
UNIT 18 CONTEMPORARY DEBATES²⁰

Structure

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18.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this unit are:

- To understand the nature of the contemporary trends in philosophy of religion.
- To understand the differences in approach to the traditional questions of philosophy of religion.
- To engage with the difference in context within which these contemporary debates emerge, such as the rise of modern science, challenge to the traditional framework of philosophy of religion from feminist thought, etcetera.

18.1 INTRODUCTION

Philosophy of religion is a vast and burgeoning domain of debates, and discussions in the contemporary world. Theists, agnostics, atheists, equally partake of discussions in this domain. Religion in itself is something that is tied with the evolution of human civilisations, and questions of religion have always occupied the human mind.

²⁰ Dr. Shridha Shah, Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Hindu College, University of Delhi.

There has been a marked change in the way in which religion is discussed in the modern world. With the growth of modern science, and the enlightenment, approaches to religion have also changed. In Europe, prior to the separation of state and religion, religion was one of the central institutions that governed an individual's life; however, with the separation of state and religion, it came to be relegated to one among the various aspects in an individual's life, and largely became a matter of the private life of an individual. This change caused a major shift in the way in which religious issues came to be discussed in western thought, and through colonialism, also percolated to eastern thought.

In the contemporary world, philosophy of religion is largely discussed as the analytic philosophy of religion, which focuses on concepts, arguments and beliefs. The continental tradition is seen to be discussing issues of anthropology, culture, mythology, practice, etcetera, but not philosophy. This divide is in itself something which is being questioned in contemporary discussions. Several traditional debates are being revisited in the light of the challenge posed by the modern scientific, secular world. Questions about God's existence are no longer issues within the domain of religious belief, but have to confront the evidential framework of modern science. Some of the other major issues are the role of religious experience in justifying belief in religion; religious pluralism, and belief in one's own religion in a globalized world; religious identity and its intersection with race, gender, caste, and other identities; religion and the ecological crisis – several such discussions, and debates are part of the contemporary scenario.

In this unit we will take up two major issues for discussion – proofs for the existence of God, as presented through the Kalam Cosmological Argument, and the Fine-Tuning Argument in relation to modern science, and the feminist philosophy of religion. The first topic is a traditionally core issue of philosophy of religion, and the other is a topic, which has emerged as a challenge to the traditional understanding of philosophy of religion.

18.2 PROOFS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

In this section we will revisit the Cosmological Argument, and the Teleological Argument for God's existence, in the light of contemporary discussions among philosophers of religion, and scientists. These arguments in the contemporary world are majorly discussed in the form of the Kalam Cosmological Argument, and the Fine-Tuning Argument.

18.2.1 Cosmological Argument

Dr. William Lane Craig is the most vocal, and well-known proponent of the Kalam Cosmological Argument. In fact, he is the one who gave this name to this form of the cosmological argument. Let us begin with a basic statement of the Kalam Cosmological Argument, which is as follows:

- (1) If the universe began to exist, then the universe has a cause of its existence.
- (2) The universe began to exist.
- (3) And, therefore, the universe has a cause of its existence.

This is a deductive argument, wherein if the premises are true, then the conclusion that follows must also be true. Typically, in trying to refute such an argument the premises of the argument must be proven false.

The first premise of the argument – if the universe began to exist, then the universe has a cause of its existence – has actually been reformulated by Craig into its present form. Al Ghazali, a medieval Islamic theologian, who originally propounded the argument

PONDER BOX-I

What is 'no-thing'? Can something come out of this nothing?

reasoned that ‘*everything* that begins to exist must have a cause for its existence’, which is a bolder assertion, but can also be attacked on the basis of the laws of quantum physics at the level of subatomic particles, as subatomic particles at the quantum level do not follow the ordinary laws of causation. Craig’s formulation is more modest, and avoids this difficulty. It is also accepted by most contemporary thinkers, as its refutation would entail that something can come out of nothing, which essentially puts into question the very nature of causality as we observe it in our everyday experience. If something can come out of nothing, then anything can come out of anything, which confounds any sense of order in change that we generally observe. We attribute this order to the principle of causality, and a rebuttal of this premise is seen by proponents of the Kalam argument as a metaphysical absurdity. Philosophically speaking, there have been questions raised in the history of philosophy about the nature of causality, in both Eastern and Western traditions, however, since we are looking at contemporary discussions of the cosmological argument, we will confine ourselves to only those discussions for now.

Most critics take on the second premise of the argument for discussion – that the universe began to exist. This is the most controversial part of the Kalam Cosmological argument that the universe has a finite past, or that it began to exist. Craig offers two kinds of arguments to defend the second premise of the Kalam Cosmological Argument – philosophical and scientific.

