

Clarity and Arguing About Gods

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Arguing About Gods, Graham Oppy, Cambridge University Press, 2006 (ISBN 0-521-86386-4), xix + 449 pp., hb \$90.00

Oppy's newest book, *Arguing About Gods*, is essential for those interested in the Philosophy of Religion, Natural Theology, and the existence of God. It represents significant research and a robust acquaintance with contemporary and classical work about the existence of God. In an important way, this book is a modern day application of David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which Oppy refers to as one of his favorites. While many defenses have been given in reply to Hume, what Oppy shows in his work is that these have failed to successfully modify the classical theistic arguments. Oppy applies Hume's method to post-Humean modifications of theistic arguments, and exhibits the same rigorous skepticism as the interlocutor *Philo* from *Dialogues*. Through an analysis of Oppy's criticism and application of Hume, it can be understood that there are two reasons why post-Humean theists have not successfully responded to Hume (and why pre-Humean theists were unable to give a 'Hume proof' argument). These will become evident as Oppy's criticisms are considered, as will a possible avenue for a successful proof, and the necessity of a proof for Christianity. The centrality of a proof, especially for Christianity, is based on the ought/can principle, making the need to show the clarity of God's existence foundational to any other aspect of the Christian gospel.

The central thesis of the book is that there are no successful proofs for or against the existence of God. Oppy believes that there are rational persons who believe in God, and rational persons who do not believe in God. What is not rational, according to Oppy, is the claim that there are no successful arguments among those that have been proposed, and to believe that there are is irrational. For Oppy, a successful argument is one that would convince a rational person. This defines success in terms of changing the other person's mind. There can be two types of rational persons who do not believe in God and at whom theistic arguments are

aimed to convince: the person who does not believe that God exists, and the person who does not hold a belief either way. The difficulty in convincing a rational person who believes that God does not exist is that he or she believes that the evidence supports the atheist's position. Therefore, what is necessary is new evidence, not an argument. There is the reality that people are not always rational in forming their beliefs, and Oppy reserves a discussion of the ethics of belief for the last chapter.

Chapters 2–4 consider the ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments. The detail and refinement of these chapters cannot be duplicated here, and they can serve as a valuable resource for those interested in research about contemporary arguments for God's existence. Oppy is fair and even handed in his presentation of these arguments, but he concludes that no successful form of these arguments has been given to date. In some cases he revises his older criticisms, noting places where they were incorrect or could be made stronger.

Problems that keep the ontological argument from being successful include that it imports the idea of God into the premises (thus becoming circular), and that where it does not do so its conclusion is not equivalent to the God of monotheism. The cosmological argument faces not only this same problem (its conclusion is not equivalent to God), but also problems about the need for a first cause. Oppy critically analyzes the claim that there cannot have been an infinite past, and also rejects several forms of the principle of sufficient reason. PSR is either stated too strongly so as to be self-refuting, or it is so weak as to not be adequate in proving the existence of God. Oppy then suggests that perhaps the universe had no cause, having a beginning without a cause (in contrast to God, who is said to be uncaused in the sense of having had no beginning). The teleological argument is unsuccessful in that it has not progressed past the critique of Hume. Oppy considers the claim that irreducible complexity proves intelligent design, and argues that this is not really different than the traditional design argument, an intelligent designer is not the same as 'God', and the argument is invalid (what appears to be irreducible complexity can be arrived at apart from intelligent design).

Chapters 5–7 consider arguments from evil, Pascal's wager, and miscellaneous other arguments that do not fit neatly into previous categorization. Much of the analysis of the problem of evil involves questions about free will and God's purpose in creating. What becomes obvious in the discussion is the lack of a clear definition of the good. This especially becomes evident as Oppy considers appeals to heaven as justification for present evils. Many (most) current theistic solutions to the problem of evil rely on libertarian free will (I am free if I could have done otherwise). Similarly, many (most) current theistic solutions

appeal to heaven where everything will be explained and the greatest good will be achieved. Oppy points out the following: if the explanation of moral evil is that it is due to freedom of the will, and God had to permit freedom to achieve the good of fellowship, then if the good of heaven is fellowship with God heaven must contain freedom, and therefore there can/will be moral evil in heaven. On the other hand, if freedom is not necessary in heaven, and the lack of freedom does not diminish the good of fellowship with God, then freedom was not necessary from the beginning, and lack of freedom would have not have diminished fellowship with God.

