

## **Background assumptions in philosophy of religion**

In the arguments for the existence of God studied at A2, the cosmological argument, and arguments from religious experience and miracles, what assumptions are being made? In particular, how do they understand the claim ‘God exists’? The syllabus identifies three types of assumptions to consider – ontological, epistemological and semantic.

Ontological assumptions relate to the question of what exists. What is being assumed here about the nature of God’s existence? (Ontology is the study of (-ology) of what exists or ‘being’ (ont-).) It is assumed that God is a being, or at least a force, that exists independently of (and prior to) human beings and religious beliefs. For example, to be the cause of the existence of the universe in a literal sense, God must exist independently of the universe. Or again, religious experience is taken to put us in touch with something outside our minds.

Semantic assumptions relate to the meaning of words and language – what does it mean to say ‘God exists’? For example, is this meant to be a statement of fact? In line with the ontological assumption, the semantic assumption of the arguments is that the word ‘God’ refers to a being that exists. To believe in God’s existence is to have a belief that can be objectively true or false.

Epistemological assumptions relate to evidence and knowledge. The epistemological assumption is that we can (and need to) support belief in God using rational arguments. The existence of God can be deduced or inferred as the best explanation from premises that are more certain or plausible than God’s existence.

The ontological and semantic assumptions are a traditional part of religious belief. Furthermore, people who think social science can ‘explain away’ religion tend to think that, if we can demonstrate that religious belief is not based on reason, we have to some extent undermined it. However, not all philosophers or believers have accepted them. Suppose that ‘God exists’ does not state an objective fact, but expresses an attitude that someone takes towards life. Or again, that to believe in God is not to make a claim about some being independent of religious practice. To talk of God is to talk of how to understand and live life. The question of belief in God is then a question of whether the religious approach towards life makes sense.

On this view, the cosmological argument is either nonsense, or more profoundly, explores the meaning of the universe. ‘God’ explains the universe not as cause, but as its point. And whether religious experience supports belief in God becomes a question about whether religious experience is ‘truthful’, revealing some important aspect of human life.

What of the epistemological assumption? The discussion of reason and faith looks at a variety of positions that challenge this assumption. We might argue that reason is incapable of supporting belief in God in the absence of faith – so arguments for the

existence of God can only meaningfully occur between those who already believe in God and are simply trying to understand their belief better. Or we might argue that religious belief is not inferred from other beliefs, but formed directly in response to experience (analogous to beliefs about what we perceive). Or we can argue that reasoning, while not inappropriate, cannot settle the matter, so belief in God must rest on a commitment, a 'leap' or 'gamble'. And there is a view of miracles that they are 'signs', only understood by those who already have faith, and are not intended to provide objective evidence.

Our discussions of the relationship between reason and religious belief have implications for how we should understand and conduct philosophy of religion. Philosophy is normally thought of as a discipline that is based on reason, drawing on empirical information where relevant. But if religious belief is necessarily or correctly based on faith, and faith is based on neither reason nor on empirical facts, this raises the question of how we should do philosophy of religion. One of the issues, then, in philosophy of religion, is whether certain debates within philosophy of religion are possible or meaningful, or whether they misconceive the nature of religious belief and its relation to reason.