

On God's Existence

The Proponent (P): I think I can offer you an argument for the existence of God.

The Opponent (O): Do you believe, contrary to what Immanuel Kant says in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, that God's existence is within the limits of human knowledge?

P: My belief with respect to that matter is not relevant now, since the conclusion of my argument does not state the existence of God as a fact.

O: What does it state, then?

P: Well, it does state that any person who rationally believes that moral excellence and spiritual completion can be achieved not only by chance should believe that God exists.

O: Why would anyone believe that moral excellence and spiritual completion can be achieved not only by chance?

P: My argument cannot convince anyone who does not believe that we, as humans, should aim for moral excellence and spiritual completion.

O: Let us suppose that I agree with you on this. Still, why should I believe that moral excellence and spiritual completion can be achieved not only by chance?

P: If you would believe that something can be achieved only by chance, would you put any effort into achieving it?

O: Why not?

P: If something can be achieved only by chance, then it is not in your power to achieve it. In addition, it would be unreasonable to try to achieve something if it is not in your power to achieve it.

O: I see.

P: Also, if you do not rationally believe that you can achieve something, how can you aim at that particular thing?

O: You cannot, indeed. So you are saying that anyone who aims for moral excellence and spiritual completion should rationally believe that both can be achieved not only by chance.

P: Yes, this is what I am saying.

O: And if your argument is right, then it would show that anyone who aims for moral excellence and spiritual completion should believe that God exists.

P: Right.

O: All right. Let me hear your argument, then.

P: The conclusion of my argument rests on three premises:

(1-0) You cannot achieve moral excellence without believing that it is possible for you to be responsible for moral mistakes which you should never forgive yourself for.

(2-0) You cannot achieve spiritual completion if you are responsible for a mistake which you should never forgive yourself for.

(3-0) Only God can release you from the responsibility of a moral mistake which you should never forgive yourself for.

O: Each of your premises seems disputable.

P: I agree, and I will try to argue for each of them in turn.

O: Before that, however, I am not convinced that your conclusion follows from your premises.

P: Please tell me why!

O: To use an analogy, I could rationally believe it is possible for me to get married and live a happy life, even if, for whatever reasons, I could not get married without believing that it is possible to never meet the appropriate person and meeting the appropriate person for marriage would be a necessary condition for me living a happy life.

P: Your analogy suggests that moral excellence leads to spiritual completion, but I did not say so. One should be able to make moral excellence the aim of his or her life without seeing it as a means for achieving spiritual completion.

O: My analogy only suggests that moral excellence is *necessary* for spiritual completion. Do you reject this idea too?

P: I do not want to say that a person who does not care about moral matters would be in principle unable to achieve spiritual completion. So I would say that your analogy is also wrong in this respect.

O: Even so, an analogy does not have to be right in an irrelevant respect.

P: I am not sure that I understand.

O: The point of my analogy is to show that I can rationally aim for two different things, say, A and B, even if A can be achieved only if I believe that C is possible and C prevents the achievement of B. The relation between A and B is an irrelevant aspect of such an analogy.

P: I see now, and I think you are right. Nevertheless, I think your analogy still leaves out an important aspect of my argument.

O: Could you, please, explain this to me?

P: Sure. You say that one could believe the following:

(a) It is possible for me to get married and live a happy life.

(b) I cannot get married if I do not believe it possible to never meet the appropriate person for marriage.

(c) I cannot live a happy life if I never meet the appropriate person for marriage.

Also, if one accepts (b) and wishes to get married, then it seems reasonable to assume that he or she also believes:

(d) It is possible for me to never meet the appropriate person for marriage.

If this is the case, then that person believes that he or she can meet the appropriate person for marriage by chance. My argument, however, was addressed to people believing that moral excellence and spiritual completion can be achieved *not only by chance*. This is the important aspect I was talking about.

O: I understand, but I have an objection. While believing (d), the person in case might also believe that it is in her power to prevent the realization of a possibility. Setting aside the analogy, I think I could accept the first two premises of you argument and still believe that I can achieve both moral excellence and spiritual completion not only by chance, because I think it is in my power to avoid making a moral mistake which I should never forgive myself for.

