

Introducing the philosophy of religion



Introducing the philosophy of religion



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Contents

Introduction	5
Learning Outcomes	6
Getting straight what we mean	7
Two provisional definitions	8
Questions about religion and God: a survey	9
Philosophical and non-philosophical questions	10
Argument or blind faith?	13
So who's right: Ada, Bert or Carl?	15
Faith and reason	16
Collecting arguments for God's existence	19
Better arguments for and against God's existence	21
Arguments from 'The way the world is'	23
Aquinas's 'Second Way'	25
The structure of arguments	27
Finding the shape of Aquinas's argument	28
Evaluating Aquinas's argument	30
Conclusion	32
Keep on learning	33
References	33
Acknowledgements	34

Introduction

In this course, you will consider the meanings of the key terms 'God' and 'religion'; identify some key questions in the philosophy of religion; think about the difference between philosophical and non-philosophical questions about religion; and look at the often-discussed question of whether argument and evidence are even possible when we are thinking about religion. Then we will note the variety of possible ways of arguing for or against God's existence; distinguish three different arguments; and describe and assess one of them in more detail.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [A222 Exploring philosophy](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the meaning of the words 'God' and 'religion'
- understand what the main questions are in philosophy of religion
- have a better sense of the differences between philosophical questions or arguments and other kinds of questions or arguments
- think about the relation between belief and evidence, faith and proof
- have a sense of the variety of arguments for or against God's existence, and of how to categorise this variety.

Getting straight what we mean

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make words mean different things.’

(Carroll, 1978 [1871], p. 168)

Alice’s point is clear. If we are to understand each other, then we have to mean the same by the words we use. We can’t just use words to mean whatever we choose them to mean, as Humpty Dumpty does (or says he does) in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). Instead, we have to try to use our words as precisely and consistently as we can.

Precision and consistency with words is important everywhere – and it is particularly important in philosophy. So in the interests of precision, here is our first activity.

Activity 1a

First, write down brief (five- to fifteen-word) definitions of what you understand these two words to mean in ordinary everyday usage:

- God
- religion

Don’t read any further until *after* you’ve written down your definitions.

Provide your answer...

Activity 1b

Now, find a dictionary. How does your dictionary define the words?

Discussion

You may be wondering why I said that you should write your own definitions for these words before looking them up in a dictionary. I had at least three reasons:

1. To encourage you to think for yourself, instead of just accepting what someone else says. (This is what you should always do in philosophy.)
2. Because there might be differences between what you say and what your dictionary says, and these differences might be interesting.
3. Because your definitions might be better than the dictionary’s! Some people think that dictionaries are always right. But they’re not. Dictionaries are written by people, and people make mistakes. (Even good dictionaries differ in the definitions they offer.)

Two provisional definitions

So what were your own definitions of God and religion? How did they compare with the dictionary's? If there were differences, why do you think that was?

Here are two possible definitions of these terms:

God

The supreme personal being existing beyond the world, creator and ruler of the universe.

religion

System of belief in and worship of a supernatural power or God.

As I say, these possible definitions are not beyond challenge just because they might appear in a dictionary. As it happens, I made them up, just to give two starting-points for our discussion. So perhaps they can be improved upon.

Improving the definitions

Perhaps you can improve my definitions of 'God' and 'religion' yourself. One way you might improve my provisional definition of 'religion' is by examining the origin of the word.

The origins of words are not always philosophically interesting or important. But sometimes they are, and 'religion' may be a case in point. Though the origins of the word are not completely clear, it seems to come from the Latin *re-*, meaning 'back' or 'again', and *ligio*, meaning 'a tie' or 'a connection'. So if we go by its origins, the word 'religion' could apparently mean either (or both?) of two very different things. It could mean a *tying back*, a restraint, a bind that stops you doing things. It could also mean a *reconnection*, a way of getting back in touch – perhaps, back in touch with the divine. It is interesting that, even today, the foes of religion see religion as almost exactly the first of these, while the friends of religion see it as almost exactly the second.

You might also improve my provisional definition of 'religion' by pointing out that not all religions believe in *one* God. The Ancient Greeks, Romans and Vikings all believed in many gods, as do some Hindus today. (Their view is called polytheism, from the Greek *polu* 'many' and *theoi* 'gods'.)

Or again, you might improve my provisional definition of 'God' by pointing out that many people have believed in a God who is neither personal nor beyond the world. For instance, the philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) said that God was the same thing as *everything* – the whole of reality. (This view of God is called pantheism, from the Greek *pan* 'everything' and *theos* 'God'.)

Also, you might point out that my provisional definition of 'God' won't do, because it apparently implies theism. It seems to imply that God exists, because it defines God as 'the supreme personal being *existing* beyond the world'. But surely, you might say, we can't settle the question of God's existence just by looking 'God' up in a dictionary! After all, many people don't believe in God at all. (Their view is called atheism, from the Greek *a* 'not' and *theos* 'God'.) And many other people don't think that we can know one way or the other whether or not there is a God. (Their view is called agnosticism, from the Greek *a* 'not' and *gnōsis* 'knowledge'.) So surely my definition should have said that 'God' means 'the one supreme personal being who *is believed to exist* beyond the world', or something like that.

Finally, one other possible drawback is that Buddhism seems to be a religion, but there are quite a lot of Buddhists who apparently don't believe in God. You might think that this means that Buddhism, at least as practised by non-theistic Buddhists, isn't really a religion. Or you might think that it proves my definition wrong. (Does it? My definition said that religion is about 'belief in and worship of a supernatural power or God' – and even non-theistic Buddhists apparently believe in some supernatural powers, such as karma.) Despite these drawbacks, and possibly others, too, my two provisional definitions will do as a start, just to get us at least roughly straight about what we mean here by 'God' and 'religion'. Quite often in philosophy, a definition is only a rough and ready starting-point – something to get thinking going, not something to close it down. In general, the more interesting things are, the harder they are to define. So I wouldn't be very surprised if no completely satisfactory definition of religion was available.

