

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION (Summer 2018)
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
Using Evans and PR (5th ed.) [bracketed readings are optional; see syllabus]

Be sure to read the editors' introductions to each "Part" in PR; they provide a useful survey of each topic.

Introduction

Evans, pp. 17-22, 57-61.

PR, Intro.

Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 1/3 (1984): 235-71, available at http://www.faithandphilosophy.com/article_advice.php

Religious Experience

Evans, ch. 4.

mystical experience

numinous

veridical experience

1. Give three reasons why some say a direct experience of God is impossible.
2. How do subjective factors (such as religious experience) affect faith?

PR, Part Two intro.

1. What kind of event is a religious experience? Give three possibilities.
2. Describe Swinburne's Principle of Credulity.
3. How does Westphal understand religious experiences?

David B. Hart, *The Experience of God*, pp. 13-45 [on reserve].

1. Describe the kinds of experience Hart has in mind when he writes about the experience of God.
2. How does H. think that people (Christian and non-Christians alike) have misunderstood God?
3. What is meant by "demiurge?"
4. What are the three terms that H. introduces, and how do they function for H.?

[PR, W. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, lectures 16 to beginning of 18, available at Google books (default edition pp. 536-617).

1. To what four marks does James appeal to identify mystical experiences?

2. What does James say about the authority of mystical states?
3. What is the relation between, on the one hand, religious experience (feeling) and, on the other hand, philosophy/theology?]

Faith and Reason

Evans, pp. 22-35, 195-98.

(classical or strong) foundationalism

1. Whether it is impious to think critically about religious belief depends on what two factors?
2. Explain what Evans means by “critical dialogue” as an approach to religious matters. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this approach.

PR, Thomas Aquinas, “The Harmony of Reason and Revelation,” from *Summa contra Gentiles* Bk. I.3-7

1. If knowledge of God is based solely on reason, what, according to Aquinas, are three consequent disadvantages?
2. According to Aquinas, there are certain truths of faith that we should accept even though we are unable, by human reason, to see that they are true. What are his reasons for this view?

PR, Blaise Pascal, “The Wager”; William Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief”.

1. What is Pascal’s explanation for the fact that some persons find themselves unable to believe, even when they can see that it would be advantageous for them to do so?
2. Does Clifford seem to have a particular kind of evidence for beliefs in mind—and, if so, what kind? Also, evaluate Clifford’s understanding of sufficient evidence.

[William James, “The Will to Believe.”

1. Explain what James means by a “genuine option.” Why is it especially in cases involving such an option that one may be rational in accepting a belief that goes beyond the evidence one has?
2. James argues that our interests and desires—our “passional nature”—do, in fact, have a considerable influence on what we believe and disbelieve. Is James right about this? If he is, do you also agree with him that this influence is legitimate?]

D. B. Hart, “Believe It or Not,” <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/05/believe-it-or-not>

1. How would you summarize Hart’s primary criticisms of “New Atheism”?
2. In what specific ways does Dawkins get theology wrong?

3. According to Hart, who is an atheist worth reading?
4. What did Nietzsche understand that the New Atheists don't?

God's Existence

Evans, ch. 3.

1. Describe the four broad classes of arguments for God's existence.
2. Describe three common objections to the cosmological argument.
3. According to E., how does the question of God's existence differ from the question of the existence of, say, the Loch Ness monster?
4. What are three lines of response to the evolutionary challenge to the teleological argument?

PR, Part Four intro.

a priori

a posteriori

PR, Anselm, *Proslogion* chs. 2-4; and Gaunilo, *On Behalf of the Fool* 2-6; available at http://www.ccel.org/ccel/anselm/basic_works.html

1. In your own words, how does Anselm argue for God's existence?
2. On what grounds does Gaunilo question whether he can have the understanding of God that Anselm thinks leads to showing that God exists, and what does Gaunilo think follows from this questioning?