18.2.1.1 Philosophical Arguments

The philosophical arguments have been around for much longer than the scientific proofs. In fact, the scientific proofs are offered only in the 20th century. Prior to that there were only philosophical arguments that focused on the metaphysical absurdity that results from accepting actual infinities. The history of western philosophy is replete with philosophers, and mathematicians using the notion of infinities to make their arguments, however, it is the notion of actual infinities that is challenged by the proponents of the Kalam Cosmological Argument.

Their general argument is that it is impossible to have an actual infinity, and that more specifically, it is impossible to have an actually infinite collection by addition of successive elements to that collection. This second formulation particularly responds to the notion of time being seen as a series of successive moments that characterizes the existence of the universe in time. If this series is taken to be infinite, then absurdities will result from it²¹. There will be no particular reason as to how we have arrived at the current moment, and it is this lack of causation that results in metaphysical absurdity, according to Craig.

PONDER BOX-II

Think about the notion of infinity. What would Hilbert's Grand Hotel look like, and how would it exist?

German mathematician, David Hilbert's famous thought experiment of the Grand Hotel, is also used by proponents of the Kalam argument to show the absurdity in accepting actual infinities. The thought experiment in itself is perfectly logically consistent, and is in part meant to reflect on the mind-bending nature of the concept of infinity, however what is of foremost interest for the Kalam argument is the absurd conclusions that would result from the actual existence of something like the Grand Hotel, posited by Hilbert – an infinite hotel, which is completely full, can always still accommodate an infinite number of new guests!

²¹ Look at Grim Reaper's paradox, or Thomson's Lamp paradox for an illustration of this issue with actual infinities.

18.2.1.2 Scientific Arguments

With the coming in of the 20th century, and the progress made in the world of cosmological sciences, questions about the ultimate nature of the universe came within the ambit of modern science, which were earlier limited to the domain of religion and philosophy. The Big Bang Theory became one of the most well-accepted theory about the origin of the universe, and yet interestingly, it is this same theory that is used by defenders of the Kalam Cosmological argument to argue for a universe which began to exist. Starting with Einstein's equations on the general theory of relativity, to the Friedman-LeMaitre model of the expanding universe, which in turn was corroborated by Edwin Hubble's observation of the "red-shift" effect from galaxies far away, these and other related findings, eventually led to more and more cosmologists accepting the Big Bang theory. The central idea of this theory that our universe, with its space and time actually began at a particular point (singularity), and is not eternal, is cited as evidence for the second premise of the Kalam Cosmological argument.

There is yet another alleged scientific proof for the Kalam Cosmological Argument, and that is the second law of thermodynamics – the law of entropy. This law states that if energy is not being supplied to a closed system from the outside, then the entropy (state of disorder) in that system will increase. This implies that at some point in the far away future (billions of years in the future), our universe will encounter heat death or complete entropy. The issue raised by Craig with regards to this law, and its implications, for our universe is that why isn't this already the case, if the universe has existed since eternity? Why haven't we already run out of energy?

These arguments are used by Craig to defend the second premise of the Kalam Argument. If we accept the arguments presented above, then we can definitely establish that the universe has a cause for its existence, and we cannot meaningfully hold onto the idea of an eternal universe. The Kalam Cosmological Argument goes further and tries to argue that the cause of the universe is a personal God. We will not go further into this line of argumentation; however, we will look at some of the criticisms raised against the Kalam Cosmological argument by scientists, and atheists.

18.2.1.3 Criticisms

The Kalam Cosmological Argument makes use of scientific evidence to corroborate its thesis about the cause of the universe. However, some scientists disagree with these implications. For instance, one of the arguments is that in the scientific discourse the state of singularity, is argued to be inherently chaotic and unpredictable, where the natural laws of physics do not apply, and based on this assertion it is further argued that there is no guarantee that the universe that will emerge will be a universe with any particular order. The famous scientist Stephen Hawking held this position. This position also, then entails that if the first theorised state of the universe is chaotic and unpredictable, then there is no necessity for accepting a cause which brings order to the universe i.e., God. The universe may or may not have been so, and the necessity for the existence of a God then cannot be accepted.

Further, Big Bang theory is currently the most well accepted theory, however there are other theories as well that speak of the nature of the universe, which may not support the Kalam argument. These theories speak of multiple dimensions, string theory, or even multiverses, though they have not yet been corroborated with any empirical evidence.

Religious apologists have responded to these criticisms, and the discussions continue. This is a fairly rich, and provocative area for discussions in contemporary philosophy of religion.