His analysis brings out a number of issues that can be useful in understanding why theists (particularly Christians) have failed to give a clear proof for God's existence. By defining the good as fellowship with God that will be achieved in heaven, the focus becomes 'how do I get to heaven'. Furthermore, this fellowship is understood as an immediate/intuitive relationship with God, or perhaps even a relationship where one can visibly see God. The result is that 'proofs' for God's existence become useless for achieving the greatest good. One does not need to prove that God exists in order to get into heaven, and once in heaven, the immediate/intuitive perception of God removes once and for all any need for a proof. The only use for a proof is to help some philosophically inclined persons in this life, but even then these proofs are not seen to be much help since they are not necessary for achieving the good life but instead are a kind of distraction or hobby.

In contrast, if the greatest good is knowing God, and God is known mediately through his works (Psalm 19, Romans 1, *et al.*) not immediately in a beatific vision, then proof becomes essential to the good life. There are philosophical reasons to think this is a better understanding of the greatest good. In order to know God, one must first know if there is a God. This does not mean that fellowship is not the greatest good, but fellowship is based on knowing, and is a development of continued knowing. If the essence of God (in theism) is that he is a spirit, and spirit is nonvisible consciousness, then God cannot be visibly/directly seen, now or in heaven. Rather, God is 'seen' by understanding the works of God. There are also scriptural reasons to think this is a better understanding of the greatest good: Jesus said 'now this is eternal life: that they might know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent' (John 17:3 NIV); Paul said 'for since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse' (Romans 1:20 NIV). The implication is that both Jesus and Paul believed that humans ought to know God, and that they can know God in this life, and that this knowledge is 'eternal life', the greatest good.

But this leads to a significant problem for Christianity. If humans ought to know God then they must be able to know God. But if Oppy's analysis is correct, and there are no successful proofs to date for God's existence, then humans cannot know the first thing about God (if he exists). The implication is that humans cannot be held responsible for knowing God, and yet Christianity maintains that the failure to know God is a sin (according to Paul, the sin that leads to all other kinds of sins – Romans 1), and the failure to know God results in (or is equivalent to) the failure to have the greatest good. The onus seems to be on Christianity to either provide a clear proof for God's existence or abandon its claims about unbelief as sin and the good life as knowing God.

Related to these considerations, in his chapter on miscellaneous arguments (Chapter 7), Oppy considers the argument from unbelief. Essentially, this argument states that if God exists then God would make his existence known, but since there are unbelievers God has not made his existence known, and therefore God does not exist. One can deny the first point but only if one also denies that knowing God is the greatest good, and humans are sinful if they do not know God. Consequently, it seems Christianity must affirm that if God exists then his existence is clear to everyone. One way this is done is by asserting that everyone already believes in God, but they are denying it. This is based on a reading of Romans 1:18–21, mentioned earlier. Here it says:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them . . . For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

The assertion is that here Paul says people both knew God (because God made his existence clear) and they ignored this knowledge and worshiped idols. However, notice that the suppression occurs due to wickedness, and the wickedness Paul indicates is exchanging God for something that is not God. The truth is suppressed by believing something false, namely, this idol is God. Paul is affirming that there are people who do not believe in God (although they did at one time), even though God has made his existence clear. The attempt to deny that there is unbelief (by asserting that everyone believes in God 'deep down') empties the distinction of all meaning: supposedly everyone believes in God, although they deny that they do, and although they attribute the qualities of God to something else. If someone who does

these things can still be said to 'believe' the proposition 'God exists', then when does not someone believe a proposition? This same claim can be applied to any proposition, making the distinction between belief and unbelief meaningless.

The problem of unbelief cannot be solved by denying that God would make his existence clear (for Christians at least), and it cannot be solved by denying the reality of unbelief. If it is to be solved it must be solved by showing that it is clear that God exists, and explaining why people do not know God as they should. In other words, within Christianity, a theistic proof is necessary for the greatest good, and necessary to understand sin and redemption. But is there any hope that a proof can be given, especially after Hume and Oppy?

Perhaps there is, and it might be that the avenue that can provide a proof will also help settle some other foundational questions, such as what is the good, and why is there evil. As has been noted, Christians have not been very motivated to give a clear proof because they have not focused on knowing God as the greatest good. While this is true in general, it is also true that within Historic Christianity there has been a focus on knowing God as the greatest good (chief end of man). The Westminster Confession of Faith begins by asserting that the light of nature, and the words of creation and providence, provide clear proof for God's existence (1.1). The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins by asking 'what is the chief end of man', and answers 'the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever'. This would be impossible if God cannot be known. In question forty-six it asks 'what is required in the first commandment?' and answers 'The first commandment requireth us to know and acknowledge God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify him accordingly'. The parallel answer from the Larger Catechism says 'the duties required in the first commandment are, the knowing and acknowledging of God to be the only true God, and our God'. Clearly, knowing God is essential to Christianity, whether it is Jesus and Paul, or Historic Christianity as affirmed in the Westminster Confession. Hume, raised in the context of the Church of Scotland, would have been personally aware of the claims made in the Westminster Confession. He would have been aware that if he is correct, and proof for God cannot be given, then Christianity is either false or must be modified in a way that would render it unrecognizable. To avoid this, it is necessary for Christians to show that it is clear that God exists, and perhaps the failure to do so is rooted in the very problem itself.

