

Philosophy of Religion (Booklet)

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Introduction

“... a little philosophy inclineth man’s mind to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth men’s minds about to religion.” [Francis Bacon, Of Atheism]

The philosophy of religion is replete with arguments that purport to prove the existence of God. Not all of these arguments have their origins in Christian philosophy; Jewish and Muslim philosophers have made significant contributions to the philosophy of religion, and both Plato and Aristotle have influenced its development. Recent decades have seen something of a revival of interest in natural theology and the philosophy of religion. Each of the classical theistic proofs has been revived and refined, presented in revised form and defended afresh. Whether any of these arguments for the existence of God is successful, of course, remains controversial. The theistic proofs section sets out to explain each of the common philosophical arguments for theism, and so to explore the case for the existence of God.

Arguments for the Existence of God

Within the Arguments for the Existence of God section, the arguments are arranged under the following headings: “Pascal’s Wager”, “The Ontological Argument”, “The Cosmological Argument” (including the first cause argument), “The Teleological Argument” (i.e. the argument to design), “The Moral Argument”, “Religious Experience” and “The Argument from Miracles”.

Pascal’s Wager

Pascal’s Wager is an argument for belief in God based not on an appeal to evidence that God exists but rather based on an appeal to self-interest. It is in our interests to believe in God, the argument suggests, and it is therefore rational for us to do so. The claim that it is in our interests to believe in God is supported by a consideration of the possible consequences of belief and unbelief. If we believe in God, the argument runs, then if he exists then we will receive an infinite reward in heaven while if he does not then we have lost little or nothing. If we do not believe in God, the argument continues, then if he exists then we will receive an infinite punishment in hell while he does not then we will have gained little or nothing. Either receiving an infinite reward in heaven or losing little or nothing is clearly preferable to either receiving an infinite punishment in hell or gaining little or nothing. It is therefore in our interests to believe in God.

The Ontological Argument

The ontological argument is an argument that attempts to prove the existence of God through abstract reasoning alone. The argument begins with an explication of the concept of God. Part of what we mean when we speak of “God” is “perfect being”; that is what the word “God” means. A God that exists, of course, is better than a God that doesn’t. To speak of God as a perfect being is therefore to imply that he exists. If God’s perfection is a part of the concept of God, though, and if God’s perfection implies God’s existence, then God’s existence is implied by the concept of God. When we speak of “God” we cannot but speak of a being that exists. To say that God does not exist is to contradict oneself; it is literally to speak nonsense.

The Cosmological Argument

The cosmological argument is the argument from the existence of the world or universe to the existence of a being that brought it into and keeps it in existence. The idea that the universe has an infinite past, stretching back in time into infinity, is both philosophically and scientifically problematic. All indications are that there is a point in time at which the universe began to exist. This beginning was either caused or uncaused. The cosmological argument takes the suggestion that the beginning of the universe was uncaused to be impossible. The idea of an uncaused event is absurd; nothing comes from nothing. The universe was therefore caused by something outside it. The cosmological argument thus confirms one element of Christianity, the doctrine of Creation.

The Teleological Argument

The teleological argument is the argument from the order in the world to the existence of a being that created it with a specific purpose in mind. The universe is a highly complex system. The scale of the universe alone is astounding, and the natural laws that govern it perplex scientists still after generations of study. It is also, however, a highly ordered system; it serves a purpose. The world provides exactly the right conditions for the development and sustenance of life, and life is a valuable thing. That this is so is remarkable; there are numerous ways in which the universe might have been different, and the vast majority of possible universes would not have supported life. To say that the universe is so ordered by chance is therefore unsatisfactory as an explanation of the appearance of design around us. It is far more plausible, and far more probable, that the universe is the way it is because it was created by God with life in mind.

The Moral Argument

The moral argument is the argument from the existence of morality to the existence of God. The existence of God, it suggests, is a necessary condition for the existence of morality. Morality consists of a set of commands, and there cannot be commands unless there is a commander; who, then, commanded morality? The answer to this question is to be found by considering the authority of morality. Commands are only as authoritative as the one that commands them, but moral authority transcends all human institutions. Morality was therefore commanded by someone whose authority transcends all human institutions. This can only be God.

The Argument from Religious Experience

The argument from religious experience is the argument that personal religious experiences can prove God's existence to those that have them. One can only perceive that which exists, and so God must exist because there are those that have experienced him. While religious experiences themselves can only constitute direct evidence of God's existence for those fortunate enough to have them, the fact that there are many people who testify to having had such experiences constitutes indirect evidence of God's existence even to those who have not had such experiences themselves.

The Argument from Miracles

The argument from miracles is the argument that the occurrence of miracles demonstrates both the existence of God and the truth of Christianity. If the Bible is to be believed, then Jesus' ministry was accompanied by frequent miraculous signs that his claims and his teachings were endorsed by God the Father. His resurrection from the dead was, of course, the greatest of these, and is still taken by many today to be a solid foundation for their faith. Miracles typically involve the suspension of the natural operation of the universe as some supernatural event occurs. That can only happen, of course, given the existence of some supernatural being.

Pascal's Wager

“Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.” [Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, *Infini-Rien*]

Pascal's Wager is an attempt to justify belief in God not with an appeal to evidence for his existence but rather with an appeal to self-interest. It is in our interests to believe in the God of Christianity, the argument suggests, and it is therefore rational for us to do so. The argument is attributed to Blaise Pascal on the basis of a section of his *Pensées* entitled “*Infini-rien*”. Some defenders of Pascal insist that his argument there is both more subtle and more defensible than the argument that we now call “Pascal's Wager”. However, Pascal's Wager has achieved sufficient popularity to warrant discussion irrespective of whether it is what Pascal intended in *Infini-rien*.

Pascal's Wager seeks to justify Christian faith by considering the various possible consequences of belief and disbelief in the God of Christianity. If we believe in the Christian God, the argument runs, then if he exists then we will receive an infinitely great reward in heaven while if he does not then we will have lost little or nothing. If we do not believe in the Christian God, the argument continues, then if he exists then we will receive an infinitely great punishment in hell while if he does not then we will have gained little or nothing. The possible outcomes of belief in the Christian God, then, are on balance better than the possible outcomes of disbelief in the Christian God. It is better to either receive an infinitely great reward in heaven or lose little or nothing than it is to either receive an infinitely great punishment in hell or gain little or nothing.

The conclusion that Pascal's Wager draws from this is that belief in the Christian God is the rational course of action, even if there is no evidence that he exists. If the Christian God does not exist then it is of little importance whether we believe or disbelieve in him. If the Christian God does exist then it is of great importance that we do believe in him. In order to cover ourselves in all circumstances, therefore, we ought to believe that the Christian God exists. A formal statement of this argument might be constructed as follows:

(1) It is possible that the Christian God exists and it is possible that the Christian God does not exist.

(2) If one believes in the Christian God then if he exists then one receives an infinitely great reward and if he does not exist then one loses little or nothing.

(3) If one does not believe in the Christian God then if he exists then one receives an infinitely great punishment and if he does not exist then one gains little or nothing.

(4) It is better to either receive an infinitely great reward or lose little or nothing than it is to either receive an infinitely great punishment or gain little or nothing.

Therefore:

(5) It is better to believe in the Christian God than it is to disbelieve in the Christian God.

(6) If one course of action is better than another then it is rational to follow that course of action and irrational to follow the other.

Therefore:

(7) It is rational to believe in the Christian God and irrational to disbelieve in the Christian God.

Three common objections to this argument will be considered here. A more detailed discussion of each can be found by following the appropriate link.

The first of these objections targets the third premise of the argument as it is stated above. It is the objection that Pascal's Wager illicitly assumes a Christian view of the criteria for entrance into heaven, i.e. it illicitly assumes that if there are infinite rewards and punishments to be had then they will be distributed on the basis of belief or disbelief in the Christian god. There are many possible ways in which such rewards and punishments might be distributed; they might be distributed on the basis of belief in the Christian God, or on the basis of good deeds, or on the basis of belief in the Muslim God, for instance. In fact, distribution of heavenly rewards and infernal punishments on almost any basis imaginable appears to be possible. It is only, however, if such rewards and punishments are distributed on the basis of belief in the Christian God that belief in the Christian God is in our interests. On many of the other possible distributive schemes, it is by disbelieving in the Christian God that one receives a heavenly reward. If any of those distributive schemes were the true scheme, though, then the third premise of Pascal's Wager would be false. It would not be the case that if one does not believe in the Christian God and the Christian God does not exist then one gains little or nothing, for if such a distributive scheme were the true scheme then one might gain a great deal (i.e. an infinite reward in heaven) by disbelieving in the Christian God. In order to demonstrate that the third premise of his argument is true, then, the advocate of Pascal's Wager must demonstrate that the only possible criterion for entrance into heaven is belief in the Christian God and the only possible criterion for entrance into hell is disbelief in the Christian God. This, the objector suggests, cannot be demonstrated, for it is false.

The second objection to Pascal's Wager targets the fourth premise of the argument as it is stated above. It is the objection that the probability that God exists, and so the probability of either receiving an infinite reward in heaven or of receiving an infinite punishment in hell, is so small that these possible outcomes of belief or disbelief can be discounted. The choice between belief and disbelief is thus taken to be a choice between losing little or nothing and gaining little or nothing. As it is better to gain little or nothing than it is to lose little or nothing, this objection concludes that it is wagering on atheism, rather than wagering on theism, that is the rational course of action. It is better, the objection suggests, to take the certain benefits of disbelief (the joys of indulging in sin and of being free from religious commitments) by wagering that God doesn't exist than it is gamble on the vastly improbable hope of a heavenly reward and almost certainly gain nothing at all.

