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978-0-521-45723-1 - On the Nature and Existence of God

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Excerpt

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## Introduction

This book addresses the question whether there is rational justification to believe that God, as conceived of by traditional Western theism, exists. There are contemporary fideists who hold that there is no need to justify belief by appeal to arguments, since the mere fact of belief is supposed to be self-justificatory. There is no inconsistency in offering both a fideistic and an argumentative support of belief, as do some contemporaries. My concern is only with the latter part of their justification. The question, then, is whether there are any good arguments either for or against believing that God exists.

I do not pretend to answer this question, since I completely ignore inductive arguments based on design, beauty, and lawlike regularity and simplicity for the existence of God, as well as those based on evil to show the improbability of his existence. A proper discussion of these arguments is the topic for a separate book of considerable length, since it would have to deal with the applicability of Bayesian models of probability to the aggregation of the premises of all the different inductive arguments for and against God's existence. One of the valuable lessons to be learned from Richard Swinburne's *The Existence of God*, which makes out such a Bayesian case for belief, is that the issues are exceedingly complex and need to be treated by those who are steeped in probability and confirmation theory, which eliminates me.

Our question whether there are any good arguments either for or against belief takes on special importance in the light of

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the startling resurgence of theism within philosophy during the past thirty or so years. What might surprise some is that the three leaders of this movement, William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, and Richard Swinburne, are themselves analytical philosophers. Some mistakenly see analytic philosophy as the natural enemy of theism, no doubt because certain movements in twentieth-century analytic philosophy, such as logical atomism, logical positivism, and some versions of ordinary language philosophy, developed theories of meaning that were employed to slay the dragon of theism by showing that it did not measure up to certain minimal standards of meaningfulness. But it is a mistake to identify analytic philosophy with these movements and their dogmas.

While these movements, along with their theories of meaning, have come and gone and the criticisms of theism based on their theories of meaning have become old hat, analytic philosophy has forged new weapons in the interim that have been deployed by analytically trained philosophers on behalf of theism: for instance, rational choice theory to breathe new life into the perennial Rodney Dangerfield of philosophy, Pascal's wager; modal logic to reformulate a more powerful version of the ontological argument; language-game analysis for justifying the practice of religion and, in particular, the *prima facie* acceptability of existential claims based on religious experiences; and Bayesian models of probability for an inductive justification of belief. Philosophy of religion is to the core areas of philosophy – logic, scientific methodology, the philosophy of language, metaphysics, and epistemology – as Israel is to the Pentagon. The former are a proving ground for the weapons forged in the latter. Whenever there is a significant breakthrough in one of the core areas, it eventually finds a fruitful deployment in the peripheral areas, such as the philosophy of religion. And this is what we have witnessed during the past thirty years.

Because theism has found such a powerful new formulation, due to the deployment of these new analytical weapons, there is a need for a return visit from Hume's Philo. But the sceptical Philo whose spirit imbues my book is more than

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just a crazed Charles Bronson, who is back again and *really* angry this time, even more so than on the previous thirty-six occasions; for my philosophical version of “Death Wish XXXVII” has the positive upshot of helping us to command a more adequate conception of God – a God that will prove a worthy object of worship and obedience, even if the the case for believing in his existence is shaky. My book, therefore, has both a negative and a positive pole.

There are two very different sorts of arguments to show that belief (disbelief) is rationally justified. One is directed toward establishing the truth (falsity) of the proposition that God exists. It will be called an “epistemological argument,” since it purports to supply the sort of justification that would support a claim to know that God exists (does not exist). The other, to be called a “pragmatic argument,” is directed toward showing the prudential or moral benefits that result from believing (disbelieving) this proposition. Both ways of justifying the rationality of belief (disbelief) will be considered.

