

## Lecture 1: Philosophy and Religious Belief

### Why study philosophy of religion?

An initial paradox: it wouldn't be of use to a theist; nor to an atheist. Neither needs philosophy of religion to tell them whether God exists.

But is this the point of philosophy of religion?

Philosophy of religion doesn't aim to settle the question of whether God exists, nor that of whether it is reasonable to believe that God exists. Instead, its core objectives include clarifying the nature and scope of religious beliefs, experience, and practice in the context of other significant human endeavours.

By looking closely at religious concepts, we are in a better position to sketch the contours of key ideas – both in philosophy and for our everyday understanding of the world and ourselves.

A few examples: agency, responsibility, knowledge, causation, personhood, obligation, creativity.

### Five philosophical approaches to religious belief

#### Logical positivism

If a statement is meaningful, we should be able to tell with certainty whether it is true or false either by means of empirical observation or by means of logical/ mathematical analysis. Statements of faith fall outside this framework.

A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (p. 115): '...to say that 'God exists' is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false. And by the same criterion, no sentence which purports to describe the nature of a transcendent god can possess any literal significance'.

If this approach to religious belief is correct, it would also apply to moral and aesthetic beliefs.

#### Discussion

Consider the following statements:

1. God is the Creator of the Universe.
2.  $2+2=5$ .
3. Torturing people for fun is wrong.
4. In 2013-2014, the Philosophy of Religion Module Convenor at Kent is a woman.
5. DLT2 is a very pleasant lecture theatre.

Which of the above, if any are meaningful?.....

Which of the above, if any are meaningless?.....

Reason(s) for your answer:.....

.....

Analysis of religious language

Philosophy has a descriptive, not a prescriptive role to play with respect to religion.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §§123-4 (1968): ‘A philosophical problem has the form: I don’t know my way about. Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is.’

An important distinction at play here is that between ‘surface grammar’ and ‘depth grammar’. ‘Grammar’ is employed in the sense of ‘set of underlying rules’.

Example: ‘Could you please close the door?’ We have a question at the surface that *actually* expresses a command (an imperative).

Religious statements share the surface grammar of statements of fact; however, their depth grammar might be radically different.

D.Z. Philips, *Religion without Explanation* (1976, p.181): ‘To ask whether God exists is not to ask a theoretical question. If it is to mean anything at all, it is to wonder about praising and praying; it is to wonder whether there is anything in all that. This is why philosophy cannot answer the question ‘Does God exist?’ with either an affirmative or a negative reply... ‘There is God’ though it appears to be in the indicative mood, is an expression of faith.’

Discussion

Consider the following statements:

1. God is the Creator of the Universe.
2.  $2+2=5$ .
3. Torturing people for fun is wrong.
4. In 2013-2014, the Philosophy of Religion Module Convenor at Kent is a woman.
5. DLT2 is a very pleasant lecture theatre.

In which of the above, if any is the depth grammar the same as the surface grammar ?.....

In which of the above, if any is the depth grammar different from the surface grammar ?.....

Reason(s) for your answer:.....

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Epistemic foundationalism

As believers, we have an epistemic responsibility to hold only beliefs that are backed up by evidence. We are not entitled to believe anything that is not grounded in (sufficient) evidence.

K.W. Clifford, ‘The Ethics of Belief’ (In B. Davies, *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, 2000, p.35): ‘it is wrong everywhere and for everyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.’

Antony Flew, *The Presumption of Atheism* (1976): There is a presumption of atheism just like there is a presumption of innocence in a court of law.

Alternatives to evidence: properly basic beliefs, trust and testimony

Some beliefs do not require further justification in terms of evidence. They could be (1) ‘properly basic’, i.e. they serve as foundations for a person’s other beliefs. Alternatively, they could be (2) grounded in trusting others’ testimony.

- (1) Alvin Plantinga, ‘Reason and Belief in God’ (In A. Plantinga and N Walterstorff (eds.) *Faith and Rationality* 1983, p.17): ‘...it is entirely right, rational, reasonable, and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all.’
- (2) Elizabeth Anscombe, ‘What is to believe in someone?’(In C.F. Delaney (ed.) *Rationality and Religious Belief*, 1979, p. 143): ‘...the greater part of our knowledge of reality rests upon the belief that we repose in things we have been taught and told.’

Further clarifications:

Epistemic foundationalism draws on an important intuition: we *should not* (and in many cases simply *cannot*) *believe at will*. A somewhat schematic way to presenting this point is to say that beliefs have a mind-to-world direction of fit, whilst desires have a world-to-mind direction of fit. The contrast here is between a person’s shopping list (what they want to buy) and a detective’s list of what this person actually bought. Belief is like a detective’s list and unlike a shopping list.

Yet, the alternative picture is also compelling. Granted we shouldn’t believe at will, direct evidence is not all that there is by means of valid epistemic justification. In fact, having a set of beliefs as opposed to isolated individual beliefs doesn’t seem possible if a person doesn’t trust the testimony of others.

Discussion

Consider the following beliefs:

- 1. I exist.
- 2. God has guided all important decisions in my life.
- 3. Torturing people is never justified.
- 4. On 3 October 2013, 3pm there are/were 47 students present in DLT2.
- 5. The Canterbury Campus of the University of Kent is beautiful.

Which of the above, if any can only be justified on grounds of factual evidence?.....

Which of the above, if any can never be justified on grounds of factual evidence?.....

Which of the above, if any could be taken on trust?.....

Which of the above, if any would require a justification not mentioned above?.....

Reason(s) for your answer:.....

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Distinguishing religious beliefs from delusions

*A case study: Simon, aged 40, lawyer*

Simon was a senior, black, American lawyer from a middle-class, Baptist family. Although not a religious man he had had occasional relatively minor psychic experiences that had led him from time to time to seek the guidance of a professional ‘seer’. Otherwise his career and life generally were going well.

Then, out of the blue, he was threatened by a malpractice legal action from a group of his colleagues. Although he claimed to be innocent, mounting a defence would be expensive and hazardous. He responded to this crisis by praying in front of an open bible placed on a small altar that he set up in his front room. After an emotional evening's ‘outpouring’ he found that wax from two large candles on the altar had run down onto the bible marking out various words and phrases (he called these wax marks ‘seals’ or ‘suns’). He described his experiences thus. "I got up and I saw the seal that was in my father's bible and I called my friend John and I said, you know, 'something remarkable is going on over here.' I think the beauty of it was the specificity by which the sun burned through. It was ... in my mind, a clever play on words."

From this time on, Simon received a complex series of ‘revelations’ largely conveyed through the images left in melted candle wax. They meant nothing to anyone else including Simon’s Baptist friends and family. But for Simon they were clearly representations of biblical symbols particularly from the book of Revelations (the bull, the 24 elders, the arc of the covenant, etc) signifying that “I am the living son of David ... and I'm also a relative of Ishmael and ... of Joseph”. He was also the “captain of the guard of Israel”. He found this role carried awesome responsibilities: “Sometimes I'm saying - Oh my God, why did you choose me, and there's no answer to that”. His special status had the effect of “increasing my own inward sense, wisdom, understanding, and endurance” which would “allow me to do whatever is required in terms of bringing whatever message it is that God wants me to bring”. When confronted with scepticism, he said simply: “I don't get upset, because I know within myself, what I know”.

(quoted from K.W.M. Fulford and L. Radoilska (2012), ‘Three Challenges from Delusion for Theories of Autonomy’, In L. Radoilska (ed.) *Autonomy and Mental Disorder*. Oxford: OUP)

Discussion:

Based on the vignette above, do you consider that Simon expresses:

- (1) Religious beliefs based on intimate first-personal experiences .....
- (2) Delusions indicative of mental disorder.....
- (3) Neither .....

Reason(s) for your answer:.....  
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## Lecture 2: The Cosmological Argument

### What is a cosmological argument?

Natural theology: a set of arguments for the existence of God that are meant not to presuppose a belief in God. Their starting point instead is: **a**) the existence of the world (Cosmological Argument); **b**) the order (purpose) in the world (Design or Teleological Argument); **c**) the concept of God (Ontological Argument).

#### The basic form of the Cosmological Argument:

1. Anything that exists has a cause
2. Nothing that exists can be its own cause
3. The world is the totality of things that exist.

*Therefore*: The world has a cause that is outside the world. This cause is God.

Initial observation: our assessment of how successful a cosmological argument is will greatly depend on the conception of cause that we work with.

