IS THERE A GOD?

DR. PETER VARDY
GOD?

○ DO BOOJUMS EXIST?
  ○ You cannot answer this question without knowing what a ‘Boojum’ is.

○ DO ALIENS EXIST?
  ○ You cannot answer this question without knowing what you mean by ‘aliens’ – intelligent beings? Microscopic life on other planets? Advanced A.I.?

○ DOES GOD EXIST?
  ○ Since almost all believers accept that ‘God’ is the ultimate mystery, that which lies beyond human conceptualisation and most certainly NOT ‘an old man with a white beard’ – the question is not clear!!
Some religious believers reject philosophy and rationality as ways of attempting to arrive at the existence of God. Instead they argue that REVELATION FROM GOD should be the starting point. This is the case with many evangelical Christians who start from revelation in the Bible; with almost all Muslims who start with revelation in the Qur’an or with Orthodox Jews many of whom start with revelation in Torah.

The problem with revelation as a starting point is how does a neutral observer decide which revelation should be the starting point...

Critics will argue that this is often a matter of upbringing and indoctrination and cannot, therefore, be regarded as reliable.
This is a powerful argument against relying on revelation as a basis for faith.

It is not, of course, conclusive as the fact that someone adopts the beliefs of their parents does not necessarily mean these are mistaken.
Almost all religious believers consider that:

- God is that which underpins the whole of reality
- God created and sustains the universe – without God, there would be no universe.
- God is personal in that God can be addressed as ‘Thou’ and is interested in every individual.
- God is omnipotent, omniscient, loving, just and wise (however these words are to be understood)
- God is that which underpins the absolute nature of ethics, love, beauty, justice and goodness – God is that which gives life and the universe meaning and purpose.
There are many types of argument for the existence of God:

1) COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS
   - These seek to show that God is needed to explain motion, causation, and the existence of the universe itself through the singularity.

2) ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS
   - These seek to derive the existence of God for an analysis of the nature of God

3) RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE ARGUMENTS
   - These seek to move from the hundreds of thousands of reports of religious experience to the existence of the God that causes these experiences.

4) TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS
   - These are arguments from design or purpose and seek to show that the complexities of the universe demand an explanation which is God.
COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

These all start from some observed features of the universe. St. Thomas Aquinas’ ‘FIVE WAYS’ are the best known.
Cosmological Arguments

These seek to move from some feature of the universe to the existence of God:

- We see motion in the universe. One thing may be moved by another but one cannot go on for ever in an infinite regress so there must be an UNMOVED MOVER which is not moved by anything else – this is God.

- We see causes in the universe. One thing may be caused by another but one cannot go on for ever in an infinite regress so there must be an UNCAUSED CAUSE which is not caused by anything else – this is God.

- Everything in the universe depends on something else for its existence but one cannot go on for ever in an infinite regress of dependent things so there must be something that in NECESSARY and not dependent – this is God.
THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE
ARGUMENT
Religious experience arguments

- Hundreds of thousands of people across the world have reported religious experience and these can be argued to point to the existence of God.

- However as Professor Richard Swinburne of Oxford University argues, there is an initial question that needs to be addressed – and that is the issue of probability...
Swinburne argues that ‘PRIOR PROBABILITY’ is essential.

If the probability of fairies, the Loch Ness monster, Martians or God is considered to be very low, then almost no argument will convince someone.

If, however, there is a reasonable possibility/probability that God may exist, then it becomes reasonable to rely on religious experience (one’s own or those of others) as a pointer to God’s existence.
ASSESSING PROBABILITY

WHAT IS YOUR ASSESSMENT OF THE PROBABILITY OF THE EXISTENCE OF:
1) FAIRIES?
2) THE LOCH NESS MONSTER?
3) ALIENS?
4) GOD?

IF YOUR ANSWER WAS ‘IMPOSSIBLE’ THEN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES WILL NOT CONVINCE YOU!
Swinburne lays down two principles for accepting reports of religious experience (assuming that there is a reasonable prior probability that God exists):

1) THE PRINCIPLE OF CREDULITY – things are probably as they seem to be
2) THE PRINCIPLE OF TESTIMONY – unless we have reasons to disbelieve someone, we generally trust their reports.

THE CRITIC WILL REPLY THAT SWINBURNE’s ARGUMENTS APPLY TO NORMAL, EVERYDAY REPORTS – NOT TO FAIRES, FATHER CHRISTMAS OR GOD…

TO WHICH SWINBURNE WOULD REPLY: “THAT IS WHY PRIOR PROBABILITY IS SO IMPORTANT AND THAT IS WHY ALL THE ARGUMENTS TAKEN TOGETHER ARE SO IMPORTANT!”
Dawkins argues that the proper response for someone who has had a religious experience is to check oneself into a psychiatric hospital.