The epistemological arguments will be my first and foremost concern, with only the final Chapter 9 devoted to the pragmatic arguments. I am going to reverse the usual order of presentation and begin with arguments against the existence of God, with special attention to so-called atheological arguments that attempt to deduce a contradiction from the theist’s conception of God, with appeal to only necessarily true additional premises. My reason for doing so is that the first order of business should be to clarify the nature of the God whose existence is in question. And that is just what these atheological arguments help us to do. They are the thought experiments that probe the internal consistency of the theist’s conception of God, often with the result that the theist must go back to the drawing board and redesign the particular divine attribute(s) that is the focus of the argument. Their role in spurring consideration of the divine nature is similar to that of Zeno’s paradoxes in forcing subsequent philosophers to come to grips with the nature of space and time. The idea of God in Western civilization has in fact undergone just this sort of dialectical unfolding through

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the successive challenges posed by different atheological arguments.

The idea of redesigning our concept of God might strike some as blasphemous. This becomes less shocking when it is realized that the concept of God that is the target of an atheological argument is that of the theologian, which is a highly theoretical concept that is as distant from the somewhat anthropomorphic concept of God in the Scriptures as is the physicist's concept of a table from that of the ordinary person. The religiously available God – the one who communes with men and intervenes in history – was metaphysicalized by the great medieval theists so that he began to have the sort of being enjoyed by a Platonic form. Our religious experiences and traditions serve as data for these metaphysical theories about God's nature, but in virtue of their underdetermining these theories, there is considerable room for conceptual maneuvering when a given theory of God's nature runs afoul of an atheological argument, just as there is when a scientific theory faces anomalous facts. The basic problem that a theological concept of God faces is that of over metaphysicalizing God so that he no longer is a person and thereby becomes religiously unavailable. This is a special instance of the problem faced by any theoretical or rational reconstruction of an ordinary concept: Which features of the ordinary concept must get retained? In Carnapian terms, the question concerns the conditions of material adequacy for the analysis of our concept of God. This will be a recurring issue in this book.

Blasphemy aside, the idea of redesigning our concept of God raises the problem of how we can keep the referent of the word "God" constant amidst these conceptual reforms, which can involve a change in either what are taken to be the essential or defining properties of God or how they are understood. There must be some answer to how this is possible, since this is in fact what has happened.

But just how is it possible? To answer this we must see how "God" refers. Some have claimed that "God" is a title that applies to an individual in virtue of his playing the role of the

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absolutely perfect sovereign being, which is the concept of God in traditional Western theism. If "God" is a title, it functions quite differently from the ordinary titles with which we are familiar, for instance, "the king of France," "the heavy-weight champion of the world," and so on. Being God, unlike having one of these titles, is both essential to and constitutive of the essence of its possessor, that is, this individual could not exist without being God, and no other individual could be God. The champion can lose his title to another, which shows that this title is neither essential nor necessarily possessed uniquely either within a single world or across possible worlds. The character played by Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront* said that he could have been a contender, even the champion; but it would be a violation of the meaning of God for him to have said that he could have been God or for God to say that he might have been a two-bit enforcer for the mob. No wonder there is no theological version of the king-must-die legend.

Granted that any being who is God is God in every world in which he exists and no other being is God in any world, there still remains the question of what qualifies an individual as the denotatum of "God." "God," no doubt, is a proper name, but this is not sufficiently helpful, since there are such widely divergent views of how proper names refer. On the one hand, there is the so-called descriptivist theory according to which a proper name has a sense that is expressed by some definite description or cluster of descriptions, it being both sufficient and necessary for an individual to be its denotatum that she satisfy this description or a good number of the descriptions in the cluster. In regard to successive uses of a name, the cluster theory can require that they either have enough members of the set in common or be connected by a sequence of uses of the name, adjoining members of which satisfy this condition. This would allow successive coreferential uses to have no properties in common, this paralleling the bundle theories of the identity of material objects and persons over time. On the basis of this analogy, the latter will be called the "bundle version of the cluster theory." Opposed

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to this is the view of proper names as purely referential, their referent being determined by various causal or historical facts connecting the referent with the user of the name. "God" does not perfectly fit either theory, but by judiciously incorporating elements of both theories, along with some language-game analysis, an adequate answer can be given to our question as to how the referent of "God" can remain constant amidst conceptual reform.

