A-LEVEL PHILOSOPHY TEACHING GUIDE:
THE METAPHYSICS OF GOD

Clare Carlisle
King's College London

Introduction: the question of God

We should approach the question "does God exist?" with caution, and perhaps even suspicion. This is, we might assume, a classic question, one of the "big questions" of philosophy. And the question, posed in just three words, appears simple enough. Even though we may expect it to be difficult to reach an answer with any certainty, the range of possible responses seems fairly limited: "yes", "no", "I don't know," "maybe".

Yet this would be to move too quickly, and to assume too much. The question "does God exist?" is structured in a way that implies that we already know what God is – that we have a concept of God – and that we are asking whether there *is*, in reality, something that corresponds to this concept. The question structurally resembles questions like "does Santa Claus exist?" and "do chairs exist?" and in these cases we know who Santa Claus is and we know what chairs are. What is in question is, are these things real? are there really such things?

The common question, "do you believe in God?" is also implicated in this logic. This question focuses on the person being addressed, rather than on God's existence. But it might be rephrased as "do you think that God exists?" or "do you answer 'yes' to the question, 'does God exist?'?"

Having taught philosophy of religion for many years, I have come to think that the question "does God exist?" can be unhelpful, even profoundly misleading. It is unhelpful and misleading if it is taken at face value in the way I have just described – if, in other words, the question is allowed to smuggle in a determinate concept of God that we understand in common. What is smuggled in here is the idea that, while people who "believe in God" may of course have their theological disputes and disagreements about God's character and properties (can God suffer? is God responsive to human experience?), and while people argue about whether or not God exists at all, these discussions and arguments concern a concept of God that we roughly share, just as we all have pretty much the same idea who Santa Claus is. On this assumption, whether we are believers, atheists or agnostics, we know *what* we are arguing *about* when we argue about the existence of God.

We have two reasons to question this assumption. The first concerns the nature of God, and the second concerns the nature of philosophy.

First, in monotheist traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) God is regarded as unique, and this warns against treating the concept of God in same way as we would treat the concept of any other thing or person. Moreover, it also warns us against comparing God, or the concept of God, with anything else. This means that it is problematic to use the same logic to argue about the existence of God as we might use to argue about the existence of some other thing. Furthermore, we cannot assume that God can be known in principle, let alone in practice. God might be unknowable in principle, and/or human beings may be too limited in their cognitive capacities to apprehend God. Many theologians – including Anselm and Aquinas, whose works are included in the A-level syllabus – have emphasized the limits of our knowledge of God. This means not only that the existence of God is uncertain, but also that the very *concept* of God may be inaccessible to us.

Second, philosophical enquiry involves interrogating our own assumptions. There are many different styles of philosophical discourse and many different methods of philosophical investigation, but one of the features that distinguishes philosophy from ordinary thinking and debate is a willingness to question our preconceptions, our ready-made ideas. If we are going to

have a genuinely philosophical discussion about God's existence, we need to reflect on how we understand the concept of God, how we understand existence, and how we understand the meaning and logical structure of questions concerning God's existence. Do we really possess a concept of God – and if not, can we really understand the question, "does God exist?"? Students should be encouraged to talk about the concepts of God they bring to the debate about God's existence, and to think about where these concepts have come from.

Since I have raised the question of the nature of philosophy, I shall offer a few general remarks about philosophical method. The AQA's "Scheme of work" guidelines for "The metaphysics of God" suggest that

> Teachers should reinforce the notion that, in philosophy, if asked about the existence of God, students can legitimately argue that God does not exist, that God does exist or that we cannot know whether or not God exists. What is important is the quality of the argument. For this reason, a student might choose to argue in a way which is directly contrary to his or her own beliefs, because that way is philosophically more interesting.

It is quite right that in philosophy the quality of arguments is important, and that students should be permitted to choose which position they wish to defend when arguing about God's existence. Focusing on arguments for their own sake – as these guidelines imply – is certainly one well-established model of philosophical training. This model has the advantage of helping students to recognize the distinction between doing philosophical analysis and stating their own views; between philosophical discussion and the exchange of personal opinions. Expressing opinions about philosophical matters – such as the existence of God – is not the same as doing philosophy.

However, it would be a shame if this method were to teach students that philosophers spend their time arguing for positions that they do not themselves believe in, and which they are perhaps indifferent to. Very few, if any, of the authors included on the syllabus take this approach. Pursuing arguments for their own sake, with no investment or even interest in what one is arguing *for*, seems to reduce philosophy to sophistry or pedantry. Socrates regarded this kind of exercise as pseudo-philosophy. Are good arguments an end in themselves, or are we interested in truth, and in getting to know our own minds better? It is not clear to me how devising arguments for their own sake contributes to a flourishing human life – and if philosophy does not contribute to our flourishing, then why *are* we doing it?

An alternative approach is to encourage students to follow their own instincts and intuitions, at least as a starting point for philosophical thinking. What do they already believe? Many will find that articulating this, or figuring it out in the first place, is by no means easy. Which beliefs are they prepared to compromise, and which feel non-negotiable? When they read philosophical texts, which authors and ideas are they most drawn to? While it is important to persevere with texts that are difficult or off-putting, it is also fine to choose to pursue in more detail whatever seems most appealing, most exciting, most compelling, most true. This is what most professional philosophers do. And it is always possible to change our minds, and to change direction in our enquiries.

If a student is convinced that, for example, there is no God, she might be asked to reflect on the source of this belief – does it come from her parents? her friends? her own experience of the world? What exactly does she mean by "God" – and where did *this* idea come from? She

can also be guided to reflect on the nature of her conviction: why is she so sure about this? She should encouraged to understand that believing that God does not exist, and believing that God's non-existence is certain, are two distinct views: the first concerns a metaphysical issue, and the second concerns an epistemological issue. If the student's views remain the same through this process of reflection, her philosophical task is then to formulate arguments (there may be more than one) in support of her position. She might come up with three different arguments: how do these arguments relate to one another? which does she find most and least persuasive? do they contain implicit presuppositions that need to be accepted in order to accept the argument as a whole? Through this process of reflection and analysis, students may or may not change their views – but they should understand these views better.

The "Metaphysics of God" syllabus includes texts by some of the greatest philosophers in the western tradition: Plato, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Hume and Leibniz. It also includes penetrating analyses by distinguished modern philosophers: Eleonore Stump, A. J. Ayer, John Hick, Normal Malcolm, Ian Crombie, and others. I believe it is almost always more illuminating – and more interesting – to consider philosophical questions as they are approached by specific thinkers in specific texts, rather than as abstract, free-floating problems. Reading texts teaches us a lot about the style, structure and method of philosophical argument, and it is always fascinating to appreciate the literary diversity exhibited throughout the philosophical tradition. The texts in this syllabus contain elements of fiction, dialogue, debate, parable, metaphor and rhetoric, as well as plenty of analysis, critique, examples, and arguments. In my teaching guide I have concentrated on the set texts, aiming to open them up to first-time readers and make them more accessible – and, hopefully, more enjoyable to read.

Encountering these sophisticated works of philosophy for the first time is a challenge for A-level students – and their teachers – but it is also an exciting intellectual adventure. Embarking on this adventure involves appreciating what is really radical about philosophy: being open to changing our minds and thinking differently. This means bringing our preconceived ideas and assumptions into the open, holding up them to the light, and asking whether they are as certain, clear and obvious as they may seem to be at first glance. Following the syllabus will be most rewarding if the concept of God is treated not as something given, already understood and taken for granted, but as an open question: what does "God" mean? This openness towards the concept of God makes the familiar question of God's existence more puzzling, more mysterious. In philosophy, puzzlement and mystery is a good place to start from.

3.3.1 The concept and nature of 'God'

<u>God's omnipotence</u>

The *Summa theologica* is **Thomas Aquinas**'s (1225-1274) great work of Christian theology, composed between 1265 (when Aquinas was teaching philosophy at a convent in Rome) and 1274 (the year of Aquinas's death). Aquinas intended the *Summa theologica* to be an introductory work, suitable for beginners, and it is shaped by his own experience as a teacher of theology and philosophy. However, it is quite a challenging text for modern readers. It is worth reflecting with students on how Aquinas blends philosophical analysis with quotations from the Bible, which he treats as authoritative; this approach is quite different from modern philosophical method, which tends to treat only human reason and experience as a legitimate basis for argument.

Aquinas approaches all the questions he addresses in the *Summa theologica* by staging a mini debate. This allows him to consider different sides of each question, and to put forward several objections to the answer he offers. Perhaps these are the kind of objections he had heard, or imagined hearing, from the students he taught in various educational contexts, including the University of Paris. As well as setting out his own position, he provides responses to each objection in turn. By considering these objections, Aquinas shows why the issue is difficult or perplexing before he seeks to resolve these difficulties: his method is to examine the difficulties, instead of making dogmatic assertions or simplifying the question. So we learn from Aquinas that theological questions can be difficult, and often produce ambiguities that may be resolved with the help of rational, philosophical thinking.

Part 1, Question 25, article 3 addresses the question, "Whether God is omnipotent?" Aquinas answers that God *is* omnipotent, but first he considers four objections to this view. It may be helpful to rearrange the passage, so that Aquinas's responses are paired more closely with the corresponding objections:

> **Objection 1.** It seems that God is not omnipotent. For movement and passiveness belong to everything. But this is impossible with God, for He is immovable, as was said above (I:2:3). Therefore He is not omnipotent.
> **Reply to Objection 1.** God is said to be omnipotent in respect to His active power, not to passive power, as was shown above. Whence the fact that He is immovable or impassable is not repugnant to His omnipotence.
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> **Objection 2.** Further, sin is an act of some kind. But God cannot sin, nor "deny Himself" as it is said in 2 Timothy 2:13. Therefore He is not omnipotent.
> **Reply to Objection 2.** To sin is to fall short of a perfect action; hence to be able to sin is to be able to fall short in action, which is repugnant to omnipotence. Therefore it is that God cannot sin, because of His omnipotence. Nevertheless, the Philosopher says (Topic. iv, 3) that God can deliberately do what is evil. But this must be understood either on a condition, the antecedent of which is impossible—as, for instance, if we were to say that God can do evil things if He will. For there is no reason why a conditional proposition should not be true, though both the antecedent and consequent are impossible: as if one were to say: "If man is a donkey, he has four feet." Or he may be understood to mean that God can do some things which now seem to be evil: which, however, if He did them, would then be good. Or he is, perhaps, speaking after the common manner of the heathen, who thought that men became gods, like Jupiter or Mercury.

Objection 3. Further, it is said of God that He manifests His omnipotence "especially by sparing and having mercy" [Collect, 10th Sunday after Pentecost]. Therefore the greatest act possible to the divine power is to spare and have mercy. There are things much greater, however, than sparing and having mercy; for example, to create another world, and the like. Therefore God is not omnipotent.

