

The Epistemic Overreach of Theism and Atheism

Name: Amber Priyadarshi

Student ID: 24735552

Research Essay

Introduction

Theism, or more accurately classical monotheism, represents the “belief in a personal God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, and who is distinct from but related to the world (Davies, 2004).” It propounds the existence of a single, all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving deity. In contrast, atheism’s position is layered. Positive atheism can simply be defined as the antithesis of theism. It forwards the belief in the non-existence of God. Negative atheism is flexibly defined as the absence of theistic belief. It refuses to accede to theism yet proposes no explicit repudiation of God’s existence. This essay will outline the unexamined epistemic presumptions of both these propositions. Two classical arguments, which agree with the aforementioned definition of God, will be advanced in favour of each. Anselm’s ontological argument will advocate the case for classical monotheism. An ontological argument draws upon the very notion of God to establish His existence. Its premises are *a priori* inferred to be true by reason, preceding experience. The problem of evil, argued by Epicurus and later refined by Hume and Rowe, states that the world’s evil is irreconcilable with the assumed nature of a monotheistic God. Its premises are *a posteriori*- derived purely from empirical observations. This will help elucidate the position of positive atheism.

The essay will reveal that both these arguments commit an epistemic fallacy. They presuppose that the existence, or the negation of existence, of God is ascertainable through reason or experience, and His being can be lucidly conceived of and coherently predicated. A synthesis of insights from Kant’s “Critique of Pure Reason” and Wittgenstein’s “Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus” will expose the inability and inadequacy of reason and language in presiding over metaphysical affairs concerning divine existence. Conclusively, an alternative approach *via negativa* by non-dualistic philosophies and the folly of conflating Buddhist silence on metaphysical questions with atheism will be enunciated.

The Case for Theism

In the prologue to the *Proslogion* (Anselm, 1996), Anselm expresses the desire to form an argument that is sufficient unto itself to prove the existence of God; that God is the epitome of goodness, self-sufficient, and upon whose being we owe our contingent existence.

As a self-evident axiom, Anselm insists both the theist and the atheist must concede that God exists in the understanding. For even the atheist must at least acknowledge and comprehend the idea of God to refute His existence in reality. For Anselm, God represents “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” (Anselm 1996, ch. 2). In other words, it is logically impossible to conceive of a being that could supersede God’s greatness.

According to him, properties that constitute greatness are as follows:

Property 1. The zenith of virtue.

A great being will necessarily be benevolent, wise, powerful, etc.

Property 2. Existence itself is a great-making quality.

For any specific y , if y_1 exists in reality as well as in understanding, and y_2 exists in understanding only, then y_1 is a greater being than y_2 .

So, when we refer to the “greatest conceivable being”, we speak of a being that exemplifies both these attributes: maximal qualities + existence.

Knowing this, we can now move to Anselm’s formal argument. His argument is structured as a *reductio ad absurdum*. A *reductio ad absurdum* attempts to falsify a premise by demonstrating a contradiction. In this case, Anselm will logically show that the atheistic claim, “God exists in the understanding alone”, entails a contradiction.

His argument can be formulated as follows:

- 1. The greatest possible being exists in the understanding alone (premise; provisionally accepted for the sake of the reductio)**
- 2. Existing in reality is greater than existing in the understanding alone (premise)**
- 3. If 1 and 2, then the greatest possible being is not the greatest possible being (1 and 2, conditionalisation)**
- 4. It is not the case that the greatest possible being is not the greatest possible being (premise; contradiction)**
- 5. It is not the case that 1 and 2 (3 and 4, modus tollens)**
- 6. Either not 1 or not 2 (5, distributing the negation)**
- 7. Not-not-2 (2, double negation)**
- 8. Not 1**
- 9. The greatest possible being exists in reality. (8)**

A more rudimentary form of the same:

1. God is the greatest conceivable being.
2. Greatness includes existence.
3. Therefore, God exists.

Anselm's argument is internally consistent; it proceeds purely from a point of consensus between the theists and the atheists. Atheists, regardless of whether they reject or withhold theistic belief, must admit understanding theistic belief. This is the minimal concession that Anselm assumes, totally bereft of any metaphysical assertion.

