

**PHILOSOPHY 1:  
WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS FACED BY  
PHILOSOPHERS WHEN PROVIDING ARGUMENTS  
FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD?**

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ABSTRACT. An attempt is made to detail the problems encountered by philosophers who are trying to prove or disprove the existence of God or a God. The task of presenting a proof of the existence of nonexistence of God is broken down and the factors that need to be considered before beginning and while constructing the proof are illustrated. This essay deals with why it is important to know what God is, why it matters whether God exists or not, how to deal with apparently contradictory evidence and why arguments fail if the viewpoint of the reader is not how the writer intended it.

This essay mentions God as opposed to god or a god. God is normally considered to be the Judeo / Christian God. This line of approach has been followed because many popular arguments are concerned with this god. However, the reasoning presented may equally be applied to any god or gods.

One of the key problems facing philosophers is concerned with being able to provide a proof for the existence, or nonexistence, of God. Whilst attempting this, most philosophers assume that either the reader already knows what God is, or uses their own definition without explicitly stating it. In fact, the nature of God is usually treated as a complete set of arguments in its own right. However, as in all cases, a precursor to being able to argue the existence or nonexistence of something is being able to actually define the object itself. Therefore, it is necessary to define some “parameters” for God. - It is necessary to

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state what God, if God exists, is responsible for providing and / or governing. These “parameters” will affect the arguments for and against the existence of God because they will reveal where to look in order to find the “evidence” required to confirm or reject the conjecture.

God is often popularly perceived in two ways: As a creator and as a mentor or guider. These are two completely different “jobs” and, although it may be possible, it is not necessary that they be carried out by the same person. It is also popular to perceive God as the most powerful being in existence. A being that is capable of anything; not only the most powerful, but also all powerful. By making God both a creator and a mentor, people have a single point of reference for both their questions about the past and their questions about the future. These questions include things pertaining to “Where did I come from”, “How should I live my life” and “What happens when I die”. This is the most basic definition of God. An example of some additional and popular beliefs about God follow. These beliefs have probably existed for as long as the basic definition of God, but they are not well defined. This leaves them very much subject to interpretation and dispute. This lack of definition does not deter people from believing them and as a result, a philosopher’s task is made more challenging.

God is a man. Mankind has created the image of God in his own likeness: In the likeness of the physically stronger and, traditionally, the provider of his own species. It is not immediately clear why “being a man” is important. However, “being a man” almost immediately prompts the question “Well, where does He live then?”. This problem has traditionally been overcome by the contradictory statement that “God is everywhere”. This statement immediately precludes God from being a man: Men cannot be everywhere. Men have bodies that start and end in well defined places. Therefore, the popular interpretation of this statement is “God has influence everywhere: He sits in a place

where He can see everything.” However, this interpretation is quite useless because one is brought back around to the beginning with the question “Where is this place then?”

God is perfect. God never makes mistakes and is completely infallible. Everything that God does is right and everything that God decrees is law. It is this belief that results in some of the most heated arguments between people. People read their religious texts and learn that God is perfect. They also learn other things that the God teaches them through the texts and they assume that their interpretations, and the ideas that they leave them with, are also perfect. This belief provides people with some degree of certainty in their lives. If they are unsure about what to do in a situation, or how to deal with something, then they can turn to God. God is perfect, and nothing that God tells us is wrong. This leads onto the next popular belief in God.

God is benevolent. People can trust in God: God never does bad things. This is one of the most questioned attributes of God. How can God be benevolent if bad things happen in the world? Who does God do “good things” for? - Something that is good for one person may be bad for someone else and in the same way that perfection has no degrees, neither does benevolence. Something is either benevolent or it is not. Benevolence and perfection, by their very definition, are absolute.

