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**FAITH AND REASON:
THE PHILOSOPHY
OF RELIGION**
COURSE GUIDE



Professor Peter Kreeft
BOSTON COLLEGE

Faith and Reason: The Philosophy of Religion

Professor Peter Kreeft
Boston College



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Faith and Reason:
The Philosophy of Religion
Professor Peter Kreeft



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Course Syllabus

Faith and Reason: The Philosophy of Religion

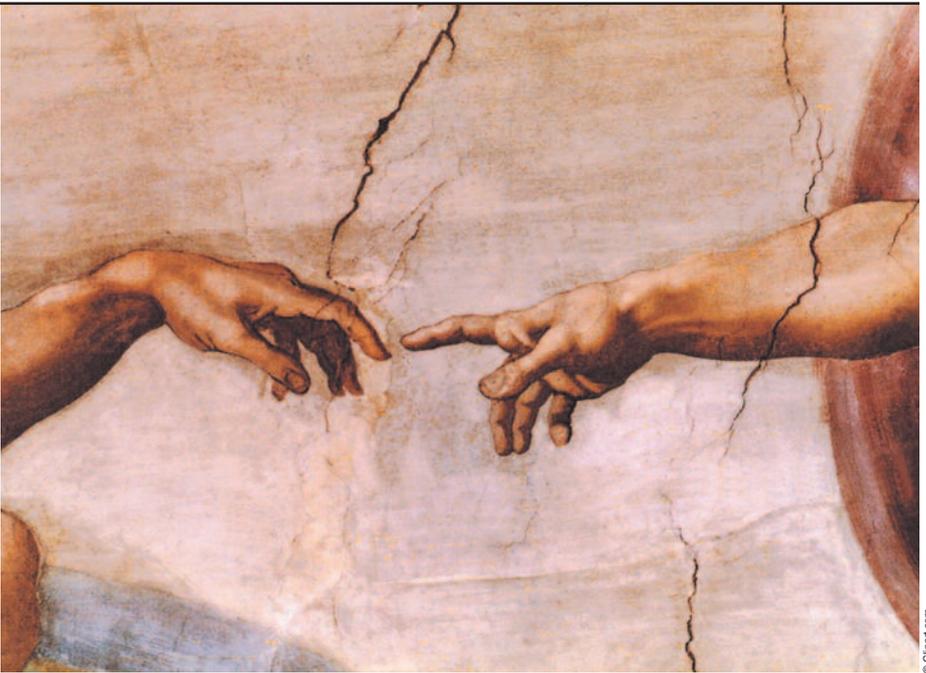
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About Your Professor

Peter Kreeft

Peter Kreeft is a professor of philosophy at Boston College. He has written more than forty books, including *Fundamentals of the Faith*, *The Best Things in Life*, *Back to Virtue*, *Socratic Logic*, *Ecumenical Jihad*, and *Summa of the Summa*. He received his bachelor's degree from Calvin College and his Ph.D. from Fordham University. Kreeft has been at Boston College for forty years.



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Introduction

Through the ages, mankind has pursued questions of faith in something beyond the world of ordinary experience. Is there a God? How can we explain the presence of evil? Do humans, or human souls, live on after death? Is there a hell?

The following lectures examine these eternal questions and present the most compelling arguments for and against God's existence, the seeming conflicts between religion and science, and the different truth-claims of the world's most popular religions. By delving into the major characteristics of world religions, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, mankind's association with the many different varieties of religious practice is brought to light. Above all, *Faith and Reason: The Philosophy of Religion* lays the groundwork for a rational approach to pursuing questions of faith—and at the same time provides a better understanding of religion's ongoing importance in the realm of human experience.

**Lecture 1:
What Is Religion?
Why Is It Worth Thinking About?**

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Peter Kreeft's *Socratic Logic: A Logic Text Using Socratic Method, Platonic Questions, and Aristotelian Principles*.

What Is Religion?

The word "religion" is easy to define. It comes from the Latin word *religare*, which means to relate, to yoke together, or to bind back. And this tells us something about religion: that its essential purpose is to relate us, or yoke us, or bind us to something greater than ourselves—something like God.

Why Is Religion Worth Thinking About?

If the claims of religion are true, they are the most important truths in the world, and if they're false, they are the most important falsehoods in the world. Religion has made a greater difference, has guided or misguided more lives, than anything else in history.

What Is the Philosophy of Religion?

Religion is, to most people, the most important thing in life. Philosophy, which means the love of wisdom, thinks about the most important things in life. Therefore, philosophers naturally think about religion.

But philosophy is done by reason, by logic, while all the religions of the world depend on some kind of faith. Yet religion and philosophy investigate many of the same questions.

But Why Do We Need to Philosophize About Religion?

Because the more important the questions are, the more difficult they are to get clarity and certainty about. Perhaps this means that we will have to end with skepticism about them, but we had better not begin as skeptics and assume that we can never find the truth about such things. That would be dogmatic skepticism. If we want to do philosophy, we should be skeptical skeptics; we should be skeptical of everything, even skepticism. We should keep an open mind about everything, even about an open mind.

Method

Philosophy of religion is not religion. You can't do religion and critically evaluate it at the same time. When you evaluate anything, you're outside it; when you do it, you're inside it.

The study from the outside seems like the only fair approach. But religion's data is largely an inside affair, and unless we have inside data, unless we have experience, we are bound to talk nonsense. But to speak from inside is not to be neutral and unprejudiced.

Do we have to be religious believers and practitioners, then, to do the philosophy of religion? No. But we need some imaginative empathy, at least, just as the believer needs to have some empathy to understand atheism.

An Examination of Our Initial Spontaneous Attitudes Toward Religion Might Reveal Something Useful

Here are four statements about religion. Which one of these four do you identify with?

- #1: It is the most important source of truth and goodness, truth for your mind about life's most important questions, and goodness for your life and your moral choices and your personality. Let's call people who check this answer the believers, or the traditionalists.
- #2: It is the world's greatest illusion, the thing people believe is the number one source of truth and goodness, but which is really the number one source of superstition and oppression. Let's call people who check this answer the unbelievers, or the radicals.
- #3: It is an illusion or superstition or myth rather than truth, but it is still a good thing for your life because it makes you better and happier. It's not true, but it's good because it makes you good and makes you happy. Let's call people who check this answer the modernists, or revisionists, or demythologizers.
- #4: It's none of the above; it's simply not interesting to me. Let's call people who check this answer the indifferent.

Why Religion Is So Controversial

Why is religion so controversial? Because people are passionate about it. Why are people so passionate about it? Because it is so interesting. Probably, its only rival is sex and romance. Why is it so interesting? Because the questions it claims to answer are so interesting—for instance, How can I find joy? What is ultimate reality? What happens at death? And its answers, whether true or false, liberating or oppressive, are surprising: for instance, that you find joy by dying to the desire for it, or that ultimate reality is a single being so real that it is indefinable, or that death is your opportunity for supreme life in consummating your life's courtship with this being.

Listening

We still haven't solved our dilemma about method. Is there any that fulfills the demands of both the outside approach and the inside approach? Yes. In one word, listening.

If we begin with the outside approach, listening will send us to our data, to listen carefully to it, and to the religious believer, and to the critic, and to the saint and the mystic, to listen to their passion, to empathize, to try to enter into their experience imaginatively as best we can. If we do not listen respectfully and nonjudgmentally before we begin to judge and evaluate and argue, we will have no data about religion, only words.

The inside approach also demands listening, because every religion in the world tells us to listen: to God wherever he speaks, or to whatever is the ultimate reality even if it's not called God, and to listen to our own deepest selves and to each other, and to listen to justice and reason as well as faith.

The Relation Between Religion and Logic

Basic logic tells us to demand three things: clear definitions of terms, true premises (true data), and logical arguments (proofs). The rules of logic apply

everywhere, in every field. The rules of logic do not change when we insert religion into the content. If you say that God can violate not just physical laws but logical laws, you have not said anything that has any meaning.

Should We Use the Scientific Method?

Though the laws of logic must apply to religion, what about the laws of other, more specific, methods, such as the scientific method? Clearly, it would be unfair to argue, as one famous atheist did, that “God does not exist because I cannot find him in my test tube.”

There is nothing wrong with the scientific method, but to say that we should believe only what can be proved by the scientific method is self-contradictory, for that principle itself (that we should believe only what can be proved by the scientific method) cannot be proved by the scientific method.

Should We Use Descartes’ “Universal Methodic Doubt”?

We might be able to use some parts of the scientific method, but not others. One of the most important steps of the scientific method is called universal methodic doubt. It means beginning not with unquestioned assumptions, but with doubt. Subject everything to questioning.

But this method will not be appropriate if religion is more like getting to know another person than like getting to know a concept or a material thing. You can’t get to know people if you assume that everything they say is false until they prove that it’s true. The best method for understanding people is methodic faith rather than methodic doubt: assume that the other person is telling the truth until you have good reason for believing that they are ignorant or lying. So if religion is more like friendship with another person than it is like physics, then the appropriate method will be methodic faith rather than methodic doubt.

I think our method should be neither universal methodic doubt nor unquestioning belief, but universal methodic faith followed by critical questioning.

Should We Use Ockham’s Razor?

One other part of the scientific method is Ockham’s Razor, from William of Ockham, a thirteenth-century British philosopher. It says that “hypotheses should not be multiplied without necessity”—in other words, you should always prefer the simpler explanation.

Ockham’s Razor is useful for science, but not for philosophy. It excludes too much data. Not all data is scientific data. Is love only animal appetite, and thought only cerebral chemistry, and man only a clever ape? This reductionism, reducing the complex to the simple, may be good science, but it is bad philosophy. It’s like laser light: powerful, but narrow.

There is also a logical problem in using reductionism to exclude religion. The formula for reductionism is that A is nothing but B. But how do you know there’s nothing more in A than B? Do you know absolutely all of A? Are you infallible? Aren’t you assuming a knowledge only God can have? If only God can have such knowledge, and you claim to have it, aren’t you assuming that there is a God, namely you?

There may be some good reasons for believing in the more complex explanations that religion offers, and you can't discount those reasons just by saying that you should always use the simplest explanation.

Defining Religion

One of the properties of all religions is faith. Every religion asks you to believe something you can't see and can't prove. But calling religious faith belief is still not specific enough. People aren't willing to die for their beliefs, or opinions, but they are often willing to die for their faith.

The object of a mental opinion or belief is an idea; the object of a religious faith is more than an idea. The object of religious faith is God, or gods, or Nirvana, or Tao—not the idea of God, or the idea of Nirvana. Only God knows the essence of God. The religious claim is not that we know God, but that God knows us.

Defining Philosophy

Philosophy of religion is a subdivision of philosophy. Philosophy means the love of wisdom. Wisdom is not just knowledge, but understanding, and understanding not just things like languages and animals and geometry, but things like ourselves and our ultimate purpose. And since all religions claim to tell us interesting and important things about human nature and moral values and the purpose of human life, and the nature of ultimate reality, or God, there is a natural interface between philosophy and religion, even though there is a distinction in method: philosophy uses only reason, not faith.

Defining Reason

Socrates, Descartes, and Kant are the three thinkers who most importantly changed the meaning of the concept of reason, all narrowing it, in different ways, so we can distinguish four meanings of reason.

Before Socrates, reason meant everything that distinguished man from animals, including intuition, mystical experiences, and dreams. Socrates narrowed it to mean giving clear definitions and logical proofs.

Descartes narrowed it further to mean something more like the scientific method, even in philosophy: the act of calculating, reasoning, proving, rather than wisdom or understanding.

Finally, Kant psychologized reason. He said that our reason constructs or shapes the world rather than discovering it, so it can't know things as they are in themselves; we can't know objective reality by reason.

I will use reason in the way most people still use it: in the Socratic way. Mystical experience or dreams or intuition or myths will not count as reason, but only what is definable and provable. But we won't narrow the term any more than that. We won't identify philosophical reason with scientific reason or reduce reason to calculation, as Descartes tried to do, and we won't assume that reason can never know objective reality, as Kant did, because that really reduces philosophy to psychology.

The Relation Between Faith and Reason

Can reason define or prove everything, most things, only a few things, or no things that are believed by religious faith? And do faith and reason, religion and logic, contradict each other?

There is no one standard answer among Jewish, Christian, or Muslim philosophers to the question of how much of religious faith can be proved by reason. The most popular and traditional answer is this: not all of it, for then faith would not be necessary, and not none of it, for then philosophy of religion would be impossible, but some of it.

What about the more important question: Are there any contradictions between faith and reason? No orthodox Jew, Christian, or Muslim can admit that there are any. Because if God created us in his image, and reason is part of that image, then when we use that instrument rightly we are being taught by God, and God never contradicts himself; therefore, there can never be any real contradictions between religious faith and reason. If there were, then reason would have disproved that part of religious faith, so an honest person would no longer believe it.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What is the relationship between philosophy and religion?
2. Is the scientific method useful for answering the question of religion?

Suggested Readings

Kreeft, Peter. *Socratic Logic: A Logic Text Using Socratic Method, Platonic Questions, and Aristotelian Principles*. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2003.

Other Books of Interest

Kant, Immanuel. *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson. New York: Harper Brothers, 1960.

Purtill, Richard. *Thinking About Religion: A Philosophical Introduction to Religion*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 1978.

Lecture 2: Atheism

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is J.P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen's *Does God Exist?: The Debate Between Theists and Atheists*.

The Role of Reason in Deciding for Atheism or Theism

Most people don't decide whether to believe in God or not to believe by objectively and logically comparing the arguments for atheism with the arguments for theism. Most just believe because their families or friends do. Probably a larger percentage of unbelievers than believers can give good reasons, because in our culture, religious belief is still the more popular position, so the unbeliever, as the rebel, usually has to think more independently.

Let's use the term "atheism" to mean simply the belief that no God exists and "theism" to mean the belief that some God exists. We will be arguing merely about the judgments that God exists or does not exist, rather than about the roads by which one comes to that judgment.

Who Has the Onus of Proof? Atheist or Theist?

I begin with atheism because I think the theist has to accept the onus of proof. Persons should be judged innocent till proved guilty, but ideas should be judged guilty till proved innocent, as long as you don't limit proof to absolutely clear and certain proof.

But the atheist has to give reasons too, at least in a religious society like ours in which most people believe God does exist. If you are an atheist and you want to help people to find the truth, you have to take their religious beliefs seriously to begin with and try to refute them, and therefore you have to give reasons for your atheism.

Twenty Arguments for Atheism

Here are twenty arguments for atheism given by Western philosophers.

1. The strongest and most popular argument for atheism is the problem of evil. When theists say God exists, they don't mean a god like Zeus, who is limited in goodness and in power, but the God of the Bible, who is unlimitedly good and powerful. So if the infinite God existed, there would be no room for his opposite, evil. But evil is real. Therefore such a God does not exist.
2. A second common argument is that God is an unnecessary hypothesis, like UFOs. Even if you can't prove there is no God, you can explain everything without him. Everything in nature can be explained by natural forces, and everything in human life can be explained by human beings and human minds and wills. Maybe you can't prove there is no God, but if you can't prove there is, it's irresponsible and silly to believe in God. Ockham's Razor tells us to use the simplest explanations rather than needlessly multiply hypotheses.

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3. All the theists' arguments for the existence of God can be answered. Each of them has a weak point: an ambiguous term, a false assumption, or a logical fallacy.
 4. On the assumption that there is no God, the atheist can explain religious belief better than the theist can explain disbelief. If this wonderful God were real, why wouldn't everyone want to believe in him? Why would the atheist give up religion unless he grew up and learned enough facts to refute it?

The theist, on the assumption that God is real, can't explain how the illusion of atheism arose in the mind of the atheist as well as the atheist can explain how the illusion of God arose in the mind of the theist. His explanation is usually that the atheist is either very stupid or very wicked. But why would anyone want to deny God, if God is real and such a comfort?

5. The scientific method is by far the most reliable method we have ever found for finding truth. Scientists don't keep arguing forever, like philosophers and politicians and religious people. They have found a method of resolving and ending their disagreements. But religion does not survive the scientific method. If we use the scientific method to test religion, we will not be able to verify it, any more than we will be able to verify Santa Claus. We probably can't prove that the Loch Ness Monster doesn't exist, but we have no good reason for thinking it does. So the reasonable attitude is not to believe.

There are two kinds of unbelievers: atheists and agnostics. Atheists say they are sure God does not exist. Agnostics say they don't know, but there is no adequate reason for believing God does exist.

6. Religion can't be verified or falsified, proved or disproved, by any data. No matter what happens, religious believers will interpret it religiously. If terrible things happen, that's God's justice; if they cease, that's God's mercy. No data, no experiment, can in principle disprove a religious faith. That makes this faith logically meaningless.
7. The atheist appeals to the historical fact that science has gradually replaced religion, throughout human history, because science explains more and more of what we used to think was supernatural. We used to think there must be a god like Zeus to explain thunder and lightning; now we know what causes it. The more we know about science, the less we believe in miracles.
8. Another scientific argument focuses on evolution, which shows that the human species evolved gradually by random chance and natural selection; this contradicts the religious belief in creation, which claims that we were created suddenly and miraculously by a superior being out of deliberate, intelligent design. Are we made in the image of King God or King Kong? The two theories contradict each other, and there is massive scientific evidence for evolution and none for creation.

