

CHAPTER 13: PHILOSOPHY AND BELIEF IN GOD

Main Points

1. Religious commitment involves philosophical beliefs. The philosophy of religion attempts to understand and rationally evaluate these beliefs. In contrast to theology, it does not make religious assumptions in doing so.
2. The beliefs of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition have received the most discussion by Western philosophers.

Two Christian Greats

3. *Anselm*. Though he thought it impossible for anyone to reason about God or God's existence without already believing in him, **Anselm** was willing to evaluate on its own merit and independently of religious assumptions the idea that God does *not* exist.
4. *The ontological argument*. Anselm's ontological arguments attempt to show that disbelief in God entails self-contradiction.
5. *Gaunilo's objection*. **Gaunilo** attempted to refute Anselm's first argument, using the idea of the most perfect island. If Anselm's reasoning is sound, Gaunilo argued, then the most perfect island must exist in reality because if it didn't, any island that did exist in reality would be more perfect than the most perfect island.
6. *Aquinas*. **Aquinas's Five Ways**: the first three proofs of God's existence (motion, causation, contingency) are versions of **cosmological argument**; the fourth proof (degrees of goodness) is a **moral argument**; the fifth proof (purpose) is a **teleological argument**. Many consider the third way the soundest proof; Aquinas favored the first way.
7. *The first way*. Because there is change in general, a first mover (God) must therefore exist that is moved by no other.
8. *The second way*. Nothing causes itself; if no first cause exists, there would be no effects. So we must admit a first cause, namely, God. For Aquinas, there cannot be an infinite series of simultaneous causes or movers.
9. *The third way*. If everything belonged to the category "need not exist," then at one time nothing existed. That being the case, nothing would exist now. Thus, there must be something the existence of which is necessary, and because it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things that have their necessity caused by another, there must be a necessary being that has its own necessity, and this is God.
10. *The fourth and fifth ways*. All natural things possess degrees of goodness, truth, and all other perfections; there must be that which is the source of these perfections, and that is what is called God. Natural things act for an end or purpose, functioning in

accordance with a plan or design; thus, an intelligent being exists by which things are directed toward their end, and this intelligent being is God.

11. Aquinas: Some theological truths (truths of revelation) cannot be discovered by philosophy. But other truths (God's existence) can be proven by philosophy.

Mysticism

12. It is one thing to say "God came to me" in mystical experience but another to explain why such experience is a reliable form of knowledge.
13. The mystic **Julian of Norwich** focuses on the nature of personal religious and moral knowledge, as well as on whether it is possible to know God. She denied that there is any meaningful difference in the validity of mystical revelations (she called them "showings") made directly to our soul and knowledge derived through reason. We can know God only partly through revelation; further knowledge comes through loving God.
14. For Julian, God lives in us and we in God; we are one with God and are nurtured and fed knowledge of God and of ourselves by this divine parent.
15. Julian: The knowledge God gives the mystics can provide reasons for ordinary people to have hope in the midst of wars, plagues, and religious disputes.

Seventeenth-Century Perspectives

16. *Descartes*. **Descartes** found God's existence indubitable, for three reasons. The first two are combination ontological–cosmological arguments; the third is a streamlined ontological argument.
17. *Descartes's first proof*. Descartes reasons that he is a thinking thing who finds within his mind the idea of God, of an infinite and perfect being. There must be a cause of such an idea, but because there must be as much reality or perfection in the cause of an idea as there is in the content of the idea, God exists.
18. *Descartes's second proof*. (1) I exist as a thing that has an idea of God; (2) everything that exists has a cause that brought it into existence and that sustains it in existence; (3) the only thing adequate to cause and sustain me, a thing that has an idea of God, is God; (4) therefore God exists.
19. It seems possible to devise alternative explanations for one's having the idea of God; Descartes's first proofs depend on this not being possible.
20. *Descartes's third proof*. A version of the ontological argument: (1) My conception of God is the conception of a being that possesses all perfections; (2) existence is a perfection; (3) therefore I cannot conceive of God as not existing; (4) God therefore exists.
21. *Leibniz*. **Leibniz** employed the principle of sufficient reason to prove God: unless there is something outside the series of events, some reason for the entire series itself, there is no sufficient reason for any occurrence.
22. The proof is thought by many to be the soundest cosmological argument.

