

Some Notes on God and Philosophy

(These notes condense a lot of material from my notes and lectures into an outline of two essential things. First, why is the subject important? Second, I want to give you summary presentations of the most important philosophical arguments on the subject. Be aware that these are summaries of arguments that you would read in any collegiate Introduction to Philosophy textbook. The result of summarizing is that the arguments lose some of the key details. I risk presenting them in such a way as to be easily torn apart. This is not my intention. Make sure you understand that each of these arguments is much more powerful than the summaries indicate. I invite you to read them when you have more time.)

Introduction:

From the canyons of the mind

 We wander on and stumble blind,
Wade through the often tangle maze
 Of starless nights and sunless days,
Hoping for some kind of clue—
 A road to lead us to the truth.
But who will answer?...

Is our hope in walnut shells

 Worn 'round the neck with temple bells?
Or deep within some cloistered walls
 Where hooded figures pray in shawls?
Or high upon some dusty shelves,
 Or in the stars,
 Or in ourselves?

Who will answer?

If the soul is darkened

 By a fear it cannot name,
If the mind is baffled

When the rules don't fit the game,
Who will answer?
Who will answer?
Who will answer?

Introduction continued...

A. Setting the cultural stage: A shift in worldviews

One worldview follows from another.

1. In the eighteenth century the Enlightenment challenged the Biblical synthesis that had dominated western culture
2. In the nineteenth century both romanticism and scientific materialism came along.
3. The twentieth century gave us Marxism and fascism, positivism, and existentialism.
4. These are all considered stages of Modernism. The modern world view is now considered old fashioned.

The twenty-first century brings with it a new emerging world view called "Postmodernism."

Princeton theologian, Diogenes Allen: "A massive intellectual revolution is taking place that is perhaps as great as that which marked off the modern world from the Middle Ages."

According to Christian scholar Thomas Oden, the modern age lasted exactly 200 years, from the fall of the Bastille in 1789 to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

The French Revolution exemplifies the triumph of the Enlightenment.

With the destruction of the Bastille, the prison in which the monarchy jailed its political prisoners, the premodern world with its feudal loyalties and spiritual hierarchies was guillotined.

The revolutionaries exalted the Rights of Man
They dismissed Christianity as a relic of the past. Human Reason would take the place of God, solving all human problems and remaking society along the lines of scientific, rational truth.

The trust in human reason and the rejection of the supernatural took many forms, but nowhere did the modernistic impulse reach further or more ambitiously than in the invention of the Marxist state.

All problems were explained according to material, economic causes. A quasi-scientific alternative was offered to solve these problems – Communism.

What it brought was unparalleled oppression and brutality.

5. The two major assumptions of modernism are Positivism and Existentialism (materialism)

6. Postmodernism

a. In his book, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be*, Walter Truett Anderson says there is a dawning of a conceptual shift as profound as any in human history.

According to Anderson, we are presently in the midst of a transition from one way of thinking to another. He cites three processes shaping this transition.

(1) The breakdown of belief. Today there is no consensus about what is true. We are, he says, “in a kind of unregulated marketplace of realities in which all manner of belief systems are offered for public consumption.”

(2) The birth of a global culture. Anderson says, “all belief-systems become aware of all other belief systems.” As a result, it is difficult to accept any of them as absolutely true.

(3) A new polarization. Conflicts over the nature of social truth tear at our society. We have “culture wars,” particularly battles over the critical issues of education and moral instruction. Anderson distinguishes between “objectivist’ (those who believe that truth is objective and can be known) and “constructivist,” (those who believe that human beings make up their own realities.)

II (of Introduction material) **Leveling with Philosophy**

C.S. Lewis once remarked that unless a complicated argument could be simplified to appeal to the average person, the chances were that the one doing the explaining did not understand it either.

Three Levels of Philosophy

A. Theory

1. It is here that we engage one another in the great ideas of philosophy and in the categories that are provided for reasonable discourse.

2. Rigorous application of the laws of logic and the advancement of the argument through sound reasoning.

3. Neither feeling, cultural sentimentality, nor tradition have any prior claim.

Knee-jerk emotional responses, however passionately felt, must be set aside, for it has no validity in defending the truthfulness of propositions or systems.

August Comte was right when he said, "Ideas govern the world, or throw it into chaos."