### Three versions of the Cosmological Argument

#### *The temporal version:*

1. Anything that *begins to exist* has a cause
2. Nothing that exists *in time* can be its own cause
3. The world as the totality of things that exist in time *has itself a beginning*.

*Therefore*: The world has a cause that is outside the world and doesn't have a beginning. This cause is God.

#### Causation and time:

The concepts of causation and time are interlocked on this version. Causes *precede* their effects: Events at any time  $t$  are caused by some events at an earlier time  $t_1$ . What is more, time is conceived here as finite and linear, e.g. the Arrow of Time.

#### Alternative conceptions of time: The Infinite Past Model and The Closed Time Model.

On both pictures, every event is preceded by another, and so has a cause; yet the world (the totality of things that exist) has no beginning and thus no cause.

Misgivings about causation: We cannot be certain that whatever has a beginning must also have a cause. The typical association between cause and effect that we make in our ordinary thinking cannot be backed up by demonstration from self-evident first principles, nor can it be supported by empirical observation. (cf. David Hume, *The Treatise of Human Nature*).

Discussion

Consider the following statements:

- 6. God can add past events to the world’s history without the need for these events to have ever happened in the present.
- 7. An event can both precede and come after a specific moment in time.
- 8. Causation and time are notions that help explain only relationships between events within the world. They are not applicable to the world as a whole.
- 9. Given our ordinary conception of time, the temporal version of the cosmological argument does a good job in explaining why there is a world at all.

Which of the above would you endorse?.....

Which of the above would you reject?.....

Reason(s) for your answer:.....

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.....

***The modal version:***

- 1. Anything the existence of which is contingent has a cause
- 2. Nothing the existence of which is contingent can be its own cause
- 3. The existence of the world is contingent.

*Therefore:* The world has a cause that is not contingent. This cause is God.

Contingent truth as opposed to necessary truth:

‘The world exist.’ looks like a contingent truth: its negation is not self-contradictory. Contrast with: ‘All triangles have three angles.’ Necessary truths are self-explanatory, but not contingent ones. Hence, the existence of the world stands in need of further explanation: The Principle of Sufficient Reason (cf. Leibnitz, *Monadology* §32).

How compelling is the Principle of Sufficient Reason? Is its negation self-contradictory? Can it be proven on the basis of empirical observation?

- (1) There might be contingent, yet unintelligible facts (contingent facts without explanation). The existence of the world might be such a fact.
- (2) The conclusion does not withstand scrutiny. The cause of the world cannot be contingent (it would require an antecedent cause itself). Yet, it cannot be necessary either (if it is, it would necessary entail the totality of contingent facts; hence, they won’t be contingent).

Discussion

Consider the following statements:

- 6. ‘The principle of sufficient reason expresses a demand that things should be intelligible through and through...There is nothing that justifies this demand, and nothing that supports the belief that it is satisfiable even in principle.’
- 7. We cannot go on thinking, acting, and living unless we assume the validity of the Principle of Sufficient Reason.

8. 'The universe is just there, and that's all.'
9. The modal version of the cosmological argument is more persuasive than the temporal version.

Which of the above would you endorse?.....

Which of the above would you reject?.....

Reason(s) for your answer:.....

.....

.....

### ***The First Cause Argument***

1. Anything that exists has a cause
2. There are things that are not their own cause.
3. The world is the totality of such things.

*Therefore:* The world must have a cause that is itself uncaused by another. This first cause is God.

### Causation revisited

The First Cause Argument (defended by Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae*, Part I; see also Aristotle, *Physics*, Books 1 and 2) draws on the notion of causation as we experience it in the world:

In the observable world, causes are found to be ordered in series; we never observe, nor ever could, something causing itself, for this would mean it preceded itself, and this is not possible. Such a series of causes must however stop somewhere; for in it an earlier member causes an intermediate and the intermediate a last (whether the intermediate be one or many). Now if you eliminate a cause, you also eliminate its effects, so that you cannot have a last cause, nor an intermediate one, unless you have a first. Given therefore no stop in the series of causes, and hence no first cause, there would be no intermediate causes either, and no last effect. One is therefore forced to suppose some first cause, to which everyone gives the name 'God'. (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia,2,3)

But could this understanding of causation help us clarify the very *existence* of the world as opposed to why things that exist are this way rather than other (questions about their *essence*, or their properties)?

For instance, we are able to offer detailed accounts for fictional characters without suggesting that they exist outside fiction. In this sense, we could say that fictional characters have an *essence* that is not only separable from their *existence* but also presupposes their *non-existence*.

So, there might be something odd in the idea of a first cause as cause of everything that exists.

A possible reply: the notion of a first cause here is not necessarily the same as that of a first efficient cause. There is an older philosophical tradition (going back to Aristotle), according to which things in the world are explicable by four separate causes: formal, final, efficient, and material. Each of these causes offers a different kind of explanation of the same thing; these explanations are complementary.

Consider an example: a chair. It is made, say, of wood (this is its material cause); it is made by a craftsman (this is the efficient cause); it corresponds to a product specification (this is the formal cause); and it serves a particular function or purpose (this is its final cause).

The first cause might be best understood as being simultaneously formal, final, and efficient cause (not a material though).

Discussion

Consider the following statements:

1. To make sense of causal explanations, we must also believe that there is a first uncaused cause.
2. The first cause argument is more persuasive than the temporal version of the cosmological argument.
3. The first cause argument is more persuasive than the modal version of the cosmological argument.
4. ‘You investigate to find the cause of a thing...But you never investigate to find out whether it has a cause or not. You look for the cause of it but you don’t look to see whether it has a cause.’ Therefore, any version of the cosmological argument rests on a mistake.

Which of the above would you endorse?.....

Which of the above would you reject?.....

Reason(s) for your answer:.....

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In light of our previous lecture on Philosophy and Religious Belief, could a successful cosmological argument offer good grounds for religious belief?

(1) Yes

Reason(s) for your answer:.....

(2) No

.....

### Lecture 3: The Design Argument

#### What is a design argument?

Natural theology: a set of arguments for the existence of God that are meant not to presuppose a belief in God. Their starting point instead is: **a**) the existence of the world (Cosmological Argument); **b**) the order (purpose) in the world (Design or Teleological Argument); **c**) the concept of God (Ontological Argument).

#### Two forms of the Design Argument:

##### *Design as purpose*

1. Anything that exhibits *some purpose* (as opposed to being the way it is *by accident*) points to an intelligent and purposive agency.
2. The world (the totality of things that exist) exhibits a lot of purpose: both as a whole and in its constitutive parts.

*Therefore*: Being purposeful, the world points to an intelligent and purposive agency that is outside the world. This agency is God.

##### *Design as regularity*

1. Anything that exhibits *certain regularity* (as opposed to being the *outcome of chance*) points to an intelligent and personal agency.
2. The world (the totality of things that exist) exhibits a lot of regularity: both as a whole and in its constitutive parts.

*Therefore*: Being well-regulated, the world points to an intelligent and personal agency that is outside the world. This agency is God.

#### An illustration:

Look around the world, contemplate the whole and every part of it: you will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these machines and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy which ravishes into admiration everyone who has ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the production of human contrivance. (Cleanthes in Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Part II).

#### Three important points:

1. The Design Argument is an argument from analogy (between artefacts and the natural world);
2. The Design Argument implies a notion of agent causation: intelligent agency instead of efficient cause, cf. the cosmological argument; and
3. The Design Argument aims to establish the probability not the necessity of its conclusion.

#### Discussion

Consider the following:

1. Recall the four-cause analysis of an artefact such as a chair (Lecture 2). Could this apply equally well to an organism, say, a puppy? If yes, how exactly? If not, which of the four causes would not be applicable?

2. “The utmost that the [Design] argument can prove is an architect of the world who is always very much hampered by the adaptability of the material in which he works, not a creator of the world to whose idea everything is subject.”
3. “Some things which tend to a goal, tend to a goal because of a direction imposed upon them by someone with awareness and understanding.” Does this mean all things that tend to a goal have it imposed upon them by an intelligent agent?
4. “There are two different kinds of explanation: in terms of natural laws operating on preceding states of affairs and in terms of rational choices of free agents.” If the second kind of explanation is reducible to the first, the Argument from Design loses its credibility.
5. “The inference from natural laws to a god responsible for them is of a perfectly proper type for inference about matters of fact.”

Which of the above would you endorse?.....

Which of the above would you reject?.....

Reason(s) for your answer:.....

