Chapter 14

Rational Arguments

14.1 Readings and Homework

- Readings: Hume, part 9

- Study Questions:

  1. Reconstruct Demea's argument for the existence of God.

  2. What "decisive" argument does Cleanthes oppose to Demea's?

  3. Philo "observes" that "the argument a priori has seldom been found very convincing, except to people of a metaphysical head [...]". What is an argument a priori? What characteristic of Philo's philosophy makes him think that anybody of common sense cannot be convinced by a priori arguments?

  4. What do you think of Demea's argument? Is it convincing to you? More, or less, convincing than the design argument?

14.2 A priori argument for the existence and nature of God

14.2.1 Demea's a priori argument

This is a partial reproduction of Prof. Warren's course notes – I thank him again for letting me using his notes.

I. Demea

A. suggests that if a posteriori arguments are fraught with so many difficulties, that we ought to rely on **a priori arguments** instead

B. a priori arguments have the advantage that, unlike a posteriori arguments, they establish the **infinity** and the **unity** of God

 II. Cleanthes

A. objects that one cannot establish the validity of an argument from the usefulness of its consequences (q.v.) – thus contradicting his own position on p. 12

B. asks Demea which a priori argument he has in mind

III. Demea replies with a combination of the cosmological and the ontological argument

A. *Whatever exists must have a cause*

B. in reasoning from effects to causes, we must either:

1. go on infinitely

2. have recourse to some cause that is necessarily existent

C. however, *an infinite regress would be absurd* (54)

1. in an infinite chain of causes and effects, although each effect has a cause, the entire chain taken as a whole does not (54)

2. this leads to the question as to why this chain of causes exists, as opposed to some other chain or none at all (55)

3. whether there is something or nothing is then equally possible, which for Demea is absurd

D. hence, *we must recourse to a necessary being*, one for whom non-existence would be a contradiction (55, q.v.)

Demea's argument is a mix of two highly classical arguments.

14.2.2   Cosmological arguments

Reference: Bruce Reichenbach, "Cosmological argument", SEP

Main idea

The main idea of cosmological arguments is to answer the typical metaphysical question: **Why is there something rather than nothing?**

These arguments stem from humans's **wonder about the very existence of the universe**. Contrast this with the wonder about the world's order, as in the design argument.

- The **main assumption** underlying such wonder is that **the world's existence is not necessary**: it is **contingent**. Things can be or not be. Nothing exists necessarily in our universe.

- **A second assumption** for most of these arguments, is that **change is ruled by causality**. In simple words, things change because of the cause of the change. If we apply this principle to the passage from "not be" to "be", or the "coming to be", then, anything that comes to be come to be from a cause.

Thus:
1. The world is contingent – it does not exist necessarily
2. Causal Principle: every contingent being has a cause of its being.

History

A long history of argumentS:

Aristotle: unmoved mover necessary to explain constant movement of the universe

Islamic tradition: "Aquinas" argument (Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1274) formulates it later): impossibility of an essentially ordered infinite regress: the world must have a **first cause**

    kālam argument: temporal impossibility of infinite regress (the world must have had a **beginning**)

Enlightment: Leibniz and Clarke: add to this the Principle of Sufficient Reason (The world have a **sufficient cause**). For example in Leibniz:

> 32. [Our reasonings are grounded upon the principle] of sufficient reason, in virtue of which we hold that there can be no fact real or existing, no statement true, unless there be a sufficient reason, why it should be so and not otherwise, although these reasons usually cannot be known by us. (Theod. 44, 196.)
>
> *Monadology*, 32

Criticism by Hume and Kant in the 18th century – mainly because these arguments are based on an illegitimate use of reason, that is, a use of reason beyond the secured realm of experience.

Still a matter of controversy in the 20th century.

Notice that Aquinas and Leibniz arguments are *logical* arguments, while the kālam argument is *temporal*.

Structure

Reichenbach's sketch of the argument:

1. **From experience:** A contingent being exists (a contingent being is such that if it exists, it can not-exist)

2. **Causal Principle:** (Principle of Causation or Principle of Sufficient Reason): This contingent being has a cause or explanation of its existence.