The Case for Atheism

If God is omnibenevolent, omniscient, omnipotent, then both theists and atheists will agree:

1. An omnibenevolent (all-loving) God will not wish for his creations to suffer.
2. An omniscient (all-knowing) God will know if his creations suffer.
3. An omnipotent (all-powerful) God can prevent the suffering of his creations.
4. Yet, suffering and evil exist.

According to Epicurus and Hume (Hume 1998, Rowe 1979), combining (1) with (4) will result in a malevolent God, (2) with (4) will lead to an oblivious God, and (3) with (4) amounts to a weak God.

The atheists subsume evil in the following categories:

1. **Natural Evil**: Corresponds to suffering rooted in natural disasters, disease, for example, famine, AIDS, etc.
2. **Moral Evil**: Corresponds to suffering rooted in human agency driven by vices, for example, the Holocaust, colonialism, etc.

Thus, the problem of evil takes two popular forms with differing conclusions:

1. **The logical problem of evil**: The existence of an omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent God is logically incongruous with the fact of suffering and evil in our world. This leads to an explicit conclusion: God does not exist.
2. **The evidential problem of evil**: The existence (and extent) of evil in the world makes it highly unlikely that such a God exists. This leads to the conclusion: God *probably* does not exist.

While stating the logical problem of evil, the atheists often concede that the evil which exists may be an inalienable aspect of our existence. For example, it may be a logical component of God's wider plan for the greater good that we, with limited minds, cannot comprehend.

However, the atheist also questions whether every bit of suffering in the world is logically necessary for the greater good. This is the question of gratuitous evil. That is, evil that a wholly good, all-knowing, and immensely powerful being would have no reason to allow.

This results in a more rigorous formulation of the logical problem of evil. The evidential problem of evil can be stipulated as follows:

- 1) If an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent being (God) exists, then pointless evil does not exist [premise]**
- 2) Probably, pointless evil exists [premise]**
- 3) Probably, God does not exist [1 and 2]**

Rowe describes "pointless evil" through an example of a fawn dying a slow, agonising death by being incinerated in a forest fire caused by a lightning strike (Rowe 1979). He argues that it seems very implausible that any good was conferred to the world, which will justifiably redeem the suffering of the fawn. He proposes that the plight of the fawn was divinely avoidable.

The problem of evil is one of the most significant challenges that theists face. Intricate defences of theodicies and sceptical theism are built to counter it. New branches of theism, open theism, process theology, and pastoral theology, have either discarded or reinterpreted at least one quality of God in resolving the problem of evil. This has ostensibly compromised the central claim of classical monotheism: God is all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving.

Shared Presuppositions Behind Both Arguments

Both theism and atheism begin with the notion of an all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful God existing in our understanding. Atheism dissents from theism when it begins to extrapolate God's existence to reality. However, both these propositions presuppose that the idea of God is intellectually decidable through reason.

Specifically, Anselm makes this amply clear when he proposes that God is "that than which nothing greater can be conceived." He presupposes that God is inherently knowable. Similarly, atheists use empirical proof of evil to disprove the "idea" of a monotheistic God.

They agree, in principle, with God being perfectly graspable. Notably, theism and atheism bear no compunction in resolving their debate with pure reason.

Limits of Reason and Language in Metaphysical Inquiry

In his “Critique of Pure Reason,” Immanuel Kant explores the epistemic validity of knowledge and its limits. Instead of reconciling the diverging views of rationalism and empiricism, he uncovers the structural dependence of experience upon modes of cognition (Kant 1998, A51/B75). Kant labels these conceptual structures as categories, such as causality, unity, plurality, substance, etc. These structures themselves aren’t byproducts of experience; on the contrary, it is through them that experiences are known. For example, the world appears to us as a cause-and-effect continuum due to the mind’s causal structure. Therefore, no amount of empirical observations of causality in the world will establish its fundamental nature.

Thereafter, Kant divides reality into *phenomena* and *noumena*. The former refers to things as they appear to us, structured by cognitive categories. Scientific truths dictate laws that govern the phenomenal realm through empirical observations. The latter refers to the reality that exists independent of our cognition. Objects in noumena can be thought of; however, they are essentially unknowable.

