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Introduction

This book shouldn't have been written. In 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche – he of impressive moustache – pronounced that God was dead. By the time those words were written, secularisation had well and truly swept over Western civilization. Science was now conducted independently of theology. Enlightened opinion no longer thought that the world was created in six days, as described in the book of Genesis. The separation of Church and state ensured that people had the freedom to advance new theories, viewpoints, and lifestyles, at odds with the teachings of religion.

Nietzsche wasn't *celebrating* the death of God. He was trying to point out its radical consequences. People had thought that enlightened philosophy would be able to rescue the key teachings of Judaeo-Christian ethics without basing those teachings, any longer, on the Bible. Nietzsche's prophecy of doom was that the death of God would have unforeseen consequences. Christian faith was no longer tenable, and so everything "built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it; for example, the whole of our European morality" must all "collapse" (Nietzsche, 2001, §343).

Whether Nietzsche was right about the role that religious faith plays in sustaining "European morality", the widespread consensus among enlightened intellectuals, at that time, was that religion was a spent force. It was on the way out. If those predictions were right, there wouldn't have been much call for a book like this. Religion would, by now, be an historical curiosity rather than a topic for live philosophical debate. But – for better or worse – predictions of the death of religion have proven to be unfounded.

As we continue our march into the twenty-first century, the power and appeal of religion – globally, and even in the secular west – seems to be on the rise. There are almost two and half billion Christians, almost two billion Muslims, and more than a billion Hindus alive today, and Nietzsche is dead.

Whether you're a believer or not, religion is something that thinking people can't afford to ignore. It sits at the heart of various public-policy debates, from abortion to euthanasia. It continues to fan the flames of global conflicts and inspire violent fanaticism. If some religion

turns out to be *true*, then the stakes could hardly be higher. We might stand to miss out on eternal salvation, or risk eternal damnation. Whether He (or, She, They, or perhaps *It*) exists or not, there's a very real sense in which God is still alive and kicking. Religion is no historical curiosity. It continues to be a central feature of human life and it calls for serious philosophical reflection. But what is philosophy?

Philosophy

The word "philosophy" means the *love of wisdom*.

Imagine that someone asks you, "what is a table?"

You might think that she doesn't know what the *word* "table" means – perhaps English isn't her first language. Perhaps her question is just linguistic.

Alternatively, perhaps she's never *seen* a table before, having grown up in a rain forest. Perhaps her question is just about the use of furniture. Accordingly, you explain to her that a table is a flat surface held up at a certain height and constructed for the purpose of placing items upon it.

She replies, "Of course it is! I know *that*. But what I want to know is this: what ***is*** a table?"

At this point, you should conclude one of the following three things: either (a) she's insane, or (b) she's asking a *philosophical* question – or (c) quite possibly both.

Any topic, and indeed, pretty much any question at all – even a question about a table – can be philosophical. A question becomes philosophical when we're looking for an answer that possesses a certain sort of *depth*. This person doesn't want to know how to use the word "table" appropriately. She doesn't want to know what tables *do*. Instead, she wants to know something about the nature of matter, or the nature of social concepts, that allow for the existence of artifacts. You'll know that you've arrived at a philosophical question when no existing practical science could possibly provide you with a satisfying answer.

In the West, philosophy as a field of study began with Socrates and a number of his predecessors. Socrates was so persistent in asking philosophical questions that he came into conflict with the authorities. He was eventually executed for corrupting the minds of the youth

of Athens. But philosophy didn't *start* in ancient Greece. Philosophical questions have presumably been asked from time immemorial. Moreover, philosophy has been pursued in all sorts of cultural and historical contexts, giving rise to a number of rich philosophical traditions: Indian, Chinese, African, and more.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, English speaking philosophy departments have come to be dominated by a tradition known as analytic philosophy. My training was in the analytic tradition. Analytic philosophy, from its outset, was centrally concerned with mathematical logic as a tool for rigorous clear-thinking. Moreover, it's a tradition that adopted a deferential attitude towards contemporary science – especially towards contemporary physics. One of its founders was Bertrand Russell, who was also a famous critic of religion.

You might think: a logically rigorous and scientifically informed philosophy should surely have little time for the discussion of religion, which should be discounted as a superstitious vestige of a primitive past. Even if the *concept* of God is alive on the streets beyond the hallowed halls of the university, you might think that this should be a concern for psychologists and anthropologists – not for serious philosophy.

Recent developments in the cognitive science of religion have shown how religious beliefs are almost natural for humans to develop. We now have a scientific understanding of why religion is so tenacious; why it captures the imagination and survives as a belief system in a wider array of environments than atheism does. Religion is here to stay. But, once again, that doesn't mean that it should be taken seriously by philosophers.

Nevertheless, since the 1970s, a group of Christian thinkers, trained in the rigours of the analytic tradition, founded the Society of Christian Philosophers. Together, they developed new arguments for the key tenets of their faith. They found ways to articulate traditional Christian convictions in the language of analytic philosophy. It certainly remains the case that only a minority of contemporary philosophers are theists, or religiously devout, but this surge of quality Christian philosophy has contributed towards a change in attitudes. Theistic philosophy is no longer regarded by many professional philosophers, in the analytic tradition, as a hopeless case (even if it's thought to be somewhat eccentric).

These days, it is widely recognised – among philosophers – that there are some serious arguments in favour of central religious convictions. Those arguments deserve a hearing – even if we end up rejecting them. Consequently, this book will be an introduction to the analytic philosophy of religion; a vibrant and growing discipline.

Having celebrated the vibrancy of analytic philosophy of religion, I should also say that there are (at least) two respects in which I think it could do better. First: it tends to focus upon the content of religious belief. Here are some examples: Christians say that God is three persons and one God. Does that *belief* make sense? Many Eastern religions believe in reincarnation. Is the nature of the human person such that this *belief* can be at all plausible?

These questions are important, but this focus on the content of *belief* has often come at the expense of philosophical engagement with the various aspects of *lived*-religion; aspects of the religious life that *don't* centre upon belief – the nature, function, and value of *ritual*, for example; or, religion as a *communal* endeavour that forms a person's identity; and the nature and value of religious *experience*.

Second: non-Christian religions have been under-represented in analytic philosophy. This is perhaps to be expected since analytic philosophy is primarily conducted in English speaking countries where Christianity remains a dominant tradition. Moreover, analytic philosophy of religion only really came into being because of the efforts of a number of Christian thinkers. But the focus on Christianity is a problem to the extent that university courses and essay collections on the "philosophy of religion" can sometimes look more like courses and collections on the philosophy of *Christianity*.

This book belongs to a Routledge Series called, *The Basics.* The idea of the series is to provide accessible guidebooks which provide an overview of the fundamental principles of a subject area in a jargon-free and undaunting format. That's exactly what I seek to do in this book. But it's important to note that academic philosophy of religion is evolving, which means that what we might consider to be its fundamental principles are currently shifting and expanding, to encompass more and diverse questions and topics.

Other philosophers writing such a book might have focused more heavily on specifically Christian philosophy than I will, given the fact that that has been the historical tendency among

analytic philosophers of religion. But since the field is currently becoming more diverse, I think it important for this book to reflect that fact (and even to contribute to the process of diversification).

Still others, writing such a book, might have focused more heavily on religious *beliefs*, and concentrated less on the practical and political dimensions of religion, given the historical tendency of analytic philosophy of religion to focus on belief more than practice. But again, the field is expanding, and this book hopes to reflect that fact (and even to contribute to it).

So, all being well, this book *will* give you a basic overview of fundamental principles that have animated contemporary analytic philosophy of religion up until now. In addition, and without neglecting the classic concerns of the subject, this book will also try to extend those discussions to encompass aspects of the religious life *beyond* religious belief, and *beyond* Christianity. In that regard, this book does more than serve as an introduction to a field of study. It also seeks to give the field a nudge in the right direction. It seeks to encourage an open-mindedness as to what should be considered the fundamental elements of the philosophy of religion going forward; a re-assessment as to what should be counted as among *The Basics*.

Like all serious philosophy, this book will be opinionated. I'll try to give all sides of the key debates a fair hearing, but I'll often leave you in no doubt as to what my own views are. As well as being an academic philosopher, I'm an Orthodox Jew. Sometimes, no doubt, my own biases will be apparent for all to see – although I'll do be best to keep them in check. At the end of the day, you can agree or disagree with my arguments; you may share or reject my intuitions and biases. That's all part and parcel of live philosophical debate.

If you agree with my arguments, that will be great. If you disagree with them, then you'll have to articulate your opposition, which means you'll be doing philosophy. And that's great too! To encourage informed debate about religion, and the topics that we'll cover together in this book, is *exactly* what I set out to do.

I'll wrap this introduction up now with a brief roadmap of the chapters to come.

Roadmap

- In chapter 1, I ask a question that philosophers have often ignored in recent years, but which the philosophy of religion can't really afford to ignore. The question is, what *is* religion?
- In chapter 2, we'll explore some questions about religious *language*. For example:
    - If God exists, would He/She/It be the sort of thing that we could talk about? (Note that from this point on, I'm going to follow the convention of referring to God with the male-pronoun. This convention shouldn't be taken to imply that God is actually thought to be male. For an argument against this practice, see (Rea, 2016))
    - When we *use* religious language, are we really expressing *beliefs*, or are we doing something else?

Once we know what religion is and feel comfortable that it's a topic we can talk about (even if only within certain fixed parameters), we'll be ready to address the philosophical arguments that continue to rage both in favour, and against, certain religious beliefs, and even in favour, or against, entire *religions*.

- Chapter 3 explores arguments for the existence of God or, at least, for the existence of something Godlike.
- Chapter 4 explores arguments in favour of specific religions.
- Chapter 5 explores key arguments *against* theism and religion.

Having explored certain religious beliefs, the book then turns to other aspects of religion and the religious life.

- Chapter 6 explores a number of questions at the intersection between religion and ethics.
- Chapter 7 explores philosophical questions that emerge from certain religious practices.
- The book closes, in chapter 8, with a discussion of religion in a pluralistic world.

You may have noticed above that I cited Nietzche and then I had this peculiar little thing in parenthesis, reading "Nietzsche, 2001, §343." This is pretty standard for academic texts, but it confused me when I first saw it as an undergraduate. Does it mean that Nietzsche wrote something in 2001? No. He was dead by then. Rather, every time I quote a book, you'll see – in brackets – the last name of the author, the year that the book I've quoted from was published (which is sometimes centuries after it was written), and the relevant page, or chapter, or section number. So don't be confused when you see "Augustine, 1967"! All of the books that are cited in this format can be found in the bibliography at the back.

In addition to the bibliography, I end each chapter (including this one), with a list of further readings for those who want to dig deeper. There's also a glossary at the end of the book for the most technical and baffling words that sometimes appear in this text (though I've done my best to steer clear from jargon).

Further Reading:

In addition to articles and books cited in this chapter

<u>On Nietzsche and the death of God:</u>

Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<u>On Analytic Philosophy:</u>

Hans-Johann Glock, What *is Analytic Philosophy*? (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<u>On the Cognitive Psychology of Religion:</u>

Justin Barret, Why *Would Anyone Believe in God?* (AltaMira Press, 2004).

<u>On the Doctrine of the Trinity:</u>

Dale Tuggy, "Trinity", in Edward Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2021 Edition)* <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/trinity/>.

<u>On the Metaphysics of Reincarnation:</u>

Ankur Barua, "Revisiting the rationality of reincarnation talk, "*International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 76/3 (2015): 218-231.

Chapter 1: What is Religion?

