

Cardiff University Debate on 'The Existence of God' (February 2013)

Opening Speech by Peter S. Williams

My opening speech will offer a cumulative case of four arguments for theism.

1) A Moral Argument

Coming to know that the earth goes around the sun was a matter of *discovering* truth, not *inventing* it. Moral objectivism says that ethics is about *discovering* moral truths that exist even if we fail to discern them. According to moral objectivism there are genuine moral disagreements; and the observation that people sometimes hold different moral opinions just shows that our moral *beliefs* can be either correct or incorrect *according to the moral facts of the matter*.

Are there any moral facts? Those who point to the reality of evil as the basis for an argument against God certainly think so; for nothing can be objectively evil if there are no objective values. Hence atheist philosopher Peter Cave defends moral objectivism by appealing to his intuitions about evil:

whatever sceptical arguments may be brought against our belief that killing the innocent is morally wrong, we are more certain that the killing is morally wrong than that the argument is sound...¹

The properly basic intuition that torturing innocent children for fun is wrong isn't undermined by the existence of the psychopath who enjoys torturing children. By the principle of credulity, torturing an innocent child for fun clearly isn't *merely* something that stops the child functioning normally (an empirical observation), or *merely* something we dislike because of our evolutionary history, or *merely* something our society has decided to discourage. Rather, torturing an innocent child for fun is *objectively wrong*. So *at least one thing is objectively wrong*. Therefore, *moral objectivism is true*.

Of course, my moral intuition *could be wrong*; but *this very admission* of fallibility *presupposes moral objectivism*; for if moral subjectivism were true, no moral claims could be objectively false. As atheist Russ Shafer-Landau argues: 'subjectivism's... picture of ethics... entails a kind of moral infallibility for individuals or societies... This sort of infallibility is hard to swallow.'²

Finally, if moral objectivism were false it couldn't be true that we objectively *ought* to consider arguments against objectivism, or that we *ought* to consider them fairly: Knowing this, we see that to embrace an argument for subjectivism would be to take the self-contradictory position that: a) there are no objective moral values, but that b) we objectively *ought* to accept subjectivism!

Many atheists argue that *if* God doesn't exist, *then* objective moral values don't exist. For example, Jean-Paul Sartre said he found it:

extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There can no longer be any good *a priori*, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it.³

An objective moral value is a transcendent ideal that prescribes and obligates behaviour; but an ideal implies a mind, a prescription requires a prescriber and an obligation demands a person. As H.P. Owen argues:

On the one hand [objective moral] claims transcend every human person... On the other hand... it is contradictory to assert that impersonal claims are entitled to the allegiance of our wills. The only solution to this paradox is to suppose that the order of [objective moral] claims... is in fact rooted in the personality of God.⁴

It's important not to confuse this argument with the false claim that one must *believe* in God in order to *know* or to *do* the right thing. The moral argument is concerned with moral ontology and not moral epistemology.

2) The Argument from Reason

Atheist Sam Harris affirms that 'Our logical, mathematical, and physical intuitions have not been designed by natural selection to track the Truth.'⁵ Likewise, Patricia Churchland holds that:

Boiled down to essentials, a nervous system enables the organism to succeed in the four F's: feeding, fleeing, fighting, and reproducing. The principal chore of nervous systems is to get the body parts where they should be in order that the organism may survive... Truth... definitely takes the hindmost.⁶

But if truth 'takes the hindmost' on naturalism, how can Harris and Churchland be confident about their naturalism? As atheist Thomas Nagel concedes: 'the reliance we put on reason implies a belief that... the basic methods of reasoning we employ are not merely human but belong to a more general category of *mind*.'⁷ That is, our rationally inescapable cognitive confidence is at odds with naturalism, but stands in a mutually supporting relationship with theism.