P: I will concede this, for now, but I still think I can give enough support to my argument in a slightly modified form. For this, instead of talking about moral mistakes which one should never forgive oneself for, let me speak of *unpreventable* moral mistakes which one should never forgive oneself for. I will call these Unpreventable and Unforgivable Moral Mistakes – UUMMs, for short – and restate my premises accordingly:

- (1) You cannot achieve moral excellence without believing that it is possible for you to be responsible for UUMMs.
- (2) You cannot achieve spiritual completion if you are responsible for an UUMM.
- (3) Only God can release you from the responsibility of an UUMM.

O: I can also concede that if your premises are true, then it follows from them that if one rationally believes that moral excellence and spiritual completion can be achieved not only by chance, then that person should believe that God exists. Nevertheless, in its actual form, your first premise seems obviously false.

P: I suppose you believe so because it seems impossible for you that one should be responsible for an unpreventable mistake.

O: Indeed.

P: Can I be responsible for loosing a game of chess?

O: Yes, of course.

P: Suppose I am not very good at chess, but I play chess against a grandmaster and loose the game. Would you say that the loss of the game is not my responsibility?

O: I would not say such a thing.

P: You would say it was my responsibility, even if it was not in my power to win?

O: Yes, but it was in principle possible for you to win, although not in practice, and you could have chosen not to play against a grandmaster.

P: I did not say that UUMMs were in principle unavoidable. In addition, one could chose to have no interaction with other people, or even to ignore all moral matters and never describe his or her own actions in moral terms. What I am saying is only that you cannot do so if you aim for moral excellence. In a similar way, it could be said that one cannot learn to be a good chess player without playing against stronger players and loosing some games.

O: I still do not see why should I never forgive myself for a mistake if it was not in my power to prevent making it.

P: I will not say that one should never forgive oneself for loosing a game of chess against a sensibly stronger player. When it comes to moral mistakes, however, some of them seem to be such that they should never be forgiven by the person responsible for them.

O: Could you give me some examples?

P: I think people speak of homicide, torture, mutilation, extreme humiliation and other kinds of actions which lead to a definitive loss of a person's self-esteem, identity, physical or cognitive abilities as unforgivable. Since I take moral excellence and spiritual completion to be among the most valuable aims of a human life, I would say that at least any mistake the foreseeable outcome of which is an irreversible loss of another person's ability to achieve moral excellence or spiritual completion should never be forgiven by the one responsible for it.

O: Why not?

P: Well, because it seems to be morally wrong to forgive yourself for a mistake as long as the harm produced by that mistake was not remediated and the harm done by an UUMM can never be remediated.

O: I see. However, I think I could still believe that I cannot knowingly make a UUMM. Would you say, perhaps, that I must consider the possibility to face moral dilemmas like the one illustrated by the trolley problem?

P: If you think of moral dilemmas like being in principle insoluble, then I would disagree, since that would mean that we cannot achieve moral excellence. If you think of moral dilemmas as actual cases in which it is difficult to choose the right behavior, although the right choice is available and can be known, then my answer would be affirmative. In addition, I could speak of all the cases in which the outcome of an agent's behavior could be predicted by that agent but is not successfully predicted by him or her. Also, perhaps other cases could be added to this list if we consider that the lack or insufficient training of some moral virtues might lead to UUMMs.

O: You seem to believe that in order to achieve moral excellence we have to undergo some sort of moral training, during which the worst mistakes are possible.

P: You do not think my belief is reasonable?

O: I think it is a fair belief and I would also accept that one cannot improve oneself in any matter without recognizing his or her own mistakes and that in order to be able to recognize your mistakes you must believe they are possible. However, I am not ready yet to accept that among the worst mistakes which I could make there are some such that I should never forgive myself for making them. You argued that I should, because I could not correct their effects, but I think I could still hope to compensate for them in some way. Why should I believe that although I could make very big mistakes, I could not offer equally big compensations?¹

P: Compensations might have a value from an impersonal point of view. I hope you have noticed that I have never spoken of mistakes so big that one should never be forgiven for making them. In this respect, I even sympathize with the Christian idea that one should try to forgive anyone who has harmed him or her, no matter how bad, even if no compensations are provided. What I was saying was that it would be morally wrong for *me* to forgive *my own mistakes*, if their predictable outcome has made another person forever unable to pursue moral excellence or spiritual completion, the same rule being applicable to anyone else's case. I think the existence of such an irreversible outcome makes it my obligation to never allow myself to forgive what I have done and renders all compensations irrelevant.

O: In this case, your moral attitude is not very productive, since it gives you no motivation to try to compensate for your moral mistakes.

P: It does not give me a psychological motivation, indeed, but I do believe that we have the moral duty to try to compensate for any harm we produce, even if we cannot correct it.

