

## My Revision Notes: AQA A2 Religious Studies: Religion and Ethics and Philosophy of Religion

### Unit 3B Philosophy of Religion

#### 1 The ontological argument: faith and reason

##### (a) Outline Anselm's ontological argument.

(30 marks)

Anselm attempted to show that the concept of God included the concept of existence. Just thinking about God does not make God exist. However Anselm argued that when he thought about God, he realised the necessity of God's existence. It was not that his thinking about God imposed existence on God, but rather existence imposed itself on his thinking about God. He expressed this argument in two forms.

The first form began with the definition of God as 'a being than which nothing greater can be conceived'. Anselm argued that it was possible to think of something greater than a mere idea. So, given that God is the greatest that can be conceived, he must exist in reality since it is greater to exist in reality than just existing as an idea.

Expressed as a formal deductive argument it is as follows:

- 1) God is the greatest possible being (nothing greater can be conceived).
- 2) If God exists in the mind alone (only as an idea) then a greater being could be imagined to exist, both in the mind and in reality.
- 3) This being would be greater than God.
- 4) Thus God cannot exist only as an idea in the mind.
- 5) Therefore, God must exist both in the mind, as an idea, and in reality.

Anselm's second form of his argument was in response to a challenge by a monk called Gaunilo, who contended that Anselm's argument was flawed since if you conceive of the greatest of anything then it seems that it must have to exist, on the grounds that it is greater to exist in reality than in the mind only.

Anselm countered this challenge by explaining that there were two types of existence – existence that can fail to be (contingent existence) and existence that cannot fail to be (necessary existence). It is greater to have necessary existence than contingent existence. So God, being the greatest conceivable, must have necessary existence, and so exist in reality.

Expressed as a formal deductive argument it is as follows:

- 1) God is the greatest possible being (nothing greater can be conceived).
- 2) It is greater to be a necessary being than a contingent being.

- 3) If God exists only as a contingent being, so therefore can be imagined not to exist, then a greater being can be imagined, namely a necessary being.
- 4) This necessary being would be greater than God.
- 5) Therefore, God must be a necessary being, and exist in reality.

**(b) 'The success or failure of the ontological argument has no significance for religious faith.'**

**To what extent do you agree?**

**(20 marks)**

For many people, religious faith is based on having good reasons to believe. They see religious faith as linked to some kind of evidence and rational argument. If the ontological argument succeeds, then it provides some reason for belief and is therefore significant. Indeed, the ontological argument may be of value since it is a deductive a priori argument, so if the premises are true, the conclusion must follow. This would mean that it could provide a universal proof which is not based on premises acquired from experience, so it cannot be refuted empirically. In such a case it could be seen as the reason for religious faith or it can strengthen an already existing religious faith. It could provide a challenge to an atheist. Its starting point is the definition of God and non-believers must have a concept of God and so may be drawn to the conclusion that God must exist.

However, if the ontological argument fails, then the extent to which it has significance for religious faith will be dependent on how much it featured as the reason for belief. If the religious faith was based on the ontological argument or at least it was seen as giving some support for religious belief, then the argument's failure will be significant to a greater or lesser degree. Its failure may weaken faith. Of course, if the argument formed no part of supporting religious belief then its failure will have no significance.

For other people, religious belief is not based on having good reasons to believe. Indeed, proof is neither relevant to faith, nor sought after. In such a view, the ontological argument is irrelevant to religious faith. Coming to a belief in God by means of rational argument alone is beyond the limits of both philosophy and reason. Faith is required prior to reason. So, for the non-believer, the ontological argument would be of little value.

Hence, the extent to which the ontological argument is significant for religious faith will depend on one's understanding of the nature of religious faith. However, in recent times, the proofs for the existence of God have been seen by some as irrelevant, on the grounds that the God of philosophy is not the God of classical theism.

## 2 Religious language

(a) Explain how the following have challenged religious language:

(i) the verification principle

(ii) the falsification principle.