Questions about religion and God: a survey

The philosophy of religion means asking philosophical questions *about* religion – about systems of belief in and worship of God such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Sikhism, Jainism, and the like. We should add that philosophy of religion also means asking philosophical questions about God (or about the gods).

So what are the philosophical questions that are worth asking about religion and God?

Activity 2

Listen to the audio recording 'Introducing the philosophy of religion'. In this recording, I introduce some of the themes of this course. (Note that the recording makes reference to 'Book 2', but you can ignore that for the purposes of this activity.)

In the middle of what I say, you will hear a number of people whom we stopped in the street to ask what big questions they had about God and religion.

If we'd asked *you* that question, what would you have said? Spend five minutes writing down the questions that *you* most want to ask about religion and God. What are the burning issues, for you? Be as frank as you like – no one else is going to see them!

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Introducing the philosophy of religion](#)

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Here are some of the questions about religion and God that you might have found yourself writing down. (Don't worry if you didn't come up with just these questions – there isn't a single *right* list here.)

- Does religion only cause trouble in the world?
- Does God exist?
- Could the world exist if God didn't exist?
- If God is good, why is there so much evil in the world?

- E. Does religion depend on fear and brainwashing?
- F. Are all religious people hypocrites?
- G. Were Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King hypocrites?
- H. Can you be a good person without being religious?
- I. What difference does it make whether or not there is a God?
- J. Are all religions basically the same?
- K. Is religion something you can argue about, or just a matter of blind faith?
- L. Is the world designed? If so, does that mean it must have a designer?
- M. Can miracles happen?
- N. Can we experience God?

When you were listening to the audio, you might have noticed that I say that some of the questions that we got from people in the street 'aren't philosophical questions'.

What about the questions in the list (A – N), or the questions you've just written down yourself? Are all of these philosophical questions about religion, or some other sort of question – historical, perhaps, or biographical, or statistical, or something like that?

Philosophical and non-philosophical questions

Activity 3

Using the list below, try to decide how many of the questions are philosophical questions.

Make a note of the questions you're sure about. If you're not so sure, jot down the reasons you see for answering one way or the other. But whatever you put, notice your reasons for putting it! Then add your own questions to the list.

- A. Does religion only cause trouble in the world?
- B. Does God exist?
- C. Could the world exist if God didn't exist?
- D. If God is good, why is there so much evil in the world?
- E. Does religion depend on fear and brainwashing?
- F. Are all religious people hypocrites?
- G. Were Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King hypocrites?
- H. Can you be a good person without being religious?
- I. What difference does it make whether or not there is a God?
- J. Are all religions basically the same?
- K. Is religion something you can argue about, or just a matter of blind faith?
- L. Is the world designed? If so, does that mean it must have a designer?
- M. Can miracles happen?
- N. Can we experience God?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

What makes any question a philosophical question? Different philosophers will say different things here. My own response is: a question is philosophical when it is a question about our own or somebody else's world-view – about what really exists, about what we can know and how, about what is good or bad, right or wrong – and so on. (This vague ending 'and so on' is deliberate: there is a lot of overlap between philosophical questions and other sorts.)

I'd say that some of the questions identified above (A–N) are *clearly* philosophical questions. In this category are questions such as (B) 'Does God exist?', (C) 'Could the world exist if God didn't exist?' and (D) 'If God is good, why is there so much evil in the world?' I think these questions are clearly philosophical, by which I mean this: you have no hope of answering them well without doing some philosophy.

I think other questions in the list are *clearly not* philosophical questions. Most obviously, question (G) 'Were Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King hypocrites?' is not a philosophical question. To answer (G), you don't need to do philosophy; you need to do some biographical research. You need to find out about the life stories of Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King, and see whether they lived hypocritically, or whether, on the contrary, they sincerely tried to practise in private what they preached in public.

The same is true of the more general, but still not philosophical, question (F), 'Are all religious people hypocrites?'. To answer this question, what you need to do is a little dictionary work (what does 'hypocrite' mean?) and then, once more, some biographical research. If you can find just one religious person who is *not* a hypocrite, then the answer to (F) is 'No'. This biographical exercise is not philosophy either. So (F) doesn't count as a philosophical question any more than (G) did.

Now consider question (E), 'Does religion depend on fear and brainwashing?' and question (H), 'Can you be a good person without being religious?'. Are these philosophical questions, or aren't they?

Well, think about the different ways we might go about answering (E) or (H). One way would be to set up a statistical survey. We could take a sample of 1000 religious people, and see whether their motivations to be religious arose from fear or brainwashing. Or we could take a sample of 1000 good people, and headcount how many of them go to church/mosque/synagogue/temple/gurdwara/etc. If we answer (E) or (H) by these statistical means, then we are not treating them as philosophical questions.

Alternatively, we might try to answer (E) or (H) by closely examining the concepts (or ideas) involved. We might argue that 'The very idea of religion has (or does not have) fear and brainwashing built into it', or that 'The very idea of being a good person is (or is not) a religious idea'. When we argue in this idea-based (conceptual) way, we *are* arguing in a philosophical way. Running this sort of inquiry *is* doing philosophy.