Check your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is the Kalam Cosmological Argument, and how is it justified?

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2. What are some of the criticisms of the Kalam Cosmological Argument?

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18.2.2 Teleological Argument

The teleological argument in its traditional form was seen as part of Thomas Aquinas' *Five Ways*. It was discussed further by William Paley as the intelligent design argument, in the 19th century. Interestingly, the intelligent design argument had already been critiqued by David Hume in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), which was before Paley had developed his arguments. Implications of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, further rebutted the intelligent design argument, and it seemed to be refuted for good.

The teleological argument however, has found a new lease of life in the latter half of the 20th century, where along with the Kalam Cosmological Argument, it is one of the most discussed arguments for the existence of God, especially with respect to the scientific community. One of the major reasons for this revival is the Fine-Tuning Argument, which is what we will discuss in this section.

18.2.2.1 Fine-Tuning Argument

Along with other religious apologists, Dr Robin Collins is one of the strongest proponents of the Fine-Tuning Argument. It is also a deductive argument based on empirical evidence, and probability. The major thesis of the Fine-Tuning argument is that for intelligent, embodied, conscious agents to exist, the conditions in the universe are very finely-tuned to that end. The argument is that the universe is akin to a huge biosphere, which sustains intelligent life, and the conditions of this biosphere are so minutely adjusted to sustain this intelligent life that it but entails an intelligent designer i.e., God.

PONDER BOX-III

Think about the laws of nature that support life, and how these laws are interrelated with one another.

Collins argues for three types of fine-tuning – laws of nature, constants of physics, and the initial distribution of mass and energy at the time of the Big Bang. With respect to each of these parameters, there are a specific set of laws, and constants that allow for life to exist. Any change in these laws or constants, by even 2%, would not allow life to exist in the universe. There are several examples discussed in the literature to indicate this fine-tuning such as, the law of gravity, cosmological constant, electromagnetic force, etcetera.

There are two major possibilities that emerge based on a consideration of these laws and parameters – either the universe is there by necessity, and design, or that it is there randomly, by chance. The theist, in view of this evidence, argues that there is a much higher probability of an intelligent design that supports the universe, and it is then the onus of the atheist to show otherwise.

18.2.2.2 Criticisms

As stated, this is one of the most often discussed arguments in contemporary discourse, there are obviously scholars who disagree with this thesis. One of the major criticisms of this argument comes from the idea that perhaps there is no (one) universe, but in fact there are multiverses, maybe an infinite number of them. Given that there are an infinite number of universes, then it is quite probable for one to have this particular configuration of matter and laws, and thereby sustain life, which then cannot be attributed to intelligent design. There are scientific models of this infinite universe generator system, in theory, which challenge the fine-tuning argument. Another criticism is that the universe could also argued to be just a brute fact, and we as conscious beings attribute meaning to its nature. There is also the arguable possibility that in the observable universe we may just be a random fluctuation, which allows for intelligent life to emerge, and this again would require no designer.

There are also criticisms which question who created the designer. The designer must be more complex than the design, and if so, then how does the designer come into being. Related to it, is also the criticism that there may actually be multiple designers, and not one.

All these questions deal with philosophical and scientific possibilities, and there are responses from both sides on these issues, which keeps the debate ongoing.

Check your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is the Fine-Tuning argument?

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18.3 FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

The next issue that we will discuss is very different from what we have discussed so far, as it will question the very basis of modern western philosophy of religion. Most modern western philosophy of religion is characterized by the analytic method, which focusses largely on conceptual clarity, and precision, and questions of practice, and situatedness are left out. This is where the critique from the feminist perspective comes in, which is largely influenced by continental thought, and they also seek influences from non-western paradigms.

From the point of view of the social sciences, religion has largely been viewed as a patriarchal institution. Feminist philosophy of religion also, recognizes the dominance of the ‘male-neutral’ perspective in western philosophy of religion, which means perspectives and concepts that are dominantly male, but are presented as neutral or facts, tend to dominate philosophy of religion. Feminist thinkers, such as Pamela Sue Anderson, in this domain argue for new ways of thinking and theorizing, keeping in mind the interventions by feminist thought. Feminism in itself is a fairly complex, and multi-faceted domain of thought, with its own take on different aspects of philosophical thought,

PONDER BOX-IV

Is God a male?

and there is no one way of characterizing feminist philosophy that can be articulated, except perhaps to recognize the marginalization, and oppression of women, and their voices from the mainstream.