(30 marks)

(i) In the 1920s and 1930s a group of philosophers were concerned that some questions remained unanswered century after century while other academic areas progressed. They questioned whether some philosophical questions were not resolved because they were not real meaningful questions. This group of philosophers, known as the Vienna Circle, decided that what was needed was a test for meaningfulness, so that propositions could be identified as either meaningful or meaningless. Meaningful is concerned with whether a statement makes sense. A major influence on this group was the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. He argued that the meaning of a proposition lay in knowing what is pictured. Words ultimately derive from our sensory experience, so meaningful language involved words being defined by the real world of objects.

Logical Positivism was a movement that developed from the Vienna Circle. Its proponents sought to find the ultimate test for meaningful statements – the verification principle (VP). They concluded that we know the meaning of a statement if we know the conditions under which the statement is true or false.

A J Ayer suggested a form of the VP, known as the weaker form, which became accepted as the means by which statements could be tested for meaningfulness. He said that statements should be:

(a) verifiable in principle (i.e. it was sufficient to know how to verify the statement to show it could be true, without actually doing it in practice). This allowed statements about past events to be meaningful since they were verifiable in principle but not in practice.

(b) verifiable in terms of probable (i.e. it was sufficient to know how to verify the statement to show it was probably true, without having to show it conclusively). This allowed for general laws of science to be meaningful.

The challenge to religious language was that statements such as 'God is timeless' failed the VP and so were deemed meaningless. Indeed, according to Ayer, all talk of God must be nonsensical since the notion of a person whose essential attributes are non-empirical is not an intelligible notion at all. The VP ruled out all religious language as meaningless. Indeed, the misuse of language had resulted in the assumption that because a word existed, there must be some corresponding reality. In particular, this was applied to the word 'God'.

(ii) The falsification principle (FP) further challenged religious language. Its origins can be traced back to the work of Sir Karl Popper when he challenged the accepted methodology of science and argued that it was concerned with falsification rather than verification. This idea was then applied to the debate about language in general by Antony Flew. His famous parable of the gardener highlighted the problem that religion does not seem to let itself be proven false. Religious people have an answer for every question, in statements like 'God moves in a mysterious way'. For the non-believer there seems to be no difference between a God who loves, a God who does not love and no God at all.

If nothing could show a statement to be false, then it was argued that the statement was meaningless. Flew's parable was seen to imply that religious statements are meaningless since the believer does not allow anything to count against the existence of the gardener (God). Once again, this was a challenge to religious language as it seemed to be claiming that all religious statements were meaningless.

**(b) To what extent is it possible to talk meaningfully about God? (20 marks)**

The approach of logical positivism has not been without challenge, especially in its deliberations about the status of religious language. The VP has been criticised as failing its own test, since the VP itself is not open to verification. Others argue that verification is possible. For instance, historical statements are regarded as meaningful, so the statement that Jesus was raised from the dead is meaningful. Hick used the example of eschatological verification, whereby if there is a life after death then it is verifiable in principle since it could be experienced. Similarly the FP has been challenged. Like the VP, it seems to fail its own test since it is not clear what would count as evidence against the principle.

A different approach to religious language is to consider religious language as non-cognitive. This is to see religious language as not about illustrating information but more as functional. It is not referring to reality but to the medium in which reality is expressed. It is not seen as the method of referring as accurately as possible to the external reality of God. If religious language is seen as non-cognitive rather than cognitive, then the challenges posed by the VP and FP are irrelevant. In non-cognitive language, meaning emerges in the context of human activity, not from dependence on correspondence between word and object. Meaning is about convention and applying the word in the right way. Analogy, symbolism, metaphor and myth are all examples of types of religious language that are functional in purpose rather than illustrating information. Wittgenstein spoke about language games, arguing that words only have meaning because of their context. He said about language that we should not ask for the meaning but rather ask for the use. For many, this non-cognitive approach is unsatisfactory since it reduces such phrases as 'eternal life' to mean the quality of life lived now rather than any idea of living forever. It seems to reduce religion to psychology and feelings rather than some external being.

