God and Religion

On Wednesday, 9/14, we will begin a section on God and religion. The question at issue is whether or not you can prove God exists (or, what may be a different question, whether or not you can prove it is rational to believe that God exists).

WEDNESDAY, 9/14

Morrison lists seven reasons why he believes in God. The first of these is his version of one of the attempted proofs of God’s existence, the Argument from Design.

The Argument from Design

The Argument from Design is based on the complex order of the universe. Science has established two things about the world: first, there is an intricate fitting together of pieces ranging from the subatomic to the gigantic and, second, there is a mathematical precision in the laws that describe the regular and orderly behavior of these interlocking pieces. Morrison notes that the probability against order is great, for example, the chances of drawing ten pennies out of your pocket in a prescribed order is 1 in 10 billion. The probability of the much more complex order of the universe arising by chance is 1 in some huge number (maybe even 1 in infinity).

Morrison’s analysis of the probability seems correct. The question is, what conclusion shall we draw? If we found a watch on the beach, we would not believe that is was caused by the chance action of wind and waves; we would conclude that it was produced by a watchmaker. Moreover, if we found some unknown object with a complex mechanism and/or manner of behavior, we would still conclude it was made by someone, even though we did not know what the object was nor what to call the maker. How could we possibly believe that the most complexly functioning object in the universe, namely, the universe itself, was just an accident, a fluke? Surely we must believe that this infinitely complex object has an (infinite) maker.

There are some things to note here. First, the argument is about what it is rational to believe. BIG QUESTION: What is the relation of belief to fact? Imagine a case where the evidence strongly supports the truth of a belief, but the belief is actually wrong, for example, a case in which an innocent person is wrongly convicted. In this case, it would be rational to accept the belief, but, of course, believing it does not make it true. Second, the argument rests on an analogy, namely, “the universe is like a machine made by humans.” BIG QUESTION: How far can the analogy be extended? They both are complex. Do they both have a maker (can you think of any complex object that is not produced by a maker)?
Dawkins, on the other hand, argues against the Argument from Design.

The Argument Against Design

Dawkins argues that biological evolution, as contemporary biological science understands it, is capable of producing the most complex entity that we know about, namely ourselves. Moreover, this process consists of a long chain of chance adaptations to the environment, and this chain “fits” us so well to the natural world that it appears to require deliberate, conscious design. But, he points out, this is a misperception.

There are other arguments against the Argument from Design. We will look at the argument and counterarguments in class.

FRIDAY, 9/16

Swinburne gives several different justifications for theism, that is, the belief that a God exists. It appears that Swinburne thinks that any single one of the justifications is not sufficient, but that “the case for the existence of God is a cumulative one” in which the collective weight of the multiple justifications is decisive.

We will look at these in class, and we will also look at the question of what is being justified. Does Swinburne claim that God’s existence has been proven, or does he claim that belief in God’s existence has been justified? And how are these different?

One of the justifications rests on the religious experiences that at least some people report having. We take people’s experiences as evidence for ordinary beliefs, for example, I take my auto mechanic’s years of experience with stalled cars as good reason for following his advice to thoroughly warm up a cold carburetor car before turning it off, otherwise it won’t start back up right away. Shouldn’t we also take people’s religious experiences as evidence for religious beliefs?

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT #4 -- Due in class Friday, 9/16.

Consider the following body of religious experience: John is reading the newspaper one evening, and God appears to him in a vision. God tells John that a terrible earthquake will strike his town, and being a religious person, John believes the truth of his vision. Since John is the emergency response coordinator for his town, he immediately orders an evacuation, which saves many lives when an earthquake strikes only hours after the evacuation is completed. A month or two later, God again appears to John in a vision, and tells him things that also prove to be true. John accepts these visions and the truth of God’s predictions as proof that God exists. Is he justified in doing so? Is his acceptance any different than the astronomer who accepts the truth of an astronomical law because observations confirm predictions based on the law? Reflect on this issue and briefly report your conclusions.
MONDAY, 9/19

Early in the history of Christianity, the doctrine of a benevolent, all-powerful God was challenged by the Epicurean trilemma. It went like this:

- If God was benevolent (that is, supremely good), He would want to eliminate all pain, suffering, and evil in the world.
- If God was all-powerful, He could do anything He wanted to do, and He would therefore eliminate all pain, suffering, and evil in the world.
- However, there is pain, suffering, and evil in the world.

Therefore, either God is not benevolent, or He is not all-powerful, or He does not exist at all. This trilemma is a concise statement of the Problem of Evil.

The Problem of Evil does appear to present a challenge to traditional theist beliefs. If the theist admits God is not benevolent, then He becomes someone to avoid rather than believe in. If the theist admits God is not all-powerful, then He is not much of a god, and the motivation for believing in Him diminishes. If the theist admits God does not exist, then he or she stops being a theist and becomes an atheist. So, how can a person remain a theist given all the pain, suffering, and evil in the world?

Johnson argues that there is no solution to the Problem of Evil; instead, the only rational response to the evil in the world is to stop believing in God. Hick argues that the Problem of Evil can be solved; indeed, the evil in the world is an integral part of God’s plan to bring about ultimate goodness. We will examine these two arguments.

Independently of the question of whether a rational explanation can be given as to why God allows the existence of evil, theists have to make a psychological response to the existence of evil. That is, on the emotional level they have to prevent the pain, suffering, and evil in the world from undermining their belief. These emotional, psychological responses might not be a rational explanation, but they have to be able to prevent doubt. What might these responses be?

WEDNESDAY, 9/21

Clifford and James start from the same assumption, namely, you cannot develop a scientific proof of the existence of God or any other religious belief. Beginning with this shared assumption, however, they reach different conclusions about whether people are justified in believing religious ideas.

Clifford argues it is **never** correct to believe something unless there is sufficient proof of a factual, scientific type.

James argues that there are many things for which it is not only correct, but also necessary, to believe in absence of conclusive scientific proof. James gives the following examples:

1) the ability of scientific method to uncover the truth,
2) that another person likes (or loves) us, or is a friend,
3) that other people are pulling their weight (doing what they should in given social contexts, e.g., your job, college, etc.), and

4) religious belief.

Two questions come to mind.

– First, is James right about the first 3 beliefs? Why or why not?

– Second, assume for the moment that he is correct about the first 3 (or maybe you believe he is and do not need to assume it). How is number 4 different from numbers 1-3? Or, maybe it isn’t?

**WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT #5 -- Due in class Wednesday, 9/21.**

Is James right in saying that our beliefs that someone loves us are not based on scientific proof -- indeed, that they cannot in principle be based on scientific proof? If James is right, does this mean Clifford would say that we should never believe someone loves us? If Clifford would have to say this, would that undermine his whole argument?

**FRIDAY, 9/23**

Tolstoy takes us inside a religious believer’s experience, and he vividly recounts how faith in God saved him and gave his life meaning. How could this be if religious belief is empty, meaningless, and unjustifiable? And does it not legitimate Tolstoy’s belief?