Even after attempting to define just three attributes of God, it is clear that God is many different things to different people. Therefore, it may be pertinent to pose the question “What do people need a God for?”. As stated previously, God is a Creator and a Mentor. A God is also the figure head of a religion. God gives people a way of absolving their responsibility for the way that they lead their lives. - They no longer have to make many important or “heavy” decisions of their own. Through religious texts, God has laid down what is right

and wrong. He has laid down how to relate to other people and what can be expected of others. He has offered some explanation of how the universe was created and what happens after death. From observation, it appears that people need a God because they cannot accept that “the buck stops with them”. On one hand people want freedom, and on the other, they are unwilling to accept the responsibility that this entails: They do not want responsibility for their own actions that they may regret and they do not want responsibility for the way the world around them is shaped. Therefore, they surrender their freedom to a God. This is why it is so important that people, if they believe in God, can prove that He exists: Some people have shaped their whole lives around the belief that God does in fact exist. In *Pascal's Pensées* [4], Blaise Pascal proposes the following;

“God is, or He is not.” But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos which separated us. A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. . . Which will you choose then? Let us see. Since you must choose, let us see which interests you least. You have two things to lose, the true and the good; and two things to stake, your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to shun, error and misery. Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose. . . But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. . . If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.

Here, Pascal is saying that if one believes in God then there is nothing to lose and everything to gain, where as, if one does not believe in God then there is everything to lose and nothing to gain. That is, if one believes in God and is correct then one will obtain the rewards promised in many religious texts; namely eternal happiness. If however the belief turns out to be incorrect, nothing will have been lost. If one does not believe in God, and God does exist, then one will not benefit from the rewards of believing. However, if it turns out that God does not exist, then nothing happens and nothing will be lost. Therefore, by believing in God, the worst outcome possible is that nothing happens. There are a number of problems with this argument: What if one believes in the “wrong” God. Religious texts commonly state that believing in the “wrong” God is as bad, and often worse, and not believing in a God at all. What if, as part of your belief in God, one makes lots of sacrifices that one would not otherwise have made? If it turns out that God does not exist after all, then something will have been lost. Perhaps most importantly, most religious texts teach that one should not seek benefits for one’s self in the manner proposed by Pascal.

It is popular amongst philosophers who are trying to argue the existence or nonexistence of God to pose the question “Does it really matter if God exists?”. The idea of a God actually exists. Both believers and nonbelievers can accept the idea of a God, and this in itself provides structure to peoples’ lives; it was seen previously that providing structure to peoples’ lives is one of the chief things that people look for in a God. Therefore, does it really matter if God actually exists? Even if He does not exist, He has already fulfilled at least one of His roles. This is in line with the agnostic view that God Himself is a matter of faith. If it does not matter whether God actually exists or not, then is God really relevant? Karl Marx believed that religion,

and therefore God, were there to “control” poor or disadvantaged people: To make these people happy with their lives even though other people had “better” lives. In *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* [2], Marx has the following to say;

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

Marx’s ideals seek to abolish poverty (and wealth) and therefore, he is saying that religion, and the things that God provides are unnecessary in an ideal world. Marx implies that God and religion serve to keep an unideal world in a reasonably stable state and an ideal world will keep itself in a stable state. Although many people dislike Marx’s general philosophy, he may be right in believing that religion and God are necessary in a world such as it is today. Despite modern advances in science, a vast proportion of the world’s population still depend heavily on religion in that they actively practice it and it is an integral part of their lives.

Many philosophers see the presence of “evil” in the world as a problem when trying to prove the existence of God. - How can a benevolent God exist if He allows evil to proliferate in the world? This leads to “How can God be perfect if He is not benevolent” It is at this point in the argument that some interesting points come to light. Through specific interpretation of the nature of God and exploitation of “loopholes” in the structure of language, it is possible to form extensive arguments both for and against the existence of God: If God is perfect then this means that He must be benevolent. Therefore, due to the fact that evil exists, God must not exist. If God is perfect then this means that He must be benevolent. Therefore, in order for us to appreciate what it

means to be good, He provides something from which to draw comparison. Language defines both perfection and benevolence in their own rights, but not with respect to each other. God has been “placed upon a pedestal” far above the realm of a human being, and now, mankind lacks the appropriate tools with which to perform analysis of the situation. The idea of a God developed long before human intellect had been trained. Therefore, when you train human minds with logic and reason it becomes incredibly difficult to analyse what lies beneath. - What lies beneath becomes covered up with structure and discipline.

