

God's Existence: Argument from the Lens of Faith and Philosophy

Philosophy of religion is a discipline which investigates many complex themes, such as the nature of religion, attributes of reality, the means of relating to reality—such as faith and human experience— and the possibility of the existence of God. Among the many ontological questions the philosophy of religion endeavors to address, perhaps the most controversial is the existence of God. Unraveling this complex question has puzzled philosophers for ages and has kept the spark lit in this theological debate to this day. Along with arguments for—and against—God, there are topics which inevitably follow from such a debate, namely the divine attributes of God and divine action. This essay will briefly expand upon arguments for God’s existence evidenced by some of the most notable theories and concepts about His attributes and how He relates to His creations, namely humans. In addition to assertions made by credible philosophers and theologians, the claims in this essay will also be informed by my own understanding of Christian faith and values. For the interest of this essay and the integrity of the claims of those philosophers such as William James, Anselm, and Kierkegaard to stand, “God” is to be understood here as the Abrahamic, and specifically Christian, conception of the Supreme Deity.

To open the discussion of the existence of God, it is first important to develop a foundational understanding of religion. Reading the texts in *Philosophy of Religion*, one is able to gather a plethora of information to form a stable opinion concerning such a broad topic as religion—which we may then use to consider other, more specific matters related to religion, such as those outlined in the paragraph above. Page 13 of the text presented an interesting question: “Is language older than religion?” Now, this question in and of itself has great depth and may be investigated at another occasion. Here, though, this question is useful in conceiving of a particular perspective of the purpose of religion; it sparked a discussion between I, the

reader, and the various understandings of religion. The question presented itself in the context of the passage titled “The Roots of Religion,” wherein the origin of religion itself as well as various religions’ values and ethics were introduced. This particular question provoked a pondering of the very essence of religion, which according to the major world religions, is not part of space-time. Its “purpose” for lack of a better, more spiritually inclusive term, is that the universe in which humanity resides and the experiences we humans have on earth is not the final resting place. Nor is it the place in which truth or abstraction, more specifically ethical concepts, reside. Like many other human-made inventions and events, language is of similar intent and origin; it describes, characterizes, makes sense of humanity’s experience on earth, which is precisely within space-time. Of course, not all religions use these exact distinctions or exact words, but they share a similar understanding of human experiences and reality. Thus, this question “is language older than religion?” is a bit funny but provokes some thought of various subjects, the power of the nuances of language being another, and of course the more ontological, metaphysical understandings as well. To expand, perhaps the way the question is worded has a big impact on how I am taking it to be, or what I am taking it to mean. Truthfully, it is just more fun to take the question as rather “silly” because it leads to a more thoughtful analysis and understanding of religion itself. Many subjective human experiences on earth, within the bounds of space and time, may be confused—depending on who one asks—with other phenomena rather than labeled as a religious or spiritual one.

Regardless of the content of one’s conception of religion, it is necessary to articulate as it provides the foundation for the development of other beliefs concerning before the existence of God, His attributes or His Divine action. Referencing a few critical texts such as William James’ “The Will to Believe” is helpful in explaining how one may defend his belief in God. James

asserts that one's religious experiences are highly individualistic, and thus it is justified for people to hold religious beliefs without sufficient evidence of the truth of those claims. In his essay, James attempts to defend the rationality of having religious beliefs even when they lack sufficient evidence of truth. His thesis in this work is that there are some contexts in which it is fine to hold a belief even though we don't have sufficient evidence for it. Now, he is not claiming that anyone can believe anything they wish, rather that when clear and objective evidence is unavailable, it is sound to believe with our "passional nature." He distinguishes between intellectual and passional natures of the human being, asserting "The next matter to consider is the actual psychology of human opinion...evidently our non-intellectual nature does influence our convictions...pure insight and logic, whatever they might do ideally, are not the only things that really do produce our creeds" (James, 110). Though his essay does not directly reflect any religious or Christian thought, his work is appealing for believers in God as his thesis reflects other theologians' and philosophers' notions of faith over proof, which I will explain at a later time.

