Is the concept of God coherent?

Intro: Despite challenges, the concept of God is coherent.

1. Define God, give Descartes/Anselm/Augustine’s definition and establish proposed attributes on the basis of these.
2. Paradox of the stone
3. Solved by arguing question is incoherent as ‘stone so heavy and omnipotent being cannot lift it’ does not make sense, anymore than a 4 sided triangle does. This is not a limit on God’s power.
4. This begs the question as the solution assumes omnipotent being is a coherent concept.
5. Solution 2: God cannot create a stone which God cannot lift’ only means that ‘if God can create a stone, then God can lift it’. As there is no limit on God’s power of lifting stones, so there is no limit on God’s power of creating stones either. So God lacks no power related to lifting or creating stones. This makes no reference to omnipotence and so avoids the above response
6. A more challenging objection to God’s coherence is the question of whether God’s omniscience is compatible with his creation of beings with free will. If God is good he would give us free will so our lives are morally significant. But if he is omniscient, he will know our choices in the future meaning we cannot do otherwise and therefore are not free. (Be sure to define free will as the ability to do something other than the thing you do)
7. Solution: God is everlasting, not eternal therefore does not know what we will do as this is impossible. Is this in keeping with the definition of God though? No.
8. Solution: compatibilism
9. Reply: is this really free will? We are determined by our character/circumstances which we cannot choose
10. Solution: God’s relation to time means that the question is framed poorly and is understood from our temporal perspective, not God’s eternal perspective. When understood properly, it is not that God knows what we *will do* but what we *are doing* since all things are present to God. There is no contradiction between God knowing what we are doing and our being free. Therefore the challenge fails.

**How convincing are ontological arguments for the existence of God? (25)**

Intro: Despite a strong challenge from Kant, ontological arguments ultimately succeed in showing that God’s existence is necessary and therefore actual.

1: Explain the nature of ontological arguments i.e. a priori and what this means.

2: Anselm’s argument

3: Gaunilo’s perfect island response

4. Anselm (necessary existence cannot be applied to contingent things) & Plantinga (islands have no intrinsic maximum)’s replies

5: Kant’s objection

6: Descartes/Malcolm’s response: existence is not the predicate, necessity is

7: Objection: this only proves that God’s existence is either necessary or impossible maybe it is impossible

8: the burden is now on the atheist though to prove God’s existence is impossible.

9: Objection: Paradox of the stone proves God’s existence is impossible

10: Reply: no it doesn’t, therefore God’s existence is necessary.

**How convincing are teleological arguments for the existence of God? (25)**

Intro: Although arguments from spatial order can be adequately countered, teleological arguments which appeal to temporal order do succeed in demonstrating the existence of a designer. However, further arguments would be required to prove this designer is God.

1: Explain Paley’s argument

2: Hume’s objection to the analogy

3: Reply: Paley’s argument isn’t actually from analogy

4: Objection: evolution by natural selection is a better explanation of the order we see in the world and Paley’s argument cannot account for the disorder we see, e.g. appendix

5: Swinburne’s argument from temporal regularity

6: Objection: Perhaps a multiverse would explain the laws

7: Ockham’s razor suggests that a single God is the better explanation, especially given the lack of evidence

8: Swinburne has given good reason to believe in a designer of the regularity we see in nature. However, this argument alone does not prove that the designer: continues to exist, is all powerful, is loving. E.g problem of evil. So teleological arguments cannot prove the existence of GOD.

**How convincing are cosmological arguments for the existence of God. (25)**

Intro: cosmological arguments for the existence of God are ultimately unconvincing. Although the arguments are persuasive and have adequate replies to many of the objections, there is a logical leap in the conclusion and there is no reason to think that the being that is concluded to exist has all of the attributes that we would associate with GOD.

1: Explain Aquinas’ second way and the Kalam argument (one argues for the need for a sustaining cause of the universe, the other for a temporal cause)

2: Objection: both of these arguments rely on the causal principle. Hume points out that we do not know this to be true. It is not analytic and we learned it through induction therefore not certain.

3: Reply, this is true but we are making an inductive argument for God’s existence so we are not claiming a proof, merely that we have a good reason for thinking God exists.

