

Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion

What is Philosophy of Religion?

Philosophy of religion is just thinking philosophically about topics that come up when the subject is religion. Thinking philosophically involves reflecting critically about a set of issues, with the aim of figuring out what to believe about those issues. Sometimes such reflection is simply about what we already believe. But open-minded inquiry requires reflecting, as well, on what others have thought, and it can involve examining proposals that no one else has articulated. One aspect of this kind of critical reflection may be illustrated by an anecdote about the comic actor, W. C. Fields (1880–1946), famous for playing somewhat mean-spirited and dissolute characters in what was apparently not casting against type. Near the end of his life, Fields was observed by a friend to be reading the Bible. Surprised, since Fields was not known to be at all religious, the friend asked, “What are you doing?” Field’s reply, delivered in his characteristic snarl was, “Lookin’ for loopholes, lookin’ for loopholes.”

Philosophers look for loopholes. They take details seriously, they subject claims to close scrutiny, and they try to find what’s wrong with a given view. If the loophole they find is a (possibly made-up) case in which some general claim fails to hold, they have discovered a *counterexample*. Finding fault isn’t the only thing philosophers do, however. For one thing, it’s often not worth the trouble to look for loopholes to a claim that’s too vague or too carelessly stated to tell exactly what it says. So another project in which philosophers engage is that of producing a careful and clear statement of the claim or thesis under consideration. This has the benefit of providing a clear target for scrutiny. But the very process of trying come up

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with a precise statement of a position often results in the discovery of complications or of needed distinctions that weren't apparent prior to attempting to state the position carefully. What emerges in this case is a deeper understanding of the complexity of the issues involved.

Another way in which philosophers try to introduce clarity before looking for loopholes is by carefully separating someone's reasons for holding a position from the position or thesis itself. Often the best way to do this is by constructing an argument for the thesis in question, with the reasons then being seen as the premisses of this argument.¹ We'll look more closely at arguments later in this chapter. For now let's simply observe that disentangling a thesis from reasons for it, or a conclusion from the premisses that are supposed to support it, gives us not only a clearer target to aim at but also opens up more possibilities for loopholes. As we'll see more precisely below, reasons can fail to be *good* reasons either by not being true or by failing to provide the right kind of support for the claim for which they are advanced. If we're serious about identifying a loophole in this kind of reasoning, we'll want to be able to say accurately what it is.

Finally, philosophers don't only set up targets for demolition. When a loophole is found, a constructive project is to attempt to fill it or to figure out a way to avoid the problem it has exposed. Perhaps a modest revision will escape the objection, or perhaps it would be better to look in a different direction altogether. Of course, any new proposal should be subjected to the same scrutiny that uncovered a flaw in the original proposal, and perhaps the new proposal will be found to have defects of its own. The process of looking for loopholes can have the felicitous outcome of leading to an improved formulation of a theory or claim, but even if it doesn't, it will lead to a greater understanding of what the issues are.

We've discussed in very general terms what it is to think philosophically, but we haven't looked at the second part of our subject: what is it to think philosophically *about religion*? One answer, in fact a pretty good answer, is that it is to employ the critical approach we have been discussing in the investigation of any topic that comes up when the subject is religion. As a matter of fact, philosophers of religion have found many such topics worth discussing. Some matters that we won't examine in this book include prayer, ritual, the nature of a saint, and defining religion, to mention just a few.

Instead, we'll take a cue from the fact that the major religions in the west – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – are all *theistic* religions, or varieties of *theism*. Richard Swinburne, the former Nolloth Professor of the Christian Religion at Oxford University, has described theism as the claim that there is someone “without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good, is the proper object of human

worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the universe” (Swinburne, 1993, p. 1). In other words, theism is the claim that there is a God, that God exists. Focusing our inquiry on this claim, so central to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, will allow us to organize our critical thinking on issues suggested by it. For example, does God exist? Can it be proven that there is a God? Or, can it be proven that there is no God? What does it mean to say that someone is “able to do anything”? Is it possible for there to be an *omnipotent* being? What is involved in someone who “knows everything”? If God is *omniscient*, does his knowledge extend to the future? And, if it does, is that compatible with human beings acting freely? If God is “the creator and sustainer of the universe,” is he able to interfere with it? Are miracles possible, and might it be rational to think that miracles have occurred? Finally, if no proof can be found of God’s existence, could it nevertheless be reasonable to believe in his existence? Is it always wrong to believe something without good evidence in its favor? How are faith and reason related?²

Arguments and Proving God’s Existence

Since our first topic is the attempt to prove that God exists, the remainder of this chapter will discuss some key concepts that will prove helpful in pursuing this topic. Although our discussion will be framed in terms of proving the existence of God, the concepts and ideas we’ll introduce here will also apply to the attempt to prove God’s nonexistence, as well as the attempt to establish anything on any of the topics we will take up in the course of this book.

