The Philosophy of Religion

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Introduction to the philosophy of religion

Why study the philosophy of religion?

If you are religious:

> to deepen your understanding of your religion;
> to help you to apply your religion to real-life problems.

Whether or not you are religious:

> to understand important strands in our cultural history;
> to understand one of the foundations of modern ethical debate;
> to see the origins of types of philosophical argument that get used elsewhere.

The scope of the subject

We shall focus on the philosophy of religions like Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Other religions can be quite different in nature, and can raise different questions.

The questions in the contents list indicate the scope of the subject.

Reading

You do not need to do extra reading, but if you would like to do so, you could try either one of these two books:

Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford University Press, third edition, 2003.

Chad Meister, *Introducing Philosophy of Religion*. Routledge, 2009.

Can we show that God exists?

What sorts of demonstration are there?

Proofs in the strict sense: logical and mathematical proof
Demonstrations based on external evidence
Demonstrations based on inner experience

How strong are these different sorts of demonstration?
Which ones could other people reject, and on what grounds?

What sort of thing could have its existence shown in each of these ways?

What might we want to show?

That God exists
That it is reasonable to believe that God exists

The ontological argument

Greek *onta*, things that exist.

Anselm (1033-1109), Abbot of Bec then from 1093 Archbishop of Canterbury.
"Credo ut intelligam" – "I believe in order that I may understand" (*Proslogion* 1).
He gave ontological arguments in *Proslogion* 2 and 3. Here is a reconstruction of the argument.

1.   We understand the idea of a being, such that we cannot conceive of a greater being.
2.   So that being exists in the mind, so long as we have heard of the idea.
3.   We can conceive of its also existing in reality.
4.   It would be greater if it did exist in reality as well as in the mind.
5.   So if it existed only in the mind, we could conceive of a greater being.
6.   So the being which is such that we cannot conceive of a greater being exists in reality.
7.   This being is what we call God.

The greatest conceivable island objection: run the same argument to show that the greatest conceivable island exists. Response: "island" is too specific, unlike "being", so we can conceive of the island's not existing.

The objection that existence is not a property that forms part of the concept of something (Immanuel Kant, 1724-1804). Response: if this attacks line 4 of the argument, it fails because existence does add something, even if not a property.

The cosmological argument from contingency

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), author of the *Summa Theologiae*. had five ways of proving the existence of God. Three are cosmological arguments (unmoved mover, first cause, contingency). The others are from degree (there are better and worse so there must be a best) and from design. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) also gave a cosmological argument from contingency. Here is a version of the argument that combines elements from Aquinas and from Leibniz.

1.   There are contingent things in the world. They might not have existed.
2.   Something contingent has the possibility of not existing.
3.   So if everything is contingent, there could have been a time at which nothing existed.
4.   Anything comes into existence only through something that already exists.
5.   So if at one time nothing existed, nothing would exist now.
6.   So contingent beings are insufficient to account for the existence of current reality.
7.   So there must be a necessary being, to explain current reality.
8.   If its necessity was caused by something else we would have an infinite chain.
9.   So its necessity must be within itself.
10.   This being is what we call God.

Objection: the contingent series might simply be there. Things can exist without their existence being sufficiently explained.

Objection: even if the elements in a series are contingent, the whole series might not be contingent.

Objection: how can anything exist necessarily?

Objection: why should a necessary being (or beings) be anything like God as traditionally conceived?

The Kalam cosmological argument

Al-Kindi (801-873) from Iraq and al-Ghazali (1058-1111) from Persia. William Lane Craig (1949-), at Biola University, Los Angeles. Here is a version of the argument.

1.   Everything that has a beginning of its existence has a cause of its existence.
2.   The universe has a beginning of its existence.
3.   So the universe has a cause of its existence.
4.   If the universe has a cause of its existence then that cause is a personal being.
5.   That being would be God, so God exists.

Support for line 2

A.   The past has been created by adding moments. That cannot get you to an infinite number.
B.   You cannot traverse an infinite time, but the time up to now has been traversed.

Support for line 4

The universe could not have been caused by a first impersonal event because that would have needed a cause. So there must have been a personal action - an example of *agent causation*.

Arguments from design

Also called teleological arguments: Greek *telos*, the goal of an action.

William Paley's argument

William Paley (1743-1805), lecturer at Cambridge then vicar in and around Carlisle. Wrote *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* (1802).
The intelligent design movement.

If you came across a watch, you would infer that there was a watchmaker. The parts of the mechanism would obviously have been put together for a purpose, telling the time. If any part had been left out or had been of a different size or shape, the purpose would not have been achieved. There is much more design in nature than in a watch, so there must be a nature-maker.

