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The Philosophy Files

The Philosophy Gym

25 SHORT ADVENTURES IN THINKING

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DOES GOD EXIST?

PHILOSOPHY GYM CATEGORY

WARM-UP

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Just how sensible is belief in God? Can the richness of the world around us – the existence of order, life and we ourselves – really be explained without supposing that the universe had a supernatural designer? Or does Darwin's theory of natural selection make God superfluous? Does the existence of pain and suffering in the world show that there is no God? Or can this suffering be shown to be consistent with the existence of a loving God after all?

Justifying Belief in God

Many millions believe in God. Some say that their belief is a matter of faith. I shall be taking a closer look at faith towards the end of this chapter. I want to begin by considering whether belief in God can be *justified*. In the first part of the chapter I'm going to look at one of the most famous arguments for the existence of God: the argument from design.

The Design Argument (Teleological Argument)

While walking on a deserted beach, you discover a watch lying on the sand. How did it get there? It's hugely unlikely, surely, that the watch came into existence without the help of some sort of designer. Watches don't just spontaneously put themselves together, do they? Indeed, this watch clearly has a purpose or function: to tell the time. It seems plausible, then, that the watch was designed to fulfil that function. But then I'm justified in supposing that there exists a designer, a being of sufficient intelligence and power to create such a complex and ingenious object.

Now consider the human eye. The eye is also an extremely complex object, far more complex, in fact, than any watch. Eyes also have a purpose – to allow their owners to see. Human eyes are remarkably well suited to that end. Isn't it likely, then, that the eye has a designer, too? Only the eye's designer must be far more

intelligent and powerful than we are, for the design and production of such an object is quite beyond us. Its designer must therefore be God.

I call this the *design argument* (also known as the *argument from design* or *teleological argument*, 'telos' being the ancient Greek word for 'end' or 'purpose'). The argument takes as its starting point the observation that nature is extremely complex – indeed, she appears to show signs of function and purpose. The argument then proceeds by *analogy*: if it's reasonable to suppose that a watch has an intelligent designer, then by analogy it's reasonable to believe that the eye has a designer too.

The design argument is not absolutely conclusive, of course. Its proponents may admit that the eye *might* have come into existence purely by chance, without the aid of a designer. Their point is that this is highly *unlikely* to have happened. It's much more plausible that an intelligent and powerful being was involved. So the existence of the eye provides us with *pretty good grounds* for believing in God.

The design argument is enduringly popular. William Paley (1743–1805), who drew the analogy between a watch and an eye, is perhaps the argument's best-known exponent. Even today, many suppose that their religious belief is justified by some version of it. But, despite the argument's continuing popularity, there are notorious difficulties with it.

Natural Selection

Perhaps the most obvious problem with Paley's argument is that we now possess a theory that can explain how objects like the eye might appear without the aid of any sort of designer. That theory is *natural selection*.

Living organisms contain within their cells something called DNA, a string of molecules that constitutes a sort of blueprint for building organisms of that sort. When organisms reproduce, their DNA is copied and passed on. However, through chance events, tiny changes in the DNA sequence can occur. Because of this, the new organism may be different (if only slightly) from its parents. These changes are called *mutations*. Given the environment in which this new organism finds itself, these mutations may either help or hinder its chances of surviving and reproducing.

For example, a creature with a slightly longer neck may find it easier to feed from the tall trees. A creature with more brightly coloured plumage may be easier for predators to hunt. Mutations that are advantageous are more likely to be passed on to future generations. Mutations that are disadvantageous are less likely to be

inherited. As mutation on mutation is added over hundreds, thousands, or even millions of generations, a species will gradually evolve and adapt to its environment. Indeed, through the process of natural selection a whole new species may eventually emerge.

Natural selection can similarly explain how the human eye came into existence. Perhaps a simple sea-dwelling organism mutated a single light-sensitive cell. Such a cell might well be advantageous – for example, it might allow the creature to gauge its depth in the ocean (the deeper you go in the ocean, the darker it gets). Further mutations might add more such cells until eyes like our own eventually appear.

