

## God – thought or experience?

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When it comes to an examination syllabus in the Philosophy of Religion, you are likely to find one section dealing with **arguments about the existence of God** – the Ontological, Cosmological, Design and Moral arguments. And the assumption is that, given an agreed definition of what you mean by the word 'God', it might be intellectually possible to say whether there is anything in existence that corresponds to that word.

And then, later on, there is also likely to be a section on **Religious Experience** – and you are going to examine some of the more unusual aspects of experience: the sense of awe and wonder, the sense of the mysterious, the sense of value and moral obligation and so on. And the assumption is that the religious person is going to use these to illustrate what he or she means by God, and the relevance that God has for them. Many students enjoy studying 'near-death experiences' or discussing supernatural phenomena and whether there can be a scientific explanation for them. And it's assumed that if you believe in God you will interpret the experiences you have one way, and if you don't, you'll interpret them in another.

But notice how **strange** this is.

If you were talking about anything other than God, it would be much simpler. Let's say, you claim that an 'ugg' exists. The first question you'd ask is 'What do you mean by an 'ugg'? You'd have two options...

1. Either, an ugg is a concept. It is a word you use to describe an idea. You could say, 'I think attending a Philosophy conference as an absolute ugg!' But you'd then need to explain ugg in terms that other people understand. If you have no such common terms, the word 'ugg' becomes meaningless.
2. Or you may argue that an 'ugg' is an existing thing. In other words you claim that there is an ugg. In that case, you will need to specify what experience corresponds to the ugg. If there is no experience that is of an ugg and nothing else, then you have no common experience and therefore no basis to argue that an ugg exists.

So saying that an ugg exists is, in itself, a hopeless task unless you can specify – in terms that other people understand – exactly how you use that word, and saying what experience you have of it.

### **Exists?**

And bear in mind what we commonly mean by existence. In the ordinary use of that word, to exist is to have boundaries – to 'stand out' (that's what it means) and have a separate identity. Unless you can specify boundaries – that it is this and not that, then to speak of something existing does not make much sense.

And that's because all of our experience of the world is in terms of space and time, we see things and name them because they are discrete entities.

So let's be clear about our ugg. If an ugg is an idea, it is a human construct. In other words, it is an thought (perhaps a very important, or most important thought for you) which helps you to make sense of life. But it is something that is part of your ways of seeing things – it is not an external 'thing' in itself. (Kant made the distinction between a regulative concept (something with the aid of which you understand the world) and a constitutive concept (something that exists out there in the world). He argued that God was a regulative concept – but a very important one.)

On the other hand, if an ugg is an entity, something existing within the world we experience, then to say that an ugg exists only makes sense if we can specify what it means to experience an ugg. (Logical Positivists – the meaning of a statement is its method of verification – to say that something exists is meaningful only if you can say what evidence there is for it.)

So let's move that argument on to the more emotive issue of whether or not a God can be said to exist.

First of all, be aware that 'God' does not have a fixed or universally accepted meaning. It is a translation of a whole range of other words, which themselves have meant different things at different times over the centuries and in different cultures. The Hebrew word Yahweh, for example, has a root meaning 'that which it' (or, 'reality itself' if you like). The Greeks and Romans had a range of gods and goddesses in an elaborate mythology which explored aspects of psychology – for the gods exhibit many human failings and traits. If you're thinking about the Hindu concept of Brahman, it's a term for fundamental and impersonal reality.

So its not realistic to expect a single argument to decide the matter of whether or not God exists – indeed, whether or not God exists seems rather a secondary question to finding out what someone means by God.

The sort of argument you produce, decides the sort of god you get... (We're going to look briefly at two approach: the Cosmological Argument and Religious Experience).

### **The cosmological argument**

The basic questions: Why is there anything at all? Can the universe have an explanation?

Is everything dependent on everything else. Is there nothing beyond this circle of interdependence?

Absolutely fundamental. If you believe that there is some sort of reason, cause, first principle – then you count yourself a theist. If not, then the world is self-contained and needs no external explanation.