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**Hume’s critical points in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion***

1. The limits of inference from effect to cause: we can only claim knowledge of the effect-producing properties of the putative cause.
2. The world is only one: no argument from analogy can help us gain knowledge about it.
3. Inferring the existence of a designer leads to infinite regression.
4. In order to work, the analogy between human and divine designers should be much closer: god cannot be immaterial.
5. In a similar vein, there might be more than one divine designers just like there are many human designers.
6. The world might be an end in itself.
7. The immergence of life, regularity, and purpose in the world might be just as well the outcome of chance.
8. The world is not all that well designed. For instance, there are many natural disasters.

Discussion

Consider the following:

1. “Would anyone tell me with a serious countenance that an orderly universe must arise from some thought and art, like the human; because we have experience of it? To ascertain this reasoning, it were requisite, that we had experience of the origins of the worlds.”
2. “An intelligent Being of such vast power and capacity as is necessary to produce the universe exceeds all analogy, and even comprehension.”
3. “No Animal can move immediately anything but the members of its own body; and indeed the equality of action and reaction seems to be a universal law of nature.” The Design Argument goes against this experience.
4. “An appeal to chance to account for order becomes less and less plausible the greater the order. We would be justified in attributing a typewritten version of the collected works of Shakespeare to the activity of monkeys typing eternally on eternal typewriters if we had some evidence of the existence of an infinite quantity of paper randomly covered with type, as well as the collected works.”

Do 1,2,3 or 4 relate directly to any of the critical points? If so, to which ones and how? If not, does any of them instigate/ refute a new line of critique?

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Reason(s) for your answer:.....

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5. Which of Hume’s eight critical points outlined earlier is the strongest?
6. Which of Hume’s eight critical points outlined earlier is the weakest?

Reason(s) for your answer:.....

.....

**The Argument from Design and the Theory of Evolution**

Living beings arguably offer the best examples of purposefulness in nature. Yet, natural selection is meant to exclude any notion of design: the appearance of design is explained away by chance factors, such as random genetic variations that may (but also may not) ensure the adaptability of a particular species to its environment.

However, consider the following:

If the argument from design ever had any value, it has not been substantially affected by the scientific investigation of living organisms from Descartes through Darwin to present day. If Descartes is correct in regarding the activities of animals as mechanistically explicable, then a system may operate teleologically while being mechanistic in structure. If Darwin is correct to ascribing the origin of species to natural selection, then the production of a teleological structure may be due in the first instance to factors which are purely mechanistic. But both may be right and yet the ultimate explanation of the phenomena be finalistic.” (A. Kenny, *The Five Ways*, p. 118)

Discussion

Consider the following statements:

1. The theory of evolution disproves the argument from design.
2. The theory of evolution is at odds with the argument from design.
3. The theory of evolution is compatible with the argument from design.
4. The theory of evolution strengthens the argument from design.

Which of the above would you endorse?.....

Which of the above would you reject?.....

Reason(s) for your answer:.....  
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In light of our first lecture on Philosophy and Religious Belief, could a successful design argument offer good grounds for religious belief?

- |         |                                 |
|---------|---------------------------------|
| (3) Yes | Reason(s) for your answer:..... |
| (4) No  | .....                           |

**Seminar readings:**

**Main text:** Swinburne, R.G. 'The Argument from Design'. *Philosophy* 43 (1968); 199-212. Reprinted in B. Davies (ed.) *Philosophy of Religion. A Guide and Anthology*. OUP: 2000. Chapter 27.

See also: D. Hume, Excerpt from *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. In B. Davies (ed.) *Philosophy of Religion. A Guide and Anthology*. OUP:2000. Chapter 25.

## Lecture 4: The Ontological Argument

### What is an ontological argument?

Still part of natural theology: a set of arguments for the existence of God that are meant not to presuppose a belief in God, but to rely instead only on premises and principles that practically every rational person would accept.

However, unlike the Cosmological and Design Arguments, the Ontological Argument is supposed to appeal to logical coherence only (merely considering the concept of God), not a causal inference or analogy.

The name 'ontological' has been given to this line of reasoning by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A591/B619).

### The basic form of the Ontological Argument:

1. If one understands what 'God' means, one cannot fail to appreciate that God exists.
2. This is because it is in the very essence or definition of God, unlike that of anything else, to exist necessarily.

*Therefore*: God cannot fail to exist, i.e.: God is a necessary being.

Initial observations: (1) our assessment of how successful an ontological argument is will greatly depend on whether we think 'existing' is a genuine predicate, telling us something about the subject to which it is predicated or not; (2) how we define the nature and varieties of necessity in relation to other modal categories, esp. possibility will also be extremely significant; and (3) whether we think that there is a reliable correlation between mind and world will be just as important.

### **Anselm's version in a nutshell (one possible reconstruction)**

1. To understand what 'God' means, is to appreciate that God is that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-conceived
2. Whatever is conceived, exists in the mind
3. Being conceived, God exists in the mind
4. Whatever exists not only in the mind, but also in reality is greater than that which only exists in the mind.

*Therefore*: Once we understand what 'God' means, we cannot deny that God exists in reality and not only in the mind, without self-contradiction.

### Addendum:

5. Once we understand that 'God' is that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-conceived, we cannot fail to appreciate that it is impossible to conceive of God as non-existent.

*Therefore*: God cannot fail to exist, i.e.: God is a necessary being.

Misgivings: Anselm's version seems to prove too much. Anything that we conceive of as being the perfect (unsurpassed) specimen of its own kind, would turn out to exist merely by virtue of being conceived (defined, posited) as better than the specimens we know to exist. (cf. Gaunilo's 'Perfect Island' objection).

Discussion

1. Which premise of Anselm’s version (as reconstructed above) is the most significant and why?  
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2. Which premise of Anselm’s version (as reconstructed above) is the most controversial and why?  
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3. “It is one thing for an object to exist in the mind and another thing to understand that an object actually exists.” If so, does it mean that Anselm’s argument fails?  
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4. “If God, a being greater than which cannot be conceived, does not exist, then He cannot come into existence. Since He cannot come into existence, if He does not exist, His existence is impossible. Thus, God’s existence is either impossible, or necessary. It can be the former only if the concept of such a being is self-contradictory or in some way logically absurd. Assuming that this is not so, it follows that He necessarily exists”. Is this an Ontological Argument? Does it represent a compelling line of reasoning?  
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**Descartes’ version in a nutshell (one possible reconstruction)**

1. To understand what ‘God’ means, is to appreciate that God is supremely perfect.
2. To be supremely perfect means to have all perfections.
3. Existence is a kind of perfection.
4. We cannot conceive of God as non-existent and yet supremely perfect.

*Therefore:* God cannot fail to exist; existence is an aspect of his essence.

“Since I have been accustomed to distinguish between existence and essence in everything else, I find it easy to persuade myself that existence can also be separated from the essence of God and, and hence that God can be thought of as not existing. But when I concentrate more carefully, it is quite evident that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the fact that its three angles equal two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle, or than the idea of a mountain can be separated from the idea of a valley. Hence, it is just as much of a contradiction to think of God (that is a supremely perfect being), lacking existence (that is lacking a perfection), as it is to think of a mountain without a valley.” Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy V*.

Discussion

1. Which premise of Descartes’ version (as reconstructed above) is the most significant and why?  
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.....
2. Which premise of Descartes’ version (as reconstructed above) is the most controversial and why?  
.....  
.....
3. “My thought doesn’t impose any necessity on things; and just as I may imagine a winged horse even though no horse has wings, so I may be able to attach existence to God even though no God exists.” If so, does it mean that Descartes’ argument fails?  
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4. What distinguishes Descartes’ from Anselm’s version? Which one do you find more persuasive?  
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**Kant on the Impossibility of a successful Ontological Argument**

1. There is no contradiction in rejecting the triangle and together with its three angles. The contradiction arises only if we posit the subject (triangle) but reject the predicate (it having three angles).

*Therefore:* ‘God is not supremely perfect.’ is self-contradictory; however, ‘There is no God.’ isn’t.

2. ‘Being’ is not a real predicate, its function is to either posit an object of thought (to indicate that something is subsumed under a concept of mine), or to posit a subject with all of its predicates (doesn’t count as an extra predicate in its own right).