The history of religious studies is littered with failed definitions of "religion". A successful definition would have to isolate that X-factor that makes something a religion. As soon as we have a candidate definition on the table, philosophers will typically try to find a counter example – *i.e.,* something that has that X-factor, but which clearly *isn't* a religion. Or they'll try to find something that's clearly a religion, but which *doesn't* have the suggested X-factor. This is one of the ways in which philosophy develops. Some philosopher suggests a definition of some central concept, other philosophers try to find counterexamples, and this forces us towards ever more sophisticated definitions.

Every well-known attempt to define religion has collapsed under the pressure of counterexamples. In fact, most scholars of religion today – be they philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, or what have you – tend to make do *without* an explicit definition.

"Religion" obviously isn't the only useful word that seems to defy any attempt to provide a watertight definition. Ludwig Wittgenstein provides the example of the word "game." Try and find an X-factor shared by every game and only by games. Are all games *fun*? No. And even if they are all fun, lots of things that aren't games are *also* fun. Do all games have a fixed and agreed upon set of rules? No. And even if they did, lots of things that aren't games – like driving – have a fixed and agreed upon set of rules. Are all games a competition for victory? No. And even if they were, not all competitions for victory are rightly called a game.

Wittgenstein suggests that we use the word "game" not to pick out a well-defined group of activities. Instead, we use it to pick out a loose network of activities united by any number of factors. The more of these factors an activity has, the more central it is in the network; the fewer it has, the less central. Wittgenstein called words that pick out these loose networks, "family-resemblance terms." There's not one feature shared by all three of my children, that all other children don't share, but there's clearly a family-resemblance that threads through the three of them somehow – separating them, if only vaguely, from other children.

Wittgenstein might have been wrong about the word "game." Bernard Suits thought that we *could* define a game as a "voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles." But even if Wittgenstein's example wasn't right, we can certainly accept that there might be useful words which don't admit of tight definitions; which function, instead, as family-resemblance terms. Is "religion" one of them?

William Alston is one of very few analytic philosophers to bother to provide a definition for religion. Ultimately, he endorsed a family-resemblance account. The best he thought we could do was to list "religion-making characteristics." None of these characteristics were (by themselves, or even collectively) put forward as *the* X-factor such that possession of the X-factor would make something a religion, and such that the lack of it would ensure that something *isn't* a religion. The best we can do, he thought, was to isolate certain common characteristics, widely shared among most religions.

Perhaps Alston's right. Perhaps family resemblance *is* the best we can do. But a sharp definition would certainly be *useful*. For example, scholars debate the extent to which it's acceptable, in a pluralistic society, for citizens and politicians to appeal to religious reasons in public discourse (see chapter 8). That is to say: is it appropriate to justify public policy in a pluralistic society on the basis of purely religious reasons? Should a politician be allowed, in a liberal democracy, to vote for a policy just because she thinks the Bible tells her to do so?

Similar debates take place regarding religious *exemptions*. Some countries make it illegal to carry a blade in public. Sikhs claim that they have a religious duty to wear a ritual blade. Should they be exempt from the general law? In addition, liberal democracies sometimes seek to protect people against religious discrimination. But without a sharp definition of religion, it's difficult to have these debates. What sort of reasons are being dismissed when we dismiss religious reasons? What sorts of legal exemptions count as *religious* exemptions? And what counts as religious discrimination?

Having said that, the sheer variety of lifestyles that we call "religious" make it very hard to isolate anything *more* than a loose network of family-resemblance. The existence of atheistic religions, for example (such as certain forms of Buddhism, and Taoism), will rule out a definition

of religion in terms of theology (such as James Martineau's suggestion that, "Religion is the belief in an ever living God…" (Martineau, 1888)).

Immanuel Kant sought to define religion in terms of morality and duty (Kant, 1999). But these attempts aren't sufficiently discerning. We should be careful not to confuse systems of ethics with religions. John Stewart Mill's book, *Utilitarianism,* was trying to defend a system of ethics. He certainly wasn't proposing a *religion*.

Rudolph Otto tried to define religion in terms of the experience of the holy (Otto, 2010). But does *every* religion, and do *only* religions, have such a concept? Secular atheists report moments of awe and transcendence. They sometimes use the language of sanctity to describe them.

On the 6th of January 2021, a mob attacked and entered the Capitol building in Washington DC. It was said by many, at the time, that the "sanctity" of the chambers of congress had been "defiled". This claim presupposed no religious beliefs, even with its use of the notion of *sanctity*. Perhaps they were just using religious words to describe something secular, but still, it will constitute something of a challenge to know when religious words are to be taken as having religious meaning, and when they're being borrowed. What is sanctity, anyway? Is it really only the religious who recognise sanctity?

Emile Durkheim defined religion as a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things … which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim, 2008, p. 46).Durkheim therefore added the notions of ***community*** and ***practice*** to Kant's ***morality (or value)***, to Otto's ***sanctity***, and to Martineau's demand for ***belief***. But still, one wonders whether these additions are enough. I can come up with a counterexample.

Imagine a club or association for art enthusiasts. They have an organised ***community***. They have a regular ***practice***, which is to visit museums and galleries together. They share certain ***values*** and ***beliefs***. They take art to be, in some sense, ***sacred***. And they seek experiences of awe in the "chapel" of the art museum. Is this club a religion, or is it yet another counterexample to yet another failed definition of religion?

John Dewey (2013) and Paul Tillich (1963) tried to define *religiosity* instead of religion. They define 'religiosity' in terms of its "affective" qualities (i.e., how it makes people *feel*), and how it plays a central role in organizing one's activities and concerns. But this approach doesn't give us an obvious route back to a definition of *religion*. A commune of Marxists might say that their political ideology has *affective* qualities (i.e., it makes them feel a certain way). They'll tell you that their Marxism plays a central role in organizing their activities and concerns. We *do* recognise that people can dedicate themselves with a religious *zeal* to things that are not *religions*. You can be religiously Marxist, but that doesn't make Marxism a religion. You can even follow a football team with religious fanaticism.

The question is: if you can be a religious Marxist as easily as you can be a religious Hindu, then what makes Marxism an ideology, and not a religion, and what makes Hinduism a religion (to the extent that the word "religion" can apply to Hinduism without imposing Western concepts where they don't belong) and not an ideology?

John Dewey's suggestion is that "religion" in its classic sense has something to do with belief in the supernatural. You can be religiously Marxist, but Marxism doesn't believe in anything supernatural, so Marxism itself isn't a religion. But not every belief in the supernatural is religious. Are you religious if you believe in ghosts? Moreover, it's not clear that *every* religion would accept that they *do* believe in the supernatural. In fact, I'm not exactly sure I know how to draw the distinction *between* the natural and the supernatural. Until the natural sciences have been completed – that is to say, until we know everything there is to know about nature – we're probably not in a position to be able to draw that distinction to begin with.

My Definition

Having seen past attempts at clear definition succumb to counterexamples, you'll probably have some sympathy for the suggestion that "religion" is, indeed, a family-resemblance term. But with a good dollop of audacity, I'm going to trample in where angels fear to tread. I propose my own definition of religion which, I claim, is immune to counterexample and gets to the bottom of what we mean to discuss when we talk about religion. Here it is:

Religion: A religion is a system of thought and/or practice that calls for religiosity from its adherents

This definition looks hopelessly circular, but hear me out. We've already seen that it's easier to define religiosity than it is to define religion. Perhaps we should learn a lesson from that. Perhaps we should define religiosity *first*, and then define religion in terms of religiosity. All we need is a definition of religiosity that's precise enough to power my definition of 'religion', and to close the door on possible counterexamples.

Even though I'm in the business of providing a watertight definition, rather than an analysis of a family-resemblance, I do recognise that religiosity can come in degrees. It's not always a black and white issue as to whether a given person is religious. That's fine. That won't mean that it isn't a black and white issue as to whether a given system of thought is a religion. When I define *religiosity*, I'm providing what philosophers call a "*norm-kind*" – which is to say, a description of what religiosity *aspires* towards. A norm-kind is something like an *ideal*. Religious lifestyles are only religious to the extent and degree that they *approximate* the norm-kind that I'm going to describe in the next section.

Once I've provided a norm-kind for *religiosity,* which allows for people to be more or less religious, depending upon their proximity to the norm-kind, we'll have set the stage for a sharp definition of religion. A religion, I shall argue, is any system of thought and practice that calls upon its adherents to do their best to approximate that norm-kind. If you're already trying to come up with counterexamples, hear me out first!

Religiosity and Community

When we think about religiosity, we think about dedication, and emotion, and – of course, *belief* and *conviction*. But we should also think about *community*. For some religions, this claim is pretty uncontroversial. Judaism is a good example.

When the Rabbis wrote the Mishna – which is one of the key texts of Rabbinic Judaism – the closest they came to saying what a Jews has to *believe* can be found in the following words:

> These [Jews] have no share in the World to Come: One who says that the resurrection of the dead is not from the Torah, or that the Torah is not from Heaven, and an *Apikoros* ["Apikoros" is a word I'll define later on]…
>
> Mishna Sanhedrin 10:1

But, if you look carefully, you'll see that this text isn't explicitly concerned with what people *think* but only with what they *say* and *do*. The Sadducees were a rival group of Jews to the Rabbis. The Sadducees denied the doctrine of resurrection, and they denied the divinity of what the Rabbis called the Oral Torah (which is the collection of teachings and legends that evolved from the teachings which, according to Rabbinic belief, were handed down to Moses on Mount Sinai alongside the Five Books of Moses – i.e., alongside the Written Torah).

The word "*Apikoros*" literally means an Epicurean – i.e., somebody who follows the Hedonistic philosophy of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, but the Rabbis who wrote the Talmud (the authoritative commentary to the Mishna) understood an Apikoros to be any person who disrespects the Rabbis.

In other words: it might not matter what you *think*, so long as you don't *say* that the Oral Torah isn't from heaven. If you go about *saying* that, then you'll be adding to sectarian strife – you'll be lending support to the Sadducees; you'll be undermining the Rabbis. Indeed, the notion that these people have no share in the World to Come is a shorthand for saying that they're not really Jews, since the Mishna begins with the assertion that "All of Israel have a share in the world to come." Sectarians do not belong. They must be excluded from the *community*. This Mishna has less to do with belief than it has to do with *communal belonging*.

But Judaism isn't alone in this regard. Christian history is punctuated with very important meetings of very important councils. These councils published proclamations about matters of Christian faith. But conciliar statements (i.e., the proclamations of these councils) spend a great deal of time doing something called "*anathematising*" opposing views. To anathematise a view isn't merely to label it *false*; it's also about shutting certain sorts of believers out of the community; saying to them that they don't belong (unless they change their views). Accordingly, Christian religiosity *also* cares a great deal about communal belonging.

Now, you might accuse me of trying to fit a Christian peg into a Jewish shaped hole. Remember, I'm not just a philosopher. I'm also an Orthodox Jew. And yet, no less a Christian authority than St. Thomas Aquinas assures his readers that holding a false belief can never be sufficient grounds for accusing a person of heresy. Heresy isn't primarily about believing the wrong thing. Even according to Aquinas (*Summa Theologiæ*, II-II, Q11, art. 2), heresy occurs when a person publicly defies the authority of the Church.

So far so Catholic. Protestantism, by contrast, was built upon defiance in the face of the authority of "the Church." Some Evangelicals claim to abhor established religion. Can I really argue that community belonging is an essential aspect of *their* religiosity? I can, and I will.

First: many Protestants *do* feel a close connection and loyalty to their denomination; their particular brand of Protestantism. More importantly: devout Christians who see themselves as falling outside of any organised religion will nevertheless see themselves as part of a community of fellow travellers; fellow followers or disciples of Jesus, etc. Even the founder of a new religion, who has no community to belong to, hopes to be the first link in a community that will extend on in time. Similarly, the last surviving member of a religious community still views herself as loyal to her communal forbears, even if she has no contemporaries in her community.