A proof of God’s existence might be thought to give a really good reason to believe that God exists. I suggested above that we could distinguish a thesis from reasons for believing that thesis by construing the reasons as the *premisses* of an *argument* that has that thesis as a *conclusion*. Accordingly, we could start with the idea that a proof of God’s existence is an argument that has the proposition that God exists as its conclusion, where an argument is simply a list of sentences or propositions, one of which is designated as the conclusion.

Of course, not just any argument that has *God exists* as its conclusion would be a good argument. For starters, we should want the conclusion to *follow from* the premisses. It’s not easy to say exactly what “follows from” amounts to. Fortunately, there is a relatively clear concept that we can employ instead, namely, that of an argument being *valid*, where that term is defined as follows:

- (D1) An argument is *valid* =_{df} it is not possible for the premisses of the argument to be true and the conclusion false.³

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We can also introduce a term to describe an argument that is not valid, namely,

(D2) An argument is *invalid* =_{df} it is not valid.

An argument will be invalid just in case it fails to satisfy the definition of being valid, that is, just in case it *is* possible for its premisses to be true and conclusion false. We can use the more precise term “valid” to give an account of the informal concept of a conclusion “following from” some premisses as follows: a conclusion follows from a set of premisses if and only if the argument with those premisses and that conclusion is valid.

We can gain a better understanding of validity by considering some examples of arguments.

Example 1:

- (1) Every human being is mortal.
- (2) Socrates is a human being.
- ∴ (3) Socrates is mortal. (1) (2)

The symbol “∴” in front of line (3) abbreviates the word “therefore.” Thus, (3) is a conclusion, and the numbers in parentheses at the end of it indicate that it is a conclusion from the premisses, lines (1) and (2). This argument is *valid*. It satisfies the definition of validity given in (D1) because it is not possible for its premisses to be true and conclusion false. Here is another example:

Example 2:

- (1) If you study hard, you will pass your philosophy course.
- (2) You study hard.
- ∴ (3) You will pass your philosophy course. (1) (2)

This argument has a different form, but it, too, is valid. There is no way the premisses could be true but the conclusion false. If you think that you can imagine a scenario in which the conclusion is false but the premisses are true, for example, a scenario in which you study hard but sleep through the tests and so you don’t pass the course, that will invariably be a scenario in which at least one of the premisses is false. In the example I just gave, the first premiss would be false if you studied hard but didn’t pass. There simply is no way things could go according to which the premisses of this argument would be true and the conclusion would be false, but that is what would be required for this argument to fail to be valid.

Here is a related example:

Example 3:

- (1) If you study hard, you will pass your philosophy course.
- (2) You don't study hard.
- ∴ (3) You won't pass your philosophy course. (1) (2)

This argument is *invalid*. There are many ways things could go according to which the premisses are true but the conclusion is false. Perhaps you don't study hard but pass the course on native ability. That's compatible with the truth of premiss (1), which only gives a sufficient condition for passing this course, leaving it open that there are other ways to pass. A sufficiently large bribe to the instructor might be one of those other ways.

If it wasn't obvious that Example 3 is invalid, there's a useful strategy, one we'll use repeatedly, for showing that an argument is invalid.

(Strategy) To show that an argument is invalid, find another argument of the same form with true premisses and a false conclusion.

To apply this strategy we should notice that Example 3 has the following form:

- If p then q .
- Not- p .
- ∴ Not- q .

So we should look for another argument that has this form. If it *actually has* true premisses and a false conclusion, we know that it is *possible* for it to have true premisses and a false conclusion. In that case, it is invalid. But since the validity of an argument depends upon its form, any other argument of the same form is also invalid. Here is one:

Example 4:

- (1) If it is warmer than 100 °F today, then it is warmer than -20 °F today.
- (2) It's not warmer than 100 °F today.
- ∴ (3) It's not warmer than -20 °F today.⁴

If we want a proof of God's existence, it would be useful to find a valid argument for the conclusion that God exists. But that's not all we would

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need, for a valid argument could nevertheless have a false conclusion. Consider:

Example 5:

- (1) If donkeys can fly, then donkeys have wings.
- (2) Donkeys can fly.
- ∴ (3) Donkeys have wings. (1) (2)

This argument is of the same form as Example 2, which we have seen to be valid; so this argument is valid, as well. But there is something egregiously wrong with it, because its conclusion is manifestly false. This does not show that there is a flaw in our concept of validity; after all, falsehoods have consequences, too, and we often draw conclusions from propositions without regard to whether they are true. But it shows that for an argument to be good, validity isn't the whole story. It's easy enough to see where the flaw lies, however: not only is the conclusion false, but the second premiss of the argument is false. So we should also recognize that a good argument has true premisses. The term for a valid argument with true premisses is "sound."

(D3) An argument is *sound* =_{df} it is valid and all its premisses are true.

As in the case of validity, we can also define the opposite of sound:

(D4) An argument is *unsound* =_{df} it is not sound.