However, some of the most intelligent people in history as well as hundreds of thousands of ordinary people claim to have had religious experience – so to reject ALL these reports as delusional rests on a prior assumption – that God does not exist and, therefore, religious experiences MUST be delusional.

THE FAMOUS ATHEIST A.J. AYER HAD A RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE!!
William James argues that underneath all religion lies the priority of religious experience and there are four key marks of these experiences:

- **Noetic Quality** – the experiences provide knowledge that is not available elsewhere.
- **Ineffability** – the experiences cannot be expressed in words. Teresa of Avila and Thomas Merton both endorsed this.
- **Transiency** – the experiences last a short time.
- **Passivity** – the person is passive and cannot control when the experiences are received.
William James was an American psychologist and one of the leading figures dealing with religious experience. He argues that underneath all religions lie the primacy of the religious experience of their founders. Those who have had religious experiences, have the right to regard these experiences as authoritative and pointing to the existence of God.

BUT HE DOES NOT CONSIDER THAT THESE EXPERIENCES SHOULD BE AUTHORITATIVE FOR OTHERS.
Another impasse...

- So, again, arguments from religious experiences may convince existing believers that they are right to believe in God but they will not convince atheists!
THE UNIVERSE IS DIRECTED TOWARDS AN END OR PURPOSE
Aquinas's fifth way is a well known TELELOGICAL ARGUMENT – it maintains that everything in the universe is directed to an end or purpose.

Every plant, every animal and even the development of the planet seems to have POTENTIALITY built in and purposes seems to be everywhere:

1. All natural occurrences show evidence of design
2. This suggests that there is a being that directs all things
3. Things that lack knowledge cannot achieve anything unless directed by a thing with knowledge
4. There is therefore an intelligent being that directs everyone and everything towards a purpose
5. For Aquinas, this being is God
Aquinas’ Arrow Analogy

1. An arrow hits a target even though it does not have a mind of its own. (An effect)
2. The archer (someone with a mind of their own) shot the arrow. (A cause)
3. Things in the natural world follow natural laws even though they do not necessarily have a mind of their own. (An effect)
4. Someone with a mind of their own caused the natural world to behave in this way. We call this someone God. (A cause)
Richard Dawkins would completely reject this argument as:

- As Charles Darwin has shown, there are no fixed natures or purposes of plants, animals or human beings – they have all evolved by natural selection. Natures evolve and development based on the survival of the fittest.

- There is no meaning or purpose behind the universe – the assumption that there is, is a faith claim which has no rational justification.

- Aquinas ASSUMES a telos or purpose for the universe in order to arrive at his conclusion (God) but there is no basis for this assumption.
ATHEIST ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE EXISTENCE OF GOD
Many atheists reject belief in God for the following reasons:

1) BELIEF IN GOD IS SELF-CONTRADICTORY
   - God is held to be all powerful, wholly good and yet evil exists. This is seen as a contradiction. J.L. Mackie: This is an ‘inconsistent triad’

2) SCIENCE CAN PROVIDE A COMPLETE EXPLANATION OF REALITY
   - God is not required any longer to explain the natural world. Science, in particular Darwinian natural selection, can provide a complete explanation.

3) THE EXISTENCE OF INNOCENT SUFFERING
   - If God is held to be loving and personal, there is no way to justify the extreme suffering of children and innocents. (Ivan Karamazov in ‘The Brothers Karamazov’)

4) THE UNIVERSE IS MEANINGLESS AND WITHOUT PURPOSE
   - Any attempt, therefore, to argue from meaning or purpose is invalid.
ABDUCTIVE ARGUMENTS
There are no arguments for or against God that will convince everyone.

- Atheists will reject key assumptions made by religious believers.
- Religious believers will reject key assumptions made by atheists.

It seems that there is an impasse and arguing for or against God will get nowhere.

- Certainly there is no ‘knock down’ proof either way.
At the beginning of the C20th the philosopher Charles Pierce suggested that many arguments are best seen as ABDUCTIVE.

An ABDUCTIVE ARGUMENT seeks to arrive at the most plausible explanation, at the explanation that makes most sense of the evidence.

Those who support abductive arguments accept that they are not conclusive – it is a matter of PERSUASIVENESS.

The evangelical certainty of celebrity atheists and some religious believers may be misplaced – humility may be needed!
In the film ‘Contact’ Jodi Foster portrays a brilliant scientists searching for extra terrestrial intelligence. She is a confirmed atheist.