O: I see. Now, I have one last objection.

P: I would like to hear it.

O: If your premise (1) were true, then anyone aiming for moral excellence would be learning to play an extremely dangerous game. It would be, if you forgive my comparison, as if we would learn to operate a nuclear plant, knowing that at any time during our education we could make a fatal mistake and erase an entire city from existence. Were that the case, not many people would be willing to improve themselves morally and maybe even the duty to improve yourself morally would be disputable. You, however, seem to think that everyone should aim for moral excellence. In other

¹ This objection was suggested to me by Adrian-Paul Iliescu.

words, there seems to be a tension between this last idea and your premise (1).

P: The danger you are speaking about is, in fact, the danger of having the obligation to refrain from forgiving yourself for some of the moral mistakes you could do while improving yourself morally, is it not?

O: Yes, but according to your second premise this is also the danger of not being able to achieve spiritual completion, if I understood you correctly.

P: You did. Nevertheless, if you remember well, I only said that my argument would mean nothing to someone who does not believe that we, as humans, should aim at moral excellence. I did not try to justify this idea and I happen to think that trying to present it as expressing a moral duty would be circular.

O: You are right, indeed.

P: Can I consider, then, that we have reached an agreement on the first premise of my argument and continue with presenting you my reasons for accepting the second premise?

O: Your second premise seems less controversial to me than your first, but I would still like to hear your arguments for it.

P: Please tell me, then, do you believe that a person can achieve spiritual completion and still lack inner peace?

O: I am not sure that I fully understand what you mean by 'spiritual completion'. Could you perhaps offer a definition?

P: Well, I do not want to put you off by using vague terms, but I do not think it is necessary for us to agree on a definition of spiritual completion in order to make (2) acceptable. So please, try to answer my question!

O: I will say, then, that it seems to me that a person who has achieved spiritual completion should be at peace with herself.

P: This is what I also believe. Now, does it seem to you that you could be at peace with yourself if you should never forgive yourself for some UUMM?

O: I am not sure. Perhaps I could acknowledge that I should never forgive myself for some UUMM and still be untroubled by this.

P: You could, of course, acknowledge that you have a moral obligation and ignore to fulfill it, but then you would have abandoned the attempt to achieve moral excellence. Otherwise, I do not see how could you acknowledge that you should never forgive yourself for an UUMM and do nothing about it.

O: I will do something about it, then, but how would that prevent me from being at peace with myself?

P: Let us see what you can do about it, first. On one had, you could try to refrain from forgiving yourself for an UUMM and fail. However, a person who does not succeed to do what she set herself to do cannot be at peace. On the other hand, if the person succeeds in not forgiving herself for an UUMM, she has to feel some remorse for that UUMM, since remorse is a necessary condition for not forgiving yourself for something. Inner peace and remorse are, nevertheless, incompatible.

O: Why is remorse a necessary condition for not forgiving yourself for something? Suppose I have a state of mind different from remorse which I express by saying that I know I still do not forgive myself for M, where M is some UUMM I made in the past. Since I could not *know* I still do not

forgive myself for M without it being true that I still do not forgive myself for M, this should be sufficient.

P: I cannot accept the existence of any state of mind expressible by 'I know that p ', precisely because having such a state would automatically make p true.

O: Yes, I see, but I still think I can ask you for a reason for making remorse a necessary condition for not forgiving yourself for something.

P: Then let us think of a person saying 'I still do not forgive myself for M'. The person in case performs a speech act, which cannot be successful if the person does not feel remorse for M.

O: Why is it so? After all, I can promise something without having the intention to keep my promise. My speech act, in such a case, would be perhaps defective, but I will succeed in making it.

P: You are right if you speak about making promises to other persons, but I cannot make a promise to myself without having the intention to keep it.

O: This is a curious thing. Why should something which is not a necessary condition for performing a speech act directed towards another person become a necessary condition for performing the same speech act directed towards myself?

P: You are asking an interesting question, but if you accept the fact I am stating, then an explanation is not needed for my argument.

O: I accept it, indeed.

P: So, would you say now that I have offered you a convincing support for my second premise?

O: Yes, and I think we can move on to your third premise, but not right away. If I accept the first two premises of your argument, it seems to me that I already have a conclusion at hand – moral excellence and spiritual completion are incompatible. Why should I not accept this conclusion instead and forget about your third premise?