PR, Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*

1. What is Aquinas' argument for God's existence from motion?

Thomas Aquinas, "Whether God Exists," in *Summa theologiae* Ia.ii.3, at <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1002.htm#article3>

1. Summarize the "five ways" of demonstrating God's existence.

PR, W. Paley, *Natural Theology*, ch. 1, available at Google books

1. What analogy does Paley use to construct his teleological argument for the existence of a Creator?

PR, C. S. Lewis, "Moral Argument"

1. What two points does Lewis claim are foundational for understanding ourselves and the world?

2. How does Lewis claim that the Law of Human Nature leads us to believe that God exists? Do you think that his argument is successful, and why?

Knowing God without Arguments

Evans, pp. 183-211.

evidentialism

properly basic belief

hermeneutical circle

cumulative case

1. What does E. think about “pragmatic arguments” against theistic belief?
2. What are the two lines of response to the evidentialist challenge?
3. What does E. mean by a “nonalgorithmic type of rationality?”
4. What does true religious belief have to do with a way of life?

PR, A. Plantinga, “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology.”

1. What is natural theology?
2. According to Calvin (via Plantinga), what is the *sensus divinitatis* and what impedes it?
3. What is a noetic structure?
4. What is the difference between weak and strong foundationalism?

Religious Language

Evans, pp. 52-55.

logical positivism

verifiability theory

analytic propositions

synthetic propositions

1. What is the main problem with the verifiability criterion?

(Pseudo-)Dionysius the Areopagite, *Mystical Theology*, available at <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/rolt/dionysius.v.html>

1. According to Dionysius, what are the possibilities and the limitations involved in speaking about God?

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia.xiii.5 resp. (that is, focus on the “I answer that...” section), available at <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1013.htm#article5>

univocal

equivocal

analogical

1. Aquinas considers how we apply predicates to creatures and to God. What does it mean to apply predicates to anything? What is the relation between predicates (linguistic elements) and attributes (ontological elements)?

A. Flew, R. M. Hare, and B. Mitchell, “Theology and Falsification,” available at <http://homepage.usask.ca/~ebd038/THEOLOGY%20AND%20FALSIFICATION.pdf>

blik

1. Mitchell disagrees with Flew that nothing counts against religious beliefs but argues that religious faith does not let anything count decisively against its beliefs. How does his story make this point?

Divine Attributes

Evans, ch. 2.

polytheism

henotheism

(mono)theism

pantheism

panentheism

PR, Part Six intro.

1. What are some of the main alternatives to the theistic view of God (common to Judaism, Islam, and Christianity)?

PR, Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia.xxv.3, and
PR, George Mavrodes, “Some Puzzles concerning Omnipotence”

1. When Aquinas says that God is omnipotent and can do “all things,” why is it necessary for him to state clearly what is included under the word *all*?

2. Give a brief but clear explanation of Mavrodes' answer to the question of why the "paradox of the stone" does not undermine the claim that God is omnipotent.

PR, Boethius, *De consolazione philosophiae* Bk. 5, available at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/boethius/consolation.vi.html> ; and PR, Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Is Everlasting"

1. How does Boethius define eternity?
2. How does Boethius solve the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom?
3. Wolterstorff argues that God must be thought of as "everlasting," rather than "eternal." Explain what is meant by these two contrasting terms.
4. Wolterstorff lays great emphasis on the Bible's depiction of God as acting within human life and history. Why does this depiction lead him to say that God must be understood as temporal (everlasting), rather than timeless (eternal)?

Divine Action
Evans, pp. 42-52.

compatibilism

middle knowledge

open theism

1. What are four ways of resolving divine foreknowledge and human freedom?

PR, Part Seven intro.

process theism

divine determinism (compatibilism)

libertarianism

PR, P. Helm, *The Providence of God*.

1. Describe the "risky" view of God's providence that Helm opposes.
2. What does it mean to say that a passage of Scripture is an instance of "accommodation?" Why does Helm believe that certain passages must be viewed as accommodation? Does this view of Helm strike you as plausible and satisfying?

[PR, David Basinger, "Middle Knowledge and Classical Christian Thought."