*Therefore:* We cannot get existence by analysing any concept of ours, including the concept of ‘God’. As Kant famously puts it: “*Whatever and however much our concept of an object may contain, we must go outside it, if we are to ascribe existence to the object.*”

Discussion:

Consider the following statements:

1. Statements of existence (e.g. ‘There is...’; ‘There are...’) are just answers to the question ‘How many?’. They do not tell us anything about the properties of things that they are about.
2. “In thought as well as in the surface forms of language, ‘exists’ seems to be handled as a predicate of individuals. Existing, it appears, is something that individuals do, and thereby ensure the realisation of whatever descriptions apply to them, or the instantiation of whatever general features they possess.”

Which of the above would you endorse?.....

Which of the above would you reject?.....

Reason(s) for your answer:.....  
.....

**Contemporary versions of the Ontological Argument**

***The Modal Ontological Argument***

1. If God’s existence is not impossible, then it is necessary (since God cannot be a contingent being).
2. God’s existence is not impossible since it is not self-contradictory.

*Therefore:* God cannot fail to exist; God’s existence is necessary.

***A Possible Worlds Interpretation*** (cf. A. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, 1974):

1. ‘Maximal greatness’ is the property of having ‘maximal excellence’ in every possible world;
2. ‘Maximal excellence’ is the property of having all perfections in one possible world;
3. if ‘maximal excellence’ is instantiated in one possible world, it may not be instantiated in others; however,
4. if ‘maximal greatness’ is instantiated in one possible world, it will necessarily be instantiated in all others.
5. Maximal greatness is not self-contradictory; hence,
6. it is instantiated in at least one possible world.

*Therefore:* ‘Maximal greatness’ is instantiated in all possible worlds; God’s existence is necessary.

Discussion

1. Which premise of the Possible Worlds Argument (as reconstructed above) is the most significant and why?  
.....
2. Which premise of Possible Worlds Argument (as reconstructed above) is the most controversial and why?  
.....
3. Does the Possible Worlds Argument manage to sidestep Kant's objections to a successful Ontological Argument?  
.....
4. Would a successful Ontological argument offer good grounds for religious belief?  
.....

**Seminar readings:**

- Anselm argues that God cannot be thought not to exist and Gaunilo argues that Anselm is wrong. In B. Davies (ed.) *Philosophy of Religion. A Guide and Anthology* (Oxford, 2000).
- 
- Mackie, J.L. *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and Against the Existence of God* (Clarendon, 1982), ch. 3. PDF available on Moodle.

## Lecture 5: The Problem of Evil

### Nature and scope of the Arguments from Evil

Direct link to natural theology: a set of arguments for the *non*-existence of God that are meant not to presuppose atheism, but to rely instead only on premises and principles that practically every reasonable person would accept.

The underlying reasoning goes from observations about the Creation, as we know it (the world as the totality of things that exist and we have experience of), to conclusions about the inconsistency or improbability of a Creator worthy of worship: the target is a specific configuration of divine attributes: omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection.

#### The basic form of the Argument from Evil:

1. If anything, the word 'God' means an all-powerful and morally perfect being.
2. An all-powerful and morally perfect being would not allow, let alone bring evil into the world.
3. There is a lot of evil in the world.

*Therefore*: No being that could rightly be called (and worshiped as) 'God' exists.

Two versions: (1) Logical and (2) Evidential. The difference amounts to how strong the conclusion reached should be taken to be:

- (1) the presence of evil in the world makes it irrational to believe in 'God' as defined above or
- (2) the presence of evil in the world makes it rational not to believe in 'God' as defined above.

#### *The Logical version:*

"God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological propositions: the theologian, it seems, at once *must* adhere and *cannot consistently adhere* to all three."

J. Mackie, Evil and Omnipotence, *Mind* 64 (1955)

Initial observation: arguably, this version implies that 'God' is ultimately responsible for everything, i.e. there is no other agent in the strict sense.

#### *The Evidential version:*

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

- An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

Therefore: There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

W. Rowe, The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979)

Clarification: the Evidential version is meant to establish only that we have rational grounds to believe premise (1), not that we can prove it to be true. Interestingly, premise (2) is assumed to ‘express a belief that accords with our basic moral principles, shared by both theists and nontheists’(Rowe 1979); hence, it is taken for granted, not argued for.

***A Quasi-Argument from Moral Outrage***

“We have not to attempt the impossible problem of reconciling infinite benevolence and justice with infinite power in the Creator of a world such as this. The attempt to do so not only involves absolute contradiction in an intellectual point of view but exhibits to excess the revolting spectacle of a Jesuitical defence of moral enormities.”

J.S. Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, 1875 (cf. P. van Inwagen 2009)

Further observations: our assessment of how successful either versions of the Argument from Evil is will greatly depend on how we understand not only (1) the three divine attributes, but also (2) the nature of morality, e.g. are there moral facts and properties that the moral discourse tracks or is the surface grammar of moral language misleading by implying this is the case?

Discussion:

Consider the following statements:

- An omnipotent being could do anything, including the logically impossible.
- Although omnipotent, God cannot sin.
- Statements about future events have no truth value before the occurrence of these events. An omniscient being cannot know the future.
- “Morality presupposes a moral community: and a moral community must be of beings with a common language, roughly equal powers, and roughly similar needs, desires, and interests. God can no more be part of a moral community with them than he can be part of a political community with them. As Aristotle said, we cannot attribute moral virtues to divinity: the praise would be vulgar. Equally, moral blame would be laughable.” (A. Kenny, *What is Faith?*, 1992).
- The Argument from Evil cannot be separated from the Quasi-Argument from Moral Outrage. They stand or fall together.
- There is no significant difference between the Logical and the Evidential versions of the Argument from Evil.

Which of the above would you endorse?.....

Which of the above would you reject?.....

Reason(s) for your answer:.....

.....  
.....  
.....

**Theistic Responses to the Argument from Evil (in a nutshell)**

- (1) The Argument from Evil makes inappropriate use of moral language.
- (2) We don't have epistemic access to all facts in order to answer the crucial question whether any particular instance of evil or intense suffering was preventable or not.
- (3) Positive first-hand religious experience contradicts the conclusion of the Argument from Evil
- (4) Evil is not an active principle opposed to good, or even a genuine feature of reality: it is merely the absence of good, some form of imperfection or shortcoming. Hence, it cannot be traced back to God.
- (5) Evil in the world is not gratuitous: it cannot be eradicated without eradicating the possibility of Human Free Will.

Initial observation: our assessment of how successful any of these responses is will greatly depend on whether we take it to present a theodicy (a justification in the sense of showing something to be just) or a defence (a deflection of a criticism as unwarranted): see also P. van Inwagen 2009.

**The Free Will Response (in some detail)**

- 1. Free will requires alternative possibilities (genuine choice between good and evil, with genuine consequences that can be either good or bad);
- 2. Free will is such a great good that it outweighs the presence of evil.

An implication: libertarianism about free will. Commitment both to (1) free will is incompatible with determinism and (2) determinism is false.

***Critiques of the Free Will Response***

- 1. Free will does not require alternative possibilities.
- 2. Free will is incompatible with both omnipotence and omniscience; hence, the Free Will response is self-defeating.
- 3. Free will does not outweigh the presence of every instance of evil. At least some instances are gratuitous.
- 4. Not all evil results from human free will. Natural disasters can be just as abhorrent, if not worse.

Discussion

- 1. Which of the five theistic responses has the greatest intuitive appeal?  
.....  
.....
- 2. Is there an interesting link between different theistic responses to the Arguments from Evil? E.g. are they reinforcing one another, or are they pulling in opposite directions?  
.....  
.....
- 3. "Free decision spells self-determination because people, by their free decisions, move themselves to action. Freedom does not require that a thing is its first cause, just as in order to be the cause of something else a

thing does not have to be its first cause.” Is this line of reasoning persuasive? What is its bearing on the Problem of Evil?

.....  
.....

4. Does freedom of will require freedom of action? To answer this question, consider the following thought experiment:

“Suppose someone – Black, let us say – wants Jones to perform a certain action. Black is prepared to go to considerable lengths to get his way, but he prefers to avoid showing his hand unnecessarily. So he waits up until Jones is about to make up his mind, and he does nothing unless it is clear to him (Black is an excellent judge of such things) that Jones is going to decide to do something other than what he wants him to do. If it does become clear that Jones is going to decide to do something else, Black takes effective steps to ensure that Jones decides to do and that he does do, what he wants him to do...Now suppose that Black never has to show his hand because Jones, for reasons of his own, decides to perform and does perform the very action that Black wants him to perform.”