3. The cause or explanation of its existence is something other than the contingent being itself.

4. **Principle of Excluded Middle:** What causes or explains the existence of this contingent being must either be solely other contingent beings or include a non-contingent (necessary) being.

5. **Contingent beings alone cannot cause or explain the existence of a contingent being.**

6. Therefore, what causes or explains the existence of this contingent being must include a non-contingent (necessary) being.

7. Therefore, a necessary being (a being which, if it exists, cannot not exist) exists.

Possible "beings" to fill in Premise 1:

- things in motion (Aristotle)

- caused events (Aquinas)

- contingent existing things (Aquinas)

- whole series of effects (Duns Scotus: this is Demea's)

The key to failure or success of the argument: Premise 5. Premise 5 states what counts as a good explanation or cause for contingent being. If the requirement is strengthened to a requirement of a sufficient reason, and if the contingent being we are talking about is the universe, then the cause must be

- **outside** the contingent universe, and distinct from any part of the universe.

- **supernatural** (no natural cause is satisfactory) – intentional for example

14.2.3 Ontological Arguments

Source: Graham Oppy, "Ontological Arguments", SEP

Main idea

Ontological arguments are purely **a priori argument** – no observation of the world involved.

The main idea is that **the very notion of God implies His existing**. "God", as "God", necessarily exists.

The arguments typically appeal to controversial notions: a priority, necessity...

The arguments also typically appeal to controversial notions as theirs main premise: the idea of God as perfect being, greatest being...:

> Of course, the premises of ontological arguments often do not deal directly with perfect beings, beings than which no greater can be conceived, etc.; rather, they deal with descriptions of, or ideas of, or concepts of, or the possibility of the existence of, these things. However, the basic point remains: **ontological arguments require the use of vocabulary which non-theists should certainly find problematic when it is used in ontologically committing contexts** (i.e not inside the scope of

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prophylactic operators such as "according to the story" or "by the lights of theists" or "by the definition" which can be taken to afford protection against unwanted commitments). (Oppy, my emphasis)

History

Saint Anselm of Canterbury (11th century): God:= *a being than which no greater can be conceived* must exist, otherwise something greater exists.

Descartes: God:= *a supremely perfect being* cannot lack existence.

Leibniz add to Decartes's argument, that the idea of all perfections co-existing together in a single being – the idea is coherent.

Best Criticism: I. Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason* – existence is not a "predicate" (more bellow...)

20th: still vivid discussion: On the one hand, Kurt G´odel, Charles Hartshorne, Norman Malcom, Alvin Plantinga – modal ontological argument. On the other hand: Lewis.

Taxonomy

From Oppy, SEP:
"According to the taxonomy of Oppy (1995), there are seven major kinds of ontological arguments, viz:

1. definitional ontological arguments

conceptual (or hyperintensional) ontological arguments

modal ontological arguments

[...]
Examples of each follow. These are mostly toy examples. But they serve to highlight the deficiencies which more complex examples also share.
1. God is a being which has every perfection. (This is true as a matter of definition.) Existence is a perfection. Hence God exists.

2. I conceive of a being than which no greater can be conceived. If a being than which no greater can be conceived does not exist, then I can conceive of a being greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived namely, a being than which no greater can be conceived that exists. I cannot conceive of a being greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived. Hence, a being than which no greater can be conceived exists.

3. It is possible that that God exists. God is not a contingent being, i.e., either it is not possible that God exists, or it is necessary that God exists. Hence, it is necessary that God exists. Hence, God exists. (See Malcolm (1960), Hartshorne (1965), and Plantinga (1974) for closely related arguments.)"

(I took out a few of the kinds of arguments distinguished by Oppy for simplicity)

14.3   Problems with a priori arguments

14.3.1   Cleanthes' objections to Demea's argument

From Prof. Schmaus course notes:

A. objects that one cannot establish matters of fact or existence with a priori arguments (q.v.)

1. "Decisive argument":

- Proposition P is demonstrable only if non-P implies contradiction

- nothing conceivable implies a contradiction

- there is no being whose non-existence implies a contradiction

2. There is no hope that **experience**, on the other hand, ever gives us any clue about God's whole essence and nature

3. this method of reasoning could just as easily prove that the **material universe** is the necessarily existent being as that God is (56)

4. we can imagine the non-existence of god just as easily as the non-existence of matter

B. also attacks Demea's argument against an infinite regress

1. something that existed from **eternity** would not need a cause, especially as causality implies temporal priority (56)

2. it does no good to argue that it is **the whole of the chain** that requires a cause, because the idea of a whole is something the human mind imposes on things

3. to explain to parts of a whole is enough to explain the whole.

