

THE ALEPH COURSE : Notes for talking.

2 : GOD.

LAST TIME : Suggested that GOD was necessary as a basis for REAL VALUES.

THIS TIME : Ponder that. If it works, it's IMPORTANT. (If it's true ? – can't tell.)

QUESTION 1 : DOES GOD EXIST ?

There is not much point in speculating about God if we can demonstrate that He isn't there.
(Or, better, that He isn't – "there" implies some sort of place, which might or might not be appropriate.)

But you can never *prove* that God isn't. Suppose that God is, but never takes any action perceptible in the world. Then you'd have no evidence to distinguish God from no God.

And that wouldn't satisfy me at all, but it's an extreme case to establish the point.

Can you PROVE THAT GOD IS ?

Many people think so; several "standard" proofs are on offer.

But these are generally for a "bigger" God than we've assumed so far. In most Christian thought, God is credited with a lot more faculties than we've yet given Him. That's not because we're looking for a little God, but just because we're trying to be careful. We'll very soon find that we have to make more assumptions if we're going to get anywhere.

Some examples :

The WATCHMAKER :

The universe we see is so marvellously and intricately coordinated that it can't have happened by accident; it must have been designed.

Therefore there must be a designer.

ANSWER : WHY can't it have happened by accident ? Yes, it's improbable to the highest degree, but so is everything else. Suppose you throw five dice – which is the more probable result,

6 6 6 6 6

or

3 1 4 2 5

?

Both the same. *Every* individual outcome is equally probable.

Also significant : the ANTHROPIC PRINCIPLE (I think) : the fact that we are here talking about it means that, whatever the mechanism by which the universe came about, it *has to be* "marvellously and intricately coordinated", or we wouldn't work. So you can't use that to argue for a particular answer.

The FIRST CAUSE :

Everything must originate from something, so what came first ?

God ?

ANSWER : Where did God come from ? It isn't a silly answer. If you say that God is eternal, so always was, then it isn't true that "Everything must originate from something".

RESPONSE : God created Himself.

ANSWER : Please explain what that means.

The ONTOLOGICAL argument :

Of all things, there must be some greatest conceivable thing.

That's God.

ANSWER : What do you mean by "great" ? Can we tell what sort of greatness characterises God ? Is there such a thing ? Is God great in all respects ? (The greatest tyrant ...)

An "explanation" from an ordained minister of the church, who had been greatly enlightened by the ontological argument : "I understood that A therefore B therefore A and B (long pause) therefore AB. It's hard to explain."

ALL the arguments make some sort of sense, saying something significant about God, once you accept that God is. But NONE is conclusive if you don't.

Perhaps the answer is "NO". That's obviously what I'd expect from my previous comments.

- NO conclusive arguments;
- NO unambiguous evidence.

(I do think that this is consistent with some other things about Christianity – this will appear in due course.)

SHOULD WE BE WORRIED ?

I don't think so. We've already worked through that. We're not worried about having no conclusive evidence for science; we're just happy that it works pretty well. That's the sort of "evidence" we want for religion.

(And it's worth adding that after the event one can be "taken by" a conviction that doesn't rely on formal evidence, or anything like it. That's not offered in evidence now, because it isn't accessible now, but the experience is not uncommon.)

But we can PROVE some NEGATIVE THINGS :

- If God is, He doesn't always force Himself onto us. (Which doesn't mean that He couldn't if He wanted to.)
- God is probably not a gentleman in a white nightshirt sitting on a cloud. (Significant because a Russian cosmonaut said he'd been into space and hadn't seen God, which proved that God didn't exist.)
- God doesn't always instantly smite people who do wrong. It's not obvious that He gives them a hard time later, either. That doesn't match parts of the Old Testament. Neither does He necessarily reward people who do good in any obvious way. (Which doesn't mean that He never does.)

So whatever our idea of God turns out to be, it has to conform to reality. BUT BEWARE – reality is what IS, not what people say it is. We have to conform to what happens; we don't necessarily have to conform to people's interpretations of what happens.

THAT DIDN'T HELP US A LOT.

But perhaps it's cleared the ground a bit.

We're not going to try to prove things; we're not beginning with a set of baggage which we have to fit in somehow.

We're going to make some guesses (which we'll make as sensibly as we can, but they'll still be guesses), and we're going to see whether these will help us to make sense of what happens in the world.

That's quite like science, but we're aiming at a level which science doesn't touch – we began with values. It would be nice if we could get a set of assumptions which would be consistent and make sense of this level of human operation.

We're going to try not to make too many guesses, but it's a complex world and is likely to take quite a few. (There are a LOT of guesses in science.)

WHERE DO WE START ?

It would be silly to ignore people's experience. For millennia, people have claimed to know things about God and His (or their, or its, depending on who you ask) relationship with people. They have developed

RELIGIONS.

From our point of view, a religion is a set of assumptions. It's interesting, because its adherents claim that it works, and has been working reliably for a long time.

We're not sure that it's just what we want, because it's too complicated to swallow whole.

But we can pick one or two bits to try.

Perhaps a sensible strategy is to select one of the religions, and to seek a few assumptions which will express the major features of the religion, and try that.

(If it doesn't work, we can try another one.)

We're going to try CHRISTIANITY, for two reasons :

- It's the only one I know.
- My experience is that it works.