23. *Leibniz and the problem of evil.* Leibniz' theodicy (defense of God's goodness and omnipotence in view of apparent evil) said that for God to create things other than himself, the created things logically must be limited and imperfect. Thus, to the extent that creation is imperfect, it is not wholly good, and thus it is "evil."
24. Yet, using the principle of sufficient reason, Leibniz reasoned that this is the best or most perfect of all worlds possible (because God had chosen it for existence). That is, it is the best world given the materials God used; it is not a perfect world.
25. Leibniz' theodicy was ridiculed by Voltaire in his famous novel *Candide*.

Eighteenth-Century Perspectives

26. *Hume.* His criticism of the teleological argument (argument from design): We cannot attribute to the cause any qualities beyond those, or different from those, required for the effect; given the limitedness of our viewpoint we cannot say that the world is perfect or deserves praise; we cannot infer cause from a single effect; we cannot assume that the cause of the world is like the causes of happenings in it or that the entire world was created by the same mechanisms by which happenings in it are caused; we cannot be sure the world is not the result of trial and error by a multitude of creators; we are in no position to evaluate the comparison of the world to a human artifact.
27. Hume's criticisms of the cosmological argument, which concludes that a necessary being, an uncaused cause, exists: (1) As far as we can make out, the universe may itself be "the necessarily existing being"; (2) if you maintain that everything has a prior cause it is contradictory also to maintain that there was a first cause; (3) if I explain the cause of each member of a series of things there is no further need for an explanation of the series itself as if it were some further thing.
28. *A verbal dispute.* Theists say the universe was created by the divine will but admit there is an immeasurable gulf between the creativity of the divine mind and human creativity. Atheists concede there is some original or fundamental principle of order in the universe, but they insist there is only the remotest analogy to everyday creative processes or to human intelligence. Hume suggested the dispute between the theist and atheist was only verbal and not fundamentally different in kind.
29. *Kant.* Provided one of the most famous moral arguments for God's existence, but criticized the three traditional proofs.
30. *What is wrong with the ontological proof?* The ontological argument assumes that existence is a predicate, which is false.
31. *What is wrong with the cosmological and teleological proofs?* The cosmological argument rests on the ontological argument and employs a principle (that every contingent has a cause) that has significance only in experience to arrive at a conclusion beyond experience. The teleological argument, according to Kant, proves at best only an architect who works with the matter in the world, and not a creator.
32. *Belief in God rationally justified.* Nevertheless, although we do not have theoretical or metaphysical proof of God, God's existence must be assumed as a postulate of practical reason.

Nineteenth-Century Perspectives

33. *Newman*. Offered an argument for God based on the fact of conscience: There is no logical proof that God exists, but concrete or real-life reasoning finds certitude in the feelings of conscience that we are answerable to an intelligence beyond ourselves.
34. *Kierkegaard*. For **Kierkegaard**, God is beyond the grasp of reason, and the idea that God came to us as a man in the person of Jesus is intellectually absurd; yet Kierkegaard was totally committed to Christianity.
35. Kierkegaard: Truth is subjective; it lies not in what we believe but in how we live. We must commit ourselves to God not through a search for objective truth (as if it would give meaning to life) but through a leap of faith, through a nonintellectual, passionate commitment to Christianity.
36. Kierkegaard: The objective uncertainty of God is essential to a true faith in Him.
37. *Nietzsche*. When **Nietzsche** writes that “God is dead,” he does not mean that God once existed and now no longer does. He means instead that there is no intelligent plan to the universe and the order we imagine to exist is merely pasted on by the human mind. But the mass of people, motivated mainly by resentment, see the world as law-governed and adhere to “slave morality” that praises the person who serves others in self-sacrifice.
38. Nietzsche: Slave morality is contrasted with the morality of the “overman” or “superman,” a new kind of human being whose forerunners included Alexander the Great and Napoleon.
39. Nietzsche’s thesis that there is no God and its apparent corollary that there are no absolute and necessary criteria of right and wrong were accepted by such twentieth-century existentialists as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre.
40. *James*. You must choose to believe or not as a live option excluding agnosticism because God’s existence can neither be proved nor disproved by logic and evidence. The pragmatic choice is to believe.
41. James: If the religious beliefs are true but there is insufficient evidence for them, then a policy of avoiding error at any cost is an irrational policy because it cuts off a person’s opportunity to make friends with God.
42. James’s philosophy was a species of *pragmatism*. On the matter of free will and determinism: Determinism is unworkable, he said, because it entailed never regretting what happened (it would be illogical to feel it should not have happened). Acceptance of determinism is inconsistent with the practices of moral beings, who perceive themselves as making genuine choices.