Ultimately, the extent to which it is possible to talk meaningfully about God will rest on one's view of religious language (whether it is cognitive or non-cognitive) and also whether one regards the VP and FP as successful.

### 3 Body, soul and personal identity

#### (a) Analyse what is meant by a near death experience.

(30 marks)

Near death experiences (NDEs) are lucid experiences associated with perceived consciousness apart from the body, occurring at the time of actual or threatened imminent death. Raymond Moody (b. 1944), a philosopher and psychiatrist, coined the term 'near death experience' and published a collection of 150 accounts. He realised that many people claimed to have near death experiences and the experiences all shared common characteristics. Accounts of similar experiences can be traced from early times from such diverse sources as Zoroastrian, Islamic traditions and Plato. A typical account can be found in Peter Fenwick's book, *The Truth in the Light*:

'I went down what seemed like a cylindrical tunnel with a bright warm inviting light at the end. At the end was a beautiful open field with a bench seat where my Grampi sat (he had been dead seven years) ... I didn't want to go back ... After my experience I am not afraid of death as I was before my illness.'

Fenwick identified 12 features that describe a 'complete' experience, though he was not claiming that all twelve occurred in every NDE. The list comprises: feelings of peace, out of body, into the tunnel, approaching the light, the being of light, the barrier, another country, meeting relatives, the life review, the point of decision, the return, the aftermath. Others identify five stages: peace, body separation, entering the darkness (tunnel), seeing the light, and entering the light.

Some of the key features of a mystical experience occur in NDE accounts. Indeed, Fenwick comments that the NDE subject 'feels that he has seen through the very texture of the universe into its ultimate structure'. It seems to be a spiritual experience for most people. It is accompanied by a sensation of transcending space and time, of feelings of joy and peace, and positive changes in attitude and behaviour. In addition, the 'radiant and glowing' figure at the end of the tunnel experience is often associated in the mind of the subject with a spiritual being such as God, Jesus or Allah.

#### (b) To what extent does a near death experience prove there is survival after death?

(20 marks)

The frequency of the accounts, their common features across cultures and the strength of the testimony gives strong support to life after death. In particular, there are three features

of the accounts that imply survival after death. The first is that the accounts imply a soul-body dualism. There seems to be an aspect of a person (their consciousness and physical senses) that exists separately from the body. This suggests that though the body may die there is something else that continues and which encapsulates personal identity.

Secondly, the accounts often refer to a 'figure of light' which seems to imply the existence of a spiritual realm or presence. In other words, another realm after death exists in which life is lived, albeit in a different form. Thirdly, there seems to be some sort of judgement – a review of the person's life. This suggests some continuity between this life and the life after death.

However, such evidence is only valid if the accounts are accurate. Many explanations have been proposed that seek to give a natural explanation for the experiences, thus casting doubt on their value as evidence for survival after death. For example, in medieval accounts of NDEs, entering a tunnel is replaced by sailing in a ship. This suggests NDEs are based on culture and imagination. However it could be argued that the cultural aspects were necessary to enable the person to understand the experience. The NDEs could therefore be genuine rather than the cultural aspects being attributed to a person's imagination. Indeed, the fact that NDEs are reported in every age and culture strengthens the case that the accounts depict real events.

Other natural explanations include oxygen deprivation that produces similar effects to an NDE. However, this is challenged as the clarity of the memory is not affected as it would be with oxygen deprivation. Also not all aspects of the experience can be explained by oxygen deprivation. Another explanation is that the experience is caused by drugs since the people are often in hospital being treated. However, not all NDEs fit this scenario and would different drugs still produce the same core characteristics of NDEs?

Clearly, the extent to which NDEs are seen as proof for survival after death will depend on the persuasiveness of the natural explanations. However, different explanations tend to focus only on parts of the experience. Perhaps it requires an overall explanation of the whole experience to show that NDEs provide no evidence for survival after death?