Notice that this account is entirely *naturalistic*: it requires no appeal to a supernatural agent or designer. The existence of this pretty plausible alternative explanation of how the eye might have come into existence dispenses with the need to invoke God. Given natural selection, eyes are the sort of thing one would expect to evolve *anyway*, without help from such a being. So the eye doesn't provide much in the way of evidence of God's existence.

Of course, in reply, a proponent of the design argument might ask *where DNA came from*. DNA is required for natural selection to take place. So the existence of DNA can't itself be explained by an appeal to natural selection. Yet DNA, some might suggest, itself shows signs of both design and purpose. Doesn't this give us good grounds for supposing that God exists?

Perhaps not. DNA is, in essence, a comparatively simple mechanism. Given what we know about conditions on earth at the time when life first emerged, it's no longer that implausible that DNA might have come into existence quite spontaneously. Of course, we do not know, and perhaps may never know, exactly how DNA first emerged. But as science progresses, it seems increasingly unlikely that the genesis of DNA would have required supernatural help.

The Levers of the Universe

So much for the traditional version of the design argument. But there are other versions of the argument that, rather than being undermined by modern scientific theories, are actually bolstered by them. Consider the following example:

The world is governed by natural laws. There are many different ways in which these laws might have been set. Only a tiny percentage allows for a stable

universe capable of producing and sustaining conscious beings like ourselves (for example, if the gravitational forces had been only a little bit stronger, then the universe wouldn't have lasted more than a second or two). It really is extraordinarily unlikely that the universe should just happen to be governed by laws allowing for conscious beings like ourselves. It's much more plausible that the levers of the universe were set not at random but with great precision, so as to yield what would be this otherwise highly improbable result. So it's reasonable to believe that there exists a God who set the universe up this way.



This argument doesn't conclusively *prove* that God exists. But it is supposed to provide good grounds for belief in God. I call this argument the *anthropic argument*.

Thinking Tools: The Lottery Fallacy

Proponents of the anthropic argument are often accused of committing the *lottery fallacy*. Suppose you buy one of a thousand lottery tickets. You win. That your ticket should be the winning ticket is highly unlikely, of course. But that doesn't give you any reason to believe that someone rigged the lottery in your favour. After all, *one* of the tickets had to win, and whichever ticket won would have been no less unlikely to win. So there's no reason to believe that your win must be explained by someone or something intervening on your behalf – there's no reason to suppose that you have been the beneficiary of anything other than spectacular good fortune. To think otherwise would be to commit the lottery fallacy.

Why suppose the anthropic argument involves the lottery fallacy? Well, the universe had to be set up in some way or other. Each of the different ways in which it might have been set up was equally unlikely. So the mere fact that it happens to be set up in *this* way, producing beings like ourselves, gives us no grounds for supposing that we have been anything

other than lucky. To think otherwise is, allegedly, to commit the lottery fallacy.

You can find another example of the lottery fallacy in Chapter 23, *Miracles and the Supernatural* (the story about the child who runs on to the railway line).

The Problem of Evil

Whether or not the anthropic argument involves the lottery fallacy, there unfortunately remain other, deeper difficulties with all versions of the design argument. Perhaps the most damning difficulty is this. Even if we accept for the sake of argument that the universe *does* show signs of having been designed by some sort of intelligent creator, *the evidence points very strongly away from that creator being God.*

Here's why. God is supposed by Jews, Christians and Muslims to have at least three characteristics: omniscience (that is, He is all-knowing), omnipotence (He is all-powerful) and supreme benevolence. But it seems impossible to reconcile the existence of such a being with the fact that there is a great deal of suffering in the world. Yes, God, if He exists, made 'all things bright and beautiful'. But let's not forget that He also made cancer, earthquakes, famine, the Black Death and haemorrhoids. By such means God inflicts great pain and misery on us His children. Why?