4: Objection: Hume - possibility of infinite series of causes, not analytic

5: Reply: there are good reasons to think that infinite series is impossible, because it leads to contradictions

6: Even if you reject these responses, Aquinas’ 3rd way/Leibniz’s argument doesn’t rely on these two principles

7: Objection: fallacy of composition, do contingent things always require explanation?

8: Reply: fallacy of composition is not always a fallacy & our experience gives us reason to say that cosmological argument makes an inference to the best explanation.

9: Although making a compelling argument that the universe must depend on a necessary being, this argument alone does not prove that this being is all powerful, all knowing, is loving etc. E.g problem of evil. So cosmological arguments cannot prove the existence of GOD.

**Does the problem of evil prove God does not exist? (25)**

Intro: the logical problem can be solved by a free will defence, the evidential cannot because of the extent of pointless suffering in the world

1: Explain the problem of evil and the distinction between the logical and evidential problems as well as distinction between moral and natural evil

2: Free will defence

3: Objection: this only works for moral evil, what about natural evil?

4: Plantinga’s reply: free angels (Satan) are responsible for natural evil

5: Accept that this solves the logical problem but, in order for this to be applicable to the evidential problem, Plantinga needs defend the claim that we DO have free will, not just that we could. Explain determinist challenge to free will

6: Reply: compatibilism

7: Objection: compatibilism doesn’t really sound like the kind of free will Plantinga needs for his defence but there is a bigger problem, he needs to provide a convincing account of the existence of angels/Satan to explain natural evil – which he hasn’t

8: Hick’s soul-making theodicy

9: Too much pointless evil to be accounted for – therefore evidential problem demonstrates God doesn’t exist (probably)

**Is religious language meaningful? (25)**

Religious language in theistic religions is primarily language used to talk about God and our relationship to him, e.g. ‘Jesus is the Son of God’, ‘Allah is great’ and ‘God moves in mysterious ways’. This essay will explore the question of whether such language is meaningful and conclude that it is. Whether it is cognitive or non cognitive, religious language has the same kind of status as moral and aesthetic language, which is also meaningful.

Some philosophers argue that religious language is meaningless because it is non-cognitive. Cognitive language is that which attempts to express facts, e.g. ‘today is sunny’. Even if today is not sunny, this sentence is at least attempting to describe the world. Non-cognitive language is language which does not attempt to express any facts about the world. Cognitive language is either true or false whilst non-cognitive language is neither true nor false.

On the face of it, religious language appears to be used in a cognitive, and therefore meaningful, way. It often appears to be attempting to state facts about reality, e.g. that there is an all-loving, all-powerful God who does particular things like create the universe and answer prayers. However, the logical positivist philosopher A J Ayer argued that religious language was non-cognitive and therefore meaningless.

Ayer claimed that for a statement to be meaningful it had to be either (a) in principle empirically verifiable, or (b) analytic. By ‘empirically verifiable’ Ayer meant that a statement could be proved to be true or false by some kind of present or future observation. For example, the statement ‘John’s philosophy folder contains at least two pages of notes on every single class this year’ can be known to be true or false by looking at his folder. By ‘analytic’ Ayer meant a statement that was true by definition – for example ‘a square is a shape with four sides’. Such statements are true (or false) in virtue of the meanings of the words used. The consequence of this theory of meaning, which Ayer called the Verification Principle, is that any statement that does not fall into either of these two categories is meaningless. Ayer argued that religious statements such as ‘God exists’ and ‘Jesus is your Lord and Saviour’ are neither empirically verifiable, nor analytic. Therefore, religious statements, argued Ayer, are meaningless.