Reply to Objection 3. God's omnipotence is particularly shown in sparing and having mercy, because in this is it made manifest that God has supreme power, that He freely forgives sins. For it is not for one who is bound by laws of a superior to forgive sins of his own free will. Or, because by sparing and having mercy upon men, He leads them on to the participation of an infinite good; which is the ultimate effect of the divine power. Or because, as was said above (I:21:4), the effect of the divine mercy is the foundation of all the divine works. For nothing is due to anyone, except on account of something already given him gratuitously by God. In this way the divine omnipotence is particularly made manifest, because to it pertains the first foundation of all good things.

Objection 4. Further, upon the text, "God hath made foolish the wisdom of this world" (1 Corinthians 1:20), a gloss says: "God" hath made the wisdom of this world foolish by showing those things to be possible which it judges to be impossible." Whence it would seem that nothing is to be judged possible or impossible in reference to inferior causes, as the wisdom of this world judges them; but in reference to the divine power. If God, then, were omnipotent, all things would be possible; nothing, therefore impossible. But if we take away the impossible, then we destroy also the necessary; for what necessarily exists is impossible not to exist. Therefore there would be nothing at all that is necessary in things if God were omnipotent. But this is an impossibility. Therefore God is not omnipotent.

Reply to Objection 4. The absolute possible is not so called in reference either to higher causes, or to inferior causes, but in reference to itself. But the possible in reference to some power is named possible in reference to its proximate cause. Hence those things which it belongs to God alone to do immediately—as, for example, to create, to justify, and the like—are said to be possible in reference to a higher cause. Those things, however, which are of such kind as to be done by inferior causes are said to be possible in reference to those inferior causes. For it is according to the condition of the proximate cause that the effect has contingency or necessity, as was shown above (I:14:1 ad 2). Thus is it that the wisdom of the world is deemed foolish, because what is impossible to nature, it judges to be impossible to God. So it is clear that the omnipotence of God does not take away from things their impossibility and necessity.

Turning now to Aquinas's positive statement on this question – his "answer" – we see that his method involves reflecting on the meaning of the concepts involved in claiming that God is omnipotent. The doctrine of divine omnipotence, Aquinas explains, means that "God can do all things," and he glosses this as "God can do all things that are possible." It is interesting to compare this philosophical claim with the quotation from the Bible he offers as a contrary point to objections against God's omnipotence: "Nothing shall be impossible for God" (Luke 1:37).

Aquinas's next step is to note an ambiguity in the concept of "all things that are possible." Citing Aristotle ("The Philosopher"), he clarifies two different sense of possibility. First, possibility relative to the power of the agent: in this sense, it is possible for me to speak, but not possible for me to fly. Second, a logical or conceptual form of possibility, which Aquinas calls "absolute" possibility: in this sense, an equilateral triangle is possible, but a square circle is not possible. Aquinas argues that ascribing the first kind of possibility to God would be a tautology

> if we were to say that God is omnipotent because He can do all things that are possible to His power, there would be a vicious circle in explaining the nature of His power. For this would be saying nothing else but that God is omnipotent, because He can do all that He is able to do.

Therefore, he explains, divine omnipotence means that God can do all things that are logically or conceptually possible:

> God is called omnipotent because He can do all things that are possible absolutely… everything that does not imply a contradiction in terms, is numbered amongst those possible things, in respect of which God is called omnipotent; whereas whatever implies contradiction does not come within the scope of divine omnipotence, because it cannot have the aspect of possibility.

Aquinas concludes his answer by returning to the citation from the Gospel of Luke, "No word shall be impossible with God." This statement fits with his doctrine of divine omnipotence, he explains, because "whatever implies a contradiction cannot be a word, because no intellect can possibly conceive such a thing." In other words, when we apply the logical or conceptual sense of possibility to this biblical verse, we see that it really means "No word [that is logically coherent, or conceivable] shall be impossible with God." Aquinas's philosophical argument thus grounds a certain interpretation of the biblical text. It is vital to Aquinas that philosophy should cohere with Christian scripture.

Questions:
- ❖ *What does the concept of "possibility" have to do with the question of divine omnipotence?*
- ❖ *For a religious philosopher, what is the relationship between the sacred text and human reason?*
- ❖ *What are the advantages and disadvantages, for the reader, of the "debate" structure of Aquinas's text?*

God and goodness

Plato's (c.429-347 BCE) dialogue *Euthyphro* is best-known for its eponymous "dilemma." Like many of Plato's dialogues, it is a quest for a definition. In this case, Socrates is asking what is "pious" or "holy" – the Greek is *to hosion*. And like many of Plato's dialogues, the discussion conducted by Socrates is inconclusive, leading to an impasse or *aporia* about the nature of piety or holiness. Socrates's interlocutor, Euthyphro, ventures a series of definitions of piety, all of which Socrates not only criticises, but deconstructs.

When the dialogue is taking place, Euthyphro is in the process of prosecuting his own father for manslaughter, and his first definition of piety refers to his own action: *this*, he suggests, is piety. As Socrates rightly points out, Euthyphro's action is not a definition of piety, but an example of it. Like any example, it is not sufficiently general or universal: a definition must encompass *all* instances of piety, not just one specific instance. Euthyphro's second definition is certainly more general: piety is whatever is loved by the gods. (The ancient Greeks were polytheists.) Socrates objects that gods disagree amongst themselves about what is pious, leading Euthyphro to offer a third definition: "what *all* the gods love is pious."

The famous "Euthyphro dilemma" is based on a question that Socrates asks Euthyphro following this third attempt to define piety. Is what is pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods? For students who are learning about the very nature of philosophy, this offers an excellent example of a philosophical question, for at least two reasons. First, it is a deep metaphysical question: it concerns whether moral value is

intrinsic and objective, i.e. belongs to objects, considered in themselves; or whether moral value is conferred on objects by the action of valuing them, in which case the source of value lies outside the object. Second, the question concerns ontological priority: it a question about grounds or reasons. If being good is the ground or reason for being approved by the gods, then goodness has an ontological priority. If, on the contrary, the gods' approval is the ground or reason why something is good, then the gods' approval has ontological priority. So Socrates's question is about the structure of the concept of goodness. It is not a question about any particular thing and whether or not it is good. For instance, we might all agree that justice is good, but we may still disagree on the metaphysical question of what makes it good.

Early in the 18th century, the Christian philosopher **Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz** (1646-1716) rewrote Socrates's question, posing it in a monotheistic context: "It is generally agreed that whatever God wills is good and just. But there remains the question whether it is good and just because God wills it, or whether God wills it because it is good and just." Whereas in ancient Greek thought, the gods were envisaged as onlookers, approving or disapproving of the actions of mortals, in Christianity – as in Judaism and Islam – God becomes a powerful creator who wills things into being. This God can be considered the source of goodness in a stronger sense.

Having posed his version of the Euthyphro dilemma, Leibniz glosses the question in a way which helps to show its philosophical significance: "in other words, whether justice and goodness are arbitrary, or whether they belong to the necessary and eternal truths about the nature of things."

Over several centuries philosophers have offered arguments in favour of one or the other side of the Euthyphro dilemma. However, it is worth asking ourselves whether the label "dilemma" helps us to think through the metaphysical question of goodness. A dilemma is an either/or, which confronts us with two alternatives and compels us to decide between them. This frames the issue in a certain way. Socrates did not describe his question as a dilemma, and Plato's dialogue leaves his question open, unanswered. When we look closely at the structure of Socrates's question, we see that it makes a distinction – a conceptual distinction – between goodness and divine approval. In Leibniz's Christian version of the question, this becomes a distinction between goodness and God's will. The question becomes a dilemma only if we accept this distinction. Some theologians – including Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas – would argue that the distinction is misleading, since God's will is good *by definition*, and it is really impossible to separate the concepts. If this is right, it may be incoherent to claim that either goodness or God's will has ontological priority over the other. And if so, then choosing one horn of the dilemma will not resolve the issue – it will only obscure it further.

Perhaps this is why Socrates's question goes unanswered in Plato's dialogue: perhaps it is impossible to give a coherent answer to it. That's not to say it is a stupid question. On the contrary, posing this question, and trying to answer it, encourages us to explore the concept of goodness. If this exploration ends by circling back on the question itself, the journey to this destination will have given us a deeper understanding of the conceptual terrain.

Questions:
- ❖ *What metaphysical issues are raised by the Euthyphro dilemma?*
- ❖ *How does the Euthyphro dilemma change when it shifts from an ancient Greek to a monotheistic context?*
- ❖ *Is the Euthyphro dilemma really a dilemma?*

God's eternity

Eternity is one of the most familiar and least controversial attributes of God – yet once we begin to reflect philosophically on the idea of an eternal God, a series of conceptual problems emerge. The set text on this issue is an academic article from 1981 in which two North American philosophers grapple with the metaphysical question of God's eternity. **Eleonore Stump** (b. 1947) and **Norman Kretzmann** (1928-1998) show why the idea of an eternal God cannot be taken for granted, since it is not evident that this idea is even coherent (let alone true). Ultimately they want to defend the concept of an eternal God, but in the process they raise several questions that need to be addressed in order to accept the concept as coherent.

It is a challenging article, written primarily for specialised academic readers, using some technical vocabulary and argument. In the context of A-level study it is a valuable introduction to the concept of eternity, not least because of the way it problematizes this concept, showing how it is contentious, potentially incoherent, and liable to being misunderstood. Since it is written by a pair of authors – a form of collaboration still relatively rare in philosophy, while it is common in the sciences – it reminds us that philosophical thinking almost always develops in conversation, and often over the course of many conversations.

We should bear in mind that this article is very much of its time in assuming a Christian context for the question of God's eternity. There is nothing wrong with limiting a discussion to a particular religious or philosophical tradition; indeed, without some restriction of scope the subject of eternity would be too large to approach in a single article. However, today we would expect authors of an article like this to explain that they are confining their discussion to the Christian tradition, rather than taking this context for granted as a shared frame of reference among their readers. In the decades since this article was written academics have become much more sensitive to the ways this kind of assumption may implicitly exclude voices from other theistic traditions such as Hinduism, Judaism and Islam.

Stump and Kretzmann approach the question of eternity via a philosophical method which is a kind of hybrid of historical interpretation and conceptual analysis. They take a source from the philosophical tradition, in this case Boethius, a 5th-6th-century Roman philosopher, and interpret one of his texts; they also undertake conceptual analysis by making distinctions and by constructing (or reconstructing) formal arguments, which bring implicit assumptions or processes of reasoning more clearly into view.

The article argues that eternity is not to be confused with "sempiternity," which means limitless or everlasting duration in time. Something that is sempiternal (if there is such a thing) would exist in the same way as a finite temporal thing, but without limits. For example, my own existence as a finite temporal being stretches back forty-two years to the moment of my birth, and forwards to an unknown but eventually determinable moment in the future, when I will die. By contrast, the existence of a sempiternal thing would stretch back endlessly into the past, and forwards endlessly into the future, without a beginning or an end. Notice that we form the idea of this sempiternal thing by negation: we take the idea of a finite thing and negate its limits, its beginning and its end. Yet we conceive of the sempiternal thing in essentially the same way as

we conceive finite things: as existing in time, with a past that is already over and a future that is yet to come.