Scholars debate exactly when the Hindu identity emerged as a distinct phenomenon, bringing various more local Indian religious traditions together under one umbrella, and whether it emerged in response to Islam, or in response to British colonialism (see, for example Lorenzen, 1999, and Nicholson, 2010). But there's no doubt that part of what it means, today, to be a Hindu, is to see oneself as part of the Hindu people. Part of what it means to be a Muslim is to view oneself as part of the *Umma* – the nation of Islam, so to speak; religious Sikhs will tend to be initiated into the *Khalsa* (a special community within the wider Sikh community); other examples abound. Even though African religion is noteworthy for eschewing the sort of institutional trimmings that come with a temple, or a church, a synagogue, or a mosque, it is very much the case that African religion tends to be organized around the family unit, including ancestors who have passed away, and sometimes around a tribe (Metz & Molefe, 2021).

Religiosity, it seems, has a lot to do with belonging to a community. Accordingly, the first criterion for living a religious life is:

1. A religious life is a life that is meant to be lived as a part of a community that defines itself around a system of ideas and/or practices.

Remember that we're trying to articulate a norm-kind. That's why it's appropriate to talk about how a religious life is *meant* to be lived. We're trying to sketch an ideal. The last practitioner of a religion may lose hope of rebuilding a vibrant communal life. But she'll recognise that her lifestyle wasn't *meant* to be lived alone; it was *meant* to be lived as part of a larger community.

To subscribe to a set of theological doctrines, but not to see yourself as a part of any community at all – not to see your fate as somehow bound up with the fate of your co-religionists – simply falls short of living what most of us would call a distinctively *religious* life. A person with no sense of communal belonging can have a *theology* and a set of *rituals*, but not a religion in any *sociological*, and therefore in any standard, sense of the word. Religions are, after all, a sociological phenomenon. A wise and spiritual person living on top of a mountain only becomes a *Guru* in the context of a community.

<u>Religiosity and Faith</u>

Our first criterion entails that beliefs cannot be sufficient for fully-fledged religiosity. You also need to be part of a community. Now the question is, to what extent are beliefs a *necessary* component of a religious life? When we think about religiosity, we think about beliefs and convictions. But if we stop and think about it, we should ask whether it's *belief* that matters or whether religiosity demands *faith* rather than belief. And then the question becomes: what is the relationship between faith and belief?

A debate currently rages among philosophers about the nature of faith. Some argue that faith *includes* belief. If you have faith in God, for example, it means that you *believe* that He exists. Belief might not be enough for faith. It's widely accepted that faith requires certain emotions. You *believe* you have a sore neck, but it would be strange to say that you have *faith* that you

have a sore neck. You can only have faith in something in which you're somehow positively-emotionally invested. Accordingly, even the philosophers who enfold belief into their analysis of faith inevitably concede that faith is belief in addition to some other ingredients. In fact, their view is sometimes called, the *belief-plus account of faith*.

Others argue that faith doesn't require belief at all. A person can have faith in the face of severe and persistent doubt. Despite their doubts, they invest themselves wholeheartedly in a life that's built on certain sorts of hope; or they adopt certain goals or ideals against the odds and take a *leap* of faith. The various accounts of faith that divorce faith from belief are known as the *non-doxastic accounts of faith*.

Elsewhere I have argued that the debate between the belief-plus and the non-doxastic camp misfires (Lebens, 2022). One reason the debate misfires is that "belief" is a slippery word. Imagine you've baked a birthday cake for your kid's birthday. One of his friends doesn't like nuts. You know that he's not allergic. He just doesn't like them. He asks you whether the cake contains nuts. You tell him that it doesn't. You believe that it doesn't. You weren't lying. Minutes later, a child comes to the party who has a deadly nut allergy. She asks you whether the cake contains nuts. You might feel less confident saying that it doesn't. The stakes have changed.

Different philosophers have different accounts of how to make sense of cases like this. When the child with the nut allergy entered the room, you didn't receive any new *evidence* about the cake and its contents. It would seem strange to say that you lost your justification for the belief you had minutes earlier. One plausible account of what's going on here is called *contextualism*.

According to the contextualist, the word "belief" has a slightly different meaning in different contexts. To *believe* that something is true is to have a sufficient degree of *confidence* that it's true, but how much confidence do you need? According to the contextualist, the magic degree of confidence required to count as fully-fledged belief changes from context to context.

When you were asked by the first child, you answered him in a context where nothing too important was at stake. In that context, your confidence that the cake was nut-free was high enough to count as belief. When you were asked by the second child, your degree of confidence was exactly the same, but the context was different. In response to the second question, the

stakes were much higher. That change in *context* means that the word "belief" would have changed its requirements. It's not that you had *less* confidence (or less reliable evidence) the second time you were asked. It's that, in the second context, the amount of confidence you had (and thus, the amount of evidence you had) wasn't enough to count as belief, even though it *was* enough to count as belief in the first context.

Given the context-sensitivity of the word, "belief", the question as to whether faith requires belief seems to be ill-formed. It's like asking whether some very particular height counts as tall, without providing a comparison class. What counts as tall when talking about elephants is different from what counts as tall when talking about mice. Similarly, the degree of confidence that counts as belief in one context doesn't count as belief in another. This makes it difficult to pronounce, once and for all, upon the relationship between faith and belief.

So, what does it mean to say that you have faith that something is true, if we're not going to use the word "belief" in our definition? One philosopher, called Daniel Howard-Snyder, suggests four ingredients that I can get behind. In what follows, we're going to use the letter *p* to stand for any claim that you like (it could be claim that *God exists*, or it could be the claim that *George Harrison was a great guitar player*). Philosophers like to use the letter *p* for this, because it stands for *proposition*, and "proposition" is a fancy word for *a claim*. According to Howard-Snyder (2013), a person only has faith that *p* if she has:

(i) A positive evaluation of *p*

(ii) A positive conative orientation towards *p*

(iii) A positive cognitive attitude towards *p*; and if her attitude is

(iv) Resilient in the face of various challenges

Some of these words need unpacking, so let's take each ingredient one by one.

There's something somehow inappropriate in saying that you have faith that *p*, when you realise that *p* isn't the sort of thing that you should want to be true. Think about the example of your sore neck again. This leads to Howard Snyder's first ingredient. To afford *p* a positive evaluation

is to think that *p* is the sort of thing that people should want to be true. Nobody should want your neck to be sore.

Admittedly, a mother in the midst of an agonising cancer treatment may no longer care, in and of herself, whether she lives or dies, but she must at least have some *relevant* desire, perhaps the desire to be there for her children as they grow up, if we're to make sense of the claim that she has *faith* that she'll survive. Accordingly, when Howard-Snyder says that faith requires "a positive conative orientation towards *p*", he means that you don't have faith that *p* unless you *want p* to be true – either intrinsically, or, as in the case of the suffering mother, you might want it to be true somehow indirectly.

Howard-Snyder's first ingredient declares: people *should* want *p* to be true. His second ingredient declares: the person of faith has to want it to be true for *themselves* (either directly or indirectly).

When Howard-Snyder talks about a "positive cognitive attitude" towards a proposition, he simply means that you have to have some confidence that *p* is true. But the key question is this: how *much* confidence?

That might well be the key question, but I don't think that it's actually a *fair* question. Just as we saw with the word "belief", the confidence threshold for faith might well be context sensitive. It might change from context to context.

What the non-doxastic camp seems to get right – and Howard-Snyder counts himself among that camp – is that faith can survive with *less* confidence than belief can normally survive. Sometimes you can have faith that *p* even if you only think that *p* is the least unlikely of the relevant options. Apparently, when T. S. Eliot was questioned about his Christianity, he replied that it was the least false-seeming of the options that was open to him. That very low degree of confidence was apparently sufficient, in that context, to give rise to faith. The fact that faith can survive with less confidence than belief is part of what makes faith resilient.

To commit to a religion will require faith in some set of propositions. Some religions have book-length lists of things you're supposed to believe – these books are called catechisms. Some

religions have just a handful of fundamental principles. Sometimes a religion has no principles at all, and defines itself, instead, around a set of *practices*. Even so, to commit oneself to such practices will require faith in some set of propositions or other, even if two practitioners of the same religion can justify their identical practices via faith in *different* sets of propositions. But surely, a person won't commit to a life of religious practice unless she has faith that there's some good reason to do so.

We can now state our second essential ingredient of a religious life:

2. To live a religious life requires propositional faith directed towards the fundamental principles of the system of thought referred to in criterion 1, and/or towards some set of propositions such that faith in them can warrant commitment to the practices referred to in criterion 1.

Marxism *does* call for its adherents to unite into something like a community. After all, the *Communist Manifesto* ends with its rallying call: "Workers of the world, unite!". Moreover, Marxism seems to call upon its adherents to want certain things; to hope for them; to believe that certain things are possible; to have *faith* in certain principles.

If we define religiosity in terms of our first two criteria, and if we define a religion as a system of thought that calls for religiosity, then Marxism will be defined – erroneously – as a religion, even as the Marxist would insist that religion is the opiate of the people (Marx, 1982, p. 131). But in fact, religiosity includes more than just community membership and faith. It *requires* that one engage one's imagination. Marxism doesn't have this requirement. This is the third criterion.

Religiosity and Imagination

Religions *tend* to demand that their followers imaginatively engage with a particular set of narratives: a *narrative canon*. To engage with a narrative is, first and foremost, to engage one's *imagination*. Whether we're dealing with a fictional narrative, or a non-fictional narrative, if it's written *as* a narrative, then we engage our mind's eye. We imagine the scenes described unfolding, as if we're watching them. Neurological research suggests that we use the same

regions of our brain in witnessing an event of type *X*, as we do when we process a mere *narrative* about an event of type *X* (Oatley, 2008). To read or listen to a narrative is to engage in a sort of offline mental simulation of witnessing the events described.

I can't argue that religiosity *per se* requires narrative engagement. Not *all* religions have a narrative canon. Some forms of Buddhism revolve around stories about the Buddhas, but Zen Buddhists, despite their own body of legends and stories, seem to think that any such story threatens to serve as something of a *distraction* from the endeavour of enlightenment. Consider, for example, the quote attributed to the Zen Master, Linji Yixuan, "If you meet the Bhudda on the road, kill him." If you're on the road to your own personal enlightenment, engaging with stories about the Bhudda will only be a distraction. Why? Because we each have our own path to take.

Quakerism, despite its roots in Christianity, today eschews any particular canon of narratives. So, not every religion has a story, or a set of stories, with which we're supposed to engage our mind's eye. What I *can* say, is that every religion demands *some* form of imaginative exercise.

Zen Buddhism, for example, despite eschewing narrative, certainly seems to place a great weight upon acts of self-directed imagination. Certain elements of its meditative practice, known as *zazen*, for example, could be characterised as a very minimalistic, and intentionally sparse, form of self-directed imaginative engagement: *you are your breath*.

Sometimes religions invite us to imagine ourselves, or something around us, in what can only be called, a literally true light. According to Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch (in his commentary to the book of Exodus, 20:2), for example, we are not simply commanded to believe that God exists. Instead, we have to *view ourselves* as living in a world in which God exists, and to see ourselves as His creations. According to Judaism, we *do* live in a world in which God exists. We are God's creatures. But that doesn't mean that we automatically *view ourselves as* living in such a world, *as* His creatures. We don't always consciously attend to these facts.

