

Becky Clay
Dr. Doug Deaver
4-14-09
PHIL112

Philosophy of Religion

When discussing the philosophy of religion, it is important to recognize the specific questions and topics that arise in each of the four branches of philosophy. They are not only different from the generic questions that arise from philosophy, but they bring light to problems concerning the nature of religion and how these questions can either be supported or abandoned with the belief in a God. Another issue concerning the philosophy of religion is simply defining the term religion. And while there are many definitions available, they may be either too narrow or too ambiguous to really do justice to the term.

To start, the philosophy of religion is defined as a rational investigation into the nature of religion. It addresses the enduring questions of “Is there a God?,” and if so, “What is he like?,” and “What does that mean for us?” Although these questions are perennial, that does not mean that no progress has been made on them. There are several arguments for God that have been abandoned or refined over the years, with new arguments continuing to surface. So although the questions about God’s existence may be old, they are still far from incapable of producing a useful result.

Questions about the philosophy of religion can be classified into four main categories; epistemological, metaphysical, axiological, and logical. Epistemological questions cover issues concerning the relationship between religion and knowledge, axiological questions address issues related to religion and values, metaphysical questions address religion and reality, and logical questions address issues of religion and reason.

Five epistemological questions concerning the philosophy of religion include: 1) Does religion yield knowledge?, 2) What is enlightenment?, 3) Does religion give us truth?, 4) Does faith yield knowledge?, and 5) Can we know if God exists?

These epistemological questions differ from the traditional ones (such as what is knowledge and how does one acquire knowledge, etc.) in that they are specifically linked to religion. The questions are not broadly asking, “How do we obtain knowledge,” but rather specifically, “Is religion something that can provide knowledge?” Additionally, questions about enlightenment and the existence of God are more specific in that they question sources and types of knowledge rather than just knowledge itself.

Four metaphysical questions concerning the philosophy of religion include: 1) Does religion give insights into reality?, 2) Is there an afterlife?, 3) Is the concept of hell consistent with a loving God?, 4) Do we reincarnate?

These metaphysical questions are asking about specific religious characteristics of reality rather than general questions such as “Does reality exist,” or “What does it mean to exist?” Not only do the questions with religious reference probe about reality, but they also inquire about whether or not religious teachings can help answer these questions. Even more specifically, these questions also investigate religious realities such as afterlife, hell, and reincarnation.

Four axiological questions that are specific to the philosophy of religion are 1) Should religion determine values?, 2) Must morality be grounded in God?, 3) If God wills a thing, must it be right?, and 4) Are we taught morality?

These questions differ from the general axiological questions in that they aren't just asking what value is, but rather if values are capable of originating from religion. Typical axiological questions include "What is value?" and "Does value exist?," which are more questions of the definition of value, not questions of how religion can provide values to us.

If general questions of axiology were to be asked, one could start dissecting the meaning into 3 parts: the worth of something, the goodness of something and the importance of something. Another way would be to evaluate the existence of values and then if they do exist, are they objective? But when discussing axiological issues in a religious way, there is more specificity involved. We no longer are asking if they exist, but we are presupposing they do exist and asking what their origin is. For example, rather than asking "Does morality exist?," we would ask more specifically "Must morality be grounded in God?"

Lastly, a logical question concerning the philosophy of religion is to ask, "Is religious belief rational?" Generic logical questions are ones that ask, "What is reasoning?" and "Is reasoning innate or learned?" The difference is that the first question is asking specifically if religious belief is rational, and not just asking about reason in general.

Generally, logical questions about philosophy cover issues concerning the components of reasoning (premises, inferences, and conclusions), and also whether it is good or bad to be rational. But when approaching these issues with religious intent, they are narrowed to be more questions of "Is religious belief rational?," rather than broad questions of what reasoning is. When asking from a religious approach, we presuppose the general question that reasoning does in fact exist, and proceed to ask if it is rational to believe in a God.

In addition to the specific questions raised by religiously approaching the four branches of philosophy, there are also many problems encountered when trying just to define the word religion. Commonly, religion is referred to as "the belief in and the worship of a superhuman controlling power, usually a personal God or gods." But this definition is narrow and excludes many other religions, including the atheistic ones.

Another definition commonly used to define religion is "'worldview.'" However, this falls on the other side of the spectrum in that it is often too vague a definition, leaving its door open for any worldview qualifying as a religion. As with any other word, if a definition is too ambiguous, it suggests that almost any and everything has the capability of being categorized beneath it, which inevitably depreciates the very meaning of the word we are trying to define.

Perhaps the most accurate term that can be used to define religion is "myth," meaning a study or set of stories used to explain some characteristic of human nature, the human condition, or the history of the cosmos. Contrary to its negative connotation, a myth by definition does not in any way imply that the stories have to be false. Examples of widely accepted mythical stories today reside in the bible and include the story of

creation, the Garden of Eden, Noah's Ark, and so forth. Although these are mythical stories, they are widely accepted by the believers of the Abrahamic God today.

While discussing common questions and topics concerning the philosophy of religion are important, it is equally important to evaluate general questions of philosophy. As we have seen, the religious questions deal with very similar generic questions of philosophy, just with a more specific intention – to rationally investigate the nature of religion. In order to be capable of rationally investigating the nature of religion, we must first start with the most accurate definition of the word religion so we can stay as consistent as possible when discussing these issues.