A little bit of thought will show that it follows from (D1) and (D3) that a sound argument has a true conclusion. So if we want to prove that God exists, or if we want to prove anything else, it's tempting to think that what we need is a sound argument for that conclusion. Unfortunately, things aren't that simple. Consider:

Example 6:

- (1) Either nothing exists or God exists.
- (2) Something exists.
- ∴ (3) God exists.

This argument is sound, but it fails as a proof.⁵ People to whom I have presented this argument usually agree that Example 6 is a bad proof, but they sometimes balk at agreeing that it's a sound argument. It clearly is valid: the first premiss says that at least one of two propositions is true; the

second premiss adds that it isn't the first of them; so that leaves the second as the only option. Something exists, so (2) is true. Now I think that (1) is true, too, so I think that Example 6 is a sound argument that is a terrible proof.

Of course, I only think that (1) is true because I also think that God exists. Perhaps you don't share that view. Then consider this argument:

Example 7:

- (1) Either nothing exists or God doesn't exist.
- (2) Something exists.
- ∴ (3) God doesn't exist.

Both Example 6 and Example 7 are valid (they're of the form logicians call *disjunctive syllogism*). They are also both terrible proofs. Now either God exists, or he does not. If God does exist, then Example 6 is a sound argument. If God doesn't exist, then Example 7 is a sound argument. Either way, there is a sound argument that is a terrible proof, and that is the point I was trying to make.

So if we want to find a proof of God's existence, we should look for a valid argument with true premisses. But what else should we insist on? Can we specify anything further about what the premisses should be like? It would be too strong to require that the premisses be accepted by *everyone*. As we'll see in the next chapter, Thomas Aquinas gives an argument for God's existence that takes as a premiss *Whatever begins to exist is caused to begin to exist by something already existing*. This premiss shouldn't be disallowed on the grounds that some people do not believe it. Some people have never even considered it and thus do not believe it; others who have considered it, but not carefully or with inadequate preparation, do not believe it. In any event, enough people believe so many obviously false propositions that it would set an impossibly high standard if arguments had to satisfy everyone.⁶ Perhaps the best we can do is to say that for an argument to be useful as a proof, its premisses ought to seem to be true to nearly any reasonable, educated person who considers them carefully. Alternatively, a sound argument is good proof if it gives someone who understands it a reason to believe the conclusion that he or she would not have without understanding the argument. This remains less clear than is desirable, but perhaps we will be able to tell in particular cases whether an argument meets this standard. In any event, we should agree that whatever standards we set for arguments in favor of God's existence must also apply to arguments against God's existence and to the other arguments we will take up in later chapters.

One final point before we begin to look at some specific arguments for God's existence. You might think that there simply are no good proofs in philosophy, so we can tell in advance that there is no good argument for God's existence. But why should we think that there are no good proofs in philosophy? Surely there is no proof of that claim, because any such proof would be a good proof in philosophy; the existence of such a proof would refute its conclusion. So there seems to be no shortcut that avoids looking at the details of some attempted arguments for God's existence, which is what we will begin to do in the next chapter.

Notes

- 1 I follow Alonzo Church (1956), p. 2, in using the spelling "premiss" (rather than "premise") for a proposition included in a logical argument in support of its conclusion. This makes it easy to distinguish the plural from the legal term, "premises," which refers to a house or other building and its surrounding land.
- 2 I've just used some masculine pronouns to refer to God. I should emphasize that this is not because I think that God is male. Since God is, in Swinburne's phrase, "without a body," it follows that God has neither chromosomes nor physical sexual characteristics. So God is not male. For similar reasons, God is not female. It would make as much sense to use feminine pronouns as masculine, but that usage is not traditional. It would be a bad idea, however, to try to avoid the issue by using instead the ungendered pronoun "it"; for "it" is an impersonal pronoun, and God, as someone who knows and acts, is a person.
- 3 "_{df}" is to be read *means by definition*. A more careful way to define validity proceeds in two steps. First, an *argument* is valid just in case it has a valid form. Second, an argument *form* is valid just in case it is not possible for an argument of that form to have true premisses and a false conclusion. This more elaborate definition allows that an argument can have more than one form, it doesn't automatically count an argument with a conclusion that can't possibly be false as valid, and it makes explicit why we go on below to discuss argument forms. With apologies to purists, I'll continue using the simpler formulation in the text.
- 4 The conclusion (3) is false where I'm writing in balmy Rochester, New York.
- 5 This example is from Mavrodes (1970), p. 22.
- 6 According to an article in the *New York Times*, "Scientific Savvy? In U.S., Not Much" (August 30, 2005), 20 percent of Americans believe that the sun revolves around the earth. Many people are similarly misinformed about the age of the earth or the birthplace of President Barack Obama.

Suggested Reading

Stephen T. Davis, *God, Reason, and Theistic Proofs*, chapter 1, “What Is a Theistic Proof?” (Grand Rapids, MI.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997).

Helen De Cruz, “The Enduring Appeal of Natural Theological Arguments,” *Philosophy Compass* 9/2 (2014): 145–153.

George Mavrodes, *Belief in God* (New York: Random House, 1970).

Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?*, chapter 1, “God” (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).