INTRODUCTION

Is the existence of God something reason might decide? Some philosophers – both theists and atheists – believe that it is. However, a great many – philosophers and theologians included – argue that God's existence is something that reason is unable to settle. Pascal, for example, said:

> 'Let us say: "Either God is or he is not." But to which view shall we be inclined? Reason cannot decide this question.'

Pascal is here talking about the Judeo-Christian God as traditionally conceived, i.e. a being that is, among other things, all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good.

I take the view that reason might be able to settle this question fairly conclusively. For it might be that there are, after all, good arguments for the existence of this God. Or it might be that we can show that the God hypothesis is conceptually confused, or at least faces overwhelming empirical evidence against it.

In fact, on the face of it, the God hypothesis does seem to be straightforwardly empirically falsified – by the existence of literally unimaginable quantities of gratuitous human and animal suffering stretching back (for animals at least) hundreds of millions of years. True, it is open to theists to try to explain why this suffering is not, after all, gratuitious (they may appeal to free-will, or to a character-building programme, for example). But many theists admit that this is a daunting challenge that is beyond them. Still, some suggest, if there is a God, his ways are likely to be something of a mystery to us. Not everything he does will be something we will be able to understand, given our limited intellects. So the fact that we cannot understand why such a being would unleash such horror is not, in the end, very much evidence against his existence.

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How plausible is such an appeal to mystery? Does God's limitless power and wisdom mean that his existence is something that *necessarily* cannot be disproved in this way?

Consider an analogy. Suppose there is an infinitely powerful and knowledgeable being who created the universe. Only this being is not all-good. Rather, he is all-evil. How plausible is this evil-God hypothesis? In particular, do we suppose it is beyond the ability of reason to decide?

Clearly not. In fact, the evil-God hypothesis seems to be straightforwardly empirically falsified (by the enormous amount of good we find in the world). So, while it is open to theists to argue that the good God hypothesis is not empirically falsified in the same way, it seems that, if they acknowledge the evil God hypothesis is empirically falsified, then that at least raises the possibility that the same is true of the good God hypothesis. It is not, it turns out, a hypothesis that it is *in principle* beyond the ability of science to falsify.

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