Twentieth-Century Perspectives

43. James’s critics thought he had elevated wishful thinking to the status of proof; believers questioned his implicit assumption that God’s existence cannot be established. Others said James’s belief in God amounted to a gamble rather than true religious acceptance of God.

44. *God and logical positivism.* A central tenet of the Vienna Circle and of logical positivism is the verifiability theory of meaning, according to which the meaning of a factual proposition is the experience you would have to have to know that it is true.
45. Theological utterances such as “God exists” or “God created the world” appear unverifiable by experience, and hence meaningless.
46. Logical positivists were not atheists in the sense of denying God’s existence. Their position was that the utterances “God exists” and “God does not exist” are both nonsense.
47. *Mary Daly: The unfolding of God.* **Mary Daly**, in *Beyond God the Father*: “If God is male, then the male is God.”
48. Daly: Theological symbolism and communication “serve the purposes of patriarchal social arrangements.”
49. Daly: Women’s confrontation with the “structured evil of patriarchy” implies the liberation of all human beings, a new phase in the quest for God.
50. Daly: “God” as an intransitive verb would not be conceived as an object, implying limitation, for God as “Be-ing” (the “most active and dynamic verb of all”) is contrasted only with non-being.
51. Daly: Becoming who one really is means turning one’s back on “the pseudo-reality offered by patriarchy” and by that act affirming “I am”; it means facing the threat of non-being with the courage to face the anxieties of losing job, friends, social approval, and health.
52. Daly: The women’s revolution must ultimately be religious; it must reach “outward and inward toward the God beyond and beneath the gods who have stolen our identity.” In the absence of false gods (“God the Judge” or “God the Judge of Sin”), women are able to experience the presence of a power of being “which both is and is not yet.”
53. *Who needs reasons for believing in God?* Analytic philosopher Alvin Plantinga has argued that the theist may accept the belief in God as a “basic belief,” a belief it is rational to hold without supporting evidence and that is foundational for the entire system of the theist’s beliefs.

Boxes

The Black Cat

(What the theologian finds in a dark room)

Reductio Proofs

(Useful for understanding the ontological argument)

Profile: St. Thomas Aquinas

(A brilliant thinker, nicknamed the Dumb Ox)

Profile: The anchoress, Julian of Norwich

(Best known for her mystical “showings”)

Miracles

(Hume’s principle for evaluating reports of miracles)

God’s foreknowledge and free will

(The difficulty involved in maintaining both)

Religion: Illusion with a future

(Freud’s view)

Creation or evolution?

(An examination of the theological impact of Darwin and of the contemporary Intelligent Design movement)

Profile: William James

(Perhaps the most famous American intellectual of his time)

Pascal’s Wager

(Either God exists or he does not; by betting that he does you lose nothing if he doesn’t)

The Big Bang

(The Big Bang hypothesis leads to a hard choice between an unexplainable universe or one explainable only by reference to something nonphysical)

God is coming, and she is furious

(On God’s gender)

Readings

13.1 St. Anselm, from *Proslogion*

This is Anselm’s first and most famous version of the ontological argument.

13.2 St. Thomas Aquinas, from *Summa Theologica*

The five ways.

13.3 Friedrich Nietzsche, from *The Gay Science*

Nietzsche’s assertion that God is dead and his explanation of what it means.

13.4 Antony Flew, from “Theology and Falsification”

Flew’s famous parable, developed from a John Wisdom tale, about an invisible gardener who tends a field but escapes all efforts to detect him.

13.5 Mary Daly, from “After the Death of God the Father”

A selection from *Beyond God the Father* in which Daly discusses the rootedness of theology in patriarchy and what can be done to enable women to speak more authentically about God.