1. Explain briefly Basinger's reasons for saying that a God with middle knowledge is much better able to exercise providential control in the world than a God with only "present knowledge."
2. Basinger argues that if God has only "simple foreknowledge" of the actual future, this does not give God significantly more control than if he has only present knowledge. Explain Basinger's reasons for this claim.]

Problem of Evil

Evans, ch. 7.

moral evil

natural evil

logical problem of evil

evidential problem of evil

1. What has the argument from evil been used to demonstrate?
2. What is the difference between a theodicy and a defense?
3. What two attributes of God seem to contradict the existence of evil?
4. What does E. mean by reasonable epistemic access, and how does this apply to the problem of evil?
5. What does E. mean by "mild hell?"

PR, D. Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, part X; and
PR, Gottfried Leibniz, "Best of All Possible Worlds Theodicy"

1. In Hume's *Dialogues*, what does Philo say about human misery?
2. Reconstruct and evaluate Philo's case for how anthropomorphisms of God's attributes (e.g., justice, benevolence, mercy, and rectitude) have implications for how a being who possesses them would act with respect to evil.
3. Reconstruct Leibniz's argument that God would choose to create the best of all possible worlds. Which aspects of this argument seem strong to you? Which ones seem weak?
4. How effective is the argument that all evil in the world is justified by being connected to a greater good—that is, to the world's being the best possible? Is this sufficient to justify the divine permission of evil?

Miracles

Evans, ch. 5.

Enlightenment rationalism

1. What is the relationship between special revelation and miracles?
2. What are the three different theories about special revelation?
3. The non-propositional view is often associated with what theological movement?
4. According to Hume, what is the probability of a miracle occurring, and what is his reasoning?

PR, Hume, "Of Miracles"; and

PR, J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*

1. What is Hume's "general maxim" at the outset of the discussion?
2. The reported reappearance of a missing leg is the type of claim that Hume thinks we ought to reject. Are there conceivable conditions under which you would consider it reasonable to believe such a claim were true?
3. Why does Mackie believe that any evidence supporting the belief that an event is really a violation of a natural law is at the same time evidence against the belief that the event actually occurred as reported or observed? Did you find his argument convincing?
4. What is the double burden for those who accept that a miracle occurred, and what double line of defense does the one denying miracles possess?

Science and Religion

Evans, ch. 6.

philosophical naturalism

methodological naturalism

1. How does modern science pose a challenge to Christian faith?
2. Is methodological naturalism incompatible with Christian theism?
3. Explain Freud's challenge to religious belief.
4. What does the sociological/psychological critic lack in making the case against theism?

PR, R. Dawkins, "Science Discredits Religion"

1. What are some theological teachings that have logical implications for science, according to Dawkins?

PR, Daniel Dennett, "An Evolutionary Account of Religion," from *Breaking the Spell*

1. How does Dennett connect evolution with religion?
2. How does Dennett assess the benefit of religion, and what might be his prognostication for its survival?

David B. Hart, “Daniel Dennett Hunts the Snark,” available at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/daniel-dennett-hunts-the-snark>

1. How does Hart sum up Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell*?
2. What are two reasons why Hart sees the book as pointless?
3. What “genetic fallacy” does Dennett commit?
4. What is Hart’s final prescription for Dennett?

Religious Diversity

Evans, pp. 211-16.

1. How does Hick’s proposal fall short, according to E.?

PR, Part Thirteen, intro.

1. Name and describe the three main options for treating religious diversity.

PR, Dalai Lama

1. Given the discussion of the nature of religion in Part One of PR, what view of religion does the Dalai Lama presuppose in his interview?

PR, K. Rahner, “Religious Inclusivism”

1. What does Rahner mean when he claims that Christianity is “God’s action on men?”
2. What implications does the religious nature of human beings have for understanding those who practice religion?
3. What is an “anonymous Christian?”

Morality (time permitting)

Evans, pp. 87-96.

1. What are three ways that naturalists have attempted to explain morality?

[PR, Aquinas on Natural Law

1. Aquinas does not mention the influence of culture and experience on moral beliefs. To what extent do you think moral beliefs are influenced by these factors?]