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Introduction

Rational beliefs can be grounded in perceptual experience, memory, testimony, rational intuitions, or inference. Other things being equal, beliefs grounded in any one of these ways are rational. For example, assuming that my memory is generally reliable and that I clearly remember having had toast for breakfast this morning, my belief that I had toast this morning is rational. The apparent self-evidence of "2 + 2 = 4," or, "A whole is greater than its proper parts," fully justifies my belief that 2 plus 2 *is* equal to 4 and that a whole *is* greater than its proper parts. A number of prominent philosophers of religion have argued that religious beliefs can be justified in a similar fashion. For example, William P. Alston, Richard Swinburne, Jerome Gellman, and I have argued that perceptual or quasiperceptual experiences of God occur and justify the religious beliefs of those who have them. Others such as Alvin Plantinga maintain that in certain circumstances, beliefs in God can be "properly basic." That is, that like many of our memorial beliefs or beliefs in simple necessary truths, they can be fully justified without being grounded in further beliefs. Yet as Jonathan Edwards said in the mid-eighteenth century, "if we take reason strictly – not for the faculty of mental perception in general [which would include sense perception, memory, and rational intuition] but for ratiocination, or a power of inferring by arguments," or *reasoning*, then "reason" refers to the faculty of rational inference and its exercises.[1] The nature and proper role of inference and argument in religion is the subject of this book.

Until quite recently, philosophical studies of religious reasoning and argumentation have tended to focus almost exclusively on the validity of arguments for religious conclusions[2] and the truth of their premises. This is not altogether surprising, since no invalid argument or argument with a false premise is a good argument. But even though truth and validity are *necessary* conditions of a good argument, they aren't sufficient, since an argument can meet both conditions and not be probative.

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Arguments are constructed for various purposes, and these purposes must be taken into account when evaluating their success or failure. Furthermore, reasoning is always situated – it does not occur in a vacuum. Arguments are the products of men and women with various needs, hopes, fears, sensitivities, and proclivities, and with diverse individual histories, who are responding to highly specific problems and difficulties. They are not the expressions of a view from nowhere that abstracts from the existential specificity of the reasoner and/or the particularities of his or her concrete situation, although these frequently determine whether an argument is or is not probative in a particular situation or for a particular person. *Reason, Revelation, and Devotion: Inference and Argument in Religion* explores these neglected aspects of religious argumentation in depth.

Chapter 1 introduces four examples of religious reasoning. The first is Samuel Clarke's cosmological proof of the existence of God. Proceeding from the assumption that anything that exists must have a sufficient reason for its existence, Clarke argues that the existence of contingent beings can be explained only by postulating the existence and activity of a necessarily existent being. The second and third arguments discussed in this chapter address the question of what attributes can be properly attributed to the maximally perfect reality that is the intended object of the devotional practices and existential commitments valorized in the major world religions. In what sense can God be said to be omnipotent, for example? If he can do everything that is logically possible for an agent to do, can he do evil? And if he cannot, can he truly said to be omnipotent? Again, is the maximally perfect reality personal, as Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Hindu monotheists believe, or is it necessarily nonpersonal, as Buddhists and others maintain? The chapter concludes by examining a specifically theological controversy: the quarrel between Pelagius and Augustine over the roles played by freedom and grace in human life, as well as some developments of their positions in later Christian thought and analogues of the controversy in Hindu theism. Chapter 1 will bring out the strengths and weaknesses of these arguments. Its primary purpose, though, is to provide the reader with examples of historically important instances of religious reasoning to which she or he can refer in later chapters.

In order for the arguments discussed in Chapter 1 to be good ones, it is not enough that they be valid, noncircular, and have true premises. For as George Mavrodes pointed out, proofs are "person-relative" – a valid, noncircular argument with true premises can prove something to Mary without proving it to John.[3] To take a trivial example, if Mary knows that all the premises of a valid, noncircular argument are true and John does not, the argument can extend Mary's knowledge without extending John's. The proof's relativity in this case depends on the fact that Mary knows something that John does not. Other sources of person-relativity are less obvious, however. Arguments are constructed for various purposes, for example, and these have a bearing on their success. The medieval Hindu theist Udayana,

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for instance, maintained that his arguments had three aims: to convince unbelievers, to strengthen the faithful, and to honor God by presenting them at his "lotus feet." Chapter 2 explores these and other uses to which religious arguments can be put, and the bearing that the purposes underlying the construction of religious arguments should have on our overall assessment of their success and failure.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine two further sources of person-relativity. Both have a major impact on the character of religious reasoning.