Can science give a complete explanation. Is it enough to show the mechanism why something came about? Do you also need to ask 'Why?' do you need to find some explanation beyond those of cause and effect and science?

The relevant question here is not 'Does this prove that God exists?' but 'What sort of 'God' does this argument present? Does this argument address what religious experience or organised religion mean by the word "God"?'

The burden of proof has to lie with those who would argue for the existence of God. Ockham's razor:

'Entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity.'  
(In other words, it's best to take the simplest explanation.)

We need to keep this principle in mind as we turn to the Cosmological argument - which is the attempt to argue from the fact of the world's existence to a transcendent creator. In seeking an explanation (if one is needed) for why the world is, one is not justified in giving God with qualities other than those required for the purpose of creation.

There are two forms of the cosmological argument. The better known is that of **Aquinas** (1224-1274) which he set out in the first three of his famous 'Five Ways'. The other, known as the **Kalam argument**, was set out by the Muslim philosophers al-Kindi (9th century) and al-Ghazali (1058-1111).

The Kalam argument is that, looking back in time, the universe must have a first cause. It may be set out like this:

- Everything that begins to exist has a cause for its existence.
- The universe began to exist.
- Therefore the universe must have a cause.

This argument throws up a very basic question: If you have a sequence of events, each one caused by another that precedes it, stretching back in time - can that sequence be infinite? Although a theoretical infinity (as used in mathematics) may seem a straightforward idea, actual infinities cause all sorts of problems. Infinity plus one, equals infinity; infinities cannot grow. Since the time of Aristotle, philosophers have argued that a actual infinity cannot exist. Even if it did, how could you know that something was infinite? It is not the same as being without discernable limit.

You can therefore present the Kalam argument like this:

- an actual infinite number cannot exist
- therefore the series of causes for the world being as it is now cannot be an **infinite** temporal sequence
- in other words, the sequence of causes must be finite
- therefore the world began to exist at some point in the past
- there was a time in the past when one of two states was possible - that there should be, or should not be, a universe.

'al-Ghazali argued that when two states of affairs are equally possible the one that comes about must be willed by a personal agent.

Think about the experience of infinity....

- Put an animal in a conventional cage – it will eventually come up against a wall. But have you ever seen a Hamster in a perspex ball? – runs forever, keeps rolling. The hamster never encounters a wall, and can run on unimpeded.
- A circle provides an infinite journey. The surface of a sphere provides for infinite movement in all directions.
- Therefore, it is possible to think of a universe that is limited both in terms of space and time, and yet appears infinite to those within it.

• Were I to travel far enough, I would return home: familiar to us now, but unthinkable to those who assumed the Earth to be flat and speculated as to what existed beyond its edge.

**Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 74)** was probably the most important philosopher of the medieval period, and has certainly been the most influential in terms of the philosophy of religion. From the age of 5, Thomas Aquinas had been brought up in the Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino, but because of the war between Frederick II and the Pope, he moved to the secular university at Naples when he was 14, to continue his studies there. That was a crucial move for Aquinas, for the University of Naples taught the philosophy of Aristotle, and he was able to use Aristotle's ideas as an intellectual vehicle for setting down his own religious philosophy. He sought to reconcile the Christian faith with the philosophy of Aristotle, which in the 13th century had been 'rediscovered' and was being taught in the secular universities of Europe.

Aquinas presented **Five Ways** in which he believed the existence of God could be shown. They are:

1. The argument from an unmoved mover.
2. The argument from an uncaused cause.
3. The argument from possibility and necessity.
4. The argument from degrees of quality.
5. The argument from design.

The first three, which are forms of the cosmological argument - all based on observation of the world, and a reflection on the nature of causality.

The first may be presented like this:

- Everything that moves is moved by something.
- That mover is in turn moved by something else again.
- **But** this chain of movers cannot be infinite, or movement would not have started in the first place.
- **Therefore** there must be an unmoved mover, causing movement in everything, without itself actually being moved.
- This unmoved mover is what people understand by 'God'.