The moral is that there are some questions which you can approach *either* philosophically, or in other ways. (You can also approach them in *both* ways.) As you will see, philosophy does have its own distinctive means and methods. One of its characteristic methods is careful, logical argument – but, of course, that happens in other subjects as well as philosophy. Another is the close examination of ideas or concepts – 'conceptual analysis', as it is often called. But there is more than this to philosophy. Philosophy is not just about concepts of things, but about the things themselves as well. Moreover, philosophy

(fortunately!) does not exist in isolation from every other kind of inquiry. Often it is so closely connected with other kinds of inquiry that it is an open question whether what you are doing counts as philosophy or not. As I said above, there is quite a lot of overlap between philosophy and adjacent subjects such as psychology, sociology, politics, science and theology.

This is a good thing, not a bad thing. It is something to bear in mind as you work through this course. It's not a reason for thinking that the non-philosophical or less philosophical questions that we might raise about religion are uninteresting, or less interesting than the philosophical questions. But it is a reason – in a course about the *philosophy* of religion – for focusing on the philosophical questions about religion and God.

Argument or blind faith?

In asking whether ‘religion is something that you can argue about’ (Question (K) in the list in the previous section), I’m not asking whether it’s possible to have a conflict or a row about religion. All too obviously, that’s perfectly possible – history is full of such conflicts. What I’m asking is whether religion is something we can argue *philosophically* about. And in philosophy, **argument** doesn’t mean having a row or a conflict between different viewpoints. Philosophical argument is about giving **evidence**, perhaps even proofs, for your viewpoint – evidence or proofs that you hope others might be convinced by.

argument

In philosophy, an argument for a claim is a series of statements that somebody makes or might make, giving reasons to believe that claim.

evidence

Evidence for a claim means facts or experiences or data or any reasonable assumptions that can be given to support a claim – the kind of things that someone might mention in a good argument for the claim.

So can there be successful philosophical arguments about God and religion? Here is a little dialogue between three people – Ada, Bert and Carl – who give different answers to this question. Which of them are you nearest to agreeing with?

- | | |
|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ada | Yes, there can be philosophical argument about God and religion. And the upshot of the philosophical arguments is to prove that God exists. |
| Bert | Yes, there can be philosophical argument about God and religion. And the upshot of the philosophical arguments is to prove that God doesn’t exist. |
| Carl | Well, one of you has got to be wrong! I think your arguments cancel out. There can’t be a proof of God’s existence such as Ada believes in, when some people, like Bert for instance, are so sure that there’s a proof of God’s <i>non</i> -existence. |
| Ada | Wait a minute, Carl. You think that just because Bert disagrees with me about religion, I can’t be right? And just because I disagree with Bert, <i>he</i> can’t be right? But that’s ridiculous. People might disagree about whether the earth is flat. In fact, they <i>do</i> ! That doesn’t mean that no one can be right about whether the earth is flat. Same with religion. Just because people disagree about religion, that doesn’t mean that no one is right about religion. |
| Bert | Exactly. Just because Ada thinks there is a God, it doesn’t mean there is one. Ada is the one who’s the flat-earthier here. |
| Carl | But the thing is, if we were talking about whether the earth is flat, we could discuss the arguments. We could <i>prove</i> that the earth isn’t flat, and that would be the end of the question. What happens with God and religion isn’t like that. There aren’t any proofs one way or the other. There aren’t even any arguments. |

- Ada** No, there are arguments on both sides. I have arguments for believing in God, and Bert has arguments for not believing. It's just that my arguments are convincing, and Bert's aren't.
- Bert** Well, they might convince you, but they shouldn't!
- Carl** OK, so you do both offer arguments. But I don't think either of you believes what you believe *because* of your arguments. I think it's blind faith on both sides. Your arguments are just a pretence. They're an excuse for believing what you *want* to believe anyway. If you want a long word, they're a rationalisation!
- Ada** Carl, I've spent years thinking about all this. I've been really careful and logical in examining the evidence. I believe in God because that's the position the evidence supports. There's nothing *blind* about my faith! Given the evidence, faith in God is the only reasonable position.

Bert

And I can say the same. I've spent years thinking about it, too, and I don't disbelieve in God just because I feel like it! I disbelieve in God because that's the position the evidence supports. There's nothing blind about my *lack* of faith! Given the evidence, disbelief in God is the only reasonable position.

So who's right: Ada, Bert or Carl?

Does any of this sound familiar? If you have ever listened to or taken part in an argument about whether God exists, it probably does. Lots of people (like Ada and Bert) advance arguments for and against God's existence, and many of them are clearly intelligent and reasonable people. But still we don't seem able to *settle* the arguments about God one way or the other. That leads many other intelligent and reasonable people to a conclusion like Carl's: there isn't any conclusive argument either for or against God's existence, and those who think they have found one only think that because they want to believe it.

So who's right: Ada, Bert or Carl? You might well think that there is something to be said for all three views. Ada (you might say) has a point, because there are some things in the world that don't seem to make sense unless there is a God. Bert has a point for the opposite reason – because there are some things that don't seem to make sense if there *is* a God. Meanwhile Carl, too, must be right to point out that neither Ada nor Bert is being completely fair on the other, and that, sometimes at least, people are theists – or atheists – because that's what they *want* to believe.

On the other hand, you might say, both Ada and Bert go too far in talking about *proof*. There may be evidence for or against God's existence, but *proof* is a very strong word. If you have proof for a belief, that means the belief *must* be true, and surely (you might say) that is going too far with such a difficult question as God's existence. And Carl – you might add – goes too far as well. Just because neither Ada nor Bert can *prove* their beliefs, it doesn't follow that they don't have any evidence at all for them.

You might have different reactions from these, of course. Another possible reaction is to say that Ada is right to believe in God, but Carl is right to say that belief in God doesn't depend on reasons. Belief in God is good for us – it makes our lives go better than they do without belief – so we should believe in God even though we don't have very good evidence that he exists. This kind of view has been suggested by the seventeenth- and nineteenth-century philosophers Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) and William James (1842–1910). Their view is often called fideism (from Latin *fides*, 'faith').

