Lesson IV | Some Psychological Arguments for God and Suffering

Review: Fill in the blanks to complete the sentences:

The Argument from Contingency:
- “Last time we noted that everything in the universe possessed existence as a ______ feature and so everything in the universe needs an ____________ for how it came to exist.”
- In the analogy of the magnet and nails the magnetism represented __________, the nails represented ______________, the source of the magnetism represented ______.

The Argument from Design
- If you observe a design in the universe then you can reasonably conclude that there must be a ______

Objectives:
- We will be able to briefly sketch out the Argument from Morality and the Argument from Desire for God’s Existence.
- We will be formulate a few responses to the Problem of Evil

Key Vocabulary:

**Theism**: a philosophical perspective that says there is a God.

**Argument**: a logical sequence of ideas that supports a claim; not a disagreement or a difference of opinion

**Natural Law**: the more or less hazy understanding that humans have that they should do good and avoid evil

**Atheism**: the philosophical perspective that says there is no God

**Proof for God’s existence**: an argument based in reason for why belief in God is reasonable;

**Privation**: The lack of a good that ought to be there

**Moral Relativism**: The belief that there we each have our own truth but there is no absolute Truth when it comes to how we should behave

How important would you say a sense of right and wrong is for society to function smoothly? Explain your answer:
The Argument from Morality

The argument from Morality goes like this. We observe in all different culture, places, and times humans not only have a sense of right and wrong but a sense of obligation to do what is right. Let’s call this sense of right and wrong the Natural Law or the Law of Conscience. Where does this Natural Law come from? Well, things don’t just come from nothing; an absolute moral law requires a moral law giver, and that moral law giver we call God.

C.S. Lewis puts it this way. He observes, in his first chapter of Mere Christianity, that human beings regularly bicker about who is ‘in the right’ and who was ‘unfair’. Humans display an intense need to justify their actions. If someone says, “hey you shouldn’t take his pencil,” we are likely to reply, “well it was mine in the first place” (so I was correct in taking it) or “he did it do me first” (so it was not unjust). This moral bickering is remarkable especially when one takes the long view of human history. There may be any number of differences between cultures and values but even more than those differences there is a striking amount of similarity in moral values, “Think of a country where people were admired for running away in battle, or where a man felt proud of double-crossing all the people who had been kindest to him. You might just as well try to imagine a country where two and two made five” (Mere Christianity Book I ch 1). This moral code is innate in humans so where does it come from?

Or to put it this way, every time we say ‘this action is fair’ or ‘this action is not’ we are assuming we have a way to judge the amount of justice an action possess. This is only possible if there is a standard against which we can compare these things. This ‘standard of morality’ that imposes itself on our conscience and calls us from within to behave in good way is what we call God.

P1. Moral laws are objective: just as objective as the laws of nature

P2. A moral law has to have a moral law-giver.

C. There is a moral law giver and that law giver is God.
Check for understanding:

In the box provided summarize what you have understood about the Argument from Morality using the sentence starter provided.

We observe that...

In the box provided brainstorm some possible objections to the argument from Morality
Isn’t this sense of right and wrong just the instinct of survival?

That is a reasonable question but what this objection doesn’t see is the difference between instincts and what we are observing about our sense of moral obligation. An instinct is something we feel and happens without us thinking about it. If an animal feels the instinct to ‘fight’ or ‘flight’ in a given moment, the stronger of the two is what determines what will happen. But the moral obligation is not that way because it is a rational psychological phenomenon by which we are actually thinking about our instincts and judging between them. What’s more, Lewis also points out, our sense of moral obligation will actually tell us to do the instinct that is weaker. For example if we see a person being harassed, we will probably feel two instincts: the instinct to stay safe and not get involved and the instinct to stand up for the weak. But we also have little voice telling us to do the very instinct that is least dominant in us: in other words, you should go stand up for them in spite of the danger. This ‘little voice’ as you might call it, is not an instinct because it is judging between instincts. So this cannot be a biological adaptation.

Isn’t right and wrong really just about your personal preference in a given situation.

This objection confuses two things: just because someone has preference for a thing does not mean that it is nothing but a preference. For example, people might bicker on any number of topics---music, food, how to keep a lawn up, and any number of moral issues. Now when we disagree about music or food we bicker but we don’t feel the same outrage as when we talk about issues of grave moral importance: such as slavery or keeping kids safe or protecting people from abuse. Of course we don’t want slavery and of course we prefer that kids be kept safe and we would prefer that abuse should not happen, but that is not the point. The point is that these things should not happen regardless of anyone’s preference. So moral outrage is fundamentally different in kind from disagreement on personal preference.