When you're being asked to imagine yourself, or something around you, in a *true* light, I would call it *attentive-seeing-as*. This can be *self-directed*, as when the Jews try to see themselves as a creature of God, or *other-directed*, as when the Quakers "endeavor to see "that of God" in every

person" (Clarke, et al., 2011, p. 5). I call it *attentive-seeing-as* because you don't believe that you're making something up – instead, you're trying to attend to something that's all too easily ignored. It's as if you're engaging your imagination in order to see the world more *accurately* – in *accordance* with what you believe, or in accordance with your faith. When someone tries to engage in attentive-seeing-as, I will describe them as *adopting a perspective*.

Terrence Cuneo describes another imaginative exercise, this time associated with Eastern Orthodox Christianity (Cuneo, 2017). He describes an attitude that Eastern Orthodox Christians try to adopt towards the saints. It is something more than mere veneration, but it can't be called *emulation* or *identification*, because those attitudes might be, in certain cases, inappropriate. The attitude in question, Cuneo calls "alignment". To align yourself with a person is, in some sense, to stand with them, to share in their ideals and their goals. To stand with a person has nothing to do with spatial proximity. The proximity is generated instead, symbolically, by an act of the imagination. Indeed, religiosity often seems to demand aligning yourself with a personal God, or with the saints, or with some person or other, even if those persons are beyond our emulation or identification.

Howard Wettstein talks about *signing on* to an image (Wettstein, 2012). Take the image of God judging us on Rosh Hashonah (the Jewish New Year). What it means to *sign on* to that image, I take it, is to agree to structure your life through its prism, to engage your emotions with it, to make it your *own*, to choreograph your life with this image as part of your personal symbolic landscape. What religious people *do*, characteristically, is to engage in a very powerful and intimate way, with certain images, symbols, and metaphors, at certain times; to *sign on to them*. This is where religiosity goes further than propositional forms of faith and manifests what is sometimes called "global faith", or "faith as a venture"; i.e., models of faith that require a person to organise and orient their lives in a certain way.

We can now formulate our third and final essential ingredient of a norm-kind for the religious life:

3. To live a religious life requires imaginative engagement (either via a species of make-belief, attentive seeing-as, alignment, or in terms of *signing on*, depending on the

context) with the canonical narratives, metaphors, prescribed games of make-belief, persons, and/or perspectives of the system of ideas and practices in question.

Religious life, at least as a norm-kind, is supposed to be absorbing. It is the imaginative component of religion that gives rise, most centrally, to this quality. It is one thing to *believe* in a religion; it is another thing to *sign on*. Signing on (alongside the other acts of imagination that we've described) is what it means, *to live one's life in service of an ideal* (this is a phrase I borrow from John Kvanvig (2018)). Signing on engages the imagination. There is something defective about a religiosity that believes in a creed but fails to engage the imagination; that would be a faith without a full-blooded religious psychology.

Religion Defined

So far, I've argued for the following three claims:

1. A religious life is a life that is meant to be lived as a part of a community that defines itself around a system of ideas and/or practices.

2. To live a religious life requires propositional faith directed towards the fundamental principles of the system of thought referred to in criterion 1 (or, at least to their conjunction), and/or towards some set of propositions such that faith in them can warrant commitment to the practices referred to in criterion 1.

3. To live a religious life requires imaginative engagement (either via a species of make-belief, attentive seeing-as, alignment, or in terms of signing on, depending on the context) with the canonical narratives, metaphors, prescribed games of make-belief, persons, and/or perspectives of that system of ideas and/or practices.

These three claims give rise to a norm-kind for religiosity. If I'm right, then a person is religious to the extent that her lifestyle approximates this norm-kind. And of course, this allows, as we *should* allow, that a person can commit oneself to something that *isn't* a religion, such as Marxism, or even football fandom, in a distinctively religious way.

Where past definitions of "religion" have gone wrong, I claim, is that they haven't recognised that religiosity has to come first. With an understanding of religiosity already in place, however, we can define "religion" as follows:

Definition: For any system of ideas and/or practices *R*, *R* is a religion if and only if:

i. *R* calls upon its adherents to live their lives as part of a community that defines itself around *R*, and

ii. *R* calls upon its adherents to have propositional faith in the conjunction of some set (or other) of propositions, and

iii. *R* calls upon its adherents to engage their imagination with a set of canonical narratives, metaphors, persons, prescribed games of make-belief and/or perspectives.

A person can exhibit all of the elements of religiosity even in their football fandom. But to be a fan of a given team doesn't require, or *call for*, all three elements in the way that a religion does. What does it mean for religion to *call for* religiosity? Since a religion is a set of ideas and/or practices, it can contain prescriptions within its set of core propositions. What makes something a religion is that it *prescribes* religiosity of its adherents (and sometimes, in the case of proselytising religions, it can seem to prescribe adherence of all people). That's all it means for a religion to "call for" religiosity.

A person can be a Marxist with truly religious zeal. Not only might they see themselves as members of the global proletariat (the working class), not only might they have faith in the fundamental principles of Marxist ideology, but they might even see the world, imaginatively, through the prism of Marxist symbols and metaphors. But Marxism *isn't* a religion. Our definition can explain why.

Marxism *doesn't* call upon its adherents to engage their imagination in this distinctively religious way. You're no less good a Marxist for not being interested in Marxist art, narratives, metaphors, or poetry. It is because Marxism *doesn't* call upon Marxists to instantiate this third element of

religiosity that Marxism *isn't* a religion. Indeed, a Marxist might rightly point out that it is this imaginative element of religion that can make religion such a dangerous opiate to begin with.

Do you agree with my definition of religion? If you do, that's great. We now have a clear subject-matter for the philosophy of religion to study. If you don't, you'll have to mount an argument. The best form of argument here, it seems, would be to discover a counterexample: either a clear case of a religion that doesn't call for religiosity in the ways I've defined it, or a clear case of a system of thought and/or practices that *does* call for religiosity, just as I've defined it, but which clearly *isn't* a religion. But if that's what you're doing, then – despite our disagreement – I commend you, because you are now practicing the philosophy of religion. You are philosophising *about* religion.

But before we move on to the next chapter, let me see if I can pre-empt some of your possible counterexamples and try to bat them away.

What about a desert island cast-away – a Robinson Crusoe? Can't he found a religion, even once he's lost hope of founding a *community*?

What about the last surviving human after a nuclear holocaust, can she not found a religion, even without hope of founding a community?

Doesn't the reliance of my definition upon community erroneously rule out such possibilities?

No. I think that a Crusoe figure *can* found a religion, but only if he harbours the *desire* to found a community around the system of ideas and/or practices in question; only if that system *calls* for community. Only if the lifestyle in question is *meant* to be lived as part of a community. The fact that he knows that this desire and this calling is unlikely, or even impossible to satisfy, doesn't, on my definition, undermine the fact that he founded a religion.

But, what if Robinson Crusoe founded a system of beliefs and/or practices according to which other people are supposed to find their *own* paths? What if his system of beliefs and/or practices *renounces* any call for community building around it? What about a personal religion that detests the notion of community? The philosopher, Dean Zimmerman, put it to me (in correspondence) that, if the tenets of Crusoe's faith were rich, and if it included, for example,

lots of prayer, and ritual, we'd still want to call it a *religion*, despite its renunciation of community, even if we could only call it a *private religion*. My definition, and its reliance upon the call to community, seems erroneously to rule out Crusoe's community-renouncing religion.

The community-renouncing lifestyle that our Crusoe adopts certainly contains elements of religiosity. I readily admit that much. And a person *is* religious to the extent to which his lifestyle approximates the norm-kind for religiosity that I've laid out. This Crusoe's lifestyle approximates two elements of that norm-kind to a very high degree, high enough – perhaps – for us to call him a religious person. You might even think that he's founded, or wanted to found, a community of people who shun conformity. That would still be a *community*. But if Crusoe's lifestyle really does shun *community*, and not merely *conformity*, then it's going to be very hard to maintain that his lifestyle satisfies the first characteristic of my definition of a religious life. If to shun communal belonging is automatically to belong to the community of community shunners, then we've probably made communal belonging far too easy to achieve. So, is Crusoe's community-shunning religion a counterexample to my definition?

No. I think that my definition is *right* to deny Crusoe's community-shunning lifestyle the title of "religion". I can demonstrate the point via a *reductio*. A *reductio ad absurdum* is a form of argument that assumes your opponent's point of view in order to show that absurdity will follow. So, let's assume that our Crusoe's community-shunning religion really is a religion.

On the basis of this assumption, we're going to find it hard to avoid the conclusion that there are, in the world, at least as many religions as there are idiosyncratic spiritual people. But, surely we don't want a definition of "religion" to have that consequence. Accordingly, I would suggest that a "private religion" is no more of a religion than "false teeth" are teeth. Private religions are *not* religions.

I'll leave it to critics to try to find and develop more candidate counterexamples. But I don't know of any that work. A religion is a system of ideas and/or practices that calls for religiosity from its adherents.

Let's move on to chapter 2!

Further Reading:

In addition to articles and books cited in this chapter

On the Belief-Plus account of Faith:

Michael Scott & Finlay Malcolm, "Faith, belief and fictionalism", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 98/S1 (2017): 257–274

On Non-doxastic accounts of Faith:

Daniel McKaughan, "Cognitive opacity and the analysis of faith: acts of faith interiorized through a glass only darkly", *Religious Studies*, 54/4 (2018): 576-585.

On Global Faith:

Robert Audi, *Rationality and Religious Commitment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 2011

Chapter 2: Religious Language

This book will say things about religion, God, and the ultimate values that this life might hold. Before we can say those things, we need to be sure that they're the sort of things that can be spoken about. We'll also need to be sure that when religious people, texts, and traditions, talk about God and ultimate value, they really mean what they seem to be saying.

Why should we think that we *can't* speak about God, or ultimate value? Surely, we *can* speak about them. If we couldn't, then we wouldn't be able to *say* that we couldn't! And since we *can* (falsely, it seems) say that we *can't* speak about God and ultimate value, it turns out that we *can* speak about them. Case closed.

Similarly, why shouldn't we take at face value the words of sincerely religious people who claim to believe in God, or some other ultimate value? Surely, they mean exactly what they say they mean. But, as we shall see, these questions turn out to be more compelling than they seem at first.

Describing the Indescribable

Yaqub Al-Kindi is thought to be the father of Islamic philosophy. He was born in approximately the year 800. He seems much more comfortable telling us what God isn't than what God is. He wrote:

> The true One … has no matter, no form, no quantity, no quality, no relation, is not described by any of the remaining intelligible things, and has no genus … It is, accordingly, pure and simple unity...
>
> (al-Kindī, 1974, p. 112)

Now, I'm not exactly sure what all of that means, but it certainly leaves very little room for description! In fact, it almost looks like a contradiction. How can we say that God is "pure and simple unity" if we're not willing to say that he has any properties at all? Isn't *pure and simple unity* a property?

The first Rabbinic Jew to have been well-versed in secular philosophy was Saadya Gaon. He lived less than a century after Al-Kindi. He too denies that God has any properties of his own, since God created all properties. Maimonides is widely recognised to be the greatest Jewish philosopher, and he follows closely in Saadya's footsteps on this issue.

In the Christian tradition, we find even earlier thinkers denying that God can be described. Pseudo-Dionysius (late fifth century to early sixth century) describes a process in which we come to deny more and more claims about God, until we come to recognise that language has no tools capable of describing Him at all:

> [M]y argument now rises from what is below up to the transcendent, and the more it climbs, the more language falters, and when it has passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable.
>
> (Ibn Yusuf, 1989, p. 111)

The more we come to recognise what God isn't, the more we find ourselves to have a real sense of communion with a God that defies positive description. For this reason, the school of thought I'm describing – with its emphasis on what God *isn't* – has been called *Negative Theology*. But these paradoxical ways of talking – describing things as indescribable – are not restricted to Abrahamic religions.