H. Frankfurt, Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility, *Philosophy* 66 (1969)

.....  
.....

**Seminar readings:**

- Rowe, W. ‘The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1979, 16: 335- 34. PDF available on Moodle.
- Van Inwagen, P. ‘The Problem of Evil’ In W. Wainwright (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford, 2009). Electronic copy downloadable from the University Library resources.

### Lecture 6: Religion and Morality

#### Does moral obligation speak in favour of theism?

##### Kant's Transcendental Argument in favour of Theism

Transcendental arguments aim to identify the conditions of possibility (or the preconditions for the truth) of a particular premise.

##### A reconstruction:

1. There are two goals of human life and action: virtue and happiness.
2. These goals are neither conceptually nor probabilistically related: virtue without happiness is not just conceivable, but very often the case, and *vice versa*.
3. Yet, both virtue and happiness are goods.
4. The highest good (*summum bonum*) is a world where human happiness is proportional to human virtue.
5. Morality obligates us to seek the moral good (to act virtuously).
6. In so doing, it obligates us at the same time to seek the highest good.
7. Morality cannot obligate us to seek the impossible.
8. We cannot ensure, by ourselves, that the highest good obtains: to do so would require that one can make the natural order conform to the moral order.
9. Yet, that the highest good obtains is a rational, moral necessity.
10. Only a theistic God can ensure that the highest good obtains.

*Therefore:* We are rationally and morally obligated to postulate that God exists.

Initial observations: (1) the Transcendental Argument is not a 'proof' of the existence of God in the traditional sense. It only states that in so far as we understand the demands of morality, we cannot fail to implicitly postulate the existence of a theistic God; (2) the conception of moral obligation at work here: we cannot opt out of morality. Morality obligates us unconditionally, no matter whether we want to be moral or not.

##### Discussion

1. Which premise of the transcendental argument (as reconstructed above) is the most significant and why?  
.....  
.....
2. Which premise of the transcendental argument (as reconstructed above) is the most controversial and why?  
.....  
.....
3. 'Ought implies Can' is a universal principle of morality.  
If you agree with the above, briefly say why. If you disagree, provide one or two counterexamples.  
.....  
.....

4. Consider the following example from the *Critique of Practical Reason* (5:515-6). What does it tell us about the relationship between virtue and happiness implied by the Transcendental Argument:

...an honest man whom someone wants to induce to join the calumniators of an innocent but otherwise powerless person (say, Anne Boleyn, accused by Henry VIII of England). He is offered gain, that is, great gifts or high rank, he rejects them. This will produce mere approval and applause in the listener's soul, because it is gain. Now threats of loss begin. Among these calumniators are his best friends, who now refuse him their friendship; close relatives, who threaten to disinherit him (he is not wealthy); powerful people who can pursue and hurt him in all places and circumstances; a prince who threatens him with loss of freedom and even of life itself. But, so that the measure of suffering may be full and he may also feel the pain that only a morally good heart can feel very deeply, represent his family, threatened with extreme distress and poverty, as imploring him to yield and himself, though upright, yet not with a heart hard or insensible either to compassion or to his own distress; represent him at a moment when he wishes that he had never lived to see the day that exposed him to such unutterable pain and yet remains firm in his resolution to be truthful without wavering or even doubting; then my young listener will be raised step by step from mere approval to admiration, from that to amazement, and finally to the greatest veneration and a lively wish that he himself could be such a man (though certainly not in such circumstances); and yet virtue is here worth so much only because it costs so much, not because it brings any profit. All the admiration, and even the endeavour to resemble this character, here rests wholly on the purity of the moral principle, which can be clearly represented only if one removes from the incentive to action everything that people may reckon only to happiness.

.....  
 .....

The posterity of the Transcendental Argument:

Central concepts of morality, such as law, duty, obligation make no sense without a moral lawgiver and this can only be a theistic God.

This is consistent with three very different conclusions:

1. Resurgence of religious ethical theory, e.g. Divine Motivation Theory (e.g. Zagzebski)
2. Modern ethical theory should go back to the Ancients for inspiration: Virtue ethics.
3. The Genealogy of Morals (Nietzsche) and the Critical Theory.

Discussion:

Consider the following statements:

1. We can opt out of religion, but we cannot opt out of morality. If so, what does that tell us about the links between moral obligation and religious belief?
2. Saying that an action is morally wrong, or that it is sinful are just two ways of expressing one's disapproval.
3. Moral experience is awareness of God.
4. There can be no link between virtue and happiness. We should embrace the human condition as it is. The transcendental argument is a piece of wishful thinking.

Which of the above would you endorse?.....

Which of the above would you reject?.....

Reason(s) for your answer:.....

.....

## The Euthyphro Dilemma

“Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?”

A problem for theistic ethics:

1. If God wills the good because it is good, then the good is independent of God’s will, so God’s will does not explain/ justify moral goodness.
2. If what is morally good is so because God wills it, then God’s will is arbitrary. Again, it does not explain/ justify moral goodness.

Possible replies:

1. Religion sometimes calls for the ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’. S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (1855). For instance, in The Old Testament God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. The significance of absolute trust. Ethics is subsumed in authentic religious experience, not negated.
2. The directions of fit implied by the dilemma (mind to world and world to mind) are not mutually exclusive. There is an intrinsic fittingness (likelihood) between goodness in the world and God. A development of the notion of the first cause as universal final cause (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, lecture 2): God as the ultimate source of value.

Discussion:

1. The Euthyphro dilemma raises a fatal objection to theistic ethics.
2. Any ethical theory would be faced with a version of the Euthyphro dilemma, not just theistic ethics.
3. The teleological suspension of the ethical opens the door to cruelty in the name of religion.

Which of the above would you endorse?.....

Which of the above would you reject?.....

Reason(s) for your answer:.....

.....

## Is religion incompatible with morality?

### Rational autonomy

To the extent that worship requires the abandonment of one’s rational autonomy, it undermines the very foundations of morality (cf. James Rachels, ‘God and Human Attitudes’, *Religious Studies* (7) 1971; Robin Le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism*, 2000):

1. It is important to understand and reflectively endorse the reasons for one’s actions. If not, these actions would have no moral worth.
2. To do God’s will sometimes requires that one acts on blind trust.
3. Rational autonomy is incompatible with blind trust.

*Therefore:* Religious obedience to authority is inconsistent with morality properly understood.

### Value pluralism, Toleration, Moral Disagreement

Shared ground: theistic ethics would have difficulty making room for diversity as a moral, social, and political good.

Discussion

1. Which premise of the argument from autonomy is the most significant and why?  
.....
2. Does the fact of religious intolerance offer good grounds for the conclusion that religion is at odds with morality?  
.....
3. Does persistence of moral disagreement offer good grounds for the conclusion that religion is at odds with morality?  
.....

**Seminar readings:**

- Anscombe, G.E.M. 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 1958, 33:1-19. Downloadable from the Library website.
- Zagzebski, L. 'Morality and Religion', In W. Wainwright (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford, 2009). E-book available in our Library.
- Kant, I. 'God as a Postulate of Sound Moral Thinking'. In B. Davies (ed.) *Philosophy of Religion. A Guide and Anthology* (Oxford, 2000). Or: relevant section from Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*.

### Lecture 7: Religious belief and first-personal experience

#### Nature and significance of religious experience

Arguments for/against theism focus on concepts, claims and proofs. Two implications:

- 1) God is taken to be an appropriate object of rational inquiry, whose existence and attributes we are meant to ascertain;
- 2) the inquiry is supposed to make sense from an impersonal viewpoint, since the validity of its conclusions is meant to be at least in principle recognisable by any unbiased rational thinker.

This approach leaves (first-)personal religious experience out of the picture. This lecture outlines an alternative: the subject matter of Philosophy of Religion is religious experience, not the nature or existence of God.

William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)

Central claim: religion is something that individuals experience; this experience is a kind of psychological universal – not in the sense that we all believe in God, whether we admit it or not, but in the sense that religion has an important life-sustaining and life-affirming function.