Conversely, you might think that belief in God is *bad* for us, and conclude that we have good reason not to believe in God, whether or not we have good evidence that he doesn't exist. This kind of view you will find in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and the twentieth-century philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970).

Some people even think that there can't be any real faith in God *unless* there is no evidence for God's existence. Faith is essentially trust, and there can't be trust unless there is something you don't know: I can't really *trust* that my daughter will recover from her illness, if I already know that she has recovered. Likewise with faith in God: we couldn't have real faith in God if we *knew* that God existed. This is the strongly fideist view that the nineteenth-century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) takes in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846).

Fideism has its critics, too. One possible problem for a fideism like Kierkegaard's, James's or Pascal's comes from the question 'Can you choose to believe?' Fideists think that we should adopt a belief in God without much or any evidence that it is true. But we might wonder whether it is even possible to adopt a belief just because you choose to, rather than because there is good evidence for that belief.

Try it for yourself. Have a go at making yourself believe this:

Custard is really spaghetti

Can you do it? Well, you can certainly make yourself *have the thought* 'Custard is really spaghetti'. But having a thought is not the same thing as believing it. It seems impossible to make yourself *believe* 'Custard is really spaghetti', just by trying to believe it. So it's hard to see how you will be able to make yourself believe that God exists, unless you think that there is good evidence that God exists.

Another problem for Kierkegaard's kind of fideism is the worry that he muddles up two separate senses of the word 'faith'. What do we mean by 'faith'? We might mean (at least) two very different things. In one sense, 'faith' can mean belief in the propositions of religion (e.g. 'God exists', 'God is loving', 'God created the world', and so on). In the other sense, 'faith' means personal trust, of the kind that you have in friends or parents or a husband or wife. Maybe Kierkegaard is right about one kind of faith, faith as personal trust, but wrong about the other kind, faith as propositional belief. And maybe faith as personal trust can involve what Kierkegaard calls a 'leap of faith' – without that meaning that there can't be evidence for or against faith as propositional belief.

Faith and reason

Activity 4

Whatever we think about these further questions, it should be clear that the question of faith and reason is a big one. Philosophers and theologians (and others) continue to debate it. You can find one recent example of such a debate in the audio recording 'Faith and reason', which features the Christian priest and philosopher Keith Ward, the Muslim theologian Mona Siddiqui, the Jewish Rabbi Mark Goldsmith and the atheist philosopher Peter Cave talking to the interviewer Winifred Robinson about this very question.

You should listen to the recording all the way through before reading the questions below. When you have read them, listen to the recording again. This time you may find it helpful to stop and start the discussion to make a note of your responses as you go along.

So listen to 'Faith and reason' now.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Faith and reason](#)

Now ask yourself the following questions:

1. The three theists in the debate (especially Mark Goldsmith and Mona Siddiqui) seem to agree that accepting that God exists is only the beginning for religious belief. Do you agree with Peter Cave that this means that believers must *start* by taking what he calls ‘the great kangaroo leap of faith’? If this is so, why might it be thought to be a bad thing? *Hint:* Peter Cave indicates some reasons in the recording and you may be able to think of others. Even if you don’t think it is necessarily a bad thing, try to work out why others might think so.
2. Mona Siddiqui and Keith Ward both say, in different ways, that there is a middle ground between ‘conclusive proof’ and ‘blind faith’. Not everything can be proved conclusively. It doesn’t follow that whatever is not conclusively proved is just accepted without question. But how much proof or evidence do you think we need in order to believe in God? *Hint:* Various views on this are suggested in the debate. Try to note them down and work out what might be said for or against them.
3. Notice that Winifred Robinson asks the three theists why, if there is one God, they don’t agree about God. And all three of them – starting with Mark Goldsmith – reject the assumption in her question. They say that they do agree, because they all accept the existence of one and the same God. What do you think of this answer to Winifred’s question?

Discussion

1. Keith Ward (at 8’07”) responds to Peter Cave by suggesting that most people start off in life as believers in something divine beyond the material world, so if there is any ‘kangaroo leap’, it is in the opposite direction, away from faith. Does this match your experience? Whether or not you are a believer now, did you start off as a believer?

If you agree with Keith Ward’s response, do you think it helps the case for theism? Peter Cave suggests that the trouble with ‘the great kangaroo leap of faith’, as he calls it, is that it’s irreversible – once people have taken it, they are usually stuck with, and heavily committed to, their religious beliefs (5’50”). Is this true? Notice that Mona Siddiqui (from 6’39”) and Mark Goldsmith (at 4’14”) emphasise the struggle that many religious people have with their faith and their continuing journey to understand God.

2. At 2’52”, Keith Ward mentions W.K. Clifford (1845–1879), who in his essay ‘The Ethics of Belief’ (1877) famously said that ‘It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.’ Keith Ward suggests that ‘sometimes we can and should believe a bit more than what our senses tell us’. Who do you agree with here? (Peter Cave clearly agrees with Clifford!)

On Cave’s (and Clifford’s) side: it seems irresponsible to go around making up your own beliefs. (Perhaps it’s not even possible: remember the ‘Custard is really spaghetti’ example.)

On Ward’s (and James’s) side: we need to ask just what belief is supported by what evidence. If I find that I can see something red and round in front of me, what does that justify me in believing?

- That there’s an apple in front of me?
- Just that there is something red, round and apple-like in front of me?
- Just that I am either hallucinating or seeing an apple?