P: You could do that, of course, but then you would exclude yourself from the audience of my argument, since if you believe moral excellence and spiritual completion are incompatible, you cannot rationally believe that both can be achieved anymore.

O: You are right. For a moment I forgot the conclusion of your argument, namely that if one rationally believes that moral excellence and spiritual completion can be achieved not only by chance, then that person should believe that God exists. Still, how can I hold the belief that moral excellence and spiritual completion can be achieved if the first two premises of your argument render them incompatible?

P: They are incompatible, according to my argument, only if there is no way in which one could overcome the state of not forgiving herself or himself for an UUMM.

O: Your use of an acronym might conceal the fact that we are speaking of *unforgivable* mistakes here. How could something unforgivable be forgiven?

P: If something should never be forgiven, then of course I cannot simply forgive it. If I have the duty to never forgive myself for an UUMM, in other words, then I cannot forgive myself. Nevertheless, if my duty is somehow removed, then I can overcome the state of not forgiving myself.

O: Yes, but on your view, not even the forgiveness of the person you have harmed can remove your duty to never forgive yourself for your mistake.

P: Indeed, and I would also add that no natural event can remove a moral obligation.

O: What do you mean?

P: Let me give you an example. Let us suppose that parents have to protect their children no matter what. If a parent gets poor, sick or suffers amnesia, the obligation does not disappear, right?

O: Right, but what if the parent dies?

P: A dead parent might not be able to protect his or her children anymore, but it is still true that the parent must protect the children.

O: Yes, the moral rule that parents must protect their children does not disappear, but if the person who has the obligation ceases to exist, then his or her obligation also ceases to exist.

P: A body could stop functioning. This is a natural event. A person ceasing to exist seems to be a different thing. I do not understand very well what does it mean, but I do not believe that this is reducible to some natural event.

O: What is the base for your skepticism?

P: Allow me to avoid your question, for now, and put aside my claim that no natural event can remove a moral obligation. In return, I will accept that if a person's end is reducible to a natural event, then that person's moral obligations can be removed by a natural event. However, since in order to achieve spiritual completion you have to exist, it is of no use for our discussion that a person's duty to never forgive himself or herself can be removed by a natural event which puts an end to that person's existence.

O: Since you did not define spiritual completion, how can you be so sure that one has to exist in order to achieve it?

P: We have been talking about spiritual completion as something a person could achieve. By 'a person' I mean an existent person, of course. Thus, we understood spiritual completion as something which cannot be achieved while not existing. Do you not agree?

O: I do now.

P: Let me return, then, to your previous question: "How could something unforgivable be forgiven?". My answer was that it could if the duty to never forgive yourself for an UUMM could be somehow removed. At this point, we seem to have agreed that a person cannot release herself from such an obligation and no other human being can release someone from this particular obligation. We have also seen that even if the end of someone's existence could make the obligation disappear, it would also make spiritual completion unachievable, so we should not take it into account.

O: We do not seem to be left with anything.

P: What if someone could absolve me from the responsibility of an UUMM? Were I no longer responsible for my mistake, I would also have no duty to never forgive myself for doing it.

O: True, but you have just said that no one can do such a thing.

P: No human being can do such a thing, but since I have to believe that it could be done, I must believe that a person different from any human being could do it.

O: I would like to understand how can you believe that without knowing that such a person exists. In fact, I have waited for this moment to ask you about the way you use the word 'God' in your third premise. How can you say anything about God without assuming that God exists?

P: Well, suppose we read a book and do not know whether a character mentioned in it is fictional or not. Some of the other characters mentioned in the book prove to be nonfictional, but with respect to this particular one we have no information. This does not mean that we cannot talk about the character in case. In the same way, by 'God', in my third premise, I mean something like 'the fictional or nonfictional character of a person who is responsible for the existence of the world, has complete knowledge, full power to act and perfect moral authority'. Also, when I talk about a person who could absolve me from the responsibility of an UUMM, I do not say that I know such a person to exist, but only that I must believe that such a person exists, since otherwise moral excellence and spiritual completion could not be achieved.

O: I have nothing against talking about characters who could be fictional or nonfictional. Such characters, according to you, are: God, a person with perfect moral authority and a person who could absolve you from the responsibility of an UUMM. Still, you have to show me: (a) how could a person with perfect moral authority be the person to absolve you from the responsibility of an UUMM; (b) that only a person with perfect moral authority could be the one to absolve you from the responsibility of an UUMM; (c) that a person cannot have perfect moral authority without being God; (d) that the only person with perfect moral authority is God.