Chapter 3 examines a topic that has been almost totally neglected by analytic philosophers of religion. Paul J. Griffiths and Francis X. Clooney have recently called our attention to the crucial role that the ingestion of central texts plays in classical Buddhism, Christianity, and Vaishnavism. Proper reasoning in these text-centered traditions presupposes that one has so thoroughly absorbed and existentially appropriated the relevant texts that they have become part of one's very being as an intellectual and volitional creature. Moreover, textual traditions affect what their participants regard as good reasons. Because these traditions vary, however, so too does what are regarded as good reasons. The variation of textual traditions thus provides one more source of person-relativity.

Chapter 4 discusses yet another source of person-relativity. The standard view in the West since the rise of modernity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is that reason functions properly only when one brackets what Pascal called our "heart" and William James referred to as our "passional nature" – our temperament, needs, concerns, fears, hopes, passions, and emotions. "Right reason," according to this view, is disinterested reason. Chapter 4 calls this into question. Traditional Christian theology, for example, maintained that in ethical and religious matters, at least, proper reasoning is a function of the state of one's heart as well as of one's logical acumen, and that a valid, noncircular argument about religious matters with true premises can therefore quite properly convince one person without convincing another. Nor is this position peculiarly Christian. Similar views were expressed by Plato and Aristotle and by Chinese Neo-Confucians. Chapter 4 concludes by arguing that appeals to the heart needn't be either unduly subjective or viciously circular.

Chapter 5 reexamines the fraught relations between philosophy and rhetoric. That philosophy should be sharply distinguished from rhetoric has been a commonplace of Western philosophy since Plato. Locke, for example, said that the devices of rhetoric "are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and indeed are perfect cheats: and therefore … are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided."[4] Locke's judgment is typical. Yet if the views expressed in Chapter 4 are correct, philosophy and rhetoric can't be so neatly separated, and I will argue that a properly chastened rhetoric can and should play an essential role in philosophical reasoning about religion and other value laden matters.

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The features discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 are not peculiar to religious reasoning because they also characterize reasoning about ethics, aesthetics, comprehensive world views, and other value-laden subject matters. The legitimacy of the textually informed reasoning discussed in Chapter 3, however, depends on the *authority* of religious texts, that is, on revelation, and reason's relation to revelation is discussed in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6 begins with a comparison of Vedanta's and Christianity's accounts of the relation between reason and revelation and continues with an examination of the attacks on revelation mounted by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century deists. The chapter concludes with a detailed case study of the apparently conflicting views of the place of reason provided by seventeenth-century Anglo-American Puritans, on the one hand, and the Cambridge Platonists, on the other. I shall argue that their views on the comparative worth of reason and revelation are not as starkly opposed as might at first seem, and that this is typical of the Christian tradition in general.

Chapter 7 concludes the book by examining Dionysius the Areopagite's and John Chrysostom's claim that reason breaks down when confronted with the overwhelming mystery of God. I shall argue that – unlike the superficially similar claims made by adherents of the Madyamika school of Buddhism, for example – these Christian mystical theologians are not so much rejecting reason as (like Plato in the *Republic*) arguing for its absorption in or transcendence by something higher, namely, a kind of "knowing by unknowing." A sense of mystery may chasten reason. It doesn't repudiate it.

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1

Four Examples of Religious Reasoning

This chapter examines an influential proof of God's existence, attempts to defend the coherence of the concept of omnipotence, arguments for and against the personhood of ultimate reality, and competing accounts of the relative importance of grace and free will. While this chapter will bring out the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments it examines, its primary purpose is to provide the reader with historically important instances of religious reasoning which he or she can refer to when reading later chapters.

