

Arguments for Theism and Christianity

The question of whether there is good evidence for God is one that Christians are bound to keep encountering, particularly in post-Christian cultures where the idea that the world is the handiwork of a creator seems very far from obvious to many people. In this seminar we look at three arguments for God's existence that have generated much discussion not only amongst philosophers but also beyond the confines of the academy, namely: the argument from cosmic fine-tuning, the argument from morality, and the argument from consciousness. Finally, we look at an historical argument for Christianity from the evidence of the empty tomb of Jesus and the apparent postmortem appearances to the disciples.

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I. Introduction

- A. The majority of philosophers over the last two millennia in the Western tradition were theists, but the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the rise of atheism, to the point that theism had all but been banished from academic philosophy by the mid-20th century. A striking shift has been occurring over the past 50 years, in which God has returned as a topic for serious discussion, and the proportion of philosophers who believe in God today has risen to somewhere around 1 in 5. Not that the number of people who believe something implies that that thing is true, but the revival of theism in philosophy is striking.
- B. Is it *unbiblical* to use arguments for God's existence? This has been a topic of debate among Christians. There are indicators that the apostles sometimes tried to find common ground with pagan audiences as a launchpad for proclaiming the Gospel (e.g., Acts 17).
- C. Arguments for God are best not viewed as proofs but instead as clues or pointers.
- D. There are a wide range of arguments for God's existence under discussion today. We'll just consider three: the argument from fine-tuning; the argument from moral obligations; the argument from consciousness. We'll also consider the historical case for the resurrection of Jesus.

II. The Argument from Fine-tuning

- A. Over the past few decades physicists have discovered that a number of features of the structure of the universe appear to be fine-tuned for life: these features needed to be very precisely configured in order for there to be a universe containing galaxies, stars, and planets on which life could emerge (e.g. strength of the force of gravity: if this varied by as little as 1 part in 1060 then no galaxies could form).

- B. The first hypothesis is sheer chance: in other words, the various parameters all just happened to be in exactly the right places to yield a life-supporting universe. This hypothesis is staggeringly improbable, and it has few defenders.
- C. The second hypothesis is that this universe is the product of a designing mind who intentionally set the dials in all the right places so as to produce a life-supporting universe.
- D. The third hypothesis is that this isn't the only universe; rather, there's a universe-generating mechanism which has produced many, many universes, each universe having different settings of the dials, so that according to this hypothesis, if enough different parameter settings are randomly tried out, eventually a life-permitting universe is bound to pop out.
- E. The real competition seems to be between the design hypothesis and the multiverse hypothesis. So why opt for the design hypothesis over the multiverse hypothesis?
- F. A key reason is that the multiverse hypothesis ultimately just pushes the problem up a level: what explains the fine-tuning of the mechanism that is responsible for generating the universes that make up the multiverse?

III. The Argument from Moral Obligations

- A. This argument begins by trying to show that morality is something that is true for everyone — it's not just true relative to what a particular society thinks — and it goes on to claim that this true-for-all morality makes much more sense if God exists than if there's no God.
- B. What reasons can be given for thinking that morality is objective? The short answer is that it seems to be impossible to uphold most of our ordinary, everyday ideas about morality unless we presuppose an objective standard of right and wrong: e.g., the idea that certain things are wrong in all times and places; the idea that societies sometimes move in the direction of having better moral attitudes, which only makes sense if there is some objective standard that we are trying to get nearer to.
- C. Step two of the argument tries to argue that objective morality — a true-for-all standard of right and wrong — makes much more sense if there's a God than if there is no God.
- D. Moral truths are truths about how self-conscious beings should and should not behave. Can we make sense of there being objective truths about how self-conscious beings should behave in a godless universe? If there is no God, these objective truths about right and wrong would have to be free floating, just there, and there wouldn't be any deeper story or explanation for why they are there. This has struck many philosophers as an odd picture. Such truths would seem to be much more at home in a universe created by God.

IV. The argument from consciousness

- A. The first step tries to show that conscious experience can't be reduced to physical events in the brain, even if it is intimately related to the workings of the brain. E.g., even a totally exhaustive physical description of what happens in the brain when someone stubs her toe leaves something crucial out: what it's like to experience the pain of stubbing a toe.
- B. The argument then goes on to say that the fact that there is this very odd phenomenon of conscious experience that is fundamentally different from any physical aspect of the world, makes more sense if the universe is the product of a conscious mind than if at bottom there is just blind physical matter.

