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The Epistemic Presumption in the Question of God's Existence

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Abstract

Evidentialism posits that the epistemic value of propositions lies in their evidence. However, alternative approaches, independent of evidential support, have emerged to maintain validity when competing viewpoints falter. This phenomenon, often termed "epistemic presumption," serves as both a procedural starting point and occasionally holds substantive truth-value. In discussions surrounding the existence of God, differing presumptions—whether theism, atheism, or non-belief—are contentious. Theists and atheists assert positive claims necessitating evidence, while agnostics posit that both positions lack support, contingent upon evidence provision. Thus, the burden of proof rests upon all three perspectives.

Keywords: Burden of Proof, Epistemic Presumption, Agnosticism, Negative Atheism.

Introduction

In debates concerning the existence of God, there exists a notion of adopting a particular proposition as a presumption. This presumption suggests that in the absence of evidence to the contrary, it is epistemically justified to adhere to it. However, this presumption is sometimes viewed merely as a starting point, devoid of inherent truth-value, and its epistemological significance remains contingent upon the failure of competing approaches to provide rationale. Conversely, others regard this presumption as more substantive—an established foundation that is both justified and true. Unless an alternative approach can refute it, its truth-value is maintained. Both perspectives boast proponents, and this paper aims to scrutinize their respective arguments.

Research Findings

1. Belief in God is foundational and not deduced from other beliefs. Plantinga argues that the foundational nature of belief in God rests on the proper functioning of cognitive faculties, relieving the theist of the burden of proof. According to Plantinga, natural theology holds merit only in the presence of evidence against God's existence—a substantive presumption. Thus, adopting theism temporarily or as a premature hypothesis holds little value (Plantinga, 1979: 27). Wainwright contends that non-belief necessitates suppressing the innate religious inclination in humans. If reliance on natural faculties and instincts is deemed reasonable, the presumption tilts towards religious belief. Analogously, phenomena such as belief in the existence of other minds and the external world do not demand proof; the burden of proof does not lie with the claimant as they are prima facie accepted and intuitively reasonable to affirm (Wainwright, 2003: 81). However, this



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approach lacks compelling rationale and posits belief in God as beyond the agent's reach and independent of cognitive faculties—an assertion contrary to the ethics of belief.

2. Disbelief in God's existence serves as the presumption, with the burden of proof resting on the theist. Some argue that both theists and atheists acknowledge the existence of the physical world; however, atheists refrain from positing anything beyond this, while theists introduce a transcendent creator. Additionally, some view atheism as a prior and valid assumption based on three main reasons: its negative rather than affirmative assertions, its majority acceptance, and the perceived low probability of theism being true (Poidevin, 2010: 47-50). Scriven (1966: 103) and Hanson (1972: 323) contend that the absence of sufficient reasons for God's existence constitutes evidence for his nonexistence. However, this perspective is flawed. Asserting that the metaphysical structure of the world aligns solely with God's absence, and that only proponents of God's inclusion in metaphysics bear the burden of proof, necessitates compelling evidence and arguments. Furthermore, contrary to their assertions, no intrinsic difference exists between positive and negative statements, and personal inclinations do not determine presumption or the superiority of either side.

3. Nonbelief serves as the presumption, wherein no affirmative or negative claims are made regarding the existence of God. Flew asserts that the debate's outset involves a lack of conception and the suspension of judgment regarding God's existence or nonexistence, a stance he terms "negative atheism" (Flew, 1972: 32-38). Nielsen argues that, ethically, the preferable position is to remain entirely noncommittal until sufficient reasons for a specific commitment are presented (Nielsen, 1977: 147). Kenny contends that having a presumption regarding God's existence isn't particularly problematic, but neither theist nor atheist holds a superior position thereby (Kenny, 2009: 122).

4. No presumption exists. Amid confirmation, refutation, or suspension, there is no inherently epistemically superior starting point (be it procedural, substantive, or otherwise). Rational discussion methodology differs from that of judicial and legal courts, which operate on the presumption of innocence. Each position—confirmation or refutation—requires argumentation, with no return to a starting point. Failing to choose between the two, nonbelief emerges as a rational stance, yet it too necessitates epistemic support. All three positions assert positive claims while simultaneously seeking to refute one another, thus engaging in both negative and positive claims.

Conclusion

The question of what God is, and whether the concept is consistent or inconsistent, remains unanswered. Those engaging in this debate shoulder the responsibility of providing an answer. Similarly, the question of God's existence is as complex as the former, with no prior commitment required. All three approaches to the problem of God's existence stand on equal footing; the burden of proof rests on each. A nonbeliever does not hold a superior position unless they can substantiate their nonbelief with compelling reasons. Flew's notion of procedural presumption lacks value in scientific discourse. In weighty debates such as the one concerning God's existence, agnostics cannot simply dismiss existing arguments without evaluation.



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