We don't have a clear way of saying just how much is proved by any evidence. Without that, it isn't completely clear-cut what counts as going beyond what is proved by the evidence, either.

Keith Ward also takes up a distinction that Mona Siddiqui makes first in the discussion, and which Mark Goldsmith also seems to accept – a distinction between 'material evidence', evidence you can touch and see, perhaps, and 'spiritual evidence', of the sort that religious experience, for instance, might provide (3'20"). Is this a helpful distinction for this debate?

3. Winifred asks this question at 11'03". The three theists may believe in the same God, but they still disagree about what God is like, for instance about whether the Torah, the Qur'an, or the Christian Bible is the Holy Book that God has given us for guidance. You may have thought that there is a serious objection to theism here, which Peter Cave might have made more of (if he'd been given a chance). Or you may consider that the theists could retort to Peter Cave that, after all, atheists disagree, too.

When you have worked through this activity, please don't drop the question of faith and reason as one you don't have to think about any more! I hope you keep this question in view throughout the course. The argument we will go on to consider should make a difference to what you think about the question 'Does God exist?' It should also help you think about whether there can be arguments for God's existence at all. Maybe, by the end of the course, you will have a different view about the question of faith and reason from the one you started with.

Collecting arguments for God's existence

What kind of evidence is there for God's existence? What kinds of arguments are available? (Remember the definitions of ['evidence'](#) and ['argument'](#) that we saw earlier.)

We'll begin with a 'brain-storming' survey, and try to collect up as many types of argument and evidence for or against God's existence as we can think of.

Activity 5

Start with yourself. Ask yourself this question, and think as hard and as honestly about it as you can.

What is my main reason for my current view about whether God exists or not?

Write down your answer to this question (or answers – there might be more than one). If possible, discuss your response with a friend, and ask that friend how he or she would answer it.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

What answers did you come up with? In the table below are some things that you, or your friend, might have said. Some of them, admittedly, are only things that you are likely to say if you realise you haven't thought all this through properly, and are being really honest about it.

What is my main reason for my current view about whether God exists or not?

	If you believe that God exists (the theist view)	If you believe that God doesn't exist (the atheist view)	If you don't know whether God exists or not (the agnostic view)
(1)	I don't have any reasons. I just do think that.	I don't have any reasons. I just do think that.	I don't have any reasons. I just do think that.
(2)	I want God to exist.	I want God not to exist.	I don't care whether God exists or not.
(3)	Lots of clever people, or people whose authority I accept, think God exists.	Lots of clever people, or people whose authority I accept, think God doesn't exist.	Lots of clever people, or people whose authority I accept, don't know whether God exists.
(4)	I don't need <i>reasons</i> for thinking God exists. It's the other side who need reasons, for thinking he doesn't.	I don't need <i>reasons</i> for thinking God doesn't exist. It's the other side who need reasons, for thinking he does.	I don't need <i>reasons</i> for not claiming to know whether God exists. It's those who claim to know, theists or atheists, who need reasons.

Irrespective of whether it is used to support a theist, atheist or agnostic viewpoint – and irrespective of whether you yourself gave any of them – none of the four kinds of answer in the discussion above ought to impress you very much. But why not?

Activity 6

Part 1

Pause to reflect on the answers offered in the table in Activity 5. Then write down a reason why each of the four kinds of answer is not very impressive.

(1) Having no reasons for your beliefs.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Having no reasons for your beliefs creates obvious problems if we want to apply philosophy to assess those beliefs. (Compare some of the criticisms of fideism that we considered earlier.) If our beliefs don't depend on any reasons, it is very hard to argue philosophically either for or against them – because philosophical argument, as we have seen, is all about reasons and evidence.

Part 2

(2) Believing whatever you believe because you want to.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Believing whatever you believe because you want to faces problems that we have also seen already. You can't just choose to believe that custard is really spaghetti, or that God exists. Besides, wanting something to be true is not enough to make it true, so that even if you could make yourself believe whatever you want, those beliefs would run the risk of being wildly inaccurate. Suppose Jane asks you what time the bus comes. 'Six o'clock,' you say. 'Why do you think it comes at six?' asks Jane. 'Because I *want* it to come at six o'clock,' you reply. Jane can reasonably infer from your answer that you don't know what time the bus is due.

Part 3

(3) Believing what you believe because clever people (or people whose authority you accept) believe it.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Believing whatever you believe because clever people (or people whose authority you accept) believe it is also philosophically unsatisfactory. Of course it's not possible for each of us to investigate everything – we all have to take some things on trust. But borrowing others' opinions on everything is intellectual laziness. And it is risky, too, because even clever people and people in authority get things wrong. (Sometimes, the cleverer they are and the more authority they have, the more they get wrong.) Moreover, clever and authoritative people reach different conclusions about all sorts of things; including whether God exists or not.

Part 4

(4) Forcing the other side to prove their belief.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Forcing the other side to prove their belief is the first answer that is remotely satisfactory. Forcing the other side of the argument to accept the onus of proof, instead of accepting the onus yourself, at least shows low cunning. The trouble is that the other side can pull the same trick: they can hit back with 'No, I don't have to prove anything, you're the one who has to prove what you believe.' Of course, this can easily get a bit sterile. It is not very interesting, and not very fruitful, to just sit back and wait for a chance to catch your opponent out. Good philosophers are much more interested in understanding the world than in winning the argument. They are even prepared to risk *losing* the argument if, in the end, that will help them to understand the world better.

Better arguments for and against God's existence

Here are four more answers that you might have given to the question 'What is my main reason for my current view about whether God exists or not?'. They are more satisfactory than the first four because they involve trying to find some evidence for our beliefs about God's existence or non-existence.