All of the popular proofs of the existence or nonexistence of God have run into trouble either because someone has approached the proposition from a different viewpoint from the writer, or because the subtleties of language have left their argument open to interpretation or abuse through deliberate misinterpretation. What follows are a number of examples where a selection of philosophers have encountered troubles in their arguments not through narrowly defining the nature of God, but by not considering every viewpoint. In fact, at the time of writing, the “proof” was considered complete, and it is only with further knowledge and experience that it is possible to see its flaws.

William Paley’s argument for the existence of God is based on the observation that the universe appears to exhibit all the qualities of something that has been designed. In *Natural Theology* [3], Paley talks about discovering a watch and how its intricate construction could not have come about merely by chance:

...the watch must have had a maker; that there must have existed, at sometime, and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers, who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer...

Paley continues by presenting the reasons why imperfections in the watch do not detract from the fact that it is still complicated enough to

require a creator. Paley also explains that even if the watch was capable of reproducing itself, this does not explain how it originally came into existence. He then extrapolates to postulate that the apparent design of the universe points undeniably to the existence of a creator of the universe itself.

Paley's argument does not rely on any definition of God more complex than "God is a creator". However, by careful consideration of Paley's arguments and application of modern theories it is possible to argue against the evidence that he presents. Today, science has discovered self organising systems. Self organising systems will produce something, that appears to have order and structure from, almost any starting conditions. Using Darwin's theory of evolution, DNA is often cited as an example of a system that is capable of improving and refining itself. Through observation it is seen that DNA works principally on random mutations and natural selection to produce its results, rather than a deliberate attempt to achieve a specific state.

In *Summa Theologica* [1], Thomas Aquinas proposes that God exists because the requirements for the existence of life are so strict: Everything around mankind is so ideally suited to supporting life and even a tiny change in these conditions will make it completely impossible for life to exist. Therefore, Aquinas proposes that the universe was deliberately made like that because if this was not the case, then the current situation would not have arrived by chance. This argument however, is superseded by modern "Big Bang" theory in the following way: Given that the universe starts at a point and expands outwards and that the force of gravity acting in the universe can potentially cause it to collapse in upon itself again, one can argue that this can happen an arbitrarily large number of times. Therefore, just as a monkey who randomly presses keys on a typewriter, by probability, will eventually produce the entire works of Shakespeare, the universe will eventually



find itself in its current state. When the universe finds itself in this state, life will be able to evolve. Even though it may be unlikely for the universe to fall into this state, it will eventually happen. All the time the universe is not in the necessary state for life to evolve there will be nobody around to comment on the universe's unsuitability for supporting life.

In conclusion, it is the arguments for or against the existence of God in which the writer considers God simply to be a creator that have traditionally been the hardest to form objections to. Although it is possible to object to any argument, that is presented as "proof" for or against the existence of God, simply by disagreeing with the writer's definition of God, there are also other problems with these arguments. These problems have been chiefly to do with two things: A lack of knowledge or experience on the part of the writer has often meant that the argument can be viewed from a different point of reference. This new point of reference will allow the analyst to interpret exactly the same evidence in a different way and therefore, draw completely different conclusions. Secondly, manipulation and ambiguity of the language that the writer has used to explain his thoughts can be exploited to illustrate loop-holes in a previously "water tight" proof. It is important to realise that before an attempt is made to offer a proof for or against the existence of God, one must have a clear definition of what exactly is trying to be proved. The writer should also be clear about what they hope to achieve by proving or disproving the existence of God. Are they trying to prove that there was a being who created the universe in the beginning? Are they trying to prove that mankind has a mentor that will lead them through life? Or, are they trying to prove the existence of a God that serves an entirely different purpose?

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