Although referred to as the 'unmoved mover', for Aquinas the 'movement' that he is thinking about is more a matter of change than of physical displacement. Everything that changes is changed by something else. His example is of fire causing something potentially hot to become actually hot, and therefore changing. But that thing that does the changing must itself be changed by something else. Now, we must stop somewhere, otherwise there will be no first change, and, as a result, no subsequent changes. **This first cause of change, itself not changed by anything, is what he understands by God.**

The second argument has the same structure:

- Everything has a cause.
- Every cause itself has a cause.
- **But**, you cannot have an infinite number of causes.
- **Therefore** there must be an uncaused cause, which causes everything to happen without itself being caused by anything else.
- Such an uncaused cause is what people understand by 'God'.

A possible objection to this argument is that you might indeed have an infinite number of causes or movers. Instead of stretching back into the past in a straight line (with all the problems that the idea of an actually infinite number can cause), the series of causes could be circular, or looped in a figure of eight, so that you never get to a first cause, and everything is quite adequately explained by the one cause that comes immediately before it. But this image of circularity does not really help, for it is unlikely that Aquinas was thinking of a series of causes (or movers)

stretching into the past. **His argument actually suggests a hierarchy of causes here and now. This is the crucial difference between the Kalam argument and Aquinas's version.**

Example: What was it that caused you to be here today?

(London Underground?) Move outwards – transport system, finance system, education system, careers and universities, aspirations of yourself and your family .... And so on...

Causes move outwards – not just what was there in the past, but the ongoing influences in the present. Everything that happens has a theoretically infinite number of causes... not a single sequence going back into the past.

The third argument follows from the first two:

- Individual things come into existence and later cease to exist.
- Therefore at one time none of them was in existence.
- But something comes into existence only as a result of something else that already exists.
- Therefore there must be a being whose existence is necessary, and that all would understand to be 'God'.

This further unpacks the points raised by the second argument. There is no one thing in the universe which will account for the whole universe - for everything is limited both in time and space. To account for the **whole** universe, you therefore need to posit something beyond the universe.

- Everything is only fully understood in terms of the whole. But how is the whole to be understood? THAT is the cosmological question.

Problems with the argument –

David Hume (1711-1776). He based all knowledge on the observation of the world. Something is said to be a cause because it is seen to occur just before the thing that is called its effect, and the linking of cause and effect depends on the observation of them as two separate things.

**But**, in the case of the world as a whole, we have a unique 'effect', and therefore cannot observe its cause. We cannot get 'outside' the world to see both the world and its cause, and thus establish the relationship between them.

Nor, since this is the only world we know, can we say that in the case of all **other** worlds there was seen to be a cause, and that therefore there is likely to be one in the case of **this** world.

If, like Hume, you consider sense impressions to be the basis of all knowledge, then the cosmological proofs cannot be accepted as giving proof of the existence of a God outside the world known through the senses.

Kant argued that the whole notion of cause and effect was one of the ways (along with the concepts of space and time) in which our minds interpret the world - we cannot help but impose causality upon our experience. **If Kant is right, then an uncaused cause is a mental impossibility.**

So the Cosmological Argument attempts to get from the experience of this world to something that is 'beyond' There are philosophers who therefore claim that we simply cannot speak meaningfully about what is 'outside' the universe.

- Bertrand Russell made the point that the world is 'simply there' and that there is nothing more that can be said.

- Wittgenstein (in his early work, *Tractatus*) argued that 'the World is all that is the case' and concluded that 'Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent.'

**'God' is a concept that has suffered from being visually conceptualised and therefore 'placed' within the universe in a way that is quite inappropriate.**

Cosmological arguments do not **prove** that there is an God who is the uncaused cause or unmoved mover - for (as Hume or Kant would readily show) that is beyond the possibility of human reason.

However, they do point towards the sort of reality that a religious person is thinking about when he or she uses the word 'God' - not a particular thing within (or, imaginatively, outside) the universe, but a reality which underlies and sustains everything.

Not one cause among the myriads of others that determine every event, but that which lies within and yet beyond all of them.