B. The Arts

A massive global assault has been launched upon us, and it is the arts more than any single force that predominates as an influential agent, mold our character, our values, and our beliefs. This invasion bypasses our reason and captures our imagination.

Truth has been relegated to subjectivity; beauty has been subjugated to the beholder; and as millions are idiotized night after night, a global commune has been constructed with the arts enjoying a totalitarian rule. The arts are now an all-pervasive influence, even upon matters of transcending importance – in effect, desacralizing everything and programming our very beings.

C. The Kitchen-table conversation

...where some very profound questions can be asked in nonthreatening situations.

1. The problem is that the solutions are usually superficial and simple.
2. This is where most of us live. From coffee shops to neighborhood parties to the kitchen table, if life-defining and life transforming conversations take place by a seemingly casual exchange of ideas.

D. What's the point? If one is to come to a correct conclusion when debating any issue, I propose we must abide by a rule, and that is this:

1. **Argue** at level one, **Illustrate** at level two, and **Apply** at level three.
2. The reasoning process provides the foundation, the arts the infrastructure and illustration, and the kitchen table the superstructure and application.
3. If this process is rearranged, meaningful debate is precluded, and there is no point of reference for truth.

Second Introduction to the subject.

Questions that might suggest that there is a god (Great Mysteries)

1. Why is there a universe at all?

Martin Heidegger: "Why is there any Being at all – why not far rather Nothing?"

Ludwig Wittgenstein: "How extraordinary that anything should exist."

2. Why do predictable laws operate the same way throughout the universe (rather than being different a million light years from here)?

3. Why is there order rather than chaos?
4. Why is there beauty?
5. Why do humans exist? (And why are they so different from every other being?)
6. Why are we curious?
7. Why, in general, do things that are bad for us taste and smell bad? Also, why is there a digestive track and why is food nutritious?
8. Why do we see things?
9. Why do I appear to have free will?
10. Why do I have a sense of right and wrong?
11. Why does air work so perfectly and have so many functions? Why can I see through it?
12. Why is there gravity?
13. Why is my mother so nice to me?
14. Why are there evil people?
15. Why does anything move?
16. Why does an egg hatch? (Why are there eggs?)
17. Why is there reproduction? How could it happen?
18. Why are so many living things similar?
19. Why does beer ferment?
20. Why do billions of people claim to know God?
21. Why do people die young?

I. God and Religion

A. It is possible to discuss a Supreme Being without directly referring to any particular religion.

B. One does not have to be religious to understand the standard philosophical arguments for God, or to understand the standard accepted characteristics of such a being.

C. No one is required to accept as fact the concepts discussed here. But everyone is expected to understand the concepts discussed here and to be able to discuss them intelligently.

II. God and Philosophy, The importance of the question at hand.

It should be made clear that in an Introduction to Philosophy course, we are limited to discussing the Western concept of God, as time is limited. If you are interested in exploring this subject more, you are encouraged to take other philosophy courses that deal with other concepts of gods from around the world. In saying "the Western tradition," we are for the most part speaking of Socrates onward.

Professor Albert Einstein, "My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds. That deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God."

Darwin wrote in his *Origin of Species*, "The Creator breathed life into a few forms, or one."

The *Syntopicon* is a two volume topical index for the Great Books of the Western World. Dr. Mortimer Adler, the chief editor, was asked to reduce the number of pages devoted to God. There were over 70 pages, far more than any other topic. His response was that it could not be reduced any further. Everyone wrote about it and it is the most important question of all. How you answer the question of God will determine how you answer every other question.

There is a need for incontrovertible answers to four inescapable questions dealing with origin, meaning, morality, and destiny.

III. The Concept of a Supreme Being

A. Univocal versus equivocal and the definition of “god.”

1. We can talk about one god or many gods, lesser gods, and false gods. That is, the term “god” is a general term, such as “man,” “horse,” and “stone,” and as such can apply to a whole range of entities.

2. On the other hand, the term “god” is usually used to talk about one specific being, namely, the one and only supreme being. Thus, we cannot talk about many Gods or lesser Gods, because if God exists then there is exactly one being which is supreme.

