"What Difference Would – or Does – God's Existence Make?"

Opening Statement

Peter van Inwagen

> Note: This is the full text of the opening statement read by Peter van Inwagen at a debate held in Toronto on March 6th, 2015. A video of this event is available online here, at, but some of these remarks were not captured on video, due to a technical glitch. Van Inwagen participated in this event via Skype.

The God of the philosophers is something like this: a person—that is, a someone, not a something; a he or she, not an it (we have special pronouns for persons in English—personal pronouns—but, unfortunately for theological purposes, some of the more important ones are gendered); a being who is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, necessarily existent, and necessarily the creator *ex nihilo* and sustainer in existence of all other beings—or of such other beings as there may be, for the Creator has free will in the matter of Creation, and he might well not have created anything.

He is thus quite unlike any other beings (whether they be real or imaginary) that the term 'god' has been applied to. There are *mountains* older than Zeus—all the pagan gods have "origin stories" like any comic-book superhero; the Hebrew bible is remarkable in that it says nothing about where God "came from"; God is just *there*—and, if we may believe Aeschylus he has boasted that he'd win a tug-'o-war if all the other gods were on the other end of the rope. But the idea of a contest of power between God and any other possible being or beings is conceptually defective: all other beings have the power they do at every moment as a gift from God at that moment. Imagining a tug-'o-war between God and, let us say, Satan, would be like imagining a young man trying to outspend his father when all the money the young man has is in the form of a freely given allowance from his father. He is also quite unlike the "One" of the neo-Platonists: the One is not a person (there is nothing that it is like to be the One; the One does not call itself 'I'—for the simple reason that it's not the sort of being who can call anything anything. And the One does not freely create all things besides itself—rather other things emanate from the One in a way analogous to the way in which light and heat emanate from the sun. God is not like the being Spinoza calls '*Deus*' because, for all Spinoza's cleverness in the way he talks about his God, in the end, this being is not a person. And it, if you will forgive the pronoun, is not a free Creator, or indeed a Creator at all—for, in the sense in which Spinoza's God is a thing, it is the only thing. Other "things"—you and I, for example—are actually finite modes of the substance that is God. That is to say, Spinoza is a pantheist, not a theist. There are possible worlds (fortunately for us, non-actual ones) in which the God of the Philosophers exists and nothing else does—words in which God creates nothing. But there are no worlds in which Spinoza's One Infinite Substance has no finite modes. In fact, come to think of it, Spinoza's metaphysic implies that there are no non-actual possible worlds at all.

Do I believe in the God of the Philosophers. Well, I have some difficulties with the concept of omnipotence, but laying those minor, technical difficulties aside, yeah, I suppose so.

But I feel rather odd saying that I believe in this God. It's like saying that I've never stopped beating my wife. Technically true, but liable to mislead.

Consider this wife—the one whom I've never stopped beating. Do I believe that she exists? Well, yeah, that's *true*—I do accept the proposition that my wife exists. But it's not a proposition that would ever be explicitly before my mind unless I were engaged in some kind of philosophical discourse (as I am at this moment). I accept this proposition because it's an obvious logical consequence of each one of a vast number of things I believe—some of which are before my mind at during each waking hour of my life.

When I say, as I do each Sunday, "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty . . .' the concept I attach to the word 'God' is a much richer concept than the concept I've laid out under the rubric "the God of the Philosophers."

To take just one example, when I think of God, I'm thinking of a being within whose absolute unity of being there are three persons. This fact, the fact that as a Christian, as a member of the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church, I am a Trinitarian will actually have important consequences for what I have to say about God and value. But if I am debating with an atheist about God and value, my opponent's concept of God is going to be the concept of the God of the Philosophers—he'll of course say that that concept applies to nothing, but that's the concept he'll be working with. He'll be laying our his views about what the relation is between that concept and the concept of value—defending, perhaps, the conclusion that there are important values that could not be realized in a world in which there was a being who satisfied the conditions I've set out in my description of the God of the philosophers. And *I'll* be talking about the relationship between the concept of value and a being who has *all* the properties I ascribe to God.

Now that may make no real difference from my opponent's point of view. Laying certain reservations aside for the sake of simplifying the discussion, I'm happy to stipulate that God has all the attributes I've ascribed to the God of the Philosophers. And, of course, if the existence of a being with attributes A, B, and C is incompatible with the existence of certain valuable things, then so is the existence of a being with attributes A, B, C, and D. I wish only to forewarn you that *I'm* going to be discussing the relationship between the God of the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds and the concept of value. The reason for this is simple. I have nothing positive to say about the relation between the God of the Philosophers and value (I might have something to say in response to an argument for the conclusion that the existence of the God of the Philosophers is inconsistent with various important values), and I have a great deal to say about the relation between the God of the Creeds and value.