Better arguments for and against God's existence

	Theist	Atheist	Agnostic
(5)	Personal experience shows that there is a God.	Personal experience shows that there is no God.	Personal experience shows neither that there is a God nor that there isn't.
(6)	History shows that there is a God.	History shows that there is no God.	History shows neither that there is a God nor that there isn't.
(7)	The way the world is shows that there is a God.	The way the world is shows that there is no God.	The way the world is shows neither that there is a God nor that there isn't.

(8)	The nature of the idea of God shows that there is a God.	The nature of the idea of God shows that there is no God.	The nature of the idea of God shows neither that there is a God nor that there isn't.
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Activity 7

Stop to think for a moment about these four kinds of argument (5–8) for or against God's existence.

- If *you* were going to argue for (or against) God's existence, which of these kinds of argument would you use (if any)?
- Which of these kinds of argument do you think provides the strongest evidence for (or against) God's existence?
- Which of them is the weakest form of argument? Why?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

One thing that you will probably notice as you work through the arguments is this: you don't have to take the same attitude (theist, atheist or agnostic) to all the arguments. Sometimes passionate theists (or atheists, or agnostics) think that they are committed to using every possible argument for their view, and that not to use them all would be 'letting the side down'! But much subtler attitudes are possible, and indeed advisable. For instance, you can be a theist without thinking that the nature of the idea of God shows that there is a God. (Thomas Aquinas is an example of this combination of views.) Or again, you can be an atheist without thinking that atheism is proved by personal experience. (Probably most atheists do not think that.) In general, it doesn't have to be that all the evidence points the same way.

Also, you may notice that evidence comes in different strengths. These are arguments that claim to *show* that God exists or doesn't exist. But arguments often do rather less than *show* or *prove* things. Often they only *provide some reason for thinking* something, e.g. that God exists or doesn't exist. Indeed sometimes they only *suggest* that something *may be* true, e.g. that God *might* exist or not exist.

Now try to put yourself in other people's philosophical shoes. If you are an atheist, think your own position through first – and then try to imagine how the arguments look from a theist's or an agnostic's point of view. If you are a theist or an agnostic, do the same: when you have thought through your own position, try to work out how other people might argue differently.

Theists have offered arguments – and atheists and agnostics have offered counter-arguments – under all four of the headings above:

- Plenty of theists have argued (5) that they know God exists because they have personally experienced God.
- Most of the world's major religions claim (6) that we can know God exists because God has intervened at one point or another in human history.
- Most religions also argue (7) that we can know that God exists because we can know that God made the world (i.e. the whole universe).

- Finally (8) many theists have defended the argument that God's existence is something we can know about just by reflecting on the very idea or concept of God.

In the remainder of this course, we will consider arguments that appeal to 'The way the world is' (7).

Arguments from 'The way the world is'

We now turn to arguments from 'The way the world is'. In the table 'Better arguments for and against God's existence', arguments for God's existence are collected together in this general form:

(7) The way the world is shows that there is a God.

However, under the general heading of (7), there are a number of different kinds of argument for God's existence that are worth distinguishing. When you think about (7), you may be able to pick out some of them. After all, there are lots of 'ways the world is' – so lots of arguments can be created by thinking about different ways.

One important 'way the world is' is this: the world seems to be *designed*. That is, the world has lots of features that look as if they are intentionally made to bring about particular good results. One of the most important arguments for God's existence homes in on just this feature of the world. In very simple outline, it runs like this:

(7a) The detail of the world's design shows that there is a God.

This is the classic argument from design. It is sometimes also called the argument *for* design, or teleological argument (from 'teleology', the study of design or purpose in nature).

Another 'way the world is' is this: it exists! Many theists have argued:

(7b) The fact that the world exists shows that there is a God.

This argument arises from the classic question 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' It can seem amazing – perhaps it *should* seem amazing – to us that there even is a world. The mere fact of the world's existence can look like it needs explaining. And it can look like the most natural explanation of the fact that the world exists is that God made it: 'How can there be a creation unless there was a creator?' This argument is what philosophers sometimes call the cosmological argument (from 'cosmology', the study of the origins of the universe). We won't discuss (7a) or (7b) any further here, but you should keep them in mind as a contrast to (7c).

A further 'way the world is' is that it contains orders of causes. Some theists have focused on this third feature of the world and argued:

(7c) The existence of orders of causes in the world shows that there is a God.

Orders of causes are chains of events where one thing brings about another, and that in turn brings about something else. For example: a rock falls and starts a mudslide, and the mudslide blocks a river, and the blocked river creates a flood, and the flood makes the organisers of the village fete think, 'We'd better cancel', and that thought makes them cancel the village fete. We shall examine a version of this argument further in the next section.

Aquinas's 'Second Way'

The most celebrated version of (7c), the argument for God's existence from the orders of causes in the world, is given by Thomas Aquinas in a passage in his *Summa Theologiae* (1266–73). This is known as the 'Second Way' argument and is one of Aquinas's 'Five Ways' of proving God's existence.

Who was Thomas Aquinas?

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) was an Italian priest of the Dominican Order, and an immensely influential philosopher and theologian, whose works present a synthesis of Christian and Aristotelian philosophy. In the Middle Ages he was the foremost proponent of the project of arguing for God's existence from the way the world is: his five arguments are known as Aquinas's 'Five Ways'. He is one of the very few philosophers to be canonised (the Catholic Church declared him a saint in 1324), and also one of the very few who still has self-described followers (known as Thomists, from his first name) today. His influence on Western philosophy remains considerable, for one thing because he was one of the main authorities that René Descartes was reacting against. The works for which he is best known are the *Summa Theologiae* (1266–73) and the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (1258–64), both of them huge compendia of arguments on almost every topic in philosophy and theology.