In recent years the descriptivist theory has come under fire from the likes of Kripke, Putnam, and Donnellan. The basis of their attack is to take any description (or cluster of descriptions) that is offered as constituting the sense of a name and show that we can construct a counterfactual story in which the actual referent of the name does not satisfy the description (or a sufficient number of those in the cluster). In place of this account, they suggest that typically, a name is ostensibly or indexically bestowed upon an individual and subsequent users of the name pick up the referent from their predecessors in an ongoing linguistic community, with the historical chain extending all the way back to the original baptizer. This secures constancy of reference over time to this individual and allows us in the interim to revise radically our views of the essential nature of this being. It is this reliance on an ongoing linguistic community that will have a fruitful application to the case of "God," in which the linguistic community is replaced by a religious community.

The historical-causal theory of reference also applies to names of natural kinds. Consider "gold" in this connection. We begin by ostending a paradigmatic class of specimens of gold. We then turn our scientists loose to investigate the nature or essence of these specimens. As time goes by we revise our definition of what constitutes the essential properties of gold, which is what in fact happened as the alchemist's theory gave way to that of modern atomic theory. Thus, the descriptive sense a name might have at some time is not inviolable in that a later use of it can be coreferring even though it lacks this descriptive sense, due to a change in our definition of this natural kind.

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If “God” were to fit this simplified historical-*cum*-indexical-reference theory, our question would be answered. But there are two reasons for doubting that it does. First, because God is a supernatural being, he seems to defy being indexically pinned down or baptized. There are no lapels to be grabbed hold of by a use of “this.” Some would contend that we can ostensibly pin down the name “God” by saying “this” when having or after just having a mystical or religious experience, in which “this” denotes the intentional accusative or content of the experience. This would seem to require that these experiences are cognitive and that their objective accusative is a common object of the experiences of different persons as well as of successive experiences of a single person. These are very controversial claims and must await a full discussion (and refutation) in Chapter 8.

A second disanalogy between “God” and the sort of ordinary proper names to which the historical-*cum*-indexical-reference theory applies is that whereas it is not an analytic truth or true by definition that the referent of an ordinary proper name satisfy some description (e.g., we can imagine what it would be like to discover that the person whom we baptized as “Jones” and thought to be a human being is a robot), this does not appear to be so for “God.” At any time at which “God” is used, there will be some descriptive sense that it has by definition. For example, at the present time it is analytically true that God is a powerful, benevolent being that is eminently worthy of worship and obedience. To this extent, “God” is not distinguishable from a natural-kind term, which also can have at any time a descriptive sense that is definitionally determined. But they part company because some of the descriptive properties that are definitionally tied to God are *hard core* in that we would not allow a use of “God” to be coreferring with ours if these properties were not at least partially constitutive of the sense of the name. Soft-core descriptive properties, even if definitionally linked with “God,” can alter over time without destroying sameness of reference. Examples of such properties are being absolutely simple, that is, admitting no distinction between essence and



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existence or between his properties, and being unrestrictedly omnipotent, both of which properties have come and gone as part of the sense of "God" without affecting its reference.

Examples of the hard-core descriptive properties of "God" are being a supremely great being, that is, as great as any being could possibly be, and being eminently worthy of worship and obedience. My reason for selecting these properties as hard core is that it is essential to our idea of God, to the role it plays in the form of life in which it is implicated, that God is eminently worthy of worship and obedience, and a being could occupy this exalted position only if he is a being than which there could be none greater. These are high-level, emergent properties, since an individual can have them only in virtue of the possession of other, lower-level properties, such as omnipotence, benevolence, and so on.