The third objection targets the inference from the fifth and sixth premises to the conclusion. It is the objection that we cannot choose our beliefs. We form our beliefs on the basis of evidence, not on the basis of desire. No matter how much one may want to believe that a given proposition is true, one cannot bring oneself to do so simply through an act of will. Rather, in order for one to come to believe that a proposition is true one requires evidence for its truth. Pascal's Wager, though, merely prescribes belief in God; it does not provide any evidence that such a belief would be true. As such, it asks us to do the impossible: to believe without reason.

Wagering on Atheism

The second objection to Pascal's Wager. That the probability that the Christian God exists is so small that it is wagering on atheism, rather than wagering on theism, that is the rational course of action.

In calculating whether belief in the Christian God or disbelief in the Christian God is the more prudent course of action, it is necessary not only to take account of the various possible outcomes of belief and disbelief, but also to take account of the probability of each of these outcomes occurring.

The possible outcomes of belief in the Christian God - either receiving an infinitely great reward in heaven or losing little or nothing - are better than the possible outcomes of disbelief in the Christian God - either receiving an infinitely great punishment in hell or gaining little or nothing. If the probability of each of these outcomes were approximately equal, then belief would clearly be preferable to disbelief.

If, however, the probability that the Christian God exists were so slight as to be negligible, then we might be justified in setting aside the possibilities of heavenly rewards and infernal punishments in deciding what to believe. The choice between belief and disbelief would thus become a choice between losing little or nothing and gaining little or nothing; heaven and hell would not come into the equation. As it is better to gain little or nothing than it is to lose little or nothing, in this case it would be disbelief in the Christian God rather than belief in him that would be the prudent course of action.

Those who object to Pascal's Wager on these grounds take themselves to be in exactly this situation; they judge the existence of the Christian God to be so unlikely that they need not seriously entertain it as a possibility. They therefore hold that it is rational to take the certain benefits of disbelief (the joys of indulging in sin and of being free from religious commitments), and irrational to gamble on the hope of a heavenly reward and almost certainly receive nothing at all.

There are three types of response to this objection available to the advocate of Pascal's Wager.

The first response to this objection available to the advocate of Pascal's Wager is the denial that it is improbable that the Christian God exists. One way of doing this would be to offer an argument for agnosticism. Indeed, Pascal's discussion in "Infini-Rien" is based on just an argument; Pascal claims that because our minds are finite we cannot comprehend the infinite and so cannot decide whether or not God exists on the basis of evidence. A second way of doing this would be to offer some positive evidence for the

existence of God, e.g. the argument from fine-tuning. Certainly the claim that God's existence is unlikely is debatable, and the theist should criticise the objection to Pascal's Wager on this point.

The second response to the objection available to the advocate of Pascal's Wager is not only consistent with God's existence being improbable, but is even consistent with God's existence being impossible. This response involves the denial that a life without faith is better than a life with faith if God does not exist. Religious faith can, this response notes, bring rewards in this life even if not in the next. Even if there are no eternal rewards and punishments, it suggests, those with religious faith live lives with a sense of value and purpose that is seldom found elsewhere. It might thus be maintained that belief in God is in our interests irrespective of whether or not God exists, and so that belief in God is pragmatically justified no matter how improbable it is that such beliefs are true. The difficulty with this response is that in addition to those that have found that religion adds fulfilment to their lives there are those that have found religion stifling and oppressive. Belief in God does not always bring with it obvious rewards in this life; indeed, it is in many cases associated with suffering and persecution.

The third possible line of defence for the advocate of Pascal's Wager stresses the magnitude of the possible punishments and rewards that are at stake when we decide whether or not to believe. What is at stake when one decides whether to believe or to disbelieve in God, the argument suggests, is not the possibility of receiving either a great reward or a great punishment. Rather, what is at stake is the possibility of receiving either an infinite reward or an infinite punishment. It is sometimes argued that where infinite rewards and punishments are at stake, we ought to be prepared to take any finite risk in attempting to secure the reward and to avoid the punishment, irrespective of the probability of our succeeding in doing so. What ought we not to risk in pursuit of such a prize as heaven?

We Cannot Choose our Beliefs

The third objection to Pascal's Wager relates to a philosophical theory called "doxastic voluntarism". "Doxastic" means "pertaining to belief". "Voluntarist" theories are theories that emphasise the primacy of the will. Doxastic voluntarism is thus the theory that belief is subject to the will, i.e. that we are able to choose what to believe.

There are certain cases in which doxastic voluntarism clearly does not hold. We cannot simply choose to believe that it is the year 2020 and that elephants rule the Earth; we cannot induce this belief in ourselves by a sheer act of will. Many philosophers think that doxastic voluntarism is false in all circumstances; that belief is entirely subject to reason rather than to the will. If this is true, then it presents a problem for Pascal's Wager.

The objection to Pascal's Wager is that we form our beliefs on the basis of evidence, not on the basis of desire, i.e. that we cannot choose our beliefs. No matter how much I may want to believe that a given proposition is true, I cannot bring myself to do so simply by willing that I do so. Rather, in order to come to believe that the proposition is true I require some evidence for its truth.

If this is correct, then in prescribing that we choose to believe in God Pascal's Wager is prescribing the impossible. Pascal's Wager may be sound insofar as it tells us to do all we can to bring it about that we believe in God, but if we are unable to do anything to bring it about that we believe in God then this conclusion will hardly be significant.

Some respond to this objection by mounting at least a partial defence of doxastic voluntarism. It may be that doxastic voluntarism is false with regard to certain beliefs, such as the belief that it is the year 2020 and that elephants rule the Earth. With regard to certain other beliefs, including belief in the existence of God, however, doxastic voluntarism is somewhat more plausible. We have a great deal of evidence, it might be argued, that it is not the year 2020 and that elephants do not rule the Earth, and it is this evidence that prevents us from choosing to believe both that it is and that they do. What evidence we have concerning the existence of God, however, is far less conclusive, and so an element of choice whether to believe or to disbelieve remains.

A stronger response to the objection, however, is to concentrate on the indirect control that we have over our beliefs. Doxastic voluntarism may be false, i.e. it may be false that we can induce in ourselves a belief in God simply by willing that we so believe, but Pascal's Wager does not distinguish between beliefs formed by the will and beliefs formed in any other way. Pascal's Wager prescribes belief in God; it does not prescribe belief in God by a sheer act of will. There are other means by which it is possible to induce in oneself a belief in God, and if the only problem with Pascal's Wager were that doxastic voluntarism is false then it would demonstrate that we ought to use these other means in order to bring ourselves to believe.

Though we do not have direct, voluntary control over our beliefs, it does seem that we have indirect control over them. We are able, for instance, to exercise control over the kinds of evidence to which we are exposed. We can choose to associate with people who believe in God; we can choose to read books by noted apologists; we can choose to act as if we believe and see what happens. Each of these choices would increase the likelihood of our coming to believe in God. If Pascal's Wager is correct in saying that we ought to exercise what control we can over our beliefs in an attempt to induce in ourselves a belief in God, therefore, then we ought to do each of these things.

There are also other, more cynical ways in which we can exercise control over our beliefs. Using the techniques of hypnosis it is possible to induce beliefs in a subject without any regard for evidence at all. If one were thoroughly convinced of Pascal's Wager, therefore, then one might choose to exercise control over one's beliefs by hiring a hypnotist.

There are, then, some things that we can do to influence our beliefs even if doxastic voluntarism is false. Even if we cannot induce in ourselves a belief in God simply by an act of will, we can exercise control over our beliefs in other ways. If Pascal's Wager is to be resisted, therefore, then this must be done on some other ground than that we cannot choose our beliefs.

The Ontological Argument

“But clearly that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot exist in the understanding alone. For if it is actually in the understanding alone, it can be thought of as existing also in reality, and this is greater... Without doubt, therefore, there exists, both in the understanding and in reality, something than which a greater cannot be thought.” [St Anselm, Proslogion, Chapter 2]

The ontological argument attempts to prove God’s existence through abstract reasoning alone. The argument is entirely a priori, i.e. it involves no empirical evidence at all. Rather, the argument begins with an explication of the concept of God, and seeks to demonstrate that God exists on the basis of that concept alone. The argument is ingenious. It has the appearance of a linguistic trick, but it is a difficult task to say precisely what, if anything, is wrong with it. All forms of the argument make some association between three concepts: the concepts of God, of perfection, and of existence. Very roughly, they state that perfection is a part of the concept of God, and that perfection entails existence, and so that the concept of God entails God’s existence.

The ontological argument was first formulated in the eleventh century by St. Anselm in his Proslogion, Chapter 2. Anselm was a Benedictine monk, Archbishop of Canterbury, and one of the great medieval philosopher-theologians. Anselm’s ontological argument rests on the identification of God as “that than which no greater can be conceived”. Once it is understood that God is that than which no greater can be conceived, Anselm suggests, it becomes evident that God must exist.

A form of the ontological argument also constitutes the crux of Rene Descartes’ Meditations. Having presented the argument from dreaming - the sceptical argument that we are not justified in believing that there exists an external world on the basis of sense-perception because one might have the same sense-perceptions in a dream - Descartes rescues himself from scepticism on the basis of his belief in God. God is no deceiver, Descartes argues, and so our clear and distinct perceptions of the external world can be trusted. Descartes arrives at the belief that there exists a trustworthy God via a form of ontological argument.

The most prominent modern advocate of the ontological argument is Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga is best-known for his defence of the view that religious belief is foundational, i.e. that religious belief does not stand in need of external justification, but is also known for his work on modal logic, i.e. on the logic of possibility and necessity. Plantinga applies his approach to modal logic to the ontological argument, presenting it in a revised form.

The critics of the ontological argument are no less distinguished than are its advocates. Among them is St. Thomas Aquinas, the thirteenth century Dominican and the greatest philosopher of religion of all. Aquinas was canonised in the fourteenth century, when he was said by the Pope to have met the criterion for canonisation of having performed three miracles in virtue of the answers that he had given to perplexing philosophical questions

about God. Aquinas rejected the ontological argument in his *Summa Theologica*, First Part, Question Two.

