

---

Think

by Simon Blackburn

---

Chapter 5 God

---

# The approach with the

- This chapter examines arguments for and against the existence of God.
  - It takes seriously the idea that religious people have beliefs that are meant to be evaluated in terms of their truth and falsity.
  - For instance, he assumes that people who believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ believe this in a literal sense, not just in some metaphorical or literary sense.
  - What this means is that Blackburn is not examining religion insofar as it is just a set of rituals or practices that people find spiritually satisfying at a certain level.
-

---

# The history of the ontological argument

- The ontological argument is a famous, though now thoroughly discredited argument proposed by a medieval philosopher and theologian named St. Anselm around 1050 A.D. It's validity was reaffirmed by Descartes in his *Meditations*.
  - Today the argument is primarily of historical interests, though it is also a very useful tool for exposing the defects of rationalism, the view that genuine knowledge must come from reason alone.
-

---

# Structure of the ontological argument

- The ontological argument has the structure of what is known as an indirect proof.
  - An indirect proof is one that begins by assuming the opposite, i.e the denial, of what it is attempting to prove. On the basis of this assumption it then attempts to derive some logically absurd conclusion.
  - According to this method, to show that the denial of the conclusion leads to an absurdity, is equivalent to showing that the conclusion itself must be true.
-

---

# A practical example of indirect proof

- The method of indirect proof may seem obscure, but it is easy to understand by thinking of a practical analogy.
  - Suppose your friend Henry is afraid to ask out Leslie, upon whom he has a gigantic crush. You want to encourage him, so you say something like this.
  - If you don't ask Leslie out, then I will. And if she accepts, which she probably will, then we will go out, and we'll eventually get it on, and I will tell you how great it was and you will hate me, and our friendship will go down the tubes. Is that what you want? Of course not, so call her now.
  - Notice, that this has exactly the structure of an indirect proof. It begins by assuming the opposite of what you are trying to prove, namely that Henry need to ask Leslie out. It shows that his failure to ask Leslie out leads to an absurd conclusion, namely the dissolution of your friendship. On the basis of this derived absurdity, you conclude that Henry must ask Leslie out.
-

---

# The ontological argument

- There are many different versions of the ontological argument, but they all go roughly like this.
  - 1. God is, by definition, the greatest conceivable being.
  - 2. Let us assume that such a being does not exist.
  - 3. Of course, I can conceive of a being with all God's properties who does exist.
  - 4. But it is better to exist than not to exist.
  - 5. So such a being would have to be greater than God.
  - 6. But (5) contradicts (1).
  - 7. Therefore, (2) is false; and God must exist.
-

# Problems with the ontological argument

- There are several serious problems with the ontological argument, but the most important of these was given by a monk named Gaunilo.
- Gaunilo's argument is similar to Blackburn's Dreamboat argument. Gaunilo applied his argument to the concept of the "most perfect island," but you can really apply it to anything at all.
- For example,
  - 1. Dreamboat is, by definition, the greatest conceivable lover.
  - 2. Let us assume that such a being does not exist.
  - 3. Of course, I can conceive of a lover with all Dreamboat's properties who does exist.
  - 4. But it is better to exist than not to exist.
  - 5. So such a lover would have to be greater than Dreamboat.
  - 6. But (5) contradicts (1).
  - 7. Therefore, (2) is false; and Dreamboat must exist.

---

# Gaunilo's point

- Gaunilo's point here is that Anselm's argument itself leads to an absurdity, namely that the most perfect anything must exist. Since Gaunilo takes it as obvious that this is ludicrous, he concludes that there must be at least one flaw in the ontological argument.
  - The most important flaw is in premise 4, the claim that it is better to exist than not to exist.
  - As Blackburn explains in his Dreamboat example, existence just is not properly thought of as a property like any other property. It just does not add anything to the meaning of the term 'Dreamboat' or 'God' to add to it that he, she or it exists.
  - In other words, existence can not be thought of as part of the meaning of a term. Whether or not something exists can not be established by a definition, it must be established by the world itself.
-



---

# Rationalism vs. empiricism

- The ontological argument is a deeply rationalistic argument that attempts to establish God's existence by reason alone, on the basis of an a priori examination of the meaning of the term 'God' itself.
  - The empiricist rebuttal to this method of proof is that God's existence is not a conceptual matter, but a matter of fact. If God does exist, then this is not something that can be known simply by thinking about the meaning of 'God'. It is something for which we must give experiential evidence.
  - Although ontological proof is taken seriously by very few people today, people still routinely commit Anselm's error in other matters. Anytime you find yourself saying that you believe something because it "just makes sense" or "just stands to reason" when in fact you are acquainted with no evidence for or against the view at all, then you are committing a less sophisticated version of the same sort of error.
-