Right and Wrong are really just dependent on where you grew up (Moral Relativism)

One response to this is the one we already made in the explanation: that morality is actually strikingly similar across cultures. Check about the Appendix to the Abolition of Man by C.S. Lewis for a concrete list of this. But we can also say that if right and wrong were simply relative to our location then you would never get any social progress or improvement. Ghandi or Martin Luther King’s teaching
and Women’s rights could never be praised as ‘improvements’ because they aren’t any better or worse than what came before. Nazi morality and American morality wouldn’t be better or worse they would just be ‘different’. But of course we don’t think that. We really believe that some things are better than others. Which just goes to show how rare real relativism is.

The Argument from Desire

This argument in its shortest form was famously put forth by Augustine: “You have made us for yourself oh Lord and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.” This is an intuitive and insightful statement about the human condition but how can this be used as evidence for God? Some people have put it this way: We notice that in the human heart there are two kinds of desires, innate desires: desires that come hardwired into our being such as the desires for water, food, sex, sleep, companionship etc. and learned desires: desires that we have to learn about first in order to desire such as the desire for a sportscar, or the desire for winning a world series, or the desire to live in the Land of Oz. Now we notice that for every innate desire there exists something in this world that can satisfy us: for hunger there is food, for thirst there is drink, for rest there is sleep etc.

We also notice in the human heart that there is a desire for something that is never quite achieved in this world. We can express this in a number of ways. We might ask, why is it that no matter how good things are, I always seem to want more? Why is it that on may happiest days there is a desire for it to keep going and sadness when it doesn’t? Why is it that we have a lovers quarrel with the world---just when things are going good, the world takes what we had away from us: a conversation with a friend, a loved one, the perfect afternoon, a stage in life that we relished, or just this perfect cup of coffee. Why does the world feel like an ‘appetizer’ and why do our hearts look for the ‘main meal’? Others have wondered, why is it that, we who live in time are always so anxious about not having enough or running out of tie. It is as if we were meant for something more than the time we have. It would be like a fish who living in the ocean who kept complaining about how wet the world was---when they are created for the water. Why do we, who live, move, and breath in time, seem to have a desire for something more, something outside of time?

So however you like to put it, if we have an innate and natural desire for something more than this world, and if for every natural desire there exists something to fulfill that desire, then it stands to reason that there is something more than this world that can satisfy our deepest longings: that thing we call God. That is a beautiful thought---it is as if there very ‘restlessness’ of our beings was meant
WHY WOULD ANYONE BELIEVE IN GOD?

It is hard to see why anyone would want to deny this. But people do, so. Let’s reflect on this.

P1. There are two kinds of desires: innate and learned desires

P2 for every innate desire there is something that can satisfy it.

P3 in every person there is a desire, which is never satisfied by anything in this world

C: there is something beyond this world that can satisfy us

Check for understanding:

In the box provided summarize what you have understood about the Argument from Desire with the phrase starter provided

“Starting from…"

In the box provided brainstorm some possible objections to the argument from Desire
“I don’t know what you’re talking about, I’m perfectly happy”

That really would be a remarkable thing to witness would it not? I think if that was the case I would want to learn all I can from that person. This is not meant facetiously. I think that the person who thinks this really is worth getting to know. What leads them to think that they are maximally happy? What makes them think this way and what is their story in life that has brought them to this place? And just the question, “What do you want in life?”, as simple as that is needs to be asked more. It may be that what we thought was happiness was really something else and it might just be the thing that gets us asking the right questions.

“I think the desire for more is a learned desire”

I think here the burden of proof is on the speaker. However, it means that the human heart seems to be doomed to walk around in room that is half its size. What I mean is that if the human heart desires ‘x’ and the world only provides for a certain percentage of ‘x’ then it would appear that the world will be a very painful place for the human heart and the predominant task of the human is one of disillusionment.
The Argument from the Problem of Evil:

Aquinas puts it this way: If one of two opposites were infinite then the other would not exist. If God exists he would be infinite goodness and so evil should not exist. But evil does exist so we can conclude that God does not. Here is Augustine’s version

P1: If God exists he is both totally good and totally powerful.