As God is supremely benevolent, He can't *want* us to suffer. As He is omniscient, He *knows* we suffer. Yet He is omnipotent, so He can *prevent* the suffering if He wants to. Indeed, God could have created a much nicer universe for us to inhabit: a universe free of disease and pain, a universe in which earthquakes never happen and people never go hungry. God could have made earth as heaven is meant to be. Why didn't He?

It seems that if, as Paley believed, the universe *was* designed by some sort of being, then either that being is not all-powerful (He was unable to make a better universe for us to inhabit) or not all-knowing (He didn't know it would produce such suffering) or not all-good (He knew we would suffer, but didn't much care). But God, if He exists, has all three of these characteristics. Therefore God does not exist.

The problem that this argument raises for theists is called *the problem of evil* (suffering being an 'evil').

Theists have expended a great deal of energy in attempting to deal with this problem. Here are three of the most obvious lines of defence.

1. God's Punishment

Some suggest that the suffering we endure is a *punishment*. Just as loving parents must sometimes punish their child when he does wrong, so God must punish us when we sin.

One obvious problem with this line of defence is that suffering is not distributed in a manner consistent with its being meted out by a just and benevolent God. Why, for example, does God choose to give protracted and painful diseases to small children? What have they done to deserve it? Nothing, surely?

The theist may insist that the punishment meted out to children is for sins committed by adults. But this seems outrageous. No one would consider a court that punished the children of criminals to be morally acceptable. A being who punished in the same way would surely be no less morally abhorrent.

2. God Made Us Free

Perhaps the most popular response to the problem of evil is to suggest that our suffering is not God's fault, but ours. God gave us *free will* – the ability to make free choices and decisions and to act on them. Sometimes we choose to act in ways that cause suffering. We start wars, for example. True, God could have prevented this suffering by not giving us free will. But it's better that we have free will. The world would have been even worse had God made us mere automatons incapable of free decision. But then the existence of suffering can be reconciled with that of a benevolent God after all.

The most glaring flaw in this defence of theism is that much suffering is natural in origin. Earthquakes, famines, floods, diseases, and so on are not, for the most part, caused by us. If there is a God, then He is responsible for them.

A theist might insist that at least some so-called 'natural' evils are really our own fault. For example, perhaps we accidentally cause floods by burning too many fossil fuels. The resulting pollutants cause global warming that in turn produces floods. But it's absurd to suppose that, if only we were to behave differently, there would be *no suffering at all*. It's difficult to see how we accidentally cause earthquakes. It's hard to avoid the conclusion that if God exists, then much of our suffering is His fault.

3. Suffering Makes Us Virtuous

Some theists suggest that the suffering and hardship we endure have a purpose – to make us better people. Without suffering, we cannot become the virtuous people God wants us to be.

You might wonder why God didn't just make us virtuous to begin with. But in any case, if suffering is the unavoidable price we must pay for virtue, it is hard to explain why God dishes out suffering in the way He does. Why do mass-murdering dictators live out their lives in luxury? Why do sweet and lovely people have horrendous diseases inflicted on them? It is, to say the least, hard to understand how the seemingly random distribution of suffering in the world is supposed to make us more virtuous.

Some try to defend the suggestion that this suffering is for our own good by insisting that 'God works in mysterious ways'. But this is really just to concede defeat. It's to point out that, despite the fact that the distribution of suffering certainly doesn't *seem* to make any sense, nevertheless it *may* ultimately make sense. Well, yes, it *may* ultimately make sense. But that's not to deny that the evidence really does, on the face of it, point very strongly towards there being no God.

To sum up, even if the argument from design does provide grounds for believing the universe was designed (which is doubtful), it seems its designer can't be God. The problem of evil is, in short, an extremely serious one for theists. In fact, the problem seems to provide us with *pretty good grounds* – if not conclusive grounds – for believing that there is no God.

Thinking Tools: Ockham's Razor – 'Keep It Simple'

Our brief survey of arguments for and against the existence of God suggests that there's little evidence that God does exist and pretty good evidence that He doesn't exist.

But suppose, for the sake of argument, that there was no more evidence for God's existence than there was against. What would it then be rational to believe?