---

# The cosmological argument

- The cosmological argument is another rationalist argument for the existence of God. It was formulated by Aristotle (who did not himself believe in a personal god) and reformulated within the Christian tradition by the St. Thomas Aquinas.
  - The cosmological argument is a rationalist argument in that it is ultimately based on the meanings of certain terms, not observation. Unlike the ontological argument, however, it is not primarily based on the meaning of the term 'God'. Rather, it is based on the meaning of the term 'cause'.
-

---

# The cosmological argument: simple version.

- The basic idea behind the cosmological argument is that everything that exists, does so either contingently or necessarily.
    - Something exists contingently if it is caused by (or contingent upon) something else.
    - Something exists necessarily if it is impossible for it not to exist, and impossible for it to be caused or brought into being by something else.
  - The simplest version of the cosmological argument assert that while physical events are clearly contingent, this chain of contingent causes can not extent back infinitely in time; at some point we must arrive at a first cause, which by definition would have to be a necessarily existing thing.
  - It then asserts that this necessarily existing thing is God.
-

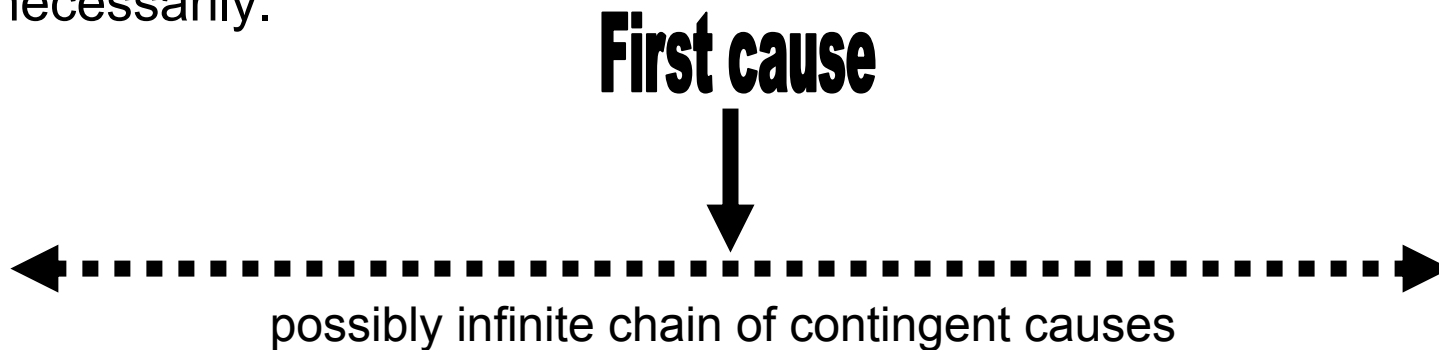
---

# Problems with the simple version

- There are two main problems with this version of the cosmological argument.
    - First, how do we know that a chain of causation can not extend infinitely back into the past? It is hard to grasp, but there is no obvious logical absurdity in assuming that it does.
    - Second, supposing that the idea of a necessarily existing thing makes sense, what reason could we have for thinking that such a thing could be a being with the kinds of qualities we normally attribute to God?
-

# Subtler version of cosmological argument

- A subtler version of the cosmological argument does not rely on the rejection of an infinite past.
- It asserts that even if we allow that the chain of contingent causes is infinite in both directions (past and future) it still makes sense to ask what causes the entire chain of causes to come into existence.
- The idea here is that contingent causes occur within space and time. But when we ask where space and time itself came from, the answer can only be in terms of something that exists necessarily.



---

# Problems with the subtle version

- This version of the cosmological argument is still beset by the following difficulties:
    - Given that we accept the existence of something that exists necessarily, how do we know that the universe itself is not such a thing?
    - How do we know that there can not be an infinite chain of contingent causes of the universe itself?
    - Does the idea of something that exists necessarily even make sense?
-

---

# Necessary existence redux

- Both Hume and Kant reject the idea of a necessarily existing entity on empiricist grounds, agreeing that existence is a factual matter, not a logical or conceptual one. Whatever we may conceive of as existing, said Hume, we may also conceive of as not existing.
  - Kant, in particular, argued that the idea of a necessarily existing thing is just a confusion.
  - Given that a certain kind of thing exists, certain truths about it are contingent and certain truths are necessary. For example, given that a spherical object exists, it may only be contingently true that it is bouncy, but it is necessarily true that its surface area is  $4\pi r^2$ .
  - But it is wrong to infer from the existence of necessary truths about certain kinds of things, that there must be certain kinds of things whose existence is necessary.
-