14.3.2 Philo's criticism

A. concurs with Cleanthes – he had made similar points back on p. 17

B. then, using the example of products of nine, he argues (56-7)

1. that sometimes what looks like design can actually be the result of necessity

2. hence it is dangerous to bring in the idea of necessity to this discussion – it can lead to conclusions opposed to religion (57)

C. only people of a metaphysical bent find these a priori arguments convincing – they are not what lead ordinary folks to religion

14.3.3 Objections to the cosmological argument

The Universe Just Is

Russell (one of the most important philosophers at the beginning of the 20th century)

- rejects the demand for an explanation for the universe

- denounces a Fallacy of Composition in the argument for the contingency of the universe: the universe is not more contingent than a wall made of small bricks is small

- But is the wall solid? Big controversy about the contingency of the universe

Explaining the Individual Constituents is Sufficient

cf. Cleanthes: when the parts are explained, the whole is explained.

What to think of this? Are wholes to be considered as **sets** or as **aggregates**?

1. There are cases in which it is true (elastic collision between two massive bodies, chemical reaction, watch – any mechanism in short) , but other in which it does not seem to be true (biological organism?). Explaining the part does not explain:

   - why these parts exists rather than others, or rather than not at all

   - why these parts are arranged as they are

2. So: what about our case? of which type is it? Is the universe to be considered as a **set** or as an **aggregate**?

3. even if simple set: what is the cause of the existence of the set itself? – a necessary being: matter-energy?

4. What do we have to explain?

   Richard Swinburne: requirement for explanation for any contingent being: completist fallacy. An explanation is complete when "any attempt to go beyond the factors which we have would result in no gain of explanatory power or prior probability (1979, 86).

   Question is thus: Does explaining in terms of a first uncaused cause why something exists rather than nothing and why it is as it is give additional explanatory power in explaining why a universe exists at all?

And why not the infinite?

In defense of premise 2, some argue that an actual infinite cannot exist.
Craig: paradox of two infinite sets of different-same size (Integers and Reals) – one-one relation
Cantorian mathematics resolves such paradoxes concerning infinity in defining precisely sizes for infinite sets – A is smaller than B iff A has same cardinal as a subset of B and B has not the same cardinal as any subset of A

Against the Causal Principle

Reichenbach, SEP:

Critics of the argument contend that the Causal Principle or, where applicable, the Principle of Sufficient Reason, that underlies versions of the argument is suspect. As Hume argued, there is

no reason for thinking that the Causal Principle is true **a priori**, for we can conceive of effects without conceiving of their being caused (*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, IV). Neither can an argument for the application of the Causal Principle to the universe be drawn from **inductive experience**. Even if the Causal Principle applies to events in the world, we cannot **extrapolate** from the way the world works to the world as a whole (Mackie, 85). To assume that the universe complies with our own preferences for causal order is not justified.

Defenders of the argument reply that the Principles are necessary to **make the universe intelligible**. Without such presuppositions, **science** itself would be undercut. But even then, critics reply, the principle has only **methodological** and not ontological justification. As Mackie argues, **we have no right to assume that the universe complies with our intellectual preferences**. We can simply work with brute facts.

Clearly, the soundness of the deductive version of the argument hinges on whether principles such as that of Causation or Sufficient Reason are more than methodologically true, and on the extent to which these principles can be applied.(My emphasis)

(Reference to Mackie, J. L., 1982, *The Miracle of Theism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.)

Causation and Quantum Physics

Indeterminism, Indetermination, and objective chance. Or backward causation? At least problematic!!

14.3.4 Objections to the ontological argument

Ontological arguments are not persuasive

... even if they have fascinated philosophers for centuries...
Problems are:
- invalid
- premises that only theists would accept
From Oppy again:

(1) Definitional arguments: - Ontologically committing vocabulary is introduced solely via a definition.