3. What do “univocal” and “equivocal” mean?

a. Univocal means literally “with one voice” or indivisible. In language there are univocal words. For instance, “photosynthesis.” This word always means the same thing every time it is used. When one says that God is love, they do not mean that God is part love, they mean He is 100% love. Further, He is said to be 100% justice, 100% mercy, etc. We can discuss these attributes separately, but everything about God flows from His nature that is all of these things (and more) at once. So, His justice flows from His mercy, which flows from His love, and so on.

b. Equivocal means “with more than one voice.” In language there are equivocal words that change meaning depending on their context. For instance, “screwdriver” can mean a straight blade screwdriver

tool, or a Phillips screwdriver, or an alcoholic beverage. God is not different things. He is One.

B. Characteristics of a Supreme Being

1. The Supreme Being is All Good

a. Whatever the being wills or commands or does is the right thing to do.

b. "God is good" means that God has good motives and whatever he wills, does, or commands is morally right.

2. The Supreme Being is Omnipotent (all powerful)

a. The quick definition is that the supreme being has the ability to do anything at all. But God cannot do anything that involves a logical contradiction. For instance, the old and silly question, "Can God make a rock so big that he can't lift it." No, because it's a logical impossibility. This does not impinge on God's omnipotence. God also cannot exist and not exist (though many foolish students think he can, depending on whether they believe he exists or not). It is logically and physically impossible to both exist and not exist at the same time.

So, God has the ability to do anything that is logically possible to do. God's inability to do self-contradictory things does not limit his power.

3. The Supreme Being is Omniscient (all knowing)

Einstein: "The harmony of natural law...reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all

the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection.”

a. This brings up interesting questions about our free will, and also God’s ability to change his mind.

b. Ultimately omniscience means that the supreme being knows all truths.

4. Other Characteristics of a Supreme Being

a. Holy, meaning entirely separate from creation.

b. Eternal, meaning always existing backwards and forwards, eternally. It is better to conceive as God’s eternal existence as outside of time, time being considered a creation of God (see Holy).

c. The creator of all things out of nothing (ex nihilo).

Scientists have come to expect a unified framework for nature’s laws because all our experience in discovering them shows that they work together with tremendous precision (which physicists usually call “fine-tuning”_ to make life possible. There is a supreme rationale behind them. The laws of the universe yield evidence of perfect forethought, not arbitrary patchwork.

d. Worthy of complete devotion and reverence.

IV. Can the Belief in the Existence of a Supreme Being be Justified?

Listed here are a number of reasons that people believe along with some outlines of the most famous philosophical arguments for the existence of God.

A. "I was taught to believe."

Rather than discuss this here, I'd like you to discuss it in the forum. Is this a strong basis for believing?

B. "God exists because most people believe God exists."

a. The loosest sense of the term "God" is being used here.

Again, rather than discuss this here, consider whether it is a strong reason for accepting that there is a God.

C. Pragmatic argument (different from Pascal's Wager, which will be covered later).

1. This is the idea that life works better when we accept that God exists. Following God's rules lead to better results in life, like being honest, not cheating on one's spouse, not stealing, etc.

2. The problem is that even if this is true, it doesn't prove that God exists. Pragmatism doesn't always mean true. For instance, we have something called "useful fictions" that are helpful to us, but are not true. For instance, we speak of the sun rising and setting, but in reality the sun does not rise or set. The earth rotates until the sun is visible and later stops being visible.

D. The First-Cause Argument (Cosmological Argument)

1. Sir J. Jeans, the eminent astronomer wrote, "A universe which runs down like a wound up clock cannot be a fortuitous concourse of atoms and radiation. Everything points with overwhelming force to a definite event, or series

of events, of creation at some time or other, not infinitely remote.”

2. Astronomer Sir Frederick Hoyle said, “To avoid the issue of creation it would be necessary for all the material of the universe to be infinitely old, and this cannot be.” (The primary reason is that entropy would have completely played itself out, and everything in the universe would be the same temperature.)

3. Baruch Spinoza logically deduced that the First Cause had to be not only independent of its creation, but infinite as well. The First Cause had to be unlimited, because if it were limited, it would have to be limited by some other thing (it couldn't be limited by nothing), and it wouldn't be completely independent any longer. So this entity which requires nothing else for its existence must be without limits – infinite.

Also, logic tells us that an effect cannot be greater than its cause. Thus the First Cause must be greater in power than anything in the universe; in fact, it must be greater than the sum of all the powers in the universe.

4. St. Thomas Aquinas's Five Ways [Dominican Monk 1225-1275]

a. Argument from change.