The Hindu school of thought known as *Advaita Vedanta* embraces a practice known as *neti neti* (literally, "not this, not that") which is supposed to bring a person closer to Brahman (which is the highest ultimate value, reality, or you might call it *God*). The practice is supposed to work by negating all that isn't Brahman, on the assumption that Brahman itself admits of no positive characterisation in words.

Christopher Chapple groups this Hindu practice together with the Yoga tradition, and with the Madhyamaka school of Indian Buddhism, since, "In each of these practices, the method is clearly negative: the absolute of each system is spoken [of] in terms of what it is not. Each systematically denies all that is represented by language until the silence of the absolute is found" (Chapple, 1981, p. 34).

Chapple goes on to argue that even the, so-called, "mind-only" tradition of the Yogacara Buddhists and of some schools of Hinduism, which seems to endorse a more robustly describable world-view – a world-view according to which all things exist only in the mind – is actually committed to the same basic thesis, namely, that – *even* to say that all things exist in the mind is, ultimately, to say too much, since the *absolute* truth cannot be described at all.

Witness the words of Nagarjuna, widely respected as one of the most influential Buddhist philosophers:

> I prostrate to Gautama Who,
> through compassion
> Taught the true doctrine
> Which leads to the relinquishing of all views.
>
> (Garfield & Priest, 2003, p. 10)

But if he relinquishes all views, isn't he also relinquishing the view that all views should be relinquished?

Similarly, the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra (X.227) – a central text of Mahayana Buddhism – teaches that, for the person who achieves enlightenment:

> … there are no Buddhas, no truths, no fruition;
> no causal agents, no pervasion, no *nirvana*,
> no passing away, no birth.
>
> (Chapple, 1981, p. 41)

So, is it supposed to be a *truth* that there are no truths?

What's so puzzling about these traditions is that, despite telling us how little can be said about God or ultimate reality, they also tend to say an awful lot about those things: that we should have faith in them, or worship them, etc. Due to the distinct whiff of paradox, most analytic philosophers of religion have been quick to dismiss anything that sounds like negative theology, or to ignore it all together.

But Negative Theology is a widespread religious phenomenon. It would be rash to write it off summarily. Instead, we should ask two questions:

1. Is there any way of making sense of indescribability?

2. Is there any motivation for thinking that God or the Absolute *would* be indescribable?

Thankfully, in recent years, a small number of sympathetic analytic philosophers *have* turned their mind to these questions. Another word for Negative Theology is apophaticism. The word "apophasis", in Greek, just means *denial*. One way to divide the territory ahead of us is to distinguish between those philosophers of religion who, when answering our two questions, take apophaticism literally, and those who don't. Those who take it literally believe that God, or some other ultimate being or value, is – in some substantive sense – *indescribable*. Those who *don't* take their apophaticism literally, by contrast, accept that anything we can talk about *must* be describable. Nevertheless, non-literal apophaticism says that there is some good reason to *say* that God, or some other ultimate being or value, is indescribable even if it isn't *literally* indescribable. Let's examine these two views in turn.

Literal Apophaticism

At least since Aristotle, it's been a widely accepted principle that no proposition can be true and false simultaneously. This is known as the law of non-contradiction. Some philosophers, even in the analytic tradition (with its reverence for logic), have argued that the law of non-contradiction might be false. These philosophers are known as dialetheists.

Take, for instance, the paradox of the liar. The liar says:

- "This statement is false"

Is his statement true or false? If it's true, then it must be false. And, if it's false then it must be true! According to the dialetheist, the liar's statement is a counterexample to the law of non-contradiction. It's a statement which is both true *and* false. Accordingly, you might recognise that it's a contradiction to say of some being or value that it's *indescribable* (after all, if it were really indescribable, you wouldn't be able to describe it), and yet, you might think it *true*. Some contradictions *are* true. Perhaps this is one of them.

Many apophatic theologians in the Abrahamic religions were explicitly wedded to the general philosophical outlook of Aristotle, and to his law of non-contradiction. Accordingly, it seems

unlikely that they were dialetheists. Even when dealing with eastern religions which didn't fall under the influence of Greek philosophy, we might want to be wary before we read them as embracing contradiction. Are there no *other* ways to make sense of their words?

Another option put forward by contemporary analytic philosophers, hoping to make sense of apophaticism, appeals to two different levels of reality. On this way of looking at things, we have to make a distinction between how the world is from God's point of view, and how the world is from our point of view. This then allows us to talk about what's true relative to one, and what's true relative to the other, point of view.

Call these two types of truth, $truth_1$ and $truth_2$. Mystical Jewish thinkers have sometimes called $truth_1$ *mitzido* (meaning, from God's point of view), and $truth_2$ *mitzideinu* (meaning, from our point of view). In Buddhist and Hindu thought, something like $truth_1$ is referred to as *paramārtha* (ultimate truth), and something like $truth_2$ is referred to as *saṁvṛti* (conventional truth).

Alternatively, you can divide reality into the *fundamental* facts, and those facts which are somehow *less* fundamental. For instance, you might think it more accurately carves the joints of reality to describe my table as a collection of atoms arranged table-wise, than to describe it as a table, but that doesn't mean that you'll give up on the word "table"; even though you think that tables are less fundamental constituents of reality than atoms. Table-talk might be less fundamentally true than atom-talk, but both are true!

The distinction between $truth_1$ and $truth_2$ allows you to say, without contradicting yourself, that it's $true_2$ that *there are no $truths_1$ and no $falsehoods_1$ about God*. Likewise, the distinction between fundamental and less fundamental truths allows you to say that it's a non-fundamental truth about God that *there are no fundamental truths, and no fundamental falsehoods, about God*.

More generally, whenever an apophatic theologian looks to be contradicting himself, it could be that he's making one fundamental assertion, and one non-fundamental assertion, or he's making one assertion relative to the standards of $truth_1$ and a *different* assertion relative to the standards of $truth_2$. The appearance of contradiction would then be an illusion.

But why think that the contours of reality would look so radically different from God's point of view than they do from ours? Furthermore, if there are no fundamental truths about God, then there's nothing about how God is fundamentally that makes it the case that, say, Christianity is (non-fundamentally) true, and that Islam, say, is (non-fundamentally) false. This would seem to imply that apophatic religions all collapse into one another, since, by their own lights, there's nothing about how God/reality fundamentally is to make any of them (non-fundamentally) true or false.

A much simpler way to make sense of apophaticism is to distinguish between two sorts of descriptions, those which John Hick called "substantial", and those which he called *merely* "formal" (Hick, 1989, p. 239). Substantial descriptions of God would include descriptions of His being good, powerful, wise, and the like. Purely *formal* descriptions of God would include descriptions of His existing, His being the referent of the name, "God", his being such that 2+2=4, and the like – descriptions which, if true, would be *trivially* true; descriptions which are automatically true of every entity – such as *being self-identical*.

Perhaps, for the apophatic theologian, it isn't true that *no* description applies to God. Rather, it's *substantial* descriptions that don't apply, even though *formal* descriptions *do*. To stave off contradiction, we'd better hope that "being such that only formal descriptions apply" is itself a *formal* description, and not a substantial one! It sounds pretty substantial to me.

Simon Hewitt escapes this problem (Hewitt, 2020, pp. 23-24). The descriptions that apply, he says, needn't be trivial, but they have to be "reflectively semantic". A reflectively semantic description of *x* is any description of *x* in terms of the relationship between *x* and language. Those are the only descriptions we can apply to God.

Clearly, then, *being indescribable* is a reflectively semantic description. Accordingly, Hewitt would allow us to describe God in that way. And, despite appearances to the contrary, this apophatic description of God doesn't mean that *no* descriptions apply. Rather, it means that descriptions that aren't *reflectively semantic* don't apply.

Accordingly, we can't say that God is good, or strong, or wise, if we want to be taken literally. God isn't the sort of thing to which such descriptions can apply. But we *can* say that He's

indescribable, and we can say this without contradicting ourselves. What we really mean is that *some* descriptions (i.e., those which aren't reflectively semantic) don't apply.

To summarise: we've seen three ways in which to make sense of apophaticism, taken literally.

1. Apophaticism is contradictory, but some contradictions are true; or
2. The world divides into multiple levels. One half of any apparent apophatic contradiction is spoken relative to one level of reality, and the other half is spoken relative to another level. The contradiction therefore evaporates; or
3. Apophaticism makes a distinction between different sorts of description. When it says that God, or ultimate reality, is indescribable, it only means to restrict one category of description, but not *all* descriptions (and certainly not the description of indescribability).

This brings us to our next question. Why should we think that anything like this might be true?

Simplicity

If your brand of literal-apophaticism is dialethic (that is to say, the brand which allows for true contradictions), you might argue along the following lines:

- Language and logic are pretty good tools. They help us to think about all sorts of things, including the structure of the universe. But, if language and logic are ever liable to break down, and yield true contradictions, then it's likely to happen when you've reached the most fundamental truths there are. So of course, God, or Nirvana, or Absolute Reality, or what have you, would force us to assert contradictions.

But, given the extraordinary powers of language and logic, why should we think that they *ever* break down, or – at least – that they ever break down so severely as to yield true *contradictions*?

If you reject dialetheism and adopt one of the other two varieties of literal-apophaticism, you might be basing your position upon the *simplicity* of God/ultimate reality. What do I mean by "simplicity" here?

In medieval times, when philosophers described God as simple, they meant that He couldn't be divided into parts. But they meant more than that too. They meant that God was somehow prior to any concept or distinction.

Here's a really important distinction for philosophers: the distinction between an object and its properties. If I'm holding a red ball, I can distinguish between the object – the ball – and its *properties* – being round, and red. But, if God or ultimate reality is simple, and if being simple means being prior to any concept or distinction, then God or ultimate reality will be neither an object, nor a property, nor an object with properties, because God will be *prior* to the entire distinction between objects and properties. But why think that God should be simple in this way?

Well, according to Aristotle, whenever we are confronted with an object and its properties, we're entitled to ask for an *explanation*: why did this object come to have these properties?

Take, for example, my table. It is matter with form (i.e., an object with properties). It therefore calls for explanation: "Why does this matter take this form?"

By way of an answer, I must first distinguish the matter (*i.e.*, the wood and the nails) from its form (*i.e.*, its *tablehood*). An explanation must also provide us with what's called an "efficient cause", in this case: the movements and actions of a certain carpenter over a certain time, which took the matter and gave it this form. Still, the explanation isn't complete until we've provided a *final* cause, which would be something like the *motive* or *goal* of the carpenter. This will tell us why the carpenter fashioned that material into that form in that way.

Next, we could take the wood, or the nails, and ask for an explanation of why *those* parcels of matter (i.e., objects) have the forms (i.e. properties) that they have (or *had* before they were made into a table), and the process of explanation will begin again.

Now, if God exists, or if any reality is thought to be somehow ultimate, you might think that it will have to be the ultimate explanation of everything else. God, for example, is thought to be the reason why there's something rather than nothing. But, if He were an object that had properties, you'd still be owed an explanation. Why does this object have these properties?

If there really is an *ultimate* explanation, that explanation must transcend the very distinction between object and property. It must be prior to all concepts and distinctions. It must be *simple*. Only something with this sort of *conceptual simplicity* fails to call for explanation. Only something conceptually simple transcends the distinction between matter and form. In other words, explanation can only bottom out in conceptual simplicity.