When she was younger she had a relationship with a young man who is now the Chaplain at the White House.

They meet after not seeing each other for some years and the talk gets round to a book the Chaplain has just written about science and God....
TODAY WILL FOCUS ON ONE ASPECT OF THE ARGUMENTS

DOES THE UNIVERSE REQUIRE AN EXPLANATION?

This is the central issue. If the answer to this is ‘no’ then trying to prove God exists is simply folly.

The universe ‘just is’ – end of discussion (Russell and Dawkins)

The universe is without purpose or meaning – other than that which human beings create.

Humans are simply advanced animals that have evolved by natural selection and science can provide a complete explanation.
Almost every serious religious believer accepts:

1) That the universe began with the singularity about 13.7 billion years ago
2) That Darwinian natural selection and evolution can explain a great deal about animal, plant and human evolution.
3) That science can explain more and more about the natural world and human beings and how they work.

THESE ARE NOT CONTESTED.

What is at issue is whether these can provide a COMPLETE explanation.

God is not a wizard with a magic wand. Christianity and scientific theories about the origins of the world are compatible. I accept the theory of evolution and the big bang theory. People with hate in their hearts mock God, for they don't understand that God is nothing else than LOVE.

Pope Francis, October 2014.
The great Greek philosopher, Aristotle, argued that every plant and animal was good if it fulfilled its potential.

Every thing in the universe is actual in that it exists and has potentialities related to the sort of thing it is.

- A butterfly has the potential to fly and to breed
- An ant has the potential to carry many times its own weight and to cooperate with other ants
- A bee has the potential to sting, to collect nectar and to make honey
- A daffodil has the potential to produce a flower and seeds and also to reproduce by creating new bulbs.
- A human being has the potential to run, jump, walk, manipulate objects, do science, speculate about the nature of reality.
ALL THE POTENTIAL OF HYDROGEN AND HELIUM TO IGNITE THE NUCLEAR FIRES WITHIN STARS WHICH IS NECESSARY TO PRODUCE CARBON WAS IN THE SINGULARITY

ALL THE POTENTIAL TO PRODUCE THE SUN, THE EARTH, PLANTS, ANIMALS, HUMANS AND YOU AND I WAS BUILT INTO THE SINGULARITY
Most scientists agree the universe came into existence 13.7 billion years ago. Background radiation, Fraunhofer lines, red shift and many other observations seem to point to the singularity. What is extraordinary is how incredibly precise the conditions had to be for there to be any universe at all. Even the tiniest variations on many, many of the initial conditions of the singularity would mean no hydrogen and helium (needed to ignore the nuclear fires to produce stars and thereby carbon), no stars and planets at all, and no life as we know it. All the incredible potential to form the universe was built into the singularity. The odds against this are astronomical.
Professor John Polkinghorne

- Polkinghorne was one of the foremost quantum scientists at the end of the C20th century. He was Principal of Queens College, Cambridge and was knighted for his services to science.
- In his late 50s he became a Christian because his scientific studies convinced him that the existence of God made better sense of all his scientific findings than any alternative.

“Science and religion...are friends, not foes, in the common quest for knowledge. Some people may find this surprising, for there’s a feeling throughout our society that religious belief is outmoded, or downright impossible, in a scientific age. I don’t agree. In fact, I’d go so far as to say that if people in this so-called ‘scientific age’ knew a bit more about science than many of them actually do, they’d find it easier to share my views.”

~JOHN POLKINGHORNE
POLKINGHORNE IS ARGUING:
1) That the hypothesis of God makes more sense of the scientific evidence that any alternative.
2) That God is a simpler and more plausible explanation and is, therefore, to be preferred.

HE IS PUTTING FORWARD AN ABDUCTIVE ARGUMENT – it is not conclusive and he would accept that this is the case.

Mathematics is the abstract key which turns the lock of the physical universe.

John Polkinghorne
It may be that:

1) The universe ‘just happened’ – clearly we are here, so the universe must have come into existence and no explanation is required (this is Richard Dawkins’ position)

2) We live in a multi-verse – a near infinite number of universes of which we happen to be the one suitable for planets to form (some scientists suggest we may be in a computer simulation)

3) There is an intelligence which created the incredible precise conditions necessary for stars and carbon based life forms to emerge.

Polkinghorne and others are arguing that (3) is the most plausible explanation.

NOTICE THAT IT IS A MATTER OF ASSESSMENT OF PROBABILITY – ALL THESE ARE POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS