To think about

Would you agree with Tillich in his view that ‘exists’ is the wrong word to use of God? Why, or why not?

When people say that unicorns don’t exist, they mean that if you could look at all the things in the world, you would not find anything which matched our understanding of ‘unicorn’. However, if God is not one of the ‘things in the world’, but something different entirely, what does it mean to say that God does or doesn’t exist?

In spite of objections such as those of Russell or Tillich, people have nevertheless attempted to show, using argument, that God does exist, and that the faith of believers is reasonable and logical.

Inductive and deductive arguments

Before we look at specific arguments for the existence of God, it is useful to have some understanding of what an argument is, and what it might be expected to achieve. When we use the word ‘argument’ in conversation, we often mean a disagreement: ‘You were flirting with my boyfriend …’ ‘No I wasn’t …’ ‘Yes you were!’ and so on. But in philosophical terms, an argument is not the same as a string of contradictions with a few insults thrown in. An argument has a conclusion (or several conclusions), and these are supported by reasons in an attempt to persuade someone that the conclusions are true.

Many arguments are based on inductive reasoning, and others are based on deductive reasoning.
amount they drank at the restaurant rather than because of the food. But with a
deductive argument, the conclusion is an inevitable result of the logic of the premises.
It is not based on observation or experience, but on logical processes.

A priori and a posteriori arguments

Another very similar way of classifying arguments is into two categories: a priori
arguments, and a posteriori arguments. A priori arguments, like deductive arguments,
are those which rely only on the processes of logic to prove a point. You do not need
to have any particular experiences or provide any evidence, in order to make the proof;
the proof can be made solely through the logic of the argument. A posteriori
arguments, in contrast, are those which depend on some kind of evidence to support
them. They derive from experience, they come after or ‘are posterior to’ experience
of the way that things are. These sorts of arguments look at the world, and say that
we experience X to be the case, and that therefore Y must be true. Examples of
a posteriori arguments for the existence of God are design arguments, the moral
arguments, the cosmological arguments and the arguments from religious experience.

Can God’s existence be
demonstrated through argument?

Someone who does not believe in God is not going to change his or her opinion
because of the arguments of reason and logic, even if these are sound. There is more
to religious belief than just agreeing to a set of statements: it goes beyond the bounds
of reason. This does not mean that it has to be unreasonable; but religious belief
consists of more than simple agreement that an argument appears to work. It involves
Hume argued that if there is order in the world, there are plenty of different possibilities that could be offered to explain it. Order in the world does not demonstrate that it must have been put there by divine intelligence.

John Stuart Mill (1806–73) was one of the leading thinkers of the nineteenth century. He was known as a radical; his thinking explored theories of politics and economics as well as ethics, where he is particularly well known for his work on the ethical system of Utilitarianism. Mill was one of the first thinkers to consider the nature and scope of inductive reasoning and to look at the value of conclusions which were reached on the basis of probability rather than hard fact.

Mill took a different approach in his criticism of arguments from design. He did not address the issue of whether design arguments are logical, as Hume had done. Instead, Mill suggested that if we look at the world and the rules which govern it, then we see cruelty, violence and unnecessary suffering. In his essay On Nature (1874), he argued that if the world has been deliberately designed, then it indicates something very different from a loving creator God.

Living things, including people, inflict cruelty on each other, and seem to be designed for that purpose. Many animals are made with special features to enable them to be efficient killers – they have sharp claws and teeth, or excellent eyesight or hearing to help them spot their prey. Some live as parasites on other creatures. Even plants often have features which help them to suffocate other plants in order to gain maximum light and nutrients. The world, if it is designed at all, is designed so that some species can only exist by destroying others.

Nature seemed, to Mill, to be unnecessarily cruel.
Nature itself causes suffering, through natural disasters. Volcanoes, earthquakes, bush fires and floods are often natural occurrences, caused as an inevitable result of the structure of the earth. Mill argued that if there is a God who created and designed the world, then it must be a God who wants his creation to be miserable – it does not make sense to use the world as evidence of the existence of a good God. He argued in On Nature that we cannot want to worship a God who would design such a world – if people behaved in the way God seems to have behaved, then we would think of them as the worst kind of criminal:

…the order of nature, in so far as unmodified by man, is such as no being, whose attributes are justice and benevolence, would have made with the intention that his rational creatures should follow it as an example … In sober truth, nearly all the things which men are banged or imprisoned for doing to one another are nature’s every-day performances. Killing, the most criminal act recognised by human laws, Nature does once to every being that lives; and, in a large proportion of cases, after protracted tortures such as only the greatest monsters whom we read of ever purposely inflicted on their living fellow creatures …

Next to taking life (equal to it according to a high authority) is taking the means by which we live; and Nature does this too on the largest scale and with the most callous indifference. A single hurricane destroys the hopes of a season; a flight of locusts, or an inundation, desolates a district; a trifling chemical change in an edible root starves a million of people. The waves of the sea, like banditti, seize and appropriate the wealth of the rich and the little all of the poor with the same accompaniments of stripping, wounding, and killing as their human antitypes. Everything, in short, which the worst men commit either against life or property is perpetrated on a larger scale by natural agents.

To think about

Do you think that Mill is right when he argues that if the world is designed, it must have been designed by a creator who wants us to be miserable?

Mill argued that if we look at the way the natural world is designed, we see that it is full of pain and cruelty. If God designed the world, this indicates a cruel God who wants creatures to suffer.
Mill’s argument, then, is based on the observation that the world is more than just imperfect – in his view, it is gratuitously cruel. He did not say that the world could not have been designed; his view was that if it has been deliberately designed, then it does not point to a perfectly good and loving designer.