Objection: the analogy is weak because we have only one universe, and cannot compare it with others. Perhaps all have some regularity or other, but lots of different regularities.

Objection: the analogy is weak because we could see the universe like a giant animal or plant rather than a machine.

Objection: who designed the designer?

Objection: there are lots of bad features of the universe, so even if there was a conscious designer, he may have been morally bad, or incompetent. Then he would not be like the traditional god. Response: but we would still have established the existence of some sort of designer.

Objection: complex beings could have evolved through a combination of random change and selection. Each change becomes securely embedded if it is an improvement, providing a jumping-off point for the next change.

The irreducible complexity response to the last objection: there are systems in nature which cannot have evolved step by step, because they would not have had any use until complete. An eye without a retina, or without a lens, or without an optic nerve, is useless. Answer: the bits might not have been useful for vision on their own, but they might have been useful for something else.

The fine-tuning argument

Lots of things in nature are finely tuned: the expansion rate at the Big Bang, the strength of gravity, the strength of forces within atoms and so on. If any of them had been even slightly different, life would have been impossible. The fine tuning cannot be explained by chance or by natural necessity, so it must have been designed.

Objection: there could be many universes, and some of them would come out right.

Objection: we only get to wonder about physics in universes that do come out right, so it is not surprising that what we see is one that has come out right (an *anthropic* argument).

Can we show that God does not exist?

A cosmological argument for atheism

Quentin Smith (1952-), at Western Michigan University.

There is no identifiable time zero, at the beginning of the Universe. We can identify an interval of time as the beginning, but that is all. So what we need to explain is the existence of that initial interval. But it is explained by all of the momentary states within it. Once you have explained all of the members of a collection, you have explained the collection.

We can explain those momentary states by other momentary states. The state at time 1 second might be explained by the state at time 1/2 second. The state at time 1/2 second might be explained by the state at time 1/4 second, and so on. No specific state would be left unexplained.

So everything is explained internally. An external explanation, such as God, would be superfluous.

Objection: God might still exist, and might have set up the structure of time like that (continuous, rather than a series of separate points).

Objection: If you specify a particular momentary state, you can explain it by reference to earlier states. But there will always be a state that you could identify, but have not yet identified and explained. You can never complete the task of explanation.

The growth of science

God used to be invoked to explain life. Now we have evolutionary biology. So God gets pushed back to explaining physics (the fine-tuning argument). And plenty of physicists see no need for God there either. So why suppose that there is a God when there is no need to do so?

Objection: even if we do not need God to explain anything in the natural world, God could still exist.

Difficulties with the attributes of God

God is supposed to be:

1. necessary – has to exist;
2. omnipotent – having complete power;
3. omniscient – knowing everything;
4. eternal – having no beginning or end;
5. immutable – changeless.

Difficulties

1. How can anything exist necessarily? We can imagine any given thing not to exist.
2. (a)   Is God bound by the laws of logic?
2. (b)   Can God make a stone so heavy that he cannot lift it?
3. If God knows what is going to happen, can we make free choices?
4. Does eternity mean existing at all times or outside time? What would the latter mean?
5. If God is changeless, how did the Creation happen?

If there is a God, why do bad things happen to good people?

This is called the problem of evil. A mere response to the challenge is called a defence. A positive explanation of evil in a world with God is called a theodicy (literally God-justice, so justification for the combination of evil's existence and God's goodness).

Natural evil (earthquakes and plagues) and moral evil (human actions and character traits)
Gratuitous evil (no possible point) and horrendous evil (extreme)

The problem of evil and a defence

An all-powerful, all-knowing and wholly good God could eliminate evil, and would want to do so. But there is evil. So no such God exists.

Defence: some goods may justify some evils, and may require some evils. For example, you cannot show forgiveness unless someone has done harm, or courage unless you are in danger.

Objection to the defence: maybe God could not eliminate all evil without losing some goods, but he could have kept those goods while still having much less evil than actually exists.

Response to the objection: actually this is the best of all possible worlds (Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, 1646-1716). We cannot see this directly because we cannot see the big picture, or understand all of the interconnections between parts of the universe, free will, the consequences of actions and so on.

Theodicies

A free will theodicy

Augustine of Hippo (354-430), wrote *The City of God, Confessions* and *On the Free Choice of the Will*.
Alvin Plantinga (1932-), professor at Notre Dame University, Indiana.