By contrast, an eternal being does not exist *in time* in this way. An eternal being does not have a past or a future. This is captured in Boethius's text *The Consolation of Philosophy* by the notion of simultaneity: "the complete possession *all at once* of illimitable life." In the passage quoted by Stump and Kretzmann, Boethius explains that

> whatever includes and possesses the whole fullness of illimitable life at once and is such that *nothing future is absent from it and nothing past has flowed away*, this is rightly judged to be eternal.

As these quotations show, "illimitable life" is central to Boethius's concept of eternity. As Stump and Kretzmann point out, this notion of life is very significant, particularly in the context of the metaphysics of God: in the Christian tradition that Boethius helped to shape, God is often thought of as living or as life itself. God is different in this respect from a number or a truth which is atemporal but *not* living. God is also, of course, different from other living things, such as humans and plants and insects, which exist in time, with a beginning and an end. Much of the philosophical analysis undertaken in the article circles around the question of eternal life: how can God be both living and eternal?

Closely connected to this question is the issue of how an eternal God relates to temporal things. God is the *creator* of temporal things, and God is also said to *know* temporal things. But what kind of agency can be attributed to a God that does not exist in time? Stump and Kretzmann suggest, following Aquinas, that God "is a mind," a completely immaterial being. They argue that while some forms of mental agency involve temporal processes – for example, deliberating, anticipating, remembering, and planning ahead – other mental activities "do not require a temporal interval or viewpoint." Knowing, they explain, is not temporal; nor is willing (they distinguish this from wishing and desiring, which they take to be temporal mental acts). They also suggest that God possesses awareness, and that this is different from having perceptions, which are temporal experiences. These points lead to a fairly modest conclusion. Stump and Kretzmann want to show that "the notion of an atemporal mind is not incoherent." They explain that their remarks on this subject "are not even the beginning of an argument for such a conclusion"; rather, they are merely suggesting "the line along which such an argument might develop."

Questions:
- ❖ *Why is eternity a problematic concept?*
- ❖ *What is the difference between eternity and sempiternity – and why is this important?*
- ❖ *How does the concept of divine eternity shape the way we think about divine action?*

3.3.2 Arguments relating to the existence of God

<u>The ontological argument</u>

What we commonly call "the ontological argument" for God's existence is not one single argument, but one *kind* of argument. It seems, on the face of it, far removed from everyday religious belief. It is an ingenious argument contrived by philosophers, focusing on the concept or the definition of God – not the sort of argument we would expect an ordinary person to come up with when asked why he or she believes in God. However, the ontological argument is anchored in something that is central to ordinary belief and worship: the idea of God's greatness, perfection, or immensity. Ontological arguments proceed from a claim that few religious believers would dispute: God is the greatest being we could conceive; God is a supremely perfect being. For this reason, these arguments may have more intuitive appeal than they appear to have at first glance. Two of the most famous defenders of the ontological argument, Anselm and Descartes, find that meditating on God's greatness leads them to a deep conviction of the necessity of God's existence.

The Catholic philosopher **St Anselm of Canterbury** (1033-1109) is now most famous for his so-called "ontological argument" for the existence of God, set out in his short text the *Proslogion*. (I say "so-called" because the phrase "ontological argument" is a relatively modern invention, so it is a little anachronistic to apply it to Anselm.) The 17th-century French philosopher **René Descartes** (1596-1650) provided a similar kind of argument in his *Meditations*. These arguments have been labelled "ontological arguments" to distinguish them from other kinds of argument for God's existence, such as "cosmological arguments" and "design arguments."

The key distinguishing feature of the ontological argument is that it rests solely on the concept of God. Both Anselm and Descartes argue that if we reflect on the concept of God, we will see that God must exist, i.e. that God exists *by definition*. This is different from a "cosmological argument," which begins from the fact that the world, or the universe, exists, and proceeds to argue that the universe must have a cause, which is God; or from a "design argument" (also called a "teleological argument") which observes certain features of the world, such as eyes that perform the function of seeing in a remarkably effective way, and proceeds to argue that such as well-designed world must have a designer, who is God. Since it rests only on a concept, or a definition, the ontological argument is an *a priori* argument, meaning that it is prior to, or independent of, our experience. By contrast, cosmological and design arguments are *a posteriori*, meaning that they follow from experience – for example, from observing that the world exists, or that it exhibits certain features such as bodily organs that seem perfectly designed for sense-perception.

It is true that Anselm's argument for God's existence, when it is abstracted from the rest of the *Proslogion* and set out in a deductive form, has this *a priori* character. However, considered more holistically the text conveys a vivid sense of Anselm's own experience, particularly his inner experience. He describes his desire and longing for God, and his struggle to understand God, in an autobiographical style which bears witness to his spiritual quest to know the God to whom he is already devoted.

Looking at the different versions of the ontological argument, from Anselm's medieval text to Descartes's early modern text to Norman Malcolm's 20th-century text, provides an

opportunity to think about the different ways a philosopher might approach the question of God. St Anselm was a monk, and monasteries were the precursor of universities: they were institutions for intellectual enquiry, practiced in a religious, devotional context. The earliest universities, such as the first Cambridge and Oxford colleges, had continuities with monasteries: their architecture embodies an aspiration for quiet contemplation and communal living, with a shared dining room and a chapel at their centre. It was only in the 19th century that academic study could be conceived as an autonomous and possibly secular pursuit, enabling philosophy to take place in an institution that was not explicitly religious, already oriented to God. In other words, belief in God is a social and intellectual presupposition of medieval and early modern arguments for God's existence – and not simply the conclusion of these arguments.

We see this in the peculiar literary form of the *Proslogion*. It is part prayer, part confession. Anselm frequently addresses God in the second person. He is already talking to God when he undertakes the philosophical task of demonstrating that God exists. Is God's existence really in question here? Or is Anselm seeking to gain a better understanding of God's existence, which he is already firmly committed to? He addresses God as "You who give understanding to faith," and he famously describes his own philosophical project as "faith seeking understanding." We see this distinctive approach to the question of God's existence, with its presupposition of belief in God, at the beginning of Chapter 2 of the *Proslogion*:

> Well then, Lord, You who give understanding to faith, grant me that I may understand, as much as
> You see fit, that You exist as we believe You to exist, and that You are what we believe You to be.

As we have seen, an ontological argument begins with a definition of God. Anselm offers (to God) his definition (of God) as follows: "You are something than which nothing greater can be thought." On the basis of this definition – or concept – of God, Anselm proceeds to prove that God must exist. His argument involves a biblical text, Psalm 13. The key steps in his argument may be identified, in a non-technical manner, as follows:

1. God is "something than which nothing greater can be thought."
2. Psalm 13 says that "the fool says in his heart that there is no God." In order to deny God's existence, the fool must understand the concept of God (i.e. the concept of "something than which nothing greater can be thought").
3. There are two different senses of existence: existence in the mind and existence in reality: "it is one thing for an object to exist in the mind, and another thing to understand that an object actually exists." More precisely, something can exist *only* in the mind; or it can exist *both* in the mind and in reality.
4. What is understood certainly exists in the mind.
5. The concept of God exists in the fool's mind, since he demonstrates his understanding of this concept in the act of denying that God exists – otherwise his denial makes no sense at all.
6. The concept of God exists *at least* in the mind, since it exists in the fool's mind.
7. God, or "that than which a greater cannot be thought", cannot exist *only* in the mind, since it is greater to exist *both* in the mind and in reality than to exist *only* in the mind. It is "impossible" for God to exist only in the mind.
8. If God exists in the mind, God must exist in reality as well.

Point 3 – the distinction between existing in the mind and existing in reality – is crucial to the overall structure of the argument, so it is important to grasp this distinction. Anselm illustrates it by the example of an artist making a painting:

> when a painter plans beforehand what he is going to execute, he has the picture in his mind, but he does not yet think that it actually exists because he has not yet executed it. However, when he has actually painted it, then he both has it in his mind and understands that it exists because he has made it.

Another important point to note is that Anselm's conclusion to his argument (Point 8) is not simply that God *does* exist, but that God *must* exist. He develops this aspect of his argument in Chapter 3 of the *Proslogion*. In Chapter 2 he distinguished between two kinds of existence, and in Chapter 3 he makes a second distinction: between something that exists contingently (i.e. it can be thought not to exist), and something that exists necessarily (i.e. it cannot be thought not to exist). Anselm argues that something that exists necessarily exists "more truly" than something that exists contingently. God's existence, he explains, is necessary, not contingent. This is a unique category of existence, applying only to God: "everything else there is, except You alone, can be thought of as not existing." God's existence is not a contingent fact, like my own existence or the existence of the laptop I'm writing on. Apart from God, everything else that exists is contingent; God alone exists necessarily.

It is important to keep this point in mind when considering Gaunilo's criticisms of Anselm's argument. Gaunilo, another monk, offered a counter-example, a concept of a perfect island, to show that Anselm's reasoning is flawed. However, Anselm has already shown that we should not expect his argument to apply to any contingent thing. It applies only to God. Since God's necessary existence is unique, it is not appropriate to compare the question of God's existence with the question of anything else's existence. In other words, comparisons, analogies or counter-examples cannot be relevant here.

Anselm's insistence on God's necessity means that his argument attempts not only to demonstrate the existence of God, but to illuminate the *nature* of God's existence: the way in which God exists, or what it means to claim that God exists. God *must* exist. God exists necessarily, not contingently. Bearing this in mind, we can see that Anselm has been successful in his aim to gain a better understanding of God. His argument (if it works) has not simply confirmed his prior belief in God. Rather, he has progressed from believing that God exists to grasping the necessity of God's existence. God, he has learned, is not a contingent being, which may or may not exist, and can be conceived not to exist. Rather, God is a necessary being, which cannot be conceived except as existing.

In Chapter 4 of the *Proslogion* Anselm returns to the character of "the Fool," who thinks that God does not exist. What does it mean to have a thought, or to think about an object? This chapter is organized around yet another distinction, this time between two senses of thinking of something: saying the word in one's mind, and understanding the object:

> In one sense a thing is thought when the word signifying it is thought; in another sense when the very object which the thing is is understood. In the first sense, then, God can be thought not to exist, but not at all in the second sense. No one, indeed, understanding what God is can think that God does not exist.

This fourth chapter of the *Proslogion* ends with a prayer, in which Anselm thanks God for helping him to understand God better. He portrays the argument itself not as his own invention or his own discovery, but as a gift from God.

Various objections have been raised against Anselm's argument. **Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804) – who was responding not to this specific formulation of the argument, but to ontological arguments in general – objected that "existence is not a predicate." This means that existence is not part of the definition or description of God. For example, we might define or describe God as eternal, infinite, omnipotent, and omniscient: these four features are all predicates of God, features which tell us what God is. According to Kant, "existing" is not another item in this list that specifies the concept of God. Rather, we form a concept of God, and then it is a separate question whether something exists which corresponds to this concept. In other words, existence is not internal to a concept, and makes no difference to a concept; rather, the question of existence is extrinsic to the concept of the thing in question.