9. If the theist argues for a creator from evidence in the visible world, the atheist replies that most of the evidence in the world counts against theism. The universe is far more full of emptiness, waste, injustice, chance, disorder, and suffering than their opposites. Why the empty eons before man evolved? Why all that space, all those galaxies, all those wasted fish eggs, all the bloody competition for survival, all the animals that had to die for man to evolve? How can you look at the real world and say this is evidence for a loving, benevolent God who created man in his own image?
10. Belief in God usually goes with belief in a spiritual soul that is immortal, so denial of God usually goes together with denial of the soul or spirit. When science believed in spirits, it didn't work; only when science became materialistic did it start to work. Only when we stopped looking for the angels that supposedly moved the planets did we discover celestial mechanics and gravity. Only when we stopped looking for the soul did we learn how to perform brain surgery. Materialism works.
11. Materialism also works logically. There is no supposedly spiritual event that can't be explained materially. Your brain is a computer. If you remove parts of it, you can't do math; remove other parts and you can't make moral choices. Remove other parts and you can't pray or have religious experiences. Everything that used to be believed to exist in the spiritual column can be explained by something very specific and identifiable in the material column.
12. There are no logical contradictions in science, but there are many logical contradictions within religion. For instance, in Buddhism, the mystic discovers that the self does not exist. The self discovers its own nonexistence! You need a real self to make that real discovery. And in Western religions, God is perfect, and everything he does is perfect, yet he creates an imperfect world. In Christianity, he is one and three at the same time, and Jesus is divine and human at the same time.
13. There are also contradictions between any two religions in the world. And since both of two contradictory beliefs can't be true, there must be falsehoods in every religion, or else only one is totally true and all the rest, which contradict it, have falsehoods.
14. Religion does harm because it is arrogant and fanatical. It does harm to the mind because it closes the mind and deceives you into thinking you have certainty when you don't; and it does harm to others because if you believe you have the absolute truth, you will probably make yourself a preachy pest, if not a terrorist, to try to make other people believe what you believe. Religion narrows the range of human thought and behavior: you must not think heretical thoughts that contradict your religion's claims to truth, and you must not behave in any way not approved by your religion's moral code.
15. Suppose the theist uses the psychological kind of argument and says that you should believe in some religion because it makes you

better, not worse. Almost nobody can deny that it's good to be good. So the atheist must reply that religion doesn't make you good, it makes you goody-goody; it doesn't make you righteous, it makes you self-righteous. Religion exists to make saints out of sinners, but saints are rare. If an auto manufacturer produced ninety-nine lemons for every good car, would you buy a car from that company?

16. Religion has produced more harm than good publicly and collectively and historically, as well as privately and individually. Religion has fueled and motivated most of the wars, and the bitterest wars, in our history. The deepest hatreds are religious. If religion produces the most wars, and wars harm people the most, by killing the most people, it logically follows that religion harms people the most.
17. Another bad psychological effect of religion is guilt. The higher the standards I believe I have to come up to, the worse I will believe I am. Religions don't just give us high ideals, they give us impossible laws. Religions all begin by making us feel almost hopeless, then they offer themselves as the only cure.
18. Another effect of having impossibly high ideals is hypocrisy. We can't admit we are as bad as religion tells us we are, so we pretend we are good; we pretend we are fairly successful at being the saints that our religion tells us we have to be, otherwise we would be in despair. So religion makes us lie to ourselves.
19. Another bad psychological effect of religion comes from its belief in life after death. That becomes a diversion, a distraction from this world and all its joys and beauties and possibilities. Religion depresses the value of this life, and this world, for the sake of the next life, and the next world.
20. Similarly, religion ignores or puts down or condemns the body for the sake of the soul. But most of our pleasures are bodily pleasures. Religion tells us to give them up. They all condemn greed and lust (in other words, money and sex). If all religious believers suddenly became convinced that there was no God, no Heaven and no Hell, how would that change their lives? They would probably make all the money they could and have all the sex they could with all the people they could, without guilt or scruple or repression. What stops them? It is their belief in God's frown and wagging finger.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What is the argument for atheism based on the problem of evil?
2. What is the conflict between the theories of creation and evolution?

Suggested Reading

Moreland, J.P., and Kai Nielsen. *Does God Exist?: The Debate Between Theists and Atheists*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993.

Other Books of Interest

Flew, Anthony, and Alasdair MacIntyre, eds. *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*. New York: Macmillan, 1973.

Johnson, B.C. *Atheist Debater's Handbook*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Press, 1983.

Lucretius. *On the Nature of the Universe*. New York: Penguin, 1994.

Lecture 3: The Problem of Evil

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Robert Farrar Capon's *The Third Peacock: The Problem of Good and Evil*.

Why the Question Is So Important

The problem of evil is one of the most important of all questions in the philosophy of religion for three reasons: First, it's universal. Everyone wonders why bad things happen to good people. Second, it's not just an intellectual problem; it's an existential problem, a concrete, human problem. It's not just about whether the two concepts of God and evil can be logically thought together without contradiction, but also about whether the lived experience of evil and the lived choice of religious faith can exist together in life. Third, it's the strongest argument for atheism (in fact, the only one that claims to prove with certainty that God cannot possibly exist). For the theist, evil is a problem; for the atheist, it's a proof.

Four Logical Formulations of the Problem of Evil

If one of two opposites is infinite, the other cannot exist. But "God" means infinite goodness. So if God existed, then evil, God's opposite, could not exist. But evil does exist. Therefore God does not exist.

Here is a second way. If God exists, he is both totally good and totally powerful. "God" means a being whose goodness and power are unlimited. Now if God is all-good, he would will only good, and not evil, and if God is all-powerful, he would attain everything he willed. Therefore, if God existed, everything would be good. But some things are evil. Therefore God does not exist.

Here is a third formulation, which focuses on subjective human happiness instead of objective goodness. If God is all-good, he loves us, and if he loves us, he wants us to be happy. And if he is all-powerful, he can get everything he wants. But we are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness or power or both. If God exists, he is either bad or weak. And that's not God.

There is a fourth formulation of the argument: It is logically impossible that all four of the following propositions are true. If any three of them are true, the fourth must be false. First, that God exists. Second, that God is all-good, or omnibenevolent. Third, that God is all-powerful, or omnipotent. Fourth, that evil exists.

If God exists, and is all-good, and is all-powerful, then evil cannot exist.

If God exists, and is all-good, and evil exists, then God is not all-powerful.

If God exists, and is all-powerful, and evil exists, then God is not all-good.

And if "God" means a being that is all-good and all-powerful, and yet evil exists, then God cannot exist.

Six Possibly Ambiguous Terms

There are six terms in the argument: God, exists, evil, all-good, all-powerful, and happy. So there are basically six ways theists have tried to answer the argument.

1. God—We have been arguing about God’s goodness and power, but we forgot a third attribute, his wisdom. It might be that he sees what we do not see: how apparent evil really works out for our greater good and our greater happiness in the end.

That answer is not satisfying to our natural curiosity because it doesn’t explain evil. Instead, it explains why we can’t explain it. But although it’s not satisfying, it is logically consistent.

The theist can even further argue that the very problem of evil that leads many minds to atheism shows that atheism can’t be the right answer. For the problem of evil assumes that evil is real. And that assumes that our judgment of it is true. And that assumes that we are in touch with a real standard of goodness when we are outraged at an evil like the undeserved suffering of innocent children. And the *standard* must be perfect, but only God is perfect. So the problem of evil really seems to argue for God, if you trace back its assumptions.

2. Existence—The atheist’s answer to the preceding argument is that the theist is using the term “exists” ambiguously. Valid standards of true judgment don’t exist as stones and people exist. So the theist can’t prove God exists just by showing that the atheist is presupposing a real standard of perfect goodness.

This brings us to our second ambiguous term: “exists.” The theist replies that the atheist is committing the same fallacy of ambiguity when he argues that God can’t exist because evil exists. The atheist argues that if God is the creator of all things, then he is the creator of ill things. But the theist can reply that there are no ill things, that all *things* are good, though not all of our actions and choices are good. Only free choices by persons can be morally good or evil. And those aren’t things God created, because they’re not things at all, and God didn’t create them, we did.

3. Evil—A third potentially ambiguous term is “evil.” We just distinguished two very different kinds of evil: moral evils, like the choice to murder, and physical evils, like suffering and death.

Because there are two kinds of evil, there are two problems of evil. The theist’s answer to the atheist question of why God would allow moral evil is human free will. God doesn’t create moral evil, we do.

The remaining problem of physical evil is still there, but it is less of a problem. The worst human suffering comes from moral evil. The worst evils are the ones we do to each other. Our worst sufferings are not caused by things, but by people, especially the one we see in the mirror.

But physical evils are still problems. How could a totally good God create a world with any physical evil in it? The simplest answer is

to ask what else he could do. If he's going to create a finite world at all, it's got to have limits, limited physical goodness.

There are further questions here. The atheist may ask the theist whether he believes there will be pains in Heaven, and if not, then God can create a perfect world without any physical pains. So why didn't he create this world that way?

The theist may reply in three ways. First, that God did create a perfect world, a Garden of Eden, but we messed it up. Second, you could say that we will appreciate the perfect world of Heaven more if we experience imperfections here first. Or third, that the perfect world can be perfectly ours only if we freely choose it, and that requires a trial, a free choice.

4. Goodness—A fourth potentially ambiguous term is “goodness.” How can God be good if he allows so many evils? The analogy of the parent might explain why God allows moral evils as well as physical evils. It's for love. When we love someone a lot, we put a very high value on his or her freedom.

The issue of the relation between suffering and God is not just a logical problem, but one that cuts deep into the very essence of religion. If we look at the saints as the clearest examples of what religion is supposed to do for us, we will see that they all suffer a lot, and unjustly, and willingly, out of their love and faith. They say it's God's design, to strengthen and toughen them against anything this world can throw at them, and at the same time to make them softer and more pliable to God. Eastern religions don't usually speak of the will of God, but they too see sacrifice and suffering as necessary, because the ego has to be kicked off the throne of our lives. So suffering is not an accident; it is part of the divine design.

5. Omnipotence—A fifth term that might be ambiguous in the problem of evil is “all-powerful.” If God can do anything, then he can create a finite world with free will in it and guarantee that there will be no evil in it, can't he? If he can, and doesn't, then he's not as good as he could be. And then he's not God.

Most theists answer that he can't, just as he can't make a rock bigger than he can lift. It's a meaningless self-contradiction to create free choice and guarantee that no one will freely choose evil. God can perform miracles, but not contradictions.

Most of us, even most atheists, are glad we have this world rather than no world, or a dead world, or an unfree world. So even the atheist believes in God's values even though he doesn't believe in God.

6. Happiness—The sixth and final ambiguous term is “happiness.” If God is all-good, why aren't we happy?

And the theist's answer is: Because we are in time, in a drama, a story, and we will be happier in the end if we go through some unhappiness now. We are like a three-year-old who just dropped

her favorite ice cream cone onto the street and is outraged that her parents don't take her tears seriously. Can we be sure we are older and wiser than that three-year-old compared to God? If you answer yes, I recommend you read Socrates and first learn the secular, human wisdom of humility before tackling questions about God.

The Problem of the Unjust Distribution of Evil: Bad Things Happening to Good People

The hardest form of the problem of evil for the theist to answer is the unjust distribution of evil: Why does it happen to those who don't deserve it? The problem is not just why bad things happen, or even why so many bad things happen, but why they happen to good people.

The theist could reply that there are no good people, that the real problem is why so many good things happen to bad people. Atheists often complain that religion makes you arrogant and self-righteous; isn't it the essence of arrogance and self-righteousness to assume that you are "good people"?

What standard do you use to judge human goodness? God's standards? But that presupposes God. Human standards? Do you judge good and bad by the average human life? But that begs the question the other way. The theist believes that that average is now very bad, and not a fair standard. Should we judge saints by sinners' standards, or sinners by saints' standards? The saints all say we are bad, and the saints are the best and the happiest people in the world.

The theist will also say that the reason good people suffer is not justice. It is something like art. The world is a sculptor's studio and the saints are the artist's masterpieces. When we move away from the clear, shallow, surface worlds of politics and ethics and law and enter the deeper worlds of love and beauty and art, questions about justice are not so much solved as dissolved.

The theist's point about there being no good people can also be put in the form of a question: Are there people who are so perfect that they can't be ennobled and made better by suffering?

But the atheist will object that suffering does not ennoble most of us. It makes a few of us better, but it makes more of us bitter.

Theists' Answers: Two Mysteries of Solidarity: Original Sin and Vicarious Atonement

To the hard question of why God distributes suffering as he does, some theists give two very mysterious answers: the ideas of original sin and vicarious atonement. These are the technical terms that Christian theologians call them; Jews and Muslims do not use those terms, but some of them, especially their mystics, have surprisingly similar ideas. The basic idea is a human solidarity and interdependence, both in sin and in salvation.

The family is probably the best analogy. Imagine you discovered that Adolf Hitler was literally your grandfather. Why would you be ashamed? You didn't commit or approve his crimes. But you feel ashamed, because it's "all in the family." And if someone else in your family becomes a hero, you feel proud, even if you are not a hero.

In this vision of life, there are no victimless crimes. When we save one person, we save the world, and when we harm any one, we harm everyone.

The innocent suffer for the guilty. Original sin is the bad news side of that idea. Vicarious atonement is the good news side of the same idea: Everyone contributes to the disease or to the health of the whole human family by every evil or good choice.

Maybe mothers are the key to the problem of evil. Mothers give and children take. Mothers give life and children take life, and that's not justice, but that's the way life goes on, and if you don't like that, you don't like life.

Evaluating the Reasonableness of Belief in These Two Mysteries

I began with a lot of clear logic, but have wandered into some extremely mysterious ideas. Evil began as a problem and ended as a mystery. Is that a problem? Does that make it less likely to be real? The more you look at any reality, the more mysterious it becomes. Throughout the twentieth century, we've been discovering that matter is much more mysterious than we used to think, ever since Einstein and quantum physics; why should man be less mysterious than matter? And why should God be less mysterious than man?

I will end with the best one-sentence answer I have seen to the problem of evil, which will probably strike you as either utterly incomprehensible or stunningly profound. A man once wrote: "Why do the righteous suffer? The answer to that question is not in the same world as the question, and therefore if I could answer it, you would shrink from me in terror."

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How does the existence of evil seem to contradict the existence of God?
2. What is vicarious atonement?

Suggested Reading

Capon, Robert Farrar. *The Third Peacock: The Problem of God and Evil*. Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1986.

Other Books of Interest

Hick, John. *Evil and the God of Love*. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.

Kreeft, Peter. *Three Philosophies on Life*. "Job: Life as Suffering." San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1989.

Plantinga, Alvin. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. New York: HarperCollins, 1975.

Lecture 4: Arguments for God's Existence from Nature (Cosmological Arguments)

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli's *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*.

Our experience has two poles: the subject and the object, the within and the without. In this lecture, we will summarize the ten most famous arguments from evidence in the objective world, or nature, or the universe. In the next lecture, we will look at ten arguments from the inner world.

The First Ten Arguments for Theism

1. The first argument is the argument from change. The most universal feature of all our experience is time. Even our mind is in time, though not in space, like our body. It takes time to think. Everything—both matter and mind—changes.

Either there is or there is not some real being that does not change. That would be a divine attribute, enough to disprove atheism and prove some sort of God.

This unchanging being could be the cause of all change, the explanation for all change, and nothing else could. If there is no first mover, then there could not be any second movers or any movement at all. But there is movement. Therefore, there must be a first mover. No one denies the second premise, so it is the first one that the atheist must deny. How does the theist try to prove it?

By the fact that change works by cause and effect. Each change requires a changer, a cause. If no cause, no effect. And if the second event is the effect of the first event, there can be no second without a first, and no third or fourth or anything else. In other words, no change anywhere, without an absolutely first changer.

But an absolutely first mover must be outside the universe, so to speak. Of course, it can't be literally in some place outside the universe, because the universe is the sum total of all space and time. So this being would have to be more than the universe, not in space or time at all.

Change is not like numbers, in which there can be an infinite regress of negative numbers just as much as an infinite progress of positive numbers. There can't be an infinite regress of causes of change with no first event, even though there can be an infinite progress into the future, with no last event. Even before Big Bang cosmology proved that time is finite and has an absolute beginning, about fifteen billion years ago, philosophers came to the same conclusion by an analysis of the essential meaning of change.

If the first event had no cause at all, if the Big Bang had no Big Banger, then we would have something utterly unscientific as well

as irrational: the whole universe popping into existence out of nothing for absolutely no reason whatsoever. Nothing could be more unscientific than that.

2. The argument from the existence of things: A second argument is similar, but begins not with change, but with the very existence of things in the universe. There are two kinds of causality. One kind changes its effect. The other kind brings something new into existence. Both kinds of causality follow the principle that you can't have an effect without an adequate cause. Neither new changes nor new beings simply happen; they are caused.

So what could cause the existence of everything in the universe? Nothing can cause itself to come into existence, not even God. That's a logical contradiction. You can't cause yourself to begin to exist, because you have to exist first before you can do anything.

So the cause of all existing things must be an uncaused being, a being that has existence by its own essence, a Necessary Being.

3. The argument from contingency: A third argument begins with the opposite data: not that things begin, but that they end. Everything dies, even stars.

Now if there is no God, there is no being that can never die. And if there is no God, there is no creator, no absolute beginning. So time would have to be infinite. So there has already been an infinite amount of time.

But in an infinite amount of time, every possibility is eventually realized. Now one of those possibilities for everything in the universe is that it ceases to be. So if there is no Necessary Being that has to exist and can never cease to exist, then everything would have ceased and nothing would now exist. Something does exist.

Therefore a Necessary Being exists, a being whose existence is eternal and not lovable.

