INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

LECTURE SEVEN

ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

A Kantian Division:-

> Those that begin from indeterminate experience
> - God shouldn't have created any universe – manifestly implausible [though see note below]

> Those that begin from pure categories a priori
> - Concept of God incoherent – already dismissed in first lectures

> Those that begin from determinate experience
> - The Problem of Evil
> N. B. 'Evil' is being taken to mean anything that is in any respect/to any extent bad

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

1) If there were a God, He would be omnipotent and perfectly good;
2) An omnipotent being could ensure there was no evil;
3) A perfectly good being would wish to ensure there was no evil.
4) If there were a God, He would ensure there was no evil.
5) There is evil.
6) There is no God.

Deductively valid; premises 1, 2 & 5 undeniable; premise 3 prima facie very plausible
                                                    - Child-knifing example

Looks as if the Problem of Evil is a deductively sound argument for the non-existence of God the deductive soundness of which is more obvious than is its conclusion that there is no God; looks then as if the Problem of Evil is a good argument for believing that there is no God

Premise 3 not as plausible as it at first seems   - Emergency appendectomy example

Initial argument fails, but the proponent of the Problem of Evil can regroup and attack again

Two features of the conceptual landscape on which the battle will be fought:-

1) It is *logically* or *metaphysically* impossible that one might enjoy some goods to the extent that we enjoy them without suffering from the evil that accompanies them to the extent that we suffer from that evil.

Example: the good we enjoy of having freedom (to make important choices)

> - Choice between Oxfam or British American Tobacco jobs example
> - Choice between hardcopy or softcopy circulation list of *Practical Tiddlywinker* example

No important differences between actions that are not important because one or more of these actions is better than one or more others, this other or these others thus being to some extent and in some respect bad, i.e. evil

What about natural evils?   - Andy wishing to harm Bob example

Freedom to affect one another for good or bad requires differences in power between agents, differences which must ultimately be natural facts, natural facts which fail to serve the interests of someone and thus are evils - natural evils are a necessary consequence of creating a world with natural laws, natural laws being necessary for there to be natural facts of the sort required for free agents to be able to affect one another in important ways.

2) A good may compensate for an evil even if it does not outweigh it in any even-in-principle-quantifiable way.

- Choice between becoming a great sculptor (with more physical pain) or a mediocre painter (with less pain) example

- Teacher in charge of a group of schoolchildren at playtime example

Question: What conditions morally justify you in generating a system with victims?

Answer: 1) your capacity to provide suitable compensation for victims
2) whether or not the people in question asked to/not to participate in it
- Choice between multiple playgrounds example

Shows it's not irrational to choose playground with more suffering (yet, consequently, more freedom)
- Choice whether or not to have children example

Shows God's not under an obligation to ask us beforehand whether or not we wish to exist – this 'lets him off the hook' with regard to condition 2. And God can easily satisfy condition 1 (with Heaven).

It's good to have a chance to be Greeks!   – Herodotus example

Conclusion

The occurrence of evil in the world provides us with no reason to think that there's not a God.

CAUTIONARY NOTE.

Of course, as with any argument, my argument relies on premises; and, as with any interesting argument, the premises are ones that people seek to call into question.
I'm relying in my argument on the falsity of something called 'Theodical Individualism' – that to be morally justified any evil that God allows to befall a person must be strictly necessary for some benefit that outweighs it and that comes *to the same person* as the evil befalls.
And I'm relying on their being no 'un-compensatable' evils; the terms 'horrendous' evil and 'radical' evil are used in a variety of ways, but, on a common construal of them, my view is that there are no horrendous or radical evils.
It's worth knowing of the distinction between the so-called 'logical' problem of evil, the argument that asserts that there's a logical incompatibility between any evil and God, and the evidential version, which asserts that the evil in the world is evidence that there's no God. I run the two together as I think that neither works, for the reasons I sketch, but they are two different versions of the problem.
There is one qualification to my conclusion. What I would call atheistic and irreligious experiences are evils on Theism (for they mislead those who have them about important issues) and, as mentioned briefly in discussing the Argument from Religious Experience, these experiences do indeed provide good reason to believe Theism false; indeed it's because they provide these reasons that they are evils on Theism. These experiences then escape my 'solution' to the Problem of Evil and ought to be taken - for the reasons previously articulated - as reasons to believe that there is no God.

