



How to Think About God: A Guide for the 20th-Century Pagan

Mortimer J. Adler

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Dr. Adler, in his discussion, extends and modernizes the argument for the existence of God developed by Aristotle and Aquinas. Without relying on faith, mysticism, or science (none of which, according to Dr. Adler, can prove or disprove the existence of God), he uses a rationalist argument to lead the reader to a point where he or she can see that the existence of God is not necessarily dependent upon a suspension of disbelief. Dr. Adler provides a nondogmatic exposition of the principles behind the belief that God, or some other supernatural cause, has to exist in some form. Through concise and lucid arguments, Dr. Adler shapes a highly emotional and often erratic conception of God into a credible and understandable concept for the lay person.

How to Think About God: A Guide for the 20th-Century Pagan Details

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From Reader Review How to Think About God: A Guide for the 20th-Century Pagan for online ebook

Karen Lee says

Harvard philosopher Mortimer Adler makes the case that belief in a God who caused the existence of the universe can be rational "for the 20th-century pagan". In this book, he adopts a truly philosophical approach to theology, as opposed to "natural theology" from antiquity, which too often contained implicit assumptions to be purely rational.

Adler takes his time to set the stage by eliminating possibilities of circular arguments, and by being very precise in his definition of the terminology used and statements to be proven. He improves upon the cosmological argument by presenting a generalized version that is rigorous. It may not be airtight, and even if you do not agree with his conclusions, you will know exactly which particular point you object to, because he is so clear and so meticulous, you may still find many other steps he makes to be very reasonable. One of the things that makes this account more compelling than previous "philosophical motivations for God" is perhaps the fact that he makes a sharp distinction between "the philosopher's God", his object of discussion here, and "the theologian's" God", instead of mixing them up like his predecessors did in most of their arguments. He makes very clear what the scope of his work is. For example, the problem of pain is not something that philosophy can discuss. Certain topics of theology are within reach only in the context of sacred theology, and makes no sense until/unless one makes the "leap of faith", which the author hopes to make easier with his work.

I appreciate having at my disposal the distillation of thoughts of a brilliant man who had contemplated on this issue for four decades before feeling confident of writing it down. I also found it intriguing that, although he was a sympathizer of the Christian faith, he was not a worshipper of a monotheistic God and did not officially accept it until twenty years after this work was produced, when he was more than eighty years of age!

Ted Gurley says

Complex, complete and insightful.

Keith Davis says

Adler was a conservative 20th century philosopher who wrote books about philosophy for the average reader which do not require graduate degrees in philosophy to follow. In this book he examines the various arguments for the existence of God and finds them wanting, but ultimately concludes that God exists, all the while admitting the philosophical arguments are not strong enough to prove it. He uses the term "20th century pagan" in the title to refer to the non-religious in general rather than to polytheists or nature worshipers as some might expect.

Isaac says

This book is distinctive among popular defences of theism, as it is written by a philosophical theist, not a religious theist. There are only a handful of books like this, so its worth reading on that basis alone. The strengths of this book are (1) it responds to critiques of natural theology, e.g. that of David Hume, and show their reputation is not well-deserved, (2) it clarifies the fundamental differences between monotheism and polytheism - a distinction that is often ignored by modern atheists, (3) it presents and defends a distinctive version of the cosmological argument.

Frank Cahill says

Thought provoking discussion of God's existing by one of the most well known philosophers of our time. It's an interesting discussion without the drudgery of many books on philosophy and logic. If you enjoy these subjects, then add this book to your list.

Roxanna zalesny says

As the subtitle suggests, this book is intended "for those who do not worship the God of the Christians, the Jews, or the Muslims"--people Adler calls Pagans. More specifically, Adler wants to reach the "open-minded pagans." Perhaps he should have simply stated that the book was for the open-minded AND the intellectually adept. If the "pagan" does not have a basic background in these arguments they will have to read the chapters very slowly in order not to get caught in the web of points, sub points, and counterpoints, not to mention the incessantly repeated points. He presents layers of "proof" for each premise he makes which makes it very hard to follow. He comes off as pompous when he loses patience for any reader who cannot understand his first "self-evident" philosophical truth; snobbish when he asserts, "very little can be done to remedy the deficient understanding on the part of the those who don't immediately see the truth of such propositions." His bottom line seems to be that since the universe is radically contingent there must be a "preservative cause." This sustainer/preserver must be separate from the universe and therefore, not contingent (i.e. supernatural). Since the contingent universe could not create itself, there must have been a supernatural cause that did. My bottom line: This was a wild goose chase where philosophical "what ifs" are mixed with court room antics in an attempt to argue that something unprovable is likely through twisting words and confusing terms. I did however learn the meaning of such words as "aseity," "raison d'etre," "ab alio." It's always good to learn new words.