The earliest critic of the ontological argument, though, was a contemporary of Anselm, the monk Gaunilo of Marmoutier. Gaunilo objected to the ontological argument on the ground that it seemed possible to use its logic to prove the existence of any perfect thing at all. Gaunilo sought to demonstrate this by constructing an ontological argument for the existence of the perfect island. This argument, he suggested, is clearly fallacious, and so the ontological argument for the existence of God, which relies on precisely the same logic, must be fallacious too.

The most vaunted criticisms of the ontological argument, however, are those of Immanuel Kant. Kant argued against the ontological argument on the grounds that existence is not a property of particulars but a property of concepts, and that whatever ideas may participate in a given concept it is a further question whether that concept is instantiated. Whether his criticisms are sufficient to undermine all forms of the ontological argument remains a matter of much dispute.

h of these things.

There are also other, more cynical ways in which we can exercise control over our beliefs. Using the techniques of hypnosis it is possible to induce beliefs in a subject without any regard for evidence at all. If one were thoroughly convinced of Pascal's Wager, therefore, then one might choose to exercise control over one's beliefs by hiring a hypnotist.

There are, then, some things that we can do to influence our beliefs even if doxastic voluntarism is false. Even if we cannot induce in ourselves a belief in God simply by an act of will, we can exercise control over our beliefs in other ways. If Pascal's Wager is to be resisted, therefore, then this must be done on some other ground than that we cannot choose our beliefs.

Anselm's Ontological Argument

St Anselm's version of the ontological argument appears in his *Proslogion*, Chapter 2. His is the definitive statement of the argument. It has the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*, which means that it takes a hypothesis, shows that it has absurd or otherwise unacceptable implications, and so concludes that the hypothesis is false. In the case of Anselm's ontological argument, the hypothesis treated in this way is the hypothesis that God does not exist.

Anselm's argument rests upon the conception of God as "that than which no greater can be conceived". It is this conception of God with which the hypothesis that God does not exist is supposed to conflict. If God does not exist, Anselm argues, then something can be imagined that is greater than God, namely a God that does exist. If, though, God is that than which no greater can be conceived, then nothing can be imagined that is greater than God. The hypothesis that God does not exist thus seems to give rise to a logical absurdity: that there both is and is not something that can be imagined that is greater than God. A hypothesis that gives rise to a logical absurdity, though, must be false. God, therefore, exists.

A formal statement of this argument might be constructed as follows:

(1) God is that than which no greater can be conceived.

(2) If God is that than which no greater can be conceived then there is nothing greater than God that can be imagined.

Therefore:

(3) There is nothing greater than God that can be imagined.

(4) If God does not exist then there is something greater than God that can be imagined.

Therefore:

(5) God exists.

The first premise of this argument, (1), is Anselm's conception of God. (2) is a simple logical truth; if God is the greatest conceivable being then there is no greater conceivable being. (3) follows simply from (1) and (2).

Anselm argues in support of (4) by comparing a non-existent God with an existent God. An existent God, says Anselm, is greater than a non-existent God. If God were non-existent, therefore, then we could imagine a God greater than he, namely an existent God. (5) follows simply from (3) and (4).

Anselm - Proslogion

This central argument of this chapter is described in Anselm's ontological argument. The Proslogion itself goes as follows:

Chapter 2: God Truly Is

And so, O Lord, since thou givest understanding to faith, give me to understand - as far as thou knowest it to be good for me - that thou dost exist, as we believe, and that thou art what we believe thee to be. Now we believe that thou art a being than which none greater can be thought. Or can it be that there is no such being, since "The fool hath said in his heart, 'There is no God'"? But when this same fool hears what I am saying - "A being than which none greater can be thought" - he understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding, even if he does not understand that it exists. For it is one thing for an object to be in the understanding, and another thing to understand that it exists. When a painter considers beforehand what he is going to paint, he has it in his understanding, but he does not suppose that what he has not yet painted already exists. But when he has painted it, he both has it in his understanding and understands that what he has now produced exists. Even the fool, then, must be convinced that a being than which none greater can be thought exists at least in his understanding, since when he hears this he understands it, and whatever is understood is in the understanding. But clearly that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot exist in the understanding alone. For if it is actually in the understanding alone, it can be thought of as existing also in reality, and this is greater. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be thought is in the understanding alone, this same thing than which a greater cannot be thought is that than which a greater can be thought. But obviously this is impossible. Without doubt, therefore, there exists, both in the understanding and in reality, something than which a greater cannot be thought.

Gaunilo's Perfect Island

The ontological argument is the argument that it follows from the concept of God that God actually exists. God is, as Anselm put it, that than which no greater can be conceived. A God that does not exist, though, cannot be that than which no greater can be conceived, for he could be conceived to exist which would be greater. God, therefore, cannot be non-existent; he must exist.

One problem with this argument is that it invites parody. Parallel arguments purporting to prove the existence of any perfect thing at all can be constructed. This objection was first raised by one of Anselm's contemporaries, the monk Gaunilo of Marmoutier, who constructed an ontological argument for the existence of the perfect island.

The perfect island, this argument goes, is the island than which no greater can be conceived. Any island that does not exist, though, cannot be the island than which no greater can be conceived, for it could be conceived to exist which would be greater. The perfect island, therefore, cannot be non-existent; it must exist.

Similar arguments for the existence of the perfect baseball pitcher, or the perfect husband - for the existence of any perfect thing at all - can be constructed.

If any of these arguments is sound, it seems, then they must all be sound. Clearly, though, they are not all sound; the perfect baseball pitcher does not exist, and neither does the perfect husband. All of these ontological arguments, then, must be unsound, including the ontological argument for the existence of God.

The Cosmological Argument

The cosmological argument is the argument that the existence of the world or universe is strong evidence for the existence of a God who created it. The existence of the universe, the argument claims, stands in need of explanation, and the only adequate explanation of its existence is that it was created by God.

Like most of the purported proofs of the existence of God, the cosmological argument exists in several forms. Two forms of the argument will be discussed here: the temporal, kalam cosmological argument (i.e. the first cause argument), and the modal “argument from contingency”.

The main distinguishing feature between these two arguments is the way in which they evade an initial objection to the argument. In order to explain what this objection is, and how the two arguments evade it, a simple, generic statement of the cosmological argument will be necessary. This statement is as follows:

The Simple Cosmological Argument

(1) Everything that exists has a cause of its existence.

(2) The universe exists.

Therefore:

(3) The universe has a cause of its existence.

(4) If the universe has a cause of its existence, then that cause is God.

Therefore:

(5) God exists.

This argument is subject to a simple objection, which arises in the form of the question “Does God have a cause of his existence?”

If, on the one hand, God were thought to have a cause of his existence, then positing the existence of God in order to explain the existence of the universe wouldn't get us anywhere. Without God there would be one entity the existence of which we could not explain, namely the universe; with God there would be one entity the existence of which we could not explain, namely God. Positing the existence of God, then, would raise as many problems as it solved, and so the cosmological argument would leave us in no better position than it found us.

If, on the other hand, God were thought not to have a cause of his existence, i.e. if God were thought to be an uncaused being, then this too would raise difficulties for the simple cosmological argument. For if God were an uncaused being then his existence would be a counterexample to premise (1). If God exists but does not have a cause of his existence then premise (1) is false, in which case the simple cosmological argument is unsound. If premise (1) is false, i.e. if some things that exist do not have a cause, then the cosmological argument might be resisted on the ground that the universe itself might be such a thing. The existence of an uncaused God would thus render the simple cosmological argument unsound, and so useless as a proof of the existence of God.

Each of the two forms of cosmological argument discussed here is more sophisticated than the simple cosmological argument presented above. Each of the two cosmological arguments discussed here draws a distinction

between the type of entity that the universe is and the type of entity that God is, and in doing so gives a reason why the existence of the universe stands in a need of an explanation while the existence of God does not. Each therefore evades the objection outlined above.

In the case of the kalam cosmological argument, the distinction drawn between the universe and God is that the universe has a beginning in time. Everything that has a beginning in time, the kalam cosmological argument claims, has a cause of its existence. The uncaused existence of God, who does not have a beginning in time, is consistent with this claim, and so does not present the problem encountered in the discussion of the simple cosmological argument above.

In the case of the argument from contingency, the distinction drawn between the universe and God is that the existence of the universe is contingent, i.e. that the universe could have not existed. Everything that exists contingently, the argument from contingency claims, has a cause of its existence. The uncaused existence of God, whose existence is not contingent but rather is necessary, is consistent with this claim, and so does not present the problem encountered in the discussion of the simple cosmological argument above.

Each of these two forms of the cosmological argument, then, evades the objection introduced above in a distinct way. The two arguments are therefore distinct, and so warrant individual assessments.

The Kalam Cosmological Argument

The temporal, kalam cosmological argument, dates back to medieval Muslim philosophers such as al-Kindi and al-Ghazali. It has recently been restored to popularity by William Lane Craig.

Like all cosmological arguments, the kalam cosmological argument is an argument from the existence of the world or universe to the existence of God. The existence of the universe, such arguments claim, stands in need of explanation. The only adequate explanation, the arguments suggest, is that it was created by God.

What distinguishes the kalam cosmological argument from other forms of cosmological argument is that it rests on the idea that the universe has a beginning in time. Modal forms of the cosmological argument are consistent with the universe having an infinite past. With the kalam cosmological argument, however, it is precisely because the universe is thought to have a beginning in time that the existence of the universe is thought to stand in need of explanation.

The argument has the following structure:

(1) Everything that has a beginning of its existence has a cause of its existence.

(2) The universe has a beginning of its existence.

Therefore:

(3) The universe has a cause of its existence.

(4) If the universe has a cause of its existence then that cause is God.

Therefore:

(5) God exists.

The first premise of the argument is the claim that everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence. In order to infer from this that the universe has a cause of its existence the proponent of the kalam cosmological argument must prove that the past is finite, that the universe began to exist at a certain point in time.