So, if descriptions of God/ultimate reality are true, then they certainly can't be *fundamentally* true. Or, if you don't like the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental truth, you might think that no substantive descriptions at all can apply to God/ultimate reality. When we say that God loves, or that God is wise, we must be speaking metaphorically, because – in actual fact – God transcends all descriptions if He is to be the ultimate explanation of all that is.

According to Simon Hewitt, we come to adopt theistic ways of speaking because we really do believe that the question of existence – why is there something rather than nothing? – has an answer. God is the answer. But in order to be an answer to that question; in order to be the ultimate explanation of all that is – God needs to be simple; so simple as to transcend the very notion of an entity to which language can refer.

Consequently, when we say that "God exists," according to Hewitt, we say something true, but because we're speaking God-talk, and because God-talk has a different sort of a "grammar" to other areas of language, the true thing we're saying doesn't refer to some entity, and then attribute the property of existence to it. Rather, we're committing ourselves to the claim that the question of existence has an answer.

When we say that God is good, and God is just, we're also not referring to an entity, and then attributing properties. God-talk is different to other areas of language, and it has to be, because God – in order to be the answer to the question of existence – must be simple. To illustrate this view, Hewitt quotes a sublime piece of prose from St. Augustine's *Confessions*:

> And what is He? I asked the earth; and it answered, 'I am not He.' And everything on earth made the same confession. I asked the sea and the deeps, and the creeping things that lived, and they replied, 'We are not your God. Seek higher than we.' I asked the breezy air; and the universal atmosphere with its inhabitants answered, 'I am not God.' I asked the heavens, the sun, moon, and stars: 'Neither,' they said, 'are

> we the God whom you seek.' And I answered all these things which crowd about the door of my flesh, 'You have told me concerning my God that you are not He. Tell me something positive about Him!' And with a loud voice they exclaimed: 'He made us.'
>
> (Augustine, 1961, X.vi)

Accordingly, we've been led to take apophaticism literally because of the role that God-talk is supposed to play, and because of our understanding of what it means to be an ultimate explanation. To say that God exists is to say that the universe has an ultimate explanation, even if it transcends all categories and concepts.

But perhaps some facts don't *call* for explanation. Or perhaps it's okay for explanation to stop with something less than totally *simple*. Disgraced comedian Louis CK once described how frustrating a conversation with children can be (excuse the exotic language):

> They just keep coming; more questions: "Why?", "why?", "why?" ... My daughter the other day, she's like, "Papa why can't we go outside?"
>
> "Well, cuz' it's raining."
>
> "Why?"
>
> "Well, water's coming out of the sky!"
>
> "Why?"
>
> "Because it was in a cloud."
>
> "Why?"
>
> "Well, clouds form when there's vapor."
>
> "Why?"
>
> "I don't know! I don't know! That's... I don't know any more *things*. Those are all the things I know!"
>
> "Why?"
>
> "Cuz' I'm stupid, okay? I'm stupid!"
>
> "Why?"
>
> "Well, because I didn't pay attention in school, okay? I went to school, but I didn't listen in class."
>
> "Why?"
>
> "Cuz' I was high all the time. I smoked too much pot."

"Why?"

"Cuz' my parents gave me no guidance..."

"Why?"... This goes on for hours and hours and it gets so weird and abstract. At the end it's like, "Why?"

"Well, because some things *are* and some things are *not*."

"Why?"

"Well, because things that are *not* can't *be*."

"Why?"

"Because then nothing wouldn't *be*. You can't have f*cking nothing *isn't*; everything *is*!"

"Why?"

"Cuz', if nothing *wasn't*, there'd be f*cking all kinds of sh*t that we don't like: giant ants with top hats dancing around. There's no room for all that sh*t!"

"Why?"

"… You eat your French fries you little…"

(Székely, 2011)

At some point, the right answer to a why-question really is, "Well, because some things *are* and some things are *not*." We've dug down as far as explanation can hope to seek. At that point you need an investigation-terminating answer, like the one that Louis CK sought to give his daughter.

But the existence of something so simple as to make it impossible to talk about doesn't really *explain* anything. So, why not stop sooner? Why go so far as to posit such simplicity? Instead, explain as much as you possibly can, which may well take you all the way to the posit of a being who is necessarily existent, and (say) necessarily omnipotent (we'll see, in the next chapter, of course, whether you're convinced by any argument for the existence of God). But, once you've accepted the existence of God, do we then need to ask, "What causes God to have all of those necessary properties?" No!

At that point, it may be in order to say: "Those properties are essential to a being who grounds all other beings. He *has* to have those properties." Why? Because that's how the notions of necessity, grounding, power, and being relate to one another. Why? "Well, *because*!" At no

point am I tempted to ascend to the posit of a being so simple that we can't actually talk about it. So, eat your French Fries and stop asking why.

God being the ultimate explanation isn't therefore, to my mind, a good enough reason to think that God is conceptually simple. And, if God isn't conceptually simple, then I don't understand why God-talk should be treated as completely different to other uses of language (although, admittedly, language does have *lots* of uses, and – as we'll see, there's good reason to think that religious language aims at more than just describing the world).

Admittedly, you might think, with Saadya Gaon, that God created all properties. But, on the other hand, it's not clear that properties and abstract categories stand in need of *creation* to begin with. Perhaps properties and other abstract things, since they don't exist in space or time – and since they have no *beginning* in time – need no maker.

Moreover, it might well be possible for properties and other abstract things to be somehow grounded in God, or in the mind of God, whilst also *applying* to God. So, even if God is somehow the ground of all properties, it's still no reason to think that God is conceptually simple.

Without a belief in God's conceptual simplicity, or without a belief in dialetheism (i.e., the view that some contradictions are true), it's not clear to me why anybody would accept a literal apophaticism.

Non-literal Apophaticism

You might think that God, or ultimate reality, can only ever be partially known. Consequently, at any given time, our knowledge of such things might be like the knowledge you have of a character in a book, before you've finished reading the whole thing. You might know all sorts of things about this character, but those things which you know might later be cast in a different light, once you know *everything* there is to know about her – once you've finished the book.

That day will never come when the character is God, or ultimate reality.

Moreover, there might be some aspects of God or ultimate reality that you can experience directly, perhaps in the midst of some sort of religious experience, but which you don't yet have

a rich enough vocabulary to describe in depth. Accordingly, when you say that God is indescribable, or that you feel the presence of something in your life that defies description, you might be saying things that are literally false – since nothing is indescribable – but your utterance might *point*, as metaphors do, towards those aspects of the Divine that you feel ill-equipped to say much about; or, you might be using this language in order to remind yourself and others to be humble, in the face of what you do know about God/ultimate reality, given how much you recognise that you *don't* yet know.

Moreover, there might be some experiences which, even if they *can* be described, can only be known fully by *living* them. Using language to insult language might be the best way to wake somebody up from the complacency of knowing something merely by description, encouraging them to go out and know it directly.

For example, the Tao sage, Zhuangzi speaks of a religious ideal, known as *wu-wei*. *Wu-wei* is a state which is variously translated into English as "no-trying," "no-doing," "non-action," or "effortless action."

Imagine a breath-taking gymnastic routine. The gymnast jumps, flips, turns, and dazzles the imagination. But she is so practiced, and the routine is so wired into her muscle-memory, so to speak, that her mind is almost empty as she does it.

Even though it took the gymnast many years of effort and practice to get to the stage where she could perform this way, there's a sense in which the performance itself is *effortless*. She is in the state of *wu-wei*. How might language be used to shake a person from their slumber and encourage them in the path towards *wu-wei*?

Zhuangzi tells the following story:

> Duke Huan was in his hall reading a book. The wheelwright Pian, who was in the yard below chiselling a wheel, laid down his mallet and chisel, stepped up into the hall, and said to Duke Huan, "This book Your Grace is reading - may I venture to ask whose words are in it?"
> "The words of the sages," said the duke.
> "Are the sages still alive?"

> "Dead long ago," said the duke.
>
> "In that case, what you are reading there is nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old!"
>
> "Since when does a wheelwright have permission to comment on the books I read?" said Duke Huan. "If you have some explanation, well and good. If not, it's your life!"
>
> Wheelwright Pian said, "I look at it from the point of view of my own work. When I chisel a wheel, if the blows of the mallet are too gentle, the chisel slides and won't take hold. But if they're too hard, it bites in and won't budge. Not too gentle, not too hard - you can get it in your hand and feel it in your mind. You can't put it into words, and yet there's a knack to it somehow. I can't teach it to my son, and he can't learn it from me. So I've gone along for seventy years and at my age I'm still chiselling wheels. When the men of old died, they took with them the things that couldn't be handed down. So what you are reading there must be nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old."
>
> (Zhuangzi, 2013, p. 107)

It's true that, to do the job right, the blows of the chisel can't be too hard nor too soft. Those words are accurate. But the know-how itself is not communicated by those words. Likewise, the words of the dead, though they may be true, fail to capture something of their lived experience itself – like the know-how of the wheelwright, which cannot be known fully without experience. This is what renders their words – in fact, all words – like chaff. The irony, of course, is that Zhuangzi is telling us this story in words. Are they too, merely the dregs of a dead man?

These Taoist reflections led the philosopher, Julianne Chung, to the following suggestion. Perhaps apophatic language is employed, like this story itself, simply "to shift people's focus away from taking on particular" beliefs, so that they might, instead, be inspired to "engage the world." According to this suggestion:

> apophatic utterances are best interpreted as *invitations* to engage the world aesthetically and creatively… their goal is principally to motivate us to act in ways that will allow us to *appreciate* the extraordinary or divine, rather than to, say, *believe* that some proposition regarding the extraordinary or divine is true.
>
> (Chung, 2020, p. 102)

Some of the most important parts of life, though they can be described, cannot be described *discursively*. Apophatic ways of speaking – though literally false – may help us to correct a tendency to overconfident and arrogant theology; reminding us that beyond all the true things we might be able to say, there are things to experience that the words can't do justice to.

When apophatic theologians say things about God that contradict themselves, maybe they're not saying that their contradictions should be *believed*. Rather, as Chung puts it, "the activity of trying to represent God, and the recognitions of its failure, may promote a closer relationship with God."

Just because you don't think that apophaticism is literally true doesn't entail that you should write it off altogether. Apophatic ways of speaking may be important, in all of these ways, even if they can't be used to express literal truths.

Metaphoricism

If you're convinced that apophatic language is only sensible when taken metaphorically, then perhaps you'll also be attracted to a view that's known as *metaphoricism* or *panmetaphoricism*. According to this view, anything that we can truly say about God, can only be expressed through metaphors.

Gordon Kaufman writes, "God is ultimately profound Mystery and utterly escapes our every effort to grasp or comprehend him. Our concepts are at best metaphors and symbols of his being, not literally applicable" (Kaufman, 1975, p. 95). Likewise, Flora Keshgegian bases her theology on "the traditional premise that everything we assert about God is metaphorical" (Keshegian, 2008).

Now, you can rightly ask whether metaphoricism itself is only a metaphor. If it is, we'd need to know what it's a metaphor for! On the other hand, if we're to take it literally, that we can only speak metaphorically about God, the position undermines itself.

Here's a more sophisticated version of the view:

> **Metaphoricism:** Anything that we say about God – so long as what we're saying about God isn't *reflectively semantic* – can express a truth only as a metaphor.

The view itself isn't to be taken as a metaphor. Now the problem is that "exists" is not a reflectively semantic description. Accordingly, if the sentence "God exists" expresses a truth, it does so, for the metaphoricist, only as a metaphor. And thus, as Daniel Howard-Snyder points out, the metaphoricist seems to be committed to the claim that "there is nothing about God in virtue of which the predicate 'exists' can apply literally to God." But that claim entails that "the statement 'God exists' is false. But if the statement 'God exists' is false, then the statement 'God does not exist' is true" (Howard-Snyder, 2017, p. 31). And thus, metaphoricism quickly descends into atheism.