Kenneth Hicks says

This book is exactly what the author says it is -- an attempt to prove the existence of God from a purely rationalistic point of view. In trying to accomplish this, he takes the reader on a short but very interesting tour of previous arguments for the existence of God by Aristotle, Anselm and Aquinas. To my mind, he was

extremely clear in pursuing an argument that was complex and dependent on many incremental steps. In the end, he readily admits the limits of what he has done. Proving to his satisfaction that God exists is a far cry from proving that God is of the type and has the characteristics that various religions have given to him. In any event, as I read I always felt that I was being lead by a very smart individual who honestly approaches big problems and tries to break them down in ways that make them understandable. When I finished this book, I went to the library and got out Mr. Adler's book on Aristotle.

Walter says

Mortimer Adler was a University of Chicago Professor of Philosophy and one of the founders of the Great Books Foundation. Jewish by background but not practicing any religion, Adler examined the classical philosophers, and especially St. Thomas Aquinas, to tackle the great questions, does God exist, and if so, what is He? In doing so, Adler approached the problem, not from the perspective of theology or science, but from pure rationalism. In doing so, Adler asks many profound and important questions that are important, not just for the 20th Century Pagan, but for all of us.

Many of us may find it silly to ask the question what is God. After all, many of us have mental images of God, images that I like to call the "cartoon God". Perhaps we see God as an old man in the clouds passing judgment on the earth. Perhaps our God is a divine Santa Claus who gives us stuff that we ask Him. Some theologians encourage us to think of God as our Mother. All of these are caricatures and limit our imaginations when it comes to God. Even Jesus' own teaching that we should address God as "Our Father" falls short in this respect. Although the image of God as Father is a wonderful portrayal of our relationship with God, the fact is that God is much more than any human father ever could be.

In this book, Adler encourages us to step out of our comfort zone and examine the philosophical concept of God. In order to do this, we must examine the nature of being itself. What gives reality its shape? When we consider the world around us, we see not just quantities of objects but qualities as well. We see beauty and recognize that some things are more beautiful than others. We see complexity and realize that some things are complex and others are simple. So what does perfect simplicity look like? What is the perfection of beauty? The Bible speaks of God in such superlative terms. When God introduced Himself to Moses at the burning bush, he referred to Himself as "I AM". This is not to say that God merely exists, but rather it means that God encompasses all existence, and that nothing exists without Him. Similarly, in the Prologue to St. John's gospel, Jesus is described as "The Word", not just because He has a name, but because He is the meaning behind all words, that without Him no word makes any sense at all. Finally, when the Pharisees addressed Jesus as "Good Teacher", Jesus asks them, "why do you call me good? There is nobody good except God." By this Jesus doesn't mean that there is no good in the universe but God, but rather that all goodness has God for its source, and that there is no good except from God.

If we consider that all things that are have a beginning and an end, then we must consider what is the origin of the cosmos. Now, many philosophies and scientists believe that the cosmos has no beginning. But if they do, then they must concede that Something gave shape to the world. This is one of the sticky points behind the Big Bang Theory. If you believe in the Big Bang Theory then you must believe that something caused the Big Bang. But what was it? What started the process of explosion and creation? It must be something that itself had no beginning. Furthermore, if you feel that the universe was created for a purpose, then that purpose must come from somewhere. It comes from a source beyond all purpose, a Primary Cause if you will. That is the thing that we call God.

Adler points out that it is very tricky to prove the existence of God, because since God is the Primary Purpose and Primary Cause, then any argument made from causality begs the questions about God's existence. In fact, I believe that it is impossible to prove the existence of God the way that you can prove that the squares of the two legs of a right triangle add up to the square of the hypotenuse. This is why faith is a virtue, and to receive it is a blessing. But it is possible to explore the possibility of God through rationalism alone. Adler does so in this book and gives the reader plenty to think about.

This is a very short and very easy to read book. Even if you have never taken a philosophy class in your life, you should understand Adler's arguments. I would highly recommend this book, not just for philosophers or for "pagans", but for believers as well.