The crucial premise of the kalam cosmological argument, then, is the second: “The universe has a beginning of its existence”. How do we know that the universe has a beginning of its existence? Might not the universe stretch back in time into infinity, always having existed? The proponent of the kalam cosmological argument must show that this cannot be the case if his argument is to be successful.

Advocates of the kalam cosmological argument claim that it is impossible that the universe has an infinite past. The existence of an infinite past, they say, entails all manner of logical absurdities.

If there exists an infinite past, then if we were to assign a number to each past moment then every real number (i.e. every positive integer) would be assigned to some moment. There would therefore be no unassigned number to be assigned to the present moment as it passes into the past. However, by reassigning the numbers such that moment number one becomes moment number two, and moment number two becomes moment number three, and so on, we could free up moment number one to be assigned to the present. If the past is infinite, therefore, then there both is and is not a free number to be assigned to the present. That such a paradox results from the assumption that the past is infinite shows that it is not possible that that assumption is correct. The past, it seems, cannot be infinite, because it is not possible that there be an infinite number of past moments.

The Argument from Contingency

The modal cosmological argument or “argument from contingency” is the argument from the contingency of the world or universe to the existence of God. The argument from contingency is the most prominent form of cosmological argument historically. The classical statements of the cosmological argument in the works of Plato, of Aquinas and of Leibniz are all statements of the modal form of the argument.

What distinguishes the modal cosmological argument from the kalam cosmological argument is that it is consistent with the idea that the universe has an infinite past. The kalam cosmological argument rests on the controversial claim that the universe has a beginning in time. The argument from contingency, in contrast, is consistent with the universe having existed from eternity.

The argument from contingency draws on the distinction between things that exist necessarily and things that exist contingently.

Something is “necessary” if it could not possibly have failed to exist. The laws of mathematics are often thought to be necessary. It is plausible to say that mathematical truths such as two and two making four hold irrespective of the way that the world is. Even if the world were radically different, it seems, two and two would still make four. God, too, is often thought to be a necessary being, i.e. a being that logically could not have failed to exist.

Something is “contingent” if it is not necessary, i.e. if it could have failed to exist. Most things seem to exist contingently. All of the human artefacts around us might not have existed; for each one of them, whoever made it might have decided not to do so. Their existence, therefore, is contingent. You and I, too, might not have existed; our respective parents might never have met, or might have decided not to have children, or might have decided to have children at a different time. Our existence, therefore, is contingent. Even the world around us seems to be contingent; the universe might have developed in such a way that none of the observable stars and planets existed at all.

The argument from contingency rests on the claim that the universe, as a whole, is contingent. It is not only the case, the argument suggests, that each of the things around us is contingent; it is also the case that the whole, all of those things taken together, is contingent. It might have been the case that nothing existed at all. The state of affairs in which nothing existed at all is a logically possible state of affairs, even though it is not the actual state of affairs.

It is this that the argument from contingency takes to be significant. It is because it is thought that the universe exists contingently that its existence is thought to require explanation. If the universe might not have existed, then why does it exist? Proponents of the cosmological argument suggest that questions like this always have answers. The existence of things that are necessary does not require explanation; their non-existence is impossible. The existence of anything contingent, however, does require explanation. They might not have existed, and so there must be some reason that they do so.

Critics of the argument from contingency have sometimes questioned whether the universe is contingent, but it remains at least plausible to think that it is so.

The only adequate explanation of the existence of the contingent universe, the argument from contingency suggests, is that there exists a necessary being on which its existence it rests. For the existence of the contingent universe must rest on something, and if it rested on some contingent being then that contingent being too would require some explanation of its existence. The ultimate explanation of the existence of all things, therefore, must be the existence of some necessary being. This necessary being is readily identified by proponents of the cosmological argument as God.

The argument from contingency, then, can be summarised as follows:

- (1) Everything that exists contingently has a reason for its existence.
- (2) The universe exists contingently.

Therefore:

- (3) The universe has a reason for its existence.
- (4) If the universe has a reason for its existence then that reason is God.

Therefore:

- (5) God exists.

The Teleological Argument

“The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man.” [Spoken by Cleanthes in David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, Part II.]

Teleological arguments are arguments from the order in the universe to the existence of God. Their name is derived from the Greek word, “telos”, meaning “end” or “purpose”. When such arguments speak of the universe being ordered, they mean that it is ordered towards some end or purpose. The suggestion is that it is more plausible to suppose that the universe is so because it was created by an intelligent being in order to accomplish that purpose than it is to suppose that it is this way by chance. The classical statement of the teleological argument is that of William Paley. Paley likened the universe to a watch, with many ordered parts working in harmony to further some purpose. The argument as he constructed it is thus an argument from analogy.

Modern teleological arguments look somewhat different to that constructed by Paley. Modern teleological arguments focus on the “fine-tuning” in the universe. Whether they are successful is therefore a question distinct from the question as to whether Paley’s argument is successful. The two types of teleological argument therefore require investigation separately.

Although teleological arguments are often referred to as “arguments from design”, those who oppose such arguments sometimes take offence at this. Noted sceptic Anthony Flew, in particular, has criticised this name.

Flew grants that if the universe contains design then there must be some intelligent agent that designed it. This appears to be a simple linguistic truth, on a par with the truth that if something is being carried then there must be something else that is carrying it.

What Flew disputes, and what he takes to be the centre of the discussion concerning the teleological argument, is whether the universe does indeed contain design. Paley’s watch analogy, and the evidence of fine-tuning, are not intended to demonstrate that the design in the universe is the work of an intelligent agent, but rather are intended to demonstrate that the order in the universe is indeed design. Flew therefore suggests that we speak not of “arguments from design” but of “arguments to design”.

The Argument from Analogy

The classical statement of the teleological argument is that of William Paley in his Natural Theology. Paley likened the universe to a watch. Like a watch, he said, the universe consists of many complex parts functioning in harmony to some useful end. In a watch the various parts are ordered such that they measure time; in the universe, such that they support life. The two are, in this respect, similar.

In the case of a watch we take these properties to constitute evidence of design. If we were to stumble across a watch in a natural environment, lying on a heath, for example, then we would instantly know that it was designed because of its order and complexity. If order and complexity constitute evidence of design in the case of a watch, though, then they must also constitute evidence of design in the case of the universe. The case of the watch therefore illustrates the fact that the order and complexity of the universe is evidence that the universe was designed.

The inference from the order and complexity of a watch to its being designed is not dependent on knowledge of how watches are made. If we were to stumble across a watch in a natural environment, then we would instantly know that it was designed even without any knowledge of how watches are made or where watches come from. It is therefore no objection to Paley's argument that we know how watches are made but do not know how universes are made. Order and complexity are together sufficient to support the inference to a designer even without any knowledge at all of the origins of universes.

Not only can we infer from the analogy between the order and complexity of a watch and the order and complexity of the universe that the universe has a designer, we can also infer something about what this designer is like. For the universe is not only ordered and complex in the same way as a watch, but it is so on a much grander scale. The order and complexity of the universe far exceeds that of a watch, and we may therefore infer that the designer of the universe is correspondingly greater than designers of watches.

One objection to this argument is that the analogy between a watch and the universe is too weak to support the inference to a designer of the universe. Another objection is that arguments from analogy are too limited in the kinds of conclusion that they can support, and so force those who use them into an anthropomorphism that is inconsistent with theism.

The Argument from Fine-Tuning

If you and I were each to independently write down a number between one and a thousand, to compare those numbers, and to find that they were identical, then this would stand in need of explanation. If we were to repeat this test ten times, each time finding that the numbers that we had written down were identical, then this would be strong evidence that what was happening was more than a mere coincidence.

This is because the theory that there is some connection between my number and your number explains the succession of agreements between our numbers in a way that the theory that there isn't doesn't. If there were some connection between the numbers that each of us is writing down, then we might expect our numbers to be the same. If there were no connection, then the succession of agreements would be vastly improbable. The succession of agreements therefore confirms the theory that there is some causal connection between our respective selections of our numbers.

The argument from fine-tuning, a form of teleological argument for the existence of God, is the argument that the state of the universe, like the succession of agreements in our numbers, stands in need of explanation. The

state of the universe, the argument suggests, confirms the theory that the universe was created by an intelligent being for the purpose of supporting life, just as the succession of agreements between our numbers in the example above confirms the theory that there is some cause of their agreement.

What is it about the universe, then, that requires explanation? The argument from fine-tuning suggests that the fitness of the universe for life either involves a series of staggering coincidences, or is the result of intelligent design. There are many ways that the universe might have been, and the overwhelming majority of these would not have been such as to support the development of life. The expansion of matter after the Big Bang, for instance, had to occur at the right rate - fast enough to avoid a Big Crunch but slow enough to allow for the formation of planets - in order for life to arise; it did. The strengths of the physical constants (e.g. the strong force and the weak force) had to fall within certain bounds in order for life to arise; they do. The greater the number of conditions necessary for life, the less likely it is that the universe satisfies these conditions by chance. The argument from fine-tuning has now been developed to include a vast number of such conditions.

A Weak Analogy

The argument from analogy is an inductive argument. Inductive arguments project observed regularities to similar unobserved cases. If every observed raven to date has been black then we are justified in inferring that the next observed raven will also be black. We are not, however, justified in inferring that the next observed bird will be black unless we have good evidence for believing that the next observed bird will be a raven.

Paley's argument from design has the following structure: (1) Ordered systems a, b and c have designers.

(2) The universe is an ordered system.

Therefore:

(3) The universe has a designer.

Paley's argument thus projects an observed regularity - the observation that certain ordered systems have designers - to an unobserved case, namely that of the universe. Paley's arguments thus rests on an analogy; it is only if the universe is relevantly similar to the ordered systems a, b and c that Paley's inductive inference will be justified.