Activity 8

Now read through the following passage from Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*. Take it slowly and carefully, a sentence at a time. Don't be alarmed, even then, if it fails to make complete sense on your first read-through.

In the world that we perceive around us we find an order of causes. In each ordered series of causes, the first item is the cause of the next item, and this in turn is the cause of the final item (though there may be more than one intermediate step); and if any one cause is taken away, the effect will also be absent. Hence if there was not a first item in the series of causes, there will be no intermediate or final items. But if the series of causes stretches back to infinity, there will be no first cause, which will mean that there will be no final effect, and no intermediate causes, which is patently not the case. Hence it is necessary to posit some first cause; and this everyone calls 'God'.

Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, First Part, Question 2, Article 3; quoted from Cottingham, 2008, p. 350 (with minor edits to help the reader)

To help you make sense of this passage, a picture or model might be useful. (Vivid pictures and models can be very important as ways of helping us to get hold of philosophical ideas.) So imagine that a very long row of dominoes is arranged in front of you from left to right – so long that you can't see either end of it. As you look at the dominoes, each one falls and tips over the next, starting somewhere on your left and heading towards your right.

In this picture, the reason why there are dominoes falling *now* has to be that, at some time in the past, some *first* domino fell. Unless the process had a beginning, it couldn't be running now.

This picture can help you to understand what Aquinas is saying, because Aquinas is making the same kind of point. Aquinas asks: 'Why is there an order of causes running in the world now?' His answer is: 'Because at some time in the past, some first cause got this order of causes going.' Something outside the whole series of possible causes and effects has to intervene, to turn those *possible* causes and effects into *actual* causes and

effects. Unless there is such an intervener, nothing else will ever happen at all in the order of causes. But obviously, in our world, lots of things do happen. So there is an intervener from outside. This intervener from outside, says Aquinas, is what 'everyone calls "God"'.

The structure of arguments

Often in philosophy, it helps to write an argument out as a set of claims which we call **premises**, leading to another claim which we call the **conclusion**. The premises are claims which give us reason to think that the conclusion is true. Here is one famous example:

Premise 1 All men are mortal.
Premise 2 Socrates is a man.

These two claims give us reason to think the following conclusion is true:

Conclusion Socrates is mortal.

This particular argument has two excellent traits, traits that all arguments ought to have. The first is that *all its premises are true* (if you ignore the fact that they are expressed in the present tense even though Socrates died long ago). The second is that the inference from its premises to its conclusions is a good one – or, as philosophers like to put it, the inference is **valid**. To say that an inference is valid is to say that it is *guaranteed to be truth-preserving*: if the premises of a valid inference are true, then this truth is bound to carry over to the conclusion. In the present example, the truth of the premises is indeed enough to guarantee that the conclusion is true. (To see this for yourself, try to imagine a world in which the two premises were true but in which the conclusion was false. You should find that such a world is impossible even to imagine.)

If an argument has the two desirable traits I have just described – i.e. all its premises are true and it is valid – then the argument is said to be **sound**. If it fails on either count – i.e. if it has one or more false premises, or if it contains an invalid inference – then it is unsound.

premise

A claim that supports, or is intended to support, the conclusion of an argument.

conclusion

The claim that the argument is intended to give us reason to accept.

valid

To say that an argument (or an inference within an argument) is valid is to say that it is guaranteed to be truth-preserving: if the premises are true, then this truth is bound to carry over to the conclusion.

sound

To say that an argument is sound is to say that it has two desirable properties: all its premises are true *and* it is valid.

Notice that sound arguments, i.e. arguments with *both* desirable traits, are bound to have true conclusions, since the truth of the premises will be carried over into the conclusion. Having just one of the desirable traits is not good enough. Having premises that are all true is no use if, because the argument is invalid, this truth is not carried over into the conclusion. Nor is being valid of any use by itself: if the premises aren't all true, there will be no truth to preserve, as the following example of a valid argument shows.

Premise 1 All philosophers are horses.
Premise 2 Socrates is a philosopher.
Conclusion Socrates is a horse.

These notions (premise, conclusion, validity, soundness) are fundamental to presenting and evaluating arguments and, as you already know, arguments are fundamental to philosophy. In the next activity I will ask you to start putting them to work.

Finding the shape of Aquinas's argument

Activity 9

Part 1

Have another look at the passage from Aquinas. Can you see anything like the structure of the argument described in the previous section? Try to identify the premises and conclusion.

In the world that we perceive around us we find an order of causes. In each ordered series of causes, the first item is the cause of the next item, and this in turn is the cause of the final item (though there may be more than one intermediate step); and if any one cause is taken away, the effect will also be absent. Hence if there was not a first item in the series of causes, there will be no intermediate or final items. But if the series of causes stretches back to infinity, there will be no first cause, which will mean that there will be no final effect, and no intermediate causes, which is patently not the case.

Hence it is necessary to posit some first cause; and this everyone calls 'God'.

Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, First Part, Question 2, Article 3; quoted from Cottingham, 2008, p. 350 (with minor edits to help the reader)

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Despite the complexities of Aquinas's argument, we can represent its basic moves in a simple form.

Premise 1

If there is no *first* item in an order of causes, there can be no *other* items after it (no intermediate causes, and no final effects).

Premise 2

In the order of causes which is the world, there obviously are intermediate causes and final effects.

Conclusion

So the world must have had a first cause, and this everyone calls 'God'. (From Premise 1 and Premise 2.)

If you look again at the end of the passage from Aquinas quoted above, you should be able to see this argument there, almost word for word. So this simple argument seems a fair representation of what Aquinas was getting at.

