

# *Philosophy of Religion*

*reason, faith, belief and doubt*



George Matthews, Pennsylvania College of Technology

2020

# *Perspectives on religion*

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- **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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- Does God exist?



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- Is the universe the result of deliberate planning or the result of the blind forces of nature that could easily have been otherwise?

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

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- Polytheism: there are multiple gods often with many different personalities.
- Pantheism: God is everywhere or in every thing.

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

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- Christianity claims that God is *both* unitary *and* has three separate "persons" -- Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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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.*

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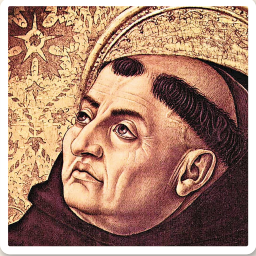
**Agnosticism** Is the view that we cannot tell for sure whether or not a God exists.



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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.

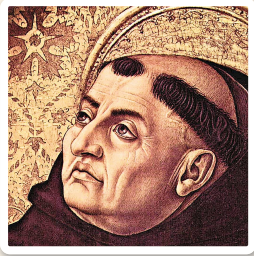
# *Classic arguments for theism*



Saint Thomas  
Aquinas  
1225-1274

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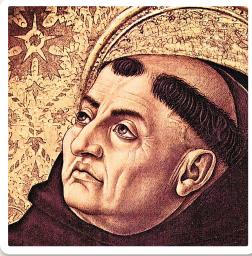
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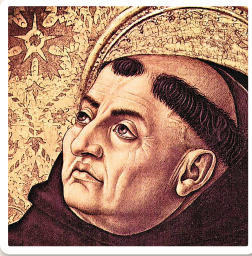


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- Aquinas was an important figure in the history of the Catholic Church.

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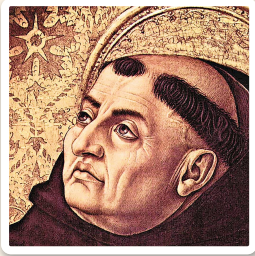
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- Aquinas was an important figure in the history of the Catholic Church.
- He combined the conceptual framework of Ancient Greek philosophy with Christianity, thus given definitive form to the medieval world-view of the Great Chain of Being, where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

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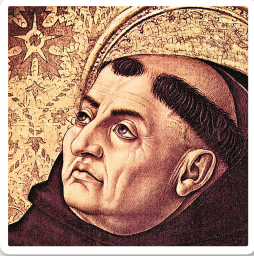


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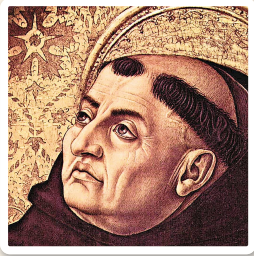
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Everything that exists has a cause.

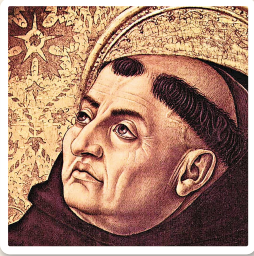
The universe as a whole exists.

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

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## The Cosmological Argument



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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*



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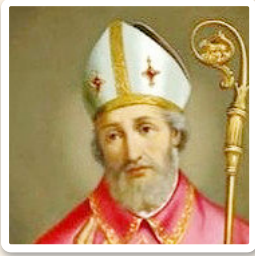


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- Anselm was an early Medieval philosopher convinced of the power of human reason to make sense of things.

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- 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.

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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.

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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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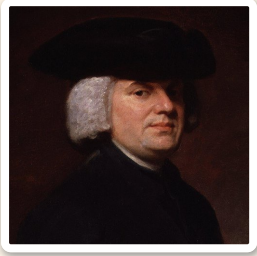


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- William Paley was an Anglican minister whose "natural theology" was taken to be the best explanation for biological complexity until Darwin challenged it.
- His argument is still popular among Christian fundamentalists who use it to oppose evolution.

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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.

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

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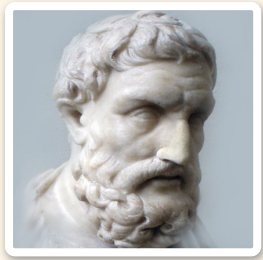


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*Appeals to faith are a double-edged sword. If there are **no reasons** offered, only belief, we also have no reason to take such appeals seriously.*

# *Atheism and the problem of evil*

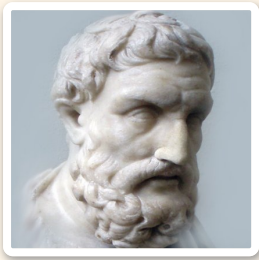


Epicurus  
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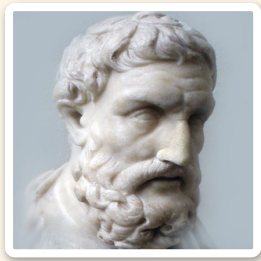
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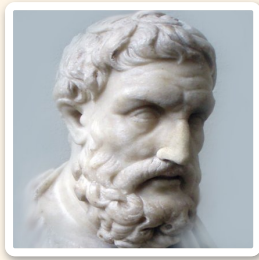


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- Epicurus was a Greek philosopher who was skeptical of religion and advocated enjoying life to the fullest.

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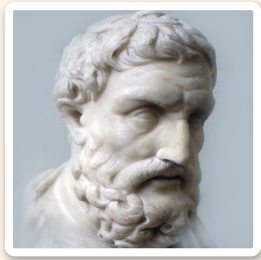


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- He argued against religious belief in an era when it was almost universally accepted.

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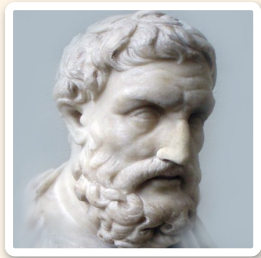
## *The Argument from Evil*



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

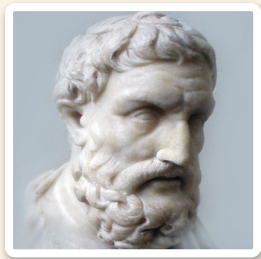
But evil does exist.

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Thus such a God does not exist.

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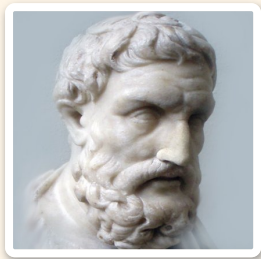
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- Can this defense deal with "natural evils" like disease or natural disasters without blaming the victim?

# *Belief and uncertainty*



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1623-1662



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"We are all compelled to gamble."



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

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

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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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## *The Parable of the Arrow*



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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.

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

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- 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*.



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