

Handout 8: The "No Evidence" Argument

I. The "No Evidence" Argument

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- P1. If there is reason to believe that God exists, then that is either because God's existence is knowable *a priori* or else because there is good evidence that God exists.**
P2. God's existence is not knowable *a priori*.
P3. There is no good evidence that God exists.
C. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that God exists.

On P2:

Hawthorn's Definition of 'A Priori'

A claim is knowable *a priori* just in case either (i) it is self-evident or (ii) it is deducible from claims that are self-evident (via rules of inference that are self-evident).

The Thomistic Account of Self-Evidence

A claim is self-evident just in case anyone who understands it will believe it.

Examples:

- The Law of Non-Contradiction ("No claim is both true and false") is self-evident.
The claim that nothing can be red and green all over at the same time is self-evident.
The claim that all triangles have three sides is self-evident.

The claim that the internal angles of any triangle sum to 180° is *a priori*.
The claim that $117896 + 132587 = 250483$ is *a priori*.

The claim that you have hands is NOT self-evident.
The claim that this page is white is NOT self-evident.

Aquinas' Argument against the Self-Evidence of God's Existence (and so in support of P2)

- i. If a claim is self-evident, then anyone who understands it will believe it.
("No one can mentally admit the opposite of what is self-evident.")
- ii. There are some people who understand the claim that God exists but do not believe it.
("... the opposite of the proposition *God is* can be mentally admitted: The fool said in his heart, There is no God (Ps. 1ii. I).")
- c. Therefore, the claim that God exists is not self-evident.

* If God's existence is also not deducible from self-evident claims (as in, e.g., the Ontological Argument), then P2 is true.

On P3:

The two main kinds of evidence (Hawthorn):

- (i) *direct perceptual evidence*
 - (ii) *explanatory evidence*
- (A third, derivative kind: *testimony*.)

Rationale for P3:

- (i) No one has ever directly perceived God.
- (ii) The hypothesis that God exists is not required to explain anything that we do directly perceive.

II. From “no reason to believe in God” to “God does not exist”?

Compare: We all accept:

(1) There is no reason to believe that there are invisible, undetectable goblins in your refrigerator.

Furthermore, we also accept:

(2) There in fact *are no* invisible, undetectable goblins in your refrigerator.

What justifies the inference from (1) to (2)?

III. Hawthorn’s Criticism of P2

Hawthorn’s Objection to Aquinas’ Argument against the Self-Evidence of God’s Existence:

“If self-evidence requires that everyone who understands believe, then hardly anything is self-evident” (p. 126).

Hawthorne’s Alternative Account of Self-Evidence

A claim is self-evident for a kind of being just in case any member of that kind who understands it and is not cognitively deficient will find that proposition *primitively compelling*.

Hawthorn’s Account of Faith

To be given the gift of faith is to be transformed into the kind of being that finds God’s existence primitively compelling.

Is the claim that God exists primitively compelling for any actual people?

“I have never doubted the existence of God. Never. My acceptance of God’s existence – of a force beyond everything and the source of everything – goes so far back in my consciousness and memory that I can neither recall ‘finding’ this faith nor being taught it. So when I am asked to justify this belief, as you reasonably do, I am at a loss. At this layer of faith, the first critical layer, the layer that includes all religious people and many who call themselves spiritual rather than religious, I can offer no justification as such. I have just never experienced the ordeal of consciousness without it. It is the air I have always breathed. I meet atheists and am as baffled at their lack of faith – at this level – as you are at my attachment to it. When people ask me how I came to choose this faith, I can only say it chose me. I have no ability to stop believing.”

– Andrew Sullivan, from his blog post “Faith Unchosen” (2007)

IV. Replies to Hawthorn’s Criticism of P2

Atheist’s Reply: “But how do I know that your faith is a gift as opposed to an illusion?”

Hawthorn’s Rejoinder: the same kind of question can be asked anytime anyone believes some claim because she takes it to be self-evident.

A possible difference between the cases?: *agreement*.

A second reply: “But one could take this strategy for *any* belief one wanted to keep but had no evidence for.”

V. Hawthorn on P3

The possibility of *religious experience* might force the atheist to modify to the “No Evidence” Argument to apply only to those who have had no religious experiences.

“if someone has [(i)] no compelling religious experiences and [(ii)] lacks the gift of faith then [since the explanatory evidence is no good either] he is indeed poorly placed to reasonably treat anything as evidence for theism.” (p. 130)