The distinctive conclusion of Anselm's argument – that God exists *necessarily* – may give us reason to question Kant's reasoning. He may be right to claim that existence is not a predicate, that it adds nothing to the concept of anything to say that something corresponding to this concept actually exists. However, *necessary* existence may well add to the concept of God, insofar as it tells us something about the nature of God: that God is necessary, not contingent. A Kantian might respond as follows. Kant has shown that the concept of God is one matter, and the existence of God is another matter. The claim that God exists necessarily does not add to our concept of God, but it adds to our concept of the existence of God. *If* we get so far as proving that God does exist, *then* we must add to this the claim that God exists necessarily. But claiming that "if God exists, then God exists necessarily" is different from claiming that "God exists necessarily."

Another objection to Anselm's argument concerns not his conclusion, but one of his premises. He argues that even the Fool who denies God's existence understands the concept of God, and thus this concept exists in the Fool's mind (point 5). However, according to Anselm's own logic, when we understand the concept of God we understand that God exists necessarily. As Anselm himself argues in Chapter 4, the Fool does not grasp this, and so he did not really have the concept of God in his mind. Anselm does in fact want to argue that the Fool's denial of God's existence is incoherent; that the Fool does not understand what he is saying when he says there is no good. But does this damage his own reasoning (points 5 and 6)?

This question about whether or not the concept of God exists in the Fool's mind may not, in itself, undermine Anselm's overall argument. However, in Chapter 15 the *Proslogion* – a part of the text that is not, unfortunately, included in the A-level syllabus – Anselm revises his own definition of God. According to this new definition, it seems that the concept of God does not, after all, exist in his *own* mind:

> Lord, not only are You that than which a greater cannot be thought, but You are also something greater than can be thought. For since it is possible to think that there is such a one, then, if You are not this same being something greater than You could be thought—which cannot be.

This calls point 6 of his argument more decisively into question. Of course, Anselm's "ontological argument" set out in the early chapters of the *Proslogion* can be reconstructed

without taking into account this revised concept of God as "something greater than can be thought." But doing this gives only a partial insight into the way Anselm approaches the question of God. Basing an argument for God's existence on the claim that we possess the concept of God is what we might call a rationalist approach to God. Anselm undermines this rationalism later in the *Proslogion*, and adopts the opposite view, that in fact we *cannot* comprehend the concept of God. It is "greater than can be thought." Paradoxically, Anselm defines God as a being that cannot be thought, and thus cannot be defined. The view that knowledge of God's nature and existence lies beyond our reach is called "apophaticism," and it is a familiar feature of discourse about God among many theologians, including Anselm. Chapter 16 of the *Proslogion*, following immediately from Anselm's revised definition of God, uses metaphors to describe the apophatic approach to God:

> Truly, Lord, this is the inaccessible light in which You dwell. For truly there is nothing else that might penetrate through it so that it might discover You there. Truly I do not see this light since it is too much for me; and yet whatever I see I see through it, just as an eye that is weak sees what it sees by the light of the sun which it cannot look at in the sun itself. My understanding is not able to attain to that light. It shines too much and my understanding does not grasp it nor does the eye of my soul allow itself to be turned towards it for too long. It is dazzled by its splendor, overcome by its fullness, overwhelmed by its immensity, confused by its extent. O supreme and inaccessible light; O whole and blessed truth, how far You are from me who am so close to You! How distant You are from my sight while I am so present to Your sight! You are wholly present everywhere and I do not see you. In You I live and move and in You I have my being and I cannot come near to You. You are within me and around me and I do not have any experience of You.

Thomas Aquinas – another theologian with apophatic leanings – discusses Anselm's ontological argument under the question, "Whether the existence of God is self-evident?" (ST1.1 q2 a1). Aquinas argues that God's existence is *not* self-evident, and rejects Anselm's argument as follows:

> Perhaps not everyone who hears this word "God" understands it to signify something than which nothing greater can be thought, seeing that some have believed God to be a body. Yet, granted that everyone understands that this word "God" signifies something than which nothing greater can be thought, nevertheless, it does not therefore follow that he understands that what the word signifies exists actually, but only that it exists mentally. Nor can it be argued that it actually exists, unless it be admitted that there actually exists something than which nothing greater can be thought; and this precisely is not admitted by those who hold that God does not exist.

Many philosophers have considered Aquinas's refutation of Anselm's argument to be decisive. However, the argument has persisted through the history of philosophy, and it continues to intrigue us. Perhaps one accomplishment of Anselm's argument is to shift the burden of proof onto those who deny God's existence, by posing the question of whether it is even coherent to claim that God does not exist.

More modern versions of the ontological argument, put forward by Descartes and then, much later, by the American philosopher **Norman Malcolm** (1911-1990), can be compared with Anselm's version. The literary genre of **Descartes's *Meditations*** is very different from the devotional style of the *Proslogion*. Descartes's reflection on God's existence is addressed to the reader, not to God, and he interrogates his own ideas, subjecting them to critical scrutiny, before he establishes his conclusions as certain. This is closer to modern philosophical method

than Anselm's enquiry (though this does not necessarily mean it is "more philosophical"; we would need to clarify what we mean by "philosophical" before making this judgement). The literary form of Malcolm's discussion is different again. Malcolm defends a version of the ontological argument that focuses on the necessity of God's existence, and so he argues that Anselm's main proof is in Chapter 3 of the *Proslogion*, not in Chapter 2, which Malcolm considers to be an inferior first attempt at expressing the argument. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*'s article on the ontological argument gives a good overview of how the argument has been revised (and criticized) by other 20th-century and 21st-century philosophers.

In his fifth Meditation Descartes expresses the essence of the ontological argument by claiming that God's existence cannot be separate from the concept of God. He argues that God's existence can be deduced from the fact that the idea of "a supremely perfect being" contains the idea of necessary existence. As soon as we have this concept of God, we know that God necessarily exists. And Descartes insists that he *does* have this concept of God: "the idea of God, or a supremely perfect being, is one which I find within me just as assuredly as the idea of any shape or number." Underpinning this claim is Descartes's theory of innate ideas – ideas we possess prior to experience. For Descartes, the idea of God is thus *a priori*, like certain mathematical ideas.

Unlike Anselm – whose reasoning, as we have seen, emphasizes the uniqueness of God – Descartes offers an analogy to clarify the structure of his argument. His analogy is mathematical, or, more precisely, geometrical: for Descartes, the "clear and distinct ideas" offered by mathematics provided an exemplary standard of certain knowledge. He argues that

> existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the fact that its three angles equal two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle, or than the idea of a mountain can be separated from the idea of a valley.

Like Anselm, Descartes thinks that this argument demonstrates not only God's existence, but God's *necessary* existence. It is, he argues, a "contradiction" to think that God, a supremely perfect being, lacks existence. Descartes also echoes Anselm in stating that God is unique, not least in the sense that God is the only being to which this kind of reasoning can apply: "apart from God, there is nothing else of which I am capable of thinking such that existence belongs to its essence."

Descartes's argument includes the claim that existence is "a perfection." Thinking of God without existence would, he suggests, mean thinking of a supreme being "without a supreme perfection" – and this is impossible. This formulation of the argument led Kant to object that existence is *not* a perfection, since a perfection is a kind of predicate – and existence is not a predicate.

Questions:
- ❖ *Why is the idea of necessity so important in ontological arguments?*
- ❖ *Does the concept of God exist in our minds, or not?*
- ❖ *Do analogies help or hinder ontological arguments?*
- ❖ *How does the literary form of Anselm's Proslogion and Descartes's Meditations reflect differences in their philosophical approaches to the question of God's existence?*

The design argument

While ontological arguments are rather technical – they are, so to speak, specialist philosophical arguments unlikely to be voiced by ordinary people – design arguments have a wide intuitive appeal for religious believers. Even if they do not appeal to "design" as a formal demonstration of God's existence, religious people are quite likely to cite the marvelous order and beauty of the universe as a reason for believing that "there must be a God." Design arguments are thus connected to a religious worldview, which not only "believes in God" in a theoretical sense, but sees and experiences the world as the product of divine creation.

Like the ontological argument, the design argument for God's existence is not one single argument, but a category of arguments. It appeals to observations of "design" or purpose in natural things to argue that these features of nature must be caused by a designer, i.e. God. Because the concept of purpose is central to design arguments, they are sometimes called "teleological arguments" after the Greek word *telos*, meaning purpose.   Design arguments have been made for millennia: for example, the ancient Roman philosopher Cicero (106-43 BCE) wrote in *De Natura Deorum* (On the Nature of the Gods) that

> When you see a sundial or a waterclock, you see that it tells the time by design and not by chance. How then can you imagine that the universe as a whole is devoid of purpose and intelligence, when it embraces everything, including these artifacts themselves and their artificers?

As this passage indicates, another significant feature of design arguments is their use of analogy. Their structure tends to rest on an analogy between features of objects designed by human beings, such as watches and tables, and features of natural organisms such as animals and plants, and a corresponding analogy between human and divine creation. This helps to give design arguments their strong intuitive appeal, but it also means that any design argument will only be as strong as the analogies it appeals to – and this is often targeted by critics as a weak spot.

Design arguments appeal to observations of what the world is like, and therefore they are *a posteriori*, proceeding from experience. Because these arguments are *a posteriori*, and have some empirical content, they overlap with scientific explanations. Does this make them vulnerable to new observations, and to our changing scientific understanding of processes which formed the natural world? Today, "creationist" views of nature are often regarded as rivals to scientific, evolutionary explanations of the same phenomena. William Paley's book *Natural Theology*, which contains one of the most famous formulations of the design argument in western thought, was an exhibit in a 2005 US court case, Kitzmiller v. Dover, which concluded by ruling it unconstitutional to promote creationist or "intelligent design" theories in US public schools.

The Scottish philosopher **David Hume** (1711-1776) offers a spirited discussion of the design argument in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, written in the 1750s and published in 1779 shortly after Hume's death. "Natural Religion" is a concept contrasted with "Revealed Religion": it concerns the knowledge we may have of God through reason and experience, rather than from texts, such as the Bible, that are considered to be the sacred and authoritative word of God. As its title indicates, Hume's work is written in dialogue form – a genre with a distinguished philosophical pedigree since it was deployed so extensively and successfully by Plato. It was Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, however, which provided the model for Hume's

Dialogues. Contemporary readers have to contend with the challenge posed by Hume's old-fashioned English prose (including his idiosyncratic use of commas), in addition to the complexities of the dialogue form in which contrasting opinions are voiced by different characters. Reading the *Dialogues*, we have to keep a close eye on who is speaking, and decide whether Hume himself approves or disapproves of the views espoused in the text.