On the Christian conception of God, all

> good things in creation are, in some way or other, copies or images of the uncreated. God himself, Christian theology teaches, could not invent the idea of a good that was not prefigured in his own nature, for in the radiant plenitude of that nature, all possible goods are comprehended. And this holds for the supreme good, love. All forms of human love are (we believe) copies of the love that is internal to God. The natural affections of the family, friendship, sexual love (insofar as it is uncorrupted), the charity that will endure when faith has been swallowed up in sight and hope in fulfillment- all of these are creaturely images of the love that already existed, full and perfect and complete, when Adam still slept in his causes.[1]

In sum, all good that exists in things other than God is derivative from the goods that would exist in God if God had never created anything.

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[1] van Inwagen, P. (1988) "And Yet They Are Not Three Gods But One God." In *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, Ed. T. Morris, University of Notre Dame Press, 241.

And what about the other pole of value—*disvalue?*

On the Christian conception of good and evil, evil exists only in a derivative sense, as a defect in something that, were it not defective, would be wholly good. Since evil is a mere defect, it has no real, positive being, and thus does not fall within the scope of the Creedal statement that God is the creator of all things visible and invisible. Suppose, for example, that something causes a crack to appear in a beautiful vase. Does anything come into existence in virtue of that episode? No—there is nothing there that wasn't there before the vase was cracked. The population of the world has not changed. "But what about the crack," someone asks. "Doesn't the crack come into existence? And don't tell me the crack lacks real positive being. If it exists, it has being, and I don't see what you are adding to the idea of being if you apply the term 'real positive being' to it." Well, if that's someone's metaphysical position, I don't know how to refute it. The best I can do is to cast doubt on it by presenting cases of the kind some philosophers have called "intuition pumps." This one for example. Consider two bricks lying side by side, one face of one brick being contiguous with one face of the other. Now move them apart—but just a bit, just a few centimeters. Have you thereby brought something into existence, namely a gap between the two bricks? It seems to me that it is not *that* easy to add things to the furniture of the world. And, I think, if you think that the crack in the vase is a real thing, you ought also to think that the gap between the bricks is a real thing. In any case, the Christian metaphysic of value, and more generally the metaphysic of value endorsed by all the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), implies that evil is not a real thing. This is *not* to say that the existence of evil (as well as milder forms of disvalue) is some sort of illusion. (As Mary Baker Eddy taught.) No, the existence of evil is an objective fact. To say that defects do not exist *could* be a way of saying that nothing is defective. But when the *metaphysician* says that defects do not exist, those words are being used in a sense that does not imply that nothing is defective. If you buy a shirt and discover that there's a large hole in it, the nice metaphysical point that holes aren't really *beings* does nothing to change the fact that your shirt needs mending. So: the world contains perforate shirts and cracked vases; it does not, not really, contain holes and cracks. The world contains morally evil human beings but it does not contain an entity called moral evil—not at any rate, if Christians and Jews and Muslims are right about the metaphysics of disvalue. Other religions, as you may know, disagree. Zoroastrianism, for example, holds that the world contains two independently existing powers, one good and one evil, perpetually at war. If the Zoroastrians are right, evil is *not* a mere defect in things that would be wholly good if they were not defective—as they might not have been.

So, as I view matters, all positive value comes from God. Everything created by God is good unless it has in some way been corrupted. ("But why would God allow things to become corrupt or defective or whatever term you want to use?" That is one way of stating the Problem of Evil. A vast topic, and a topic about which I have a great deal to say—but it is not our topic today.) And its goodness can be nothing more than a kind of copy of a goodness that exists within God's nature and which would exist if there were nothing created.

This is a doctrine that only Trinitarians can hold. For Unitarians—by which I mean not the members of a certain denomination whose historical roots are in Protestant Christianity, but rather Jews and Muslims—must concede that there are good things that could not exist if God had not created anything. One of them is the love of one person for another, and a second is two or more persons working together in love to give a gift to

someone whom they both love. This fact does, incidentally, provide Jews and Muslims with an answer to the question, "Why did God create a world?" Trinitarians must regard this as a mystery. To the question, "Why would God *bother* to create anything?", Trinitarians have no answer. For Trinitarians, a possible world in which God creates nothing is as good a world as any other world.

Now what more that this is there to say about God and value? (I mean from my point of view.) Some philosophers have raised the following question: are there any good things such that their existence is incompatible with the existence of God? It is evident that from my point of view, the answer to this question has to be no—that can't be the case if, necessarily, every good that is realized in created beings is a sort of copy of some good that is internal to God's nature. To ask me whether there is some good whose existence would be incompatible with the existence of God would be like asking Plato whether he thought that there might be some good whose existence was incompatible with the existence of the Form of the Good.