4. The argument from degrees of perfection: Not all things in nature are equal; some are better, more perfect than others in longevity or health or strength or beauty or intelligence or moral goodness. (Moral goodness is only one kind of goodness.) But things can be compared only by a standard; "better" means closer to the best. "More perfect" means closer to absolutely perfect. And "really better" things mean things closer to the really best. If the standard is not objectively real, our judgment is not objectively true. "I like dogs better than cats" doesn't prove dogs are better than cats. If our standard is only subjective, then we are not measuring real degrees of perfection at all, but only our degree of satisfaction.

But if there are "really better" things, and if "really better" implies "really best," then there must be a "really best"; if degrees of perfection are real, then perfection is real. And that is another name for God: a really perfect being.

5. The argument from design in nature: The more we learn about the universe through all the sciences, especially astrophysics,

genetics, brain physiology, and cell biology, the more perfectly calibrated it looks.

The universe is like a giant incubator, or a giant womb. It is exactly calibrated to produce human life. Life could never evolve if any one of thousands of extremely narrow windows of opportunity had closed. The probability of it all happening by chance is far, far less than the probability of the same one out of a billion bettors winning every single one of a billion lotteries every single day for a billion millennia. It doesn't take faith to believe that the game is fixed. It takes faith to believe it isn't.

This is probably the single most popular argument for God. You find it among the most primitive tribes and among the most sophisticated scientists. Order requires an Orderer. If there is no God, no divine mind that planned and designed us, if our brains evolved merely by chance, then intelligence is a latecomer in the universe, and its causes were unintelligent. If I think as I do merely because the electrical signals in my brain have been caused to move in a certain way by a long, large chain of events that do not include intelligence, a chain that does not go back to an intelligent creator and designer, then I have no good reason to trust my brain when it tells me about anything, including itself and its electrical signals.

6. The argument from miracles: If miracles happen, then like everything else, they must have an adequate cause. Even miracles can't violate the law of causality, even if they might violate the laws of physics. If Jesus raises the dead, or ascends into Heaven, that seems to violate the laws of physics, but even that doesn't violate the law of causality. There can't be more in an effect than in its cause, its total cause, or the sum total of its causes. A miracle is an event in the universe that needs a supernatural cause, needs something more than things in the universe to produce it.

The atheist answers the argument from miracles in two ways. One way is to deny that any ever happen. And that requires you to investigate the data. Another way is to admit that events that everyone calls miracles do sometimes happen, but to deny that they have a supernatural cause, to admit that science can't explain them, but to believe that one day it will. Maybe Jesus really raised the dead and walked on water and multiplied the loaves and fishes, but he's not a supernatural being and in a future century we will find out how he did it scientifically, and therefore learn how to do it ourselves. But it seems to take more faith to believe that than to believe in miracles.

7. The argument from time: If there is no God, there is no creator, and therefore no act of creation, and therefore no first moment of time. So past time must be infinite.

But if past time is infinite, present time could not arrive. If the train of Today has to come from the station of Beginning that is 1,000 miles away, it can arrive no matter how slow it travels, but if there

is no beginning and the track is not 1,000 miles long but infinitely long, the train will never arrive. But it has arrived; today is here. Therefore there is an absolute beginning, a moment of creation, and therefore a creator.

I think this argument has three weaknesses. First, we don't have a clear idea of time. What is time, anyway? If you don't ask me, I know, and so does everyone else, says St. Augustine, but if you ask me, I find that I don't know, and neither does anyone else.

Second, it is similar to Zeno's paradoxes about motion. Zeno argued that a fast runner like Achilles can never overtake a slow runner like a tortoise because he has to pass through an infinite number of points in a finite time. But we know that Achilles does overtake the tortoise, and that is more certain than any argument about whether it is mathematically possible. So we know there must be a false assumption in Zeno's argument somewhere, and it is probably the same one in the time argument, treating space and time as discrete, like numbers, rather than as continuous.

Third, the argument is not popular because it is too abstract, too mathematical, to convince us. Its data are not real beings or events, but abstractions like time, and today, and infinity.

8. The argument from our knowledge of timeless truths: We can know some unchangeable truths with certainty, like $2 + 2 = 4$. The laws of physics (for instance, gravity) are not necessary and unchangeable; we can imagine alternatives, like antigravity, and write science fiction stories about them. Many physical laws did in fact change during the first few seconds after the Big Bang, for matter itself changed in nature. Not so with the laws of mathematics, or logic, or even some principles of metaphysics like the law of causality: there can't be an effect without a cause.

If there are unchangeable truths, and if truths must be in minds and if human minds are changeable and therefore can't be the foundation for changeless truths, then some unchangeable mind must be the foundation for changeless truths. If there are eternal ideas, there is an eternal mind.

9. The argument from the idea of God: Still another argument from the mind comes from Descartes. Its premise is the fact that the idea of God exists in human minds, even the minds of atheists. They don't believe the idea is true, but the idea at least occurs. Now every event must have a cause, and so the event of my mind understanding this idea must have a cause, and an adequate cause, a cause that has in it enough to produce and explain the effect. Now how much perfection is in this idea? Infinite perfection. And how much perfection is in any natural cause, like human minds? Only finite perfection. How could a mentally imperfect being produce a mentally perfect effect?

The atheist's answer might be that we dream of all sorts of things more perfect than ourselves, by wishful thinking, by imaginatively

extending our desires to infinity—desires like having an immortal father. That's Freud's answer. Or perhaps it comes from our desire to legitimize our economic possessions and oppressions. That's Marx's answer. The atheist can fairly demand that each of these answers be shown to be inadequate.

10. The ontological argument: Both atheist and theist must mean the same thing by the concept of God if they are to disagree with each other about whether this God exists or not. Now whose definition of this concept must we begin with? The believer's, of course. In order to be an atheist about Zeus, I have to begin with the Zeus-believer's definition of Zeus, because I want to prove that this Zeus does not exist.

So how do believers define God? Obviously, you can't enclose an infinite being in a finite definition. But you can define what God is not: God is not imperfect in any way. God is all that is perfect, all that it is better to be than not to be. Anselm's formulation is "that than which nothing greater can be conceived."

"God" means the being that lacks no conceivable perfection. But objective existence, independent of our minds, is a conceivable perfection. A real unicorn would be more perfect than an imaginary one because it would not be dependent on the mind.

Just because God exists in our minds as a concept doesn't mean he exists in objective reality, of course. Unicorns and perfect islands exist in our minds, but not in reality.

But if God doesn't exist, then the being that by definition lacks no conceivable perfection lacks this one conceivable perfection, real existence. That's a self-contradiction. So atheism is logically self-contradictory. I can conceive a greater God than the atheist's God-without-existence: namely, that God plus one more perfection, real existence. So that second God, the one with the additional perfection, is the only one that fits the definition of God. If God is not real, God is not God.

This is a strange argument. It seems utterly logical, yet it smells wrong somehow, and not convincing. Its opponents usually point to two weak points in it. The argument begins with the *concept* of God, so "God" should be put in quotation marks. But it ends with a real God, a God without quotation marks. It begins with a concept and ends with a reality. It must either begin with a reality and end with a reality, or begin with a concept and end with a concept; otherwise there is ambiguity. But if it begins with a real God, it assumes what it claims to prove; and if it ends only with a concept, it has proved only that the concept of God includes the concept of existence, not that God really exists.

A second weak point seems to be the hidden assumption that existence is a perfection. Perfections are natures, essences, qualities designated by concepts and expressed in logic by terms, terms like "wise" and "beautiful" and "large." But existence is not

an essence. Existence is designated by judgments, not concepts, and expressed in logic by propositions, not terms. "God" is a concept; "God exists" is a proposition.

Even though this argument has fascinated philosophers more than any other, most theists do not think it is a valid one. Good philosophers will not use weak arguments even to prove what they believe to be true conclusions.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Describe the argument for God from the existence of things.
2. Describe the argument for God from design in nature.

Suggested Reading

Kreeft, Peter, and Ronald Tacelli. *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994.

Other Books of Interest

Craig, William Lane. *Apologetics*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979.

Davies, Brian. *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Kung, Hans. *Does God Exist?: An Answer for Today*. Doubleday, 1980.

Russell, Bertrand. *Bertrand Russell on God and Religion*. Part Two: Chapter 9: "A Debate on the Existence of God.". Ed. Al Seckel. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1986.

Lecture 5: Arguments for God's Existence from Human Experience (Psychological Arguments)

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is C.S. Lewis's *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*.

All arguments have to begin with data. Scientific minds naturally look for evidence in the world—cosmological arguments—and more humanistic minds look for evidence in the self—psychological arguments. The following are ten psychological arguments for God.

The Second Ten Arguments for Theism

1. The argument from common consent: This first argument doesn't claim to prove that God exists, only that it is very likely. If the vast majority of people of all kinds believe X, it is at least more likely that X is true than false. If 99 percent of all the human beings who have ever lived have believed in some sort of God, that at least makes it more likely.

In other words, to be an atheist you have to be a snob. You have to believe that most of the people who have ever lived have guided their lives by an illusion. And you must believe that you and your few fellow atheists are the only ones clever enough to have discovered this gigantic hoax.

2. The argument from religious experience: If there is nothing like God, how do you explain religious experiences? If religious experiences are natural to us, why do they exist if there is nothing like God in reality? Of course, they could be illusions, but they are so natural to us that they seem to point to the reality of their object, as our experiences of eating point to, if not prove, the reality of food.
3. The argument from desire: We can classify our desires into two kinds. Some are external, accidental, and conditioned, like the desire to be Superman or to find the Land of Oz. But other desires are natural and innate and therefore universal, like desire for food, pleasure, and knowledge.

All the things we naturally desire really exist. No one has ever discovered a single case of an innate desire for a nonexistent object. If we had an innate, natural, and universal desire for God, that would be evidence for God.

And we do discover such a desire. Let's define God as something real that is so beautiful and so perfect that we can't define it or imagine it. Now if we look deeply and honestly into our own hearts, don't we discover a desire for that?

4. The argument from a natural moral law: Moral laws are just as objectively real as physical laws or mathematical laws; moral values

are also facts, though not physical facts. Civil laws are made by human wills; they are artificial. They are created, like art. But moral laws are discovered, like the laws of science.

Moral laws are discovered by conscience and prescribe how people ought to behave. If you admit that moral laws are objective, you have the first premise for the moral argument for God.

The second premise is that a moral law requires a moral lawgiver. Just as something has to cause the sense experiences that come to our five senses, so something real has to lie behind the moral law to cause our moral awareness of good and evil and our feeling of moral obligation to be good. And that something can't be just matter. It must be something like a will.

And if it were only ourselves, or our parents, or our training, or our society, then it wouldn't be universal, binding on everybody; and it wouldn't be unchanging and nonnegotiable and absolute. So this something sounds suspiciously like the will of God. So this argument seems to prove not only that God exists, but also that God is a morally perfect will.

5. The argument from conscience: Suppose you are a moral subjectivist. You don't believe in any universal objective moral laws. You believe that each individual ought to be true to his own conscience, no matter what it tells him. But why does conscience have absolute authority? If conscience is only your own feelings, caused only by your heredity and your environment, or your parents and your society and your upbringing, well, they're all fallible, so why should you treat your conscience as if it were infallible, as if it were a prophet of God?

This is a dangerous argument for the theist to use, because it can produce two opposite reactions in people who hear it. It might persuade them to move from accepting conscience as a moral absolute to accepting God as the real absolute behind it, but it also might persuade them to move from rejecting God to rejecting conscience too.

6. The argument from saints: If there are saints, there is a saint-maker. In *The Plague* by the great atheist Albert Camus, his protagonist, Dr. Rieux, chooses to risk his life to save thousands of innocent victims of a plague, because even though he is an atheist, he knows that everyone has to be as good, as saintly, as possible. That's the meaning of life, even if there is no God. But he can't solve the logical contradiction inherent in believing all three of the following things: first, there is no God; second, the meaning of life is to be a saint; but third, you can't be a saint without God, because God is the saint-maker.

Most people reason this way, I think, at least unconsciously: since it's much more certain that you have to be good than that there is no God, they believe in God because they believe in goodness.

That's not yet a logical proof for God, but I think it's by far the main motive for people choosing to believe in religion, any religion. Saints are the most effective advertisement for religion, the strongest psychological motive for believing.

Atheism seems to entail an absurd consequence. Most atheists say that ordinary people are right to take morality seriously but wrong to take religion seriously. But if religion is a big lie, then the saints, who are the strongest believers in their religion, are the biggest liars, or fools. But they're also the most morally right. How can that be? How can the greatest goodness depend on the greatest illusion? If you trust the saints about goodness, shouldn't you also trust them about truth about God that they claim is the source of their goodness?

7. The argument from beauty: The beauty that leads many people to God could be the beauty of human art, like the music of Bach, in which case the God this argument leads to is a God who inspires humans to create such art. Or it could be the beauty of nature, in which case this argument is a little like the argument from design and order in nature. Or it could be the beauty of a saint, in which case this argument is similar to the argument from the saints.

The ancient Greeks lost faith in their gods as soon as philosophy and science arose, but they were so impressed by the beauty of great art, especially music, that even after they stopped believing in their other gods, most of them still believed in the Muses, the gods who inspired music. Divine inspiration was the only cause great enough to account for that effect. Even today, I don't think music has totally lost its power to suggest something like divine inspiration to the subconscious or unconscious mind. When you're philosophizing about music, from a safe distance, you can be an atheist, but not while you're *in* the music.

8. The argument from the meaning of life: Viktor Frankl argues in *Man's Search for Meaning*, his great book about his experiences in Auschwitz, that the one thing we seem to need the most is meaning, that is, purpose. Many of the prisoners who survived Auschwitz seemed to have very little medical chance for survival, and many who died seemed to have much better medical chances. He concluded that you can endure great suffering if you see a real purpose to it.

If human life is to have an adequate purpose, that purpose must first of all be real, not made up and artificial. Second, it must be wide enough to cover all of life and deep enough to outweigh evils like torture and death.

If there is no God, no ultimate being like God, then life in the long run has no ultimate purpose. The natural psychological consequences of atheism are very sad.

Every part of life has purpose, so how can the whole of life lack purpose? But if the whole of life has a purpose, how can that be a merely human, man-made, subjective, and artificial purpose?

9. The argument from love: The love that constitutes the premise for this argument is not sentimental love but basic charity, goodwill. The argument's premise is not that you look *at* love from the outside, but that you look *with* love, from the inside. If you do that, then what love will always see is the intrinsic value of the person loved, a value that is not quantitative, not calculatable.

We believe that all persons have an intrinsic value. If this belief is not true, then the best foundation for a universal humanistic ethics is gone. And if it is true, what makes it true? It must be something real. But it is nothing in this world, nothing practical and calculatable and biological. So it must be something real that is not in this world. And now it starts to sound very religious.

10. Pascal's Wager: Suppose you are not totally convinced by any of the arguments for theism or for atheism. Then there is another kind of argument called Pascal's Wager. It tries to prove not that God exists, but that not believing in God is foolish and believing is wise. If belief and unbelief are both calculated risks, then it's reasonable to calculate the odds to see which is the wiser bet.

If some argument proved with certainty that God existed, then that truth calculation would settle it and you wouldn't need to do a happiness calculation. But the truth calculations about God are not certain. There is too much good in the world for atheism to be certain and too much evil in the world for theism to be certain.

If you bet on God, then if he exists you win everything, and even if you lose you lose nothing. But if you bet against God, then if he exists you win nothing and lose everything, while even if you win you win nothing.

When you look at your chances to win happiness, all the odds favor betting that God exists, because if he does, and you believe, then you gain everything; you gain God, eternal life, Heaven. And you lose nothing.

If he exists and you refuse him, you lose everything and gain nothing.

But if he doesn't exist, there is nothing to gain or lose; so if God doesn't exist, it makes no difference to your ultimate happiness whether you believe or not. So belief is your only chance of winning, and unbelief is your only chance of losing.

But why not agnosticism then? If we can't prove God's existence or nonexistence, why not suspend judgment? Pascal answers: But we have to bet. Death is certain, whether God exists or not. Religion is like a marriage proposal from a God who may be fake or may be real. We can say "Yes" or "No" or "Wait." But we can only say "Wait" for a little while. Eventually, death will turn "Wait" into "No."

One objection to Pascal's Wager comes from believers and another from unbelievers. Believers complain that this isn't religion, it's selfish gambling. It treats religion as a free eternal fire insurance policy. This is true, but it's some movement toward God, even if it comes from low motives.

The objection from unbelievers is that you do have to give up something to believe in God. You have to give up sin, and selfishness; and sin is fun. Pascal has two replies to that: first, what you give up is tiny compared with what you can gain. And second, even in this life, you gain more than you lose in happiness. Good people are happier, and religion makes you good, so it makes you happier.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What is the argument for God from natural moral law?
2. What is the argument for God from love?

Suggested Reading

Lewis, C.S. *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*. Orlando, FL: Harvest Books, 1966.

Other Books of Interest

Geach, Peter. *God and the Soul*. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2001.

Kreeft, Peter. *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensees*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1993.

———. *Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1989.

Lecture 6: Religion and Science

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Peter Kreeft's *Angels and Demons: What Do We Really Know About Them?*

The notion that science has disproved religion is very popular and very influential in the history of Western thought. The decline of religion and the rise of science happened together historically, and this is certainly no coincidence. Let's look at six specific religious beliefs that many claim are unscientific: the supernatural, miracles, angels and demons, divine providence, human free will, and creation.

Naturalism and Supernaturalism

Naturalism is the philosophy that nature is all there is. Supernaturalism is the philosophy that says it isn't. Religion claims that nature is not all there is, that there is something more.