The three principal characters in the *Dialogues* are Philo, Demea, and Cleanthes. Philo – who attacks the design argument – most closely resembles the views and approach that Hume puts forward in his other works, which were not written in dialogue form. For example, in Chapter 2 Philo voices Hume's empiricist principle that "our ideas reach no farther than our experience" (this opposed the doctrine of innate ideas popular among many early modern philosophers, including Descartes). And Philo advocates a skeptical view that is also closely associated with Hume himself:

> Can you blame me, Cleanthes, if I here imitate the prudent reserve of Simonides, who, according to the noted story, being asked by Hiero, *What God was?*, desired a day to think of it, and then two days more; and after that manner continually prolonged the term, without ever bringing in his definition or description? Could you even blame me, if I had answered at first, that I did not know, and was sensible that this subject lay vastly beyond the reach of my faculties?

However, recognising the similarities between Hume and Philo does not allow us to simply assume that Hume disagrees with the ideas voiced by Cleanthes and Demea. As with many philosophical texts, the *Dialogues* are open to widely diverging interpretations, and Hume's own religious position is certainly a contested issue among scholars.

In Chapter 2 of the *Dialogues* Cleanthes enthusiastically proposes a design argument, which is discussed at length from Chapter 2 to Chapter 8. Cleanthes's initial outline of his argument is an excellent summary of this kind of teleological reasoning, signaling the method of analogy and the argument's *a posteriori* character:

> Look round the world: Contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions, to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy, which ravishes into admiration all men, who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble one another, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed. By this argument *a posteriori*, and by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence.

A couple of pages later, Cleanthes supplements this argument with a couple of examples, which illustrate his analogical reasoning: "is the whole adjustment of means and ends in a house and in a universe so slight a resemblance? …Steps of a stair are plainly contrived, that human legs may use them in mounting… Human legs are also contrived for walking and mounting."

The rest of Chapter 2 is dominated by Philo's objections to Cleanthes's argument. He pursues several lines of attack. First, he argues that the analogy between the universe and a

human artifact such as a house is too weak to support a proof: "the dissimilitude is so striking, that the utmost you can here pretend to is a guess, a conjecture." Second, he objects to the analogy between human and divine designers, or "causes" of things, which Cleanthes's argument rests upon. He professes himself "scandalized" (with his tongue perhaps in his cheek) by the claim that God resembles a human being, since this implies "a degradation of the divine being." Cleanthes's analogy certainly seems to take his argument in the opposite direction to the ontological argument, which emphasizes that God is unique and incomparable. Third, Philo points out that Cleanthes's argument appeals to one kind of cause, i.e. "thought, design, intelligence," among many other causal processes to be found in the universe, and elevates this particular cause to the status of creator of the entire universe. This is, Philo suggests, anthropocentric. Fourth, Philo deploys Cleanthes's own empiricism to argue, against him, that human experience does not extend to "the origin of worlds." In other words, if we had observed several other worlds being produced, we might have some empirical basis for reasoning about the production of our own world – but, of course, we have no prior experience of world-making to draw on.

In Chapter 5 of the Dialogues, Philo amplifies his second objection that positing any resemblance between God and a human mind "degrades" God. He finds the design argument too anthropomorphic: in conceiving God to be similar to a human person, it calls into question God's "infinity" and "perfection." And why conclude, on analogy with human invention, that there is one God rather than several, or that God is eternal rather than mortal? And might not our world, with all its flaws, be just a first failed attempt at world-making of "some infant deity," or "some inferior deity," or a senile old deity? If we are going to draw an analogy between God and human beings, then why not go further still, and become "a perfect anthropomorphite"? Why not "assert the deity or deities to be corporeal, and to have eyes, a nose, mouth, ears, etc."? Cleanthes's position, claims Philo, undermines God's distinctive greatness and magnitude, as well as monotheism itself. Philo's style of argument here is called a *reductio ad absurdum*: by the end of Chapter 5 he has pushed Cleanthes's own reasoning to a point that is ridiculous, and that Cleanthes himself is anxious to "disown."

Historically speaking, **William Paley's** *Natural Theology* (1802) sits between Hume's dialogues and Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Darwin's theory – and its subsequent development by other evolutionary biologists – is widely seen to provide a rival explanation for those phenomena that, for proponents of the design argument, point to an intelligent creator of the universe. In Paley's title "Natural Theology" has the same meaning as Hume's "Natural Religion." Paley introduces his argument with a specific analogy, a watch which must have been designed by a watchmaker. Reflecting on the features of the watch, he reasons from this effect to its cause, arguing that

> there cannot be design without a designer… Arrangement, disposition of parts, subserviency of
> means to end, relation of instruments to a use, imply the presence of intelligence and mind.

Paley spends two chapters establishing the necessary connection between watches and watchmakers. In his third chapter, he uses this analysis as the basis for an analogy between watches and natural phenomena. He focuses on the example of eyes: "there is precisely the same proof that the eye was made for vision, as there is that the telescope was made for assisting it." For Paley, "chance" is the only serious rival to intelligent design as the cause of well-

functioning organs such as the eye. He argues that chance is a plausible explanation for warts, moles and pimples – "but never an eye." Appealing to his analogy with human artifacts, he points out that "never was a watch, a telescope, an organized body of any kind, answering a valuable purpose by a complicated mechanism, the effect of chance." Paley's argument can be assessed in light of Philo's objections to Cleanthes's version of the argument in Hume's *Dialogues*.

In 1968 the philosopher of religion **Richard Swinburne** (b. 1934) offered a defence of the design argument that directly addresses Hume's critique. Swinburne identifies a series of objections, most of them voiced by Philo in the *Dialogues*, and argues that they do not successfully challenge his own version of the design argument. It is interesting to compare Swinburne's discussion to Paley's. While Paley is quite polemical, arguing forcefully for one conclusion and reluctant to admit weaknesses in his own argument, Swinburne exhibits an admirable intellectual honesty and modesty. He admits that a design argument rests on the strength of the analogy between designed artifacts and the universe as a whole: "I do not propose to assess the strength of the analogy but only to claim that everything turns on it." Similarly, at the end of his article he limits his conclusion to the rather downbeat claim that "the philosopher will be content to have shown that though perhaps weak, the argument has some force." Swinburne is thus quite scrupulous and cautious in his claims – but perhaps this may be frustrating for readers who want a fuller, more decisive answer to the question of whether or not the design argument is philosophically compelling.

Central to Swinburne's defence of the design argument is his distinction between "two kinds of regularity or order," manifest in both human artifacts and natural phenomena: "regularities of co-presence or spatial order, and regularities of succession, or temporal order." Cleanthes and Paley, he shows, appeal to spatial regularities. This kind of regularity provides a very weak basis for their argument, partly because there are many examples of spatial *disorder*, and partly because scientific explanations stand as rivals to theological explanations for spatial order. By contrast, Swinburne argues, regularities of succession provide a much stronger premise for design arguments. Unlike regularities of co-presence, regularities of succession are "all-pervasive." And they are natural laws, which cannot be explained by other (scientific) natural laws, since this simply means positing more regularities, which is not an explanation for regularity itself: "almost all regularities of succession are due to the normal operation of scientific laws. But to say this is simply to say that these regularities are instances of more general regularities."

Swinburne posits "rational choice of a free agent" as the only other way of accounting for natural phenomena. As he acknowledges, this depends on the metaphysical question of free will. Some philosophers would dispute Swinburne's view that human beings *do* act from "rational choice of a free agent," and if this view of human agency is rejected then the analogy that forms the basis of his design argument disappears.

Questions:
   ❖ *What is the distinctive structure of design arguments?*
   ❖ *To what extent are design arguments rivalled by modern scientific theories, such as evolution?*
   ❖ *How strong and decisive should we expect the conclusions of design arguments to be?*

The cosmological argument

Thomas Aquinas's "Five Ways" are set out in response to the question "Whether God exists?" and they include the classic formulation of the cosmological argument (again, a class of arguments rather than a single argument) for God's existence. As we saw when we considered Aquinas's discussion of God's omnipotence, he sets out his analysis in the form of objections and responses, plus a statement of his own position.

      In the article that precedes his response to the question "Whether God exists?" Aquinas sets out the philosophical basis for his "cosmological argument." Like the design argument, this is an *a posteriori* argument that reasons from known effects to their lesser-known cause:

> When an effect is better known to us than its cause, from the effect we proceed to the knowledge of the cause. And from every effect the existence of its proper cause can be demonstrated, so long as its effects are better known to us; because since every effect depends upon its cause, if the effect exists, the cause must pre-exist. Hence the existence of God, in so far as it is not self-evident to us, can be demonstrated from those of His effects which are known to us.

As this passage suggests, the concept of cause is crucial to Aquinas's attempt to prove the existence of God. Each of his five ways posits God as cause, though in a different sense. His fifth way is a version of the teleological argument (this label seems more appropriate than "design argument" in the case of Aquinas) but the other four ways belong to a different class of argument.

      Aquinas's first way resembles the "Kalām argument," which is an argument from temporal causation. It is "the argument from motion," and posits God as the "first mover" which initiates all motion in the universe. Here Aquinas draws on Aristotle's distinction between potentiality and actuality – metaphysical concepts that Aristotle employed to make sense of natural processes of becoming and change. Aquinas states two premises that are essential for his conclusion that there must be a "first mover": (1) nothing can move itself, and (2) there cannot be an infinite sequence of things moving one another. "Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other, and this everyone understands to be God."

      The second way is structurally very similar to the first way. It substitutes the concept of "efficient cause" (another concept borrowed from Aristotle) for the concept of motion. Aquinas posits God as the "first cause" which is not caused by anything else, just as in the first way he posited God as a "first mover" which is not moved by anything else. And just as he insisted that nothing can move itself, so he insists that nothing can cause itself, and that there cannot be an infinite chain of things causing one another.

      Note that these first two arguments reason from natural causal processes that happen in time, to God as the cause of these processes. Indeed, Aquinas seems to suggest that God is the first in a temporal series of causes; this is certainly the case in the first way, and ambiguously the case in the second way. Even if we accept the conclusions of these arguments, they do not show that God continues to exist, let alone that God is an eternal being. As Stump and Kretzmann's article on divine eternity showed us, a lot of philosophical work is required to make any sense of the idea of an eternal God who produces temporal things.

Aquinas's third way avoids getting God entangled in temporality. It draws on the concepts of possibility and necessity, which in philosophical logic are called modal categories. (We encountered the modal concept of necessity in Anselm's ontological argument.) Aquinas explains that we observe in nature many things that are possible, or contingent: they happen to exist, but they might well not exist – and we know that they are contingent because we see such things arising and passing away. From this firm basis, Aquinas argues that

> if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence – which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary.

When we read this passage carefully we notice that Aquinas's argument depends on an hypothesis, which he shows to be possible but does not show to be true: "at one time there *could have been* nothing in existence." Once he has established that something necessary must exist, he introduces the concept of cause. We can't go on to infinity positing a series of necessary things caused by other necessary things, so we must posit a "the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity." Aquinas is confident that his readers will recognise this intrinsically necessary being as God.