Whether the universe is relevantly similar to the ordered systems a, b and c is debatable. Opponents of Paley's argument object that only the observation of various other universes with designers would provide a pattern of observations that would justify the inference that this universe has a designer. Defenders of Paley point out that the inference is from order to design, and that it is irrelevant in what kind of system that order is found, whether it be a universe or a watch.

Analogy and Anthropomorphism

The argument from analogy is a form of the argument from design. It takes the analogy between the order of the universe and the order of a watch to support the inference that the universe, like a watch, has a designer. One

objection to this argument is that the analogy between a watch and the universe is weak. Another objection is that arguments from analogy are too limited in the conclusions that they can offer, that analogies can be pressed too far.

If we are justified in inferring that like cases have like causes, as the argument from analogy suggests, then we can prove more than that the universe has a designer. Watches, to remain with Paley's example, have corporeal designers. Watches have teams of designers. The designers of watches are finite, mortal, and flawed. By the principle that like effects have like causes, then, we can infer not only that the universe, like a watch, has a designer, but that the universe, like a watch, has several corporeal, mortal and flawed designers.

The only kind of conclusion that the argument from analogy can yield is that God, the creator of the universe, resembles man, the creator of watches. It forces anthropomorphism upon those who use it. This, though, does not get the theist to the conclusion that he is aiming to prove. To prove the existence of a community of gods that are like unto men would be to return to something like the Roman pantheon. If this is the conclusion that the argument from analogy supports then that argument is of little use to theism.

In response to this objection, the theist might claim that he can concede that the argument from analogy pushes him towards anthropomorphism without either rejecting that argument or holding that God is exactly like men. The argument from analogy provides evidence, he might say, but that evidence is defeasible; where opposing evidence is available the conclusions of the argument from analogy are to be rejected. There is no counter-evidence in the case of the inference to an intelligent, powerful designer, he might say, and so these conclusions are to be accepted. There is, however, counter-evidence in the case of the inference to, for instance, a corporeal designer. What this evidence is will be for the theist to specify, but this is one route that he might go.

Alternatively, the theist might try to rest his case upon Ockham's razor. Ockham's razor states, roughly, that the simplest explanation of a given set of evidence is to be preferred to more complicated explanations. The existence of a designer of the universe is required by the evidence, the theist might suggest, but further details about the nature of this designer are not. It might be that there is one designer, it might be that there are several; the designer or designers might be corporeal, or mortal, or they might not be. The simplest explanation of the evidence, though, is to postulate one designer, and to leave it at that. Further details unnecessarily complicate the explanation of the order in the universe, and so are unwarranted.

The Moral Argument

The transcendental argument from morality is the argument from the existence of morality to the existence of God. The existence of God, it suggests, is a necessary condition for the existence of morality.

Morality consists of a set of commands; it does not describe the way that the world is, but rather prescribes the way that the world ought to be; it tells us what to do. Commands, however, cannot exist without there being a commander, and there must therefore be some being that issued the commands that constitute morality.

This being, however, cannot have been a human being. For a command only carries as much authority as does its commander, but the authority of morality exceeds the authority of any human being. In fact, the commands that constitute morality carry ultimate authority; if morality prescribes that I perform one act, but prudence, or any other non-moral consideration, prescribes that I perform another, then all things considered I ought to perform the act prescribed by morality. Moral considerations, then, outweigh all other considerations. The authority that issued the commands that constitute morality must therefore be an ultimate authority. The only ultimate authority, however, is God. The existence of morality therefore depends on, and so demonstrates, the existence of God. (1) Morality consists of a set of commands.

(2) For every command there is a commander.

Therefore:

(3) There is a commander that commanded morality.

(4) Commands only carry as much authority as does their commander.

(5) Morality carries ultimate authority.

Therefore:

(6) The commander that commanded morality carries ultimate authority.

(7) Only God carries ultimate authority.

Therefore:

(8) The commander that commanded morality is God.

Therefore:

(9) God exists.

The Argument from Religious Experience

The argument from religious experience is the argument that God must exist because he is the object of certain experiences. It is only possible to experience that which exists, it is argued, and so the phenomenon of religious experience is taken to demonstrate the existence of God.

This argument assumes that religious experiences are a type of perceptual experience, i.e. a type of experience in which something external is perceived. Some, though, would argue that religious experiences are more akin to imaginings than they to perception, that the object of the experience is not something that exists objectively in the world but rather is something that exists subjectively in the mind of the person having the experience.

Objections may also be raised along lines suggested by traditional philosophical scepticism. There exist powerful philosophical arguments that our experiences of the external world, i.e. of the familiar everyday objects around us, are insufficient to justify belief in their existence. Descartes' argument from dreaming is the best known of these, though external world scepticism can be traced back at least as far as ancient Greece and Pyrrho of Elis. If our familiar and lucid experiences of the external world are insufficient to justify belief in its existence, though, then how much more uncertain must be the connection between barely tangible religious experiences and belief in God.

The Argument from Miracles

Miracles have traditionally been taken as validations of religious claims. If the Bible is to be believed, then miraculous signs and wonders that testified that it was God working through him accompanied Jesus' ministry. His resurrection from the dead was the greatest of these miracles, and is still frequently taken today to be a solid reason for believing in the existence of God.

Setting aside the question as to just how strong the evidence for the resurrection, or for any of the other miracles reported in the New Testament, is, religious sceptics frequently cite Hume as having undermined any such argument for belief in the existence of God. Hume noted that there are two factors to assess in deciding whether to believe any given piece of testimony: the reliability of the witness and the probability of that to which they testify.

The testimony of a witness that is both honest and a good judge of that to which they testify is worth much. The testimony of a witness who is either dishonest or not in a position to know that to which they testify is worth little. The reliability of the witness is therefore something that is to be taken into account in deciding whether to believe anything on the basis of testimony.

The probability of that to which they testify, however, is also relevant. If a witness testifies to sighting a flying pig then it is more likely that their testimony is false than that their testimony is true, even if they are a reliable witness.

The reliability required of a witness in order for his testimony to justify belief in that to which he testifies increases as the probability of that to which he testifies decreases. A miracle, however, is by definition an event that is as unlikely as anything else. It will always, therefore, be more likely that the testimony of a witness to a miracle is false than that it is true. So, at least, goes the Humean argument.

Arguments for Atheism

Though the history of the philosophy of religion has been dominated by attempts to prove the existence of God, there also exist a number of arguments that seek to disprove theism. These range from a priori arguments that the concept of God is logically incoherent, to a posteriori arguments that the world is not the way that it would be if God existed. The atheistic proofs section surveys these arguments for atheism.

Within the Arguments for Atheism section, the arguments are arranged under the following headings: “The Problem of Evil”, “Problems with Omnipotence” (including the paradox of the stone), “Problems with Omniscience”, “Divine Justice” (the injustice of hell), and “The Argument from Autonomy”.

The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil is the problem of reconciling the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent God with the existence of a world full of evil and suffering. If God is omniscient then he knows how to bring it about that there is neither evil nor suffering. If God is omnipotent then he is able to bring it about that there is neither evil nor suffering. If God is benevolent then he wants to bring it about that there is neither evil nor suffering. But if God knows how to, is able to and wants to bring it about that there is neither evil nor suffering, then why does he not do so? The simplest answer is that God does not do so because he does not exist. This is by far the most popular argument for atheism.

Problems With Divine Omnipotence

The doctrine of divine omnipotence is the doctrine that God is all-powerful. It is sometimes argued, however, that the concept of omnipotence is paradoxical, logically incoherent, and so that it is logically impossible that there be any being that is omnipotent. This position, if it can be sustained, precludes the existence of God.

Problems with Divine Omniscience

The doctrine of divine omniscience is the doctrine that God is all-knowing. The doctrine of divine omniscience, though, faces several philosophical objections; there are a number of arguments in the philosophy of religion that purport to demonstrate that God cannot possibly know everything. These include arguments that the doctrine of divine omniscience is logically incoherent, that it is inconsistent with the further Christian doctrine of divine impeccability (i.e. the doctrine that God cannot sin), and that it is refuted by the fact of human freedom. If any of these arguments is successful, then there can be no omniscient God.

Problems with Divine Justice

The doctrine of divine justice is also subject to criticism. First of all, it appears to conflict with the idea that God is forgiving. A just God sees that each person gets what he or she deserves; a forgiving God sees that some people’s sins go unpunished. Second, the Christian view of heaven and hell appear in many ways to be unjust. Hell, for instance, appears to inflict an

infinitely great punishment upon those who are sent there. How, though, can any finite sin deserve infinite punishment? Just punishments and rewards are proportionate to the badness or goodness of the person that deserves them. Heaven and hell though, are all or nothing. They therefore cannot be just.

The Argument from Autonomy

The argument from autonomy is the argument that the existence of morally autonomous agents is inconsistent with the existence of God, and so that the fact that morally autonomous agents do exist disproves the existence of God. God, if he exists, is worthy of worship. If a being is truly worthy of worship, though, then he is entitled to our unconditional obedience. Moral agents, however, cannot be required to give unconditional obedience to any agent. Moral agency requires autonomy, and so the idea of a moral duty to give up one's autonomy is incoherent; in giving up one's autonomy one would cease to be a moral agent so would cease to have moral duties at all. We cannot, therefore, have a duty of unconditional obedience to any agent, and there therefore cannot be any agent that worthy of worship. There can therefore be no God.

The Problem of Evil

“Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?” [Epicurus]

The problem of evil is the problem of reconciling the existence of the evil in the world with the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent God. The argument from evil is the atheistic argument that the existence of such evil cannot be reconciled with, and so disproves, the existence of such a God. Christianity claims both that God created the world and that he sustains it. Christianity claims that God knows all things and is capable of all feats. Christianity claims that God is perfectly good, and wants only the best for his Creation. If each of these claims is true, though, then it is difficult to see why God allows the evil in the world to persist. The evil in the world thus appears to be at least strong and perhaps even conclusive evidence that at least one of these central claims of Christianity is false.