---

# The argument to design

- The design argument to the existence of God is distinct from both the ontological and the cosmological arguments in that it proceeds from experience.
  - The design argument does not attempt to prove God's existence with certainty. Rather, it hypothesizes God's existence in an attempt to explain a certain kind of observation.
  - The observation in question is that the universe is not chaotic, but rather highly ordered. The design argument seeks an explanation of this fact.
  - The proposed explanation of the observed order in the universe is that the universe has designer, i.e., God.
-



---

# Analogical nature of design argument

- The argument in favor of the design hypothesis is analogical in nature.
  - The basic claim is that the order we observe in the universe is just like the order we observe in a well-designed man-made object, such as a watch.
  - It is logically possible, but still incredibly unlikely, that something with the internal complexity of a watch could come into existence by a succession of ordinary physical interactions. The best explanation seems to be that the watch is creation of an intelligent being.
  - Hence, if the universe displays the same kind of order as a watch, then we are justified in explaining it's existence in the same way.
-

---

# The argument to design formalized

- Here is one way of formalizing the design argument.
    1. The universe is like a machine in that it displays a high degree of order.
    2. The ordered nature of machines is due to the fact that they were designed by someone.
    3. Therefore, the ordered of the universe is due to the fact that it was designed by someone.
-

---

# General problems with analogical argument 1

- The main problem with the design argument stems from the problematic nature of analogical argument itself.
  - The problem is that just about any two things in the universe are similar in some respect, but this similarity is rarely if ever sufficient to justify the conclusion that they must be similar in some other as yet unobserved respect as well.
  - Here, for example, is an argument with the same logical structure as the design argument:
    1. A human is like a chimpanzee in that they share almost identical DNA.
    2. As a result of their DNA, humans are capable of advanced mathematics.
    3. Therefore, chimpanzees are capable of advanced mathematics.
-

---

## General problems with analogical argument 2

- The point is not that the chimp argument is absurd. The similarity of our DNA may actually be a good reason for wondering whether chimps could understand mathematics.
  - Rather, the point is that this argument is only successful in suggesting an interesting possibility, one that would have to be tested by further inquiry into the cognitive abilities of chimps.
  - Unfortunately, there is just no way to do this with the design argument. The claim that a watch was designed can be tested: we can ask to see the designer and the plans she followed. But the claim that universe was designed cannot be tested in the same way. Neither the designer nor the plans can be revealed to us without violating the assumption that the designer and his plans are somehow external to the universe itself.
  - Hence, as far as corroboration is concerned, the analogical argument can be nothing more than an interesting idea.
-

---

# Specific problems with the design argument.

- The design argument has some specific problems as well.
    - 1. Although the order of universe is similar to that of a machine, it is also similar to that of an animal. Animals arise from a process of cellular replication, so it seems at least as plausible to suggest that the universe arises from this kind of process as well.
    - 2. Complex designed objects like spaceships have many designers, not one. So even if we allow that the universe is designed, we have no reason to think that the universe had only one designer.
    - 3. In our experience, intelligence is always the result of the activity of a brain, which is a physical thing. Hence the design argument would seem to entail the view that the designer of the universe itself has a brain, meaning that the designer of the universe is itself a physical being.
-

---

# The problem of evil 1

- Much philosophy of religion focuses on the following question. Why does God permit evil? The attempt to answer this question is known as Theodicy.
  - The question arises because monotheistic traditions conceive of God as having three properties: omniscience, omnipotence, and omni-benevolence.
  - The question, then, is how an all-knowing, all-loving, and all-powerful creator can permit widespread human suffering.
  - This is a very large subject and Blackburn deals with it fairly narrowly, in terms of the design argument alone. The question he poses is whether a person who is truly aware of the incredible degree of human suffering that exists in the world would ever hypothesize that the universe was created by a being with the properties noted above.
-

---

# The problem of evil 2

- Classical Theodicy is the attempt to show that God's existence is logically possible given the amount of suffering in the universe. Many scenarios have been imagined that would make sense of this world being the best of all possible worlds.
  - The problem is that classical Theodicy is only of interest to someone who already believes in God. In the absence of any prior belief in God's existence, the amount of suffering in the world is actually very compelling evidence that God lacks one of the properties noted above.
  - For example, God may simply be an extremely powerful being, but not an omnipotent one. Hence, while he loves us and knows that we suffer, he can only do so much to prevent it without eliminating the universe as a whole.
-