There is also a quite independent problem that faces this question even in respect of the God of the Philosophers. God's existence (if God exists at all) is necessary, and his attributes—his power, his wisdom, his goodness—are essential to him. Therefore, to ask whether there is some good that could only be realized if he didn't exist is like asking whether there is some good that could only be realized if pi were precisely equal to 3— arithmetical convenience, perhaps. Just as one cannot consider and evaluate the features of a possible world in which pi equals 3 (there being no such worlds to consider), one cannot, if God is necessarily existent, consider and evaluate the features of a possible world in which he does not exist. I am aware that there are philosophers who affirm the existence of false counterfactuals with impossible antecedents—who suppose for example, that *both* the 'would' conditionals

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and

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are false—the orthodox view being that the one with the true antecedent is false and the one with the false antecedent is true. (In the present state of mathematical knowledge, no one knows which is which.) And I am a proponent of the orthodox view.

But I think this problem can be solved. On the orthodox view, both the following counterfactuals are true (at least if Kripke is right about necessary truth)

> If the atomic number of iron were 27, then there would be 27 protons in the nucleus of an iron atom.

> If the atomic number of iron were 27, then Tokyo would be a suburb of Addis Ababa.

Both true—but there is a difference. The first can be seen to be true by a simple piece of *a priori* reasoning. All one would need to know to see that it was true would be to know the meaning of 'atomic' number. And the only way to know that the second is true is to know that the atomic number of iron is *not* 27.

Similarly, both the following counterfactuals might be true:

> If God did not exist, goods of a kind that do not actually exist would exist.

> If God did not exist, there would be no goods at all.

But it might nevertheless be that there was a fairly straightforward piece of a priori reasoning that showed that the former was true—and that the only way to know that the latter was true would be to know that the existence of God was impossible. Of course, the impossibility of God's non-existence also entails the first of these two propositions, but there could well be a much more navigable route to its truth.

What might such a good be? Well, here's one suggestion. As Arthur Hugh Clough as put it:

> There is no God the wicked saith,
> And truly it's a blessing.
> For what he might have done with us,
> It's better only guessing.

But perhaps your idea of a good is not the same as that endorsed in the tents of wickedness. Perhaps the most popular idea along these line—one sees variants on it in thinkers as diverse as Nietzsche and Sartre is the idea of autonomy (also called authenticity and self-creation, and, at a slightly lower cultural level, standing on your own two feet).

Consider these words. They're the opening question-and-answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism (one of the fruits of a 17th-c attempt to bring about greater doctrinal uniformity between the Church of England and the Church of Scotland)

> What is the chief end of Man?

> Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever.

If this is correct, each of us is not only a made thing but a thing that was made for a very specific purpose. As a good old-fashioned wind-up alarm clock was made for one chief end—as a tool to enable people to awaken at the time of their choice—we were made to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever. Those of us who are not glorifying God (or I suppose, not enjoying him) are not serving the purpose we were made to serve. We're like an alarm clock that is serving as a paperweight or a noisemaker at a child's birthday party. Now that, of course, is not a misfortune for the alarm clock, for alarm clocks are not the sort of thing that can suffer misfortunes. But—if the authors of the Shorter Catechism are right; in face, if almost all reasonably orthodox Christians and Jews and Muslims are right—to serve some end other than the end for which you were made is a terrible, objective misfortune. Persons in this condition may not know that they have suffered a terrible, objective misfortune. They may even be quite pleased with themselves. But they are in for a fall.

Naturally, those who value what they call 'autonomy' or 'authenticity' and who can see that if God exists these things are simply illusions will find the idea of there being a God—even the God of the Philosophers—repellent. I am fairly sure that Tom Nagel was speaking for them when he said:

> I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that.

I say "fairly sure" because Nagel does not actually identify a cause of his attitude. In this passage he spoke of his 'hope' that there was no God; but the topic of the larger passage from which this is taken is "fear of religion," which Nagel supposes to be widespread and a bad thing—and which he confesses that he is subject to. But when he speaks of fear of religion, this can only be accurate because most of the religions in his environment are theistic religions. He's not afraid of Buddhism or Confucianism. He's afraid of God—or at any rate, the idea of God is the idea of something he fears may be a part of reality. (He's an atheist, to be sure. But then I don't believe in ghosts or the other malevolent entities that figure in the plots of of horror films, but I'd be a bit uneasy if I were forced to spend the night in a graveyard.) And why would one fear this? I don't expect that Nagel's fears are anything like those of Clough's "wicked." I expect that it's a matter of autonomy. He fears being a thing that was made for a purpose that has nothing to do with his present preferences or values, a thing which has had its purpose imposed on it from outside. (Sartre invented a whole metaphysic to prove that this was impossible.) In short, he believes autonomy to be a great good that would be impossible if there were a God, and his fear is that the one of his highest values is based on an illusion.

But I have better let those who value autonomy speak in its favor. I don't find it attractive at all. I'm perfectly happy to have a purpose that I did not create or even contribute to. I'm happy to have a purpose that I could not have been discovered myself and had to be *told about*. Others will not be. It is time for them to speak.