Is There a God?

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Big Questions in Philosophy
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February 15, 2022
IS THERE A GOD?
A Debate
Little Debates About Big Questions
Pro: The Argument from Contingency

Pro: The Argument from Religious Experience

Con: Arguments from Evil

Con: The Argument from Divine Freedom
Pro: The Argument from Contingency

1. Pro: The Argument from Contingency

2. Pro: The Argument from Religious Experience

3. Con: Arguments from Evil

4. Con: The Argument from Divine Freedom
Cosmological Arguments

The General Idea

We can infer the existence of God from the fact that the universe exists at all (without needing to examine specific features of the universe).
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First Cause

1. Whatever begins to exist has a cause.
2. The universe began to exist.
3. Therefore, the universe has a cause.
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“in eternal things, even if there is no cause, we must still understand there to be a reason.” (Leibniz)

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**Cosmological Arguments**

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### Question
Why is there something rather than nothing?

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Can we prove that the universe began to exist?
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Can we prove that the universe began to exist?

Need to Argue
1. This is a good question.
2. God is a good answer.

Question
Why is there something rather than nothing?
Consider History, the total sequence of causes and effects (past, present, future). There are three cases:
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In any of these cases, it makes sense to ask ‘why?’
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In any of these cases, it makes sense to ask ‘why?’

But what kind of answer could there possibly be?
A Non-Causal Explanation

Why?
Otherwise our explanation would go in a circle.

How?
In metaphysics, grounding is the relation (or family of relations) whereby more fundamental things give rise to less fundamental things.

Some Examples
The statue exists because the clay is arranged thus and so.
The sandwich exists because the meat is between the two pieces of bread.
The dance exists because the dancers are moving thus and so.
The water exists because of the covalent bonds between oxygen and hydrogen atoms.
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Could God Ground History?

- God
  - Psychological Explanation
    - Choice
      - Grounding Explanation
        - History
Could God Ground History?

Problems

- Does grounding (in general) make sense?

History

Grounding Explanation

Choice

Psychological Explanation

God

Does this specific grounding claim make sense?

Does the notion of a choice outside history make sense?

Have we really made progress, or just pushed the question a step back?

What about competing explanations?
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Pro: The Argument from Religious Experience

Con: Arguments from Evil

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Lots of people across many cultures report experiences of God or an ultimate, transcendent reality. Experiences people describe this way include:

- Ineffable mystical experiences
- Miracles
- Fortuitous events
- Signs providing direction in life
- Sacraments
- Other religious practices

Claim: These experiences provide evidence for the existence of God, in something like the way sensory experience provides evidence for the existence of chairs.
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**Claim**

These experiences provide evidence for the existence of God, in something like the way sensory experience provides evidence for the existence of chairs.
Objection

We have no evidence that this kind of religious experience is reliable!
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Reply
We have no non-circular evidence that sensory perception, memory, reasoning, etc., are reliable.
Objection

Atheists can easily explain why people have these sorts of experiences.

True, but then skeptics can explain sensory perception, memory, etc. The real question is whether the alternative view of the world is really so much more compelling that you've got to conclude you're hallucinating.
Objection
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Objection

People only describe these experiences in theological terms because of what they were taught by their parents/teachers/etc.
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Reply

Our ways of understanding sensory perception are also shaped by culture, education, and experience.
Objection

Interpretation of religious experience is *much* more flexible than interpretation of sensory experience.
**Objection**

Interpretation of religious experience is *much* more flexible than interpretation of sensory experience.

**Reply**

Perhaps this is not true of *all* religious experience. Working within a tradition/community we can use extraordinary experiences to interpret the ordinary ones.
Objection

There's way more disagreement about what we (allegedly) learn from religious experience than about what we learn from sense experience! In particular, there are multiple well-developed traditions for the interpretation of religious experience.
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Reply
We should distinguish authentic experience from reliable experience. Experience can be authentic (it can really be experience of God) even if it’s not reliable (we don’t form true beliefs) because religious experience is difficult to interpret.
Authentic but Unreliable Experience
NOT AN ANTELOPE!
Con: Arguments from Evil

1. Pro: The Argument from Contingency

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God, [Epicurus] says, either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? or why does He not remove them?

– Lactantius, *On the Anger of God* (c. 300 CE), ch. 13
The Classical Argument

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Response

Some evils (or, at least the possibility of some evils) are necessary for some goods.
Goods that Necessarily Require (the possibility of) Evils

- Free will
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- Humans
- Me!
The Argument from Pointless Evils

The Problem

Certainly not *all* of the evils in the world are necessary for goods great enough to outweigh them!
The Argument from Pointless Evils

The Problem

Certainly not *all* of the evils in the world are necessary for goods great enough to outweigh them!

Response

We don’t know about all the goods and evils there are, or how they’re related.
The Argument from Unjust Evils

The Problem

It’s not enough that from the total perspective of the universe things are better with this evil than without it. It would be unjust for God to use suffering individuals as mere means to the greatness of the universe, without the consent of those individuals.
The Argument from Unjust Evils

The Problem

It’s not enough that from the total perspective of the universe things are better with this evil than without it. It would be unjust for God to use suffering individuals as mere means to the greatness of the universe, without the consent of those individuals.

Response

These individuals couldn’t exist in a world without evils! Therefore, as long as they have reason to be grateful for their lives overall, they have no cause for complaint.
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The Argument from Horrendous Evils

The Problem

Some people are involved (as doers or sufferers) in horridious evils, evils so bad that they give reason to doubt whether one’s life is a great good on the whole.

Marilyn McCord Adams (1943–2017)
The Argument from Horrendous Evils

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The Problem

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Response

Such evils must be ‘defeated’ (not merely overbalanced) by God, perhaps in an afterlife.
This is Not the Best of All Possible Worlds

The Problem

Since God is omnipotent and perfectly good, God would create the best of all possible worlds. This is not that world!
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Best World?

- Yes
- No

God is not free

Arbitrary World

Random World

No World

God is not unsurpassably good

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William Rowe (1931–2015)
The existence of God is still a major topic of philosophical debate. This has been a summary of a few of my favorite arguments.

- The cosmological argument from contingency argues that God provides the best answer to the question, why is there something rather than nothing?
- The argument from religious experience argues that God is known experientially, in something like the same way we know physical objects.
- Arguments from evil argue that the world we observe is not the kind of world an all-good and all-powerful God would create.
- The argument from divine freedom argues that the notion of essential perfect goodness (part of the traditional notion of God) is incoherent.

Each of these arguments should be regarded as an opening move in a debate—not the end of the story!

Each of these arguments makes assumptions about what kind of being God (or a god) would be, but there's always some other conception to which the argument is irrelevant!

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