1.   God created the universe as good throughout. One of the goods was free will for people.
2.   Some angels, and then human beings, exercised their free will to turn away from God.
3.   That brought both moral and natural evil into the world.
4.   But these evils are lacks of good, rather than positive evils.

Objection: although 3. and 4. work well together, using a break with the source of goodness to explain evil, the whole argument only works in the context of a doctrine like Adam and Eve's disobedience.

Objection: God could have created people with free will, but also with very good characters so that while they could choose to do bad things, they would never in fact choose to do so.

An Irenaean theodicy

Irenaeus (born between 115 and 142, died 202), bishop of Lyon, wrote *Against Heresies*.
John Hick (1922-), was a professor at Birmingham.

1. God set up the universe so that we could evolve as creatures with free will.
2. We start as spiritually and morally immature.
3. A challenging environment gives us the opportunity to mature.
4. Maturity comes through learning for ourselves to make the right choices.

Objection: some people do not respond well to challenges. The process seems to be pure loss in relation to them.

Objection: while we may need a challenging environment to mature, just as children do, it does not need to be *that* challenging. The argument does not justify the actual level of evil in the world.

Objection: why is developing towards maturity such a good thing? Why not just jump straight to the finished, ideal state?

Should we approach religious claims like other factual claims?

We test ordinary factual claims by reference to evidence, and the more striking the claim, the more evidence we require. Is that the right approach to religious claims?

Hume on miracles

David Hume (1711-1776). Wrote *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779).

Hume assumed that we should demand evidence as normal. If you hear a report of a miracle, you should weigh up the likelihood that the laws of nature have been broken and the likelihood that the witnesses have been mistaken or the report exaggerated.

But what sorts of evidence should we allow? – agreed observation, personal experience, transformation of a life, or what?

And how should we fix our standards of evidence?

And what if our beliefs lead us to re-interpret the evidence?

Clifford on the need for evidence

William Kingdon Clifford (1845-1879). Wrote *The Ethics of Belief* (1877).

"It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."

It does not become wrong only when you act on beliefs for which you do not have sufficient evidence, like the owner of the ship that might well be unsafe:

"He who truly believes that which prompts him to an action has looked upon the action to lust after it, he has committed it already in his heart. If a belief is not realized immediately in open deeds, it is stored up for the guidance of the future."

"And no one man's belief is in any case a private matter which concerns himself alone. Our lives are guided by that general conception of the course of things which has been created by society for social purposes. Our words, our phrases, our forms and processes and modes of thought, are common property, fashioned and perfected from age to age; an heirloom which every succeeding generation inherits as a precious deposit and a sacred trust to be handed on to the next one, not unchanged but enlarged and purified, with some clear marks of its proper handiwork. Into this, for good or ill, is woven every belief of every man who has speech of his fellows. An awful privilege, and an awful responsibility, that we should help to create the world in which posterity will live."

James on the need to allow ourselves to believe

William James (1842-1910), American pragmatist philosopher. Wrote *The Will to Believe* (1897).

We should not be too absolutist, demanding sufficient evidence in the way that Clifford does. "Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream-visited planet are they found?"

We can concentrate on seeking truth, and take the risk of error. Or we can concentrate on avoiding error, and manage that by being very reluctant to adopt any belief until we have plenty of evidence.

In the sciences, it may be fair enough to insist on plenty of evidence. But in social and political questions, we need to make up our minds. And it can be beneficial to do so. If all of the passengers in a train have confidence, on very little evidence, that others will back them up in fighting off highwaymen, they will all individually decide to fight them off.

In religious belief, we feel a strong pressure to decide. And we take a risk by holding back for lack of evidence. This is the risk of failing to believe a very big truth. What is more, a refusal to consider belief as a real option may cut us off from the possibility of making the gods' acquaintance. We may have to meet the gods half way.

Ayer on religious claims not being claims at all

A J Ayer (1910-1989). Wrote *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936).

Logical positivists (also called logical empiricists), like Ayer in the 1930s, used the criterion of verifiability: "a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express – that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false" (*Language, Truth and Logic*, Penguin, 1971, page 16).

Empirical statements pass the test: we can think of data which would help us to decide whether it was raining, or whether the Sun was 93 million miles from the Earth.

A claim that God existed, or that we had immortal souls, would appear to fail the test. Then the claim would be meaningless according to the logical positivists. It would not however be false, because only meaningful claims can be false.

Pascal's wager

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662). A mathematician, physicist and philosopher. Wrote the *Pensées*, a collection of jottings for a book that he did not complete.

