

Philosophy of Religion

First of all, it is as well to be clear about what Philosophy of Religion amounts to.

Philosophy of Religion is neither a species of religious studies nor religious philosophy. Rather, it is philosophy about religion which means that it tries to understand the kinds of thinking that underpin peoples' religious convictions and clarify the nature of religion in general. Like the other areas of philosophy, we will approach it dispassionately whether or not you have personal religious convictions. How might we determine whether or not God exists? What is the role of faith in religious conviction? Can one rationalise religious belief? How might one reconcile religious belief with the presence of evil in the world? What kinds of relationship does religious belief have with evolutionary theory? How might organised religion play a role in the survival of the human race? If faith is a central aspect of religious belief, is there any merit in even trying to formulate rational arguments for the existence or non-existence of God?

Debates within the philosophy of religion are amongst the more public that philosophers tend to engage in. This can be largely attributed to the role that religion plays in our everyday life – from personal points of view to the ways in which they can influence the political climate and direction of a country (and so on). Sometimes this can lead them to become heated. As philosophers however, we are concerned with trying to understand the nature of the various arguments involved and, whilst sometimes such philosophical analysis can touch on personal beliefs, one should not take one's interlocutor as making personal attacks. Obviously, this can be difficult since religious belief or a lack of it can be part of one's identity but it is, nonetheless, essential to maintain a dispassionate spirit in debate.

Belief in a deity is one way in which we can make sense of our existence. Recall how, in our last class, I asked you to think about why there is anything at all. This question of existence cuts right to core of the meaning of our lives: why are we here at all? Why is anything here at all? For some, the enormity of this question is enough for them to suppose the existence of a deity; for others it is not. Some argue that rationality is necessary for faith in God; others argue the opposite. This part of the

course is all about trying to understand questions raised by such positions and assessing many of the answers that have been given to them. We will begin with attempts to formulate rational arguments for the existence of God.

In this class we are going to look at three main rational arguments for the existence of God and some initial objections to them. They are: **The Argument from Design** (also known as the Teleological Argument), the **First Cause Argument** (also known as the Cosmological Argument) and the **Ontological Argument**. It is necessary to distinguish rational from irrational arguments for the existence of God because the latter, in virtue of their irrationality, cannot be subject to philosophical analysis.

The standard conception of the Christian God is a being who is all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient) and all-good (omni-benevolent). Put another way, the traditional conception of the Christian God is one that is ultimate in greatness. For the most part, this will be the conception of God with which we will be working. Let us start then, with the Argument from Design (Teleological Argument).

The Argument from Design (Teleological Argument)

The argument from design was most famously articulated by William Paley (1743-1805) in his book *Natural Theology or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*¹.

Paley's development of the argument centres on the famous analogy of the watch. Here is an abridged version of it: suppose you are walking across a heath and stumble upon a watch. Even if you had never seen a watch before, close scrutiny of it would reveal an intricate mechanism. From this, you would reasonably infer that it had a designer and, as such, did not occur by chance. The watch must be the product of an intelligent mind. Something similar can be said about nature and the universe as a whole. Like the watch, the universe appears to work at a mechanical level. This, similarly, implies a designer. We can express the argument like this:

¹ Although the philosopher David Hume made it earlier but with the sole intention of rejecting it.

1. The universe is analogous to man-made mechanical devices.
2. Man-made mechanical devices are the product of intelligent design.
3. Analogous effects will have analogous causes.

Therefore

4. Design in nature is analogous to man-made design. As such, it has a designer – namely, God.

The First Cause Argument

The First Cause Argument (or Cosmological Argument) argues that the existence of God is highly likely based on the laws of cause and effect. It also tries to address the question of why there is anything at all more directly. Current thinking suggests the universe (or current universe) has been in existence for about 14 billion years. But where did it come from? Some theories suggest that there is a continuous cycle of universe expansion and collapse; others that we are in one of many universes (mult-verses). None of these theories however, answer the question of where any of it came from in the first place. If everything was formed by the Big Bang, what caused that? And why do the laws of nature exist in the first place?

The Cosmological Argument (inspired first by Aristotle in his doctrine of the prime (or unmoved) mover) makes the following claims. God provides the best explanation of why there is anything at all; He is the first cause (or, in Aristotelian terms, the unmoved mover).

The Ontological Argument

Made most famous by Anselm (1033 – 1109) and Descartes (1596 – 1650). Ontology means ‘the study of what there is’. The ontological argument for the existence of God is, therefore, concerned with His being. It concludes that the definition of a perfect God entails His existence; as such, it is not an argument that relies on empirical evidence and is, therefore, a conclusion that is known independent of our experiences (an argument known *a priori*). I will just sketch the respective arguments of Anselm and Descartes here.

Here is an abridged version of Anselm’s argument: Nothing greater than God can be conceived. If God only existed in the mind, then it would be possible to

conceive of a greater being that existed both in the mind and in reality. Thus, God cannot just exist in the mind. As such, God is an idea as well as existing in reality. It is self-contradictory to conceive of something that nothing greater can be thought and yet deny its existence.

Anselm pushed this argument further, claiming that it was impossible to conceive of God as not existing. This argument also relies on God being in everything. It goes like this: Nothing greater than God can be conceived. It is greater to be a necessary being than a contingent one (if God was contingent, he would have to rely on something else and the possibility would exist that he might not exist). God is, therefore, a necessary being which means that he must exist. Necessary in this case, means logically necessary. Thus, God exists in reality.

Descartes takes a similar (though not identical) approach in his fifth Meditation. Descartes remarks, “...*from the fact alone that I can draw from my thought the idea of a thing, it follows that all that I recognize clearly and distinctly as belonging to that being does indeed belong to it, cannot I derive from this an argument and proof demonstrating the existence of God?*” (Meditation V p.144). Descartes continues by arguing that “*I cannot conceive a God without existence, anymore than I can a mountain without a valley, yet, just as it does not follow that merely because I conceive a mountain without a valley, there is any mountain in the world, so, similarly, although I conceive God as having existence, it does not follow from that, that there is a God who actually exists...*” (p.145). However, “*because I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, it does not follow that there is any mountain in the world, or any valley, but only that the mountain and the valley, whether they exist or not, cannot in any way be separated from one another; whereas because I cannot conceive of God without existence, it follows that existence is inseparable from him and hence that he truly exists; not that my thought can make this be so, or that it imposes any necessity on things, but, on the contrary, because the necessity of the thing itself namely, the necessity of the existence of God, determines my thought to conceive in this way.* (p.145).

Bibliography

Descartes, R. *Discourse on Method and The Meditations*. Penguin Classics. London.