Through personal experience and reading various primary sources compiled in the text, it seems that proper debate of a topic provides the deepest insights into it, in the case of this particular paper into the various arguments for God's existence. In trying to defend Anselm, it is clear he asserts a rather sophisticated argument for God's existence. In reading portions of Anselm's works, it appears he essentially established two necessary "levels" or "orders," of being. Namely he moved from our human mental capacity—or faculty, as a whole—in reality to that which is outside of, or beyond that, namely where God fits. His ontological argument begins from the positing of Being. Anselm's argument is that human beings "understand God as a being than which we cannot conceive a greater...yet, if we conceive of such a being as existing in only

the understanding, a greater being could be conceived...but this is contradictory. Hence, God...must exist" (Williams, 133). To directly quote Anselm, he asserts, "Insofar as you know it is useful for me, I may understand that you exist as we believe you exist, and that you are what believe you to be...we believe that you are something than which nothing greater can be thought" (Anselm, 133). Despite his innovative approach to the argument—and that the perspective which is displayed in this essay would enthusiastically agree with Anselm's thesis—I found it disappointing that his argument did not allow for any doubt of the existence of God. Of course, someone trying to prove God's existence most likely would want to focus his energy on that positive side of the debate, rather than focusing on the possibility of the negative. Yet, it seems ignorant to say, especially if he himself identified as Christian, to completely shut down all potential doubt of the existence. Even today, many Christians—depending on the tradition—would say that the focus is on the faith and hope that He is real and true, rather than to say there is no room for us to doubt or even that we shouldn't doubt.

It is not necessary in the faith to have total assurance every day that the beliefs which we hold as Christians are absolute in truth, for that would go against our fallen human condition. The emphasis is on having faith (in God), rather than an accretion of indubitable evidence to prove to oneself or challengers that the beliefs are true. In fact, many Christian thinkers such as Soren Kierkegaard write on this notion. Page 116 of the *Philosophy of Religion* text exemplifies this idea in the introduction to Kierkegaard's sentiments here: "Interestingly, [Kierkegaard] stresses that in order to have vital faith, it is essential that one should not be able to prove that one's belief is true" (Swenson 116).

Though it is clear that this essay argues for God's existence, it is important to examine the opposing side. Those who oppose God's existence sometimes purport that if there is a God or

Supreme Deity, it would be silly or illogical to argue for His existence using "human reasoning." I would like to examine this more in depth because I find it interesting in a few major ways: to agree with this notion, one might say "God is of a higher, different 'order' than His creations i.e. humans, thus He must be explained in different terms or through the use of different logic." In opposition to this notion, one might say "God is the Creator of all things, thus He is who we attribute the human 'acquaintance' with, or 'discovery' of logical reasoning. Thus, it makes perfect sense to use to the best of our ability logical reasoning to argue for His existence." Going further, it may be helpful to refute the argument for God's existence in examining philosopher Nelson Pike's issue with God's attributes.

Nelson Pike introduces his notion of God's omniscience in relation to human action, namely whether that action can be voluntary based on the existence of God, in arguing that if God exists then no human action is voluntary. I'd like to point things out to push back against his argument in defense of those arguing for God's existence as omniscient and omnipotent. Firstly, "voluntary action" may be better understood in this context as free will, or human will—as opposed to Divine Will, which is what God has. This is different from simply choosing between ice cream flavors. The human being is able to choose an ice cream flavor because he has free will. Next, as God is all-knowing, or omniscient, He knows what flavor of ice cream we will choose as He knows our minds and hearts; he doesn't have to guess. Moreover, traditional Christians, namely Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians, do not believe in determinism; meaning, it is not the case that God has set each human being, each one of his creations, on a path. Rather, He gave them free will, so each person makes his own path. Finally, as we continue to say in class, God is of a "different order," He is Divine, thus we cannot throw around the term

"belief" in describing God's mind. According to Christians, we can never and will never know God's mind. We can't even know the mind of another human being!

Philosophers and theologians such as William James, Saint Anselm, and Soren Kierkegaard have provided well-structured arguments for the existence of God which have shaped my own understanding of the ages-old debate on the topic. Philosophers, religious participants, and religious scholars alike have written seminal pieces offering a wide array of perspectives on God's existence, yet we have not yet come to one single "answer." As a religious participant, I am hopeful for my beliefs in faith, yet not sure that there ever will be *an* answer. But as a lover of philosophy, I am hopeful that the debate will persist as lively and fruitfully as our first encounters with these arguments were.

Bibliography

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