- Question begging: The inference from By definition, God is an existent being to God exists is patently invalid; while the inference to By definition, God exists is valid, but uninteresting. In the example given earlier, the premises licence the claim that, as a matter of definition, God possesses the perfection of existence. But, as just noted, there is no valid inference from this claim to the further claim that God exists.

Conceptual arguments: - Ontologically committing vocabulary is introduced solely within the scope of hyperintensional operators (e.g. believes that, conceives of, etc.).

- Often, these operators have two readings,

1. one of which can cancel ontological commitment,

2. and the other of which cannot.

- On the reading which can give cancelation (as in the most likely reading of John believes in Santa Claus), the inference to a conclusion in which the ontological commitment is not canceled will be invalid.

- On the reading which cannot cancel ontological commitment (as in that reading of John thinks about God which can only be true if there is a God to think about), the premises are question-begging: they incur ontological commitments which non-theists reject.

In our sample argument, the claim, that I conceive of an existent being than which no greater being can be conceived, admits of the two kinds of readings just distinguished. On the one hand, on the reading which gives cancelation, the inference to the conclusion that there is a being than which no greater can be conceived is plainly invalid. On the other hand, on the reading in which there is no cancelation, it is clear that this claim is one which no reasonable, etc. non-theist will accept: if you doubt that there is a being than which no greater can be conceived, then, of course, you doubt whether you can have thoughts about such a being.

Modal arguments: - Arguments with premises which concern modal claims about God, i.e., claims about the possibility or necessity of God's attributes and existence.

- Suppose that we agree to think about possibility and necessity in terms of possible worlds: a claim is possibly true just in case it is true in at least one possible world; a claim is necessarily true just in case it is true in every possible world; and a claim is contingent just in case it is true in some possible worlds and false in others.

- Some theists hold that God is a necessarily existent being, i.e., that God exists in every possible world. Non-theists do not accept the claim that God exists in the actual world. Plainly enough, non-theists and necessitarian theists disagree about the layout of logical space, i.e., the space of possible worlds.

The sample argument consists, in effect, of two premises: one which says that God exists in at least one possible world; and one which says that God exists in all possible worlds if God exists in any. It is perfectly obvious that no non-theist can accept this pair of premises. Of course, a non-theist can allow if they wish that there are possible worlds in which there are contingent Gods. However, it is quite clear that no rational, reflective, etc. non-theist will accept the pair of premises in the sample argument.

Parodies... for fun

Again from Oppy:

(1) By definition, God is a non-existent being who has every (other) perfection. Hence God does not exist.

(2) I conceive of a being than which no greater can be conceived except that it only ever creates N universes. If such a being does not exist, then we can conceive of a greater being namely, one exactly like it which does exist. But I cannot conceive of a being which is greater in this way. Hence, a being than which no greater can be conceived except that it only ever creates N universes exists.

(3) It is possible that God does not exist. God is not a contingent being, i.e., either it is not possible that God exists, or it is necessary that God exists. Hence it is not possible that God exists. Hence God does not exist.

And a recent one:

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There are some very nice parodic discussions of Ontological Arguments in the literature. A particularly pretty one is due to Raymond Smullyan, in 5000 BC and Other Philosophical Fantasies, in which the argument is attributed to "the unknown Dutch theologian van Dollard". A relatively recent addition to the genre is described in Grey (2000), though the date of its construction is uncertain. It is the work of Douglas Gasking, one time Professor of Philosophy at the University of Melbourne (with emendations by William Grey and Denis Robinson):

1. The creation of the world is the most marvellous achievement imaginable.

2. The merit of an achievement is the product of (a) its intrinsic quality, and (b) the ability of its creator.

3. The greater the disability or handicap of the creator, the more impressive the achievement.

4. The most formidable handicap for a creator would be non-existence.

5. Therefore, if we suppose that the universe is the product of an existent creator, we can conceive a greater being namely, one who created everything while not existing.

6. An existing God, therefore, would not be a being than which a greater cannot be conceived, because an even more formidable and incredible creator would be a God which did not exist.

7. (Hence) God does not exist.