The connection between these emergent properties and their lower-level determiners is very loose, and thereby permits there to be considerable conceptual reform without destroying sameness of reference. First, we can change our mind as to what the latter properties are without altering reference, for instance, giving up absolute simplicity as being one of these lower-level determiners. Second, we can revise our analysis of those determiners that we take to be hard core, such as being benevolent, powerful, or providential. The manner in which we account for the lower-level determiners of the hard-core emergent properties can, and has, varied greatly over time without causing any change in reference. There is no analogue to this in respect to ordinary proper names according to the standard descriptivist theory, including the bundle version variant of the cluster theory.

Recent discussions of intentional identity can also illuminate some features of when two uses of "God" are coreferring.<sup>1</sup> That they are coreferring should be independent of God's existence, and this should hold even if the referrers take having necessary existence to be one of God's hard-core properties, which would not be the case if the referent of "God" had to be pinned down indexically. Jones believes that a certain witch poisoned his well, and Smith believes



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that the same witch killed his calf. Here is a case of intentional identity in which the existence of the referent is not required. Nor does their identity of reference require that they completely agree in their sortal characterization of their common referent. Smith could believe, pace Jones, that the poisoner of Jones's well and the killer of his calf is not a witch but a warlock or a vampire. For Smith and Jones to be coreferers, it is not alone sufficient that Smith intend to refer to the same individual as did Jones. What he says does not settle the issue, unlike the case in which what an artist says his painting represents settles the matter. It is also necessary that there is sufficient similarity in their sortal characterizations of their common referent (e.g., they both thought of the referent as a being possessed of supernatural powers, in spite of their differences over just what sort of a supernatural being it is) and they assign a similar explanatory role to it. Were Smith to believe that some demon caused his rheumatism and Jones to believe that the same individual caused his rheumatism, only disagreeing in his taking it to be germs rather than a demon, we would not count his reference as being coreferential with Smith's. Jones might say that demons are nothing but germs, but this would be the eliminative use of "nothing but" – the one that entails that there aren't any demons. It is contrasted with the theoretical or reductive identity use of "nothing but" as in "water is nothing but a collection of H<sub>2</sub>O molecules," which does not have any eliminative implication.

Similar considerations hold for intentional identities involving successive uses of "God." Abraham might believe that some supernatural being created the cosmos, and Isaac might believe that the same divine person communed with him. Again, their identity of reference does not require the existence of a referent. Nor is it required that they conceive of the referent in exactly the same way (e.g., Isaac might differ from Abraham in regard to what lower-level soft-core properties he takes to be essential to God or in how he understands these divine attributes), for there is both sufficient agreement in their sortal characterization of the referent and the role they assign it as the explainer of the existence of the

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universe and various occurrences within it, such as numinous and other types of religious experiences. In spite of their differences in how they conceive of God, they agree in thinking of God as a supernatural being who is the creator and sustainer of the universe and eminently worthy of worship and obedience. Here we see the importance of God's hard-core properties in securing coreference in successive uses of "God."

The picture presented so far is overly intellectualized, stressing only the descriptive aspects of the name, both hard and soft core. No doubt these descriptive features are an essential part of the story, but they are not alone adequate to explain how reference can remain constant amidst alterations in the soft-core descriptive sense of the name, as well as in the analyses given of the hard-core properties. It is here that we must avail ourselves of the historical-causal theory's notion of a succession of referrers within an ongoing linguistic community who pick up the reference of a name from their predecessors; only we must replace the linguistic with a religious community. The reason we think our use of "God" refers to the same God as was referred to by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, despite radical differences in our theories about the nature of God, is that we are members of the same ongoing historical community of believers, sharing the same form of life.<sup>2</sup>

What is the form of life that is implicated in our common religious language game? It has to do with our having a common historical root to our religious community, sharing similar attitudes toward the meaning and significance of life, common ethical beliefs and practices, and the subsequent people in this ongoing historical chain identifying themselves with their predecessors in this chain. For their use of "God" to be coreferring with that of their predecessors, it is not enough that they intend it to be. What they say, though relevant in this matter, is not alone decisive. They must also share this common form of life with their predecessors and think of themselves as continuing their traditions and aspirations. How we individuate our religious community will