Many would say: you should then be agnostic. The rational thing to do would be to suspend judgement.

But this is a mistake. In fact, the burden of proof lies with the theist. In the absence of good evidence either way, the rational position to adopt is atheism. Why is this?

William of Ockham (1285–1349) points out that, where you are presented with two hypotheses that are otherwise equally well supported by the available evidence, you should always pick the *simpler* hypothesis. This principle, known as *Ockham's razor*, is very sensible. Take, for example, these two hypotheses:

- A: There are invisible, intangible fairies at the bottom of the garden, in addition to the compost heap, flowers, trees, shrubs, and so on.
- B: There are no fairies at the bottom of the garden, just the compost heap, flowers, trees, shrubs, and so on.

Everything I have observed fits both hypotheses equally well. After all, if the fairies at the bottom of my garden are invisible, intangible and immaterial, then I shouldn't expect to observe any evidence of their presence, should I?

Does the fact that the available evidence fits both hypotheses equally well mean that I should suspend judgement on whether or not there are fairies at the bottom of the garden?

Of course not. The rational thing to believe is that there are no fairies. For that's the *simpler* hypothesis. Why introduce the unnecessary fairies?

Similarly, if the available evidence were equally to fit both atheism and theism, then atheism would be the rational position to adopt. For the atheistic hypothesis is simpler: it sticks with the natural world we see around us and dispenses with the additional, supernatural being.

Religious Experience

In order for belief in God to be rational, need it be backed by good argument?

Perhaps not. Some insist they need no argument, for the truth of God's existence has been *directly revealed* to them. They have had personal experience of God.

One difficulty with taking such 'revelatory' experiences at face value is that they're not restricted to one faith. Catholics see the Virgin Mary. Hindus witness Vishnu. New Agers experience The Goddess. The Romans had visions of the god Jupiter. The ancient Greeks saw Zeus. Indeed, even many atheists claim to have had experiences of a revelatory and supernatural character (if not of God). The fact that people have so many bizarre and often contradictory experiences – experiences that

coincidentally always happen to fit in with their own particular religious faith (one never hears of a Catholic seeing Zeus, for example) – ought to lead someone who claims to have had a 'revelation' to treat their experience with caution.

So, too, ought the fact that at least some of these religious experiences are known to have physiological causes. For example, the famous 'tunnel' experienced by those close to death accompanied by intense feelings of well-being is the result of hypoxia (which typically produces both euphoria and tunnel vision) and can be induced at will using a test pilot's centrifuge (it's fascinating to watch the expressions on the pilots' faces as they 'bliss out' just before passing out).

Those who believe themselves to have experienced the divine *may* have done so. But the evidence doesn't strongly support that conclusion.

Faith

Many theists insist that the arguments for and against theism discussed here are irrelevant. Belief in God, they say, is not a matter of reason. It's a matter of faith. You must *just believe*.

Still, we should be clear about exactly what sort of faith is required. While many claim to have faith, they do not always mean by this that their belief is wholly without rational foundation. They mean only that, while there may be pretty good grounds for believing in God, these grounds fall short of being conclusive. God's existence, they admit, can't be proved.

Is Atheism also a Matter of 'Faith'?

There are two ways in which such talk of 'faith' can mislead. First, it may lead someone to assume that atheism and theism must be intellectually on a par. 'Look,' they may say, 'I admit I can't prove God exists. But then the atheist can't conclusively prove He doesn't. So atheism and theism *both* require a leap of faith. But then both are equally irrational.'

Here is an example taken from the Internet:

[God's] existence cannot be proved by physical means. However, neither can it be disproved. What does this mean? It means it takes complete and utter faith to believe there is a God (or Gods) and complete and utter faith to believe there is not one.'

* *Cathy's Commentaries*, 20 April 2001, at www.truthminers.com/truth/atheism.htm

The claim that atheism and theism are equally a matter of 'faith' in the sense that neither is conclusively proved here obscures the fact that the evidence and arguments may overwhelmingly support one position over the other. The two positions may well *not* be intellectually on a par. I cannot prove that fairies exist. But neither can I conclusively prove beyond any possible doubt that they don't. It doesn't follow that it would be just as sensible for me to believe that fairies exist as it is for me to believe that they don't.