This discussion will distinguish between four different forms of the argument from evil: the argument from imperfection, the argument from natural evil, the argument from moral evil, and the argument from unbelief. Though each of these arguments presents a different problem for the theist to explain, a different reason for believing that atheism is true, each shares a common form, which is described below. The four arguments are, of course, mutually consistent, and so can be and often are proposed together.

Each of the four arguments from evil begins by claiming that if God existed then the world would reach a certain standard. The standard anticipated differs between the different forms of the argument, each argument claiming that the evil named in its title - imperfection, natural evil, moral evil and unbelief, respectively - would not exist in a world created by God.

In each of the arguments this claim is supported by an appeal to God's nature. If God exists, it is said, then he is omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent. As such, it is suggested, God would know how to bring it about that the world met the anticipated standard, would be able to bring it about that that the universe met the anticipated standard, and would want to bring it about that the universe met the anticipated standard. If God knew how to, were able to, and wanted to do a thing, though, then surely he would do that thing. If God existed, then, it seems that he would bring it about that the world met the standard anticipated by the proponent of the argument from evil.

The next step in each of the arguments from evil is the claim that the world does indeed contain the evil named, that the world does not reach the standard that it would reach if God existed. The four arguments thus claim respectively that the universe is imperfect, that it contains natural evil, that it contains moral evil, and that it contains unbelief. Each argument concludes from its respective claim that God does not exist. The argument from evil can, then, be represented as having the following structure:

The Argument from Evil

- (1) If God exists then he is omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent.
- (2) If God were omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent then the world would not contain evil.
- (3) The world contains evil.

Therefore:

- (4) It is not the case that God exists.

A discussion of each of the four forms of the argument - the argument from imperfection, the argument from natural evil, the argument from moral evil, and the argument from unbelief - can be found in the following text.

The Argument from Imperfection

The argument from imperfection is one form of argument from evil. The argument from evil is the argument that the existence of evil in the world is strong, and perhaps even conclusive, evidence that God does not exist. The argument from imperfection is the form of the argument from evil that concentrates specifically on the imperfection of the world, taking the fact that the world could have been better as proof that it was not created by God.

The first task for an advocate of the argument from imperfection is to establish that if God created the world then the world would be perfect. This at least appears to follow from God's perfection. The goodness of a creator is proportional to the goodness of that which he creates. A carpenter who makes a fragile table with uneven legs is a bad carpenter. A carpenter who makes a strong and beautiful table is better. As God is a perfect Creator, then, so God's creation must also be perfect. If God created this world, it seems, then this must be the best of all possible worlds. Against this line of thought, objectors argue that there is no best possible world, and so that the idea that a perfect Creator would necessarily create such a world is false.

The second task for an advocate of the argument from imperfection is to establish that the world is not perfect. This claim, of course, is highly plausible; there are many ways in which it might be thought that the world might have been better. The world might, for example, have contained less wars, or less unpleasant diseases, or less destructive volcanic eruptions. The world, the advocate of the argument from imperfection will maintain, contains multiple defects, each of which establishes the non-existence of God.

If it is accepted both that if God existed then the world would be perfect, and that the world is not perfect, then it must also be accepted that God does not exist. The argument from imperfection can therefore be summarised as follows:

- (1) If God exists then he is omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent.
- (2) If God were omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent then the world would not contain imperfections.
- (3) The world contains imperfections.

Therefore:

- (4) It is not the case that God exists.

Is There a Best Possible World?

The argument from imperfection is the argument that if God existed then the world would be perfect, that the world isn't perfect, and so that God doesn't exist. The claim that if God existed then the world would be perfect rests on the fact that God is conceived of by theists as being a perfect Creator. A perfect Creator, the argument from imperfection suggests, is one that creates a perfect world. One that creates an imperfect world is therefore an imperfect Creator. This imperfect world, therefore, even if it was made by some Creator, was not made by God as he is conceived of by theists. The God of theism, therefore, does not exist.

One response to the argument from imperfection is to deny that there is such a thing as a best possible world. If there is no best possible world, then even a perfect Creator would not create the best possible world, in which case it would not follow from the fact that a given world is imperfect that that world was not created by a perfect Creator. Specifically, it would not follow from the fact that this world is imperfect that it was not created by God. The argument from imperfection would have been defeated.

The claim that there is no best possible world, that the idea of a perfect world is incoherent, is at least plausible. Although there are better and worse possible worlds, for any world that we can imagine we can imagine a way of making it better. We could for instance, increase the number of happy people contained by that world. As there is no intrinsic maximum number of happy people in the world, there is no world for which it is not possible to increase the number of happy people that it contains. Further, increasing the number of happy people in a world always makes that world better. It is therefore true of every world that it could be improved, and so true of no world that it is the best possible world. Thus far, the defence against the argument from imperfection appears to be on solid ground.

The concern with this defence against the argument from imperfection is that it proves not only that the idea of a best possible world is incoherent, but also that the idea of a perfect Creator is incoherent. If this is the case, then the fact that there is no possible world not only rebuts the argument from imperfection but also disproves the existence of God. For if God is conceived of as a perfect Creator and if the idea of a perfect Creator is incoherent, then the existence of God is impossible. If the theist is to answer the argument from imperfection by denying that the concept of a best possible world is coherent, therefore, then he must find some way of explicating the concept of a perfect Creator that is not dependent upon the concept of a best possible world.

The Argument from Natural Evil

“In sober truth, nearly all the things which men are hanged or imprisoned for doing to one another are nature's everyday performances. Killing, the most criminal act recognized by human laws, nature does once to every being that lives, and in a large proportion of cases after protracted tortures such as only the greatest monsters whom we read of ever purposely inflicted on their living fellow creatures.” [John Stuart Mill, Nature and Utility of Religion]

The problem of natural evil can be summarised as follows:

(1) If God exists then he is omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent.

(2) If God were omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent then the world would not contain natural evil.

(3) The world contains natural evil.

Therefore:

(4) It is not the case that God exists.

The most controversial premise of this argument is the second premise: “If God were omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent then the world would not contain natural evil.” The existence of natural evil can be justified in a variety of ways.

Some argue that good and evil are relative terms, and so that it is impossible for one to exist without the other. The existence of evil is thus taken to be justified because it allows for the possibility of the existence of good.

Even if this suggestion is resisted, a similar argument might be proposed. A world in which there were no possibility of evil would be a world in which no act has any significance. If no act can bring evil into the world, then the choice as to which act to perform is of no importance. If our lives, and the choices that we make in them, are to have genuine significance, then it seems that there must be some possibility that bad things will happen. The existence of natural evil, then, allows us to work to overcome it. The existence of evil in the world opens up possibilities for bravery, for compassion and for mutual dependence that could not exist otherwise. Without evil, our lives would be meaningless, and this, it is argued, justifies God in allowing evil to persist.

A further defence against the argument from natural evil is that evil is inflicted upon us by God as a punishment for our sins. The difficulty with this suggestion is that natural evil is a particularly crude instrument of revenge. Often, those who have committed most sins suffer least. We might expect God’s punishment to be proportional to the crimes that we have committed, but this is not what we find with natural evil.

The Argument from Moral Evil

Moral evil is evil that is wilfully inflicted upon the world by free moral agents. The problem of moral evil is the problem of reconciling the existence such evil with the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent God. Surely if such a God existed, it is argued, he would prevent such evil from occurring.

This specific form of the generic argument from evil can be summarised as follows:

- (1) If God exists then he is omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent.
 - (2) If God were omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent then the world would not contain moral evil.
 - (3) The world contains moral evil.
- Therefore:
- (4) It is not the case that God exists.

By far the most common response to the argument from moral evil is the free-will defence. The free-will defence is the argument that as moral evil results from the choices of free moral agents its existence is consistent with the existence of God. The argument works in two ways. First, it holds that as moral evil is caused by the choices of free moral agents, God is not responsible for moral evil. Second, it holds that as it is more important that free moral agents do exist than it is that moral evil does not exist, God did well in creating such agents even though he knew that they might choose to abuse their freedom.

The Free-Will Defence

The free-will defence is a defence of theism against the argument from moral evil. The argument from moral evil is the argument that the existence of moral evil is inconsistent with, and so disproves, the existence of God. (Moral evil is simply evil resulting from the free actions of moral agents.) The argument from moral evil has the following form:

- The Argument from Moral Evil
- (1) If God exists then he is omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent.
 - (2) If God were omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent then the world would not contain moral evil.
 - (3) The world contains moral evil.
- Therefore:
- (4) It is not the case that God exists.

Like all forms of the argument from evil, the key premise of the argument from moral evil is the second. Is it the case that if God were omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent then the world would not contain moral evil? If so, then the argument from moral evil appears to be sound; there is little else in the argument that admits of dispute.

In order to refute the argument from moral evil, then, the theist must show that it is not necessarily the case that if God were omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent then the world would not contain moral evil. Under what circumstances, though, for what reason, might such a God allow such evil?

Theists almost invariably meet this question with the free-will defence. Moral evil is caused by the free choices of moral agents, they argue. Free agency, though, is a good thing; a world containing free agents is far better than either a world containing only automata or a world containing no conscious beings at all. An omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent God would therefore create a world containing free agents, and in doing so would run the risk of allowing moral evil to enter into the world.

The first way in which the free-will defence works, then, is by distancing God from the moral evil in the world. Moral evil is not brought about by God, the free-will defence argues, but by free agents. God is therefore not the author of moral evil, and so is not responsible for it.

This conclusion might be criticised, however, in the following way: Even if it is the free agents that perpetrate moral evils that are directly responsible for them, God does seem to bear at least some indirect responsibility for them. After all, God created the free agents, knowing full well the risk that he was running in doing so, and is therefore at least partly to blame for their abuses of their freedom. God it can be argued, is guilty of negligence in creating free agents, even if not of actually perpetrating any moral crimes himself.