Aquinas's fourth way is based on a Platonic metaphysics that was fundamental to the medieval worldview, though it may seem strange to modern readers. Aquinas posits a metaphysical hierarchy that is at once ontological and normative: some things have more being than others, just as some things have more goodness and truth than others. Once again introducing the concept of cause, he asserts that "the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus; as fire, which is the maximum heat, is the cause of all hot things." God is then posited as the cause of the being, goodness and "every other perfection" possessed by all beings.

Just as Anselm's attempt to demonstrate God's existence takes place from a position of faith, already convinced that God exists, so Aquinas's proofs are offered in a similar spirit. At the end of each "way" he appeals to an understanding of God that he presumes his readers already share. We should also note the role of biblical texts within his discussion of God's existence. In article 2, "Whether it can be demonstrated that God exists?" Aquinas cites Paul's Letter to the Romans as a piece of evidence against the various objections to the possibility of demonstrating God's existence:

> the Apostle [Paul] says, 'The invisible things of [God] are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made' (Romans 1:20). But this would not be unless the existence of God could be demonstrated through the things that are made.

Similarly, in article 3, "Whether God exists?" Aquinas cites Exodus 3:14, "I am Who I am" as a piece of evidence against the two objections to God's existence which he considers. Like Anselm's *Proslogion*, Aquinas's "five ways" are offered within a Christian community. They are philosophical elaborations of doctrines already accepted as enshrined in the Bible, which was

held by medieval readers to be non-negotiably true and authoritative, sanctioned by the Church as the official word of God.

In his third Meditation, **Descartes** echoes Aquinas's cosmological argument – just as he echoes Anselm's ontological argument in the fifth Meditation. It is interesting to note the continuities and the differences between Aquinas's "five ways" and Descartes's cosmological argument, composed roughly four centuries after Aquinas's *Summa theologica*. A fundamental point of continuity is the pivotal role of the concept of causation. Early in the third Meditation, Descartes seems to endorse the neo-Platonic vision of a hierarchy of being, in which greater realities are the cause of lesser realities, that we encountered in Aquinas's "fourth way." Descartes reflects on the cause, or source, of his own ideas. He thinks that it is self-evident – "obvious by the natural light" of reason – that "the total cause of something must contain at least as much reality as its effect." He possesses the idea of God, and reasons that he does not himself have enough reality to generate this idea by himself – which leads him to conclude that God must be the source of his idea of God:

> By the word 'God' I understand a substance that is infinite, eternal, unchangeable, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, which created myself and anything else that may exist. The more carefully I concentrate on these attributes, the less possible it seems that any of them could have originated from me alone. So this whole discussion implies that God necessarily exists.

This is not itself the classic cosmological proof, although it does draw on the idea of causation. Later in the meditation, Descartes cites his own existence as an effect, to be explained by the existence of God as its cause. He begins this enquiry with the following question:

> if God didn't exist, from what would I derive my existence? It would have to come from myself, or from my parents, or from some other beings less perfect than God (a being more perfect than God, or even one as perfect, is unthinkable).

His argument that God is the only plausible answer to this question builds on his claim that a cause must have as much as, or more, "reality or perfection" than its effect. It also echoes Aquinas's view that an infinite series of causes is impossible, thus pointing to God as a first cause – or, as Descartes puts it, an "ultimate cause" that not only brought him into being but also sustains his continuing existence:

> As I have said before, it is quite clear that there must be at least as much reality or perfection in the cause as in the effect. And therefore, given that I am a thinking thing and have within me some idea of God, the cause of me—whatever it is—must itself be a thinking thing and must have the idea of all the perfections that I attribute to God. What is the cause of this cause of me? If it is the cause of its own existence, then it is God; for if it has the power of existing through its own strength, then undoubtedly it also has the power of actually possessing all the perfections of which it has an idea— that is, all the perfections that I conceive to be in God. If on the other hand it gets its existence from another cause, then the question arises all over again regarding this further cause: Does it get its existence from itself or from another cause? Eventually we must reach the ultimate cause, and this will be God. It is clear enough that this sequence of causes of causes cannot run back to infinity, especially since I am dealing with the cause that not only produced me in the past but also preserves me at the present moment.

One obvious way that Descartes's cosmological argument differs from Aquinas's presentation is its reflexive, first-person character. While Aquinas cites the existence of contingent, finite things *in general* as effects to be explained by a first uncaused cause, Descartes cites *his own* existence. This is in keeping with the distinctive literary character of the *Meditations* as a whole, which is written in the first person, has a confessional tone (the narrative voice echoes, for example, Augustine's *Confessions*), and pursues an introspective method. While Aquinas's *a posteriori* arguments appeal to the objective reality of the observable world, Descartes's *a posteriori* arguments appeal to the subjective reality of his own mind, his own self. Does this first-hand experience, with its immediacy and intimacy, offer a more or less compelling starting-point for thinking through the causal connection between God and the world? Should philosophical method set aside the philosopher's personal experience, or should it place this experience at the centre of its enquiries?

Questions:
- ❖ *What is the difference between Aquinas's "first way" and "second way"?*
- ❖ *How is Aquinas's "third way" distinctive, in comparison with other versions of the cosmological argument?*
- ❖ *How does Descartes's approach to proving God's existence differ from Aquinas's approach – and how does this difference matter philosophically?*

The problem of evil

When **Thomas Aquinas** considers the existence of God in the *Summa theologica*, he begins by raising two objections to God's existence. The second of these is a formal objection:

> it is superfluous to suppose that what can be accounted for by a few principles has been produced by many. But it seems that everything we see in the world can be accounted for by other principles, supposing God did not exist. For all natural things can be reduced to one principle which is nature; and all voluntary things can be reduced to one principle which is human reason, or will. Therefore there is no need to suppose God's existence.

This anticipates the philosophical principle often known as "Ockham's razor": explanatory principles should be kept to a strict minimum; unnecessary principles are, by definition, superfluous, and do not add to but rather detract from a philosophical argument. In other words, explanations should be as efficient as possible. (Richard Swinburne states a version of this principle in his article on the design argument, when responding to Hume: "When postulating entities, postulate as few as possible. Always suppose only one murderer, unless the evidence forces you to suppose a second.") As we know, Aquinas states this objection only to refute it: he argues that it *is* necessary to posit God's existence as the first mover, first cause, etc.

A lay reader might regard this formal principle as a mere technicality. Aquinas's first objection to God's existence, however, is very different: it invokes the evident, observable, palpable fact that "there is evil in the world." In citing evil as his first objection to God's existence, Aquinas acknowledges that it is a problem that any philosopher who seeks to defend belief in God's existence must, one way or another, contend with. The fact that the world is not

as we would like it to be – that it contains manifest, multiple and often excessive instances of both "natural evil" (the kinds of "flaws" that Hume's Philo counts against the design argument, such as volcanos and earthquakes that produce suffering and destruction) and "moral evil", or human wrongdoing – is not, of course, simply a theoretical technicality that trips up efforts to prove God's existence. Evil is a social problem, a moral problem, an existential problem, a spiritual problem, as well as a philosophical problem. Many people cite their own experiences of evil as the principal reason for not believing in God, or for losing faith in God.

Responses to the problem of evil that seek to defend belief in God are often called theodicies. Aquinas's response to the problem of evil suggests – citing Augustine – that God allows evil to exist only in order to produce good out of evil. This strategy, in effect, relativises or contextualises evil within an overarching goodness. Any evil that exists, does so in order to produce a good that would not exist without this evil; when this is properly understood, evil must be considered as a necessary means to produce good.

The British philosopher **John Hick** (1922-2012) pursued and elaborated a theodicy along lines that roughly accord with those sketched by Aquinas. His 1966 book *Evil and the God of Love* is a modern classic, and provides an excellent entry-point to the problem of evil considered from a Christian perspective. (I recommend Eleonore Stump's 2010 book, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*, as a secondary text on this issue.) Hick's response to the problem of evil begins with a distinction between two basic types of theodicy: the traditional "Augustinian theodicy", which includes the "Free Will Defence" (discussed below), and the "Irenaean theodicy," which Hick traces to the 2nd-century Greek theologian St. Irenaeus.

Hick criticises the Augustinian theodicy, with its emphasis on the biblical story of Adam and Eve's fall into sin, and on human free will. Instead of looking to an historical or mythical Fall to explain evil – which according to Augustine was either sin (i.e. moral evil), or punishment for sin (i.e. natural evil) – Hick's "Irenaean theodicy" looks to a future perfection, towards which humanity as a whole is progressing. Evil, he suggests, exists because it helps us to advance towards this perfection, both as individuals and collectively as a species. At the heart of Hick's analysis is the idea of "soul-making": when we experience suffering, he argues, our souls are deepened, strengthened, made morally and spiritually better.

In Chapter 13 of *Evil and the God of Love* Hick outlines what a perfected human soul would be like. This chapter points out that moral evil covers a wide range of sufferings, including the "mass evils" of undernourishment, poverty, social injustice and institutional exploitation. Hick blurs the traditional distinction between moral and natural evil by pointing out that our susceptibility to "natural" sufferings, such as disease, is not separable from psychological factors which can to some extent be attributed to human agency. Today, in the 21st century, we could push Hick's point further: it is now widely accepted that the "mass evils" Hick identifies are aggravated by climate change produced or accelerated by human activity. Furthermore, in the present Anthropocene era, natural events like flooding and land erosion can be attributed to collective human agency, and interpreted as both natural and moral evils.

Hick explains that sin, understood as a universal human condition, lies at the heart of a Christian account of moral evil. The concept of sin – like that of "moral evil" itself – may encounter resistance among young people. It does not sit easily within our increasingly secular culture. It is worth bearing in mind that sin, as traditionally understood by theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas, has as much to do with spiritual incompleteness as with moral failure conceived in a narrow moralistic sense as falling short of accepted ethical norms. Hick describes

sin as "a disorientation at the very centre of man's being," which expresses itself in human society as "various kinds of broken, distorted, perverted, or destructive relationships." Sin is also, of course, fundamentally self-destructive.

Hick analyses the "Free Will Defence" – which he will ultimately reject – by discussing both divine omnipotence and human freedom. He suggests that if human beings are "persons" and thus capable of entering into a personal relationship to God, they must have "the gift of freedom": "it would not be logically possible for God so to make [human beings] that they could be guaranteed freely respond to [God] in genuine love and trust." Hick criticises the Augustinian theodicy for being too impersonal, and also too pessimistic – since it includes the possibility of eternal damnation as a punishment for moral evil. His own theodicy, he argues, offers a hopeful vision of the final destiny of human souls finding spiritual rest and fulfilment in relation to God, and he considers this eschatological hope to be more fitting to a Christian worldview.

In contrast to Hick, the North American philosopher **Alvin Plantinga** (b. 1932) argues in favour of the "Free Will Defence" as a successful response to the philosophical problem of evil. Plantinga summarises the Free Will Defence as follows:

> A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all… The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against [God's] goodness; for [God] could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good.

