Philosophy of Religion: First Writing Assignment

Cosmological Arguments for the Existence of God

Due: Tuesday, February 24, 12:30pm (hardcopy in class)
Length: 4–5 pages (1200–1500 words)

Please don't write your name on your paper: use your USC ID instead. (I don’t want to know which paper is whose until after I’ve finished grading.)

Late papers will be dropped one full letter grade for each day they are late. I can make exceptions for extraordinary circumstances such as serious illness if you contact me with an explanation no later than 24 hours before the deadline.

Structure

In this paper you should analyze, explain, and evaluate one of the cosmological arguments we discussed in class. (And you should do these three things in order.)

1. You should pick one version of a cosmological argument (from Aquinas, or Hume, or Craig, or Van Inwagen). You can (and probably should) draw some on ideas from the other authors in your paper, but your paper should clearly focus on one specific version of the argument.
   How do you choose which one? You should choose the version of the argument which you think is the most interesting and convincing (even if you aren’t convinced by it!)

2. Analyze. You should make clear what the structure of the argument is. What is its conclusion? What are its premises? The argument should be presented in a way so that it is clearly valid (the conclusion follows from the premises).
   I strongly recommend that you do this by explicitly listing the premises and conclusion in logical order.
   You may use an argument analysis that we discussed in class, but make sure not to just follow it unthinkingly. (For instance, some of the argument analyses aren’t valid as they’re given in the handouts!) Put things in a way you understand.

3. Explain. You should clearly explain any unusual terminology in the argument. You should clearly explain what the conclusion of the argument means. You should explain anything that is difficult to follow about the logical structure of the argument (how the conclusion follows from the premises). You should explain why somebody might think each premise is plausible.

4. Evaluate. You should present one clear objection to this argument: one reason for thinking that the argument is not sound. Don’t try to present a whole bunch of different objections: you should aim for a deep discussion of one important issue, rather than saying a little bit about every potential problem.
   How do you choose which one? Again, you should present the objection that you think is most interesting and convincing (even if you aren’t convinced by it!)
   Make sure to explain the objection clearly. If the objection is successful, which premise of the argument would it show is false? What ideas or assumptions does the objection depend on?
   Finally, do you think the objection succeeds? Does it show that the argument is unsound (or at least unpersuasive)? You should consider any obvious defense of the argument from this objection. For instance, maybe you can modify the original argument so that it isn’t vulnerable to the objection anymore. Or maybe you can point out some kind of mistake that the objection depends on. Or maybe not—maybe the attempts someone might make to modify the argument or find a mistake in the objection don’t really work after all. What do you think?
   Don’t just state your opinion about this. (“I think this objection is unsuccessful, and Premise 1 is true.”) Rather, you should give clear reasons for why the objection succeeds or doesn’t.
Assessment

Here are the criteria I’ll use to grade your paper.

1. **Is it complete and on-topic?**
   - Does the paper include **analysis**, **explanation**, and **evaluation** of a cosmological argument?

2. **Is it clearly written?**
   - Does the paper use plain language that is easy to understand?
   - Are important terms and ideas explained well?
   - Are the argument, objection, and assessment of the objection explicit and easy to follow?

3. **Is it logically organized?**
   - Is it easy to tell what the line of argument is at each point in the paper? (For example: when is an objection being presented, and when is the argument is being defended from that objection?)
   - Is it clear how the parts of the paper fit together?

4. **Does it show understanding of the relevant reading and lectures?**
   - Are ideas correctly attributed to their authors?
   - If technical terms are used, are they used correctly?

5. **Is it well-argued?**
   - Is the argument presented in a way that makes it clear that it is valid?
   - Is the objection that is discussed interesting, important, and relevant?
   - Are good reasons given to think that the objection succeeds or fails, and the argument is sound or unsound?

Advice

- Read Jim Pryor’s guidelines for writing philosophy papers: [http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html](http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html)

- **Don’t try to write your paper the night before it’s due.** Writing clear, well-argued, logically organized philosophy doesn’t work that way. Write a detailed outline first. Write a complete draft early enough that you can think it over and take a fresh look later. Your second draft will probably need to be substantially changed from your first in its ideas and organization—not just spell-checked.

- **Be succinct.** To do all of the tasks required for this paper in just a few pages, you can’t waste any words on excursive introductions or meandering musings. Get right to the point.

- Don’t be afraid to think outside the box, but make sure your ideas are clearly and explicitly related to the argument you’re discussing.

- Some of our readings are written as dialogues. **Don’t write your paper in the form of a dialogue.** This is a very difficult form of philosophical writing to do well.

- Come to my office hours to discuss your ideas. Better yet, email me ahead of time ([jeff.russell@usc.edu](mailto:jeff.russell@usc.edu)) to let me know you’re coming in, so that I can plan extra time if I need to.