The metaphoricist can employ some fancy footwork to avoid this trap. She can refine her view to allow for *formal*, rather than just *reflectively semantic* properties to apply *literally* to God. So now, the view becomes:

> **Metaphoricism*:** Anything that we say about God – so long as what we're saying about God isn't *merely formal* nor *reflectively semantic* – can express a truth only as a metaphor.

Existence is a *formal* property. Accordingly, the metaphoricist* can say that God *literally* exists. At this point, Howard-Snyder releases another criticism for the view.

Metaphors are only useful to the extent that they are *apt*. "But is it really possible," Howard-Snyder asks, "for a substantial predicate to apply metaphorically to God more aptly than another if there is no determinate fact of the matter about God in virtue of which it does?" (Ibid., p. 46). If no substantial predicates apply to God literally, then it seems that there can be nothing about God to make some metaphors more apt than others. And if we can't allow that some metaphors are more apt than others, it seems pointless to try to use metaphors to describe God at all.

Metaphor and other forms of non-literal language are widespread and important in the religious life. Indeed, I would argue that apophaticism is an important, though literally false, way of speaking about God. But to take this insight to the extreme of metaphoricism* seems like a losing battle.

Expressivism, and Fictionalism

As well as calling religion the opiate of the masses, Karl Marx said that religion is "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions" (Marx, 1982, p. 131). These are beautiful words. They are echoed by Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was much more sympathetic to religion. Discussing the doctrine of predestination – according to which God has already decided who will be saved in the end of days, or according to which everything that happens is somehow the will of God –Wittgenstein says that it is "less a theory than a sigh, or a cry," and though a person might think it to be true, it isn't "permissible for someone to assert it as a truth, unless he himself says it in torment" (Wittgenstein, 1966, p. 56).

You might believe in the religious things that you say, but there's something distinctly irreligious about you saying them if they're not also deeply connected with the way you experience the world, and your emotions. And thus, some religious utterances are, by nature, both assertions and sighs. Other religious utterances are, both assertions and the expression of hope, or elation, or desire.

Another thing we might notice about religious language and belief is the peculiar ways in which it relates to the rest of our lives. How can there be religious scientists who would never believe in magic, and who search for natural explanations for every phenomenon they come across, but who believe, or at least have faith, that Moses split the Red sea, that Jesus turned water into wine, that Mohammed split the moon in two, or that the Buddha made flowers rain down from the sky? How can they be so critical and scientific in one area of life, and so credulous in another?

These sorts of reflections have led some philosophers to adopt (at least) one of the following two theories:

1. Expressivism about religious language

   Religious language doesn't mean what it seems to mean. Despite appearances to the contrary, it expresses no content that could be true or false. Instead, it is used to express an emotion (and nothing more).

2. Fictionalism about religious language

Even though religious language does express content that could be true or false, when a person uses religious language, they're not really asserting that content (even if they think that they are). Instead, they're **pretending** *to assert that content (even if, in so doing, they're also fooling themselves into thinking that they believe what they say).*

We've already seen that religious people's religious beliefs don't seem to shift in consultation with evidence in the way that their other beliefs do. And a religious assertion barely deserves to be called religious if it doesn't come with some sort of emotional and psychological investment. Accordingly, for Richard Braithwaite, the main purpose behind religious language is to express the *intention* and the *desire* to live in a certain way. To say that "God is love," for example, doesn't express a belief about God, but merely an intention to live a loving way of life.

Moreover, when religious people tell stories about Jesus, or the Buddha – even though the stories make empirical claims that could, in principle, be tested – one misses the forest for the trees if one thinks that those empirical claims are what matter to the speaker. What matters to the speaker are the ways in which those stories might guide our actions. Consequently, Braithwaite treats some religious utterances as mere expressions of intention or desire, and some religious utterances – like religious story-telling – as useful, action-guiding fictions (Braithwaite, 1955, p. 32). Braithwaite therefore combines elements of expressivism and fictionalism.

But notice: if every Christian theological doctrine merely expresses an intention to pursue a Christian or "agapeistic" (i.e., loving) way of life, then all of the many diverse Christian claims about God end up meaning exactly the same thing. This beggars belief.

Most expressivists disagree with Braithwaite's claim that religious languages expresses anything as well defined as an intention to live a certain way of life. Instead, it expresses something like an attitude or a feeling. This might help us to differentiate the many doctrines within a single religion. Perhaps each one expresses its own emotional state. But either way, expressivism is going to give rise to the so-called Frege-Geach problem (named after Gottlob Frege and Peter Geach).

Suppose that a religious believer says:

1. The Torah comes from God.

An expressivist would have to say that what the speaker really means is something like, *wow*, towards the Torah. In other words: she hasn't said something that can be true or false. She's just expressed some sort of mental state or preference. But, if that's true, then she doesn't contradict herself when she says:

2. It's not the case that the Torah comes from God.

She doesn't contradict herself because, once again, what she says isn't something that can be true or false. She just says something like, *meh*, towards the Torah. To desire something, and to desire the opposite, is not to be guilty of any sort of logical contradiction. It is, at most, a case of conflicting desires.

Contradictions only emerge when you assert something that can be true or false, and when you also assert its negation. Accordingly, the most the expressivist can say is that statements 1 and 2 are in conflict, but – bizarrely – the expressivist is forced to deny that they contradict one another. The problem doesn't end there. Witness the following claim:

3. If the Torah is from God, then Moses was a prophet.

A speaker who utters sentence 3 is not saying that the Torah *is* from God, but only that *if* it's from God, then Moses was a prophet. Accordingly, its speaker isn't saying *wow* to the Torah, or *meh* to it, or expressing any other attitude towards the Torah or to Moses. So, what will the expressivist make of the meaning of 3?

In short, the Frege-Geach problem arises when a view struggles to make sense of how the meaning of a sentence, like sentence 1, behaves when embedded in broader contexts, just as 1 is embedded in 2 and 3. The expressivist doesn't have any easy story to tell about the relationship between these sentences.

Moreover, religious people often make religious claims that are supposed to *explain* things about the world around us. As we'll see in the next chapter, the claim that God desires a relationship with living beings is, according to many religious believers, supposed to help us

explain why it is that the natural universe is so delicately balanced, against all odds, to be hospitable to life. But, if "God desires relationships with living beings" just means something like, "*yay* for meaningful relationships," then the claim can play no role in any explanation of anything.

These considerations led Michael Scott (2013) to the plausible view that expressivism is false but that, nevertheless, religious language has *two* functions which it often plays at once: it makes truth-evaluable assertions about the world, and in addition to that, it expresses all sorts of emotions, values, intentions, and the like. This makes sense of the fact that religiosity is tied up with the emotional life without denying that religions and religious language also make claims about the world.

But what about fictionalism? Well, the most obvious problem with fictionalism is that the vast majority of religious believers will tell you that they really do mean what they say and that they're not merely *pretending* to mean what they say. Georges Rey thinks that they're wrong. He writes:

> Despite appearances, many Western adults who've been exposed to standard science and sincerely claim to believe in God are self-deceived; at some level they believe the claim is false.
>
> (Rey, 2003, p. 337)

But not only is Rey's claim psychologically contentious and extremely patronising, it also doesn't guarantee that fictionalism is true. Even if religious people *are* suffering from some sort of self-deception, it would appear that their mental lives are so compartmentalised that when they do make religious assertions, they really are asserting what their words conventionally mean. They're not *pretending* to assert what they say, even if, in some other compartment of their mental life, they (also) believe the opposite of what they say. Rey's claim that religious people are self-deluded doesn't, therefore, entail that fictionalism is true.

Furthermore, Rey has very little evidence for his tremendously contentious claim to begin with. You may be an atheist or an agnostic, but surely, you'll recognise that there are, in this world, some highly intelligent, educated, and psychologically healthy religious believers. To think

otherwise, without a lot of evidence and argument to back you up, sounds like nothing more than prejudice.

Conclusions

To summarise what we've achieved in this chapter: we've seen good reason to take seriously the claim that religions are centrally interested in things that language cannot describe. But even so, we've also seen good reason not to take those important claims *literally*. Moreover, we've seen that religious language does much more than to describe the world around us, it is also used to express deep yearnings of the soul.

Some philosophers, we've seen, would argue that religious language does nothing more than to express the emotions of those who use it, or that people who use religious language shouldn't be taken to believe (or even to have faith) that what they say is true, or literally true. But these more skeptical views, we've seen, likely go too far.

In general, when somebody says that *God exists and created the world* or that *the physical world and the cycle of incarnations is an illusion that we must try to escape*, they are making real claims about the world. As we continue to the next chapter we ask, do we have any good reason to believe, of any such claim, that it's true?

Further Reading:

Two books already cited in this chapter are especially worth bringing to your attention once more:

- For a general overview of the philosophy of religious language: Michael Scott, *Religious Language* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- For a defence of literal apophaticism: Simon Hewitt, *Negative Theology and Philosophical Analysis: Only the Splendour of Light* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

<u>On Religious Language:</u>

William Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

On Apophaticism:

Aydogan Kars, *Unsaying God: Negative Theology in Medieval Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2019)

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Chapter 3: Arguments for the Existence of God (or something Godlike)

Before we look at any arguments for the existence of God (or something Godlike), we should think about what an argument is, and what a proof might be. An argument can be thought of simply as a collection of sentences.

Take the following argument:

1. All men are mortal
2. Socrates is a man

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3. Socrates is mortal

The sentences above the line are called "premises". The sentence beneath the line is the conclusion. An argument is valid if the conclusion follows logically from the premises. In other words, an argument is valid so long as it's not possible for the conclusion to be false if the premises are true. Accordingly, our argument about Socrates's mortality is valid. Its validity guarantees that the conclusion is true *if* the premises are true. But the premises might be false. For instance, the following argument is valid, even though its conclusion is false.

1. Anything that has wings can fly
2. Queen Elizabeth has wings

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3. Queen Elizabeth can fly

This valid argument is no proof that Queen Elizabeth can fly. The premises are false. An argument which is both valid *and* has only true premises is called a *sound* argument. But even a sound argument might fail to be a *proof*. The philosopher Graham Oppy (1995, p. 15) points out that, if God *does* exist, then the following argument for God's existence is sound:

1. God exists or 2+3 doesn't equal 5

2. It's not the case that 2+3 doesn't equal 5

---

3. God exists

This argument is valid because its conclusion follows from the truth of its premises. But are its premises true? Well, *if* God exists, then line 1 is true. Line 1 is what we call a *disjunction* – a sentence with the word "or" in it. The function of the word "or" is to link two claims together, and to say that at least one of them is true. The claims that get linked together in line 1 by the word "or" are the claims that *God exists* and that *2+3 doesn't equal 5*. If you're an atheist, then you'll think that line 1 is false. Neither of the claims joined together in the disjunction are true. But, if you're a *theist*, you'll think that line 1 is true. Moreover, line 2 is true according to everyone (so long as they know how to count and add).

Accordingly, if it turns out that atheists are wrong, and that God exists, then the argument in question is a sound argument for the existence of God – since it's a valid argument and its premises are true. But nobody could possibly expect an atheist (or even an agnostic) to be convinced by this argument. So, a proof for God's existence needs to be not only a sound argument but an argument with premises that even the atheist can be expected to accept. This isn't going to be easy.

Cosmological Arguments

A cosmological argument begins with premises about the *cosmos* – i.e., the universe. This sort of argument has deep roots in the work of Aristotle and was refined over multiple generations of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish thinkers. Perhaps the most influential variety of cosmological argument was developed by a school of Muslim philosophers known as the *mutakallimūm*. Their version of the argument is known as the *kalām* cosmological argument. A very similar argument to the *kalām* cosmological argument appears in a 10th Century Hindu text, the *Nyāyakusumāñjali* (Potter, 1977, pp. 100-107).