'An order of causes', remember, is a sequence in which one thing brings about another, and that in turn brings about something else. The world is like that, says Aquinas: it contains an order of causes.

So how does that fact get us any nearer establishing God's existence? Aquinas answers: because the order of causes has to start somewhere. If there is no first cause, there won't be any subsequent causes or effects. As with our picture of the dominoes, something outside the order of causes must get it going in the first place.

Part 2

Do you think this argument of Aquinas's for God's existence is a good one?

Discussion

Here are the three main questions about the argument that occur to me:

1. Why does the first cause have to be God?
2. If we need God to explain the existence of the world, then don't we need something to explain the existence of God?
3. Why couldn't an order of causes have no start, but stretch on back through time to infinity?

I will now offer some comments on each of these questions in turn. In each case, I will expand on the worry that the question expresses, and then suggest how that worry might be met.

Evaluating Aquinas's argument

1 Why does the first cause have to be God?

Here it's worth remembering my dictionary-style definition of 'God' given at the beginning of this chapter: 'the supreme personal being existing beyond the world, creator and ruler of the universe'. Does Aquinas think that he's shown, just by the argument that I outline above, that the first cause which gets going the world's order of causes is bound to be God, rather than, say, Mickey Mouse?

The answer to this question (though you can't tell this just from the extract above) is 'no, he doesn't'. Aquinas is not trying to prove that the first cause of all the other causes is what 'everyone calls "God"' (and not, for example, what 'everyone calls Mickey Mouse'). He would agree that we need separate arguments to prove this (and elsewhere in his works, he tries to provide them). Aquinas's argument here is intended simply to direct our thinking to the idea of something, or someone, that explains the world's existence. The 'Second Way' is not supposed to prove, all on its own, that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and has all the other qualities that Aquinas and other Christians believe he has.

2 If we need God to explain the existence of the world, then don't we need something else to explain the existence of God?

The answer to this is simple: no, because Aquinas's argument is not an attempt 'to explain the existence of the world'. Aquinas is not presenting a cosmological argument here (that is, an argument of the (7b) kind, which deduces God's existence just from the world's existence). Rather, Aquinas is looking for an explanation of a specific feature of what exists in the world, namely the order of causes. His argument is that there can't be an order of causes in the world unless something outside the world got the order of causes going in the first place. We won't need an explanation of the same sort for what Aquinas calls 'God' unless this God is also an order of causes. But Aquinas does not think that God is such an order of causes.

This question would be a good criticism, if Aquinas's argument was a form of the cosmological argument (7b) which asks, 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' But that is not Aquinas's argument, so this question does not apply to it.

3 Why couldn't an order of causes have no start, but go backwards all the way to infinity?

Aquinas argues that there can't be an order of causes that doesn't begin somewhere. To use the model I've suggested, the row of dominoes can't stretch back into infinity without any beginning. If there are to be any subsequent domino-falls, there must be a first domino-fall. Something outside the series of domino-falls has to act on the row of standing dominoes to get them to start falling in the first place. Just likewise, says Aquinas,

something outside the order of causes that we see in the world has to act on them to get them going. As we saw, Aquinas thinks that this outside intervener is God.

So what about this claim that the order of causes must be started by the intervention of something outside it? The trouble with this claim, it seems to me, is not that we have reason to think that it's false. It's rather that we don't have any good reason to think that it's true or that it's false. We can know – at least I think we can! – that there couldn't be a series of falling dominoes without a first falling domino. But how can we possibly generalise from that simple case, which just concerns one simple sort of cause–effect relation, to a conclusion about the whole causal order? In the words of the eighteenth-century thinker David Hume (1711–1776):

When we look beyond human affairs and the properties of the surrounding bodies: when we carry our speculations into the two eternities, before and after the present state of things; into the creation and formation of the universe; the existence and properties of spirits; the powers and operations of one universal spirit, existing without beginning and without end; omnipotent, omniscient, immutable, infinite, and incomprehensible: we must be ... apprehensive, that we have here got quite beyond the reach of our faculties.

(Hume, 1990 [1779], p. 45)

So it's very hard to tell whether Aquinas is right that the order of causes must have a beginning outside itself. And that suggests an answer to our earlier question whether this argument of Aquinas for God's existence is a good one. Take a moment to think again about how you would answer that.

I think the answer has to be that, at any rate, Aquinas's argument can't make us *sure* that God exists. For his argument to give us certainty about God's existence, we would have to be certain that the order of causes that we see in the world cannot stretch back to infinity, but must have had a beginning. But apparently, we can't be certain of that. This uncertainty about one of the argument's premises transmits to its conclusion.

Conclusion

In this course, we have thought about the meaning of the words 'God' and 'religion', and asked what the main questions are in the philosophy of religion, and which of them most interest us. This should have helped you get a sense of the place of definitions in philosophy, and helped you to distinguish questions that are genuinely philosophical from questions that are not (though, of course, they may be interesting for plenty of other reasons). We have done some work on the important exercise of thinking about how philosophical arguments can be made for views we don't ourselves accept. And we have introduced the notions of evidence and proof, and asked whether and how far they apply to religion.

We have looked at a variety of possible arguments for God's existence, including Aquinas's 'Second Way'. We have seen how his argument differs from various other forms of argument for God's existence from 'The way the world is', such as the cosmological argument and the argument from design, and we have learned how arguments from 'The way the world is' are only one variety among several possible forms of argument for God's existence.

The most important skill addressed in this course is that of identifying an argument in a piece of prose (in this case written by Aquinas) and then representing that argument in the form of premises and a conclusion. You have also seen how representing an argument this way can help us to assess the argument more readily: first, by asking whether the premises are true, and second, by asking whether the inference from the premises to the conclusion is a good, or valid, one.

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