I. Samuel Clarke's Cosmological Argument for the Existence of God

Proceeding from the assumption that anything that exists must have a sufficient reason for its existence, Samuel Clarke (1675–1729) argued that the existence of contingent beings[1] can only be explained by postulating the existence of a self-existent being, that is, a being that is both essentially causeless[2] and self-explanatory or intrinsically intelligible (although not necessarily intelligible to us).[3] If a being is self-existent, however, it is also logically necessary.[4]

We can formulate Clarke's argument as follows:

1. If something exists, it is either self-existent (and hence self-explanatory) or some other being causes it to exist.
2. A contingent being isn't self-existent. Therefore,
3. A contingent being is caused to exist by some other being. (From 1 and 2.)

   Contingent beings are usually caused by other contingent beings. Samuel Clarke's existence, for example, was caused by his parents, their existence was caused by their parents, and so on. Yet what about contingent beings as a whole?
4. Either the series of contingent beings has a first member (a contingent being that isn't caused by another contingent being) or it doesn't (the series is beginningless).

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5. If the series has a first member, then a self-existent being exists and causes it. (From 3. Since the first member is *contingent*, another being causes it. By hypothesis, the first member isn't caused by a contingent being. Hence, it is caused by a self-existent being.)
6. If the series of contingent beings doesn't have a first member (and is therefore beginningless), a self-existent being exists and causes the whole series. (From 3. Since the existence of the series is contingent, another being causes it.

   Since the cause of the series of contingent beings isn't part of the series, it isn't itself contingent.)
7. If contingent beings exist, a self-existent being exists and causes them. (From 4, 5, and 6.)
8. Contingent beings exist. Hence,
9. A self-existent being exists and causes contingent beings to exist. (From 7 and 8.)

The argument's most controversial features are the inference from 3 to 6 and its first premise. Why does a beginningless series of contingent beings need a cause for its existence to be intelligible? And why assume that the existence of everything *is* intelligible – that there *is* a reason for its existence? We will discuss these questions in turn.

Many of the cosmological argument's critics believe that its inference from step 3 to step 6 is unsound. Even if every contingent being *is* caused by some other being, it doesn't follow that the *series* of contingent beings is.[5] The series might be beginningless with each member being caused by a preceding member. If it were, each member would be explained (by a preceding member), and so the series as a whole would be accounted for. No further explanation would be required. Thus, a beginningless series of contingent beings may not need an explanation. We therefore can't infer that it has a cause.

This common objection misses the point. The question is not, "Why does this or that member of the series exist, that is, why does member *n* exist, or why does member *n*-3 exist?" and so on for any arbitrarily selected member of the series. Rather, the question is, "Why does *any* member of the series exist – that is, why is there a series *at all*?" The first question can be answered by pointing out that each member is caused by a preceding member. For example, *n* exists because *n*-1 exists, and *n*-3 exists because *n*-4 exists. The second question can't. Since the causes cited in answer to the first question (e.g., *n*-1 or *n*-4) are *members* of the series, they are *part* of what we are trying to explain.

If the series doesn't have an external cause, it is an inexplicable brute fact – something that might not have existed but (for no reason) just happens to do so. Consider an analogy. That Jacob and Rachel begat Joseph satisfactorily explains Joseph's existence. That Isaac and Rebekah begat Jacob satisfactorily explains Jacob's existence. But if what puzzles us isn't Joseph's existence or Jacob's existence but human existence in general, these explanations aren't

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helpful. Even if we were to learn that every human being is begotten by other human beings and that the series of human beings is beginningless, our question wouldn't have been answered. For we still wouldn't know why there are human beings in the first place. Similarly, if what puzzles us is that any contingent beings exist, we aren't helped by learning that one contingent being is caused by another, that by a third, and so on.[6]

In short, the existence of the series of contingent beings is puzzling whether the series is beginningless or not. If it isn't caused by a noncontingent being, it has no explanation. In effect, step 3 asserts that contingent existence does have an explanation. Step 3 thus implies step 6. Even if there are an infinite number of contingent beings and each of these is caused by another contingent being, a self-existent being is the only thing that can explain the existence of contingent entities.

Samuel Clark's argument's most problematic feature, however, is its first premise. Why would we think that something's existence is either self-explanatory or explained by the activity of another being? Many seventeeth- and eighteenth-century philosophers thought this followed from the "principle of sufficient reason." The principle was often stated like this:

> PSR1: For every contingent fact F, some other fact F' obtains such that, given F', F must obtain.

PSR1 implies that facts are either necessary or fully determined by other facts.