In view of this, there are some observations that have largely been accepted about western philosophy from the feminist perspective, such as the dominance of reason over passion, mind over the body, which is also reflected in modern western philosophy of religion. Philosophy of religion's preponderance with conceptual clarity, and discussions only of beliefs, and not practices and experiences, indicates the bias that feminist thought highlights. For instance, one of the examples taken by feminists is in terms of the problem of evil. Feminists argue that why is the problem only characterized in terms of the justification of evil, in the light of an omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent God? Why is there no consideration of what is the nature of suffering, and who is suffering? Why are they suffering, and if something can be done to alleviate that suffering? This difference is also highlighted in the way philosophy of religion, and theology approach different issues. Feminists point out that the strict distinction philosophy of religion tries to keep from theology is based on this divide between concepts and practices, or reason and experience, where philosophy is the domain of reasons and concepts, and theology can take into account experiences, practices and embodiment, but the two cannot interact.

Feminist philosophers of religion seek newer ways of theorizing about religion, without seeking to reject religion altogether. This is a fairly new domain of thought which has emerged only in the last two decades, and newer forays are consistently being made. These thinkers are looking at the history of western thought, and examples of women, who have challenged the dominant ways of thought in history. We have multiple examples of this in the west, as well as the east. The bhakti tradition in the Indian subcontinent particularly, highlights the contributions of women, who challenged the status- quo, and carved out their own space for practice, and thought within the ambit of traditional religion, thereby also reforming it.

Check your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What are some of the criticisms for philosophy of religion from feminist philosophy?

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18.4 LET US SUM UP

Despite the changing nature of the modern world, religion continues to occupy an important space in the range of human activities, which also reinstates the importance of philosophy of religion in the present world. The above discussion is not a comprehensive view of all the debates of the contemporary times; however, it highlights some of the important ones. The issue of the existence of God has been discussed since the time of medieval philosophy in western thought, however in the modern world the nature of the debate has been reformulated in the light of the challenges posed by modern science, in both the Kalam Cosmological Argument, and the Fine-Tuning Argument. In distinction to this, we also looked at the nature of the feminist critique of the framework, and method of the mainstream philosophy of religion, which sought newer ways of questions and theorizing in this context. Both these issues are allied to other disciplines as well, which brings up numerous possibilities of interdisciplinary dialogue and debate.

18.5 KEY WORDS

Cosmological Argument: An argument type that makes an inference from the alleged state of the universe to the existence of a unique being i.e., God.

Teleological Argument: Arguments for the existence of God that focus on identifying aspects that indicate the operation of a mind, or intelligence in the order or design of the universe.

Singularity: An initial point of infinite density and gravity, and before this event there was no space or time.

Embodiment: The notion of having a body, and what it particularly means with regards to the female body, in feminist philosophy.

18.6 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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18.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

1. The basic statement of the Kalam Cosmological argument is:
 - 1) If the universe began to exist, then the universe has a cause of its existence.
 - 2) The universe began to exist.
 - 3) And, therefore, the universe has a cause of its existence.

The second premise of the argument is more controversial, and is justified by using philosophical arguments which point out the metaphysical absurdity of having actual infinities, and two scientific arguments which depend on the implications of the Big Bang Theory, and the law of entropy.

2. Scientists dispute the application of the implications of the Big Bang theory. They argue that the state of singularity, is argued to be inherently chaotic and unpredictable, where the natural laws of physics do not apply, and based on this assertion it is further argued that there is no guarantee that the universe that will emerge will be a universe with any particular order. This position entails that if the first theorised state of the universe is chaotic and unpredictable, then there is no necessity for accepting a cause which brings order to the universe i.e., God. Further, Big Bang theory is currently the most well accepted theory, however there are other theories as well that speak of the nature of the universe, which may not support the Kalam argument. These theories speak of multiple dimensions, string theory, or even multiverses, though they have not yet been corroborated with any empirical evidence.

Check Your Progress II

1. The major thesis of the Fine-Tuning argument is that for intelligent, embodied, conscious agents to exist, the conditions in the universe are very finely-tuned to that end. The argument is that the universe is akin to a huge biosphere, which sustains intelligent life, and the conditions of this biosphere are so minutely adjusted to sustain this intelligent life that it but entails an intelligent designer i.e., God.

Check Your Progress III

1. Feminist philosophy of religion recognizes the dominance of the ‘male-neutral’ perspective in western philosophy of religion, which means perspectives and concepts that are dominantly male, but are presented as neutral or facts, tend to dominate philosophy of religion. There are some other observations that have largely been accepted about western philosophy from the feminist perspective, such as the dominance of reason over passion, mind over the body, which is also reflected in modern western philosophy of religion. Philosophy of religion’s preponderance with conceptual clarity, and discussions only of beliefs, and not practices and experiences, indicates the bias that feminist thought highlights.



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