#### **4 The problem of evil**

**(a) Explain what is meant by the problem of evil.**

**(30 marks)**

The so-called 'problem of evil' was first formulated by Epicurus and has been restated in various forms down the centuries. Augustine expressed the dilemma as: 'Either God cannot abolish evil, or he will not; if he cannot then he is not all-powerful; if he will not then he is not all-good.'

The assumption is that a good God would eliminate evil as far as he is able. Given that he is all-powerful, he should eliminate it all. However, evil exists. In other words, God has the means (power) and the motivation (love, goodness) to eliminate evil. So why does he not do it? When put in its simplest form, it is seen as essentially a logical problem:

- 1) God is omnipotent.
- 2) God is all-good.
- 3) God opposes evil.
- 4) Therefore, evil does not exist in the world.

The argument seems to be valid, at least from a theistic point of view, in that believers in God would agree with the premises. However, most would admit that evil existed and so there is a contradiction. In one sense, the problem is really only a problem for the believer in God. If there is no God, there is no problem.

A further problem is the actual origin of evil. If God created or caused all things, then clearly he is the originator of evil. The fact that God is all-powerful and all-knowing also raises problems about our free will and hence our responsibility for doing evil.

The problem of suffering highlights a different emphasis. It focuses on the experience of the evil. It faces the problem of evil on a more personal level, i.e. how does the individual respond to the suffering? The questions that are raised here are more of the form: Why me? Why now? Why this particular form? Why this length? These seem to be questions that struggle to find purpose and explanation in what is being experienced.

There is also an evidential problem of evil. This is an inductive argument that attempts to demonstrate that the existence of evil in the world counts against the claim that God exists. It takes the form of:

- 1) There exist instances of intense suffering.
- 2) An all-powerful, all-good God would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering.
- 3) Therefore, there does not exist an all-powerful, all-good being.

The evidential argument is a matter of weighing up probabilities. Given the evidence of suffering, which is the more likely – that there is a God, or that there is no God and the world is indifferent?

**(b) ‘The “vale of soul-making” theodicy successfully answers the problem of evil.’**

**Assess this claim.**

**(20 marks)**

The religious response to the problem of evil has been in the form of theodicies. The ‘vale of soul-making’ theodicy argues that the fall of humanity was an inevitable part of humanity maturing. Human goodness that occurs through making free and responsible moral choices is more valuable than ‘ready-made’ goodness. God also deliberately created a world in

which it is not immediately evident that there is a God. This process is worthwhile because of the eventual outcome that all will mature and become morally perfect, though it may take many lives.

However, the theodicy has not been without its critics. Many question whether the end justifies the means. Does the suffering experienced (for example, Auschwitz) justify the ultimate joy? In response, it is pointed out that the joy lasts eternally and all will experience it. However, could not the same end be achieved with less suffering? It is not hard to think of how suffering could be reduced and yet still achieve the same ends. Indeed, surely some suffering can ruin and destroy lives rather than perfect them?

The theodicy is depicted as a Christian theodicy, yet the death of Jesus and forgiveness seem irrelevant. In response, it is argued that Jesus' death can be seen as an inspiring example. His was a life that exhibited a God-like character and so showed us how we should live and act. However, this still seems to deny traditional Christian teaching about the death of Jesus and what it achieved.

If the end is guaranteed, which is the ultimate justification for evil existing, then do we have the free will to refuse to mature. One response is that there is infinite time, but then can we not infinitely refuse to mature? The requirement of other lives is also seen as problematic. Is there really any evidence of other lives? Some people point to spiritualism or remembered lives as evidence but this again is against traditional Christian teaching. Also, why didn't God simply make our earthly spans much longer, rather than have other lives? One possible response is that death does bring an end to suffering at that point and the knowledge of death itself makes us think about the way we live our lives.

However, there do seem to be weaknesses in the theodicy as a convincing solution to the problem of evil. For many, this theodicy seems to raise more questions than it answers, and alternative theodicies may be more attractive.