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Abstract

This fictional work is based on *Euthyphro* by Plato and *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* by David Hume. It mimics the dialogue style of these authors and places Socrates, Cleanthes, and Philo at Gettysburg College to discuss the existence and nature of God along with the author, a Gettysburg College student. In doing so, it shows how the questions asked by Plato and Hume are relevant today.

Keywords

Plato, David Hume, philosophy of religion, Euthyphro

Disciplines

Metaphysics | Philosophy | Religion | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Comments

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Theodore Szpakowski

Dialogue Concerning the Existence and Nature of God¹

“All right, see you on Monday!” I say to my boss, Mary, as I leave her office and head into the main library area. I have half an hour before Servo opens, so I sit down to get some work done. Before I can really get started, though, two of my classmates sit down around me.

“We need your thoughts, classmate,” Socrates says. I am 90% sure he doesn’t know my name, and 100% sure that he doesn’t care about it. I’ve never met anyone more obsessed with the contents of his own head than that one. “Philo has been unable to explain it to me, but I simply must know. What is God?”

This is where I would normally make my excuses, but Philo has seated himself on my other side and taken the liberty of closing my laptop for me. “Oh, I haven’t been able to explain it to you? Have you been listening, Socrates? You’re asking a terrible question, and yet you expect me to have a perfect answer for you. What is God? You may as well as ask what is the soul, for I have seen neither, and thus cannot comment on either.”

Cleanthes, coming out of seemingly nowhere, sits down, and I resign myself to the fact that I am well and truly surrounded. “You have seen neither?” Cleanthes said. “Well. Let us consider this library that we sit in. When looking around at the library, we see that the chairs have been placed in such a way that allows students to communicate freely with each other on this floor. The bookshelves allow us to hold a maximum of knowledge in a minimum of space, and the printers are placed by the stairs, on the path which a student would move on after completing an assignment. These things did not happen by chance.”

¹ This fictional work is based on *Euthyphro* by Plato and *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* by David Hume, both of which are in the public domain.

“I will accept that,” Plato says. “Chance is a realm only inhibited by those who wish to incite chaos. All things have a logic to them, a set of laws they follow.”

Cleanthes nods, and continues. “Our library is well suited to its purpose because a designer made it such. Now, I ask you to look around at our world, at all the ways beings are well suited to their purposes. Butterflies have patterned wings that allow them to blend into their environments and avoid predators. Cacti hold water within them in the desert so they can grow. Giraffes have long necks so they may eat from tall trees. As all of these things are well suited to their purposes, some designer must have made them so.”

“Well!” Socrates said. “I’m afraid I don’t see the relevance of your point, as well as you may have said it. What does a cactus have to do with the nature of God?”

I interject—if I’m going to sit here, I may as well contribute. “Who designed the designer? Right, Cleanthes? The library is well suited to its purpose of a study space for students because it was designed that way. But how did the designer of this space come to be well suited to the purpose of designing libraries? And how did the cactus come to be well suited to its purpose of growth? The answer is God, of course, who designed them.”

“No, young friend,” said Socrates, “I’m afraid you’re incorrect. See, you assume that just because you are perceiving this library with your senses, it must exist. But how do you know that what you are experiencing is the truth of the world? You must use your mind, not your eyes, if you wish to be a true philosopher.”

“And how has Theodore developed his mind, if not by making observations about the world he sees?” Philo says. “Experience, Socrates, is our greatest teacher. Our only teacher, perhaps, for those human teachers such as you fancy yourself to be are after all teaching about what you yourself have observed.”

“Observed?” cried Socrates. “Observed? Do not accuse me of such a thing!”

Cleanthes coughed. “Perhaps back to the point, Socrates, Philo? If not God, who has created our world—whether you believe our world to be true or not, that is, because even books of fantasy have authors.”

“Well, let’s say your designer of humans exist, as is commonly believed,” Philo said. “Who designed him? And the designer of his designer? You could go back an infinite number of times, and never achieve anything but a waste of time, on your line of thought.”

“If something is truly divine,” Socrates says, “it must not change with time, but be consistent. So it cannot be designed by something, because if it were designed by something, it would have changed—from being a thing that does not exist to a thing that does.”