Is belief in the supernatural unscientific? This is the most general question about religion and science, for all the more specific issues, like miracles or creation and evolution, come under this heading.

In one sense, the supernatural is obviously unscientific. Religious beliefs are not discoverable or provable by scientific means. But believers do not claim they are. Naturalism vs. supernaturalism is a philosophical issue, an issue between two isms, two philosophies, not between two scientific hypotheses or two religions. If either ism is going to be proved or disproved, it must be done by philosophical argument.

Even atheists admit that many beliefs that they themselves hold to be true and reasonable are unscientific in the sense that science can't prove them: for instance, that your wife loves you or that all human consciousness is not one large dream. The question is whether science can *disprove* the supernatural.

It is hard to see how science could either prove or disprove the existence of a realm, or dimension, that claims to be beyond its instruments to detect. If the atheist argues, "I do not believe in God because I do not find Him in my test tubes," the believer can fairly reply that if anyone did claim to find God in a test tube, he would be confusing God with a chemical.

However, the scientific method has proved to be the most certain and reliable method ever discovered for discovering and proving facts, or objective truths, and this method does not detect any supernatural, religious realities.

This is true, but it does not logically follow that we should not believe in anything beyond the scientific method. There is no way of proving by the scientific method alone that we should not believe anything beyond the scientific method. So the principle "Don't believe anything that can't be proved by the scientific method" is not only not probable, but it is disprovable, because it is self-contradictory.

Miracles

There might be a God without miracles—God might be able but not willing to do them—but there can't be miracles without a God. Miracles are crucial for Christianity. If miracles don't happen, Christianity is false, for all its main claims, its central doctrines, are miracles: creation, divine revelation and prophecy, Jesus' incarnation and resurrection, and the last judgment.

At least three of these miracles are also essential to religious Judaism and Islam: creation, divine revelation and prophecy, and the last judgment. But miracles are not essential to Eastern religions. For one thing, there is in most Eastern religions no transcendent creator-God to work them. For another thing, there is no clear distinction between nature and supernature, or even between the human soul at its depths and God.

One argument against miracles is that they are illogical. This is a misunderstanding. What is illogical are contradictions. Miracles are not contradictions. A corpse rising from the dead after four days is a miracle. A corpse both rising and not rising at the same time is a contradiction.

A second argument is historical: that belief in miracles stems from ignorance of the laws of nature. People believed in Zeus before the science of meteorology and in virgin births before gynecology. This argument has three fallacies. First, the fact that belief in Zeus arose *during* ignorance of meteorology does not prove it arose *because of* ignorance of meteorology. Second, a knowledge of gynecology does not make a virgin birth any more or less believable or any more or less miraculous. Finally, belief in miracles cannot stem from ignorance of the laws of nature because the very concept of a miracle presupposes a knowledge of the laws of nature.

A third argument against miracles is that they would violate the laws of nature, and thus demean them. But a presidential pardon does not violate the laws of the court, and a school principal canceling classes does not violate the laws of the school. Both act within their proper authority. And the creator would have authority over all his creation.

A fourth argument is that miracles demean God. If he has to interfere and intervene in his creation, he is like a bad architect patching up an imperfect house. But this presupposes that God designed a system in which he should never intervene with miracles, a world he originally planned to be empty of prophecies, answered prayers, and divine revelations. But the theist's claim is that these miracles were part of his original plan.

A fifth argument, a famous one from David Hume, is that miracles are maximally improbable. It is always more probable that someone is lying or hallucinating, because these things happen often, while miracles are unrepeatable singularities. But you are also an unrepeatable singularity, and so are many events in your life.

Here are two arguments for the possibility of miracles, one from the side of the cause, the God who could work miracles, and one from the side of the effect, the universe that receives them.

There is no defense against miracles in either place. For if God exists, there is nothing in the nature of God that assures us that he would never work miracles. And there is nothing in the nature of the universe that would exclude miracles. Nature is defenseless against them.

Another very simple argument is that if God created the universe, he can certainly perform miracles in it. If he banged out the Big Bang, he can certainly bang out little bangs.

Angels and Demons

You may be surprised to hear a philosopher arguing about angels, but the issue is certainly both interesting and investigatable: interesting because angels are extraterrestrial life forms, and investigatable because there are far more accounts of angels and demons than of any other kind of extraterrestrial life form.

If there is a God, an infinite and uncreated spirit, there is no reason there couldn't also be angels, finite created spirits. And if these creatures had free will, they could choose evil and become evil spirits or demons.

You might argue that their existence is probable for two reasons: The first argument for angels' existence is that most religions teach it, so if they are reliable on other things, there is no reason to make an exception about that part of their teaching. The majority of people, cultures, traditions, myths, and religions in history have believed in some kind of angels or superhuman spirits.

The second argument is that there are many animal species between plants and humans, and many kinds of plants between animals and minerals. The "great chain of being" is not full of gaps, not missing any basic links. But the distance between man and God is a great gap. The argument doesn't claim to make the existence of angels proved, but likely, and reasonable.

Divine Providence

Divine providence is another religious belief that's often challenged as unscientific. Religious believers see their lives as parts of something like a play, with a story line known and planned by God, a destiny. The religious world-view claims that life contains both destiny and free choice, like every great story ever told.

The difference something like divine providence makes is enormous. So it is an issue worth thinking about. As with the issue of miracles, there may be enough data to make the belief probable even if there is no conclusive proof. It's hard to evaluate this data, though. As with the problem of evil, there seems to be no cutoff point, no specifiable amount of order or disorder that proves or disproves divine providence. And how do you know a given event is providential or random? You see it more than you prove it.

Predestination

The concept of predestination is somewhat similar to providence, though much stronger. Yet those who say science contradicts religion concerning providence often argue not against this stronger providence, but for it, for a kind of scientific predestination and against human free will.

Those who embrace either kind of predestination argue against free will this way: The acts that I call my free choices are either caused or not. If so, they

are not free; if not, they cannot exist, for everything that exists as an event in time needs a cause.

Free will can be reconciled with predestination, or higher determinism, in three ways.

First, to know a thing is not to cause it, so the fact that God foreknows everything we will do doesn't mean that he rather than we do it, or cause it.

Second, if God does not bypass, rival, demean, or remove natural causes, but uses them, perfects them, and fulfills them, then, even if God has not only knowledge but also causality toward our acts, that does not destroy their nature but fulfills it; and their nature is to be free.

Third, God is not in time, so he does not foreknow or predestine the future. To him everything is present.

The defense of free will against the lower determinism is much simpler: If we are not free, if we are only very complex machines, then all moral language becomes meaningless. If there is no free will, there is no moral responsibility.

Creation and Evolution

Creation and evolution is probably the single example most people think of when they think of a conflict between science and religion. What is the relationship between these two ideas? Is creation possible? Is evolution possible? Do creation and evolution contradict each other?

If God exists, creation would be possible. Omnipotence could do anything that is possible, and only logical contradictions are impossible. Of course, if there's no creator, creation is logically impossible. But if God exists, it's not logically impossible that he creates a universe out of nothing.

Is evolution possible? If it were impossible, that impossibility would have to come from either God or nature. There seems to be no reason in the nature of matter or life or time to think that evolution is impossible. And it is the only theory that accounts for most of the data.

And there is nothing in the nature of God that makes evolution impossible. Fundamentalists who believe the Earth is only 6,000 years old and that the six days of creation were six literal twenty-four-hour days are really saying that God created fossils of dinosaurs that never really existed—which seems simply absurd. Why not “fossil memories” too?

Whether or not the creation of the universe out of nothing by God actually happened, as Genesis says, and whether or not the evolution of species by natural selection actually happened, as Darwin says, the two ideas neither exclude nor include each other.

Let's distinguish five different questions about origins: the origin of matter, organic life, different species of plants and animals, the human body, and the human soul. Evolution does not claim to answer the first question, the origin of matter. Evolution is a biological theory about how living species arrived on this planet, not an astronomical theory about the beginning of all matter, time, and space.

The second question, about whether life could have come from inorganic matter, is also not a question about evolution in the proper sense, but about the relation between inorganic and organic chemistry. Evolution concerns the third and fourth question, about the origin of plant and animal species, and of man insofar as he is an animal species.

But the theory does not claim to answer the fifth question, the origin of the human soul, because that is not in principle a scientific question. Souls leave no fossils. They are not visible. If a scientist claims that evolution explains the soul, he is being a bad philosopher. That's like saying sex explains mathematics.

If an evolutionist claims that there is no divine design, that is a religious or philosophical statement, not a scientific one. If you argue that evolutionary science is evidence for atheism and the absence of divine design simply because natural selection can explain the emergence of new species without God, that is like saying that science is evidence for atheism because obstetrics can explain babies without God.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Can science and the supernatural coexist?
2. What three miracles are essential to Judaism and Islam?

Suggested Reading

Kreeft, Peter. *Angels and Demons: What Do We Really Know About Them?* San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995.

Other Books of Interest

Adler, Mortimer. *The Angels and Us*. New York: Macmillan, 1982.

Craig, William L. *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*. Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 1991.

Jaki, Stanley L. *The Savior of Science*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000.

Lecture 7: The Case Against Life After Death

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Peter Kreeft's *Love Is Stronger Than Death*.

Probably the two most important claims of Western theistic religion are the existence of God and life after death. There are seven basic answers to what happens to us after death, and the simplest one of all is that nothing happens, because there is no spirit or soul. This is called materialism.

Materialism in this context doesn't mean the attitude of greed for material things, but the philosophical theory that human beings are simply material organisms and nothing more, that there is no spiritual soul. If there is no spiritual soul, there is pretty obviously no survival of death, because we can see what happens to the body.

Materialism

The idea that there is no spiritual soul, nothing that can survive death, has always been a minority view in pre-modern cultures. However, ever since the eighteenth century, a significant number of educated people in industrialized countries have believed it.

In ancient Greece and Rome, immortality was the distinguishing feature of every kind of god. And it was often believed that if a mortal became a great hero, he would attain immortality and become like the gods. The rest became ghosts after death. This is a second view of life after death, typical of ancient paganism: a vague, shadowy self survives and goes to the underworld.

There is a third view, found in some other ancient societies, that is more optimistic. It says that everyone gets to go to the land of the spirits, or the gods, and usually there is one Great Spirit above all the spirits.

A fourth view, reincarnation, is more common in the Orient than in the West, but it is becoming more popular today among people who have lost faith in the orthodox Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Heaven or Paradise. Reincarnation means that your individual soul never dies, and after your body dies, your spirit comes back in another body.

This notion is usually connected with the idea of karma: that each soul has to fulfill its destiny and learn its lessons of wisdom and morality, and that's why it keeps reincarnating until it is enlightened enough.

Reincarnation and karma are two of the teachings of most forms of Hinduism and Buddhism, and there it is connected with a fifth idea, which Western philosophers call monism or pantheism, the idea that ultimately there is only one thing, that everything is a part or form or manifestation of that one thing, and that one thing is something like God. Hindus call it Brahman, "the great one."

In this philosophy, reincarnation does not mean that individual souls are real. Most modern Westerners who adopt reincarnation don't realize that in Eastern religions it does not mean individual immortality at all. The Hindu Upanishads say, "Brahman is the only real Reincarnator." So this fifth view is not ultimately reincarnation but pantheism, or monism.

There is a sixth view, that each individual soul is immortal, but there is no resurrection of the body. After death we become something like angels. This is the view of Plato and Gnosticism.

The seventh view, found in orthodox Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is that each person, created by God in his image, is immortal, and God will resurrect our bodies after death to rejoin our immortal souls.

The main issue about life after death that philosophers of religion argue about is whether the soul survives the death of the body or not. The following are arguments for materialism.

1. If there is to be personal survival after death, then the personal self must survive. If there is a personal self, then that must be conscious. Consciousness depends on the brain. The brain dies when the body dies. Therefore, the self dies when the body dies.

But there is empirical evidence for selfconsciousness without brain activity on the part of patients who suffer brain death for a significant length of time and then come back and relate all sorts of things that they were thinking and knowing, and even *seeing* while their brain was clinically dead.

The philosophical point is simply that this seems logically possible. So the materialists' argument is no longer conclusive.

2. A second argument for materialism and against immortality is that even if selfconsciousness is possible without a brain, consciousness of the world is not possible without a brain and a body and senses. So death, in robbing us of the brain, robs us of the only means by which we can experience the world. So if we can't experience any world outside of us after death, how can you say we survive death?

This access to a world of objects not only gives us knowledge of the world, it also makes our mind and will and feelings grow and mature. Death robs us of the opportunity to *do* that any more, but that doesn't mean it robs us of the very self that *did* it when we had a body.

And if you add the belief that God will resurrect the body after death, then you have a complete human person after death, with body and soul.

3. If the individual soul lives on after the death of its body, it must have an individual identity. And if it has an identity, then it must be identifiable. But how could we identify, or distinguish, one soul from another? If individuality depends on bodies and bodies die, individuality must die.

First, even if we don't know *how* a soul identifies other souls, it doesn't follow that it can't do it.

Second, even if it can't identify other individual souls, it doesn't follow that other individual souls don't exist.

Third, even in this life we use other criteria than bodily ones to identify persons. And since we know ourselves by selfconsciousness, perhaps we can know others by a kind of mental telepathy with other selfconscious minds.

A fourth answer is that even if there is no mental telepathy and we couldn't know each other between death and bodily resurrection, we would still know each other again after the resurrection of the body, which is part of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic picture.

4. Another argument for materialism is from neurobiology. There is not a single so-called spiritual event that cannot be accounted for by some material event in the brain. If you alter the brain, you alter the consciousness.

But spiritualism is just as simple a hypothesis as materialism. You can't point to a single material event that's independent of a spiritual event. For as soon as you point to it, as soon as you are conscious of it, that means it's an event in consciousness.

There is a third philosophy that also explains all the data, besides materialism and spiritualism. It's commonsense dualism, the belief that we experience both matter altering mind and mind altering matter.

So all the arguments for materialism are inconclusive. Are there also arguments against materialism?

1. First, there is the evidence that we mentioned earlier, from out-of-body experiences.
2. Second, thought transcends matter in many ways.

Thought can be in many places at the same time—for instance, when you hold in your mind New York and San Francisco and compare them. You can't hold them together in space, and two bodies can't occupy the same space at the same time. But you do hold them together in your mind.

Thought also transcends matter by the same thought being in many minds at once. Nothing material can do that. Therefore, thought is not matter. But thought is real. Therefore not everything that is real is matter. Therefore materialism is false.

Another way thought can transcend physical laws is by abstraction. We can know abstract, timeless, universal truths (concepts like equality or truth) that have no spatial or temporal dimensions.

Still another way thought transcends physical law is that when we are aware of anything, such as another person, we are aware of many things at once—colors, sounds, feelings. There is one awareness of many things. The self that is aware of many things is a single self, like a dimensionless point at the center of the circle.

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3. I speak of some thoughts as being *my* thoughts. But what am I? According to materialism, I am merely this body, with its brain, and all the acts produced by them, including my thoughts. But what is the "I" that owns these thoughts? It can't be another thought.

The materialist will say that the self is just a thought, and thought is an act of the brain. But the self can't be just one among many acts of the brain, for then the brain would possess the self rather than the self possessing a brain.

4. The materialists claim that their philosophy is *true*. But if materialism is true, truth is either unreal or material, for according to materialism, all that is real is material. But it makes no sense to say truth is a material reality. It has no material qualities.
5. And here is a fifth argument: the argument from the nature of arguments. The materialist claims to prove materialism with logical arguments. But what is argument in a materialist world? There is room only for the relation of material cause and effect, not the relation of immaterial premise and conclusion.

Reincarnation

Hindus and Buddhists accept reincarnation on grounds of religious authority, and Christians, Jews, and Muslims reject it for the same reason. But there are also arguments for and against reincarnation that do not depend on faith, but only on reason.

1. The first argument is actual data: people often remember past lives, or claim to. Most of the time this is purely imaginary. People almost always claim to have been someone famous or interesting. If all the claims are true, then almost everyone must have been a king or a queen and no one was ever a slave. But sometimes the claims seem more credible and sometimes the details check out.

However, these cases are rare, and they can be explained without reincarnation: as something like a racial memory, or a collective unconscious, or even mental telepathy with the dead.

2. A second piece of evidence for reincarnation is not one that can be checked empirically. It is a premise about self-knowledge. Only unwise people, shallow and arrogant people, believe that they are perfect. Most of us know that we are not as good or as wise as we could be. The wise know they are fools, and the saints know they are sinners. When we die, we are not all that we can be. There is a great gap between the actual and the potential.

This is a profound premise, but it does not prove reincarnation. Reincarnation does explain and justify this deep insight, yes, but reincarnation is not the only way of justifying it. Much more in line with all the analogies in life would be some new kind of body and world and experience after death. We seem more like multi-stage rockets; the old stage falls away, like the placenta after birth, and the next stage flies into new and higher skies and along new trajectories.

3. A third argument for reincarnation is that if a soul is a different kind of thing than a body, as a person is a different kind of thing than a house, then a soul could enter and leave various houses. If the soul is confined to one body, then it seems that the soul isn't really a free and independent spirit.

But is the soul *that* independent? The only reason materialism is believable is all the evidence that it *isn't* independent. We experience our soul and body not as two things but as two aspects or dimensions of one thing, ourselves. In other words, reincarnation contradicts a basic principle of psychology and common sense, the psychosomatic unity, the oneness of soul and body.

4. A fourth argument for reincarnation is that it can't be disproved, and it does you good to believe it, because it conquers your natural fear of death and your obsession with your body and bodily goods. You lose nothing and gain much by believing it.

