

Week 15 Notes

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1 Arguments for God's Existence

Most of those who believe in one or more gods did not come to have this belief as a result of hearing a good philosophical argument for the existence of God or gods. Usually, belief in supernatural beings is something that we are raised with. Many people simply have *faith* that God (or some gods) exist, and faith is, by definition, a kind of belief for which one lacks evidence.

However, this does not mean that arguments for and against God's (or gods') existence can't be given. And plenty *have* been given, on both sides of the debate. Perhaps the most famous and influential arguments for God's existence were given by Thomas Aquinas—a philosopher and Dominican Friar, and now a Catholic Saint. Although Aquinas believed that some religious doctrines must be accepted on faith, others could be proven by reason. In particular, he believed that we could find out about God by reflecting on nature, since God reveals himself to us through nature, which is his creation.

Aquinas gave five arguments for the existence of God, which are usually called the 'five ways.' Here is a summary of one of them, which is sometimes called "the unmoved mover argument"

The Unmoved Mover

- (1) Some things are in motion.
- (2) Everything that is in motion is moved by something else.
- (3) But the cause of motion must also be in motion, and so must be moved by something else.

- (4) This can't go on forever.
- (5) Therefore, there must be a first, unmoved mover—namely, God.

Though influential, this really isn't a very good argument. For one thing, premise (2) seems to conflict with the conclusion: (2) says that everything that is moving has to be moved by something else, and the conclusion looks like it is simply making an exception to this general principle. But if we're going to make an exception, why does the exception have to be for God, instead of—for example—the singularity at the start of the big bang? Another problem with this argument is premise (4): it seems perfectly conceivable that motion goes on infinitely back in time. Although Aquinas would have give us complicated answers to these objections, I don't think any non-believers should change their minds because of this argument.

Another philosopher who took himself to have proven God's existence is Descartes, who gave a version of what is sometimes called the 'ontological argument' for God's existence. Arguments of this kind purport to show that God has to exist, just from the fact that our concept of God works the way it does. There are different ways of interpreting Descartes' argument. I will explain one of them, which is due to the Descartes scholar, Lawrence Nolan.¹

Descartes' Ontological Argument, Version A:

- (1) Whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive to be contained in the idea of something is true of that thing.
- (2) I clearly and distinctly perceive that necessary existence is contained in the idea of God.
- (3) Therefore, God exists.

In order to understand this argument better, it might help to compare it to the following analogous argument.

- (1) Ken is a bachelor.
- (2) Whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive to be contained in the idea of something is true of that thing.

¹See his article on the topic in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-ontological/>.

- (3) I clearly and distinctly perceive that being unmarried is contained in the idea of being a bachelor.
- (4) Therefore, Ken is unmarried.

This looks like a good argument. Essentially, it is a longwinded way of saying that the idea of being single is just *contained in* the idea of being a bachelor. And so anyone who really understands what the word ‘bachelor’ means can infer that any particular bachelor is unmarried without knowing anything else about them. So, at least sometimes, arguments of this kind seem pretty convincing.

Descartes thought that existence is contained in the idea of God, just as being unmarried is contained in the idea of being a bachelor. If you really understand the idea of God, he thought, then you can infer God’s existence directly from grasping this idea.

This argument seems unlikely to convince any atheists, who will likely reply that their idea of God contains the idea of nonexistence rather than the idea of existence. Descartes would say that they don’t really understand the idea of God, but an atheist can reply that it is Descartes who is confused.

A lot of arguments for God’s existence are a bit like this: they start with premises that an atheist would simply deny. This means that they aren’t really good for anything, other than perhaps allowing someone who already believes in God to trick themselves into believing that they have a good reason for doing so.

One of the readings for this week—“The Cosmological Fine-Tuning Argument”, by Roger White—presents an argument for God’s existence that, I think, does a bit better. I have chosen it because I don’t think it’s immediately obvious how a nonbeliever should escape its reasoning. One of your options for this week is to summarize and explain this argument.

2 Arguments Against God’s Existence

Many of the arguments against God’s existence aren’t very convincing either. But there is at least one argument that many have found compelling. It is often called ‘The Problem of Evil’. It goes like this:

The Problem of Evil

- (1) By ‘God’, we mean a being that is omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing), and omnibenevolent (entirely good).

