

“An analysis of arguments for the existence of God will result in valid philosophical reasons to believe in God”

Discuss and evaluate this claim with reference to both the argument from religious experience and the Ontological argument

This question chiefly brings very important issues surrounding the basis for forming a belief in God, and whether that can purely be on philosophical grounds. For instance, if somebody were to become convinced that the rationality of the religious experience and Ontological arguments were sound would belief in God follow? Or, is it simply that an analysis of these arguments shows that they are fallacious?

Firstly, when analysing Anselm's Ontological argument it can, too many, seem remarkably unconvincing, if not frustrating; it appears to be more like a riddle of words than a rational proof for a given proposition. As Bertrand Russell writes 'it is easier to feel convinced that [the ontological argument] must be fallacious than it is to find out precisely where the fallacy lies'. Even Plantinga, one of the main proponents of the argument, doubts its influence, writing that 'Few people, I should think, have been brought to belief in God by means of this argument.' Particularly, the Ontological argument is A-priori; rather than relying on sensory experience it moves through logical stages to a conclusion that is necessary. Naturally, when something is entirely A-priori, we can feel doubtful. Richard Dawkins even mocks the arguments and likens it to 'language in the playground'. He writes 'I have deep suspicion of any line of reasoning that reached such a significant conclusion without feeding in a single piece of data from the real world.'

Dawkins really falls in line with other strong Empiricists such as Hume whom believe that to prove a statement is true or false empirical investigation alone is necessary - nothing can be proved A-priori. For such a person, unless God can be empirically verified - can put into a beaker and tested - he is not real. Yet, if this could be the case, he wouldn't be the all-knowing, all-powerful God of the Abrahamic religions; if anything, the strong empiricist has wiped God off his own radar. Therefore, I find such empiricism dubious; it holds that experience somehow gives us a magical distinction to absolute reality. Yet, as Kant shows, our senses can only ever reveal the world of appearance (or what Kant phrased 'the phenomenon') - we can never know what reality is actually like (or 'the noumenon'). We can have a phenomenon experience of a something - you can see, hear, smell, touch or even taste it - but you cannot access the noumenon. In fact, Descartes famous 'I think therefore I am' reveals that it is possible to doubt the existence of all matter (we could be hooked up to a computer that relays sensory inputs!) apart from our own conscious rational thoughts. Yet, Anselm's Ontological argument is not a particularly a strong argument, and is often dismissed on the grounds of Kant's criticism that "existence" is a not a predicate - a property that something either possesses or lacks.

However, although Plantinga doubts the influence of the argument, he believes that it 'establishes, not the truth of theism, but its rational acceptability.' In other words, it establishes, for someone *who already believes*, a rational basis for doing. Particularly, to a believer, religious experience, or testimony of a religious experience, strengthens belief. However, Richard Swinburne goes further and argues that religious experience constitutes evidence for the existence of God; his principle of credulity and testimony arguing that we are justified in accepting that a religious experience occurred and the accounts of others

unless evidence is revealed for the contrary. Yet, as Peter Vardy writes, to the unbeliever 'claims to religious experience are as incredulous as claims to have seen the Loch Ness monster or to have seen UFOs.' Therefore, as somebody would be sceptical about claims about the Loch Ness or UFOs, so too will someone with a disposition that God does not exist, seek out other natural explanations. As Richard Dawkins writes 'If you've had such an experience, you may find yourself believing firmly that it was real. But don't expect the rest of us to take your word for it.' Therefore, as Subjective experience cannot be empirically verified and is open to an individual interpretation, it can easily be dismissed.

Significantly, some would argue to reach such a 'significant conclusion' that God, UFO's or the Loch Ness monster exists, evidence is needed for, rather than against, the occurrence of a religious experience. Furthermore, there is also much ambiguity surrounding religious experience as verification for God's existence - for instance, how is it we move from an experience (say a vision or dream), to that coming directly from God? However, it is not quite as easy to dismiss public experiences - say for instance the resurrection of Jesus. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, proclaims that Jesus 'appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.' This letter, which would have been read out loud to those at the church of Corinth, is basically stressing that the congregation can even ask those alive about the resurrection - Paul even emphasises the importance saying that 'if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.' Certainly, there does not seem any reason for them to make such an account up, when considering that all of disciples were killed for their claims.

Nevertheless, I would say that no Philosophical argument could really lead someone to the conception of a personal God. For instance, one of the leading Atheists Antony Flew, describing that he 'had to go where the evidence leads', has recently come to believe that there is a God. However, he has come to a Deist conception and rejects any notion of special revelation - which, at best, Philosophical arguments I think leads us. Paul even makes it clear in the New Testament that God cannot be known through our own wisdom, writing that in 1 Corinthians 1:20 'For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him.' Paul even makes clear that we shouldn't in 1 Corinthians 2:4 'My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.' Furthermore, with such a tiding change of arguments, I would reject complete Evidentialism (a position that someone is not justified unless there is sufficient evidence.) Belief should be defended against objection but it cannot be founded on external evidence alone. Reformed epistemologists contend that there are many justified beliefs that one must accept without sufficient evidence or argument. For instance, upon seeing a tree, someone simply believes they are seeing a tree. Such beliefs, among which they put God, are argued to be 'properly basic' and need no argument to substantiate them - by properly basic they mean that they do not depend for their justification on other beliefs, but on something outside the realm of belief.