There are other problems with reincarnation, such as the number of souls. More people have lived and died in the last three centuries than in the previous thirty. Where did all those new souls come from?

Another problem is an apparent built-in self-contradiction. Reincarnation is not forever; once you are sufficiently pure, and wise, and good, you go to Heaven, which has to be perfect; otherwise it wouldn't be your goal. And if Heaven is perfect, there's no evil in it. But when we trace our series of reincarnations *back* to the first one, we ask this question: Why did I need this series of bodies in the first place? I must have committed some sin in Heaven to merit being sent down to Earth into my first body, and then Heaven isn't so perfect after all.

Still another problem with reincarnation is a psychological one: We do not usually remember our past lives, so how can we be the same person as the one who had another body if there is no continuity of memory? Reincarnation is supposed to be necessary for educational purposes; we need new bodies and new lives to learn the lessons we failed to learn in the last ones. But how can we learn from our mistakes if we don't remember them?

Finally, the two religions that most doctrines of reincarnation come from, Hinduism and Buddhism, both teach that there is no such thing as reincarnation! It's a useful myth for those who still believe that individual souls are real—but they're not, according to Buddhists and many Hindus. Reincarnation is like Santa Claus: a useful myth for spiritual infants, but when they grow up they no longer believe it. Reincarnation teaches you detachment from bodily goods and evils, from greed and fear of death, so it brings you up one level from materialism; but it presupposes the reality of individual souls, which is no more literally true according to Hinduism and Buddhism than the reality of individual bodies.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What is the connection between reincarnation and karma?
2. What are the arguments for reincarnation?

Suggested Reading

Kreeft, Peter. *Love Is Stronger Than Death*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1979.

Other Books of Interest

Albrecht, Mark C. *Reincarnation*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987.
Barrett, William. *The Death of the Soul*. New York: Doubleday, 1986.
Lewis, H.D. *The Self and Immortality*. New York: Seabury, 1973.

Lecture 8: The Case for Life After Death: Twelve Arguments

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Raymond A. Moody's *Life After Life*.

In this lecture, we will examine twelve arguments for immortality, or life after death.

1. The argument from consensus: The vast majority of all people who have ever lived have believed in life after death. It is similar to the "common consent" argument for God.
2. The argument from the sages: The second argument appeals to quality rather than quantity. It is that most of the great sages, the wise, have believed in life after death. It seems unlikely that this one belief of theirs should be the exception to their wisdom.
3. Primitive man's argument from Dead Cow: Primitive man has two cows. One dies. What is the difference between the two cows now? The answer seems obvious to primitive man: Life is what makes Live Cow breathe. The word for "life" or "soul" in many ancient languages is the same word as the word for "breath." Not that life is air, but the power to move air through the lungs.

So primitive man discovers that life is not a material thing, like an organ. It is the life of the organs, that which makes them all cooperate for the health of the whole body.

The weakness of this argument is that it proves both too much and too little. Too much because it seems to prove that every cow, and every bacteria, and every plant, is immortal because all have souls in the sense of life. Or if you say that it is not each individual plant soul and animal soul that is immortal but only soul in general, or life in general, then the argument proves too little, for it doesn't prove the immortality of any individual soul.

So this argument does not prove human life after death. But it does seem to show that there are souls and that strict materialism is inadequate.

4. The argument from magic: The argument begins with the daily experience of the power of mind over matter, which is what most people call magic. For example, almost all of us can levitate. To levitate is to violate the law of gravity by commanding your body, by willpower and thought, to rise up into the air. We can jump.

If there were no mind and will behind your legs and arms, you couldn't do this magic. When you die, you won't be able to do it any more, even though the matter in your arms and legs remains. What can do mind-over-matter magic? Not matter, but mind. So we

are more than matter. And what is more than matter is not subject to the laws of matter, such as mortality.

The weakness of this argument is that all it does is show that there is *something* more than strict materialism can account for.

5. Plato's argument from the soul's survival of its diseases, from Book Ten of Plato's *Republic*: We observe that each thing has its own natural, intrinsic evil that corrupts it and weakens it and eventually destroys it: for instance, rust for iron or disease for the human body.

If any thing is destroyed, it must be destroyed either by its own intrinsic, natural evils or by what is evil for another thing, or by what is not evil at all. But the soul is not destroyed by its own intrinsic evils, which are vices, ignorance, and wickedness.

But if souls aren't destroyed by their own natural evils, much less can they be destroyed by what is evil for some other nature, including the body. What destroys one doesn't destroy the other.

This is a clever argument, but it seems to have two weaknesses. It assumes that souls and bodies are two different things. But perhaps soul and body are two dimensions of one person. A second weakness of Plato's argument is that it shows that souls are never destroyed in this life, while bodies are alive, but it does not show what happens afterwards.

6. The argument from the soul's simplicity: Another argument begins with the observation that souls, unlike bodies, are not composed of parts. Whatever is composed of parts can decompose into its parts. But what is not composed of parts cannot be decomposed. Therefore the soul cannot be decomposed.

There are only two ways for anything to be destroyed: by being decomposed into its parts or by being annihilated as a whole. But nothing is annihilated as a whole. Nothing simply pops out of existence any more than anything simply pops into existence.

So if souls can't die either by decomposition or by annihilation, they can't die. The weakness of this argument is that we cannot be sure that there is no third way a soul could die besides decomposition or annihilation. Nor can we be sure annihilation is not possible for souls, just because it is not possible for bodies.

7. The argument from the soul's power to objectify the body: The soul can know the body, thus making the body an object of knowledge.

But this power cannot come from the body. The body cannot objectify itself, be its own object of knowledge, or know itself. The self that knows objects cannot itself be one of the objects known.

Therefore, there is a power of the soul that does not come from the body. And this means that it is not wholly subject to the laws of the body, including mortality.

8. The argument from being vs. having: I have feelings and thoughts and a body. But I am the self that has these things. But my body is

had. Therefore, I am more than my body. I possess it. Therefore I can lose it, by death. But I cannot lose my "I," my soul, my self. As the *Tao Te Ching* puts it, there is no "death spot" in me, no place for death to insert itself between me and my soul, as there is between me and my body.

But doesn't this indicate a gap between the self and the soul, which is had, or possessed? Yes, but that objectification of my soul must be done by the self. The soul is part of my nature, my *what*. Nature gave me my *what* through heredity and environment, and nature takes this away in death. But nature did not give me my *who* and cannot take it away in death.

9. The argument from the soul's two immaterial operations: We can perform two operations that matter cannot perform: thinking and choosing.

Our thought transcends images. We imagine concrete things like pyramids, but we conceive abstract things like trigonometry. Therefore, our understanding transcends our imagining.

Willing is more than instinctive desiring; if not, there would be no responsibility and no morality. If you are not in control of something, you are not responsible for it. Without free will, there is no responsibility and no morality.

And if we have only instincts and not free choice, then the strongest instinct in us would always win. But sometimes it doesn't; sometimes I choose to follow the weaker instinct, like compassion rather than fear and self-preservation.

Imagining and instinctive desiring are both animal functions and dependent on matter. Abstract thinking and free choice are not. The cause of these two operations is something more than my animal organism. So I am more than my body and brain; I am also a nonbodily soul, and things not made of body do not die of bodily causes.

10. There are also arguments from the nature of God to the immortality of the soul. Most arguments reason from the effect back to the cause; this one reasons from the cause to the effect.

You can argue that the soul is immortal because of God's love. If you love a person, you don't want them to cease to exist.

11. The argument from justice begins with the premise that sometimes injustice rather than justice is the last word in this life. So since justice is not fulfilled in the short run, it must be fulfilled in the long run. And that means there must be a long run, a life after death.

But why must justice be fulfilled in the long run? To prove that premise we need to look deeper into ourselves. And when we do, we often find an absolute demand for justice. Is God less just than we are?

Let's look at this absolute, nonnegotiable demand that we make for justice. This is either subjective or objective. If you believe the first,

you are a moral subjectivist. You believe that our deepest moral judgments are only expressions of our own subjective feelings or desires. But then, you have no reason to take morality seriously.

If, on the other hand, you believe that moral judgments can be objective, then you can argue that justice demands immortality.

12. The argument from near-death experiences: The last reason for believing in life after death is not a philosophical argument but an event. About twenty million Americans have had some kind of near-death experience, and every one of them has come back from it totally convinced that there is life after death.

The experience could be an illusion or a hallucination, of course, but five features of the experience argue for its truth.

First, it does not vary much by personality. Almost everyone sees parts of the same pattern.

Second, the pattern isn't what they expect. No golden streets, angels, clouds, harps, or halos.

Third, they're usually drug free, so it can't be explained chemically.

Fourth, while these people are supposedly out of their bodies, they sometimes report having seen things like the location of lost objects that turn out later to be true.

Fifth, and most impressive, they all return to life changed. And all the changes are good ones. They don't become saints, or morally perfect people, but they do become wise in four ways. First, they know there is life after death. Second, they no longer fear death. Third, they all know that they were sent back for a reason and so they have a strong sense of meaning in their lives. And fourth, they all have a new sense of values; they all say that only two things in life matter absolutely: They are truth and love, or wisdom and compassion, knowing and loving other people without limit.

But can't it be explained as a trick of brain chemistry, or an innate wish-fulfillment illusion from the collective unconscious? Perhaps. It does not amount to a conclusive proof. Religious ideas can be argued about, but there is always a role for faith, for free choice to believe or not to believe. There is no argument in the philosophy of religion that is so mathematically certain that it closes the case forever.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Essays & Questions

1. What is the argument for life after death from magic?
2. What is the argument for life after death from near-death experiences?

Suggested Reading

Moody, Raymond A. *Life After Life*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.

Other Books of Interest

Adler, Mortimer. *Intellect: Mind Over Matter*. New York: Macmillan, 1990.

Habermas, Gary, and J.P. Moreland. *Immortality: The Other Side of Death*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1992.

Rahner, Karl. *On the Theology of Death*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1961.

Lecture 9: Different Concepts of Heaven

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Dante's *Paradiso*.

The question of Heaven is obviously an interesting question—in fact, I challenge you to even imagine a more interesting one—and it's not just subjectively interesting, but also objectively important, because it makes a terribly important difference for most people.

Ten Objections

Here are ten objections to the idea of Heaven that's taught by the orthodox versions of the three major Western religions:

1. The first objection is that the idea of Heaven is unscientific superstition. But if that's the objection, the believer's reply could be that that *objection* is unscientific. The scientific way to refute an idea is by evidence, not name-calling labels.

But the objector could say: Statistically, belief in Heaven is directly proportional to lack of scientific education.

The believer could reply that to argue that an idea is false because those who believe it are uneducated is the logical fallacy called *ad hominem*: Attacking the person instead of the idea does not disprove the idea.

But historically, belief in Heaven has declined in direct proportion to the progress of science. True, but what is the logical argument that shows that science has refuted the idea of Heaven?

The objector could say that the idea cannot in principle be verified or falsified by any science. The reply is that this is true, but it still does not prove the idea is false.

2. A second objection is that the idea of Heaven, with golden streets, jeweled gates and thrones, or the Koranic version of Paradise with palaces and a harem of virgins, certainly seems man-made, a projection of earthly things valued by past cultures.

The intelligent believer will probably reply that the details are symbolic, not literal. But then the objector can argue that if all the language about Heaven is symbolic, we should be able to say what it symbolizes. But we can't, except in vague platitudes like goodness and happiness.

The believer could reply that symbolic knowledge can be knowledge, even though it's not literal and even though it's not translatable into something literal. That's the difference between symbolism and allegory: Only allegory is translatable into something literal.

Symbols give us a different kind of knowledge. Knowing that God is more like a good father than like a bad tyrant is meaningful. So saying that Heaven is more like gold than like mud is an analogy, but it can be a meaningful analogy.

3. A third objection is a psychological one. The idea of Heaven is easily explainable by wishful thinking. The match between our wishes and the idea of Heaven is too perfect not to suspect that the idea is a projection of our wishes.

The believer can reply that the match can be explained by our desires being designed to fit the real Heaven. Both hypotheses explain the facts.

The believer might also claim that Heaven *doesn't* correspond to our wishful-thinking desires, because our desires are egotistic, but Heaven isn't. It's the place for self-forgetful saints, not self-indulgent dreamers. It's the death of egotism rather than its gratification.

4. A fourth argument is that the idea of Heaven is escapist and devalues this world by comparing it unfavorably with the next.

There is a very simple answer: If any idea is true, it's escapist not to think about it. And even if the idea were escapist, that would not prove it's not true.

The believer would have to say that the idea of Heaven does not devalue this world, because if it did, that would be a heavy count against it. And throughout history, those who believed most strongly in Heaven have made some of the greatest improvements to Earth.

It seems reasonable that belief in Heaven shouldn't devalue this world, but make it more valuable. If you believed this world is Heaven's womb, you would value it more.

5. A fifth objection is that Heaven appeals to selfishness. It motivates us to be good not for goodness's sake, but for the sake of Heavenly reward.

This is a serious objection, and it probably describes many believers' motives with embarrassing accuracy. Of course, impugning the motive for believing an idea doesn't prove the idea is false. But it does show not just a psychologically bad effect of believing it, but a morally bad effect.

But the motive for believing in Heaven doesn't have to be mercenary, and it isn't supposed to be. Heaven is supposed to be a reward, but working for a reward isn't necessarily mercenary. Some rewards are natural and proper.

6. A sixth argument is that Heaven is for angels, not humans. What makes us happy is sex and beer and rock & roll, or art and wine and symphonies. It certainly sounds like Heaven isn't fit for human habitation, only for angels.

Is there sex in Heaven? If so, it seems ridiculously earthly. If not, Americans won't want to go there.

The believer could answer simply that the objector's imagination is too limited. How do you know what will turn you on in Heaven? Why set limits to your spiritual growth?

A more positive answer might be the idea of transformation. We can ask thousands of questions in this form: Will there be X in Heaven or not? And the answer to most of them is probably neither a simple yes nor a simple no, but yes in a transformed form.

Well, what about sex? If Heaven perfects and transforms our human nature, and if sex is an important part of our human nature, then it logically follows that Heaven would perfect and transform sex too.

7. A seventh argument against Heaven is that it is boring. There are three parts to this objection: Heaven is boring because there's no time, no contrast, and no work.

Suppose eternity included all time rather than excluding it. That might also explain a fairly common phenomenon in this life: When you're about to die, your whole life sometimes passes before you—or think about those timeless moments or peak experiences during your lifetime when you lose all sense of time.

As for the second part of the question, how we could appreciate pleasure without contrast to pain, I think experience answers that question: The wiser you are, the less you need that contrast. It would follow that if God is totally wise, he would never be bored, and that the more Godlike you become, the less you need any kind of evil to appreciate the good.

What work could we possibly do in Heaven and why won't it bore us? If it's earthly work, that presupposes need. For instance, police work means people need protection, and medical work means people need medical care, and that means Heaven is not perfect. But if it's unearthly work, like perpetual adoration of God, that seems fit for angels but not for human beings. So the dilemma is this: Imperfect and interesting or perfect and boring?

Richard Purtill suggests in *Thinking About Religion* that we will do the six things that never get boring here, the six things we never do adequately here, the six things that are the reason why we exist in the first place: understanding yourself, loving yourself, understanding others, loving others, understanding God, and loving God.

8. An eighth objection to Heaven is that it stifles individuality. If we're all perfect in Heaven, we're all conformist clones of God.

But why would we have to be clones of God? Good parents don't want their children to be clones of them. Another answer might be that even if we are clones of God, that might be the secret of individuality rather than the death of it. If God were like a diamond with infinite facets, then each of his human "clones" could reflect a unique facet.

A problem closely connected with individuality is freedom. Will we be free to sin in Heaven? If so, Heaven is a dangerous place, like

Earth. If not, if there's no freedom to sin in Heaven, then it's tyranny, and God doesn't get our free love, only our forced love.

As for freedom to sin in Heaven, the believer would say there is a logical contradiction in that term; that freedom to sin is an oxymoron, like free slavery or free addiction.

St. Augustine distinguishes two meanings of freedom: free choice and liberty. Free choice is freedom from causal determinism; liberty is freedom to become your true self. Augustine says we all have free will, the lower freedom, but we don't all have liberty, the higher freedom.

And that difference is not just the difference between obeying or disobeying a set of rules, but between attaining or failing to attain our identity, our full humanity, and therefore our full joy.

In Heaven we would have to have free will, because not to have free will is not to be human. But if we are going to be perfect in Heaven, we would also have to have such perfect liberty that no one will do evil because no one will want to.

9. A ninth objection to Heaven objects to the traditional notion that Heaven is hierarchical rather than egalitarian; that we will not all be equal in Heaven. Doesn't that make God a snob, an elitist, and an aristocrat?

But even though we want to reject inequality and hierarchy in politics, judging Heaven by our political categories seems like judging Einstein by how well he matched his socks. Inequality and hierarchy certainly describe the way nature works, and if God created nature, it would seem to follow that God invented these things.

Furthermore, the traditional picture of Heaven as hierarchical also seems to consistently follow from the essential nature of justice. It's not justice to treat those who deserve an A and those who deserve an F equally by giving them both the same grade.

Here's another reason for hierarchy in Heaven: One of the greatest joys in this life is finding someone you can admire and look up to. Why should Heaven deprive us of that joy?

10. A tenth and final objection to Heaven is that there would be no privacy there. Certainly there would be no privacy from God, if God knows everything. If everyone in Heaven knows and understands each other, there would be no privacy from other people either.