In other words, in order to create beings capable of moral goodness, God had to create beings also capable of moral evil. Plantinga is scrupulous about defining his terms, beginning with freedom itself. Since this can mean various different things, he clarifies the notion of free will relevant to his discussion: "the idea of being free with respect to an action," i.e. free to perform or to refrain from the action in question. He then defines "morally significant" action by means of the concepts of right and wrong. Putting these two definitions together, he explains that "significant freedom" is the freedom to perform, or not to perform, a morally significant action.

Plantinga's analysis of the Free Will Defence considers two key objections. The most serious of these, he believes, claims that it is logically possible that there is a world "containing free creatures who always do right" – and that an omnipotent God could create such a world. In other words, this objection states that human freedom does not logically entail human evil. It rests on the idea of a "best possible world," which was advocated by **Leibniz**, coupled with the expectation that an omnipotent, perfectly good God would create such a world. Plantinga responds to this objection by arguing that there may be no such thing as the best possible world, and also by arguing that God's omnipotence is not to be understood in terms of logical possibility. Therefore, he explains, "the claim that God, though omnipotent, could not have actualised just any possible world [God] pleased" is absolutely central to the Free Will Defence.

In discussing the problem of evil, Plantinga distinguishes between consistency and probability. Some critics of theism argue that the existence of evil is logically inconsistent with the existence of God (the line of argument considered above). Others argue that the existence of evil makes it "unlikely or improbable" that God exists. Though both ways of arguing conclude that God does not exist, they are significantly different arguments. For example, explains Plantinga, James Cornman and Keith Lehrer concede that the evil in the world is

consistent with the existence of God, yet they claim that this evil makes God's existence improbable. Their reasoning employs the idea of logically possible worlds, and the best possible world. Plantinga here repeats, and strengthens, his earlier critique of the idea of the best possible world: "Just as there is no greatest prime number, so perhaps there is no best of all possible worlds." Any "best possible world" we could imagine, he argues, can always be improved, for example by increasing the quantity of happiness it contains. So the "best possible world" is simply an incoherent concept.

Plantinga argues that the existence of evil does not disprove God's existence, either on the grounds of inconsistency or on the grounds of improbability. His conclusion to his discussion of the problem of evil is interesting:

> The existence of God is neither precluded nor rendered improbable by the existence of evil. Of course, suffering and misfortune may nonetheless constitute a *problem* for the theist; but the problem is not that his beliefs are logically or probabilistically incompatible. The theist may find a *religious* problem in evil; in the presence of his own suffering or that of someone near to him he may find it difficult to maintain what he takes to be the proper attitude towards God… Such a problem calls not for philosophical enlightenment, but for pastoral care.

Here Plantinga distinguishes between the philosophical problem of evil (which he takes himself to have solved) and the religious – or existential – problem of evil, which is a different matter.

In her book *Wickedness* the British philosopher **Mary Midgley** (1919-2018) offers a different perspective on the question of human free will. She is more interested in understanding "moral evil," i.e. human wrongdoing or "wickedness," than in questions about the existence of God. She addresses the question of responsibility, and argues that human wrong-doing has both individual and social causes:

> the idea that we must always choose between social and individual causes for human behaviour, and cannot use both, is confused and arbitrary… Causes of different kinds do not compete. They supplement each other. Nothing has one sole cause.

Midgley is keen to reject wholly social explanations that would undermine individual responsibility. She also criticises a popular objection to the idea of free will, on the basis of determinism, by distinguishing determinism from "fatalism." True fatalism, she explains, is a kind of "superstition" which "characteristically shows human effort as useless, indeed, self-defeating." This is not the same as determinism, which Midgley defines – in a rather minimal way – as "the belief in natural regularity which makes modern science possible." While fatalism *does* undermine human freedom, she argues, determinism does not. This may be true of determinism as she defines it, but many philosophers espouse a more robust conception of determinism which poses a greater challenge for the idea of free will.

Midgley's attempt to understand human wrongdoing is admirable and important. However, the way she frames this as an alternative to "traditional" approaches to the problem of evil may be a little misleading. "I see [evil] as our problem, not God's," she writes. But traditional approaches do not treat it as God's problem – as she puts it, "the problem of why God allows evil." Phrasing it like this suggests that God's existence is not in doubt, and that critics of theism are blaming God for the evil they encounter in the world. Yet the traditional philosophical discourse on the problem of evil, of the kind Hick and Plantinga engage in, is

focused on the question of whether the existence of evil constitutes an argument against the existence of God.

Questions:
- ❖ *How does Plantinga's distinction between consistency and probability clarify the philosophical "problem of evil"?*
- ❖ *According to John Hick, what are the most important differences between the "Augustinian theodicy" and the "Irenaean theodicy"?*
- ❖ *What is the "Free Will Defence"?*
- ❖ *What is the relationship – if any – between the philosophical problem of evil, and the religious or spiritual problem of evil?*

3.3.3 Religious Language

<u>A. J. Ayer's critique of metaphysics</u>

The two readings from works by the atheist philosopher **A. J. Ayer** (1910-1989) provide an opportunity to see how philosophers can change their minds, sometimes radically, and come to reject arguments they had formerly presented with great confidence. Ayer's 1936 book *Language, Truth and Logic* was published when he was just twenty-four, and while it is not a particularly mature work it established him as the leading British advocate of logical positivism, a hardline philosophical movement which originated in Vienna at the end of the 19th century. Almost fifty years later, in his 1973 book *The Central Questions of Philosophy*, Ayer repudiated his earlier reliance on the principles of verification and falsification as the bedrock of meaningful discourse. Despite this philosophical shift he remained a staunch atheist, committed to the view that most talk about God is simply incoherent.

As he indicates in *The Central Questions of Philosophy*, Ayer drew inspiration from Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy as an activity "aiming at the logical clarification of thoughts." Like other logical positivists of the 20th century, Ayer restricted the scope of philosophy to "conceptual or linguistic analysis." Both of the texts by Ayer included in the A-level curriculum focus on the question of the meaningfulness, or "significance," of sentences. Ayer's rather atomistic philosophy of language considers sentences to be self-contained units of meaning, and sets rigorous conditions to determine whether any given sentence is meaningful, or simply "nonsense." Ayer's conclusion is that many (if not all) questions about metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics and religion – matters which we might be inclined to regard as rich sites of human meaning – are not only undecidable, but meaningless. This claim is slightly qualified by Ayer's distinction between "literal significance" and "emotional significance": he allows that propositions concerning moral or religious questions can have emotional significance, though he denies their literal significance. Since he does not have a particularly positive or nuanced view of emotional significance, his overall approach remains very dismissive.

Ayer describes his view as a "radical empiricist thesis," and Chapter 1 of his seminal work *Language, Truth and Logic* is devoted to "the elimination of metaphysics." He begins by criticising those metaphysicians who "believe it is possible to have knowledge of a transcendent reality," i.e. a reality that lies beyond sense-experience. In keeping with his focus on linguistic analysis, Ayer's line of attack is "a criticism of the nature of the actual statements which comprise [any system of transcendent metaphysics]." He argues that "no statement which refers to a 'reality' transcending the limits of all possible sense-experience can possibly have any literal significance" – and that it therefore follows that any effort to describe such realities will only produce "nonsense." For Ayer, metaphysicians "produce sentences which fail to conform to the conditions under which alone a sentence can be literally significant."

In *Language, Truth and Logic* the criterion by which Ayer proposes to judge the meaningfulness of any statement is "the criterion of verifiability," often called the "verification principle." Ayer's formulation of this principle illustrates his radically empiricist approach, with its emphasis on observation. He thus takes scientific method as his model for meaningful discourse. He argues that a sentence is "factually significant" to someone only if this person

knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express—that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true or reject it as false.

It is important to grasp that for Ayer this principle aims to "supply a rule for determining *only whether a sentence is meaningful*" (my italics). This is different from the way the German philosopher Moritz Schlick, founder of logical positivism and of the Vienna Circle, used the verification principle, as "giving a procedure for determining *what meaning a sentence has*" (my italics). Ayer is concerned simply to "demarcate literal sense from nonsense." He insists that statements about ethical value, or about the existence of God, are neither verifiable nor falsifiable – in other words, it is impossible to establish either their truth or their falsity – and therefore they are nonsensical.

Towards the end of his career, however, Ayer stated that the verification principle: "no longer seems to me tenable." In *The Central Questions of Philosophy* he argues that both the verification principle and the falsification principle are fraught with problems. The principles are formulated in a way that is either too restrictive or too inclusive. It is interesting to see Ayer reflect on what he perceives to be his own failure to produce an effective philosophical principle. Certain readers' critiques of *Language Truth and Logic* made Ayer realise that his criterion "allowed meaning to any statement whatsoever." Despite his acknowledged failure to provide a rigorous empiricist criterion of meaning, he remained convinced of the close connection between observable evidence and meaningfulness.

Chapter 6 of *Language, Truth and Logic* spells out in devastating detail the implications of Ayer's logical positivism for ethics and theology. Ayer argues that statements of value are *either* "ordinary scientific statements" – in which case they are literally significant – *or* they are unscientific and not literally significant, but "simply expressions of emotion which can be neither true nor false." This view – often called expressivism – became quite influential. For Ayer, it drastically reduces the scope of moral philosophy. He argues that "a strictly philosophical treatise on ethics should make no ethical pronouncements." Philosophers should limit themselves to providing an analysis of ethical terms, which is what Ayer takes himself to be doing in this part of his book.

Turning to the question of the possibility of religious knowledge, Ayer remarks that his elimination of metaphysics already rules this out. He insists that because the existence of God is not an empirical matter – it is not empirically verifiable or falsifiable – it is impossible to prove that it is even probable, let alone certain or necessary. This is not just an observation about the limits of human knowledge of God (and for this reason, as Ayer points out, his position differs from agnosticism), but about the limits of meaningful discourse *about* God. For Ayer,

it cannot even be probable that a god exists. For to say 'God exists' is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false. And by the same criterion, no sentence which purports to describe the nature of a transcendent god can possess any literal significance.

The same kind of reasoning applies to belief in an afterlife, which according to Ayer "is not a genuine hypothesis." In sum, "there cannot be any transcendent truths of religion. For the sentences which the theist uses to express such 'truths' are not literally significant."

But what about religious experience, which (by definition) purports to yield knowledge that does *not* transcend experience? We might expect Ayer's radical empiricism to make him

more sympathetic to arguments from religious experience than to attempts to demonstrate God's existence through rational argument. However, this is not the case. Ayer dismisses appeals to mystical intuition, or experience, on the grounds that the sentences which articulate such appeals are nonsensical. And he rejects any suggestion that religious experience provides knowledge that is genuine yet inexpressible to those who do not share the experience. If a mystic "really had acquired any information [about God], he would be able to express it," argues Ayer: "the fact that he cannot reveal what he 'knows,' or even himself devise an empirical test to validate his 'knowledge,' shows that his state of mystical intuition is not a genuinely cognitive state."