The *Pensées* include Pascal's wager. There are several different numbering systems for the *Pensées*, so you may find it in section 233 (Bruschvicg numbering), 397 (Le Guern), 418 (Lafuma) or 680 (Sellier).

Here is a reconstruction of the argument.

1.   You must believe or not believe in God.
2   Believing or not believing won't make much difference to the quality of your life on earth.
3.   If you believe and there is a god, you may attain eternal bliss.
4.   If you believe but there is no god, it doesn't matter for the afterlife (if any).
5.   If you do not believe and there is a god, you will suffer eternal agony in Hell.
6.   If you do not believe and there is no god, it doesn't matter for the afterlife (if any).
7.   So even if the probability that there is a god is very small, it is wise to believe.

Objection: you cannot choose to believe, you just have to make use of the evidence as it appears to you. Response: we can recognize that it would be good to believe, and then associate with believers, go to religious services, and so on. We may then find that faith grows on us.

Objection: God might not be impressed by blind faith. He might prefer honest agnosticism, or belief that was soundly based on evidence. Response: there is a strong tradition in religious thought of the virtue of faith, and the existence of that tradition may well be part of God's plan.

Objection: God might not be impressed by a decision to put oneself in a position that is likely to lead to belief, where that initial decision is inspired by a desire for personal advantage. Response: in due course, faith will come to be based on love of God, whatever the believer's starting-point may have been.

Objection: what if you pick the wrong god? God might prefer an atheist to someone who picked the wrong god. Response: it is more likely that God will prefer belief to unbelief, and he may make allowance for the fact that you are likely to choose a religion that is popular in your society.

Objection: line 2. is wrong. A life as unbeliever can be a better life, because you will base your beliefs on the evidence, because you will not be bound by the restrictions that religious traditions embody, and because you will not take yourself to be under the rule of another: you will be a free and independent person, not subject to any god.

Is being religious a matter of believing certain factual claims?

It looks like it. Specific beliefs, often set out in creeds or in sacred texts, seem to be needed in order to distinguish religious belief from other attitudes, and in order to identify which religion someone has. But not everyone thinks that being religious is a matter of believing factual claims.

Wittgenstein on belief

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), Austrian philosopher who worked at Cambridge. Wrote the *Tractatus* (1922) and the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953).

The early Wittgenstein

Belief is an attitude to the unsayable.

"To believe in a God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter" (*Notebooks 1914-1916*, Blackwell 1961, page 74).

"What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence" (*Tractatus*, 7).

The later Wittgenstein

The meanings of words are generally shown by their use.
Religious belief can be seen as a way of looking at the world.
Religious rituals can be seen as expressions of values, needs and desires.

Braithwaite on religious conviction as a commitment to a way of life

R B Braithwaite (1900-1990), professor at Cambridge. Wrote A*n Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (1955).

The use of a statement shows its meaning.
Ethical views are expressions of intent to act in certain ways: "lying is wrong" amounts to "I intend not to lie and to encourage others not to lie".
Religious convictions are expressions of intent to live in certain ways.
But not all such expressions are religious convictions. We only count the expressions of intent that are supported by particular stories, such as the ones in sacred texts.
The religious person considers those stories, without necessarily believing them.
The stories stiffen his or her resolve to live in the desired way.

Is religion a good basis for ethics?

Types of ethic

Deontological ethic – these are your duties, good actions are those done out of duty.
Consequentialist ethic – you should judge actions by their consequences (utilitarianism).
Virtue ethic – you should have the right character and sort out problems when you come to them.

What sort of ethic is a religion likely to give us?

What sort of ethic is possible (i) with and (ii) without religion?

Can we have commandments without a commander?

We seem to experience ethical demands as absolute. Does that justify belief in a personal God?

Can we have better and worse without having absolute good and bad?

Religion can make deontology palatable by offering reward and punishment after death (Kant).

The Euthyphro question

The *Euthyphro* is a dialogue by Plato, possibly written around 395 BC. It is set just before the trial of Socrates in 399, and it is about the nature of holiness. At 10a, Socrates poses this question, although the dialogue does not answer it:

"Do the gods approve the holy because it is holy, or is it holy because they approve it?"

A modern reformulation: "Does God approve certain things or actions because they are good, or are they good because God approves them?"

Thomas Aquinas's response: God is goodness itself, and there is no external standard of goodness to which God conforms. God's approval and goodness are two sides of the same coin.

Is there a conflict between ethics and religion?

Religion often calls for obedience to God's commands.

The concept of living ethically may include the notion of thinking things out for yourself and making your own decisions.