The second way in which the free-will defence works is in justifying the existence of moral evil by justifying God's creation of free agents. The existence of moral evil, the free-will defence argues, is a consequence of the existence of a greater good: free will. Without free will there could be no moral goodness; a world without free agents would be morally void. The good that is the existence of free moral agents, it is suggested, therefore outweighs the bad that is the existence of moral evil, and God therefore did well in creating free agents even though he knew that some of them would commit moral evils.

Some have criticised this line of defence by arguing that the good that is the existence of free moral agents does not outweigh the bad that is the existence of moral evil. Consider the scale on which moral evil has occurred even in recent history; this is a high price to pay for freedom; is it too high a price?

Others have thought that the free-will defence fails because God could have created free agents without risking bringing moral evil into the world. There is nothing logically inconsistent about a free agent that always chooses the good. There are, then, among all of the possible free agents that God might have created, some free agents that would always have chosen the good. Why, it is sometimes asked, did God not create those free agents, leaving the others uncreated?

A further criticism of the free-will defence imagines a human being using it to justify his failure to intervene to prevent a crime from being committed. If one of us were able to prevent a brutal murder, but instead allowed it to take place, then we could not justify our inaction using the free-will defence. If we were to say that although we could have prevented the murder, we thought it best to protect the free-will of the murderer by allowing him to carry out his plan, then we would be judged to have made a moral error.

Why, if this argument would be unacceptable coming from a human being, should we think it any more acceptable coming from God?

The Argument from Unbelief

The argument from unbelief, also called the argument from non-belief, is a specific form of the argument from evil developed by Theodore Drange. The type of evil the existence of which is taken to be evidence against the existence of God by this form of the argument from evil is the evil of unbelief. If God exists and is as Christianity takes him to be, the argument suggests, then God wants all human beings everywhere and at all times to believe both in his existence and in the gospel. Further, the argument continues, if God exists and is as Christianity takes him to be, then he is capable of proving his existence to all human being everywhere. There are people, however, who believe neither of these things. God's failure to make himself known, it is suggested, can only be explained by the hypothesis that he does not exist.

(1) If God exists then he is omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent.

(2) If God were omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent then the world would not contain unbelief.

(3) The world contains unbelief.

Therefore:

(4) It is not the case that God exists.

Problems with Divine Omnipotence

Omnipotence is a part of the concept of deity; God, if he exists, is omnipotent. It is sometimes argued, however, that the concept of omnipotence is paradoxical, logically incoherent, and so that it is logically impossible that there be any being that is omnipotent. This position, if it can be sustained, precludes the existence of God.

The argument that the concept of omnipotence is paradoxical is best introduced by presenting the theist with a dilemma. Any one of a variety of questions - e.g. "Can God create a rock so heavy that he cannot lift it?" or "Can God create a law that binds himself?" - might be posed in order to introduce this dilemma. For each of these questions, God, if he exists, will either be capable or incapable of performing the feat described. The atheistic argument is that either alternative forces the conclusion that God is not omnipotent. The argument, constructed using the first of the questions above, therefore has the following structure:

The Paradox of Omnipotence

(1) God either can or cannot create a rock that is so heavy that he cannot lift it.

(2) If God can create a rock that is so heavy that he cannot lift it, then God is not omnipotent.

(3) If God cannot create a rock that is so heavy that he cannot lift it, then God is not omnipotent.

Therefore:

(4) God is not omnipotent.

(5) If God exists then he is omnipotent.

Therefore:

(6) God does not exist.

The controversial premises of this argument are the second and the third. Proponents of the argument defend these premises in the following way. If God can create a rock that is so heavy that he cannot lift it, then there is something that he cannot do, namely lift the rock in question. If God cannot create a rock that is so heavy that he cannot lift it, then there is something that he cannot do, namely create such a rock. Either way, then, there is something that God cannot do, and if there is something that he cannot do then he cannot be omnipotent.

The most common theistic response to this problem rests on the thought that omnipotence is limited by logical possibility. An omnipotent being, it is suggested, is one that can bring about any logically possible state of affairs. The existence of a rock so heavy that God cannot lift it, though, is arguably a logically impossible state of affairs. God's inability to create such a rock, it is claimed, therefore does not count against his being omnipotent.

Problems with Divine Omniscience

Christian theists claim that God is omniscient, i.e. all-knowing. The doctrine of divine omniscience, though, faces several philosophical objections; there are a number of arguments in the philosophy of religion that purport to demonstrate that God cannot possibly know everything. These include arguments that the doctrine of divine omniscience is logically incoherent, that it is inconsistent with the further Christian doctrine of divine impeccability (i.e. the doctrine that God cannot sin), and that it is refuted by the fact of human freedom.

If any of these arguments is successful, then the doctrine of divine omniscience as it is usually taught will require at least modification, and possibly abandonment. Further, if being omniscient were thought to be a part of what is involved in being God, then these arguments against the doctrine of divine omniscience might even constitute proofs of atheism, of the non-existence of God. Four problems with divine omniscience are worthy of mention.

The first problem - the paradox of omniscience - is derived from Cantor's proof that there is no set of all sets. Omniscience, it is said, entails knowledge of the set of all truths. Cantor's proof, however, demonstrates that there is no such set. As there is no such set, it is argued, there can be no omniscient being.

The second problem is the problem of experiential knowledge. Here the argument is that there are certain facts knowledge of which can only be acquired through certain experiences - knowledge of what it is like to sin, for instance, can only be acquired by sinning - and that some of these experiences, and so some of these items of knowledge, are such that they cannot be had by God.

The third problem is that of reconciling freedom and foreknowledge, specifically the existence of divine foreknowledge with the existence of human freedom. If God knows all of our future actions, then the future is fixed, but if the future is fixed, it seems that there is nothing that we can do to change it. The ability to determine our future actions, though, is what constitutes human freedom. Divine foreknowledge, then, seems to preclude the possibility of our being free agents.

The fourth problem is the problem of middle knowledge. Middle knowledge is knowledge of what free agents would have done had the world been other than it is. As the agents are free, their choice of action cannot be determined by the state of the world, and so cannot be calculated on that basis. As middle knowledge concerns counterfactual situations, however, neither can their choice of actions be known by observation of the future. With the two possible sources of knowledge ruled out, it seems that middle knowledge is an impossibility.

Problems with Experiential Knowledge

The second type of argument commonly advanced against the doctrine of divine omniscience is the problem of experiential knowledge. The problem of experiential knowledge is that there appear to be certain kinds of knowledge that can only be acquired by having certain kinds of experiences.

One can only learn what it is like to sin by experiencing sin first-hand; one can only learn what it is like to feel malice by experiencing malice first-hand; one can only learn what it is like to be ignorant and powerless by experiencing ignorance and impotence first-hand. Some of these experiences, though, such as those listed above, are of a kind that cannot be had by God. God cannot sin, or feel malice, or lack power. If, though, there are facts that can only be known through experience, and God cannot have the experiences by which those facts can be known, then God cannot know those facts. In that case, though, the doctrine of divine omniscience will have been disproven.

(1) There are some items of knowledge that can only be acquired through experience.

(2) Some of the experiences through which items of knowledge that can only be acquired through experience are acquired are such that they cannot be had by God.

(3) If some of the experiences through which items of knowledge that can only be acquired through experience are acquired are such that they cannot be had by God, then there are some items of knowledge that cannot be acquired by God.

Therefore:

(4) There are some items of knowledge that cannot be acquired by God.

(5) If there are some items of knowledge that cannot be acquired by God then it is not the case that God is omniscient.

Therefore:

(6) It is not the case that God is omniscient.

How Does God Know the Future?

Christian theism claims that God is omniscient. With the exception of a recent movement known as “Open Theism”, omniscience has always been taken to entail knowledge of the future. If God is omniscient, then he knows not only everything about the way that the world is, but also everything about how the world will be.

How, though, can anyone know the future? And how, in particular, is it possible to know the future in such detail? There are two models of divine foreknowledge - the predictive model and the observational model - that seek to give answers to these questions.

The predictive model of divine foreknowledge holds that God knows the future by prediction, by calculating the way that the world is going to be on the basis of the way that the world is now. There are laws of nature that govern the way that the different entities in the world interact. Using these laws, even we, with our imperfect knowledge, can often make accurate predictions about the future. Think about the way that we calculate the future positions of satellites orbiting the Earth. We know where the satellites are now, and what laws govern their interactions, and so project where they will be in the future.

According to the predictive model of divine foreknowledge, God’s foreknowledge is derived from calculations such as these but on a much grander scale. Given perfect knowledge of the present state of the world, and perfect knowledge of the laws that govern the interaction of its parts, it

seems, it should be possible to predict with perfect accuracy the way that the world will be at any given point in the future. This, according to the predictive model of divine foreknowledge, is how God knows, in perfect detail, what will happen in the future.

The problem with the predictive model of divine foreknowledge is that it only works given the assumption that determinism is true. Determinism holds that each state of the world wholly determines the subsequent states of the world; given the way that the world is now, determinism holds, there is only one possible way in which the rest of history could play itself out. This assumption is necessary for the predictive model of divine foreknowledge to work, because if there were several ways in which the rest of history could play itself out then, even with perfect knowledge of the present, and perfect knowledge of the laws of nature, God could not know for certain which of those possible futures would come about. If the present does not determine the future, then the future cannot be predicted with certainty.

Determinism, though, does not seem to be true. Quite apart from the scientific concerns about indeterminacy involving small particles, indeterminacy seems to enter the world through the choices of free agents. If any of us has genuine, significant freedom, it seems, then it cannot be the case that our future actions are determined by the present state of the world. To be a free agent is to be able to react to the world in any one of several ways, to choose which of several possibilities to realise. If there are free agents, then there are many possible futures. Perfect predictive foreknowledge, then, will be impossible.

