

Is There a God?

Kenny Pearce

Big Questions in Philosophy
Trinity College Dublin

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GRAHAM OPPY AND KENNETH L. PEARCE
FOREWORD BY HELEN DE CRUZ

IS THERE A GOD?

A Debate

Little Debates About Big Questions



Is There a God?

- 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

Pro: The Argument from Contingency

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Cosmological Arguments

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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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Question

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Need to Argue

- 1 This is a good question.
- 2 God is a good answer.

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But what kind of answer could there possibly be?

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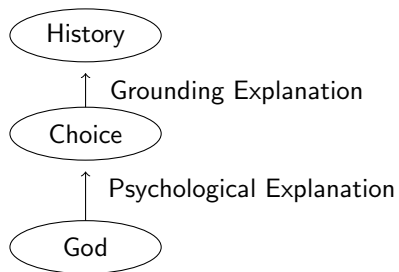
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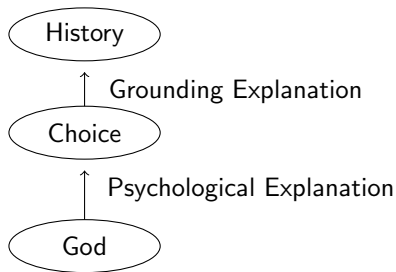
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- The water exists *because* of the covalent bonds between oxygen and hydrogen atoms.

Could God Ground History?



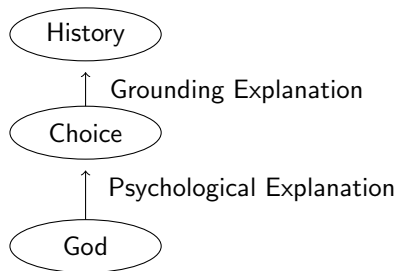
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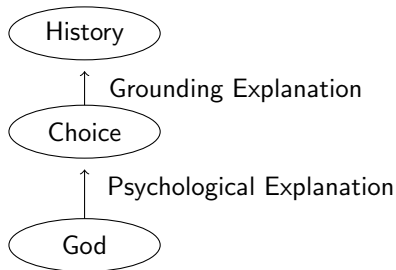
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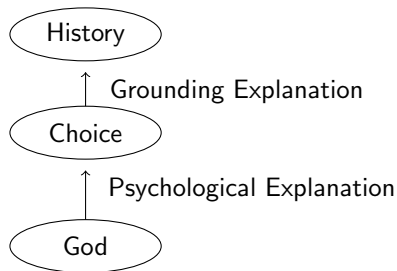
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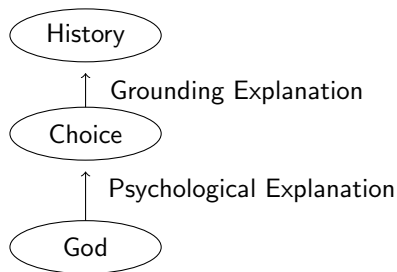
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- What about competing explanations?

Pro: The Argument from Religious Experience

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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!

Reliability

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Reply

We have no **non-circular** evidence that sensory perception, memory, reasoning, etc., are reliable.

Alternative Explanations

Objection

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

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

Reply

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

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.

Flexibility of Interpretation

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

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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.

The Plurality of Religions

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



Authentic but Unreliable Experience



NOT AN ANTELOPE!

Con: Arguments from Evil

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The Classical Argument

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?

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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

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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!

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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.