---

# Mysterianism

- As opposed to denying one of God's essential attributes, it is more common to take refuge in faith, and to claim that God's ways are essentially unknowable to humans: God works in strange and mysterious ways. This is what is known as Mysterianism.
  - The main problem with the mysterian response is that it entails that we really know nothing whatsoever about God and his plans. But we can't allow that reason is sufficient to demonstrate the existence of an all-powerful, all-loving, all-knowing God, but then deny that reason is capable of grasping what such a God would and would not do. If it means anything to say that God has these properties, it is that we can expect God to behave in certain ways.
  - Wittgenstein summarize this point very well when he says p.172.
    - *A nothing will serve just as well as a something about which nothing may be said.*
-



---

# The free will defense

- Another common strategy for dealing with the problem of evil is to argue as follows.
  - God could have made a world in which humans were incapable of evil. This may have been a world devoid of suffering, it also would have been a world without free will, which is by far the greater good. In order to grant humans freedom, God had to grant them the power to do evil.
  - There are several basic problems with this argument. The standard three are:
    - It is based on an incoherent dualistic notion of free will.
    - Most evil is not due to human free will. Pestilence, natural disasters, predators, etc., are all part of nature.
    - Even granted free will, it is not clear why God could not grant protection to the innocent by segregating evil-doers and let them exert their free will on each other.
-

---

# Miracles

- Many people believe in miracles. There is no universally accepted definition of a miracle, but the core idea is that a miracle is something that is physically impossible from a scientific perspective.
  - If miracles occur, then it might seem reasonable to attribute them to divine agency. But the real question is whether they actually do occur.
-

---

# Miracles 2

- One problem here is with the idea of something being physically impossible from a scientific perspective.
  - Contemporary science doesn't have much use for the concept of something being physically impossible. Most of the things that we normally think of as being impossible (turning water into wine, walking on water, resurrection, virgin birth, etc.) are extremely improbable, but not physically impossible.
  - Something that is very improbable at any given time, may still be quite probable given enough time. For any given person winning the state lottery is extremely unlikely. But people win all the time. The winners might call it a miracle, but it's not. It's just a low probability event that was highly probable to occur to someone at some point.
  - Before going on, it's important to say here that people who believe they have been on the receiving end of a miracle should not be ridiculed. Imagine a parent whose child is restored to perfect health after being unconscious at the bottom of a pool for over an hour. It is almost difficult to understand how such a person could refuse to believe in God after something like that.
-

---

# Miracles 3

- Still, the philosophical problem is why we should ever believe that a truly miraculous event occurred, rather than one that is perhaps a bit surprising, but still quite possible from a scientific point of view.
  - David Hume provided what is perhaps the most famous critique of miracles by asking when it is rational to believe testimony that a miracle occurred. He focuses on testimony because those who believe in the miracles spoken of in the Bible. We never saw them ourselves.
  - Hume points out that human beings are highly fallible sources of information. We're often wrong about what we think we have seen. Criminologists know that if 10 people are present at the same crime, they will get 10 different accounts of the facts.
  - Hume proposes the following principle for assent to a miracle (p.178)
    - “No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony itself be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous.”
-

---

# Miracles 4

- This statement can take a while to process, but Blackburn clarifies it nicely.
  - The basic idea is that when you hear or read a report of a miraculous event- call it M- then you have a choice to make. (1) You can believe M happened. (2) You can believe the person reporting M is mistaken.
  - Hume asks us this: Which is more likely (1) that a miracle actually happened or (2) that the person reporting the miracle is mistaken in some way.
  - Hume says that even when the person making the report is highly reliable, it is always more reasonable to believe s/he is mistaken. In order to believe (1) you would essentially have to be saying that it would be even more miraculous if the testimony were mistaken. And this is simply never the case.
-

---

# Miracle 5

- To back up this claim, Hume points out several things that people need to take into account before believing a miracle.
    1. Most people really want to believe in miracles, and there is nothing easier to convince people of than things they already want to believe.
    2. People really want to be the messengers of miracles. It makes them feel powerful and the center of attention.
    3. Almost all religions report miracles of one kind or another . For example, miracles inform Christian beliefs about the significance of Christ's teachings and miracles also inform Islamic beliefs about the significance of Muhammad's teachings. But Christians do not accept Islamic miracles and Muslims do not accept Christian miracles because they are espoused in the service of contrary teachings. The thing to appreciate here is that even people who believe in the miracles of their own religion reject the vast majority of testimony to miracles in the service of other religions.
-

