

Philosophy of Religion

reason, faith, belief and doubt



George Matthews, Pennsylvania College of Technology

2020

Perspectives on religion

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- **Religious studies:** what are the practices, beliefs and histories of the many different world religions?
- **Sociology:** how do religions work as institutions expressing shared values and social meaning?
- **Psychology:** what is going on in the mind when people have religious beliefs and engage in religious practices?
- **Philosophy:** can religious beliefs be rationally justified?

Philosophy of religion

metaphysics

epistemology

value theory



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value theory

- Does God exist?

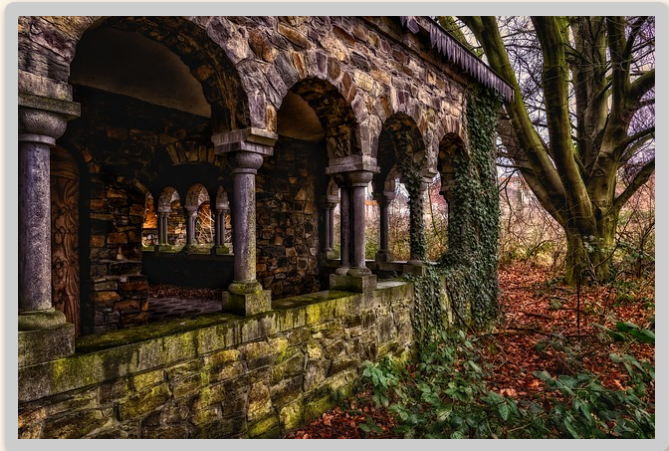


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- Does God exist?
- If so, in what form? As a supernatural being, as identical with nature, as many disembodied spirits?

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- Can we know whether or not a God or gods exist?

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- Are science and religion in conflict or are they compatible as two different ways of approaching reality?

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- What is the relation between religion and morality?

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- What is the relation between religion and morality?
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- What is the relation between religion and morality?
- Is religion a purely private matter or does it have any role to play in public life?
- Should parents be allowed to opt out of scientifically established medical treatments for their kids on religious grounds?

Does God exist?

YES

NO

MAYBE

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YES

Theism is the general term for the belief in the existence of a God or gods.

NO

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- Monotheism: there is only one God, and that God is a being with "personhood," with thoughts, feelings, intentions, free will...

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- Monotheism: there is only one God, and that God is a being with "personhood," with thoughts, feelings, intentions, free will...
- Polytheism: there are multiple gods often with many different personalities.
- Pantheism: God is everywhere or in every thing.

Does God exist?

YES

NO

MAYBE



Note that actual religions don't always clearly fit these definitions.

Does God exist?

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- Hinduism is polytheistic, but Krishna is often seen as the main "God" with many other divinities as Krishna's "avatars" or manifestations.

Does God exist?

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- Hinduism is polytheistic, but Krishna is often seen as the main "God" with many other divinities as Krishna's "avatars" or manifestations.
- Christianity claims that God is *both* unitary *and* has three separate "persons" -- Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Does God exist?

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*It is sometimes asserted that it is impossible to "prove a negative," or demonstrate that something does **not** exist or is **not true**.*



But we do this all the time, whenever we show that the existence of something entails a contradiction, or is logically incompatible with other things we know to be true.

Does God exist?

YES

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Does God exist?

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This is more an epistemological than a metaphysical view -- it concerns what we can know and not what exists.

Does God exist?

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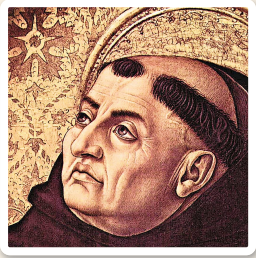
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- Buddhism might be considered an agnostic religion since it has many features of religion, yet often denies that metaphysical claims about the ultimate nature of reality matter.

Classic arguments for theism



Saint Thomas
Aquinas
1225-1274

Classic arguments for theism

"God is evident in basic facts about the world of our experience."



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- Aquinas was an important figure in the history of the Catholic Church.

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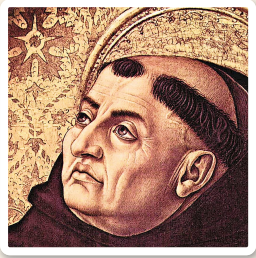
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- Aquinas was an important figure in the history of the Catholic Church.
- He combined the conceptual framework of Ancient Greek philosophy with Christianity, thus given definitive form to the medieval world-view of the Great Chain of Being, where everything in Nature has its place in a world ruled by God.

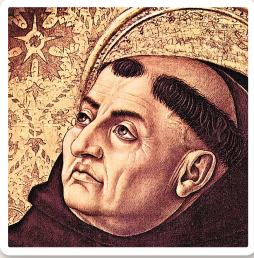
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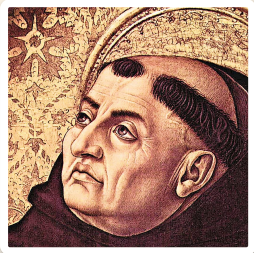
The Cosmological Argument



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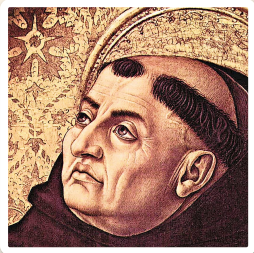
Everything that exists has a cause.

The universe as a whole exists.

So the universe as a whole has a cause -- God.

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- The key idea here is that *this* universe exists and that specific things need specific causes. But *must* this cause be the God of Christianity?

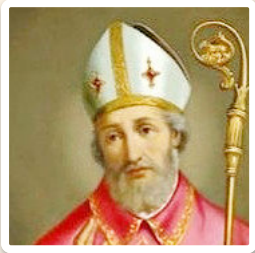
Classic arguments for theism



Saint Anselm
1033-1101

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- His most famous argument is a negative argument that shows that God cannot, *not* exist.