While both Gottfried Leibniz and Jonathan Edwards endorsed PSR1, it should be unacceptable to any theist who believes that the existence of our world is contingent since God freely created it when he could have created another world instead of it or no world at all. If PSR1 is true, God's decision is fully determined by other facts – either facts about his nature or facts about other things. Neither alternative would be acceptable to these theists. If God's decision is fully determined by his nature, other choices aren't possible. God has to make that decision. If he does, his choice isn't free. If God's decision is fully determined by other things, his sovereignty and independence are compromised as well as his freedom. Theists who believe that God could have created a different world or no world at all must therefore insist that at least one contingent fact doesn't have a sufficient reason – namely, the fact that God freely decided to create our world.

However, theists who believe that God was free not to create or to create some other world *can* accept weaker versions of the principle of sufficient reason. We can weaken the principle by narrowing its scope – restricting it to certain *kinds* of contingent facts. We can also weaken it by qualifying the demand for a *sufficient* reason – a set of facts that *fully* determines what we are trying to explain.

For example, we can restrict the principle's scope to the existence of contingent entities:

> PSR2: There is a sufficient reason for the existence of every contingent entity.

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PSR2 (which appears to be the version Clarke is using) does not entail that there is a sufficient reason for all of an entity's "accidental" properties (properties that it might or might not have). It therefore doesn't entail that there is a sufficient reason for an entity's freely deciding to do something.

One can also restrict the scope of the principle to contingent facts that don't *require* sufficient reasons:

> PSR3: Every contingent fact that requires a sufficient reason has one.

A contingent fact requires a sufficient reason if and only if (1) it is logically possible that it has a sufficient reason, and (2) it is unintelligible if it doesn't have one. All contingent facts satisfy the first condition. Some may not satisfy the second.

Suppose, for example, that a fair die turns up six. It is logically possible that the die's turning up six has a set of causally sufficient conditions. A request for a specification of the (sufficient) reason for its doing so is therefore logically appropriate. But it is *not* clear that the event's occurrence is unintelligible except upon the supposition that there are sufficient conditions for its occurrence since its occurrence doesn't run counter to the laws of probability.

Or consider a case in which I have good strategic reasons for moving my pawn to king's 4 and freely decide to do so. If my decision is contra-causally free, it isn't fully determined by its causal antecedents. But even though my decision wasn't in fact determined by its causal antecedents, it is logically possible that it was. The first condition is therefore satisfied. The second is not. My decision is intelligible because it expresses intelligible reasons and motives. (The move is strategically sound and I want to win the game.) Nevertheless, because these reasons and motives don't *determine* my decision, my decision doesn't have a sufficient reason.

One can also weaken the principle by dropping the demand that contingent facts must have sufficient reasons. Charles Hartshorne thinks that whether or not everything has a sufficient reason, nothing is "through and through pure chance." Reason discounts the possibility of something whose "inexplicability … would be infinite and total." "Mere chance, as an entire account of a being's existence," isn't admissible.[7] Hartshorne's remarks suggest the following principle:

> PSR4: There is at least *some* reason for every contingent fact.

While some contingent facts may lack causally sufficient conditions, PSR4 implies that they at least have necessary conditions that partly explain them.

Each of the weaker principles is compatible with God's freedom. PSR2 and PSR3 don't apply to contra-causally free decisions. PSR4 does, but doesn't imply that they are fully determined by other facts.

The weaker principles are also strong enough to generate the conclusion that contingent being is caused by a self-existent being. The existence of contingent beings seems to require an explanation. Hence, PSR3 as well as PSR2

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imply that contingent being has an explanation. If our earlier discussion was sound, a self-existent being is the only thing that can provide this explanation.

PSR4 is also sufficient to yield the conclusion. If *all* beings are contingent, there is *no* reason for the existence of contingent beings in general. That contingent beings exist is thus "through and through pure chance." Since that violates PSR4, a self-existent being must be at least partly responsible for the existence of contingent beings.