Some have sought to resolve this problem with predictive foreknowledge by defending a position known as “compatibilism”. Compatibilists hold that we can have significant freedom even in a deterministic world; as long as it is facts about us that determine how we are going to act, they say, our decisions about how to act are free. If this position is defensible, then it allows the theist to hold both that God has perfect foreknowledge on the basis of prediction and that we are free.

An alternative defence of divine foreknowledge, however, is to reject the predictive model of divine foreknowledge and instead advance an observational model. The observational model of divine foreknowledge holds that God knows the future not by carrying out complex calculations about how the present might play out, but simply by observing it. God exists outside time, the observational model holds, and so is able to directly observe different points in time just as we can directly observe different points in space. On the observational model of divine foreknowledge, it doesn't matter whether or not determinism is true, because God's knowledge of the future is based not on predicting how the world will be in the future but on seeing how the world is in the future.

Freedom and Foreknowledge

The argument from foreknowledge is an argument that divine omniscience, or more specifically divine foreknowledge, is inconsistent with human freedom. The argument begins with a consideration of the consequences of God knowing everything. If God knows everything then he knows every act that each of us is going to perform in the future. If God

knows every act that each of us is going to perform in the future, though, then it is not possible for any of us not to perform those acts. For if it were possible for any of us not to perform those acts then it would be possible for us to bring it about that that which God knows is false. Knowledge, of course, by definition, is knowledge of the truth; one cannot know that which is false. The idea that that which God knows could be false is therefore absurd. Because God's omniscience entails knowledge of all of our future acts, therefore, it also entails that it is impossible for any of us not to perform those acts.

The argument continues with a consideration of freedom. Freedom, it seems, consists precisely in the ability not to do that which we do, in there being a plurality of acts each of which it is possible for us to choose to perform. If one does not have this ability to choose, i.e. if there is no plurality of acts that it is possible for one to choose to perform, then one cannot be free. If God's omniscience entails that it is impossible for any of us not to perform those acts that we are going to perform, therefore, then it also entails that none of those acts will be free.

For those that believe that human beings can and do perform acts freely and will continue to do so, the argument from foreknowledge can easily be pressed into service as an argument against the existence of God. For if the existence of an omniscient god is inconsistent with any of our future acts being free, as the argument from foreknowledge appears to demonstrate, then the existence of one free future act entails the non-existence of an omniscient god. Omniscience, though, is a part of the Christian conception of God. If no omniscient god exists, then God does not exist.

The argument from foreknowledge, presented as an argument against the existence of God, may therefore be formalised as follows:

(1) A necessary condition for an act's being free is that it is possible for the agent that is going to perform the act not to perform it.

(2) If God knows that an agent is going to perform an act, then it is not possible that the agent is not going to perform it.

Therefore:

(3) If God knows that an agent is going to perform an act, then it is not the case that that act is free.

(4) If an omniscient God exists, then if an agent is going to perform an act then God knows that that agent is going to perform that act.

Therefore:

(5) If an omniscient God exists, then if an agent is going to perform an act then it is not the case that that agent is going to perform that act freely.

(6) There is an agent that is going to perform an act freely.

Therefore:

(7) It is not the case that an omniscient God exists.

One possible concern with the argument from foreknowledge is that it appears to equivocate between different senses of "possible". The "possible" in (1), arguably, does not have the same meaning as the "possible" in (2). The "possible" in (1) appears to mean "possible given everything that is logically prior to the agent's decision to perform the act". The "possible" in (2) appears to mean "possible given everything that is logically prior to

God's knowledge that the agent will perform the act". If there is some significant difference between the senses of "possible" used in (1) and (2), of course, then the argument will fail. A demonstration that God's knowledge that the agent will perform the act entails that it is impossible in one sense--the sense in (1)--that the agents will not perform the act is not a demonstration that it is impossible in some other sense--the sense in (2)--that the agent will not perform the act. If the argument from foreknowledge equivocates on senses of "possible" in this way, then, then (3) will not follow from (1) and (2).

An alternative response to the argument from foreknowledge invokes the argument from future facts. The argument from foreknowledge purports to demonstrate that divine omniscience is inconsistent with future human freedom. What appears to be inconsistent with future human freedom, though, is not the existence of a being that knows facts about the future, but the existence of those facts about the future whether they are known by any being or not. The argument from foreknowledge can, it seems, be stripped of all references to God knowing the future without losing any of its force. What remains after this process is an argument that there are no truths about the future, a counter-intuitive conclusion. If this argument is unsound, if there are facts about the future, then the argument from foreknowledge must also be unsound. If this argument is sound, if there are no facts about the future, though, then God's knowing all facts would not threaten human freedom; premise (4) of the argument from foreknowledge would be false. Either way, then, the argument from foreknowledge fails.

The Argument from Future Facts

The argument from foreknowledge purports to demonstrate that divine omniscience, or more specifically divine foreknowledge, is inconsistent with human freedom. It is arguable, however, that it is the existence of facts about the future, rather than the existence of a being that knows those facts about the future, that is difficult to reconcile with human freedom.

The argument from foreknowledge can, it seems, be stripped of its theological content without losing any of its force. To do this, references to God knowing that an agent is going to perform an act must be replaced with references to it being a fact that that agent is going to perform that act, and references to the existence of an omniscient God must be replaced with references to the existence of facts about the future. The result of this revision of the argument from foreknowledge will be referred to as the argument from future facts. This argument runs as follows:

(1) A necessary condition for an act's being free is that it is possible for the agent that is going to perform the act not to perform it.

(2) If it is a fact that an agent is going to perform an act, then it is not possible that the agent is not going to perform it.

Therefore:

(3) If it is a fact that an agent is going to perform an act, then it is not the case that that act is free.

(4) If there are facts about the future, then if an agent is going to perform an act then it is a fact that that agent is going to perform that act.

Therefore:

(5) If there are facts about the future, then if an agent is going to perform an act then it is not the case that that agent is going to perform that act freely.

(6) There is an agent that is going to perform an act freely.

Therefore:

(7) It is not the case that there are facts about the future.

This argument, it seems, is no worse than the argument from foreknowledge. Its premises are no less plausible than those of the argument from foreknowledge, and it has exactly the same logical structure. It may be, of course, that both arguments are unsound, but it is not the case both that the argument from foreknowledge is successful and that the argument from future facts is not. The advocate of the argument from foreknowledge therefore faces a dilemma.

The advocate of the argument from foreknowledge could, on the one hand, reject the argument from future facts as unsound. If he does this, though, then he must concede that the argument from foreknowledge is also unsound. For if he rejects the argument from future facts on the ground that one of its premises is false, then he must concede that the corresponding premise of the argument from foreknowledge is false, and if he rejects the argument from future facts on the ground that it employs faulty logic, then he must concede that the argument from foreknowledge similarly employs faulty logic. Rejection of the argument from future facts, then, is inconsistent with advocacy of the argument from foreknowledge.

The advocate of the argument from foreknowledge, therefore, must accept the argument from future facts as sound, conceding that there are no facts about the future. Once this concession is made, however, the threat to theism presented by the argument from foreknowledge vanishes. For the argument from foreknowledge is the argument that divine omniscience entails divine foreknowledge, but that foreknowledge is impossible given the fact of human freedom, and so that the fact of human freedom entails that no omniscient being exists. If there are no facts about the future, however, then omniscience - i.e. knowledge of all facts - does not entail knowledge of facts about the future, and so the impossibility of divine foreknowledge does not entail the impossibility of divine omniscience.

Whatever view is taken of the argument from future facts, then, the argument from foreknowledge must be abandoned.

Problems with Divine Justice

Christianity claims that God is just. Setting universalism (i.e. the theory that all are ultimately saved, that none go to hell) and annihilationism (i.e. the theory that those who do not go to heaven do not go to hell either, but rather are annihilated) aside, Christianity also claims that at the end of one's life one either enjoys an eternity in heaven or suffers an eternity in hell. These claims, it is often argued, conflict. How can a just God treat human beings in this way?

The argument is most naturally cast as a problem relating to vagueness. Just rewards and just punishments are proportional to whatever it is that is being rewarded or punished. The just punishment for murder is greater than the just punishment for slander because murder is a greater crime than slander.

Whatever it is that determines whether one is rewarded in heaven or punished in hell - be it faith, works, or a combination of the two - is something that comes in degrees. One can have more faith or less faith, more good works or less good works.

In order for the rewards and punishments for faith or works to be just, then, these rewards and punishments must admit of degrees. One with greater faith or greater works deserves better than one with lesser faith or lesser works. Heaven and hell, though, are both all or nothing affairs; they do not admit of degrees. God's policy of sending some to heaven and some to hell, then, seems to be inconsistent with his treating us justly.

The Argument from Autonomy

The argument from autonomy is the argument that the existence of morally autonomous agents is inconsistent with the existence of God, and so that the fact that morally autonomous agents do exist disproves the existence of God.

The argument begins with the assumption that God, if He exists, is worthy of worship, an assumption that will be granted by most traditional Christian theists. The argument proceeds by asking what it is that being worthy of worship entails, suggesting that a being worthy of worship is entitled to our unconditional obedience. Again, the suggestion that God is entitled to our unconditional obedience sits well with much Christian theism.

Moral agents, however, the argument continues, cannot be required to give unconditional obedience to any agent. Moral agency, it is suggested, requires autonomy, and so the idea of a moral duty to give up one's autonomy is incoherent; in giving up one's autonomy one would cease to be a moral agent so would cease to have moral duties at all. We cannot, therefore, have a duty of unconditional obedience to any agent, and in a world that is populated by moral agents there can therefore be no being that is worthy of worship. This world, though, is populated by moral agents, and so this world is one in which there can be no God.

(1) If God exists then he is worthy of worship.

(2) If God is worthy of worship then we owe him unconditional obedience.

(3) It is not possible that we owe anyone unconditional obedience.

Therefore:

(4) It is not possible that God is worthy of worship.

Therefore:

(5) It is not possible that God exists.