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The Ontological Argument



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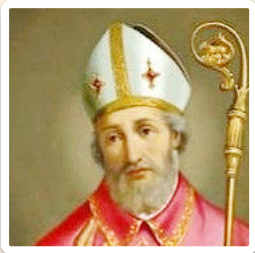
We can imagine the existence of a perfect being.

But if such a being *did not exist* it would lack something and so be less than perfect.

Thus a perfect being must exist -- God.

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- Can such abstract reasoning do more than just restate our original assumption that we *can* imagine such a being?

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William Paley
1743-1805

Classic arguments for theism

"The hand of God is visible in the complexity of the natural world."



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- His argument is still popular among Christian fundamentalists who use it to oppose evolution.

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Paley's Watch



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If you found a watch on the beach you'd be right to think it was not a product of chance but of design.

The organisms we "find" in nature are even more complex than a watch.

Thus a designer powerful enough to have designed biological organisms must exist -- God.

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- This argument fails to mention other possible explanations for biological complexity, like the "blind watchmaker" of evolution by natural selection.

Faith and the limits of reason



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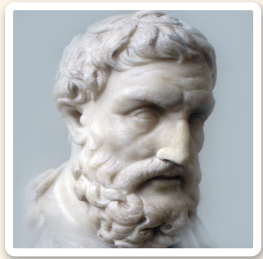


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*Appeals to faith are a double-edged sword. If there are **no reasons** offered, only belief, we also have no reason to take such appeals seriously.*

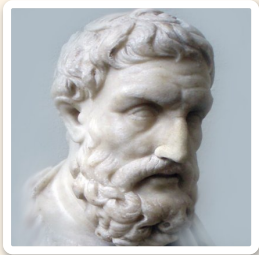
Atheism and the problem of evil



Epicurus
341-270 BCE

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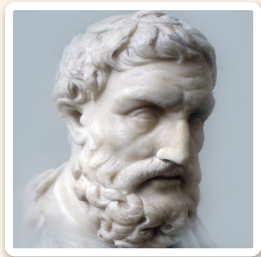
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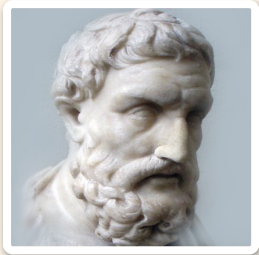


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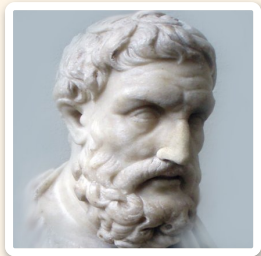


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- He argued against religious belief in an era when it was almost universally accepted.

Atheism and the problem of evil

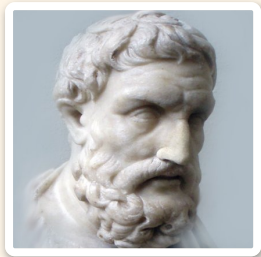
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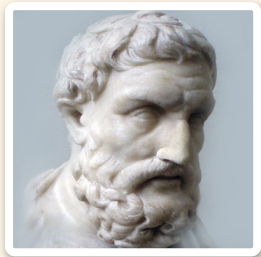
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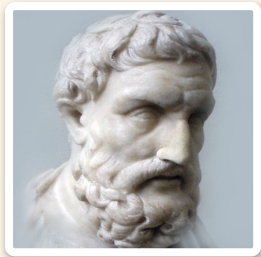
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- Can this defense deal with "natural evils" like disease or natural disasters without blaming the victim?

Belief and uncertainty



Blaise Pascal
1623-1662

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"We are all compelled to gamble."



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Belief and uncertainty

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- Blaise Pascal was deeply religious, but also a mathematician and gambler who laid the foundations of probability theory.
- Pascal offers an argument in defense of belief in God that assumes that we cannot know for sure whether or not God exists.

Belief and uncertainty

Pascal's Wager



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Belief and uncertainty

Pascal's Wager



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There is no direct evidence for or against God's existence.

But the risk of not believing is far worse than that of believing.

Thus we should accept that God exists.

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- This argument may show that we have a *motive* to believe -- to avoid punishment for unbelief *if* God turns out to exist -- but is that really a *reason* to think the conclusion is true?

Buddhism



Buddha
4th Century BCE

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"What we believe about ultimate questions is less important than how we live."



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- Born Siddhartha Gautama, heir to a royal family, the founder of Buddhism sought a solution to the human suffering that inevitably arises from the impermanence of everything and our tendency to cling to things anyway.
- Buddhism spread throughout Asia and now takes a multitude of forms, but all emphasize self-discipline and not being too attached to things in the world.

Buddhism



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Buddhism

The Parable of the Arrow



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Arguing about God, the universe and the soul is like arguing about who exactly just shot you with an arrow and why.

It's more important to pull the arrow out.

Likewise with religion, dealing with human suffering not the ultimate nature of things should be the focus.

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- Is Buddhism even a religion or instead a philosophical, ethical or agnostic spiritual system? That is not clear and maybe does not matter so much...

Find out more

Anselm and the Argument for God: Hank Green explores Anselm's ontological argument in this episode of The Crash Course.

Aquinas and the Cosmological Arguments: more from the Crash Course, this time dealing with St. Thomas Aquinas' "five ways" to establish the existence of God.

Religion Facts: this is a great website for exploring the many varieties of religion from around the world and throughout history.

Philosophy of Religion: a comprehensive overview of the major issues in this sub-field of philosophy from the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.



Credits

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