We don't often consider this, but how is change possible?

b. Argument from causation

As we already said, every event has a cause. But this is not to say that every cause has a cause. Aristotle understood that ultimately there must be an uncaused cause. Something that is

unchanging that is the cause of everything else that is. (The unmoved mover)

c. Argument from contingency

Again, not something we normally think of, but it must be pointed out that the universe is sustained, not merely initially caused by God.

d. Argument from degrees of excellence. (Plato, Aristotle, St. Anselm, Descartes)

You will read much more about this in Dr. Adler's second reading.

e. Argument from harmony (non-intelligent things move toward a goal (Aristotle))

We must distinguish between a temporal series of causes and an ontological hierarchy of causes.

Example: A candle reflecting in a number of mirrors.

1) Why must there be a first cause? What are the alternate possibilities?

b) Materialism (the belief that there is no supernatural aspect to the universe, but only matter and energy) asserts a number of miracles without the cause of the miracles. This is literally incredible and irrational, while an uncased cause is credible and rational.

5. "Chance"

a. Some argue as a response to the cosmological argument that “the universe was caused by chance.” The problem is that “chance” is a concept that has no ontological status. In other words, chance doesn’t actually exist, therefore it does not have the power to cause anything.

b. Chance is a word we use to describe situations where there are so many variables that we do not know the outcome. For instance, when one tosses a coin we say there is a “50-50 chance of it coming up heads or tails.” If we could account for all the variables (pressure from the person’s thumb, height above the ground, etc.) then we could predict with perfect accuracy whether it would be heads or tails.

E. Argument from Design (Teleological Argument) (St. Thomas Aquinas)

Introduction: About a hundred years ago a young army officer, Henry Rawlinson by name, found at Behistun in Persia, 500 feet up on a cliff-face, a very ancient inscription in three languages, together with the carved portrait of an unknown Persian king. The writing was of a curious type: it consisted of wedge-shaped characters. With great labor and difficulty he obtained a copy, and brought it to England. It appeared to be absolutely illegible. He succeeded, however, in deciphering one of the languages, old Persian, and from that clue he and other scholars were able to read the Susian and Babylonian scripts. The king was Darius I, and the date about 500 B. This opened the way to reading vast quantities of Assyrian and Babylonian literature, although at first sight it looked like meaningless markings on stone, or tablets of clay. Why could the secret be read? Because the markings

had been made by men who possessed minds like our own and who had adopted this method of expressing themselves.

Let us make another observation. Let us offer a piece of paper and pencil to a chimpanzee, or to a baby. Quite likely, the one or the other will cover the page with strange scrawlings. Now, let us read them. We cannot, because there is no mind behind them.

Let us bring this parable to the contemplation of the world of Nature. The sun, the planets, the earth, the clouds, thunder, lightning, and volcanoes; the animals and plants with which we are familiar; the functions of the animal body; the chemical elements and their reactions; the laws of heat, light and sound; do these present themselves as a meaningless jumble, not worth studying because there is nothing intelligible behind them, or do they show all the marks of a vast intelligence?

“O God,” exclaimed Johann Kepler, the founder of physical astronomy, “I am thinking thy thoughts after thee!”

It is worth adding that DNA was discovered in 1953. DNA is the densest accumulation of information coding in the known universe. There is no known method of generating information without intelligence.

Problems with Darwinian Evolution (a sample)

Spontaneous generation

Law of information systems

Specified Complexity

Irreducible Complexity

Statistical Mathematics

Natural selection (We see species drop off over time)

Fossil Record
Beneficial mutation
Genetic complexity
Information theory

1. William Paley's Watchmaker Argument

a. The gist of Paley's argument is that if we were to walk along the beach and stumble across a watch, we would pick it up and examine it. Perhaps we would pry the back off of it. We'd see the gears inside. No one in their right mind would say, "Look at this random combination of atoms in the universe." It would be clear to us that it had an intended function and was designed by an intelligent being. Likewise, when one looks at the universe, the same indication of design can be seen. For instance in the complexity of the eye, the brain, climate cycles, etc.

b. Consider that not all order is designed, but there are a number of considerations. There are fields of science that deal with determining intelligent causes, such as archeology, crime investigators, arson investigators, etc.

F. Ontological Argument (St. Anselm and Rene Descartes)

(Read Dr. Adler's article.)

