The Existence of God: A Topic of Debate
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Does God exist? And if God exists, what kind of deity is he or she? Can God safely be anthropomorphized, or is this a fallacy brought about by our limited human understanding of divinity? In many ways this paper will deal with all of these questions, though primarily it will function as an argument for the existence of a supreme being, or a divine reality. In my opinion the most compelling argument for the existence of God comes not from Western thought, but rather from the Hindu scriptures. The Upanishads have long been a source of spiritual enlightenment and guidance for people around the world, and in his essay “The Message of the Mandukya Upanishad: A Phenomenological Analysis of Mind and Consciousness,” Ramakrishna Puligandla uses these scriptures as compelling evidence of supreme divinity.

This article presents a phenomenological argument, which means that it takes evidence from perception and experience, or the lack thereof. There exist three states to the human consciousness which can be objectively proven. The first is the state of wakefulness, in which a person is aware of objects external to himself or herself. The second state is dreaming sleep, in which the individual is aware of internal objects (for example, dancing elephants). The third state is the more controversial one. Western thought argues that within the state of deep sleep, there is no consciousness because there are no objects and the mind is quiescent. However, Puligandla argues that the Mandukya Upanishad rightly proposes evidence to the contrary. In his words, “During the state of deep sleep, one does not know that one is in deep sleep. However, when one awakes and is asked whether he slept well, he answers affirmatively by saying, ‘Yes, I have had a restful and blissful sleep’” (121). If you are not aware you are sleeping, then you have no remembrance of sleeping, so you cannot attribute your awareness of how you slept to memory. Plus, there are other methods by which one can obtain the relaxation felt upon waking from deep sleep. Thus, the conclusion from this must be that there exists another type of consciousness, one that is not dependent upon mental activity and objects. When asked if we have slept well, we instinctively know that the answer is yes. When asked if we are conscious, we instinctively know that the answer is yes (Puligandla 122). There must, then, be certain things that we know without having to think about them, so there must be something beyond human thought that exists.

The Mandukya Upanishad discusses a concept called turiya, which simply means “fourth.” Turiya is seen as the place beyond deep sleep, the final level of existence. Like deep sleep, turiya involves no objects and no mental function, the difference being that in this final plane, you are aware—not aware as an individual, but aware as a universal consciousness, part of everything. According to Puligandla, “This in turns means that there is a reality about each of us— the same, non-dual reality consciousness—whose existence is not contingent upon any objects. Such reality is indeed the necessary being” (124). Neurological instruments can be used to determine the first three states of consciousness, and all of their findings show remarkably similar patterns in everyone throughout these different stages. It stands to reason, then, that in the fourth level, everybody still retains these similar patterns of brain function. What this suggests is that René Descartes was perhaps wrong when he attributed existence to thinking.

If we exist even when we are not thinking, and we all share a common experience in this state, then there must be a common factor that allows for this existence and makes it common. The Upanishads call this factor “the Atman,” which is much different from the Western concept of the soul. The Atman is the spark of divinity, the commonality, that resides in us all and that reunites us with each other in the turiya. If God does not exist, then what is it that we all share? And where do we go in deep sleep and in the turiya? The existence of an unthinking consciousness necessitates the existence of a Supreme Being or supreme reality. Without such, there would be nothing to bring us back to individuality after the experience of deep sleep or meditative states. We do not leave existence when we sleep, and so there is a reality that exists beyond us and our thoughts. To me, this evidence of a transcendent being that is beyond consciousness is by far the most compelling argument for the existence of God that I have yet encountered.