“A fair point, classmate,” Cleanthes says. “Therefore God is the ultimate cause. We are in agreement.”

“No,” say Socrates and Philo in ironic unison. Socrates continues. “We are in agreement only in that the infinite string of causes proposed by Philo is useless. Your idea still relies too much on observation.”

“And what idea, exactly, have you proposed?” I ask. “It seems you have taken great pleasure in taking apart our thoughts, but you have not provided us with some source other than observation in which to base them on, and how are we to please you without it?”

“I do not know,” Socrates confesses. “That is why I have sought out you three, though your points in class often vex me. You see, the Student Senate wants to throw me out for being a bad influence on first years. They say that impeaching me is necessary to do justice. But when I spoke with their president, Euthyphro, he could not define justice for me, only saying that it was

pleasing to God and necessary to pursue. I thought if I understood God, as you three claim to, I might understand what the true meaning of this justice is, and why it has been used against me.”

“Hang on,” Philo says. “Never have I claimed to understand God. What I understand, rather, is that God surpasses our human understanding. As we cannot experience him, we cannot know how he works, the way we understand how a library works.”

“We experience his creation, though,” Cleanthes says.

Philo tilts his head. “That, classmate, is an assertion rather than a statement you have proven. Tread carefully.”

“I suppose,” I say, “that even experiencing his creation does not mean understanding, though. As you say, by walking through this library, I can guess that it was designed by someone, and I can tell by how enjoyable my experience it was that they were good at their job of designing. But I cannot know much about them as a person—” As I take a breath, Philo interrupts me.

“Guess!” Philo says. “So there, you have found my side, then. You guess it was designed by someone, but you are not certain. We assume that these chairs are here to make it a good place to study, but perhaps the English department simply had too many chairs and thought this would be a good place to put them.”

“They were still placed, though,” Cleanthes points out. “Perhaps it was library staff, perhaps it was the English department, but these chairs did not spring up into existence.”

“And you know that how, exactly?” Socrates challenges.

“Well, I have never seen a chair spring up into existence before.”

“I suppose that doesn’t mean it couldn’t happen,” I admit. Feeling suddenly off-kilter, I excuse myself from the conversation. Perhaps the library is not so well-designed after all—it is far too easy to get distracted there. I head back to my dorm for the night.

Unfortunately, in my haste I forget to print out my art history presentation notes, so I head back to the library Friday morning. I print my notes and am about to head out when once again, Socrates approaches me. “Hey, classmate!” he calls. “I know you were busy yesterday, but might you have some time today? My hearing in the Senate is on Monday, and I fear I still do not understand either God or the justice he loves so much.”

I sigh but nod. I have put some more thought into our conversation since yesterday, and I can see Philo and Cleanthes already seated at our same table. Besides, I have two hours before class. Maybe this will help take my nerves off my presentation a bit? Although, sitting down in my chair, I find myself again struck by the off-kilter feeling that I don’t know how it got there. I don’t know if it is even real or not.

I take a deep breath and dive in. “So, Socrates,” I say. “I believe in our conversations yesterday, you felt that we were wrong to assume that what we were experiencing lined up with reality, yes?”

Socrates nods. “Let me explain. People make so many decisions about how the world works based on the idea that their observations represent their world. But it is possible we are seeing only a small portion. Let’s say that you had spent your entire life tied up on a beach, only able to see the reflections in the water, but none of the real world. You would assume, naturally, that trees grow down, yes?”

“Yes. And that the general quality of the world is sort of waver-y, because reflections in water are always shifting, not smooth images as we see when viewing things directly.” I didn’t

know what this had to do with God, but I was willing to indulge Socrates a little. I knew he was upset about his impending impeachment hearing, so being nice was the least I could do.

Socrates pointed at me. “Exactly! And then suppose that you make further assumptions based on those observations. Because the visions of your eyes are ever-changing, you assume that God must be ever-changing too. But let’s say Philo’s back is to yours, and he can only see the sand.”

“Hey!” Philo said. “I don’t want to be used in your example.”