Both theists and atheists will agree that qualities such as omnibenevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence belong to a being who has *transcended* the phenomenal realm. However, we have just established that only phenomenal objects are knowable. Resultingly, the question of God is unknowable through theoretical reason or phenomenological experience.

Nonetheless, Kant concedes that although noumenal subjects cannot be known, they can be thought of. Therefore, theism and atheism may engage in philosophical speculations about God, but never ascertain the truth of His existence or non-existence.

In his “Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus”, Ludwig Wittgenstein develops the purpose of language and its limits. He defines language as a mere “representation of the facts about the world” (Wittgenstein 1961, 2.1). Additionally, a meaningful proposition will “picture” a possible state of affairs (Wittgenstein 1961, 4.01). As a result, what cannot be captured through propositions cannot be meaningfully conveyed.

According to Kant, noumenal subjects are not knowable as *facts*, although they can be thought of. However, Wittgenstein demonstrates that language, whenever used, must represent *facts* about the *phenomenal* world. Furthermore, the theistic proposition or atheistic rejection must “picture” a possible state of affairs concerning God.

As opposed to phenomenal perception, noumenal beings cannot be “pictured.” Therefore, metaphysical propositions regarding God’s existence or non-existence are not an accurate representation of facts.

Conclusively, the question of God is neither knowable nor propositionally expressible.

A Non-Dualistic Approach

Kant shows that both theism and atheism conflate a noumenal being with a phenomenal object. Whatever is conceived, defined, accepted, or rejected in phenomena necessarily becomes an object of our perception. Therefore, both theism and atheism risk objectifying God. To prevent objectification and misidentification, we apply the method of *via negativa*. This method enunciates the rejection of what God is not. Consequently, the subject-object distinction of “I know something” collapses, since God ceases to be an object which can be positively known.

Non-dualistic philosophies such as Advaita Vedanta, translated as “the end of the Vedas”, employ a similar apophatic method called *neti-neti* (neither this, nor that) (Olivelle 1996 Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.3.6). The *Upanisads*, texts elucidating this philosophy, represent their highest principle, *Brahman*, through negation (Olivelle 1996). They discard all the categories of the phenomenal world. *Brahman* is thus an antithesis of phenomenal objects: it is formless, uncaused, immutable, inconceivable, and indescribable (Shankara 1992).

Nevertheless, even with negative descriptions, Wittgenstein’s objection about the inexpressibility of metaphysical propositions remains unaddressed. Early Buddhist texts suggest that the Buddha repeatedly refused to answer metaphysical questions, considering them “undeclared” and misleadingly speculative in the pursuit of *Nirvana* (Garfield 1995). His silence is often mistaken for implicit atheism. However, this is later debunked in the *Madhyamaka school of Buddhism*, as expounded by Nagarjuna (Garfield 1995). Nagarjuna demonstrates the futility of metaphysical debate by delineating the dependence of existence in Pratityasamutpada (dependent origination). This mirrors Kant’s exposition of perceiving phenomenal objects through cognitive categories. We see that the Buddha’s epistemic humility in maintaining silence is in keeping with Wittgenstein’s conclusion: whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent (Wittgenstein 1961, 7).

Conclusion

In this essay, we were introduced to two influential arguments of theism and atheism, respectively. We saw the ontological argument of Anselm and the problem of evil. Following this, we observed that both these arguments presumed the nature and existence of God to be understandable and expressible through reason and experience.

This was shown to be false through Kant's distinction of phenomena and noumena. Furthermore, Wittgenstein demonstrated the inadequacy of language in expressing metaphysical truths. We briefly explored a non-dualistic philosophy, *Advaita Vedanta*, which employed an apophatic method to prevent the objectification and misidentification of a noumenal being. Lastly, we reached an epistemically humbling note with the Buddha's deliberate silence on metaphysical inquiries.

Theism and atheism regularly appear inherently incompatible, given the diametrically opposite positions they share. This essay endeavoured to show the common ground they stand on and the attributes they share. Neither of the two philosophies can deny the use of reason in furthering their respective viewpoints. When both sides were implored to exercise reason to its utmost limit, a tacit agreement was finally reached: the greatest use of reason and language is in exploring their limits.

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