P: Let me try to solve each of the problems you have risen in turn. First, I will start with the case of a parent forgiving a child for a mistake. I think the parent can forgive the child because she or he has greater moral authority than the child. Generally speaking, if M is a moral mistake and a person A performs the speech act "I forgive you for M" to a person B, the act in case can be successful only if A has greater moral authority than B. From this it would follow that if a person has perfect moral authority, then that person can successfully perform speech acts of the kind mentioned for any moral mistakes, UUMMs included. On the other hand, if we speak of UUMMs, I cannot conceive a situation in which a person with less than perfect moral authority could be successful in performing a speech act like "I forgive you for this UUMM" to me. This should answer to (a) and (b).

O: I see, but why do you believe that you could be absolved of the responsibility of an UUMM only through a speech act expressing forgiveness?

P: I do not. However, any similar speech acts that I can think of have a similar requirement, namely that the person performing one of them to release someone else from the responsibility of a moral mistake must have greater moral authority than the addressee of the speech act. By analogy, one cannot release someone from a job related duty if she or he does not have a greater deontic authority in job related matters than the other person.

O: I think this answer will do, for now. Please show me how do you get from "Only a person with perfect moral authority can absolve me from the responsibility of an UUMM" to "Only God can absolve from the responsibility of an UUMM"!

P: My ideas are not very clear on this point, but I believe that in order to have perfect moral authority one must be able to release any person of moral responsibility for any action. For this, one has to be able to assume responsibility for any action, in a way similar, perhaps, to the way in which a parent assumes responsibility for the actions of her child. Since anything that happens in the world and even the existence of the world itself can be regarded as the effect of some action, a person with perfect moral authority has to be able to assume responsibility for anything happening in the world and even for the existence of the world itself. Also, since no responsibility can be assumed without knowledge, perfect moral authority seems to require complete knowledge. Thus, since one must have all the characteristics I have used to describe God in order to have perfect moral authority, it follows that only God can have perfect moral authority.

O: I see, but it could be the case that more than a single person can satisfy your description for God,

could it not? I will not enter in the details of your attempt to deduce divine attributes from perfect moral authority, but ask you this instead. Suppose you had a way to recognize perfect moral authority. Why do you believe that you could not recognize it in two different persons? Both would be authors, in a sense, of all moral responsibility, both could assume shared responsibility for anything ever done or anything that ever happened, both would have complete knowledge and so on. Why not say that each of them is God, in this case? After all, both would be able to absolve you of the responsibility for UUMMs, thus making it possible for you to play the risky game of moral excellence without losing your chance to achieve spiritual completion.

P: My argument does not prove the uniqueness of God. It only shows that in order to aim for moral excellence and spiritual completion one has to believe that God exists. The simplest way in which I could think of God is expressed by the thought that God is a single person. One could think of God as being two, three or more persons, of course. The purpose of my argument, however, was not to prevent such thoughts, but only to offer rational support to the thought that God exists.

O: Yes, I see. I think I have understood your argument now. May I address you one final objection?

P: Of course you may!

O: Well, if God does exist, then your argument is not a very good one.

P: Why is that?

O: You do not think that God is a bad person, do you?

P: I do not, indeed.

O: But only a bad person could be the author of a world in which one human being could make it impossible for another human being to achieve moral excellence or spiritual completion. So, if God does in fact exist, then your Unpreventable and Unforgivable Moral Mistakes are not possible. Thus, moral excellence and spiritual completion could be achieved not only by chance and without the need for God to intervene.

P: You do not need to say more. I find your objection very interesting. Nevertheless, my reply would be that even if I accept it entirely, your objection only shows that my argument can also be regarded as a *reductio ad absurdum*. Namely, the argument proves that it would be impossible for a person who does not believe that God exists to rationally believe that moral excellence and spiritual completion can both be achieved. My argument might be unusable for convincing a person who already believes in God's existence that she or he holds a rational belief, but, one more time, this was not my purpose to begin with.

O: So you did not try to argue that the belief in God's existence is reasonable, but only that the belief that God does not exist is not reasonable.

P: Not reasonable, indeed, for a person aiming for moral excellence and spiritual completion.

O: I see. Thank you for this discussion. I will accept your argument, but only if you agree to answer to any objections which could come to my mind at a later time.

P: Of course I agree and I will try to answer, if I can.

[G. Stefanov, 9.11.2011]