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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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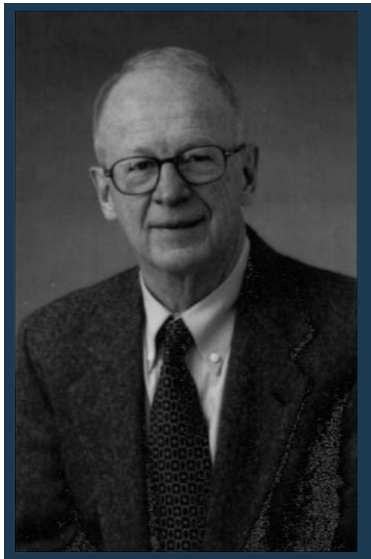
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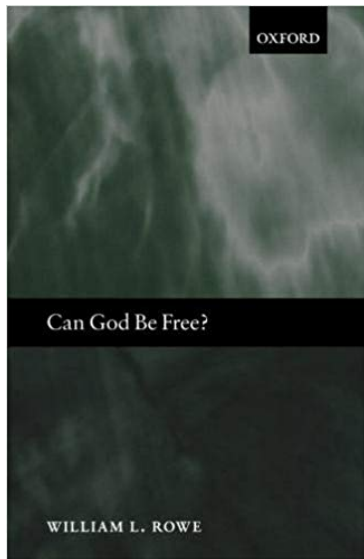
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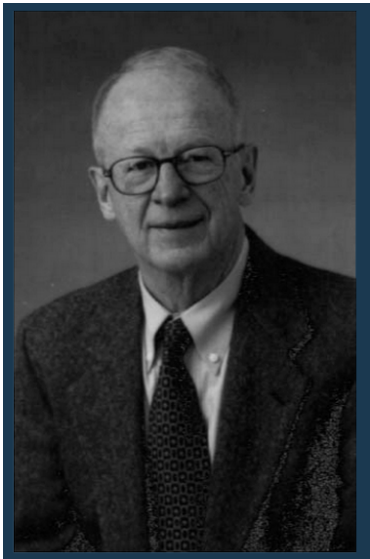
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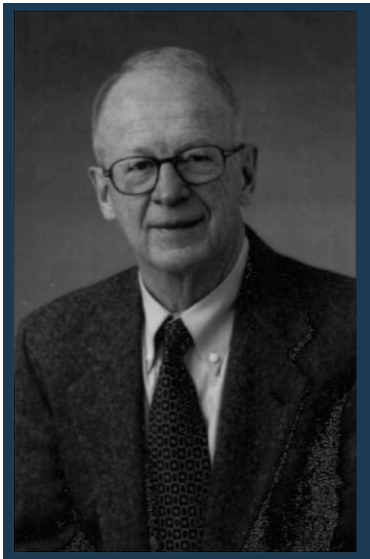
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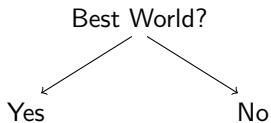
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Best World?