1. The proposed ‘science of religion’ looks into personal as opposed to institutional religion: how specific individuals make sense of their lives and manage to respond to the quest for meaning.
2. Religion is not to be sought in doctrines; its central manifestations are human action and feeling.
3. The central question: what does religion do for individuals who are able to hold onto and live by this kind of experience?
4. The upshot is a pragmatic case for the value of religious experience.
5. Religious experience and psychopathology may often go hand in hand. The distinction between the two can only be established by pragmatic considerations: what does the person feel and do as a result? (See Lecture 1, vignette on Simon in Fulford and Radoilska 2012).
6. Religion is a psychological universal to the extent that the quest for meaning is unavoidable: e.g. ‘there is more to life than meets the eye’. However, religious experience is not always positive: melancholy, evil, sense of damnation and hopelessness are also ways by which we may make sense of our place in the world.
7. The ability to overcome hopelessness and to go on living (religion at its most successful) provides a pragmatic argument for the rationality of religious belief.

#### Discussion

1. Could a pragmatic science of religion avoid objectifying God? If so, would this be an intellectual advantage?  
.....  
.....
2. Could individualism be an essential feature of religious experience given that a strong sense of community is what people usually point to as one of their main reasons for taking part in a religious practice?

.....  
.....  
3. Is the proximity between religion and psychopathology at odds with the notion of a pragmatic argument for the rationality of religious belief?  
.....  
.....

4. Consider the following passage from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. What does it tell us about the pragmatic concept of religion?

An idea, to be suggestive, must come to the individual with the force of a revelation. The mind-cure with its gospel of healthy-mindedness has come as a revelation to many whose hearts the church of Christianity had left hardened. It has let loose their springs of higher life. In what can the originality of any religious movement consist, save in finding a channel, until then sealed up, through which those springs may be set free in some group of human beings? The force of personal faith, enthusiasm, and example, and above all the force of novelty, are always the prime suggestive agency of this kind of success. If mind-cure should ever become official, respectable, and entrenched, these elements of suggestive efficacy will be lost.”

.....  
.....

Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (1923)

Religious experience is universal in the sense of having an identifiable core across different cultures, for which Otto reserves the categories of ‘numen’ and ‘numinous’. Defining features:

- a personal communion with a Holy Other
- awe- even horror-inspiring and at the same time
- fascinating and reassuring
- the above features are not experienced as paradoxical
- the encounter engages the non-rational aspects of our psychology in a way that ensures overall psychological harmony
- the ‘holy’ is a special category of value in comparison to which ordinary or natural things and experiences get disvalued as ‘profane’.

**Is positive religious experience compatible with atheism?**

Radical Theology: God is a necessary fiction. Consider the following pair of statements:

1. “God is a unifying symbol that eloquently personifies and represents to us everything that spirituality requires of us.”
2. “The only religiously adequate God cannot exist.”

Don Cuppitt, *Taking Leave of God* (1980).

A step further: Religion without God where religious activities are grounded in the recognition that God is fictional (R. Le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism*, 2000). Fictional here is understood as related to imagining in the same way as truth is related to belief. Imaginings can also spur action and emotion: e.g. Kendall Walton’s theory of representational

art as make-believe. So, religious experience may find an alternative ground in imagination, and this is compatible with an atheistic belief system.

Points in favour of Religion without God:

- If religion is primarily a sense of being at home in the world, not a belief in the existence of God, atheists do not seem excluded from it in principle.
- If numinous experience is a human universal across cultures, it would also include modern secular societies.
- Atheism is consistent with religious practice, with being part of a religious community.

Points against Religion without God:

- Religious practice does not necessarily mean religious experience.
- A numinous encounter is unlike make-believe, e.g. enjoying a work of fiction and responding to it emotionally whilst knowing that it is just a fiction.
- If some religion were just like make-believe, it would be an Ersatz, not the real thing.

#### Discussion:

1. Which point in favour of a religion without God is the most convincing?
  2. Which point against a religion without God is the most convincing?
  3. Is fictionalism a viable theological position? If so, how does it relate to more traditional forms of theism and atheism?
  4. Could religion be relevantly similar to fiction?
- .....
- .....

#### **Does religious experience speak in favour of theism?**

##### Personalist theology

Authentic religious experience is authoritative precisely because it is personal. The mistake of the traditional arguments for theism is that they search for proof in the wrong place: knowledge of God is radically different from the knowledge of natural objects. If anything, it is like the direct, unmediated knowledge we have of the person of others as opposed to knowledge of their various natural characteristics. So, the intuitive awareness of God in religious experience amounts to knowledge of God (e.g. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 1923; H.P. Owen, *The Christian Knowledge of God*, 1969).

A step further: Without personal experience of the reality of God, we are also unable to experience the reality of other human beings, and of ourselves, as persons as opposed to mere objects. Godlessness as a particularly impoverished, even 'void' first-personal perspective on the world: Roger Scruton, *The Face of God*, 2012.

Points in favour of theological personalism:

- It captures well the sense of absolute certainty associated with first-personal religious experience.
- It draws attention to the different mode of awareness that arises when we engage with people as persons rather than mere objects.

- It highlights the existential price of thorough atheism: finding oneself, alone, in a world of facts with no value or deeper meaning, and no persons to speak of.

Points against theological personalism:

- Acknowledging the worth of first-personal religious experience is not meant to serve as a proof of the existence of God: this kind of experience is radically different from the traditional arguments for theism and, therefore, cannot do their job.
- There is no reliable way to distinguish between authentic and unauthentic first-personal religious experience: subjective certainty and objective accuracy do not always go hand in hand: here, the case of delusions is particularly to the point.

Discussion:

1. Which point in favour of theological personalism is the most convincing?
2. Which point against theological personalism is the most convincing?
3. Could thorough atheism reclaim a personal dimension without at the same time implicitly reintroducing some substitute for the Holy Other?

**Seminar reading:**

- Donovan, P. 'Can We Know God by Experience?' In B. Davies (ed.) *Philosophy of Religion. A Guide and Anthology* (Oxford, 2000).

## Lecture 8: Miracles

### Two sets of questions

- 1) Are miracles possible? Is the concept of miracle even coherent?
- 2) Is it rational to believe in miracles? In particular, is it rational to believe in the testimony of miracles?

Follow-up on nature and significance of religious experience: Can we relate ours to others? Should we trust other people's religious experience? Could belief in miracles be consistent with a scientific world-view?

### Hume on Miracles (*Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Ch. X)

Hume's definition of miracle: "a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent".

This could be interpreted as stating that miracles are naturally impossible. Assumption: a natural law is more than a mere regularity. Arguably then: miracles are also logically impossible. Yet: miracles could still be supernaturally possible (although extremely unlikely).

Hume's take on the role of miracles: "no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion". Two related points:

- 1) the role is primarily epistemic (to provide rationale for religious belief);
- 2) this role cannot be successfully fulfilled.

The Humean conception of miracle takes the two underlying issues, possibility and credibility of miracles, to be intimately related. The link becomes apparent when we consider the limitations of testimony implied by this conception.

Hume's argument against miracles reconstructed (modified from Michael Root, 'Miracles and the Uniformity of Nature' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 26 (1989)):

- 1) The testimony of others is credible only on the assumption that natural laws are exceptionless regularities, i.e. that nature is uniform;
- 2) A testimony that goes against the assumption that nature is uniform undermines its own credibility;
- 3) Miracles are violations of natural laws;
- 4) As such, miracles go against the assumption that nature is uniform.

Therefore, no testimony of a miracle is ever credible.

### Discussion

1. Consider the following passage from the *Enquiry*. What does it tell us about the kind of impossibility Hume associates with miracles?

Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happen in the common course of nature. It is no miracle that a man, seemingly in good health should die on a sudden; because such a kind of death, though more unusual than any other, has yet been frequently observed to happen. But it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life: because that has never been observed in any age or country. There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle... (1777, 114)

.....  
.....

2. In light of Hume’s own view of causality (see Lecture 3 on the Design Argument), shouldn’t we acknowledge belief in miracles to be as epistemically sound as belief in the laws of nature?

.....  
.....

3. Is Hume’s definition of miracles compelling? In particular, does natural order provide an adequate reference point against which to define miracles, i.e. in terms of ‘transgression’ or ‘violation’? To answer this question, briefly describe what you would take to be a paradigm case of a miracle.

.....  
.....

4. Do you agree that in order to be rationally justified in believing other people’s word, we have to assume that the natural laws are uniform? To answer this question, provide an example or counterexample.

.....  
.....

An alternative conception of miracle: R.F Holland, ‘The Miraculous’

Central claim: a ‘violation’ conception of miracle, such as Hume’s does not capture the defining features of our ordinary, common sense understanding of miracle. A ‘contingency’ conception of miracle does a better job at this because:

- The uniformity of nature does not provide an adequate reference point against which to define miracles.
- It misses the human significance of miracles: the natural reference point is provided by the notion of luck: in both cases, there is coincidence of events that can be explained as ‘ordinary’ each on its own; however, their coming together is both extremely unlikely and beneficial.
- The sense of awe and gratitude experienced as a result is what distinguishes miracles from instances of ‘good fortune’ (see Lecture 7 on Religious experience, esp. Rudolf Otto’s notion of numen).