One criticism of Ayer’s claim is offered by the theist philosopher John Hick. Hick argues that even if Ayer’s verification principle is correct, it does not follow that religious statements are meaningless. Hick argues that if religious statements are true then we will be able to verify them after we die, as many religious claims are about things which lay beyond the limits of human life. He calls this ‘eschatological verification’ (‘Eschatology’ – study of the end times). So according to Hick religious claims can be cognitive and meaningful even if we cannot verify them in the here and now. I don’t think that Hick’s attempt to respond to Ayer is successful. For one thing, the sceptic can argue that there is no evidence for life after death. Moreover, whilst Hick does give a possible way in which religious language could be verified, it would only work if religious statements turned out to be true. If statements such as ‘God loves us’ were false (because there was no God) then there would, presumably, be no post-death life in which to experience and prove the falsity of this claim. Therefore, eschatological verification can only verify a statement positively, but it cannot falsify it. However, I do think that Ayer’s argument fails, but for another reason. This is because the verification principle itself is neither analytic nor open to empirical verification. Therefore, it is, by its own standards, meaningless and we cannot use it the pass judgement on the meaningless of other statements. Further, if Ayer was correct, then it would not only be religious language that was meaningless, but also moral and aesthetic claims, such as ‘murder is bad’ and ‘the Mona Lisa is a beautiful painting’. They are not analytic or empirically provable, but we would not accept such a conclusion in the case of these moral and aesthetic statements, and therefore we should not therefore accept it in the case of religious language.

Another attempt to show that religious language was non-cognitive and therefore meaningless was presented by Anthony Flew. Flew proposed the ‘falsification principle’. This stated that a statement was meaningful if it could be falsified, i.e. that we could at least imagine evidence that would count against the statement. E.g. the statement ‘today is sunny’ is meaningful because it could be falsified by lots of clouds in the sky. However, Flew claimed that religious language was not falsifiable. When faced with possible counter-evidence to a religious claim, such as needless suffering, the religious believer simply restates their claim, and says things like ‘God loves us… but he sometimes tests our faith.’ This process goes on and on until, as Flew says, ‘God dies a death of a thousand qualifications’.

R. M. Hare argued against Flew. He claimed that Flew did not understand the nature of religious language. He agreed that such language might not be falsifiable, but disagreed that this meant it was meaningless. Hare argued that in using religious language what we are doing is taking an attitude towards the world which he called a blik. These non-cognitive attitudes often cannot be conclusively proved or disproved but they are meaningful and very important for directing our behaviour and determining how we interpret our experiences. Bliks are not effected by any evidence, rather they determine which evidence is considered important. Hare gave the example of the lunatic don to illustrate this.

In my opinion, Flew offers an interesting alternative to the question of meaning. However, I think that, as with Ayer, he offers a far too restrictive theory of meaning. His Falsification Principle assumes that all language works in the same way. However, as Hare has tried to show, language can operate in very different ways, e.g. as indicating principles that determine what evidence counts when making judgements about the things we value most. Further, as Basil Mitchell argues, it might not even be the case that religious language cannot be falsified. Mitchell gives the parable of the resistance leader to illustrate how evidence does count against religious belief (just as evidence might could against the belief that someone really is a resistance fighter, even if we can’t say if, when and how much evidence it takes to overthrow that belief (e.g. just how much evil there would have to be in the world to show that a God does not exist).

In conclusion I have argued that the views of Ayer and Flew both fail to establish that religious language is meaningless. Hare and Mitchel demonstrate that. I think that their claim that it is noncognitive is a stronger one. But the Logical Positivist principle of verification fails its own standard, and like the falsificationist theory of meaning, it is far too restrictive in its view of what makes language meaningful. They have counter intuitive implications for aesthetic and ethical language as well as that used by religious believers. Therefore, religious language like aesthetic and ethical language IS still meaningful.

EXAMINER’S COMMENTS AND MARK

In this response the student argues with clear intent throughout, and the logic of the argument is largely sustained (16-20 band). The response shows detailed and precise understanding in some areas but not others (16-20 band). The conclusion is clear (21-25 band) and was indicated at the outset, with a range of appropriate arguments supporting it (16-20 band).

What is clearly missing is a ‘robust defence’ of the conclusion: possible replies from Ayer and Flew are not considered; evaluation of Hare and Mitchell is absent; and there is no critical and integrated consideration of whether the parallels with aesthetic and ethical language are persuasive in this context (the argument assumes rather than demonstrates that Ayer and Flew have the same issues with moral and aesthetic language).

There is a balancing of arguments, with weight being given to each (16-20), but this could have been carried out in a more precise, coherent and integrated way: there was room in the conclusion for a more developed statement of why the arguments that religious language is non cognitive are ‘stronger’ (the relatively brief and non-decisive treatment of Hick and Mitchel do not make that judgement clear).

Generally, this response shows a firm but not always detailed grasp of relevant philosophical material structured into a logical argument which answers the question. It is safely in the 16-20 band.

18/25.