) knowledge about important matters.
 - For example, we would be hard-wired to believe in the reality of the external world, the existence of other minds, the reality of the past, the uniformity of nature, and so on.
 - Also we would be hard-wired to believe in God, or to perceive God in certain ways.

Do we have knowledge of God?

- If you ask a typical theist why they believe in God, they're not likely to refer to the traditional arguments for God's existence.
- Instead, they will say that they just naturally believe in God, that God's existence seems obvious. They will likely refer to religious experiences, such as awareness of God's presence, God's love, God's forgiveness, answered prayers, and so on.

- The question, Plantinga says, is whether any of this is *warranted*. Are beliefs of this sort well founded, justified, etc.?
- This entirely depends, says Plantinga, on whether God exists. If God exists, then these religious tendencies are part of the human design plan, and hence warranted. If God doesn't exist, then they're not warranted.
- Thus Plantinga believes he has refuted the possibility that theism is true but irrational. (Has he?)

Religious experience

- In cases of ordinary sense perception, many philosophers argue that we have beliefs (e.g. *that's a tree*) that are:
 - (a) concerned with external objects, and
 - (b) warranted directly by the manner of production.

In other words, the existence of the tree is basic datum, and doesn't require argument.

Religious experience

- Beginning in the Enlightenment, however, religious experiences are not treated as perception.

“But in order to state the sort of evidentialism characteristic of Enlightenment thought, it is stipulated that no beliefs asserting the content of religious or mystical experiences count as evidence. For example, if Fatima had an experience that she would describe as of the presence of God she should not treat God’s presence to her as a piece of evidence. That does not prevent the claim that someone has had a religious experience with a certain content from counting as evidence. For example, the fact that Fatima had an experience as if of God’s presence would be a piece of evidence.”

(SEP, entry on “The Epistemology of Religion”)

- I.e. with ordinary sense perception, the evidence is “that’s a tree over there”
- But with religious experience, the evidence is not “that’s Jesus over there” but “that *seems* to be Jesus over there”, or “I have an experience *as if* of Jesus over there”
- (Is this an unfair double standard?) Alston thinks that religious experiences should be treated as cases of perception. And Swinburne thinks the experiences should be taken as genuine, in the absence of contrary evidence.

Externalism in epistemology

- Plantinga and Alston are externalists.
- Externalism says that whether or not a belief is warranted depends on “external” states of affairs, i.e. ones that a person may not be conscious of.
 - E.g. a warranted belief is one that is produced by a reliable cognitive mechanism, or one that is working properly. (We may not be aware of the fact that our brains are/are not working properly.)
- According to externalism, you might know something, without knowing that you know it.

Does religious belief need to be certain?

- Some religious traditions stress the certainty and “assurance” of their faith.
- However, many of the “top” religious figures in history (saints, etc.) admit to having grave doubts.
- Pascal, with his wager argument, says that certainty of belief isn’t needed for *acts* of faith.

Pascal's Wager

- Pascal sets up the wager by saying that reason gives us no idea whether or not God exists.
- In the rest of the *Pensées*, however, Pascal does give arguments for the truth of Christianity.
 - He argues against materialism, as failing to account for human knowledge and rationality
 - He says that Jesus's disciples were unlikely to have been mistaken about his resurrection, or to have lied about it.
 - He argues for Jesus being the Christ, based on his miracles and fulfilment of prophecies (etc.)

- On the other hand, Pascal sees human reason as limited.
 - “Reason’s last step is to recognize that there is an infinite number of things which surpass it. It is simply feeble if it does not go as far as realizing that.”
- The metaphysical proofs for the existence of God are so remote from human reasoning and so involved that they make little impact, and, even if they did help some people, it would only be for the moment during which they watched the demonstration, because an hour later they would be afraid they had made a mistake.”

- We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart. It is through the latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them. The skeptics have no other object than that, and they work at it to no purpose. We know that we are not dreaming, but, however unable we may be to prove it rationally, our inability proves nothing but the weakness of our reason, and not the uncertainty of all our knowledge, as they maintain. For knowledge of first principles, like space, time, motion, number, is as solid as any derived through reason, and it is on such knowledge, coming from the heart and instinct, that reason has to depend and base all its argument ...
- (This is rather similar to Plantinga's critique of classical foundationalism, and his claim that beliefs such as that the external world is real are "properly basic".)

- Suppose we reformulate the wager, starting with the assumption that reason gives us *some* grounds to believe in theism, or even some particular version of theism, compared to other religions.
 - Perhaps reason also suggests that God, as the source of morality, desires us to be moral?
- In that case, most (perhaps all) of the objections are avoided, especially if we represent our preferences using relative utilities as Paul Bartha suggests.

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TAKING STOCK OF INFINITE VALUE: PASCAL'S WAGER AND RELATIVE UTILITIES

ABSTRACT. Among recent objections to Pascal's Wager, two are especially compelling. The first is that decision theory, and specifically the requirement of maximizing expected utility, is incompatible with infinite utility values. The second is that even if infinite utility values are admitted, the argument of the Wager is invalid provided that we allow mixed strategies. Furthermore, Hájek (*Philosophical Review* 112, 2003) has shown that reformulations of Pascal's Wager that address these criticisms inevitably lead to arguments that are philosophically unsatisfying and historically unfaithful. Both the objections and Hájek's philosophical worries disappear, however, if we represent our preferences using relative utilities (generalized utility ratios) rather than a one-place utility function. Relative utilities provide a conservative way to make sense of infinite value that preserves the familiar equation of rationality with the maximization of expected utility. They also provide a means of investigating a broader class of problems related to the Wager.

Science and Religion

- Plantinga (and some other theists) say that science and theism aren't in conflict – very much. Rather, theism is in conflict with *naturalism*.
 - Naturalism cannot account for the comprehensibility of the world
 - Naturalism cannot account for the existence of mathematical facts
 - Naturalism cannot explain humans' ability to do science
 - Naturalism entails that evolution is 'unguided'. But we have no evidence that unguided evolution can accomplish anything.

Science and Religion

- Naturalists reply that unguided evolution *can* account for all the biology we see on earth.
- Unguided evolution can account for the human mind as well, including its ability to do science, and even its disposition toward altruism and religious belief.