

Arguments on the Existence of G-d:
The Superiority of the Psychological Case

Phil100: Introduction to Philosophy

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All religions are founded on the same principle: the existence of a deity. While almost every other theological, ethical, or ritual aspect of life is debated by the different religions, G-d's existence is the supreme truth unanimously acknowledged by all. Several atheist groups argue among themselves over the same theological, ethical, or ritual aspects of life, while all recognize the supreme truth that G-d does not exist. According to a Gallup poll taken at the turn of the millennium, 87% of the world population believes in G-d. This single fact proves that theist arguments for the existence of G-d have been much more persuasive to the public and appeal to human nature more than atheist arguments against G-d. Religious scholars use metaphysical arguments to prove that a deity exists, especially Anselm's ontological argument and Descartes' ontological and cosmological arguments. However, the most logical argument for belief in G-d is not one preached by any major religious institution, but one proposed by an unlikely philosopher. Blaise Pascal was the great mathematician responsible for Pascal's Triangle, an algorithm for generating binomial coefficients. This mathematician also created Pascal's Wager, which makes a psychological case for belief in G-d. By evaluating the major metaphysical "proofs" of G-d's existence and their critiques, as well as Pascal's Wager, it is clear that the latter is a much more persuasive argument for belief in G-d.

Before one can understand the arguments for and against the existence of G-d, it is important to define what exactly the abstract term means. In the monotheistic Judeo-Christian theology, G-d is a singular all-powerful being. He is generally defined as an omnipotent, omniscient, and compassionate creator of the universe. In nearly all cases, the monotheistic G-d is assumed to be male. Polytheistic religions believe in the existence of multiple G-ds, who rule the universe together in harmony or discord. Even

though conflict between G-ds would contradict their apparent omnipotence, they are still considered to be deities. However, certain philosophical definitions refer to a perfect first being, or uncaused first cause.

One problem associated with the question of G-d's existence is the almost universal belief that G-d possesses supernatural powers that enable him to work miracles with or without revealing his work to mankind. Thus, it is impossible to confirm the existence of a G-d who conceals himself from mankind, even if we reap the benefits of his miracles. Furthermore, one must define what it means to "prove" G-d's existence. Many religious people consider their faith in G-d to be a priori knowledge, in which empirical tests are not necessary to confirm the knowledge. Such knowledge comes from a revelation or enlightenment that comes when the one embraces religion.

Many scientists and philosophers demand that a posteriori knowledge, i.e., knowledge that can only be verified through sense experience, is necessary to confirm the existence of G-d. In fact, some theists theorize that G-d exists but that it is simply impossible to prove his existence. Others state that the existence of G-d cannot be proven because if it could be proven by facts, faith itself would lose its value. With these definitions in mind, one can now examine the arguments for and against G-d's existence with an appropriate perspective.

Saint Anselm of Canterbury was the first to create an ontological argument that attempts to give a priori proof of G-d's existence. Anselm does not use personal experience in his argument, and attempts to persuade non-believers through logic alone. The ontological argument is aimed towards the "fool" who understands the claim G-d exists and still does not believe in G-d. Anselm attempts to prove that these two beliefs

are contradictory and that anyone who truly understands the claim G-d exists can be led to see the truth in the statement. Thus, according to Anselm, atheist arguments are inconsistent as well as incorrect.