If Christianity is asserting that unbelief as a sin is the basic sin that leads to all other kinds of sin (the first commandment, Romans 1), then it should not be surprising to find that humans fail to give proof for God's existence, and when they do this proof is insufficient because it is not aimed at properly knowing God. Specifically, God is defined as a

Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth (Shorter Catechism Q. 4). To prove that there is a highest being, first cause, or designer, is not to prove that God exists. To rest with such proofs shows that one does not know God as one should, that one has exchanged the eternal power of God for something else. What must be proven is that there is an eternal being, and that this being is as defined above, in contrast to all the other views of the eternal that have been held by humans.

Because this is not the common focus in theistic proofs, it is not surprising that it does not get much attention in Oppy's book. However, the fact that it does arise is evidence of Oppy's diligence and careful research. One important thinker does seem to make this the focus of his proof, and that is John Locke. Oppy considers Locke's proof in his chapter on miscellaneous proofs. Locke begins his proof by arguing that there must be something eternal (without beginning). He then proceeds to argue that this eternal being is God. Here I want to focus on his first claim (that there must be something eternal), while recognizing problems in how he proceeds after that, and in his empiricism which undermines much of what he wants to do.

Locke argues that there must have existed something from eternity because the alternative is that something came from nothing. Locke believes that the claim 'something came from nothing' is so ridiculous that no one can actually believe it. However, in a number of places through his book, Oppy contends that it is possible for there to be uncaused events, and that the universe came into existence from nothing without a cause (not creation *ex nihilo* where God is the cause). Can this basic point be agreed upon, and if not can anything else be agreed upon? I believe it can, and that it marks the first step in showing that it is clear that God exists.

Oppy correctly points out that from the fact that something has existed from eternity it does not follow that the same thing has existed from eternity. There may have been an eternity of impermanent beings, each giving rise to the next and then going out of existence, or there may be one underlying being that is eternal, or only some being that is eternal and other being that is temporal, or nothing that is eternal. But these are a limited number of options, and it seems that they can be narrowed down further. By eliminating the impossible (what is self-contradictory), we can arrive at what is clear about the eternal.

For instance, is it meaningful to assert that nothing is eternal (all being came from non-being)? If the universe is all that is (there is no other being), and it had a beginning, then it came into being from non-being. When we say that 'a' came from 'non-a', we assume that these are both kinds of beings (such as a chicken and an egg). But 'non-being' does not refer to 'a' or 'non-a'; to assert that being came from non-being is like asserting that 'a' came from neither 'a' nor

'non-a'. This claim is meaningless, and empties the idea of 'beginning', or 'starting', of meaning.

Furthermore, it is a fundamental blurring of the distinction between 'being' and 'non-being'; if being can come from either being or non-being, then in this respect they are not different, the distinction is not being upheld. In the sense that being can come from either being or non-being, in this respect being is the same as non-being. Because this is a contradiction, the implication is that being cannot come from non-being; if there ever was only non-being then there would still be non-being. Or, if something now exists, then something has always existed. This does not rely on a form of the principle of sufficient reason, but only that being cannot come from non-being, and if the universe is all that exists and had a beginning, then it is being from non-being.

This line of thinking provides a first step toward arguing that it is clear that God exists in moving toward showing that only God is eternal (without beginning). The next steps involve asking what can be predicated of 'eternal' without contradiction. For instance, if being that changes toward an end contradicts eternity, then it is meaningless to assert that matter is eternal. Or if finite being that grows/increases contradicts eternity, then it is meaningless to assert that the finite self is eternal. The promise of this approach is: it correctly identifies what must be argued for in order to prove that God exists (namely, that only a specific kind of being can be eternal); there are only a limited number of options and each can be clearly identified; if this foundational question cannot be settled (what is eternal?), then other questions which presuppose an answer to this question cannot be settled (it must be addressed on pain of global skepticism). Oppy says a few times that it might be the case that there are uncaused events, that the universe came into being from non-being uncaused, but if we accept this as a possibility one time, it is unclear how we can deny it as a possibility other times (all the time?), and as pointed out earlier it blurs the distinction between being and non-being so that it is unclear how anything can be known that presupposes that distinction.

