

Study Guide 15

W. R. Carter, *EM*, Ch. 11, “God”

Note: Sections 11.4 and 11.5 are entirely optional.

Introduction:

Four main kinds of arguments attempt to show that belief in God is reasonable: *Cosmological Arguments* argue that the mere existence of material objects, or of motion, provides conclusive evidence for the existence of God. (Carter does not consider such arguments.) *Teleological Arguments*, also called Arguments from Design, suggest that the appearance of design in the material universe provides sufficient evidence for the existence of God. (Cleanthes, in David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, offers such an argument.) *Ontological Arguments* attempt to show that the existence of God can be demonstrated from the mere concept of God. (Descartes and Anselm both offer such arguments.) *Pascal’s Wager* attempts to show that whether God really exists or not, it is in your long term rational self-interest to believe that God exists.

Study Questions

1. Carter says that the claim, “I can believe whatever I want” is ambiguous. There is a sense in which it is true, and a sense in which it is false. What are the two meanings of the sentence?
2. According to Carter, what is wrong with the thesis that “We are justified in believing only what we directly observe to be the case”?
3. In David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Cleanthes argues that certain aspects of the material world are best explained by the hypothesis that the material world was designed and created by an intelligent being. What aspects of the material world does Cleanthes have in mind, and why does he favor this hypothesis? What does Carter think is wrong with Cleanthes’ argument?
4. According to Carter, Descartes argues, “God is supremely perfect. If God is supremely perfect, then God exists. Therefore God exists.” Does Carter think that this argument is deductively invalid? If so, why? Does he think that one of the premises is false? If so, which one, and why?

5. Sections 11.4 and 11.5 are optional. In class on Tuesday, I will present an alternate version of the ontological argument, due to St. Anselm. (The argument that Carter discusses in section 11.4 and 11.5 has certain affinities with Anselm's argument.)
6. Unfortunately, Carter doesn't set out the four key assumptions of Pascal's argument. Pascal makes four assumptions in the *Prologion*: (1) If God exists, and you believe in God and lead a morally exemplary life, you will have an infinite reward. (2) If God exists, and you are an atheist or lead a morally depraved life (or both), then you will be in for an infinite punishment. On the other hand, (3) if God does not exist, and you believe in God and lead a morally exemplary life, you will lose only some finite earthly pleasures. Finally, (4) if God does not exist, and you are an atheist or lead a morally depraved life (or both), you will thereby gain only some finite earthly pleasures. Pascal suggests that if this is the payoff scheme, it is in your rational long-term self-interest to believe that God exists. Is Pascal right about this? It's an important question, because the stakes are high!