Key point

- Mill’s argument was that the design of the world involves cruelty and suffering – so if it was made by God, it must have been made by a cruel God.

Design arguments and Darwinism

The work of Charles Darwin is considered by many people to have presented design arguments with their greatest challenge. For people like Paley, the complex features of different plants and animals provided clear evidence of a divine designer. But what if these features had not always been there? What if there was evidence to suggest that they had only developed gradually, and that there had been plenty of creatures with poor design which had not survived?

Darwin’s famous work *The Origin of Species* caused a huge storm when it was first published, but his theory of evolution did not come completely out of the blue. Fifteen years before Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, a book called *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* was published anonymously (1844). This caused a great deal of excitement, and the identity of the author was the subject of much society debate. This book suggested that there had been some kind of evolution, and that the existing species had ancestors which were different from themselves. The book was also keen to point out that God had made the early creatures, and God had made the laws governing their evolution.

This anonymous book, although the subject of discussion, was not treated as a serious threat to design arguments, because the ideas in it were presented as hypotheses, as guesses, without supporting evidence. The author, a man called Robert Chambers, was an amateur naturalist, and scientists were quick to spot and expose the mistakes in his reasoning.

However, when Darwin’s work was published, it was supported by a mass of collected evidence and examples, and was therefore considered to be far more threatening to orthodox Christian beliefs. Chambers’ views could be dismissed as wild guesses, but Darwin’s theory that natural selection had been the cause of the origins of the different

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species was supported with data and seemed, to many, to be convincing. Darwin’s theory was also supported by the new science of geology. Sir Charles Lyell’s work suggested that the world was millions of years old, not just six thousand as suggested by the Bible; and geologists were beginning to find the fossilised remains of creatures which no longer existed.

Darwin’s theory of evolution through natural selection was seen as an important challenge to design arguments.

According to Darwin’s theory of evolution through natural selection, the different species we can see in the world today have not always existed in their present form. When life first began, it was in a very simple molecular form. As it reproduced itself, the offspring were not identical. Those with stronger characteristics, more suitable for survival, lived for longer and were able to produce more offspring to continue the strong characteristics, while the weaker traits became extinct. Over many generations, different species evolved. Complexity was one of the characteristics which led to a greater chance of survival, and so more and more complex plants and animals were formed, with different characteristics to suit different habitats. Darwin’s work was supported by the discoveries made in genetics by Gregor Mendel.

To think about

Some people argue that the theory of evolution shows that God is even more intelligent as a designer than people had imagined. God did not just make the creatures, but he made them with the ability to evolve. What do you think of this argument?
had time, just as we understand it) in the eternity before the universe existed. For Augustine, the biblical account of creation points towards a timeless God, who chooses to create day and night, and chooses to create the seasons, just as described in Genesis, but who transcends notions of ‘before’ and ‘after’.

**God as impassible**

One attribute that the early founders of Christianity ascribed to God is the view that God is impassible, which means that he is unaffected by anything. In the Roman Catholic tradition, following the ideas expressed by Thomas Aquinas, God cannot be changed by anything outside himself. Just like Aristotle’s Prime Mover, which sets things in motion but is itself unaffected by any cause, God cannot be acted upon.

**To think about**

Why might impassibility be understood as a ‘perfection’?

The view that God is impassible has some subtly different understandings. To Origen, one of the early Christian fathers, it meant lacking all emotion, being unperturbed, incapable of being emotionally affected by others and incapable of feeling emotion towards others; and therefore, at one point in his career, Origen concluded that God could not suffer.

Clement of Alexandria, another early Christian teacher, suggested it meant that God could not be distracted from his essential nature: God is single-minded in his purposes. It does not mean that God is uninterested, but that God’s will comes entirely from within God and is not affected by any outside influences.

R. S. Franks, in the entry on ‘Passibility and impassibility’ in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (T&T Clark, 1999), suggested that impassibility refers to whether God is capable of being acted upon from outside, but need not rule out that God could cause feelings and emotions within himself; so God could still have feelings of love and compassion and forgiveness, but these would be feelings that arose as part of God’s own nature, rather than feelings into which God was, in effect, forced by the deeds of his creation.

This classical view of the immutability of God has its origin in Plato’s and Aristotle’s views of the Ultimate, the Perfect, the Unmoved. For Plato, the ‘Form of the Good’ was a concept, incapable of being affected by the goodness or otherwise of everything else because it had no personality. For Aristotle, the ‘Prime Mover’ is first in the chain of cause and effect precisely because it is uncaused – nothing acts upon it, it is unchanged by anything.
Kant argued that our sense of justice requires that there should be life after death.

However, clearly, in this life goodness is not always rewarded with happiness. Some people lead morally good lives, devote themselves to the service of others and try to deal fairly and honestly with everyone they meet and yet they never make very much money, or they suffer tragedies. Others are selfish, greedy and prosperous. Kant came to the conclusion that we therefore have to postulate the existence of God, and the existence of an afterlife, in order to achieve justice. Without God, and without an afterlife, our sense that we ought to be good would be futile.

Critics of Kant’s argument point out, of course, that there is no reason to assume there is any justice. We might have a strong sense that life should be fair, the good should be rewarded and the wicked should be punished, but our sense that it ought to be so is not evidence that it is so. Our sense that we ought to be good might very well be futile. It might also be argued that, whatever life after death is like, it cannot compensate for the unfairness of this life.

To think about

Do you think that life after death could solve the problem of life’s unfairness? What sort of afterlife would the parents of a murdered child need to have, to compensate for their suffering?