

The origins of ‘God’: experience and explanation

In what follows, I’ll refer to the idea of God and the concept of God interchangeably. I mean the same thing by idea and concept here. I refer to the concept/idea as GOD (all capital letters).

THE IDEA OF GOD IS INNATE

Descartes argues that the concept GOD is one that we have innately. His argument is considered separately in the handout called ‘The Trademark argument’.

THE IDEA OF GOD IS DERIVED FROM EXPERIENCE

The syllabus is misleading in suggesting that the only alternative to GOD being innate is that we invented it. There is the possibility that, like so many other concepts we have – such as apple, yellow, and pain – we acquired the concept through experience, in this case, through experience of God. We will only look at this briefly, since the syllabus concentrates more on the theories that say we invented the concept GOD.

There is a standard philosophical account of how experience can be the origin of concepts. If we have experiences of God, then this could be an explanation of where the concept GOD comes from. However, we immediately run into a problem: are experiences of God sense experiences? Do we have any good reason to think anyone has literally seen or heard God? If God has no body, so has no physical parts with which to reflect light or generate sound waves, then the answer is no. Of course, God could directly create an experience in someone’s mind of seeing or hearing – but because this experience doesn’t come from the sense organs, then it isn’t literally seeing or hearing. It is more like hallucinating: an experience just like a sense experience, but not caused by the sense organs responding to something in the real world.

Things in hallucinations do not exist. So for us to explain GOD as deriving from experience, experiences of God need to be like sense experiences, like perception, rather than hallucinations. If experiences of God were hallucinations, then the concept GOD would derive from imagination rather than experience.

But are experiences of God like sense perception at all? Some philosophers have argued that (at least some) experiences of God are importantly similar to perception, an immediate awareness of something other than oneself that is real; instead of physical objects, the ‘something other’ is God. They are quite unlike trying to think about God or imagine God.

But to this we can object that sense experience is much richer in detail than experiences of God – think how long it would take to describe a view of a garden, but people find it difficult to say much at all about experiences of God. So perhaps they are not like sense perception.

Another objection to the claim that GOD is derived from experience is that we all have the concept GOD, but religious experiences are very uncommon. But we can reply that many concepts originate with the experiences of only a few people, e.g. 'electron'. They then explain it to others, and so on, until it becomes common.

We can also object that concepts of God differ greatly from one religion and time to another, which again suggests the concept GOD doesn't come from just one type of experience. One reply here is that the concept GOD originates with religious experience, but people add much more to that concept. Differences in beliefs about God come from an elaboration of the concept, but the concept still originates in religious experiences.

THE IDEA OF 'GOD' AS A HUMAN CONSTRUCTION AND PROJECTION

If we don't have any direct experience of God, and the idea GOD isn't innate, then in some way, we have invented it. But even if we have, that doesn't mean that God doesn't exist, i.e. that the concept doesn't refer to anything. It is possible that we need the concept GOD, which we have come up with, to explain what we do experience or to explain the existence of the world, or something like that; and that these explanations are right.

In science, we often invent concepts, which we think refer to things – like the concepts GENE or ELECTRON – which we haven't experienced. Both these concepts were invented in order to explain what scientists saw. No one had seen a gene or properly identified its structure when it was created – as a hypothesis – to explain what happens in heredity. And no one can see electrons (with their eyes at least) at all! Just because we invented the concepts doesn't mean that they don't apply to the real world. If genes and electrons exist, then we were right to invent the concepts, i.e. the explanations we gave which used these concepts, and how we define GENE and ELECTRON are the right explanations and definitions; this is how the world is. (You might argue that, even if we couldn't see genes or electrons when we came up with the ideas, we can see them now. But can this reply be made for all scientific concepts? What about LEPTON or, in a different way, ECOSYSTEM?)

What is important here is that we invented the concepts because, in some way, explanations using them are true. So the reason for the concept is to describe the world truly. Historically, people explained lightning and storms, wars and famine as God's actions. Perhaps the need to explain the world is where the idea of God comes from. And one question that perhaps suggests the concept GOD most universally among human cultures is 'where did the world come from?'. Every culture has a creation story, and in very many, God plays a part.

Objections

There are two types of objection we can raise to this account, the first about whether, if it is right, we should continue to use the concept GOD; the second is whether this view – that God is a theoretical explanation – is enough on its own.

The first objection isn't actually about the origin of the concept of God; it is about the validity of the concept, i.e. should we keep using it? If the account above is right, then if we are going to be justified in continuing to use the concept, we have to think that God is the best explanation for that aspect of the world which we want to explain. And this is

certainly not true in many cases. Scientists and historians don't usually appeal to God now to explain lightning, wars, and so on. What about how life began? Or how consciousness is possible? Well, our knowledge is advancing all the time, so if we do succeed in answering these questions, there will be no need to refer to God. This theory – that God is used to explain what we can't yet explain scientifically – is often called the 'God of the gaps' theory. God fills in the gaps; the more we know, the less we need to appeal to God.

However, in reply, there are some arguments for the existence of God that suggest God is still the best explanation for certain aspects of the world. Philosophers have argued that God is the best explanation for how the universe began, for how life is possible, for religious experiences, and for miracles.

The second objection is that our desire to explain natural events and so on isn't enough to explain why we came up with the concept GOD. We should also note that we based the explanation on what we were familiar with. What created the world? Well, something like us in having a plan and a purpose and so on, but hugely more powerful. Ancient Greek myths, like the myths of many cultures in human history, make God or the gods sound very human. But why think that what created the world is anything like human beings? We need to appeal to other factors, e.g. the tendency of human beings to think the world is somehow arranged for them, or that human lives form part of the meaning of the existence of the world. GOD then is not a purely theoretical concept, like scientific concepts, but one that depends on human psychology as well.

This is not to suggest that GOD is 'just' an invention. If God exists, then God might have created human psychology as it is precisely so that it came up with the concept GOD. In other words, the way we tend to think about the universe might be the way the universe is. Of course, it might not. So we need to consider other, psychological or social explanations of the origin of GOD as well.