This fear may be real, but the objection seems easy to answer. The only reason we want privacy now is because we feel shame and because we fear others will misunderstand us and look down on us. But in Heaven there would be no shame, if all evil is gone, and there would be no fear that anyone would misunderstand you or reject you.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why might the idea of Heaven be thought to be a projection of our wishes?
2. Why could it be said that Heaven appeals to selfishness?

Suggested Reading

Alighieri, Dante. *Paradiso*. New York: Bantam Classics, 1986.

Other Books of Interest

Kreeft, Peter. *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Heaven but Never Dreamed of Asking*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990.

Zaleski, Carol G. *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experiences in Medieval and Modern Times*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Lecture 10: Hell

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Dante's *Inferno*.

Hell is the strongest objection, for most people, to the traditional theistic view of life after death, the hardest religious doctrine to swallow and the first to be abandoned. But it qualifies as an idea that's worth thinking about because it makes a great difference to our lives, whether we decide to accept it or reject it. If there's no Hell, life's choices make only a temporal difference; if there's Hell, they make an eternal difference.

There are also logical reasons for examining Hell: It is part and parcel of all three theistic religions. To reject Hell presupposes that whatever religious authority teaches, the reality of Hell is wrong, and therefore that seems to undermine the source of religious authority for everything else in the religion.

One more reason for examining this unpopular idea is that two other very popular ideas are closely connected with it: free will and a real distinction between good and evil. Certainly, many people believe in those two things without believing in Hell, but the defenders of Hell argue that that is illogical, that if there is no Hell, then there is ultimately no free will and ultimately no distinction between good and evil.

Ten Arguments Against Hell

1. The first one is very simple. Hell is simply ridiculous. Argument isn't necessary; our common sense finds a literal Hell intolerable and incredible.

But our instinctive denial of Hell doesn't prove anything any more than our instinctive denial of death does. Our instinctive refusal to believe this doctrine comes partly from confusing the doctrine with the imagery, which *is* silly if interpreted literally. The same is true of Heaven: The doctrine is not tied to the images of golden streets or fluffy clouds.

2. Let's state the overwhelmingly obvious objection rationally. Hell makes nonsense of the idea that God is love. Belief in Hell makes God a cosmic hypocrite. In Christianity, Hasidic Judaism, and Sufi Islam, God is pure love. And we are supposed to be Godlike, even to our enemies, forgiving and merciful even to those who don't deserve it. And yet God sends people to Hell, because he is also a God of wrath. Wrath means hate, and it's simply a contradiction to say that God is pure love if he is a God of hate.

The only possible answer to this objection is to deny the premise that God has literal wrath, and that's what the saints and mystics usually do. They say that God's love is literally true; God's wrath is not. It is a projection of our own wrath.

The defender could also say that God really has wrath, but not to sinners, only to sins, precisely because he loves sinners. And that's exactly what we are supposed to do, love sinners much more, and therefore hate sin much more, just like God. So God is not a cosmic hypocrite in this view.

If God's wrath is not objectively real, does that mean that Hell is also not objectively real? Can't all the language about Hell be interpreted nonliterally?

It certainly seems reasonable to interpret language about the *nature* of an invisible thing nonliterally, whether that thing is God or Hell, but you can't interpret language about the *existence* of Hell nonliterally any more than you can interpret language about the existence of God nonliterally. It seems pretty clear from the Bible and the Koran that whatever the nature of Hell consists of, its existence is real. So how is that compatible with a God of love?

A bold answer, from many of the saints and mystics, is that "the fires of Hell are made of the love of God"; that it is the very love of God for the sinner that tortures him in Hell, because he's in Hell only because he has made himself the enemy of love.

3. No one wants to go to Hell. So those who go there must go there against their will. But that contradicts the doctrine of free will. If, on the other hand, we choose Hell by our own free will, we would have to be insane to prefer eternal misery to eternal joy.

If we are honest, I think we all have to admit that we often *are* insane: we prefer misery to joy. We know, not by religious faith but by repeated experience and human reason, that when we are good, honest, loving, unselfish, and above all forgiving, we are happy; and when we are wicked, dishonest, hateful, selfish, and unforgiving, we are miserable. Yet we choose misery.

4. A fourth objection is how any good and loving person can ever be happy in Heaven if they know friends they love are in Hell. Logically, it seems there are only three possibilities. Either they don't know there is anyone in Hell—but then their happiness is based on a lie—or else they do know this, and they are happy about it—but then they are selfish, unfeeling stinkers who shouldn't be in Heaven—or else they know it and are not happy about it, in which case Heaven is not perfect because its inhabitants are unhappy.

The only two answers I can imagine to this objection are to deny that there are any people in Hell that ought to be pitied, or else to deny that the people in Heaven ought to pity them. If there are souls in Hell, they might not be persons anymore, but only ex-persons who have lost their personality, their "I."

But why wouldn't those in Heaven mourn over Hell? Perhaps because their time experience is very different from ours, because they live in the present all the time, and not the dead past to be mourned over. We probably shouldn't think of Heaven and Hell as parallel places in the same time. There may be other kinds of time.

Even in this world, time is surprisingly multidimensional and relative.

5. A fifth objection is that if there is a Hell, it must be just, not unjust. But it's not merciful. So justice trumps mercy. But God's mercy is more prominent than his justice in the scriptures of all three religions.

The objection about justice and mercy may make us rethink the relation between these two virtues. We usually think of mercy as a relaxation of justice, a compromising of justice, even a contradiction to justice. But if both are divine attributes, then justice can no more be compromised or contradicted than mercy. Justice has to be honest and has to discriminate between those who accept mercy and those who don't.

Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures say Hell is punishment. But there are two kinds of punishment because there are two kinds of law: positive law and natural law. Positive law is law that is posited or willed by some will, human or divine. Natural laws are not willed and couldn't be different; they are necessary because they are the laws of the nature of a thing, whether physical or spiritual.

The punishments for violating positive laws are changeable and negotiable. Mercy can change these laws and these punishments. But the punishments for violating natural laws are unchangeable and necessary. Mercy can't change them. So Hell would seem to contradict God's mercy if it were his positive law, but not if it were the natural and necessary punishment for being a contrary-to-God kind of person.

6. A sixth objection against the idea of Hell could come from the premise of predestination. If God knows everything, including all futures, he predestines everyone. But if God predestines some people for Hell before they are born, we are back with the moral monster, the cosmic sadist, who wills some people to be damned for all eternity.

The answer to this objection has to be a redefinition of predestination. It can't literally be "pre" anything, because God is not in time. And there can't be a double predestination, two equal predestinations, of some to Heaven and others to Hell, because a good God would not will anyone's damnation. Indeed, the New Testament says "God does not will any to perish but for all to come to salvation." So Heaven fulfills God's will and Hell does not.

7. But this leads to a seventh objection: If God wills everyone to be saved, and not all are, then God doesn't get what he wills, and in that case he is not omnipotent.

The answer to this has to go back to what we said about the problem of evil: God's omnipotence can't meaningfully extend to contradictions, and to force people to freely choose Heaven is a contradiction.

That seems logical. But a second answer might be a paradoxical one: that it takes greater power, not less, to create free children rather than robots or puppets.

A related objection concerning God's omnipotence might be this: If God is all-good and all-powerful, he must have chosen to create the best of all possible worlds. But it would have been better for God to have created a world in which there is no Hell, or a world in which no one chooses Hell.

The answer first should examine the concept of the best of all possible worlds. Perhaps this is a self-contradictory concept. Just as you can always add one more to any finite number, so you can always make a better finite world. As one writer said, "God could have created a world with a better berry than the strawberry, but he didn't."

Or the believer might try to answer the charge by asking the unbeliever what God could have done better. By not making a Hell? But he didn't make it; we make it, if it's interpreted symbolically, not as a place but as a condition of soul, a refusal of God. If so, then the only way God could destroy Hell would be by destroying the possibility of our making it, and that means taking away free will.

Even more simply, the answer to why God didn't create a world without Hell could be simply that he did, but we messed it up and created Hell in our hearts.

8. An eighth objection is that Hell seems contrary not only to love and mercy, but even to justice. The punishment does not seem to fit the crime: infinite and eternal punishments for finite and temporal crimes.

First, the relation between earthly choices and eternal rewards and punishments is not like the relation between crimes and the length of prison sentences, but like the relation between a foundation and a building. So if eternity is not quantitative, we can't calculate the quantity of eternal punishment.

The second objection says it's unjust to have infinite punishments for finite crimes. But Hell's punishments would have to be finite in intensity, not infinite. The formula for justice is "the punishment fits the crime," and that implies that both crime and punishment are finite, because "fits the crime" means "proportionate to the crime," and all proportion is finite. Only God is infinite.

Third, the defender of Hell could answer the objection that Hell's punishments are too intense for their crimes by saying that the intense images, like fire, are just that: images that are meant to suggest something far worse than the literal misinterpretation of those images. The punishment *is* the crime come to fruition.

Fourth, the believer could reply that if you understood the meaning of just two terms you would not say Hell's punishment didn't fit sin's crime. The two terms are "God" and "sin." Sin designates not just a violation of a rule or a law but a negative relationship with God, a deliberate divorce from God. So, the believer would say, if you object to Hell as too severe a punishment for sin, you do not understand what sin is.

9. A ninth objection might be that Hell is ridiculously overpopulated. Most Jews, Christians, and Muslims have traditionally believed that

more people go to Hell than to Heaven. Jesus seems to teach that when he says that the way to Hell is wide and that many find it, but the way to Heaven is narrow and only few find it. But this would be a divine defeat: more souls for Satan than for God.

The objection that Hell is overpopulated seems to assume the premise that life is a game played between God and the Devil, and the one who ends up with the most souls wins. That premise is not part of the religious hypothesis that's in question.

And how can we judge when Hell is "overpopulated"? By what standard? It's like the problem of evil: How much evil is too much to be compatible with the goodness of God? The only two possible answers are either that any evil, and any damned soul, refutes God, or that no amount of evil, and no amount of damned souls, does. We naturally feel that at some finite point it just becomes too much. But this is only feeling, and we can't translate it into reason.

Also, we simply do not know Hell's population. Many may mean simply too many.

10. A tenth and final objection to Hell is practical. What are the results of believing it? "By their fruits you shall know them"—if we apply this principle to beliefs as well as persons, we should be suspicious of Hell. Hell has produced such fear and hate and despair and oppression that it fairly cries out that it was made in fear and hate and despair and the desire to oppress and control people.

The defender might first question the objector's implicit assumption that those who believe in Hell *want* it to exist, as if doctrines were not objective facts but subjective personal desires.

It's certainly true that the doctrine has been used to oppress and control people. But any idea, true or false, can be misused. That does not prove it is false.

The objector might argue that his case is much stronger because the main result of believing in Hell is fear, and fear is harmful. But the defender could reply that when there are real dangers, a lack of fear is more harmful than fear.

The fact that Hell produces fear could even be used by the defender as an argument for the existence of Hell. An innate, natural desire always corresponds to a real object. Since we fear to lose whatever we desire to have, and desire to lose whatever we fear to have, then we have a natural desire for Heaven, and correlative to this is a natural fear of Hell. The conclusion is that both are real.

But is there an innate fear of Hell? We find the fear expressed in many different religions, cultures, places, and times, so it does seem universal and innate. But do we find it in ourselves? Isn't the thing we fear the most in death the possibility of Hell? You must answer that question for yourself.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How does the idea of God as pure love seem to contradict the idea of Hell?
2. How does the premise of predestination work against the belief in Hell?

Suggested Reading

Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno*. New York: Everyman's Library, 1995.

Other Books of Interest

Lewis, C.S. *The Problem of Pain*. Chapter 8: "Hell." San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.

———. *The Screwtape Letters*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.

Lecture 11: Testing the Different Truth-Claims of Different Religions

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Huston Smith's *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*.

In this lecture, we will test the truth-claims of four specific central ideas of four religions. My intention is not to prove what is true and what is false, but to show how one might test such claims made by religions in their scriptures.

The Four Religions and the Four Teachings

Hinduism: The experience of *mukti* is tested by psychological standards.

Judaism: The notion of the "chosen people" is tested by historical standards.

Islam: The claim of Muhammad and the Koran is tested by logical standards.

Christianity: Jesus' Resurrection is tested by textual standards.

Hinduism

The essential claim of Hinduism can be put in three words: in Sanskrit, *Tat Tvam Asi* (in English, "That Thou Art," or "That's what you are"). The "that" refers to Brahman, the one and only reality. The "thou" refers to Atman, the single self or soul that all of us are. The claim is really two: that your identity is Atman and that it is Brahman, that all human souls are one soul, or Atman; and that there is also no real distinction between Atman and Brahman; thus, ultimately there is only one being, Brahman. This is not the only form of Hinduism, but it is classical Hinduism, the Hinduism of the Vedas and the Upanishads.

Hinduism's claim is that ordinary thinking is deceptive, including ordinary logical thinking, because that thinking assumes real dualities and distinctions, especially between subject and object. The claim is that all of these dualisms are ultimately illusory.

So the claim is in principle not provable or disprovable by ordinary consciousness, with its dualisms. The part of the claim that we can think about, however, is the claim that even the dualism of thinker and objective reality is not ultimately true. There is only Brahman, and so there is no falsehood, no nonconformity between Brahman and anything else. So there is no objective truth, because there are no objects.

So if *Tat Tvam Asi* were true, we could not prove it true, because proof presupposes all sorts of dualisms that Hinduism claims are only appearances. For if Brahman is the thinker behind every thought, then false thoughts too are true thoughts because they are his thoughts, or its thoughts.

But then the thoughts that *Tat Tvam Asi* is not true and that Brahman is not true are also true. So it amounts to a denial of the law of noncontradiction. All thoughts, even contradictory thoughts, are true.

It's important to see how different this claim is from the claim made by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim mystics. There, God is the transcendent creator, and we are not God, so we can be wrong. But in the East, God does not create man and the world, God *is* man and the world, and so divine thought, mystical experience, does not merely transcend human thought, but invalidates it.

Judaism

The fundamental claim of religious Judaism is for God's word, God's law, God's Torah, which was given to a concrete historical people, the Jews, whom he chose to reveal himself to through prophets.

There are two common criticisms of this claim. The first is often called the scandal of particularity. Why would the one God of all creation be so narrow as to choose just one people and give to them the only infallible Law and the only infallible prophets? Isn't this an obvious case of arrogant provincialism?

The answer to that is quite simple: No. The Jewish scriptures claim that God has to keep reminding this people that they are no better than any other people, and that God did not choose them for any worthiness on their part.

Why then did God choose one people? The answer is quite simple and obvious: the only way we learn is by particularity, by contrast. Universals simply do not register on our minds. The only way to teach all peoples is through one people.

Also, the idea that the Jews are God's chosen people turns out to be just the opposite of the arrogant idea it seems to be. For the Jews *are* different. Maybe that's one reason why other peoples hate them. And even though every tyrant from Pharaoh to Hitler tries to exterminate them, they thrive. By every ordinary law of history they shouldn't be alive, or thrive, and yet this people has contributed a spectacularly disproportionate share of Western civilization's heritage. Either God gets the credit or they do. Their idea that God chose them is really the humblest possible interpretation of the data.

The second objection to the Jewish claim is the objection to the very idea of a divine revelation. The most popular image for the relationship between religions is that each is a different road up the same mountain. Judaism, and the Christian and Islamic religions that emerged from it, rejects that image. The very first of the Ten Commandments is exclusive: It forbids idolatry, the worship of any other god.

One objection might be to the idea of the universal, infinite God speaking to a finite group of human beings as if he were a human being. But this can be answered by noting that all language about things we do not sense must be analogical, metaphorical, or symbolic, not literal.

Islam

The heart of the religion is "islam," a word that means both surrender, or submission, and peace—the peace that comes only from total surrender to Allah. Allah means simply the God, or the one God.

But both Islam and the one God are not specific to Islam. Jews, Muslims, and Christians would all say that that is central to all true religion. Is Muhammad, then, the unique feature of Islam? His claim to be a prophet, his account of how he was called by the angel of God, is similar to the claim of Jewish prophets. And most of his teachings, especially his moral teachings, are identical or similar to Jewish and Christian teachings.

It is the Koran that is unique to Islam, which claims the Koran is infallible and perfect, and that the two earlier religions, Judaism and Christianity, have scriptures with errors in them.

There are only three possibilities about the Koran: it is either superhuman, human, or subhuman. That is, it is either from God, from man, or from the Devil.

Muslims say it is superhuman, Islam's only miracle, the divine book. The earthly Koran is the very same book as the heavenly Koran, the Koran in the mind of God. Muslims believe about the Koran something like what Christians believe about Jesus: that this one book is simultaneously human and divine.

It cannot be simply human, because if it is merely from Muhammad's reason, not from divine revelation, then this illiterate camel driver was the greatest philosopher in the history of the world, far greater than Aristotle, who discovered three or four of the attributes of God by reason alone. Muhammad discovered ninety-nine. Also, if it is only human, Muhammad is a liar, because he claims he received it from God through the direct dictation of the archangel Gabriel.

But it seems it cannot be demonic, either, because most of it is very enlightened theology and morality: the abolition of polytheism, idolatry, slavery, tribal vengeance, and cruelty unrestrained by law. For the rule of force it substituted the rule of justice. Most non-Muslims disagree about some of its laws, but the Koran certainly does not look like the Devil's work.

But there is a fourth possible explanation of the Koran: It could have been divinely revealed but mixed with error, which is exactly what the Koran itself says of the Jewish and Christian scriptures.