**Now that brings us back to the problem of what we mean by 'God'.**

- 18<sup>th</sup> century – deists believed in God as an external designer and operator, outside the universe but setting the whole thing going in the first place.
- For Aquinas, God as the unmoved mover, the ultimate explanation for the process of change and causation in the universe, the permanent reality underpinning the whole process of change.
- A fundamentalist may speak of God in terms that resembles a rather moralistic, sometimes petty and vindictive human being, waiting to punish human failures.
- Theists believe that, in prayer, they can have a conversation with this God, in which his 'will' for them is made known. They may also pray to him, and ask him (if it is his will) to change the course of events on earth.
- Someone may claim that God is known through an indwelling spirit – a sense of love and wonder that people can experience.
- And that's just within the Western Christian tradition – when you move to think of the other monotheistic religions, or to Eastern religions, the range of what people understand by God increases hugely.

Now all these are simply caricatures – there's much more that you could say about each of them – but they illustrate just how varied the idea of God can be.

**So first set of questions (discuss in small groups for a moment – then give my some feedback):**

- Does the Cosmological Argument point to what you understand by the word 'God' (whether or not you think that God exists, or that the argument itself is persuasive)
- Is it sensible to speak of God 'existing'?

- Do you think it is realistic or possible to prove in any way that is intellectually satisfying the proposition 'God exists'?

Very curious sort of question 'Does God Exist?' – because people have very similar experiences of life and yet give completely different interpretations of it. Some interpret it as controlled by God, others do not.

But with most other questions, there is evidence to bring to decide the matter. In terms of observation and experience, there seems to be little that one side can show that the other cannot try to counter and argue it differently.

But problem – God (as described in traditional theism) does not have a body. All other things have bodies in some form (even a force has a body in some sense – since it had a direct causal impact on other things) although they need not be crudely physical. Hence it is clear what the proposition 'God exists' means. – you can point to where he is and to where he is not.

With anything else, questions of existence relate to experience. That which you can point to, encounter, examine.

People do not try to prove that listening to their favourite group is an enjoyable experience. They just do it and invite their friends to share the enjoyment with them. There is something a little strange about trying to prove the content of an experience – it is what it is.

### **So what can religious experience contribute to the question of God's existence?**

Religious beliefs and attitudes are not generally accepted for rational reasons alone, but as a result of some form of experience. Understand that experience, and you understand why someone wishes to express themselves religiously.

It is estimated that at least one in four people have an experience at some point in their lives which could be called 'religious', in the sense that we shall describe later in this chapter, even if they do not think of themselves as religious or are not practising members of a religion.

What makes an experience 'religious'? Is it a matter of content or of the quality of the experience?

There would be no religion if there were no religious experiences. Great religious leaders and founders of religions (e.g. Muhammad, Moses, Jesus, Buddha, Nanak, Isaiah) have all recorded powerful experiences which have shaped their lives, and which led them to teach and preach as they did.

But for most people, the 'religious experiences' that they have are far more routine. They are the experience gained from taking part in organised religion. It's what you get if you go into a church, temple or mosque – it's the total experience of being there, taking part in worship and so on.

If people did not find that the experience of taking part in religious ceremonies, or practising meditation, or praying, give them some new element in their lives, they would not continue to do so. The fact that religions exist at all means that they provide experiences that their followers find valuable. They take part in worship and feel 'uplifted' by it. They may feel inspired by readings from scripture, or ritual, or even the building in which the worship takes place.

People may also find that religion gives new depth to ordinary experiences - they may see something that is overwhelmingly beautiful, or they may be faced with the powerful moments of

birth or death, they fall in love or fall ill. How they experience these moments may be influenced by their religious beliefs, that the experiences then reinforce those same beliefs.

In other words, as a result of some 'religious' experiences – perhaps in connection with an organised religion, people tend to interpret other experiences they have as religious. A religious person, in Western Christian terms, is someone who sees God as acting everywhere, and therefore someone who experiences everything religiously.

But the thing about the Philosophy of Religion is that it does not simply look at the facts, it probes and asks questions – it tries to tease out the truth of claims that are made. And so we should examine what religious experience can and cannot prove.