3) A Fine-Tuning Argument

Neither complexity without specificity, nor specificity without complexity compels us to infer design. However, if you saw a poem written out in alphabet fridge magnets, you'd infer design. Such a pattern is both specified *and* sufficiently improbable to merit a design inference on the grounds that 'in all cases where we know the causal origin of... specified complexity, experience has shown that intelligent design played a causal role.'⁸ This observation becomes highly significant in light of Stephen Hawking's affirmation that for life to exist: 'the initial state of the universe had to be set up in a very special *and* highly improbable way.'⁹

4) A Cosmological Argument

Suppose I ask you to loan me a certain book, but you say: 'I don't have a copy right now, but I'll ask my friend to lend me his copy and then I'll lend it to you.' Suppose your friend says the same thing to you, and so on. Two things are clear. First, if the process of asking to borrow the book goes on *ad infinitum*, I'll never get the book. Second, if I get the book, the process that led to me getting it can't have gone on *ad infinitum*. Somewhere down the line of requests to borrow the book, someone *had* the book *without having to borrow it*. Likewise, argues Richard Purtill, consider any contingent reality:

the same two principles apply. If the process of everything getting its existence from something else went on to infinity, then the thing in question would never [have] existence. And if the thing has... existence then the process hasn't gone on to infinity. There was something that had existence without having to receive it from something else...¹⁰

Atheist cosmologist Alexander Vilenkin recently affirmed that 'All the evidence we have says that the universe had a beginning.'¹¹ Big bang cosmology describes the evolution of the universe over a finite length of time, but it doesn't explain why the universe exists. Concerning this question, physicist Paul Davies observes:

One might consider some supernatural force... as being responsible for the big bang, or one might prefer to regard the big bang as an event without a cause. It seems to me that we don't have too much choice. Either... something outside of the physical world [or] an event without a cause.¹²

A physical event is a *contingent* reality, and a contingent reality is contingent *upon something beyond itself*. Hence every physical event must have at least one cause – in a general sense of the term. Since the *first* physical event cannot depend upon a physical reality, the finitude of the past highlights the need for a non-contingent and therefore non-physical 'first cause'. That is:

- 1) There was a first physical event
- 2) All physical events have at least one cause outside and independent of themselves
- 3) Therefore, the first physical event had at least one cause outside and independent of itself
- 4) The cause of the first physical event can't have been a physical cause
- 5) Therefore, the first physical event had a non-physical cause
- 6) It's impossible for everything to have a cause
- 7) Therefore, there exists a first, un-caused, non-contingent and non-physical cause of physical reality

Quantum mechanics doesn't provide a counter example to the second, causal premise. Even under the Copenhagen interpretation, quantum events happen against a backdrop of physical reality that causally conditions, even if it doesn't causally necessitate, the quantum events in question. Atheist philosopher Quentin Smith confirms that quantum considerations 'at most tend to show that acausal laws govern

the *change of condition* of particles... They state nothing about the causality or acausality of absolute beginnings...'¹³

Since the universe had a beginning, non-theists must either deny our causal premise or claim that every physical event *has a physical cause*. However, making an exception to our causal premise when it comes to the *first* physical event is *ad hoc*, whereas invoking the necessity of physical causation entails an infinite regress.

¹ Peter Cave, *Humanism* (OneWorld, 2009), p. 146.

² Russ Shafer-Landau, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?* (Oxford), p. 16-17.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (Yale University Press, 2007), p. 28.

⁴ H.P. Owen, 'Why morality implies the existence of God', edited extract from *The Moral Argument for Christian Theism* (George Allen & Unwin, 1965), in Brian Davies (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion: a guide and anthology* (Oxford, 2000), p. 648.

⁵ Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, p. 66.

⁶ Patricia Churchland, quoted by Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism* (OUP, 2011), p. 315.

⁷ Nagel, *Last Word*, p. 140.

⁸ Stephen C. Meyer, 'Teleological Evolution: The Difference it Doesn't Make',

www.arn.org/docs/meyer/sm_teleologicalevolution.htm

⁹ Stephen Hawking & Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (Bantam, 2010), p. 130 & 144.

¹⁰ Richard Purtill, quoted by Charles Taliaferro, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Blackwells, 2001), p. 358-359.

¹¹ Alexander Vilenkin quoted by Lisa Grossman, 'Death of the eternal cosmos' in *New Scientist* (14th January 2012), p.7. cf. Alexander Vilenkin, 'Did the Universe Have a Beginning?'

<http://youtu.be/NXCQelhKJ7A>

¹² Paul Davies, 'The Birth of the Cosmos,' in *God, Cosmos, Nature and Creativity* (Jill Gready (ed.), Scottish Academic Press, 1995), p. 8-9.

¹³ Quentin Smith, 'The Uncaused Beginning of the Universe', *Philosophy of Science* 55 (1988), p. 50.