Christianity

When we come to Christianity, we find that the whole religion centers on one man whom the Gospels claim to be the divine son of God and the world's only savior. The Gospels give, as reasons for believing this astonishing idea, his many miracles and his resurrection from the dead.

In arguing pro and con the literal resurrection of Jesus, we should not presuppose anything that depends on religious faith, such as the infallibility or non-infallibility of the Bible, but only public data, such as the text of the New Testament and the fact of the Church's existence and what it teaches and claims.

There are five possible theories as to what happened on the first Easter Sunday. One is the Christian belief that Jesus literally rose from the dead. A second is that Jesus never died on the cross, but was in a swoon or trance that was mistaken for death. A third is that he died but didn't rise, and his apostles simply lied. A fourth is that he died but didn't rise, and his apostles

sincerely believed they saw him but they were hallucinating. A fifth theory says they were mythmakers, and that the resurrection story was not meant to be interpreted literally but symbolically.

The first theory seems at first the least likely. The only convincing argument for this belief would seem to be a refutation of all other possibilities.

The swoon theory seems very weak. For one thing, Jesus could never have survived crucifixion. Romans had to have certain medical proof that the condemned man was dead. That's why they broke the legs of the two thieves crucified with Jesus, to hasten their death, but they didn't do that to Jesus because he was already dead. For another thing, how could armed Roman guards at the tomb have been overpowered by a swooning semi-corpse? And how could a man in a swoon move the great stone at the door of the tomb?

Finally, if Jesus awoke from a swoon, where did he go? There is absolutely no trail, no claims, no stories or myths or fantasies, even, about Jesus after his crucifixion.

The conspiracy theory seems more promising. Why couldn't the Gospel writers have made up the whole story? Because they were almost all martyred for it. Martyrdom doesn't prove the truth of the belief you die for, but it certainly proves your sincerity in believing it.

Also, if it was a lie, Jesus was dead, and both the Jews and the Romans would have been able to produce the corpse to prove it. And if the disciples stole the body, how did they overpower armed Roman guards while they were on duty? And how did they roll away the stone?

Let's examine the third possibility, that it was a sincere hallucination. If you saw a man who had just been executed walking around and talking, wouldn't you think it likely that you were hallucinating? But then why didn't they? According to the Gospels, they did. And to prove that he was not a hallucination, he let them touch him, and he ate their food.

Also, there were far too many witnesses for a hallucination. Hallucinations are private and individual. Jesus appeared separately to many different people on many different occasions. And hallucinations never behave as Jesus did in the Gospel story. They do not eat; they are not touchable. Figments of your imagination do not hold profound, extended conversations with you. Also, if Jesus' corpse had still been in the tomb, the disciples could not have believed in the hallucination.

So the most likely alternative to a real resurrection is a myth. That's the most popular position today, even among some Christian theologians. Myth was a common form of religious literature in that time. Fantastic and exaggerated mythic accounts of a great religious founder, complete with stories of miracles, often grew up and replaced the simpler historical facts in people's minds once the facts of the founder had been forgotten.

The reasons against the myth theory are mainly textual. For one thing, the style of the Gospels is radically and clearly different from the style of myths. They look like, and claim to be, eyewitness description. If they aren't, they are the world's most successful realistic fantasy.

One small detail that distinguishes the Gospels from myths is that the first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection were women. In first-century Judaism, women had no legal right to serve as witnesses. If the empty tomb was an invention, the inventors would certainly not have made it to be discovered by women.

Another problem is that there was not enough time for myth to develop. Several generations have to pass before the invented mythic elements can be mistakenly believed to be the historical facts. There is simply no example anywhere in history of a great myth or legend arising around a historical figure and being widely believed within thirty years of that figure's death.

Also, there is a simple textual proof that the New Testament is not myth that Christians confused with literal fact: It specifically distinguishes the two and repudiates the mythic interpretation. Because it explicitly says it is not myth, if it is myth then it is a deliberate lie. So the dilemma still stands: The apostles were either deceivers or deceived, not mythmakers halfway in between.

The skeptic can still offer some more general reasons to justify his skepticism. History is not an exact science, and documents prove nothing with certainty because anyone can lie in print and anything can be forged.

But no one doubts that Julius Caesar became emperor, or that Socrates drank the hemlock, or that St. Augustine was converted; why doubt Jesus' resurrection? The textual evidence is much stronger for Jesus than for anyone else.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What is the essential claim of Hinduism?
2. What is the scandal of particularity?

Suggested Reading

Smith, Huston. *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.

Other Books of Interest

Flew, Anthony, and Gary Habermas. *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?* New York: HarperCollins, 1987.

Habermas, Gary, and Michael R. Licona. *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004.

Lecture 12: Comparative Religions

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Peter Kreeft's *Between Heaven and Hell*.

Religion is usually described by sociologists and psychologists as manifesting three facets: a belief system, directions on how to live, and some spiritual or religious activities to perform, both privately and publicly. The three are often called creed, code, and cult, or words, works, and worship.

Almost all the problems in the philosophy of religion come in the first of these three areas. Religions make truth-claims, and these seem to contradict each other, and by the laws of basic common sense and logic, two ideas that contradict each other can't possibly both be true.

There is little or no such problem with the second dimension of religion, the moral dimension, for two reasons: First, all the religions of the world agree about morality. No religion, and in fact no culture, has ever taught a radically different morality. No morality, religious or nonreligious, approves murder, rape, robbery, bearing false witness, dishonor to parents, adultery, or selfish greed. The Ten Commandments are nearly universal.

A second reason philosophy of religion finds little to argue about in thinking about religious morality is this. What makes morality *religious* is its connection with God, or something like God. In Western religions, God is a moralist. His will *commands* moral behavior. This is called the Divine Command Theory.

The third area of religion is also not a subject for philosophical dispute, for two reasons. First, it's not about general principles but about particular actions, which are not claimed to be *true* or even morally *obligatory*, but simply good and beautiful and fitting things to do. Second, most religions are pluralistic and relativistic in their private and public religious exercises; you can choose the ones that fit your personality best.

So that leaves us with the first area, truth-claims, or theology. And here there seem to be major contradictions.

First, either we can know something about religious truth, or not. Agnosticism says not.

Second, there is some sort of God or gods, or not. Atheism says not.

Third, if there is, there is either only one God, or not. Polytheism says not.

Fourth, if there is only one God, either you can say that in words, there is a word for this ultimate being, or not. Buddhism says not.

Fifth, if you can put it into words, this God either created the universe and is transcendent to it, or not. Hinduism says not.

Sixth, if God is transcendent, he either revealed himself to people in the universe he created by establishing some religion, or not. Deism says not.

Seventh, if he established some religion, the three main claims are the religions established by Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. In other words, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.

All seven of these issues are serious, and amount to contradictions, it seems. Or do they? There are three positions in the field called "comparative religions," that is, the comparing of religions. They are called exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Exclusivism claims that religions are at least partly exclusive of each other, that their truth-claims really do contradict each other. But inclusivism claims that the truth-claims that apparently contradict each other don't really, that they are paradoxes rather than contradictions. The claim is that when you look deeply enough, or look with an enlightened consciousness, you will see the unity of apparently contradictory religions, that all the religions of the world are like different roads to the same mountaintop.

Pluralism is a third position, which sees difficulties in both exclusivism and inclusivism, so it takes a more agnostic position and says that we can't know whether religions really contradict each other, as the exclusivist says, or not, as the inclusivist says.

Pluralism is also often, but not always, connected with a theory of truth that's associated with that vague philosophical position called postmodernism: that truth is plural, and relative, and not common and public and universal and objective.

There are reasons for and against each of the three positions.

Exclusivism seems almost self-evidently true, especially when dealing with religions that speak the same language: that is, when Jews, Christians, and Muslims argue with each other or with atheists.

Perhaps there's not real contradiction, but misunderstanding, when they argue with Buddhists or Hindus. If a Jew said to his rabbi, a Christian to his priest, or a Muslim to his imam, that he discovered that he was God, the clergyman would throw up his hands in holy horror at the blasphemy; but when the Hindu says that to his guru, the guru smiles and says, "Congratulations. You finally found out." But when the Hindu says "I am God," perhaps he does not mean the same thing that the Jew, the Christian, or the Muslim means by "I" or by "God." Perhaps. That issue is far too mysterious and deep to go into here. So let's just look at contradictions among the three Western religions. Either the Torah got it wrong or the Koran got it wrong about God giving his primary blessing to Isaac or Ishmael. Either Jesus is the son of God or he isn't. Either the Koran, or the new Testament, or the Torah is the supreme and infallible divine revelation. It can't be all three.

So what's the problem with exclusivism? Not a logical one, but a practical and personal one. Religion isn't supposed to divide us, because it's about the one ultimate reality. It's certainly not supposed to foster hate and war. But exclusivism does.

Exclusivists tend to distrust comparative religions as leading to relativism and indifference, like fooling around with many women at the same time without a commitment or a marriage to any one of them.

The most serious charge against exclusivism is that it is exclusive not just about truth but about salvation. For religions exist not just to satisfy our

curiosity about what is true, but for salvation, and so the exclusivist tends to believe that only one religion can save you.

The exclusivists maintain that the idea that Christ is the only savior does not entail the conclusion that Christians are the only saved. Though most “fundamentalist” Christians believe that, most other Christians do not. In fact, their belief that Jesus is God and not just a man is what allows them to hold a “liberal” or “ecumenical” hope that many non-Christians are saved.

The Christian claim about the universality of Jesus is, surprisingly, somewhat similar to the claim Hindus make for Brahman: that he is both transcendent and present (though present as a literally incarnate human being, not just as the inspirer of many prophets, or saints, or avatars).

What would be the *practical* solution to the problem of comparative religions for the exclusivist, the inclusivist, and the pluralist?

The exclusivist has to believe that the best solution is for everyone to know the truth, so that means conversion of everyone in the world to the one and only totally true religion. Logically, this makes sense: If a thing is true, the very best thing is for everyone to believe it. But practically, this has obvious problems: Not only is it not going to happen, it’s far too utopian, but the attempt to make it happen by trying to convert people naturally offends people who have opposing beliefs, and it often offends them so much that they will kill or die for it. Although exclusivism doesn’t *necessarily* lead to religious wars, religious wars necessarily presuppose exclusivism.

The inclusivist believes in world religious unification, not by conversion but by universal agreement, either exoterically, by everyone having the mystical experience of unity, or else exoterically, by everyone agreeing to a single lowest-common-denominator set of teachings.

The exclusivist concentrates on religion’s truth-claims, or theological claims, and sees them as logically contradictory. The inclusivist concentrates on religion’s moral claims, its claims to make you better, happier, more peaceful, and good, and notes that all religions have already an impressive agreement there. And the pluralist concentrates on religion’s claim to *do* something with us, to plug us into God, or Nirvana, by sacraments or yoga or some way of communicating not just truth and moral law but *salvation*.

Every religion claims to give us “salvation,” or deliverance from some thing and into something opposite.

In Christianity, the very name Jesus means Savior or God saves. Christianity claims that Jesus saves us from *sin* and into *salvation*. Sin means separation from God, and salvation means reunion or reconciliation with God, both in this life and after death.

In both Judaism and Islam, God also promises salvation, or deliverance of his faithful people from all their enemies. This can be interpreted as literally physical enemies and also symbolically, as spiritual enemies. Muslims also say all men are sinners and need to repent and to hope in the mercy of Allah, whose primary name is “the Merciful,” to save them from their just punishment and take them to Paradise. The primary meaning of jihad in Islam is inner struggle against evil. It also means a just war literally and physically.

Eastern religions don’t have the notion of a God who is a person with a will

and a moral law, so they don't have the same notion of sin as a voluntary, willed, moral separation from God, or the notion of salvation from sin. Hinduism claims to deliver us from ignorance of our true identity into the knowledge that ultimately we are all one spirit, Atman, and that that is the supreme reality, or God, Brahman.

Buddha, like Jesus, tells you what he claims to save you from in his very name: Buddha means the man who woke up. He claims to save us from sleep, dream, illusion, and darkness by teaching Enlightenment, Nirvana, a transformation of consciousness as radical as the one we experience every morning when we wake up literally.

Confucianism claims to deliver us from disharmony into harmony with each other, and Taoism promises harmony with Tao, the way of ultimate reality.

So each religion promises salvation, or deliverance. But the Eastern version does not usually include a clear affirmation of individual life after death, as Western religions do. There is also no eternal hell in Eastern religions, so there is not the absolute drama that you find in the West.

The three Western religions do not all give the same answer to the question of what you have to do to get into Heaven and avoid Hell. But they do have fairly similar notions of the nature of both. Heaven is the presence of God, the all-good Creator, and thus infinite joy. Hell is the opposite: the eternal absence of all good and all joy.

Perhaps the right way to solve the dispute between the exclusivist, the inclusivist, and the pluralist is an exclusive way. The three theories seem logically exclusive of each other. Pluralism says we can't know whether religions are contradictory, just that they are different, and both exclusivism and inclusivism disagrees and says we *can* know. And then they go on to disagree with each other about whether the answer, which we can know, is exclusivism or inclusivism.

But perhaps the answer to the dispute among the three theories is that they don't ultimately exclude each other, that we need all of them, that they are different facets of the same diamond, and that the more we look, the more we will find this unity and mutual dependence among them, the more of the same thing—truth—we will find in all of them. Perhaps we will have to include even inclusivism.

Or perhaps the answer to the dispute has to be a pluralistic answer. Perhaps we have to simply be pluralistic about pluralism versus the other two theories. Perhaps we shall have to be so relativistic and tolerant that we tolerate even the intolerance of the exclusivist and of the mystical absolutism of the inclusivist.

The pluralist believes the only solution to the problem of world religious disunity is to agree to differ. He believes not in conversion or in mystical convergence but in tolerance. That's the only thing that's worked so far, he says.

The exclusivist will disagree and say that conversion has worked to bring millions, even billions, to Christian truth, or to Islamic truth, or to Buddhist truth. The inclusivist will also disagree and say that mystical experience has worked to bring many to the truth of ultimate unity. And both will say that the

world has never seen religious tolerance work on a massive scale, because religion is too passionate for that; that it's indifferentism.

The pluralist can be an agnostic about comparative religion without being an agnostic about religion itself. He is not an agnostic about religion itself because he believes God has spoken in his religion, and he is an agnostic about comparative religions because God has not spoken in any religion about any other religion.

Socrates' agnosticism didn't stop him from questioning and philosophizing; just the opposite, that was what made him do it. For if you're dogmatically certain that you have the truth, you won't ask any questions, because you already think you know the answers, and if you're dogmatically certain that no one can ever find the truth, if you're a dogmatic skeptic, you also won't ask any questions, because you think you know it's bound to be a wild goose chase.

Jesus' promise to seekers seems very much in the Socratic spirit: "Seek and you shall find." The implication is that if you don't seek, you won't find. And religion is about the things most worth finding, and therefore most worth seeking.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What is meant by Christian exclusivism?
2. Why is it relevant that most of the authors of the Bible were Jewish?

Suggested Reading

Kreeft, Peter. *Between Heaven and Hell*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982.

Other Books of Interest

Callaway, Tucker N. *Zen Way – Jesus Way*. North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 1976.

Damascene, Hieromonk. *Christ the Eternal Tao*. Platina, CA: St. Herman Press, 2004.

Easwaran, Eknath, ed. *The Upanishads*. Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2000.

Schuon, Frithjof. *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*. Adyar, India: Quest Books, 1984.

Smith, Huston. *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.

Lecture 13: What Would Socrates Think?

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Peter Kreeft's *Socrates Meets Jesus: History's Greatest Questioner Confronts the Claims of Christ*.

Socrates, Jesus, and Buddha were probably the three most influential individuals who ever lived. The only comparable competition these three might have is Muhammad, but his theological and moral teachings are similar to that of Jesus and the Jewish prophets, and I want to compare and put into dialog three fundamentally different religious options in this lecture: Western theism, Eastern mysticism, and philosophical agnosticism.

Buddha is the single most striking example of the Eastern way. He is the Enlightenment's most famous teacher and most perfect example. He himself did not rely on teachings, and he refused to address any of the philosophical questions that all Hindu teachers addressed, like whether matter and spirit were one thing or two, and whether the world was eternal or not. He called them "questions not tending to edification" and told a disciple who demanded answers to these questions that he was like a dying man shot with a poisoned arrow who would not let the doctor save his life until he first satisfied his curiosity about who shot him. "The man would die before the arrow was out. And you are that man." The poisoned arrow is the egotism, or selfish desire, or greed, that we all have that keeps us dead to the religious life of enlightenment, and the doctor who can cure us is Buddha, the "man who woke up." He is awake; we are dreaming.

Jesus is probably the best known person who ever lived for two reasons. First, there are more Christians—over two billion—than believers in any other religion. And second, Christians revere him more than Buddhists revere Buddha or Muslims revere Muhammad: they believe he is literally divine, not merely human.

These are two shocking claims: that Buddha was the man who woke up, and Jesus was the man who was God. To think about them we need the man who questioned everything, Socrates.

Socrates was not just a famous philosopher; he was the philosopher *par excellence*. All subsequent philosophy depends on him. Socrates was no one's disciple; he was almost like a new species of man. Buddha appealed to our inner light and Jesus claimed to be the light from Heaven, and Socrates focused the light of logic on every idea, including religious ideas.

Let's try to imagine what Socrates would say if confronted with Jesus and Buddha. Both Buddha and Jesus say apparently illogical things. And Socrates would certainly have a difficult time believing that all ordinary consciousness is illusion or that this man is God.

Buddha would have no trouble summarizing his teaching with the Four Noble Truths.

