

Chapter 23

What Are We Asking When We Ask “Does God Exist?”

Is there any good reason to believe that God exists? Is there good reason to believe that God does not exist? Or is agnosticism the position the reasonable person takes on the matter—neither denying nor affirming that God exists? Imagine a person who lacks evidence that God exists but who would find comfort and purpose in life were he to believe in God. Should he believe that God exists despite lacking grounds for that belief?

These are the questions we will ask and attempt to answer in this Part of this book. What we want to know is whether we should believe that God exists and if we should, why we should, and if we should not, why we should not.

1. A Being worthy of worship

If we are going to ask “does God exist?”, we need first to understand what we mean by “God.” People have conceived of God in many different ways throughout history and between cultures. We might think that since there are many conceptions of God, to begin our task we must simply pick a conception and ask whether any being answers to that conception. We would pick that conception of God that most interests us. What most interests us would depend on our religion or the religion in which we were trained or the religion that dominates in our culture. Does the God of the Old Testament exist?, we would ask, if that is the conception that interests us. Or we would ask does the God of the Christians exist? Does the God of the Muslims? There may be as many questions of God’s existence as there are conceptions of God.

This is not the way the question presents itself to a serious enquirer. The serious enquirer, whether a disinterested philosopher or a person on a religious or spiritual quest, wants first to know how God is *properly* to be conceived. It matters that what exists or doesn’t is truly God, that He is God conceived as God should be conceived. To someone who asks the question “does God exist?” seriously, the question has a gravity or importance not had by such questions as “is there a tenth planet?” or “does phlogiston exist?”, no matter how interesting she finds these other questions. To begin simply by taking a conception of God without asking whether it is the correct conception is to turn the question “does God exist?” into one of these other questions. It is to make it just another matter of interest. The question “does God exist?” feels much more significant than that.

To capture the importance of the question, we have to begin with the right conception of God; to discover what that is, we have to know why the question matters to us in a way many other fascinating questions don’t. The question matters to us, if it does, because of what we feel we would owe God were He to exist; it matters to us because of the specific attitude we would take toward God. That attitude is the attitude of worship; we owe God our worship. When the question “does God exist?” matters to us, what we are asking is “does an appropriate object of worship exist?”

Now not just anything, no matter how wonderful or significant or loved, admired, or respected by us it is, is an appropriate object of our worship. A thing might be sparkling and good and one might have total confidence in it and love it with all one’s heart—and yet it not be

a thing worthy of worship. None of Wayne Gretzky, Médecins sans frontières, and a slice of fresh apple pie, wonderful and inspiring as each is, is worthy of worship. One is right to love Bob Dylan's or Coltrane's or Beethoven's music, to find it marvellous and unique, and to admire Dylan or Coltrane or Beethoven for creating it, but neither the music nor the musician is to be worshipped. Someone who worships *Blonde on Blonde* is perverse and ridiculous—and not because of any fault in *Blonde on Blonde*. The Dylan worshipper is ridiculous mainly because he has made a mistake about himself, about his own worth and value to himself.

2. *Creator, sustainer, redeemer*

The question “does God exist?”, when asked seriously, is, we have said, equivalent to the question “does a being worthy of a person's worship exist?” What, then, we must ask, would something have to be like, given our own worth and value to ourselves, for it to be worthy, let alone commanding, of our worship?

Here is one answer to this question: To be worthy of worship, a being must fulfil the three functions of creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all that exists. All that exists begins from God's intention and will, and all that does not exist also does so from God's intention and will; that is what it is for God to be creator of all that exists. That which exists remains in existence through God's intention and will and that which does not exist remains without existence through God's intention and will; that is what it is for God to be sustainer of all that exists. And all that exists takes its purpose or meaning from God's intention and will; that is what it is for God to be redeemer of all that exists. Everything is as God wants it to be in light of his purpose in creating and sustaining it, and everything is as it is because of his purpose. The central idea behind this conception of what something must do in order to be God, what functions it must serve, is that only a being on whom all things depend and from whom all derive their meaning could be an appropriate object of worshipful devotion. If this is right, then fulfilling the functions of creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all is a necessary and sufficient condition of being God.