Discussion

1. Describe an event that would count as a miracle assuming a ‘contingency’, but not a ‘violation’ conception and vice versa, an event that would count as a miracle assuming a ‘violation’, but not a ‘contingency’ conception. Which of the two is the more intuitive?

.....  
.....

2. Would you expect that on a ‘contingency’ conception the relationship between miracles and natural regularities would be less significant than on a ‘violation’ conception? If so, in what way? If not, why not?

.....  
.....

3. Consider the following pair of statements: “The fact that something is conceptually impossible does not necessarily preclude its occurrence.” and “Something could be at the same time empirically certain and conceptually impossible.” What do you make of them?

.....  
.....

### Revisiting the terms of the discussion

#### Regularity and Supernatural Agency

Miracles are defined against some kind of stipulated regularity: as violations, exceptions, meaningful contingencies. A closer look at the notion of law, by which regularity is expressed here, would be helpful.

‘Violation’ belongs to the vocabulary of jurisprudence: an implicit analogy between laws of nature and laws of states. However, there is also an important disanalogy: the laws of states can be de facto violated without any danger of their being invalidated. Not so with the laws of nature: if an exception is established beyond doubt, then the putative law of nature gets reformulated/ refined/ revisited.

So, are violations of laws of nature on a par with exceptions? No, if we take the notion of supernatural agency seriously. Consider the following:

When we describe evidence which is contrary to a law of nature as miraculous we are not opposing the law but in an important sense defending it... The law of gravity, properly understood, applies only to natural objects unaffected by supernatural interference, so it is not incoherent to suppose that an occurrence of supernatural origin would result in the violation of the law of gravity. (Steve Clarke, ‘When to Believe in Miracles’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (1997), p.97)

#### Discussion:

1. Should we take supernatural agency seriously? If so, in what way? If not, why not?
2. What do you think is the main disanalogy between a law of nature and a juridical law? If so, would be the main analogy between these two kinds of laws?

#### Probability and Testimony

Hume’s original conclusion that the existence of miracles should not be accepted on trust is expressed in comparative, not absolute terms:

The plain consequence is ... that no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavours to establish. (*Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* 1777, 116).

Two related points: 1) testimony seems to be given epistemic significance only in terms of surrogate observation; as a result, 2) testimony itself does not affect the probability of the event.

A possible counterexample: Lottery Surprise (modified from Mavrodes 2009). The chance of winning the lottery is 1 in 100 million; yet I read my name in the newspaper as being the winner (unbeknown to me, a friend bought a ticket to my name as a surprise). Would it be irrational for me to believe that I have won given the low objective and even lower subjective probability of winning, added to the fact that newspapers are not 100% reliable? Arguably, yes: “something whose initial probability is so small as to be almost unimaginable is converted by single testimony into something that is substantially more probable than not.” (Mavrodes 2009, p. 315).

The notion of trust implied by the Humean notion of testimony might also be vulnerable to objections:

Two possible logical forms:

- 1) I believe/ disbelieve the testimony that  $p$  is the case: my focus here is the probability of a state of affairs.
- 2) I believe/ disbelieve the testimony of  $P$ : my focus here is the trustworthiness of a person.

The Humean notion of testimony seems to overemphasise 1) to the exclusion of 2).

### Discussion:

Consider the following statement. Do you agree with the model of trust it puts forward? What would be its possible implications for the rationality of taking miracles on trust?

Trusting thus functions analogously to blinkered vision: it shields from view a whole range of interpretations about the motives of another and restricts the inferences we will make about the likely actions of another... What in the absence of trust would be taken to be a reason for jealousy, for wary suspicion, or for action to protect my interests will not be so taken when there is trust. It is because the one trusted is viewed through the affective lens of trust that those who trust are – usually cheerfully, and often on the basis of the smallest evidence – willing to risk depending on the one trusted. (Karen Jones, 'Trust as an Affective Attitude', *Ethics* 107 (1996))

### **Seminar readings:**

- **Main discussion text:** Holland, R.F. 'The Miraculous', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1965, 2:43-51. Available on Moodle.
- **Recommended:** Mavrodes, G. 'Miracles', In W. Wainwright (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford, 2009). E-book available at the University Library.

### Lecture 9: God and the Meaning of Life

Meaning of life (also, meaningfulness): a positive normative feature, different from happiness, well-being, moral perfection; e.g. Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*. Princeton, 2010:

Meaningfulness as a specific type of personal identification, source of motivating and normative reasons irreducible to either morality or happiness (cf. Transcendental Argument, Lecture 6). It brings together two main ideas:

- Fulfilment view: meaning cannot be conferred to a person's life, unless he or she also cares about the meaning-conferring feature (viz. value) and
- Larger-than-oneself view: the meaning-conferring feature must be of independent value.
- Wolf's solution: a commitment or activity confers meaning to a person's life if it is both subjectively endorsed and objectively valuable: meaningfulness is realised by 'loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way' (Wolf 2010, p.13).

#### Discussion:

1. Describe a life that wouldn't count as meaningful on Wolf's conception.

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2. Looking at the description above, is meaningfulness/ lack of meaning irreducible to other normative features?

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3. Consider the following statement: "People do not act for the sake of a meaningful life." What do you make of it? Is it compatible with Wolf's conception of meaningfulness?

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How does theism affect the meaning of life? A taxonomy (modified from Tim Mawson, 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life and Philosophy of Religion', *Philosophy Compass* 8/12 2013):

- 1) Optimism, e.g. classical theism: human life is meaningful since it has God-given purpose.
- 2) Pessimism, e.g. atheistic existentialism: the existence of God would make human life devoid of meaning.
- 3) Neutralism: the existence of God does not affect the issue either way.

Euthyphro Dilemma: does God's purpose generate meaning for our lives because God wills it to be so, or does God will a purpose for our lives because it is meaning-generating?

John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life*. Routledge 2003.

Central claim: acting morally is necessary, but not sufficient for our lives to be meaningful. A theistic God is essential for it.

Two related points:

- 1) The success of one's projects is necessary if they were to confer meaning to one's life. Assumption: meaning is purpose, if the purpose is not achieved, the meaning is lost.

Example: a man devotes his life to building a proper hospital in an extremely poor part of the world where medical provision is dire. The day after the building is completed and before any patients have been treated there, a natural disaster kills the man and destroys his hospital completely.

- 2) Moral principles must be grounded in an absolute, objective, universal, unchangeable order. Assumption: even in the context of a species-wide morality, the meaning of life would be lost.

Discussion

1. Consider the following passage from *On the Meaning of Life*. How should we answer the Euthyphro Dilemma in light of it? Do you find this answer compelling?

If the ultimate nature of reality contains no bias towards the good as opposed to the vicious, if there is nothing to support the hope that the good will ultimately triumph, if essentially we are on our own, with no particular reason to think that our pursuit of the good is any more than a temporary fragile disposition possessed by a percentage (perhaps a minority) of a certain class of anthropoids — then at the very least it is hard to see how we can achieve the necessary confidence and resolution to follow the path of goodness; and at worst the very idea that some lives can be more meaningful than others begins to seem a fantasy (2003, 72).

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2. What do you make of the hospital example? Do you agree that success is required in order for a life to have meaning?

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3. Would value pluralism be problematic on Cottingham's conception?

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4. Consider the following statement: "If the purpose of a life is God-given, this life cannot have human meaning." What do you make of it?

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Thomas Nagel, 'The Absurd', *Journal of Philosophy* 68, 1970

Four bad reasons to take on absurdism (the view that our lives are necessarily meaningless):

- Our lives wouldn't matter in the distant future.
- In comparison to the universe, we are very small.
- We are mortal.
- The chain of justifications that we provide for our actions ends unsatisfactorily and so, our lives are like 'an elaborate journey, leading nowhere'.