First major distinction:

Experience is a given fact; the interpretation of that experience may be examined and its conclusions debated.

If someone says 'I have had an experience of God.' What that means is 'I use the word 'God' to describe what I have experienced.

In other words, it may not be a simple matter of saying whether the experience is true or false, but it is more a matter of the nature of what is experienced and the significance it has for the person concerned.

(After all, you can only confirm an experience if you have a separate way of knowing what has been experienced. i.e. you would say, 'I know God by some other means and therefore confirm that what you have experienced is God.'

Problem is – every experience is open to interpretation – there is no objective check.

Everything is experienced 'as' something – and experience is never simply the sense impressions that we receive. There is always another element – what does it mean, what is it 'for me', how does it compare with what I've experienced before.

So these set the context. If someone hears 'voices' – that may simply be a sign of mental disturbance. It need not be in any sense religious. Group charismatic experiences may be described in terms of group hysteria – again, need not have religious interpretation. To be religious, it needs to be interpreted 'as' something religiously significant.

### **So what are the general features of 'religious' experience...**

Mystical (Schleiermacher / William James)

In his book *On Religion: speeches to its cultured despisers* (1799), Schleiermacher described religious experience in this way:

'The contemplation of the pious is the immediate consciousness of universal existence of all finite things, in and through the Infinite, and of all temporal things in and through the Eternal.'

In his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James lists qualities associated with religious experience, and particularly with mystical experiences:

1. Ineffability (they are quite different from ordinary experiences, and cannot be described using ordinary language)
2. Noetic quality (they do provide information of a kind – a knowledge that cannot be expressed fully, and may be called 'revelation')
3. Transiency (they don't last long)
4. Passivity (the person who has the experience feels that they are passive – they simply receive something that is offered – rather than actively bringing the experience about)

He sees a conversion experience leading to:

- loss of worry
- truths that were not known before

the sense that the world has objectively changed.  
James took a psychological approach to his subject. He made no attempt to argue from his accounts of religious experiences to any supernatural conclusions but was simply concerned to examine the effect of religion on people's lives.

In *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), Rudolph Otto introduced the idea that religious experience may be an encounter with something powerful, uncanny, weird, awesome, but also attractive and fascinating. Something like the 'creeping flesh' sensation or the shudder of fear at the prospect of encountering a ghost, whether real or on the page or screen.

Otto described the object of religious experience as **mysterium tremendum et fascinans** – a mystery that is both awesomeness and fascinating. He spoke of this as an encounter with 'the numinous'.

He also pointed out that it could not be described in ordinary language, since none of our words quite capture that special sense of something being 'holy'. However, the set of words that we use (e.g. good, loving, powerful) to attempt to describe the holy are its 'schema', and the process of grasping at words to express the holy is 'schematisation'. Religious language is just such a schema.

The Personal (Buber)

In *I and Thou* (1937) Martin Buber argued that we have two different kinds of relationships: I-It and I-Thou. I-It relationships are impersonal; I-Thou relationships are personal.

For Buber the relationship with God was an I-Thou relationship, in other words, it was more like getting to know another person, than getting to know scientific facts.

In effect, James is pointing to religious experience as a phenomenon that can have a profound effect on people's lives. In one sense, it is the ultimate argument, for it is self-authenticating for the person who has it. On the other, James admitted that it did not offer any logical proof of the existence of God.

### What can this show?

If God is infinite, he cannot be located in a particular place, nor does he have boundaries. You cannot point to where God is not, if he is infinite. Yet all our experience is of particular things in particular places; they are known only because they have boundaries. Our senses divide reality up into segments to which we can give names: this is one thing; that is another.

So arguments about whether or not an experience is of God, require a prior knowledge of what God is. In other words, since **all** experience involves interpretation (we experience 'as'), our prior understanding of 'God' will be used to interpret whether this experience is an experience of God or not.

Therefore, in order for religious experience to be part of a logical argument about the existence of God, there needs to be an agreed definition of what is meant by the word 'God.' Otherwise, there will be no way of knowing how the person is interpreting their experience.