The key function for us is that of redeemer. That which redeems an existence or a life is that which makes it valuable and worth existing or living. To draw our worship, a being must be rightly seen by each of us as his or her own redeemer—as the source of his or her purpose in existence, as the source of the point or meaning of his or her life. For a being to redeem a person's life, it must be the case that a person's purpose is what it is and the meaning of his life is what it is in virtue of the intention and will of that being. It is in virtue of the redeemer's intention and will that the pain and suffering, the disappointments and failures, in one's life make sense and are as they should be. On the other hand, a being that is in any way accidental to the purpose or meaning of a person's life is either potentially a tool for that person to use or an obstacle in his way or part of the background against which he lives his life. But nothing that is merely a tool or an obstacle or part of the background is worthy of a person's worship. Thus, only a being that functions as one's redeemer could be God. But for a being to function as the redeemer of a life, nothing within that life can be beyond the intention or will of that being. Nothing can be otherwise than as that being intends and wills. God must be the answer why what exists exists and exists as it does and why what doesn't exist does not exist. And so God, as redeemer, must also be creator and sustainer of all that exists.

The question “Does God exist?” becomes, first, the question, “Does a being worthy of worship exist?” Now, though, if we are right that to be worthy of worship a being must function as creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all that exists (and of all that does not exist), the question “Does God exist?” becomes, second, the question, “Does there exist a creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all that exists?”

3. Omniscient, omnipotent, and all good

What properties or powers must a being have in order to fulfil these functions? What properties must a being have in order to function as and, thereby, to be God?

Here is an answer to this question: To function as creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all that exists a being must be all knowing, all powerful, and all good. To be all knowing or, said differently, to be omniscient, is to understand everything. If God exists, then there exists a being mistaken about nothing and ignorant of nothing. To be all powerful or, said differently, to be omnipotent, is to be able to create, alter, or destroy anything at all, anything that can be conceived. If God exists, then there exists a being whose every intention is realized through that being’s power. Goodness has two aspects, justice and love. To be all good, then, is to be perfectly just and perfectly loving. If God exists, then there exists a being who feels, thinks, and acts, and so is a person or agent, and yet who is totally without malice, partiality, or indifference. This being would be absolutely fair toward each of us, endeavouring to ensure that we get what we deserve, whether that be reward or punishment. And this being would love each of us totally and unconditionally, wishing us success, happiness, and contentment and prizing our happiness as part of its own.

On this answer, being omniscient, omnipotent, and all good is necessary and sufficient for being God. No being is God, no matter how intelligent, powerful, or good it is, if it is any less than perfectly knowing, powerful, and good. No matter how great or wonderful, a being less than perfectly knowing, powerful, or good is just one more being in the universe among all the rest.

Why are these three properties necessary properties of God? Our task, again, is to discover what properties or characteristics or qualities or attributes a being must have in order to serve the functions of creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all that exists. We can see why the three properties of omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness are necessary by considering first the function of redeeming all that exists. Only within the intentions of a perfectly just and loving being could one’s source of meaning and purpose lie, for otherwise one might rightly be indifferent to one’s meaning in life and one’s purpose could be incomplete or arbitrary or evil. But that means that only a perfectly good being could fulfil the function of redeemer. Moreover, only if that perfectly good being fulfilled also the functions of creator and sustainer could it ensure that its intentions are present and determining in the world. That is, only if that perfectly good being were creator and sustainer would the meaning that it intends for the life of a particular person inevitably be the meaning of the life of that person; neither a being ignorant of or mistaken about the facts nor a being lacking in power would be able to ensure that its intentions are realized in the world. Therefore, we conclude, in order for a being to function as creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all that exists, that being must be omniscient, omnipotent, and all good.

4. The God of the geometers

The question “Does God exist?” is, we said, equivalent to the question “Does an appropriate object of worship exist?” The question of the existence of God is unlike other questions of existence in that we feel that much about our lives and our affective attitudes towards our lives and towards the universe itself depends on our answer to this question. The question “Does an appropriate object of worship exist?” is, we then said, equivalent to the question “Does a being who functions as creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all that exists exist?” No being who fails to perform any one of these functions would be an appropriate object of worship, given what worship is and the fact that, as persons, we possess the worth and dignity of persons. (As well, given again the nature both of worship and of personhood, any being that fulfils these functions would, necessarily, be an appropriate object of worship.) The question “Does a being who functions as creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all that exists exist?” is, we next said, equivalent to the question “Does a being omniscient, omnipotent, and all good exist?” In order for a being to function as creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all that exists, that being would have to be all knowing, all powerful, and perfectly just and loving. (And, we should add, any being all knowing, all powerful, and perfectly just and loving would, necessarily, be creator, sustainer, and redeemer of anything that exists.)