Questions:

- ❖ *What is the difference between the verification principle and the falsification principle?*
- ❖ *What are Ayer's criteria, in* Language, Truth and Logic, *for determining whether or not a sentence is meaningful?*
- ❖ *Why did Ayer come to think that his attempts to defend the verification principle had failed?*
- ❖ *What are the strengths and weaknesses of Ayer's philosophical method?*
- ❖ *How decisively do Ayer's arguments undermine religious discourse?*

Theology and falsification

Perhaps we should treat with suspicion an argument that renders meaningless a large domain of human discourse on questions widely held to be profoundly important. Nevertheless, Ayer's analysis of religious language is valuable at least insofar as it has provoked debate, and inspired other philosophers to seek more positive accounts of religious meaning. The published debate between three British philosophers of religion – **Antony Flew** (1923-2010), **R. M. Hare** (1919-2002) and **Basil Mitchell** (1917-2011) – offers an opportunity to witness philosophical debate in action. It also provides a good example of an adversarial style of discussion quite common in academic philosophy, though this style is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of deep thinking. Another interesting literary feature of this text is the way each contributor to the debate makes use of a parable – a form of discourse more often found in religious teachings than in philosophical arguments.

Flew begins the debate by proposing a version of the verification principle, which clearly bears the traces of A. J. Ayer's influence. Like Ayer, Flew is disputing not merely the truth but the coherence of statements about God, suggesting that statements such as 'God has a plan,' 'God created the world,' and 'God loves us as a father loves his children' are "not really assertions at all," since they are not falsifiable. He concludes his contribution by posing the following question: "What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or of the existence of, God?" In other words, how might these claims be falsifiable? **Ian Machattie Crombie** (b. 1917), in his reflection on the debate, offers a very helpful summary of Flew's position, substituting "statements" for "assertions":

> *prima facie* [statements such as 'God loves us'] appear to assert the actuality of some state of affairs; and yet (and this is the objection) they are allowed to be compatible with any and every state of affairs. If they are compatible with any and every state of affairs, they cannot mark out some one

state of affairs (or group of states of affairs); and if they do not mark out some one state of affairs, how can they be statements?

Hare responds that "on the ground marked out by Flew, he seems to me completely victorious." But philosophy often involves marking out ground – setting the very terms of a discussion – and one philosopher need not be confined by another's markings. Hare accepts that religious statements such as "God loves us" are not assertions. Instead, he suggests, they are "*bliks*." A *blik* (always italicised in Hare's text, to signal that it is a neologism) is a new concept, and instead of defining this term Hare illustrates its meaning by the way he employs it in his argument. It seems to mean a basic non-rational belief; a belief that is not grounded on reasons; an unfalsifiable worldview; an underlying cognitive stance towards the world. As Hare acknowledges, this concept owes something to the 18th-century philosopher David Hume, who argued that many of our fundamental beliefs about the world, including our expectation that the sun will rise tomorrow morning, have no strictly rational basis. (This belief is, however, falsifiable – it would be falsified if the sun did *not* rise one morning – so presumably it does not qualify as a *blik* for Hare.) "As Hume saw," writes Hare, "without a *blik* there can be no explanation; for it is by our *bliks* that we decide what is and what is not an explanation."

Hare's concept of a *blik* attempts to capture the difference between a non-religious person and a religious person. This difference is not, he argues, "the difference between two contradictory assertions." An example of a *blik* is the belief that everything that happens, happens by chance. This is not an assertion, in Flew's sense, because it is compatible with anything happening or not happening, and therefore it can neither be falsified nor verified. If we have this *blik* we do not, simply by virtue of having it, assert anything different from people who have "more normal" beliefs about causal processes. Nevertheless, argues Hare, "there would be a great difference between us; and this is the sort of difference that there is between those who really believe in God and those who really disbelieve in him."

Mitchell's response to Flew takes a different approach, which involves a kind of fideism about religious meaning. Mitchell argues that religious assertions are genuine assertions, since he recognises a "significance" belonging to faith, although he does not spell out in any detail what this significance involves. Statements such as "God loves us" are not conclusively falsifiable, he admits. But this does not mean that they must be meaningless or vacuous. They can be treated in at least three different ways:

> (1) As provisional hypotheses to be discarded if experience tells against them; (2) As significant articles of faith; (3) As vacuous formulae to which experience makes no difference and which make no difference to life.

According to Mitchell, a committed Christian "is precluded by his faith by taking up the first attitude," and is "in constant danger" of slipping into the third attitude. But the second attitude is always a possibility, which means that the person of faith is not doomed to meaninglessness.

A clue to the nuance of Mitchell's position lies in his acknowledgement that religious statements are "not *conclusively* falsifiable" (my italics). Similarly, he suggests that a person of faith does not allow anything to "count *decisively* against" (my italics) his belief that God loves us. Certain things *do* count against this belief – evil and suffering being the obvious examples – and this contrary evidence "constitutes the trial of his faith." Indeed, argues Mitchell, a person of

faith "will only be regarded as sane and reasonable in his belief, if he experiences in himself the full force of the conflict" between his belief and whatever counts against it.

Mitchell's account differs significantly from Hare's insofar as he regards religious beliefs as assertions (or as expressible in assertions), not as *bliks*. "Nothing can count against bliks," whereas a serious religious person knows that certain facts and experiences, notably those that constitute the "problem of evil", can and do count against the belief that God loves us. For Mitchell, "the theologian *does* recognise the fact of pain as counting against Christian doctrine." But because the Christian theologian is committed by faith to trust in God, "he will not allow it—or anything—to count *decisively* against it."

Crombie provides the most explicitly and unapologetically Christian response to this debate, seeking to defend the meaningfulness of religious language against the challenge presented by Flew (and, indirectly, by Ayer). Instead of taking a sceptical stance outside religion, his contribution uses philosophical reflection to illuminate the nature of religious belief – and in this respect, at least, it resembles the kind of philosophical theology practiced by medieval thinkers like Anselm and Aquinas. Crombie proceeds on the principle, articulated right at the end of his paper, that "Religion has indeed its problems; but it is useless to consider them outside their religious context." If we agree, this makes a compelling objection to Ayer's critique of religious discourse.

Crombie's contribution also reflects his view that "Theology is not a science; it is a sort of enlightened ignorance," by which he means that there is necessarily some indeterminacy and limitation about our understanding of God. He argues that "theistic interpretations" of events in the world are not based on argument:

> for all that these journeys of the mind are often recorded in quasi-argumentative form, they are not in any ordinary sense arguments, and their validity cannot be assessed by asking whether they conform to the laws either of logic or of scientific method… [A conviction about one's own contingency, grounding faith in God] is to no extent like the conclusion of an argument; the sense of dependence feels not at all like being persuaded by arguments, but like seeing, seeing, as it were, through a gap in the rolling mists of argument, which alone, one feels, could conceal the obvious truth.

Crombie finds assurance that the notion of God "is not just an empty aspiration" in the fact that thinking of certain events in terms of "the category of the divine" provides "what seems to us the most convincing account of them."

Interestingly, Crombie uses the concept of parable – a form of discourse used rhetorically by Flew, Hare and Mitchell – as a key to grasping the kind of meaning belonging to religious statements: "We think of God in parables." Unlike the other three thinkers, Crombie offers a detailed discussion of the structure of parables, and of the kind of meaning they produce. As parables, statements about God "have a communication value, although in a sense they lack a descriptive value." In other words, when talking about God "we remain within the parable, and so our statements communicate; we do not know how the parable applies, but we believe that it does apply, and that we shall one day see how." Like Mitchell, Crombie makes some appeal to faith here: parables carry an "authority" based on trust.

Crombie's discussion is organised according to a threefold "logical structure" he perceives in religious belief, consisting of a "logical mother," and "logical father," and a nurturing "nurse" (which is religious activity). Crombie focuses most of his discussion on the two logical "parents" of religious beliefs. The "mother" is what Crombie calls "undifferentiated

theism," which provides the category of God. The "father" is "the interpretation of certain objects or events as a manifestation of the divine." The logic of religious belief thus has a "dual parentage":

> Without the notion of God we could interpret nothing as divine, and without concrete events which we felt impelled to interpret as divine we could not know that the notion of divinity had any application to reality.

Crombie analyses the significance of religious utterances in light of this "dual parentage." One important part of his argument concerns the question of whether religious assertions are statements of fact – in other words, whether they should be subject to the "demand" for verification or falsification. Crombie distinguishes two aspects of this demand: the logical, and the communicative. He argues that religious statements do meet the logical demand, which means that "there is no language rule implicit in a correct understanding of them which precludes putting them to the test." Attempting to verify or falsify a statement such as "God loves us" does not indicate that we have misunderstood the statement.

In fact, Crombie argues, the issue of whether or not God loves us cannot be decided, but this is not because appealing to facts (such as the quantity and severity of pain and suffering we experience and observe) is *logically* the wrong way to decide this issue. Rather, God's love for us remains undecided because of the limitations of our present experience. According to Crombie, it will become decidable only when we die:

> since our experience is limited in the way it is, we cannot get into the position to decide [whether or not God is loving], any more than we can get into the position to decide what Julius Caesar had for breakfast before he crossed the Rubicon. For the Christian, the operation of getting into position to decide it is called dying; and, though we can all do that, we cannot return to report what we find. By this test, then, religious utterances can be called statements of fact; that is their *logical* classification.

Their communicative classification, by contrast, takes the form of parables. When we are within a parable, we are "talking in a framework of admitted ignorance, in language we accept because we trust its source." Crombie illustrates his point with the example of the New Testament parable of the Prodigal Son (see Luke 15: 11-32):

> We know what is meant *in* the parable, when the father of the Prodigal Son sees him coming a great way off and runs to meet him, and we can therefore think in terms of this image. We know that we are here promised that whenever we come to ourselves and return to God, [God] will come to meet us. This is enough to encourage us to return, and to make us alert to catch the signs of the divine response; but is does not lead us to presume to an understanding of the mind and heart of God. In talking we remain within the parable, and so our statements communicate; we do not know how the parable applies, but we believe that it does apply, and that we shall one day see how.

Questions:
- ❖ *Are religious utterances best understood as assertions, bliks, or parables?*
- ❖ *Can questions about the meaning of religious language be understood outside a religious context?*
- ❖ *Setting aside the question of its truth or falsity, should the statement "God loves us" be understood as a statement of fact?*

FURTHER READING

Accessible books on the philosophy of religion

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Rupert Shortt, *God Is No Thing: Coherent Christianity* (Hurst, 2016)

Anthony C. Thiselton, *Approaching Philosophy of Religion: An introduction to key thinkers, concepts, methods and debates* (SPCK, 2017)

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Jennifer Hart Weed, "Religious Language", *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:
https://www.iep.utm.edu/rel-lang/

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Graham Macdonald and Nakul Krishna, "Alfred Jules Ayer", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ayer/

Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender and Religious Language* (Oxford University Press, 2007)