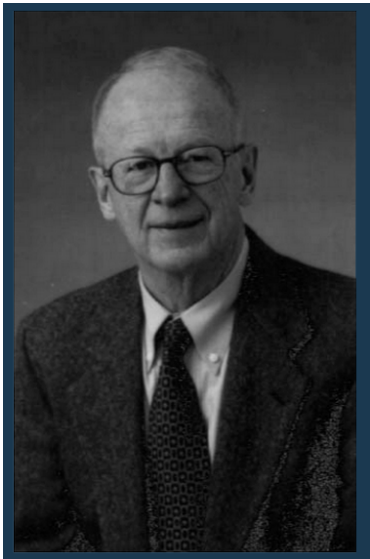
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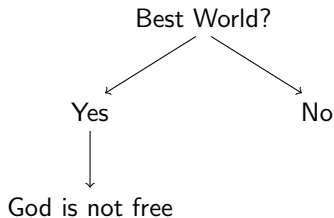
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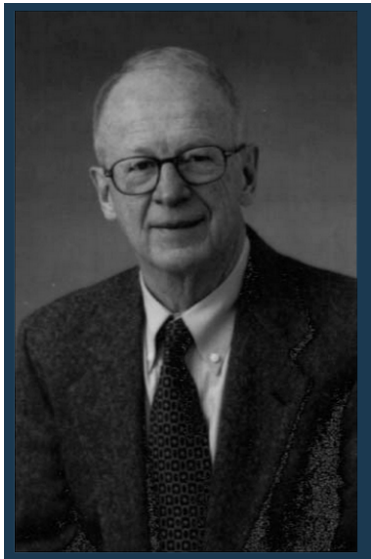
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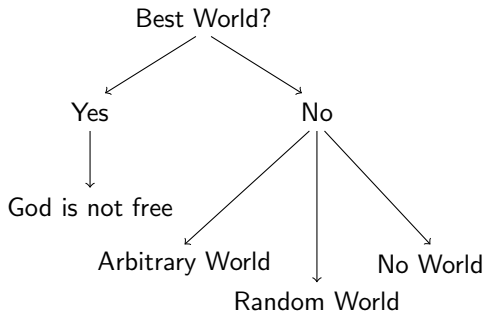
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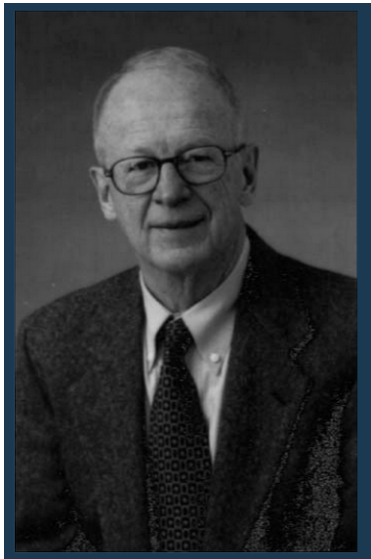
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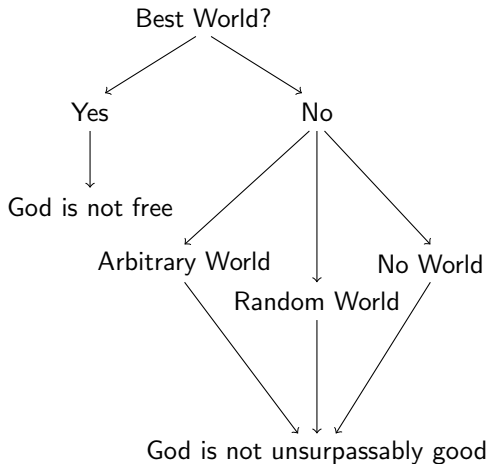
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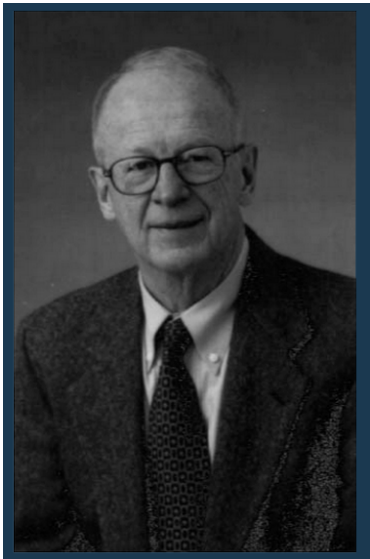
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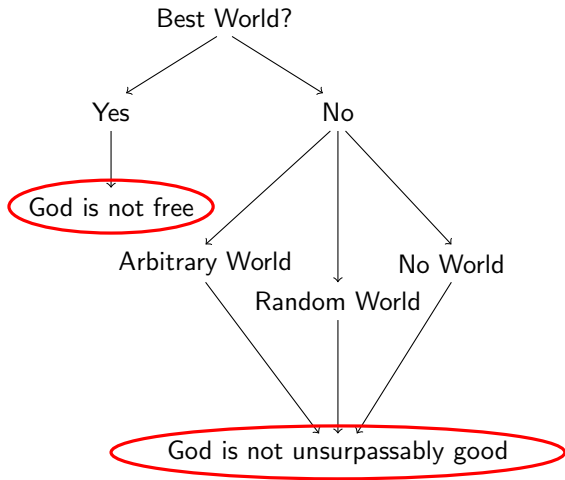
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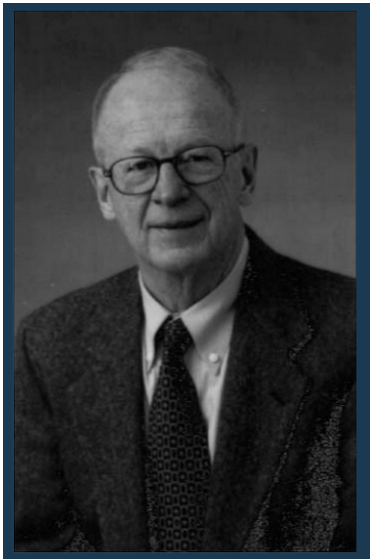
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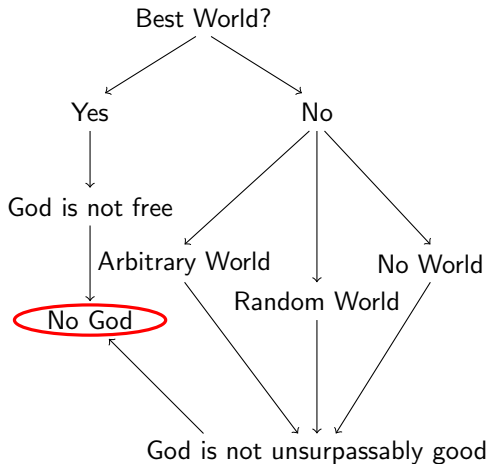
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Thank you!

Suggested Reading

- Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams, eds., *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford UP, 1990)
- William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cornell UP, 1993)
- Timothy O'Connor, *Theism and Ultimate Explanation: The Necessary Shape of Contingency* (Blackwell, 2008)
- Graham Oppy, *Arguing about Gods* (Cambridge UP, 2009)
- Graham Oppy and Kenneth L. Pearce, *Is There a God? A Debate* (Routledge, 2022)
- William Rowe, *Can God Be Free?* (Oxford UP, 2004)
- Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (Oxford UP, 2012)