One good reason for absurdism:

- The discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality. At the root is 'the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt' (p.51-52). What's more, there is always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives from which the seriousness [with which we live our lives] appears gratuitous.' (p. 52)

Discussion

1. Consider the following argument. Do you find it persuasive?  
 'If a sense of the absurd is a way of perceiving our true situation (even though the situation is not absurd until the perception arises), then what reason can we have to resent or escape it? Like the capacity for epistemological scepticism, it results from the ability to understand our human limitations. It need not be a matter for agony unless we make it so.' (p.59)  
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2. Does absurdism really go hand in hand with scepticism? If so, is it a viable position? Provide an example or counterexample.  
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3. 'Absurdity warrants neither distress, nor defiance.' Do you agree? If so, what does absurdity warrant?  
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4. Why would the point of view outside the particular form of our lives pose such a threat to the meaning of these lives?  
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Antony Flew, 'Tolstoi and the Meaning of Life', Ethics 73 (1963)

Reflections on the loss of meaningfulness in life as described in Tolstoi's *Confession*:

- 1) 'I experienced moments of perplexity and arrest of life, as though I did not know what to do or how to live...They were always expressed by the questions: What is it for? What does it lead to?'  
 (cf. Nagel's comments on the 'chain of justifications' ground for absurdism)
- 2) 'It was impossible to avoid seeing that there was nothing ahead but suffering and real death – complete annihilation.'

(cf. Nagel's comments on the 'mortality' ground for absurdism)

- 3) Tolstoy's solution: 'All that people sincerely believe in must be true; it may be differently expressed but it cannot be a lie, and therefore if it presents itself to me as a lie, that only means I have not understood it'.

Flew's interpretation: questions about the meaning of life are symptomatic. They have no meaning outside a specific form of life.

Discussion:

1. In light of Tolstoy's experience, should we reconsider the significance of mortality and the ultimate 'groundlessness' of our commitments as reasons for absurdism?

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2. How does Tolstoy's experience relate to the detached viewpoint that Nagel associates with the sense of absurdity? Is it an example, or counterexample?

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3. What would be a good argument for neutralism, the view that whether a theistic God exists or not is immaterial to the question of meaningfulness in life?

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**Seminar reading:**

- Flew, A., 'Tolstoy and the Meaning of Life', *Ethics* 73 (1963); 110-118. Downloadable from the University Library resource website.

### Lecture 10: – Life and Death and the Problem of Personal Identity

#### Two underlying questions:

1. Is personal immortality a coherent idea?
2. Is personal immortality desirable?

#### Immortality of the soul, mortality of the body:

**Central claims:** 1) substance dualism (also Cartesian dualism); and 2) the self is the immaterial (hence, immortal) soul.

#### Supporting intuitions:

- 1) Natural talk of ‘having’ our bodies. Personal identity over time, in spite of bodily change.
- 2) Privileged access to our mental states: direct and unchallengeable knowledge of our own mental states, different from the way we know things about the world around us.

A person has a body if there is one particular chunk of matter through which he has to operate on and learn about the world. But suppose he finds himself able to operate on and learn about the world within some small finite region, without having to use one particular chunk of matter for this purpose. He might find himself with knowledge of the position of objects in a room ... and able to move such objects just like that, in the ways in which we know about the positions of our limbs and can move them. But the room would not be, as it were, the person’s body; for we may suppose that simply by choosing to do so he can gradually shift the focus of his knowledge and control, e.g. to the next room. The person would be in no way limited to operating and learning through one particular chunk of matter. Hence we may term him disembodied. The supposition that a person might become disembodied seems coherent. (S. Shoemaker and R. Swinburne, *Personal Identity*, 1984, p. 23)

#### Discussion:

1. Looking at the thought experiment above, would a disembodied person operate on and learn about the world in a relevantly similar way to that of an embodied one?  
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2. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein observes: ‘I can know what someone else is thinking, not what I am thinking. It is correct to say: “I know what you are thinking”, and wrong to say “I know what I am thinking”.’ What do you make of it?  
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3. In light of the above, consider the following statement: ‘I was in pain, but I did not know this.’ .....

#### Historical precedents

Plato, *Phaedo*: the self is an immortal soul, temporarily imprisoned in a mortal body. Death is liberation for the soul. After spending some time free from embodiment, the soul becomes imprisoned again.

A *caveat*: this immortality might not count as ‘personal’ immortality.

Different criteria for personal identity: important if a ‘life after death’ is to count as the life of the same person (modified from Lynne Rudder Baker, ‘Death and the Afterlife’ In W. Wainwright, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*):

1. The pre- and post-mortem person have the same soul: Plato
2. have the same soul-body composite: Aristotle
3. have the same body: Augustine, the doctrine of resurrection as reanimation of the same body.
4. have the same memories: Locke, (to some extent also Plato)

Descartes, *Meditations*: I can have a clear and distinct idea of myself as an immaterial being; moreover, I cannot doubt my own existence; I can however doubt that I have body.

My essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing. It is true that I may have (or, anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely related to me. But nevertheless, on the one hand, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand, I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as it is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and can exist without it. (*Sixth Meditation*).

### Discussion

1. Which of the four criteria of personal identity is the most/ the least credible? Provide examples/ counterexamples.

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2. Consider the following line of reasoning. Do you agree with it?  
If it would be valid to argue ‘I can doubt that my body exists but not that I exist, *ergo* I am not my body’, it would be equally valid to argue ‘I can doubt that there exists a being whose essential nature is to think, but I cannot doubt that I exist, *ergo* I am not a being whose essential nature is to think’.

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3. What could be said in favour of an account of reincarnation along the lines of Plato’s *Phaedo*?

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### Williams, B. ‘The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality’

Immortality is undesirable; however, this does not mean that death is not an evil.

Lucretius’ arguments against the fear of death:

- Fear of death is based on a conceptual confusion: fear of experiences that one would have once dead.
- Dying earlier is not any worse than dying later: once dead, a person’s desires cannot be frustrated.

According to Williams, neither argument is successful. This becomes clear as soon as we distinguish the unconditional or ‘categorical’ desires from conditional desires. Some things we only desire assuming that we are alive; others we

desire independently of whether we are alive or not. Life might be desirable only to the extent that it is a prerequisite for the fulfilment of this second kind of desire. And so, Lucretius' mistake is to treat all desires as conditional.

Implications of the structure of categorical desires for immortality:

1. Continuous existence would make it impossible to entertain categorical desires: boredom.
2. Serial existence would make it impossible to have a character, a personal identity, but this is what grounds categorical desires.

Discussion

1. Consider the following claim. In light of the preceding discussion, do you find it persuasive? 'Immortality or a state without death would be meaningless...; so in a sense, death gives the meaning to life.' (p.82)  
.....  
.....
2. 'The question of life being desirable is certainly transcendental in the most modest sense, in that it gets by far its best answer in never being asked at all.' What do you make of this statement? Discuss in light of our discussion on the meaning of life (Lecture 9).  
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3. Why could the desire to live forever not be categorical?  
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4. Is the fear of death irrational? If so, are Lucretius' arguments compelling? If not, when is it o.k. to fear death?  
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Geach, P. 'What must be true of me if I survive my death?'

A closer look at psychological concepts, such as 'seeing' leads to exposing the notion of an immortal soul surviving the death of one's body as a conceptual muddle:

Our concepts of seeing, hearing, pain, anger, etc. apply in the first instance to human beings; we willingly extend them (say) to cats, dogs, and horses, but we rightly feel uncomfortable about extending them to very alien creatures and speaking of a slug's hearing or an angry ant. (p. 725-6)

So, a disembodied spirit cannot engage in activities that can be recognised as a person's own. The only way to survive one's death is to be 're-embodied' as oneself; yet, reincarnation wouldn't do. This is because:

1. Memories from a previous life wouldn't suffice to ensure personal identity: e.g. a baby born in Oxford in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century wouldn't be identical with Hitler even if when grown up displays knowledge that presumably only Hitler would have had.
2. The case of mediums would be indistinguishable from that of 'reincarnated selves'.

Both objections point to a similar problem: personal identity over time requires both material and mental continuity – a distinct one-to-one relationship. Hence only resurrection would count as surviving one's death.

Discussion:

1. Does the argument above aim to show that personal immortality is impossible?

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2. Does the argument above aim to show that the immortality of a disembodied soul is impossible?

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3. Could there be some compelling counterexamples to the conclusion that only resurrection would count as surviving one's death?

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**Seminar readings:**

- Williams, B. 'The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality', *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge, 1973). E-copy available on Moodle.
- Geach, P. 'What must be true of me if I survive my death?' In B. Davies (ed.) *Philosophy of Religion. A Guide and Anthology* (Oxford, 2000). E-copy available on Moodle.