ASSIGNMENT ONE

Write 5-6 pages on *one* of the following topics. If possible discuss a draft of your paper with Melissa Schumacher, the writing tutor. Papers are due on session 8. Things we will be looking for: engagement with the readings and materials covered in class; a clearly enunciated position; your reasons for taking that position; answers to likely criticisms; evidence of thinking the issues through for yourself.

1. The ontological argument attempts to prove the existence of God from our very concept of him. Explain how this is supposed to work, and then answer the following questions:

   (i)   Does the 'perfect island' objection show that there is something wrong with the general form of this argument, or is our concept of God importantly different?

   (ii)   Is there any plausibility to the idea that God couldn't exist?

   (iii) Is there in general something odd about definitions that include the concept of existence? Explain what any oddness consists in.

2. What, exactly, is the argument from evil meant to show? Formulate the argument in what you take to be its strongest form, making clear what the conclusion is. Consider these responses:

   (i)   this is the best of all possible worlds, that is, the best that God could bring about consistent with his other purposes;

   (ii)   there is no such thing as a best possible world, so God cannot be faulted for failing to bring it about.

Explain how these responses are supposed to work. Which do you think is the more effective, and why? Does it work?

3. How is Pascal's wager suppose to work. Explain the main steps in the argument, and then answer the following questions:

   (i)   Are the premises true? If not, which ones fail?

   (ii)   Is the argument valid? If not, why not?

   (iii) Pascal's wager is based on the idea that it is rational to do that which maximizes one's expected utility. Is this a good principle? Is it good in normal cases? Is it good when some of the values are infinite? (You might want to look at some of the examples that Dan presented in his lecture on paradoxes of decision.) Does you answer here affect the strength of Pascal's Wager (i.e could the argument be reformulated to avoid any problems)?

24.00 Problems in Philosophy
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