---

# Pragmatism

- The last argument for belief in God is what we call a pragmatic argument.
  - It does not attempt to prove the existence of God, or even to supply evidence for God's existence. Rather, it attempt to show that it is reasonable to believe in God regardless of the fact that we can provide neither proof nor evidence.
  - The proof is due to a famous mathematician, named Pascal. Descartes and Pascal were contemporaries, and in fact had deep disagreements about the status of scientific reasoning and evidence. Pascal was an empiricist, and a pioneer of probability theory, which Descartes rejected vehemently for it's inability to demonstrate any conclusion with certainty.
  - Pascal was also a mystic, and he ultimately abandoned mathematics and science and converted to Christianity as a result of several profound experiences he interpreted as miracles.
-

---

# Pascal's wager

- Pascal's argument is not probabilistic in nature, but it is inspired by the reasoning that is typical of probability theory, and specifically uses the language of betting.
  - Pascal points out that when we make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, we must look at all the possible outcomes, and assess them in terms of their value, positive or negative.
  - When deciding whether it is best to believe in God, we have two options: (1) Believe in God; (2) Don't believe in God.
  - There are also two possible states of the world: (1) God exists; (2) God doesn't exist.
  - This means that there are four possible outcomes that can be represented in the following table.
-



# Pascal's Wager 2

	God exists	God doesn't exist
Believe in God	God exists and you believe. Value = + infinity	God doesn't exist and you believe Value = 0
Don't believe in God	God exists and you don't believe. Value = - infinity	God doesn't exist and you don't believe. Value = 0

---

# Pascal's wager 3

- Pascal's argument is formulated in terms of Christian belief, which promises eternal bliss for belief and eternal damnation for disbelief.
  - Hence, given God's existence he attaches a value of + infinity to belief and – infinity to non belief.
  - Pascal appreciates the fact that, given God's non existence, belief in God may be a net negative, and disbelief a net positive. But he argues that because the amount of time we spend in this world is finite, both the negative and positive values in this case are essentially 0 in comparison to infinity.
  - Pascal's wager then, basically comes down to the claim that with belief you stand to gain everything and lose practically nothing, but with disbelief you stand to lose practically everything and gain practically nothing.
  - So from a practical point of view belief is a no-brainer.
-

---

# Pascal's wager 4

- Many people find Pascal's argument very compelling, but it is actually a very poor argument.
  - It's main problem is that we have no reason to think of our choices in such a limited way.
  - Christianity is just one of many religions you might consider accepting. Suppose you think of it as a choice between Christianity and Islam. Both religions believe in eternal damnation and eternal bliss in connection with their respective views.
  - So, on a very simple reading, deciding to accept Christianity is the same as rejecting Islam. Hence, the positive infinite benefit one receives from choosing the correct religion is balanced by the infinite negative of getting it wrong.
-

---

# Pascal 5

- Of course you still might think that Pascal has given a solid argument for believing in some religion rather than nothing at all. After all, there is no upside to atheism on Pascal's wager.
  - But as Blackburn points out that, too, is not clear. For all we know God is the sort of being who punishes people for basing their religious beliefs on crass, self-interested calculations and rewarding those who do their best to reason toward the truth, even when they come to the wrong conclusions.
  - So while Pascal's wager is predicated on uncertainty about the existence of God, it is based on the completely unjustified assumption that Christianity supplies the only relevant options. Once we see that alternative, contrary beliefs systems are equally strong candidates from the betting perspective, Pascal's calculus implodes.
-

---

# Faith

- Fideism is the belief that religion is strictly a matter of faith, and that reasoning really has nothing to do with it.
  - This attitude is appealing in its simplicity, especially after slogging through a bunch of inconclusive arguments for the existence of God.
  - But belief in the absence of any requirement to produce or examine the evidence for or against that belief is incredibly dangerous.
  - It is easy to admire a person's faith when the things they believe in are conducive to our own aims, or at least not hostile to them.
  - But many people practice religions in which they accept on faith that people who do not practice that religion need to die.
  - As Blackburn says pointedly (p.190): "If I check into the Mysterious Mist and come back convinced that God's message is to kill young women, or people with the wrong-colored skins, or people who go to the wrong church, or people who have sex the wrong way, that is not so good."
  - Ultimately no sensible person thinks faith itself is a good thing. You must have faith in the right things, and the only way to determine right from wrong is with the use of reason. Nobody gets a free pass here.
-