Furthermore, this approach also provides an answer to the problem of evil, and a solution to the question 'why don't rational people believe?' If the greatest good is knowing God, and this knowledge is available through God's works of creation and providence, then the existence of moral evil does not threaten the greatest good but instead deepens it. In its chapter about the fall (Chapter 6), the Westminster Confession of Faith says it this way: 'This their sin, God was pleased, according to His wise and holy counsel, to permit, having purposed to order it to His own glory'. In permitting sin there is a further revelation of the divine nature, specifically in his justice and mercy in responding to sin, which deepens the knowledge of God. This same sin which deepens the knowledge of God also obscures it for those who are not

seeking. A person who has the potential for rationality may not use it in the case of thinking about what is eternal and the implications of such beliefs. Nor does this undermine the need for philosophical dialogue on the topic because a person's response (either coming to greater understanding of what they had previously ignored, or rejecting what is clear about the eternal) is a revelation in itself about the consequences of thinking or not thinking. In this sense it can be affirmed that nothing can keep the good from those who seek it.

To put this into Oppy's definition for a successful argument, one must be able to show that only God is eternal in a way that would change a rational person's mind. Oppy correctly points out that if all that is done is to give an argument without new evidence, the other person will most likely not be persuaded. Besides the requirement of providing new evidence (which Oppy correctly believes is not forthcoming), I add the requirement of thinking presuppositionally about the meaningfulness of basic claims. The most basic claims that can be made are about being and eternity. Being is assumed in all other claims, and the eternal is ontologically and logically prior to all else. To successfully change a rational person's mind about the existence of God, one must raise questions about this person's own beliefs about the eternal. For instance, if this person believes nothing is eternal, and this is the same as claiming that being came from neither 'a' nor 'non-a', then their belief is meaningless. Presuppositional thinking brings what is often not seen to the forefront, and also addresses what is foundational first. This is necessary if agreement is to be had on nonfoundational issues.

It should be noted, however, that the fact that a 'rational' person has not been thinking presuppositionally about their own beliefs concerning the eternal raises questions about their rationality. Perhaps there are degrees or levels of rationality. While a person might be perfectly rational in their daily choices, or in interacting with others, they might be presuppositionally irrational. Because of the role that foundational questions play for the rest of one's worldview, to be presuppositionally irrational may very well be the worst kind of irrationality. Oppy ends his book with a discussion about the ethics of belief, and that seems appropriate here as well. Oppy modifies Clifford's famous principle in the following way: it is irrational, always, everywhere, for anyone to believe anything that is not appropriately proportioned to the reasons and evidence that are possessed by that one (p. 420). Applying the requirement of presuppositional thinking to this principle we can add at the end 'at the most basic level'. This addition makes the principle universal (the same for everyone) because the most basic level of thinking about being involves the distinction between being and non-being, and what being is eternal and what being is temporal. Therefore, it is irrational for anyone to believe anything that denies the distinction

between being and non-being, or predicates of the eternal something which contradicts eternity, or makes assertions about reality without critically analyzing their presuppositions.

A number of issues have been explored in this essay that will hopefully provoke further thought and research. Oppy's book is the catalyst for such activity as it candidly but provocatively explores the failings of theistic arguments. While Oppy is correct in his assessment of the traditional arguments, it has been argued here that there is hope for a successful argument. This comes in recognizing why the traditional arguments fall so far short, and in more clearly focusing on the characteristics of God that require proof. This also requires giving a deeper definition of 'good' that avoids the superficial nature of heaven as the source of the greatest good and a solution to the problem of evil. This involves thinking presuppositionally about the most basic questions that can be asked. If Christianity can show that it is clear that God exists, then its claims about the universal need for redemption from unbelief can be justified; if Christianity cannot show that there is clarity about God's existence, then its other claims are in serious trouble. Either way, these are momentous problems that require attention.

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Theology for Liberal Presbyterians and Other Endangered Species,
Douglas Ottati, Geneva Press, 2006 (ISBN 978-0-664-50289-8), pb \$19.95

In an open recognition of just how divided the Presbyterian Church has become, this book is intended specifically for one kind of Presbyterian: the liberal kind. It is an engaging and informed book intended to encourage and to theologically guide liberal Presbyterians and other liberal Christians.

This being the intended audience, the reader will want to know just what is meant by 'liberal'. Anticipating this question, Ottati defines liberal Presbyterians as: people who 'try to retrieve, restate, rethink, and revise traditional theologies and beliefs in the face of contemporary knowledge and realities'. In other words, liberals retrieve, restate and rethink, but they do not reject the tradition. Indeed I am struck by just how Orthodox this liberal Presbyterian is. Ottati's references for example are practically all from the Reformed tradition with Calvin leading the way, and he reflects at length on the Heidelberg Confession and also on the Confession of 1967. His may be just one reading of the