The First Noble Truth is the truth of suffering, *dukkha*. To live is to suffer. Socrates knew this problem and had his own unique solution to it: Happiness depends on virtue, and virtue in turn depends on wisdom, the knowledge of the true good. All unhappiness comes from evil, and all evil comes from ignorance. If we knew, without doubt, that virtue always led to happiness, then we would always be virtuous, because we always want to be happy. So for Socrates the key to virtue and thus to happiness lay in knowledge, a kind of knowledge that unhappy people do not have.

When Buddha goes on to his Second Noble Truth, Socrates would probably not agree. Socrates says the origin of all unhappiness is lack of moral virtue and intellectual wisdom; Buddha says *desire* is the cause of suffering: *tanha* is the cause of *dukkha*. *Tanha* means not just evil desires but desire itself, any desire, even innocent and natural desires like the desire to continue to live or the desire to increase your knowledge.

Buddha would try to explain to Socrates, very rationally, that if unhappiness is the gap between desire and satisfaction, the only two possible roads to happiness are the increase of satisfactions or the decrease of desires. And everyone in the world has been walking the path of trying to increase satisfactions without ever succeeding. Isn't it reasonable to try the path of decreasing desire?

Socrates would probably disagree with Buddha's diagnosis. He would agree that selfish desire makes us ignorant and unhappy, but he would not see that as the *only* cause of our unhappiness. Socrates would see Buddha's diagnosis as too simple, and thus his prescription too radical: killing the ego to cure egotism.

Buddha would reply that it is not killing the ego but seeing through it as illusion. In Western thought, whether religious or secular, the ego is real and is the cause of egotism. But Buddha's analysis is the opposite: The ego is not real and therefore cannot be a real cause. It is egotism that produces the illusion of the ego, rather than a real ego that produces egotism.

What then produces egotism? Buddha says that the strands, or *skhandas*, of consciousness are like strands of rope: they bunch together at birth, producing the illusion of a single substantial self, and then come unknotted again at death: a non-Socratic answer to the Socratic question, "know thyself."

Buddha's Third Noble Truth, the truth of Nirvana, the extinction of suffering through the extinction of desire, follows with inexorable logic. To remove the effect, all you have to do is to remove the cause. Conclusion: Nirvana, or extinction: extinction of all suffering through extinction of all desire.

The Fourth Noble Truth, the prescription, is the Noble Eightfold Path. The path is the practice of virtue and the overcoming of selfishness, a process of egotism-reduction.

Socrates would not disagree with Buddha's principle of causality, but I think he would not agree that egotism can exist without an ego, or cause the illusion of the ego, or that the ego could be an illusion. Second, he would not agree that selfish desire is the cause of ignorance of our true identity; he would say that ignorance of our true identity is the cause of selfish desire. Third, Socrates' prescription for wisdom is to live according to reason. That is

not Buddha's prescription. Reason generates concepts. Concepts go together with desires. Both reason and desire have finite objects. Buddha wants us to transcend both.

Socrates would probably declare himself agnostic about Buddha's claims about Nirvana, and Buddha would probably not try to force him but just let his time and his karma come.

I will not even try to imagine how a conversation between Jesus and Buddha would go, but I think we can imagine one between Socrates and Jesus.

As with the conversation with Buddha, it would focus on the most outrageous claim, and for Jesus that would surely be the claim to be divine. Socrates would first try to understand what this idea means before looking at any reasons there might be for believing it, because if the idea contains a self-contradiction, then it must be false. The God Jesus spoke of was the one perfect, eternal, immortal, all-wise, all-powerful, invisible creator-God of Judaism. But a man is an imperfect, temporal, mortal, ignorant, weak, and visible creature. It seems like an obviously self-contradictory concept.

Concepts that are opposite to each other, like love and hate, or even exclusive of each other, like visible and invisible, could be predicated of different aspects of the same entity, such as a human being: My body is visible; my mind, my thinking, and my character are invisible. So the claim that one person is both human and divine at the same time is not self-contradictory by its logical form alone.

But though believable, the idea still seems highly unlikely. I think Socrates would insist on spending a lot of time defining it clearly before arguing for or against it. To define anything has two steps: First, put it in a general class, a genus, and then distinguish it from other things in that genus. A genus categorizes it. So what category would Socrates use for Jesus?

Socrates might have learned from Buddha about the Hindu category of Avatars. An avatar is an appearance on earth, in human form, of the supreme God for the purpose of communicating his wisdom to man. But classifying Jesus as an avatar won't work for two reasons. First, the claim for Jesus is that he is the *only* incarnation of God. Second, avatars are mere appearances; they are divine but not really human. In the Gospels, many doubt Jesus' divinity, but no one doubts his humanity.

Another category might be that of guru, enlightened master, awakened one, like Buddha. But Buddha forbade anyone to divinize him, while Jesus did not. Buddhist gurus don't speak of God, but Hindu gurus do. Why couldn't Socrates define Jesus as a Hindu guru?

The reason is simple: Because Jesus was a Jew. What the Jews meant by "God" was strikingly different than what all the gurus meant.

Socrates might try a third category. The category of a *tulku* in Tibetan Buddhism is somewhere between the categories of avatar and guru. A tulku is like a radiator of divine energies. But this category would share the defects of both the avatar and the guru without avoiding any of them.

Still another category for Jesus might be that of a prophet. This is much more likely historically: It is a Jewish category, and Jesus was a Jew. But

prophets are not divine. Jesus called himself “more than a prophet.” I think Socrates would practice the art of listening well enough to avoid the comfortable compromise of changing the meaning of the fundamental claim of any religion before arguing about it.

I won't speculate what Jesus would say to Socrates, but some Christians would argue this way: How can you claim to know so much about God that you know in advance that God would never become man, or could never become man? Where is your Socratic humility?

I think Socrates would consider that a dangerous argument, one that could be used to justify almost any idea. Socrates would probably ask what that *evidence* for this idea could possibly be, and he would look for it seriously. He'd probably think it unlikely that two billion people are all so stupid as to believe an idea that is almost self-contradictory for no other reason than that there's no certainty that it's not true. What is the evidence *for* it?

The simplest and most obvious answer comes from the four Gospels. It's not mainly the miracles but the character and personality of Jesus. In the Gospels, his miracles did not convince his enemies, and most of his friends were persuaded by his character and his teaching more than by his miracles.

If I said what Jesus said, you would lock me up as a madman. “I am God; I am your Savior; worship me; entrust your soul to me; I have all the authority in Heaven and Earth; I alone can forgive you sins”—who in his right mind would believe that, and give up everything for it, suffer martyrdom for it? No one—if I taught it.

So if Socrates never met Jesus, I don't see much chance he would ever believe the idea, any more than the Buddhist idea. He was so skeptical and agnostic that he found it difficult enough to believe even ordinary ideas other people believed; how much more these two extraordinary ideas? If he did meet these two people, however, or even disciples of either man who had caught enough of the spirit of their master to rub off a little bit, what would Socrates think then?

Either they tell the truth, or not. Buddha says not just that some standard ideas are false but all of them. Jesus says he is not just a prophet, but God. If he believes that, and it isn't true, he is obviously more insane than I am if I believe I am a hamburger, or the archangel Gabriel.

But both personalities make such hypotheses extremely unlikely. We have never seen a liar as moral and trustable as these two, or a lunatic as wise and creative.

So all three hypotheses seem equally unlikely: truth, lie, or lunacy. Yet these are the only three logically possible hypotheses.

I think Socrates would listen. And he would think, and wonder, and ponder, and question, and go over the data again and again from as many different angles as possible. I think he was too honest to either ignore the question or to give a quick, easy, comfortable answer. He was a fanatic about the truth. But that did not mean that finding the truth was the very first thing for him. Looking for it was.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What are the Four Noble Truths of Buddha?
2. What would Socrates probably think is the cause of selfish desire?

Suggested Reading

Kreeft, Peter. *Socrates Meets Jesus: History's Greatest Questioner Confronts the Claims of Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002.

Other Books of Interest

Callaway, Tucker N. *Zen Way, Jesus Way*. North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 1993.

Kreeft, Peter. *Between Heaven and Hell*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982.

Lecture 14: Religious Experience

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

In this lecture, we will try to understand something of the essential religious experience of each of the world's major religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—not the abstract, common essence of religious experience—that's as hard to define as religion itself—but different religious experiences unique to each religion.

Hinduism has many varieties, but the goal of all of them is the experience of what we might call "the beyond within." The West has focused most of its attention on conquering the world without by science and technology. But India has explored the seas and continents of the self with as much interest as we have directed toward the seas and continents without: a kind of spiritual technology for changing our consciousness and desires rather than changing the objects of consciousness and desire in the world, to create a Heaven in the soul rather than a Heaven on Earth. These spiritual technologies are called yogas, and the one most natural to the philosopher is jnana yoga, the yoga of thought.

What is this? What self have you found?

The objects of awareness are always many, the subject is always one. What is that? It's not any one of the objects of awareness. It's indefinable. It is nothing and everything: nothing because it's no one thing and everything because it becomes whatever is given to it. It's the one thinker of every thought. And thou art that, *tat tvam asi*.

Now this little imaginative trip was not jnana yoga; it was talking about jnana yoga. It was verbal and conceptual. If you actually took the trip within, if you followed your actual thought-energy and arrived at that non-objectifiable subject by your own direct experience, that would be a Hindu religious experience, not a psychological experience. You have discovered God, the God who is neither the finite ego you call yourself, nor any possible finite object of that ego.

The experience is not usually emotional at all. But you suddenly find you have unlimited mental energy. You may have gotten to this state by meditation, but now that mental movement stops. There's nothing to do, and no desire to do it, but there's no boredom either because there's no consciousness of time. There's just perfect peace. This is the mind of God.

The Hindu religious experience I have described is only one kind of Hinduism, and it's not only Hindu; it's found among Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, even agnostics. It is interpreted differently in different religions, but the experience itself is universal. It comes from human nature, not from Hinduism; Hindus are just its oldest map makers.

When we turn to Buddhism, we find that this religion is like an arrow aimed at a single target: Nirvana. The target seems to be the same experience as in

Hinduism, but the means to this end is amazingly simple. Buddhism is a distilled-essence, do-it-yourself road to this transformation of consciousness.

Even the name for it is simple: “Buddha” means “the man who woke up.” Nirvana is to what we call waking consciousness as that is to a dream. From the viewpoint of Nirvana, ordinary waking consciousness is a dream.

But Buddhism is not theoretical, so its doctrine of no self, no atman, does not contradict Hinduism in the same way as the doctrine of atheism contradicts theism. Buddhism is purely practical; everything in it, including its doctrines, exists simply to save us from two things: illusion and suffering.

The essential Buddhist experience is the total peace and fearlessness that comes when the dream stops, when you see yourself and all other things to be mere images projected on a movie screen. The experience is like a little child in a movie theater for the first time. At first she’s terrified of the man-eating tigers and guns and bullets and blood that she saw on the screen because she thought they were real. Then suddenly she realizes that they’re not real, they’re only images projected onto the screen.

This experience sounds like the opposite of the Hindu one: Where the Hindu discovers he is infinitely more than he thought he was, the Buddhist discovers that he is infinitely less. But those who have actually arrived, both Hindu and Buddhist, say that it is the same experience in two different language systems.

Confucianism is as worldly as Buddhism is unworldly. Though Confucius’s ultimate sanction is “the will of Heaven,” Confucianism is agnostic about Heaven, the afterlife, and the gods. It’s a religion of this world, of detailed social and family roles and duties, and moral virtues: an elaborate dance, or a musical fugue. Its central experience is one of harmony.

If Confucianism is like a classical fugue, Taoism is like a Romantic lyric. Lao Tzu, its founder, turned away from the artifice of Confucian teachings and rules, and turned away—literally—from complexity, and cities, and civilization: He rode out of China on a water buffalo, but before the gatekeeper at the Great Wall would let him through he demanded that Lao Tzu share his wisdom with the world, so he wrote eighty-one short poems as his exit pass and rode off into the wilderness never to be seen again. Those eighty-one poems are the *Tao Te Ching*, the second most widely read and translated book in the world, next to the Bible.

The essential religious experience for Lao Tzu is also harmony, but harmony with nature, or with the invisible way, or Tao, of nature that is indefinable but has a definite personality.

The Tao exists on three levels: It is the way of Heaven, the eternal way, and it is also the way of earth, the way of time, the way all things emerge, like babies, from nature’s womb—and also the way to live according to this pattern, by letting the power of the way flow through you, being its womb. It is like cosmic surfing.

When we turn West and begin with Judaism, we find deep similarities and deep dissimilarities with Eastern religions like Taoism. What is dissimilar is the experience of a God who is a person, an “I,” a transcendent other who created the universe, who gave a moral law, and who interacts with people in history, both individually and collectively.

What's similar is the nature or personality of this Jewish God, which is strangely selfless and giving and altruistic, like the Tao, but also just and demanding and morally righteous. And though nature shows his glory, he is transcendent to nature. He created it and comes into nature and the human mind from outside, impregnating nature with miracles and the human mind with divine inspiration and prophecies. In Judaism, nature is experienced as God's artifact. It is de-divinized, yet taken seriously.

And that's why the Jews, and their spiritual descendents, can take a scientific attitude toward nature. You don't do science or technology on God's body or on your dreams. It is no accident that science arose in the West, where the Greeks developed the logical methods and the Jews developed the religious attitude toward nature that allows science.

The same is true of history: In Judaism, it's not fate or karma that moves history, but human choices. Jews experience history, as well as nature, as demythologized, something to be judged rather than as the unalterable juggernaut that judges. Nations as well as individuals are judged by a higher law, God's law.

Paradoxically, the new religious experience for the Jews was the world's first nonreligious experience of nature and history. If history is a ship, Taoists see themselves as its sails, but Jews as its sailors. If God is a person, Taoists see him as a mother, Jews as a father.

The essential Jewish experience with God is one of personal dialog. When God named himself to Moses, from the burning bush, as "I AM," the human "I," the ego, was displaced, just as the ego is displaced in the Hindu and the Buddhist experience; but here it displaced into God. It is God that kicks the human ego off, not our own yoga. The religious Jew does not see religion as many human roads up the mountain to God, but as God's one road down the mountain to man. Jewish religious history is experienced first of all as the history of God's search for man, not man's search for God.

A religious Jew is not defined by creed but by practice, by observance of the Law. It is not essentially a transformation of consciousness, as in Hinduism and Buddhism, but of behavior, of the will's choices and the body's actions—all in response to God's will, in dialog with God, under God.

The Jew who changed the world the most was Jesus. He never told his followers to convert from Judaism to another religion. Instead, he said, "I came to fulfill the law and the prophets, not to destroy them." The foundational religious experience for Christians is the Jewish one.

He claimed to be the son of God, a claim neither Jews nor Muslims can accept, but his attitude to the God he called his father, as revealed in his prayers, was essentially the Jewish one: adoration, love, thanksgiving, praise, and total obedience to his will.

What did he claim to add to the Jewish religious experience, that is, to the Jewish relationship with God? In short, salvation from sin and death. The essential religious experience for a Christian is the experience of being saved, that is, loved by God and forgiven.

Christians also believe that Jesus rose from the dead—that's what they call the good news, or gospel, and the differences that belief makes to their reli-

gious experience is that it changes their attitude toward death; it assures them that this Jesus who saves them is alive and present.

Muslims worship the same God as Jews and Christians, and therefore share the same essential religious experience of an attitude of absolute humility, worship, adoration, and obedience to this God. Their word for it, "islam," means surrender, or submission, and the peace that ensues from it. The most strikingly distinctive feature of Muslim religious experience seems to be absolute awe to God, and out of this flows the demand to avoid even the remotest approaches to idolatry.

That's why Muslims find the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity not only logically but psychologically unacceptable: It seems very obvious to them that calling Jesus God is idolatry, and that calling God three persons and not just one is polytheism. The absolute sovereignty and perfection of God leaves no room for mediation, only surrender. The focus of Islam is not on religious experience but on God. It is not anthropocentric but totally theocentric.

When we compare the essential truth-claims of the different religions, they seem contradictory. Exclusivism seems correct. But when we compare their religious experiences, pluralism seems true. From the viewpoint of any one of these religions, the essential experience of each of the others appears very profound and precious.

All our previous lectures have focused on the first dimension, trying to understand and argue about concepts like God and life after death, and therefore they have all been argumentative. But every religion says that religious experience is even more central to religion than concepts, explanations, and arguments. The different religions then appear more like the colors in a spectrum than like sides in a war.

Can we now connect the experiential and the logical by asking logical questions of religious experience? One question philosophers ask is, What does it prove? Does religious experience prove anything about religion, in general or in particular? If not proof, what kind of evidence does religious experience give us for the truth of religion, both in general and in particular?

If religious experience could not possibly happen unless the religion were true, that would be a strong argument for its truth. But another explanation for religious experience can always be given. Yet to the person having the experience rather than studying it, it is utterly convincing.

And that is the reason why each religion is so convincing to believers and so unconvincing to unbelievers. Believers are like lovers. Lovers are certain their love is true, certain their beloved is beautiful. But outside observers simply don't see it, and often pity lovers, or envy them. Similarly, to believers, the faith is as certain as the taste of salt, but to the unbeliever, it's a dream. But shouldn't we try to listen and empathize and understand? Only after that can we argue intelligently, because only then do we know what we're talking about.

So it was good that we stopped arguing for a little while. For the philosophy of religion is philosophy, and philosophy is the love of wisdom, and wisdom requires listening.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What is meant by *tat tvam asi*?
2. What is the difference between the essential Hindu experience and the essential Buddhist experience?

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