Cleanthes sighed. “You could be a little more polite, Philo. All right, Socrates, so Theo sees the water and I see the sand. So what?”

“Well, you, Cleanthes, based on your view of the stable, never changing sand, would assume that, like everything you see, God must be stable and never-changing. Cleanthes and Theo, you have both made quite logical conclusions if you are basing them on experience, yet you’ve drawn them completely opposite. If, in this analogy, you were to talk to each other, it is doubtless you would think the other was being entirely ridiculous.”

“So the issue with basing God on our experiences is that our experiences may not represent the full picture? Is that what you’re getting at?”

“Yes. Or perhaps not the correct picture at all: only a shadow or reflection.”

“But if not our experiences, on what can we base conclusions about God?” Cleanthes says.

“Nothing,” Philo answers. “You can’t make conclusions about God.”

“Then why even participate in this conversation, Philo? Just to tell us all how wrong we are, to look down on us?”

Philo shakes his head. “To enlighten you, rather, that you may speak more carefully in the future.”

Cleanthes shakes his head. “No. You’re caught up in the differences of Socrates’ analogy, but look at the similarities. We disagree on the nature of God, but we still agree that he exists. Perhaps from this argument I can come to understand our classmate Demea’s perspective, that God is too mystical for human understanding. But what I cannot do, Philo, is toss him aside entirely the way you have.”

“I’m not saying God doesn’t exist,” Philo said. “Rather, I am saying that we cannot know for certain either way. When you ask what the nature of God is, you assume that he definitely exists. But with our evidence, that conclusion cannot be drawn.”

“Then why does every human being draw it?”

Philo laughs, unkindly. “Really, Cleanthes? You would resort to mass consensus over a real argument? In Russia today, so many human beings believed that Hitler is doing the right thing, right? Theodore’s a history kid, I’m sure he can confirm it for you. But I ask you this, Cleanthes. Does their belief make it true?”

Cleanthes looks (understandably) upset, so I step in. “You’re making a false equivalence, Philo, between whether something or someone is *good* and whether something or someone *exists*. How do we know that Putin exists?”

“We don’t,” Socrates said. “Not really. We believe that we’ve seen photographs, but perhaps they were staged, and besides, how do we know that we’re seeing what is really there? Our eyes could deceive us.”

“But there are no people claiming that he does not exist. We can trust consensus on existence alone, free of value judgments, right?” Cleanthes says.

“Ah, but you also head toward false equivalence. There are dissenters on the matter of God,” Philo says.

“A modern phenomenon, though,” I point out. “Cross-culturally, there’s a pattern in belief in a higher power, a creator of some kind, although that creator may be very different than how we Christians envision our God.”

“Still,” Philo says. “Belief that the earth orbits the sun is also a relatively modern phenomenon. Does that make it untrue? Or, say, belief in planets beyond our solar system, belief in nebulae and black holes. Or going smaller, belief in atoms, protons, neutrons, and electrons. You say that the traditional view that God exists is enough for you. Should you then believe the traditional view that these things, which could not be seen in past eras, do not?”

“An interesting point, although we still haven’t been able to get a perfect equivalence. I don’t believe there is an enduring cross-cultural belief that atoms do not exist, after all,” I point out.

“This is why experience won’t solve your problems,” Socrates says. “You will never be able to get something that perfectly matches God other than God himself. You need to reach beyond perception, to reason.”

“How?” I ask.

Socrates is silent for an entire minute, during which I began packing up my backpack.

“You have to ignore what your eyes see and your ears hear and reach for what really exists,” Socrates finally says.

“And what else do we have,” Philo asks, “beyond sight and hearing, beyond touch and smell and taste?”

“Truth,” Socrates says.

Philo shakes his head. "The only truth is what we perceive, not what we imagine."

Cleanthes shakes his head in turn. "And here's a truth for you, Socrates: I have a class to get to. Next time that you want to get good answers, try asking better questions."

I let the two of them leave before me, and wish Socrates good luck at Senate before I depart. Socrates might not be the kindest man around, but Euthyphro would throw his own father into a volcano if he thought it the right thing to do.