- (2) If God is omnipotent, then God has the power to eliminate all evil.
- (3) If God is omniscient, then God knows about any evil that exists.
- (4) If God is omnibenevolent, then God does not want evil to exist.
- (5) Evil exists.
- (6) Therefore, God—as defined in (1)—doesn't exist.

By “evil”, we just mean objectively bad states of affairs. For example: horrible things sometimes happen to innocent people. Small children are starving to death and dying of painful and preventable diseases right now, as you read this. If God has the power to prevent such things from happening, can predict when they will happen, and always wants what is best, why would God allow such things to take place? Many have concluded that the existence of this sort of suffering is therefore logically incompatible with the existence of God, as defined in (1).

There is a long tradition of attempts to respond to the problem of evil. Responses of this kind fall into a genre of argument called ‘theodicy’. Probably the most famous attempt at theodicy revolves around the concept of free will. On this view, free will is so valuable that God gave it to us despite the fact that doing so would allow us to do evil things to one another, and to cause one another to suffer; it’s better to have free will and suffering than neither.

But there is a fatal flaw in this response: not all suffering is caused by human decisions, and so not all suffering can be explained as the result of our free wills. Consider the suffering caused by earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, and other natural disasters, for example. These events don’t happen because of anyone’s choices, and so they don’t seem to have anything to do with free will. And yet it is still an evil state of affairs if an innocent person dies a painful death as a result of a natural disaster. Why would an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God allow this to happen? There seems to be no good answer to this question.

For a particularly persuasive version of the problem of evil argument, see the youtube video of Stephen Fry in this week’s readings. Even if you aren’t convinced by the argument, I think we should all admit that it *is* the sort of argument that just might convince a believer to change their mind. And it seems to have done so on many occasions.

The second reading for this week—‘Divine Evil’, by David Lewis—offers a souped-up version of the problem of evil that purports to show that any God who meets the

usual Christian definition would himself have to be an infinitely evil being. One of your options for this week is to summarize and explain Lewis's argument.

3 What Kind of God Are We Talking About?

Here's a very important question to ask when you're presented with an argument for or against God's existence: what kind of god is it whose existence is being argued about here? Humans have believed in gods of many different kinds. Christians, Jews, and Muslims believe that there is a single, all-powerful God who created the universe, who likes to be prayed to, and who wants us to follow very specific rules while we're on earth. But the ancient Greeks believed that there were lots of different gods, that they were anything but perfect, and that they sometimes acted like flawed, if very powerful, humans.

When someone gives an argument against God's existence, they usually aren't arguing that *no* kind of god could exist. Usually, they have a specific kind of god in mind, and they're trying to show that *that* kind of god doesn't exist. For example: the problem of evil, if it is a good argument, would show only that there can't be a god of the kind that is defined in its first premise. Nothing follows about whether the ancient Greek gods exist. After all: they don't purport to be perfect. Likewise, the problem of evil is compatible with the existence of an omnipotent and omniscient god who's a bit of a jerk, or an omniscient and omnibenevolent god who can't quite manage to get rid of all of the evil, or an omnipotent and omnibenevolent god who doesn't recognize all of the evil he's created.

The same goes for arguments *for* God's existence. Take Aquinas's Unmoved-Mover Argument. Aquinas was a Christian, and so he believed that God was a supremely powerful being who created everything and who sent Jesus to earth to teach us how to behave ourselves. If his argument were convincing, would it prove the existence of that kind of God? Definitely not: it would only prove the existence of a God who moves, but whose movement wasn't caused by anything else. But you don't even have to be able to think in order to move, and so Augustine's argument doesn't prove the existence of the kind of God that he believed in, even if we think the argument is a good one.

This is an important point, because it shows that Aquinas's argument and the problem of evil aren't even in conflict with one another. The first is an argument that one kind of thing does exist, and the second is an argument that a different kind of thing doesn't exist. In principle, they could both be right at the same time.

The moral of all this is that it is never enough to assess whether an argument really proves the existence or nonexistence of “God”. We always also have to ask what kind of god it purports to prove the existence of. Otherwise, we’ll just be constantly changing the subject from one argument to the next without realizing it.

In writing your assignment for this week, you should take this advice to heart. In summarizing either Roger White’s argument for God’s existence, or David Lewis’s argument against God’s existence, make sure to explain what kind of God we’re talking about.