V. The historical case for the resurrection

A. **Jesus' death by crucifixion:** John Dominic Crossan: "that [Jesus] was crucified is sure as anything historical can ever be."¹ It's attested in at least eleven different first-century or early-second century sources,² including several non-Christian sources such as Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jewish People* (18.3.3) and Tacitus' *Annals of Imperial Rome* (15.44).

B. The empty tomb:

1. The accounts of Jesus' burial have all the hallmarks of being authentic: **(a)** the burial of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea is attested in all four Gospels; Paul also speaks about Jesus' burial (1 Cor 15.4; Rom 6.4); **(b)** the details of Jesus' burial in the Gospels fit very well with archaeological findings.³ If the location of Jesus' tomb was known, it's hard to envisage how the apostles could have preached the resurrection unless the tomb was empty.
2. All four Gospels claim that Mary Magdalene and some other female disciples discovered the tomb empty: **(a)** the four Gospels' unanimity on this core claim (with some variations on peripheral details) indicates that the tradition is early; **(b)** given first-century attitudes towards female testimony, it seems fairly unlikely that the early church would have fabricated an empty tomb story in which the primary eyewitnesses were women.⁴

C. **The appearances:** the short creed recounted by Paul in 1 Cor 15.3-8 attests appearances to individuals and groups of Jesus' followers; the Gospel narratives independently attest such appearances.

1. The earliness of the creed and its eyewitness origins: **(a)** Paul's use of formal traditioning language ("I received" [*paralambanō*]; "I handed on" [*paradidōmī*]) to signal he received it from a trusted source; **(b)** Paul had met

¹ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), p. 145

² The sources are: Mark's Gospel (perhaps based on a pre-Markan passion narrative), Matthew's Gospel, Luke-Acts, John's Gospel, Paul's Epistles, the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Petrine Epistles, Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jewish People*, Tacitus' *Annals of Imperial Rome*, Mara bar Serapion's letter to his son, Lucian's *The Passing of Peregrinus*

³ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *The Holy Land. Oxford Archaeological Guides* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 54-55.

⁴ See Geza Vermes, *The Resurrection* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 142

with Peter and James three years after his conversion (Gal 1.18); (c) his conversion occurred within three years of Jesus' crucifixion; (d) hence, Paul very likely received this creed from some of the eyewitnesses (Peter, James) within six years of the events, meaning that the creed itself was formulated even earlier.⁵

2. Appearances to groups are attested. Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz: "in the case of the appearance to the group of eleven disciples, the differences between the various versions are too great for it to be possible for them to be dependent on one another in literary terms. However, the agreements are clear enough for it to be possible to infer a real event behind these accounts... in our view there is no doubt that it really happened."⁶
3. At least two of the people who sincerely believed they saw the risen Jesus were not followers of Jesus beforehand: Paul and James the brother of Jesus.
4. The sincerity of these witnesses is underscored by their willingness to risk their lives for the resurrection proclamation: (a) Peter, James the brother of Jesus, Paul, and James the brother of John were all eventually martyred; (b) Paul's own sincere testimony that prior to his conversion he "was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it" (Gal 1.13) indicates that the opposition faced by the early church within the first couple of years after Jesus' crucifixion was a serious business.

D. The unexpectedness of the resurrection:

1. Whilst many Second-Temple Jews hoped for a general resurrection of the dead on judgment day, there doesn't seem to have been any expectation that one individual in isolation would be resurrected before judgment day (not even the Messiah).⁷
2. The Gospels depict the reaction of the disciples as one of initial disbelief and fear—the women were going to anoint the dead body; the men initially dismissed the women's report about the empty tomb; they are depicted as fearful and disbelieving at first when Jesus appears to them. These details don't paint the disciples in a particularly good light; they are unlikely to have been invented.

What's the best explanation of the data? The main naturalistic theory on offer today is that of hallucinations; almost no scholar endorses the fraud or swoon theories. Hallucination theories seriously struggle with the number of people who received appearances of the risen Jesus and the fact that some of the appearances were to large groups of people.

Recommended reading:

Richard Swinburne, *Is there a God?*

William Lane Craig, *The Son Rises*

⁵ Gerd Lüdemann, *What Really Happened to Jesus? A Historical Approach to the Resurrection*, trans. John Bowden (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), p. 38.

⁶ Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 496

⁷ Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (London: SCM Press, 1994), p. 20. For more on this, see N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003), pp. 85-207