

God? A Debate Between a Christian and an Atheist

William Lane Craig & Waler Sinnott-Armstrong

The issue of God's existence is an important topic in today's American cultural.

The book, *God? A Debate Between a Christian and an Atheist* is very intriguing

and interesting. I enjoy reading, as well as listening, to debates on issues of

religion. I find it very interesting in reading the two scholars, William Lane Craig

and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, present their point of views on the existence of

God. I see that there were four major arguments on the existence of God

presented in this debate, the cosmological argument, teleological argument,

existence of objective moral values argument, and the problem of evil argument.

There are other arguments that both Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong bring to the

table but I feel what I have listed are the major arguments presented. The

problem of evil is something that Sinnott-Armstrong initially presents and then

chooses to focus on. Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong go back and forth on the

argument of the problem of evil for most of the second half of the debate.

Sinnott-Armstrong takes a strong rationality in the view that God does not exist

and Craig takes a weak rationality in his presentation showing that there are

"good reasons to think God does exist" (page 3).

One of the major arguments that were first presented by Craig was the

teleological argument. This argument states that the fine-tuning of the universe

is due to law, chance, or design. Craig unpacks this argument in the first chapter

by initially stating, "...we now know that our existence is balanced on a knife's

edge. It seems vastly more probable that a life prohibiting universe rather than a life permitting universe like ours should exist” (page 9). Craig then goes on to state that the fine-tuning of the universe is not due to just chance. He further proves this point by stating how, “the existence of intelligent life depends upon a conspiracy of initial conditions that must be fine-tuned to a degree that is literally incomprehensible and incalculable” (page 9). Craig gives examples from different physicists stating how if certain things like the Big Bang or the strength of gravity were off by only a very little fraction then life would not be permitted. Therefore, Craig’s hypothesis is that there exists a “Cosmic Designer who fine-tuned the initial conditions of the universe for intelligent life” (page.16).

This also shows that if the fine-tuning of the universe can be proven by law then it would naturally lead to a designer who order those laws.

However, Sinnott-Armstrong of course disagrees with Craig on the teleological argument. Sinnott-Armstrong believes that God is not the best explanation of the fine-tuning of the universe. He first states that Craig’s presentation of incalculable possibilities is not reliable because the calculations could never be calculated and has no justification in the argument. He believes that the numbers are simply too big and are incomprehensible. Sinnott-Armstrong also states that the improbable chance of intelligent life is not enough to rule out chance. Sinnott-Armstrong would not rule out the theology of luck and that could have been how the universe was able to sustain life. He backs this up with examples of someone winning the lottery and how there is no reason that God

would interfere with that. Sinnott-Armstrong stays on the luck theology when talking about the Many Worlds Hypothesis by also stating that out of all the universes that came out of the Big Bang “it becomes probable that as least one contains intelligent life (page 49).

Another major argument that is presented is the objective moral values argument. Craig states, “If God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist” (page 17). Craig makes a point to state that the question is not can we live moral lives without God but rather can objective moral values exist without God? Craig states, “After all, if there is no God, then what’s so special about human beings? They’re just accidental by-products of nature...” (page 18). However, Craig shows how objective moral values do exist and therefore God exists.

Sinnott-Armstrong on the other hand believes that God has no part in objective moral values. He believes, “Morality in the philosophical sense can be objective, even if people’s beliefs about it are subjective” (page 33). Sinnott-Armstrong shows how objective moral values can be discovered by biological and cultural means and not by some supernatural being who instates the objective moral values. However, Sinnott-Armstrong still holds on to something of “just knowing” that things are wrong when he states, What’s immoral about causing serious harms to other people without justification? But now it seems natural to answer, ‘It simple is. Objectively. Don’t you agree” (page 34)?

The next argument that I feel is a major theme in this debate is the cosmological argument. This argument is stating that whatever begins to exist has a cause, the universe began to exist, therefore the universe has a cause. Because of this Craig believes that “God makes sense of the origin of the universe” (page 56). Craig goes on further to present his case for a designer of the universe by stating that a supernatural cause of the universe “must be an uncaused, changeless, timeless, and immaterial being...” (page 5). A being that is outside of all that is created could only create those things mentioned above as Craig presents. He also states that this being must be personal because this being “freely chooses to create without any prior determining conditions” (page 6).

Sinnott-Armstrong response to Craig’s statement on the cosmological argument is that it is contrary to standard quantum theory. He brings up the point that if we do not know what it is or how to label it exactly that started the universe then the statement, “nothing comes from nothing creates no trouble...” (page 44).

Sinnott-Armstrong is also hung up on the whole concept of how a timeless being who created the universe can ever enter into time at the moment of creation. He believes this is incoherent and discredits this being to be personal as well.