Our brief survey (in this chapter and in Chapter 1, *Where Did the Universe Come From?*) of the most popular arguments concerning God's existence suggests that there's little in the way of evidence for God's existence and pretty good evidence against (the evidence provided by the problem of evil). So it may be that the belief that there is no God is just as rational as the belief that there are no fairies – that is, very rational indeed.

Faith, Reason and Elvis Presley

There's a second way in which talk of 'faith' can mislead. Suppose I claim to have 'faith' in God's existence. If I mean by this only that I accept that God's existence can't be proved, I may still take my belief to be reasonable – more reasonable, in fact, than the atheistic alternative.

Indeed, theists who claim to have a simple and trusting 'faith' rarely consider their belief not to be sensible. Contrast the belief that Elvis Presley lives: Elvis's death was faked and he continues to live out the remainder of his life at some secret location. Very few theists are willing to accept that their belief in God is no more sensible than the belief that Elvis lives. The second belief is clearly irrational and absurd, the theist will no doubt point out, for there's little in the way of supporting evidence and pretty good evidence to the contrary.

But is belief in God any less irrational and absurd? As I say, my admittedly quick trawl through the popular arguments for and against God's existence seems to indicate that it is not.

Yet this is a conclusion few theists would be prepared to accept. Even those who claim simply to have 'faith' – who insist they 'just believe' – will often, if pressed to explain why they believe, quietly whisper, 'But the universe must have come from *somewhere*, surely?'

It turns out, in other words, that behind claims to 'faith' often lurk the standard theistic arguments (in this case the cause argument: see Chapter 1, *Where Did the*

Universe Come From?). These arguments, while perhaps not explicitly laid out in the mind of the believer, nevertheless make their presence felt. The cause and design arguments in particular are extremely seductive. It takes most of us considerable intellectual effort to understand why they are (at least as they are usually formulated) fallacious. It's unsurprising, then, that even those who claim to have 'faith' often take their belief to be reasonable.

Of course, the belief that Elvis lives is rather frivolous and inconsequential. Belief in God is not: it can have huge, life-changing effects. There's no doubt that the question 'does God exist?' is one of immense seriousness and importance. It has dominated human thinking for thousands of years. Belief in God seems to answer a yearning that most of us have and is not to be dismissed lightly.

Still, the question remains whether there is any more *reason* to believe in God than there is to believe that Elvis lives. Are those who believe in God any better justified? The answer, perhaps, is that they are not. We shouldn't allow talk about 'faith' to obscure this fact, if it is a fact.

Conclusion

Our examination of the most popular arguments for and against God's existence indicates that the evidence does seem strongly to point towards there being no God.

But perhaps some of the arguments for God's existence can be salvaged. Or perhaps better arguments can be constructed. And perhaps the problem of evil can be dealt with. If so, then the rationality of belief in God might be defended.

Still, these are very big 'ifs'. My conclusion is not that it is a mistake to believe in God. It is merely that theism is a much harder position to sustain than many seem to realise. Theists need to deal with the problem of evil and come up with better arguments for the existence of God. Either that, or they must maintain their belief while acknowledging that it is no more *rational* than is, say, the belief that Elvis lives.

Neither is an easy thing to do.

What to read next

Chapter 1, *Where Did the Universe Come From?*, looks at another famous argument for the existence of God. There are also arguments for the existence of God in Chapter 10, *Can We Have Morality without God and Religion?*, and Chapter 23, *Miracles and the Supernatural*.

Further reading

J. L. Mackie, 'Evil and Omnipotence', and Richard Swinburne, 'Why God Allows Evil', which appear as Chapters 7 and 8 of:

Nigel Warburton (ed.), *Philosophy: Basic Readings* (London: Routledge, 1999).

Also see:

Nigel Warburton, *Philosophy: The Basics*, second edition (London: Routledge, 1995), Chapter 1.