Yet are any of these principles true? The question isn't easily answered – partly because philosophers disagree about their nature. Some think that the principles are empirical generalizations. Others think that one or more of them are presuppositions of rational inquiry. Still others believe that they express necessary truths.[8]

According to the first view, the principle of sufficient reason is an induction from human experience.[9] Impressed with our success in discovering causal explanations, we infer that everything has a cause or explanation. It isn't easy to determine whether this induction is justified. Science has been extraordinarily successful in discovering causes. On the other hand, some phenomena continue to resist explanation. Human behavior is an example. Then, too, because the universe is so vast, our "sample" (the cases in which we have discovered explanations) may simply be too small to justify the sweeping conclusion that *everything* has an explanation. Finally, our sample is restricted to cases in which one spatiotemporal phenomenon is explained by another. It thus provides at best weak support for the claim that contingent reality *as a whole* has an explanation.

Even so, the principle of sufficient reason receives some support from the success of human inquiry, although it should be noted that weaker versions are better supported than stronger ones. For example, there are more cases in which we have discovered *some* reason for contingent facts (necessary conditions, partial causes, and so on) than cases in which we have discovered *sufficient* reasons for them. Hence PSR4 is better confirmed than PSR1 or PSR3.

Other philosophers believe that the principle of sufficient reason is a presupposition of inquiry. For example, W. Norris Clarke argued that (when understood as the claim that being is intelligible) the principle is not merely an expression of the Greeks' "youthful enthusiasm" for reason or of "a belief in a God who was the Logos," but of "an innate drive towards total intelligibility," "an unrestricted desire to know."[10]

This position raises two questions. Is such a drive real? And, if it is, should we trust it?

If Clarke's remarks are treated as straightforward empirical claims, they would appear to be refuted by my grandson's attitude toward algebra. But Clarke's claim is most usefully compared with the claim that we all desire beatitude or moral perfection. The point of the latter is that whether or not we consciously desire beatitude or moral perfection, they are in fact the only things that would truly satisfy or perfect us. Similarly, Clarke's claim is best

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understood as the claim that "total intelligibility" is the only thing that would truly satisfy our desire to know, even though, in practice, we may content ourselves with less or fail to realize that "total intelligibility" alone would fully satisfy us. The plausibility of this claim partly depends upon whether one is employing stronger or weaker versions of the principle of sufficient reason. Contemporary science offers explanations that aren't deterministic. For example, theories about subatomic particles allow for random events that lack sufficient reasons (causes that fully determine the phenomena under investigation). It seems, then, that reason can be satisfied by accounts that violate PSR1. If so, PSR1 doesn't express a demand of reason. On the other hand, reason presumably *would* be dissatisfied with an account that entailed that quantum phenomena or some other contingent fact had *no* explanation (not even a partial one) and thus violated PSR4.

But should we assume that the demands of reason can be met? Perhaps it is reasonable to trust our mental faculties and endorse their demands in the absence of good reasons for distrusting them. Hence, if some form of the principle of sufficient reason *does* express a demand of the human mind, and if there are no good reasons for thinking it false, it may be reasonable to rely on it.[11]

Samuel Clarke as well as Leibniz thought that the principle of reason is a necessary truth rather than an empirical generalization or a demand of reason. Is this plausible?

David Hume thought not. If a principle is necessarily true, its denial entails a logically impossible proposition. Hume pointed out that the denial of Clarke's version of the principle (PSR2) – "Something exists contingently and has no cause" – isn't self-contradictory. He concluded that it isn't necessarily true.

This inference is illegitimate. Formal contradictions aren't the only kind of logical impossibility. "Something is red and green all over," and, "There is not even a prima facie reason to refrain from torturing children," are not self-contradictory. Even so, they are arguably false in all possible worlds.

Others claim that they can't see the necessity of the principle, but this too is inconclusive. Propositions can be necessary that not everyone sees to be necessary. (Many theists believe that "God exists" is a proposition of this kind. True but complicated mathematical theorems or the claim that there is no set of all sets are other examples.) Still, people's intuitions concerning the necessity of the principle conflict, although weaker versions are more likely to seem necessary than stronger ones. Many, for example, undoubtedly do not see the necessity of (say) PSR4. Even so, it isn't clear that it intuitively seems to them that PSR4 *isn't* necessary (they may have no clear intuitions either way), and a failure to see PSR4's necessity doesn't carry much weight. (A claim to intuit its *non*-necessity would carry more weight, though it, too, would be inconclusive.)

The cosmological argument, then, isn't clearly unsound. Yet as it stands, it doesn't clearly establish *God's* existence – that the self-existent cause of contingent being is a maximally perfect personal agent. How could one show this?

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