The ontological argument begins by defining G-d as “that which none greater can be conceived.” Then, Anselm clarifies that the “fool” he is trying to persuade understands the claim G-d exists. Anselm assumes that if one can debate the existence of G-d at all, then G-d exists in human understanding. Once this is established, Anselm uses a form of reasoning called *reductio ad absurdum*, in which he assumes the opposite of his argument’s point, and comes up with an absurdity. Anselm begins by stating G-d exists in understanding alone, and not in reality. Anselm then declares one of his most controversial premises. He claims that if something exists in the understanding alone, but can be conceived to exist in reality, then that thing can be conceived to be greater than it actually is. He reasons here that something in existence is greater than something found in understanding alone. Thus, since G-d exists in understanding alone, it is possible to conceive of a being which is greater than G-d. However, this conclusion is an obvious absurdity. This would reason that, “that than which none greater can be conceived” can be conceived to be greater than it actually is. Because this conclusion is obviously false, the original premise, G-d exists in understanding alone and not in reality, is also false. Finally, Anselm concludes the opposite of the false premise is true; G-d exists in reality. Descartes added to the ontological argument by saying that existence itself is necessary for G-d to be perfect. He believed that G-d’s existence could not be separated from G-d’s being and definition, just as three equal angles could not be separated from the being of a perfect triangle.

While Anselm makes a strong logical point, many critics from all aspects of the debate have rejected some of his assumptions and inferences about the existence of G-d. The earliest critic of the ontological argument was the Christian Monk Gaunilo of Marmoutiers. He objected to the ontological argument because it could be used to prove the existence of any type of perfect thing imaginable. Gaunilo sought to display this by constructing a similar argument for the existence of a perfect island. However, just because Gaunilo could imagine a perfect island does not guarantee that it exists in reality. He suggested that this argument was clearly false and the same ontological argument for the existence of G-d must be false as well. Saint Thomas Aquinas objected to parts of the ontological argument because Anselm uses G-d's existence as a predicate for the entire argument. For the strict atheist who has no belief in G-d, the ontological argument does not even apply because the atheist does not fall in the category of the "fool" who can be convinced of G-d's existence. Atheists as well as many theists disagree with the assumptions made by Anselm and many with many of his inferences, which further proves just how feeble the ontological argument actually is. One highly regarded critique of Descartes' ontological argument was made by ethicist Emmanuel Kant, who said that existence is not a property of objects whatsoever, but rather a property of concepts. The question of whether ideas in a concept are ever instantiated is an entirely different one, and thus the ontological argument does not actually prove the existence of G-d. Furthermore, existence can not be used as a predicate for a subject. "Existence" can not operate as a predicate for G-d the way "omnipotence" could. The statement "G-d exists" is a tautology that applies only to believers. Using the same argument, the statement "G-d does not exist" would be just as analytic to an atheist who takes G-d's non-existence to be

a truth. With so many objections to the ontological argument, it is unrealistic to think it can undeniably prove the existence of G-d.

Rene Descartes also provided a cosmological argument for the existence of G-d that was similar to that presented by Saint Thomas Aquinas in his “five ways”. To summarize his less influential argument, this important philosopher asked himself, as all humans do at some point, how he came into existence. Descartes explored every possible option. He did not create himself, because he would know about it. If it were his parents, or some scientist, he would be forced to ask what created the natural world and the laws of nature. According to Descartes’ logic, nothing natural can create itself. Thus, there must be something beyond the natural world that created him and the natural universe. This supernatural being must have been G-d.

There are a multitude of opinions against the cosmological argument for the existence of G-d. First, one critique claims the universe could exist for no reason, and that it has always existed in its present form forever, which would render the entire cosmological argument void. This rebuttal has gained more strength with new outlooks at the origin of the universe. Where religious people believe G-d created the universe, many scientists now look at the Big Bang as the first event in the chain of existence revolving around evolution. Secondly, just because there could be an intelligent creator of the universe does not prove that it was actually a perfect being humans name G-d. Finally, the confounding question of who created G-d is posed, and the cosmological argument slowly loses its legitimacy as a logical “proof” of G-d’s existence.