[St. Anselm](#), Archbishop of Canterbury (1033-1109), is the originator of the ontological argument, which he describes in the *Proslogium* as follows:

[Even a] fool, when he hears of ... a being than which nothing greater can be conceived ... understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding... And assuredly that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be

conceived to exist in reality; which is greater.... Therefore, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, exists in the understanding alone, the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible. Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality.

The argument in this difficult passage can accurately be summarized in standard form:

1. It is a conceptual truth (or, so to speak, true by definition) that God is a being than which none greater can be imagined (that is, the greatest possible being that can be imagined).
2. God exists as an idea in the mind.
3. A being that exists as an idea in the mind and in reality is, other things being equal, greater than a being that exists only as an idea in the mind.
4. Thus, if God exists only as an idea in the mind, then we can imagine something that is greater than God (that is, a greatest possible being that does exist).
5. But we cannot imagine something that is greater than God (for it is a contradiction to suppose that we can imagine a being greater than the greatest possible being that can be imagined.)
6. Therefore, God exists.

G. Appeal to experience (William James, 1842-1910)

These are generally categorized as “Arguments grounded in personal experiences” or “testimonies.”

In philosophical thought, **mystical experience** refers to an experience where God is revealed directly, and there is a sense of oneness with the divine or ultimate reality.

What are the several varieties of **religious experience**?
conversion, near death experience, prayer, phenomena, strong and over powering emotions

James argued that certain experiences were indicators that God exists. They include:

- Mystical experiences
- Revelations
- Miracles

(It might be interesting to look this up and discuss it in the forum.)

H. Faith (Already covered in another section of this course.)

1. There are two kinds of faith: Blind Faith and Reasoned Faith.
2. It is often assumed that faith is always irrational, but that would only be faith without evidence.
3. Faith is not necessarily a term connected to God or religion. Notice that when you set your alarm clock before going to bed, you are placing faith in it that it will wake you in the morning. It is not unreasonable, if it has awakened you regularly in the past. You have evidence (the other times it worked) that it will work tomorrow. Notice that your faith is justified, but still requires an element of risk/trust.

Therefore, based on the alarm clock example, we can see that faith is logically supportable. You have evidence (all the other times it woke you) of things that you haven't yet seen yet (tomorrow morning).

The same is true of belief in a supreme being. If you believe in God without ever having examined the evidence or thought about it, then you have blind faith. On the other hand, if you have thought deeply and examined the evidence, then your belief is reasonable.

4. **Pascal's Wager** (Blaise Pascal)

a. One of the most famous arguments for the existence of God isn't really an argument at all, because it doesn't really prove that there is a God. It just shows that it makes more sense (according to him) to believe than not to believe.

b. There are four possibilities.

- 1) You don't believe there is a God and there isn't.
- 2) You believe there is a God and there isn't.
- 3) You believe there is a God and there is.
- 4) You don't believe there is a God and there is.

In two cases, you'd be right, 1) and 3).

In two cases, you'd be wrong, 2) and 4).

Pascal points out that in 1) you don't lose, because you just die, and that's it.

For 2) you don't lose because you die and that's it.

For 3) you win big, because your body dies, but your soul spends eternity with God. (This is your best bet or “wager.”)

For 4) you lose big, because you die, and your soul spends eternity apart from God, presumably in hell. (This is the worst outcome of all four possibilities.)

Pascal concludes that you should believe in God, because if you lose you’ve lost nothing, but if you win, you’ve won everything. And you should not disbelieve, because if you win, you’ve won nothing, but if you lose, you’ve lost everything, and lost it forever.

VI. Evil as evidence against the existence of God.

A. At some point almost everyone has wondered why a good God would allow evil to exist.

B. An argument against the existence of God says that three propositions are said to be true, but are logically incompatible:

1. God is omnipotent.
2. God is benevolent.
3. Evil exists.

The trouble with the argument is that the second sentence is not necessarily true.

C. Also, one should consider that there are two kinds of evil, Human evil (things like murder, war, theft, etc.) and natural evil (things like earthquakes, floods, famine, etc.)

*This would be an excellent discussion topic in the forum.
Especially consider the role of free will in this. If there is free
will, then the potential for human evil necessarily exists.
Would a good God prevent intelligent agents (humans) from
exercising their free will?*