The argument from religious experience may therefore be interesting (in that it shows what people mean by 'God') and persuasive (particularly for the person who has the experience), but it is not a logically compelling argument.

And remember the fundamental distinction between – 'religion' which is the set of beliefs, practices, ceremonies and so on. All these can be experienced in the most superficial way – as a kind of spectacle to be enjoyed, even as a set of emotions to be wallowed in. That's organised religion – and it organises experiences in worship.

Most people want to say that some moments – whether in connection with religion or just as part of our everyday experience – are in some way special, speak to them of the depths of things, not superficially, challenging their self understanding, giving their life some new sense of purpose. Those are the experiences that tend to be called ‘religious’

Parallel, of course, to others – life falling in love, or finding that someone else has fallen in love with you. Or being suddenly moved by a work of art or piece of music. Such things open up the whole dimension that we can call ‘the transcendent’. And that is probably the best way of describing ‘religious’ experience – it is an experience of something that transcends, that goes beyond the physical moment or sight or sound, that speaks of something greater.

If all these things describe what religious experience is like, could we not simply settle for saying that ‘God’ is a shorthand way of describing all that. Not a separate thing that causes us to have those experiences, but the experiences themselves.

### **Questions –**

**What experiences have you had that might be relevant to belief in God?  
What do they suggest about what you mean by ‘God’?**

The fundamental question. Is God an entity or a mental construct?

Theologian Paul Tillich – God is not a being, he is Being itself. In other words, God cannot be identified with an individual existing thing. He is a way of describing reality itself, rather than anything that exists within reality.

And, of course, depending on your answer to that question hangs the whole difference about what religion is about.

If God is an existing entity, over and above the world and over and above you and me, then religion is about relating who we are to this external reality. That can be positive or negating (Marx and Freud both had things to say about it – in terms of compensation for what we fail to have in this life, or in terms of a father substitute that allows us to relate to the world as children who have an external father in charge of us.

On the other hand, if God is a mental construct – a shorthand term for a way of interpreting the nature of reality, then religion is about the most fundamental questions: How should we live? What is worthwhile? How do we make sense of life? Is there value to be found even in life when it is fragile and suffering?

In other words, God does not become an object among others – an object that might or might not exist. (and that, for the best theologians and philosophers is quite an inadequate idea of what ‘God’ means anyway). God is simply a way of describing our deepest sense of what life is about. In other words, there is no separate supernatural world that some believe in and others do not. There is simply one world, one life, one reality – in describing it, some find it useful to personify their intuitions in terms of ‘God’, while others think it best to speak of life directly, without such images.

And perhaps you should keep this in mind when you look at the debates between atheists and humanists on the one hand and religious believers on the other. Recent bus adverts claiming that God probably does not exist, so one should stop worrying and enjoy life. That has to be the silliest thing I have ever seen. It makes it sound as if all ‘believers’ held a rather crude and fearful view of God. It also seems to imply – by using the word ‘probable’ that God is a (probably not existing) thing. And that, if they are at all sophisticated is simply not what many believers think of as God.

Problem – in debates on the existence of God or on religion and science – is that they tend to polarise between an insensitive scientism (in other words the view that only scientific explanations have any validity), which is utterly unrealistic, given the subtle meanings of beauty to be found in music, literature, art, even philosophy. And the idea that all believers are literalist fundamentalists, who consider God to be an invisible but crude, separate thing.

So I hope you will keep this in mind as you study the philosophy of religion – that the arguments about God's existence, if they are taken seriously, are really discussions of what people mean by the word 'God'. And outlines of religious experience do the same – they 'locate' the meaning people give to the word 'God'.

And it comes down to the fundamental question –

- Is God simply a mental construct?

If so, that's something that anyone can agree on. Because there is no doubt that 'God' is an idea that people use to make sense of life. You may find it helpful, or unhelpful, but it clearly exists.

- Or is God an entity?

If so, you face the problem of saying what sort of entity he is, given that he does not exist in the sense of having a physical body or a place within the universe of space and time.

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