P2: If God is all good he would only will good and if he were all powerful he would always get what he wants: goodness.

P3: Not everything is good.

C: So God cannot exist.

The classic Christian answer to the problem of Evil, of St. Thomas and St. Augustine, is that \textit{God is so powerful that he can permit evil and even use it as an occasion to bring about a greater good}. Bishop Robert Barron has said that the problem of Evil while very persuasive on the psychological level is actually not very compelling on the intellectual level. By that he means that when evil things occur we can and ought to ask, “Why God would you permit such a thing? What good can come from this?” and if we are honest we have to admit ultimately that God sees more than we do. For us to say, “there is no good that can come from this”, is to assume a perspective that is greater than God’s. Am I in a position in which I can see all possible outcomes? Can I see all the causes and effects of every single action so as to say ‘nothing good can come from this’? The honest answer is obviously ‘no I cannot’, and thus we are left trusting in a God who knows more and can do more than we will. This by the way is God’s reply to Job at the end of that book in the Bible. Now, it is important to point out that this is not always pleasant or easy, but it is honest. There is not logical contradiction between an all good God and the evil we experience in the world. But we must be careful in how this is said and the openness of the person we are speaking to so we do not make light of their situation. In fact sometimes the most potent thing we can do as Christians is to come to understand what the other is going through and to suffer with the person who is asking the questions.
WHY WOULD ANYONE BELIEVE IN GOD?

Here are some other answers: Notice that in each case the believer points out a term that is used in correctly in the atheist’s argument:

#1 Ambiguity of the term God: When we say God we mean a being that is by definition wiser than us and we can’t really understand God’s mind or his wisdom. By criticizing God’s wisdom you make yourself the standard of God’s action but it’s perfectly possible that God could allow evil to work a greater good out of it.

#2 Ambiguity of the word Exists: Evil is not a thing that exists: it is what philosophy calls a privation: the absence of a good that ought to be there. All things are good but not all actions or choices are but we create those things not God.

#3 Ambiguity of the term all-powerful: Sometimes we think that God can do all things including contradictions. This is not true, because Truth cannot contradict Truth. So the Christina can reply that Evil is a necessary possibility of freewill: Free beings that are incapable of choosing evil is a contradiction in terms. God cannot create contradictions. He could have created a world without free beings and that would eliminate the possibility of evil but he couldn’t eliminate the possibility.

#4 Ambiguity of the term Evil: There are two problems of evil b/c there are two kinds: Moral evil (sin) which comes from the human freewill and which is the worst of the two. Physical evil (suffering): One logical reply might be that suffering is unavoidable in a finite material universe. After all, everything wears down eventually: order goes to chaos.

#5 Ambiguity of the term Good: we assume that good means not allowing suffering at all but does it? Does a parent let their kids do whatever they want? Or save them from any and all suffering? Doesn’t love allow them to suffer so that they learn?

#6 Ambiguity of the term Happiness: Why aren’t we happy? Because we are in time, we are in a story: we’ll be happier in the long run after we experience it. When we look back on the sufferings of this world from the viewpoint of heaven it will seem like a night in a bad motel (St. Therese)
WHY WOULD ANYONE BELIEVE IN GOD?

#7 “The prob. Of evil assumes God if you trace back its assumptions.” This argument requires you to know what good and evil but this is only possible if there is a standard by which you can judge between them. You only know what evil is only b/c of objective Goodness: which is God. So the argument from Evil is like the little child climbing up on dad’s lap to tell his dad that he doesn’t exist.

Final Note

These responses will not refute the atheist definitively but they will keep the option of Theism open as a real option. Apparently God wanted this: he left enough evil to puzzle the atheist and enough love to woo the theist. This is the world we live in.

Also, the question of evil is given a startlingly clear answer by Jesus: God did not cause suffering or sin, they are the result of human choice but God takes suffering and makes it the means of showing the depths of love provided we repent and turn back. The resurrection is the proof for this statement.

Some other resources:

Books:
Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis
The Abolition of Man by C.S. Lewis

Podcasts:
The Word on Fire Show by Bishop Barron
- Episode 132 Why does God Allow Evil and Suffering?
- Episode 004: Answering the Atheists

Pints With Aquinas by Matt Fradd

On YouTube
Mere Christianity by C.S Lewis Doodle (BBC talk 5/Chapter 2)

Audio series
Modern Scholar Series: Peter Kreeft: The Philosophy of Religion