Finally, one of the major arguments that I feel is the pinnacle of this debate is the argument of the problem of evil. Sinnott-Armstrong initiates this argument by first defining the Christian God as to be all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing, eternal,

effective, and personal. Sinnott-Armstrong then goes on to show, by examples of suffering and evil acts that happen in this world, that God, by Christian definition, should not allowed those evil acts to occur because it is contrary to who God is. However, Sinnott-Armstrong does state, “that evil is logically necessary for an adequately compensating good” (page 85). But he does not believe that much of that evil is “logically necessary for any adequately compensating good” (page 85) and therefore proves there is no God who is all-good and all-powerful.

Craig then rebuts Sinnott-Armstrong and states, “We are not in good position to assess with confidence the probability that God lacks morally sufficient reasons for permitting the suffering in the world” (page 116). Craig focuses on how we, as humans, cannot know every outcome of events whether good or bad. Also, Craig shows that we cannot think emotionally only when dealing with the problem of evil or even think that God exists only for the happiness of human life. Craig states, “God’s ultimate goal for humanity is the knowledge of himself...” (page 120) and if suffering brings a person closer to God then that is means for one’s true happiness, because Craig also states that the knowledge of God “alone can bring eternal happiness...” (page 120).

Again, the argument of the problem of evil is the pinnacle to this debate between Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong. Sinnott-Armstrong really focuses on, if the Christian God is defined as all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing and so on then

why would he allow such evil things happen in our world since He could prevent it from happening. And Sinnott-Armstrong also feels that there are not much adequate reasons for evil and suffering. He even goes as far as saying God is unfair in allowing such evil in this world. I feel that Sinnott-Armstrong is going on feelings too much. He seems to believe that life has to be always a beautiful bliss and evil should never have a part in life if God is involved. But Sinnott-Armstrong even admits that there are some “evils” or “suffering” that brings good things to a person but he only focuses on those “evils” that he can sort out for himself. Those “evils” that he cannot explain to bring some good are for him convincing hard proofs that an all-good God does not exist. I understand Sinnott-Armstrong’s responses to be shaping God into what he wants and not looking outside of himself. However, that is Sinnott-Armstrong Atheistic viewpoint; all about self and nothing outside of self. He even seems to be shouting to God saying, “God reveal yourself and tell me why you allow suffering,” which to me seems to be shallow thinking.

In response Craig really shows how that suffering has more value then what we experience at the time of suffering. And Craig breaks it down into a practical way for the Atheist stating, “Everyone of us can think back on experiences of suffering or hardship in our lives, which at the time seemed pointless and unnecessary but, when viewed in retrospect, are seen to have been ultimately to our or others’ advantage, even if we would not want to go through them again” (page 114). I think Craig’s response about why God doesn’t show us all the time

why a particular evil happens was very pertinent. He stated, "If God were to reveal to us why he permitted us to suffer some particular evil, then our having that knowledge might lead to the frustration of God's purpose" (page 119). This means that if we knew the outcome then the intended outcome might not happen but this demand for knowledge is logically impossible for it would lead to self-stultifying situations as Craig states (page 119). Again in the final chapter of the debate Sinnott-Armstrong states, "Atheists need to claim only that there is no adequate compensation for some cases of evil or harm. In response, theist cannot simply point to some small compensation. They need to argue that the compensation is adequate, which means that it must be not only important enough but also fair" (page 138). Sinnott-Armstrong is making a judgment call on what is fair and not fair and what is adequate or not. I feel that has no basis. How can we judge on our own what is fair or not in light of evil and suffering. Sinnott-Armstrong judgment call has no authority to make such a claim. I feel that demand is wholly unreasonable.

Even though I did not have a great understanding on every argument that was presented I still thought the dialogue between the two scholars was dynamic and very informative. The dialogue about the problem of evil was fascinating to me and I feel that Craig's arguments was much more convincing than Sinnott-Armstrong. I think that if Sinnott-Armstrong would not have focused on outcomes to life for an emotional purposes and more on the knowledge that outcomes in life are more for a logical purpose then I would have been more

convinced of his arguments about the problem of evil. I really felt that Sinnott-Armstrong's down fall was his irrational statements of saying how God is unfair and his general statement that much of "evil is not logically necessary" (page 139). I feel Craig's downfall was when he presented the proof claims of how God makes sense of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This seemed out of place for Craig to present in this debate. I understand that he wanted to communicate the significance of Jesus Christ in the Christian faith but in this debate of proving the existence of God it was out of place. I really did enjoy reading this debate. I have watched and listened to William Lane Craig before debate other atheists but this debate has been the best one that has shown great arguments and intelligent support for each side of the arguments