SUGGESTED READING

R. Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*

A DIFFERENT POINT OF VIEW
But why bother listening to what *I* have to say? You can hear from the Deity Himself here…
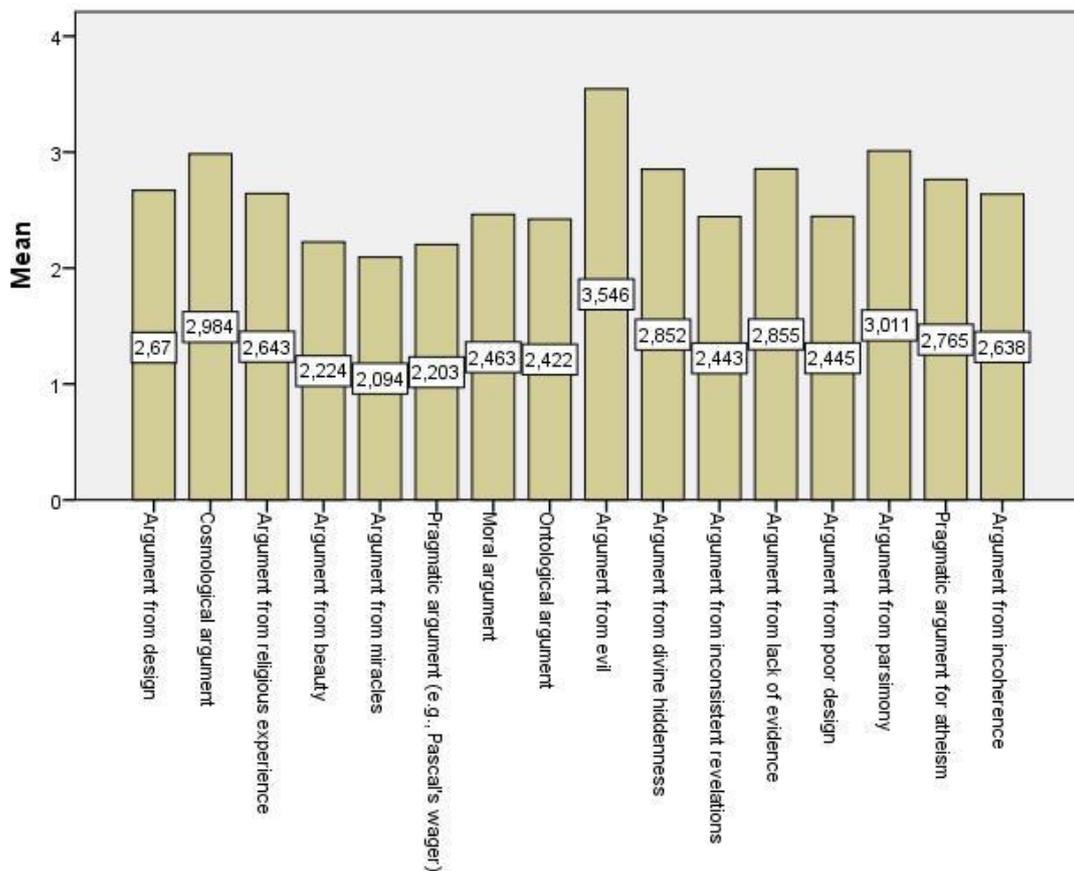
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qzf8q9QHfhI

WHAT PHILOSOPHERS TEND TO THINK ABOUT THESE ARGUMENTS

I as your lecturer have of course been giving you just one assessment of the arguments for and against the existence of God, mine, although I've indicated now and again where this assessment differs from that of a significant proportion of others working in the field. Recently, Helen De Cruz has conducted a survey which gives a clearer picture of how philosophers in general tend to regard these arguments. With her permission, I report some of her findings below:-

"Respondents were asked to rate how strong they found a series of natural theological arguments, on a … scale of 1 (very weak) to 5 (very strong). Arguments were organized in two groups (arguments for and arguments against the existence of God) of 8 items each. …

Overall, the strongest rated natural theological argument was the argument from evil (mean score: 3.55). The second strongest rated argument was the argument from parsimony (mean score: 3.01), followed by the cosmological argument (mean score: 2.98). The argument from miracles and the argument from beauty were rated as weakest. The mean scores of the arguments are summarized in the bar chart [reproduced immediately below]."

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