

## Philosophy of Religion

*reason, faith, belief and doubt*



George Matthews, Pennsylvania College of Technology

2020

## Perspectives on religion

From inside: what religious beliefs or practices should I adhere to as someone aware of the mysteries of life and death?

From outside:

- **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



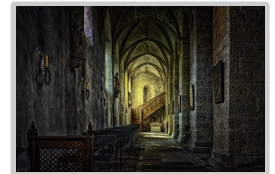
- Does God exist?
- If so, in what form? As a supernatural being, as identical with nature, as many disembodied spirits?
- What does the existence of evil imply about the existence or nature of God or the gods?
- Is the universe the result of deliberate planning or the result of the blind forces of nature that could easily have been otherwise?

## Philosophy of religion

metaphysics

epistemology

value theory



- Can we know whether or not a God or gods exist?
- Are appeals to faith to justify religious belief legitimate?
- Are science and religion in conflict or are they compatible as two different ways of approaching reality?

## Philosophy of religion

metaphysics

epistemology

value theory



- 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

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

- **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.

- 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?*

YES

NO

MAYBE

**Atheism** refers to the denial of the existence of God, the gods or a supernatural realm of spirits.

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

NO

MAYBE

**Agnosticism** Is the view that we cannot tell for sure whether or not a God exists.

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

- 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*

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



Saint Thomas Aquinas  
1225-1274

- 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.

*Classic arguments for theism**The Cosmological Argument*

Saint Thomas Aquinas  
1225-1274

Everything that exists has a cause.

The universe as a whole exists.

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

- 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*

"Reason alone can show us that God *must* exist."



Saint Anselm  
1033-1101

- Anselm was an early Medieval philosopher convinced of the power of human reason to make sense of things.
- His most famous argument is a negative argument that shows that God cannot, *not* exist.

## Classic arguments for theism

### The Ontological Argument



Saint Anselm  
1033-1101

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.

- Something seems fishy here, but it is hard to see what.
- Can such abstract reasoning do more than just restate our original assumption that we *can* imagine such a being?

## Classic arguments for theism

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



William Paley  
1743-1805

- William Paley was an Anglican minister whose "natural theology" was taken to be the best explanation for biological complexity until Darwin challenged it.
- His argument is still popular among Christian fundamentalists who use it to oppose evolution.

## Classic arguments for theism

### Paley's Watch



William Paley  
1743-1805

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.

- 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



- None of these arguments seem so convincing to modern readers.
- Perhaps the Eighteenth Century philosopher Immanuel Kant was right that these kinds of big metaphysical questions cannot be answered in any definite way.
- What then about appealing to faith as the basis of religious belief?

! 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

"The existence of evil proves that God does not exist."



Epicurus  
341-270 BCE

- Epicurus was a Greek philosopher who was skeptical of religion and advocated enjoying life to the fullest.
- He argued against religious belief in an era when it was almost universally accepted.

## Atheism and the problem of evil

### The Argument from Evil



Epicurus  
341-270 BCE

If there is an all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good God, then evil should not exist.

But evil does exist.

Thus such a God does not exist.

- One typical response to this argument is to blame evil on human free will – we would be at fault then, and not God.
- Can this defense deal with "natural evils" like disease or natural disasters without blaming the victim?

## Belief and uncertainty

"We are all compelled to gamble."



Blaise Pascal  
1623-1662

- 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



Blaise Pascal  
1623-1662

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.

- 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

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



Buddha  
4th Century BCE

- 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

### The Parable of the Arrow



Buddha  
4th Century BCE

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.

That's what religion too should be about, addressing our suffering.

- Is Buddhism even a religion or is it a philosophy, or agnostic spiritual and ethical system?

## 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

Built with:

Rstudio

xarignan.html presentation framework

Photos by:

Peter H and Valter Cirillo at Pixabay

download this presentation or print it

editorial suggestions and comments: requires a (free) GitHub account.