Pascal’s Wager is not a metaphysical argument attempting to prove G-d’s existence. Rather, it makes a psychological case that assumes humans are completely

ignorant of whether or not G-d exists. While even the best arguments made by theists are mired in doubt and controversy, Pascal's ingenious perspective renders the entire debate over G-d's existence pointless. Pascal's Wager is one of the earliest uses of probability theory and decision theory in human history. According to Pascal, one should do what is best in his own self-interest. Basically, he says people should wager on G-d because it is the best bet to make. In any decision problem, the outcome of an action is assigned utility, a number that represents the degree of value assigned by the agent in action. By combining the utility of an action with the percentage chance the action will happen, one can assign a *maximum expected utility* to an action's outcome. In decision theory, when action A's worst outcome is at least as good as the best outcome associated with action B, then action A *superdominates* action B. In such a case, the only rational action would be to perform action A.

Pascal argued that humans must "wager" one way or another about the existence of G-d. He thought reason could not settle which way to choose, but consideration of the outcomes of each action could help settle the debate. Wagering for G-d superdominates wagering against G-d. Pascal states that there are only two options in the debate of G-d's existence, he either exists or does not exist. This would mean the probability of G-d's existence is $\frac{1}{2}$. Next, according to the dominant Catholic religion of Pascal's time, the prize of belief in G-d was an eternity of life, a.k.a. salvation. Pascal has now established two assumptions:

1. The probability of G-d's existence is $\frac{1}{2}$.
2. Wagering for G-d brings infinite reward if G-d exists.

With this in mind, Pascal would say that one must take the risk of belief if the reward would be infinite. Pascal and decision theorists set up decision matrices that show the utility of all possible situations. If one wagers for G-d and he exists, utility is infinite. If one wagers for G-d and he does not exist, the utility would be finite. If one wagers against G-d and he exists, the utility is finite, while some people consider damnation to hell to be a negative infinite. If one wagers against G-d and he does not exist, the utility is again finite. The exact values of the finite utilities are unimportant, because the crucial point is the fact that they are finite. Rationality requires the probability that G-d exists is positive. Rationality also requires the decision theorist to perform the act of maximum expected utility to determine which course of action to take. Because wagering for G-d includes an infinite utility, the only rational conclusion is that all people should wager for G-d.

Pascal's Wager does not come without critics. Many question the probability of G-d's existence as $\frac{1}{2}$. This assignment is according to ancient interpretations of probability, in which all possibilities are given equal weight. This often can lead to absurd conclusions. For example, one could assume that he has a $\frac{1}{2}$ chance of winning a one-in-a-million lottery because he either wins the lottery or does not win. However, with an infinite utility found with belief in G-d when G-d does exist, the problem of the probability of G-d's existence is completely unimportant since whatever number (besides 0) is inputted into the decision theory equation with infinity will output infinity as a result. Another valid objection to Pascal's Wager is in regards to strict atheists who may insist that the probability of G-d's existence is 0. Members of this group might insist reason dictates G-d's existence to be 0 and G-d's non-existence to be 1. In such a

situation, the outcome of each belief will have two finite utilities, and there is no guarantee the finite utility attributed to belief in G-d would be greater than the finite utility attributed to absence of belief in G-d. Finally, Pascal's Wager can not solely be applied to the Judeo-Christian deity, and can actually apply to any theist belief ever. As a result, the Wager could conclude to believe in multiple religions for the sake of one's self-interest. However, when G-d is considered a group of deities that could contain only one being, it is nearly impossible to refute Pascal's decision matrix that includes a positive probability for G-d's existence.

Pascal's Wager gives a much better case for faith than all the associated "proofs" on the existence of G-d. Unlike the metaphysical arguments, Pascal's psychological case appeals to rationality and is thoroughly convincing to all but the strict atheist that it is one's self-interest to have faith. Theist and atheist arguments against each other provide a never ending debate that leaves an observer doubting both sides of the argument. The ontological arguments for G-d's existence are convincing at first glance. The cosmological arguments for G-d's existence are also persuasive because no person can attest to being a witness to the creation of the cosmos. However, atheist arguments against G-d, especially the problem of evil, appeal to the same logic and leave both sides of the debate shrouded in controversy and doubt. Pascal's Wager gives a fresh, unbiased outlook on the debate of G-d's existence because mathematics solves the question reason alone cannot.

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