“Does God exist?” = “Does an appropriate object of worship exist?” = “Does a creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all that exists exist?” = “Does a being omniscient, omnipotent, and all good exist?”: this is the chain that enables us to substitute for the question “Does God exist?” the question “Does a being omniscient, omnipotent, and all good exist?” The first question, we can say, reduces through this chain to the fourth question. It is this reduction that gives us the conception of God with which we will work in the following chapters, a conception we have devised independently of considering any particular religion or religious tradition.

Now the conception of God as omniscient, omnipotent, and all good is not foreign to current popular religions. Christians, Moslems, and Jews, for instance, all accept that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and all good. (Or, at least, most members of most sects of these three religions conceive of God as omniscient, omnipotent, and all good.) But God as omniscient, omnipotent, and all good forms only the core of the conception of God within these religions. Each religion conceives of the Diety somewhat differently than do the other two (indeed, many sects within each religion conceive of the Diety somewhat differently than do other sects). The conception of God in a living religion, a religion strong in its appeal and that claims the concern and devotion of many faithful, is inevitably a much richer conception than the core conception. Some thinkers who have asked the question “Does God exist?” have complained that to limit one’s concern to the core conception is in fact to miss the importance of the question to the serious enquirer. They complain that what they call “the God of the geometers” is too abstract and, thus, too colourless, cold, and distant, to move a person to loving devotion and worship. They hold that we must begin with a richer conception of God, the God of the patriarchs, for instance, or the God who became flesh, if we are to understand faith and to appreciate its legitimacy.

It is not clear that this criticism is fair. After all, the function of redeemer is central to the geometer’s conception of God, as is, consequently, the attribute of perfect goodness. It follows almost directly from the core conception of God as omniscient, omnipotent, and all good, that for a religious believer, a person’s life has meaning because and only because every moment on this earth is a God-given opportunity to enter into or express a personal loving

relationship with God, knowing that one's love is reciprocated, and that being in a loving relationship with God is the deepest, most profound, and most satisfying state in which a person could be. The God of the geometers is already (or, at least, almost already) both personal and warm. Still, there is something behind this criticism that we will need to confront. The criticism stems in some cases not so much from the fact that philosophers tend to limit themselves to the core conception of God but from a reaction to the impersonal and dry character of the arguments philosophers have attempted to use to show that God exists. Here the criticism is that the reality of God is known in a way apart from those ways of knowing philosophers accept. We will address this point at the end of the next chapter. The criticism stems in other cases from a concern that the philosopher identifies faith with belief or, at least, with ordinary, everyday sorts of belief. Here the criticism is that "Does God exist?" is a much more peculiar question than philosophers often think it is. We will address this concern in chapter *+11.

5. A first argument that God does not exist

Does there exist a being who is omniscient, omnipotent, and all good? If we are right that in order to be God, a being must be omniscient, omnipotent, and all good, then, if it is impossible for any being to be omniscient, omnipotent, or all good, then God does not exist. That is to say, if the concept of being omniscient or being omnipotent or being perfectly just and perfectly loving is confused or contradictory, then no being could be God, for no being can fall under a confused or contradictory concept. (Nothing could be a round square, for instance, and nothing falls under the concept of a frozen fire.)

A first criticism of the belief that God exists is that at least one of the three necessary attributes of God is no possible attribute of anything. Omniscience and omnipotence are the attributes that create the most problems for belief that God exists. Let us look at each of them.

Could any being possibly be omniscient? No, one might say, for someone can know something only by investigating it, and that means only by thinking about it, forming hypotheses about it, and then testing them. God, on the other hand, simply knows everything, and that means that He doesn't investigate to find out. But since there is no knowledge without investigation, and the concept of omniscience implies knowing without having investigated, the concept of omniscience is confused. Nothing could be omniscient, for the concept of being omniscient makes no sense. Thus, God does not exist.

Could any being be omnipotent? No, one might say, for the concept of being all powerful implies the ability to create anything having any property, and that would include such properties as immovability. That is to say, if a being were omnipotent, then it would be able to create something that it could not move; but if a being were omnipotent, then it would be able to move anything. An omnipotent being would both be able to move that thing and be unable to move it. The concept of being omnipotent, then, implies a contradiction, and so no being could be omnipotent. Thus God does not exist.

Is the concept of God confused or contradictory? We raise this problem simply to impress upon you just how strange and difficult is the concept of God. We cannot respond to this problem by saying that how God can fall under a concept that seems to us confused or contradictory is certainly a mystery, but He does fall under it. Maybe the criticism that since the concept of God is confused or contradictory, no being could be God can be answered. To

answer it, though, one needs to think hard about omniscience and omnipotence and to say clearly just exactly what these attributes could be.