Boiled down to its essence, the *kalām* cosmological argument can be stated as follows:

1. Everything that has a beginning comes to exist in virtue of an external cause
2. The universe has a beginning

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3. The universe has an external cause

If we accept this conclusion, have we accepted that *God* exists? For all the argument tells us, the cause of the universe may have *ceased* to exist upon giving birth to the universe. Accordingly, why should we believe that the God of the *kalām* cosmological argument still exists, even if he existed in the past?

This worry shouldn't detain us long. If this being is external to the physical universe, and if time is a physical dimension, then this being is external to time. Beings outside of time can't have beginnings and ends, so they can't die. Accordingly, if the cause of the universe exists at all, then it exists eternally, outside of the jurisdiction of any ticking clock. It had no beginning, and thus it didn't need a cause for its *own* existence, and it has no end.

Even so, we have no reason to think that this being has any knowledge or intention. It simply had to have the power to bring the universe into being. So, yes, it's a very powerful being. But so what? Did it create the universe knowingly? Is it the sort of being that can have intentions and will? The argument is silent on these issues. And so, even if it convinces you that the universe has a supremely powerful and eternal cause, it's not clear, by the lights of this argument alone, that this being is worthy of worship or service.

But still, to prove the existence of a supremely powerful eternal cause of the universe would surely be a step in the right direction for most religions. Perhaps once we've established this much, we can find other arguments to convince us that this being has the other properties we might generally associate with God. So, is the argument sound?

According to Einstein's theory of General Relativity (henceforth GRT) and according to observation, space itself is expanding. If you run this process backwards, extrapolating into the past, space-time curvature will tend to infinity – in lay-terms this means that the further back you go, the more matter and energy there is compressed into less and less space. It

seems like you'll reach an initial point, called the singularity, where you've got all of the mass and/or energy of the universe compacted into an infinitely small space, called the initial singularity. This is the point of the Big Bang. There is no space and there is no time before that point. It's the beginning! This seems to be a scientific proof of premise 2 of our argument.

But there are two problems with this argument for premise 2. The first problem is that the theory of GRT can't be the final word on theoretical physics. Einstein's theory gives us amazingly accurate predictions of all sorts of phenomena that, in the time of Einstein, we weren't able to test. As our technology improves, and we can test it more and more, we continue to marvel at the power of Eisntein's theory. And yet GRT is inconsistent with what we know about the physics of tiny particles, known as quantum mechanics.

Here's the problem: on all the most promising ways in which GRT might be reconciled with quantum mechanics, it turns out that there can be no such thing as a singularity. If that's right, then the Big Bang Theory will have to be revised. Gabriel Veneziano, the father of String Theory, writes:

> Was the big bang really the beginning of time? Or did the universe exist before then? Such a question seemed almost blasphemous only a decade ago. Most cosmologists insisted that it simply made no sense – that to contemplate a time before the big bang was like asking for directions to a place north of the North Pole. But developments in theoretical physics, especially the rise of string theory, have changed their perspective.
>
> (Veneziano, 2006)

On all of the best contenders for a final physics, when you rewind the expansion of the universe, you don't get to a beginning of time. The second premise of the kalām cosmological argument is robbed of the support that it used to get from the Big Bang Theory.

Moreover, there's a problem even if we assume that the Big Bang Theory is accurate. Brian Pitts explains the problem in the following way…

Start by asking yourself what you think the smallest positive number is. Your first guess might be the number 1. But that's not as small as 0.1. And that's not as small as 0.01. This can go on and on. There *is* no smallest positive number. The number 0 isn't the smallest positive number, because it isn't positive at all. 0 is the limit before which the numbers go negative, and after which the numbers are positive. But there's no smallest number.

Likewise, Brian Pitts (2009) explains, the Big Bang Theory doesn't tell us that time had a first moment. It tells us that the past has a *limit*: the singularity. The fact that the universe is finitely old doesn't mean that there was ever a first moment. There was a moment 1 second after the singularity, and there was a moment 0.1 seconds after the singularity, and there was a moment 0.001 seconds after the singularity. But there was no first moment, and a first moment is what you need if you want to establish the second premise of the kalām cosmological argument.

For these reasons, I am far from convinced that contemporary science gives us any reason to accept the second premise of the kalām cosmological argument. On the other hand, I don't think that contemporary science gives us any compelling reason to deny the second premise either. There may have been times before the Big Bang, but that doesn't mean that there wasn't, at some point in the pre-Bang history, a first moment. This is a question that science hasn't yet pronounced upon (and perhaps, for various reasons, it never can). A better reason to accept the second premise, I think, comes from the mutakallimūm themselves.

The standard argument of the mutakallimūm is that actual infinities are impossible. They would argue that as soon as you even imagine that there exists an actual object that has an infinity of any magnitude – infinite size, infinite weight, infinite age, or what have you – you give rise to insufferable paradoxes.

For example, al-Kindi (1974, p. 68) asks you to imagine, just for the sake of argument, that something infinitely large exists. Call it B (for big). Then, imagine that we cut a chunk out of B, called C (for chunk). On the one hand, we'll want to say that B minus C is smaller than B – since we've taken away a chunk of B. But then again, if B was really infinite, without end, then taking a little bit away from it won't suddenly make it finite. And thus, the worry is that B minus C is just as infinite as B. Does that mean that we've got one larger infinity (*i.e.*, B), and one smaller infinity (*i.e.*, B minus C)? It doesn't make sense to talk about smaller and larger infinities, does it? Accordingly, we should deny that there are any infinite magnitudes that actually exist, including an infinitely long past, and we should conclude that the universe must have had a beginning.

John Philoponus (1987, p. 146) puts much the same point, this way. From down here on earth, it looks like Saturn and Jupiter are both orbiting us. But Jupiter completes three orbits of the earth (or so it seems from down here), in the time that Saturn orbits once. But if this process has no beginning, then we have to assume that Saturn has completed an infinite number of orbits around the earth, and that Jupiter has completed three times that number. But three times infinity is just infinity. Once again, how are we supposed to make sense of bigger and smaller infinities? Instead, we should conclude that everything has a beginning, including the universe itself.

Saadya Gaon's rather charming way of putting the argument runs as follows. Let's imagine, for the sake of argument, that history has no beginning, such that the past is infinitely long. Well, if that were the case, then the present wouldn't have reached us, because it's not possible to complete an infinitely long journey. But the present *has* reached us, so the past must have had a start (Ibn Yusuf, 1989, pp. 49-50).

Now, modern mathematics throws up a number of problems for these arguments. Since the ground-breaking work of Georg Cantor, mathematicians do much better than they did in ancient and medieval times making sense of infinity. Al-Kindi assumes that if you take C away from B (and they are both positive numbers), then you should end up with something smaller than B. He likewise assumes that when you add C to B (and, once again, they're both

positive numbers), you'll end up with something larger than B. But these are assumptions that are only true of finite numbers. Infinite numbers work differently. Likewise, Philoponus assumes that if you multiply some positive number, S (the number of times that Saturn has been around the earth) by 3, then you'll end up with something three times as large as S. But, once again, that assumption is only true of finite numbers. Infinities abide by different rules. And though we do speak of larger and smaller infinites in modern mathematics, all of these infinities (B, B minus C, S, and S multiplied by 3) are all the same size.

Even Saadya's argument, which doesn't trade in these misunderstandings, makes a seemingly fatal assumption. It assumes that you can't complete an infinite series. But you clearly can. Whenever you walk from point A to point B, you cross the midway point between A and B (otherwise, you'd never get to B). Call that midway point C. But you won't be able to pass by C until you've passed the midway point between A and C. Call that midway point D. And you won't be able to pass D until you've passed the midway point between A and D. And this goes on forever, because you can keep dividing the space you've got to cross in half, and you never get to 0. The idea that moving from A to B is impossible because it requires you to pass an infinite number of points along the way is known as Xeno's paradox. But Xeno's paradox should make us wonder whether it's really impossible to complete an infinite series. We do it all the time!

Perhaps you're not convinced. It's true that there are an infinite number of points between A and B, just as there are an infinite number of numbers between 0 and 1. But even so, these infinities are bounded. What I mean by that is that they have a clear start and/or finish point – what we've called limits. The infinite points between A and B are bounded on both sides – on one side by point A, and on the other side by point B. Likewise, the numbers between 0 and 1 are bounded, on one side by 0, and on the other side by 1. Maybe we should accept, in the light of Xeno's paradox, that bounded infinities can be completed. But still, if the past has no beginning whatsoever, then the past is an unbounded infinity. Surely, it's impossible to complete an unbounded infinity. That would be like counting in sequence from 0 all the way to infinity, and getting the job done. But that job can't be done because

there's literally no end, no boundary, no limit. Saadya's argument, at least, still looks to be in good shape.

The problem with Saadya's argument, however, is that it assumes something very controversial about time. It assumes that time is somehow moving. It assumes that there's this thing called the present that has to reach us in order for us to be present. The notion that time is dynamic and flows in a certain direction is known to contemporary philosophers as the A-theory of time. But many philosophers and scientists today adopt what it called the B-theory of time. According to the B-theory of time, the feeling that time is flowing is just an illusion.

According to the B-theory, time is static, and a lot like space. Imagine adopting a bird's eye view of the entire timeline of the universe. You'd be looking at every moment of time, laid out in order from earlier to later. In each moment of that timeline, the people located in that moment will be calling their moment *the present*. But that's no different to the fact that in a building with multiple rooms, people located in different rooms each call the room that they happen to be in *here*. But, in actual fact, no time is really the present just like no place is really here. It's all just relative to where you happen to be located. Other rooms don't move to greet you when you move from room to room. They stay where they are. Likewise, time doesn't move to greet the people who happen to find themselves moving from one moment to another. That's the B-theory. But if the B-theory is true, there seems to be no problem accepting that the past is infinitely long because the B-theory denies that the present is a real thing which has to move along the series of past moment before it reaches us.

The arguments of al-Kindi and Philoponus, by contrast, don't rely upon the A-theory. But, as we've seen, they seem to rely upon mistaken assumptions about the application of arithmetic to infinites. Even so, some philosophers (and I happen to be among them) are happy to accept, with modern mathematics, that you can add and multiply infinities without increasing the size of the infinities in question, but remain unhappy to accept that our physical reality could actually contain unbounded infinities. A well-known thought-

experiment, known as Hilbert's hotel, asks you to imagine a physical hotel that has an infinite number of rooms. Imagine that all of the rooms are filled. You get all sorts of crazy results.

For example, even though all the rooms are filled, if a busload of new guests arrive, you'll be able to host them all without building any new rooms. How? Aren't all the rooms full already? Well, yes, but imagine that room 1 is the leftmost room in the hotel, and that the hotel stretches rightwards into infinity. It turns out that every single room has a room to the right. Well then, all we have to do is to ask all of the guests to move 1 room to the right, they'll all find a new room, because every room has a room to the right, and the process will leave room 1 empty. If we ask them all to move 2 rooms to the right, we'll have left rooms 1 and 2 empty. And, in this way, we can accommodate any number of new guests without building new rooms. Surely reality cannot contain phenomena like this. Surely completed unbounded infinities, even if their mathematical properties can be regimented and described, cannot exist in reality.

Even if you're a B-theorist, and you don't think that time, in any way, moves, you should still be worried by the notion that the past is an unbounded infinity. Unbounded infinities cannot be real. One way, perhaps, to escape from this conclusion is to adopt a philosophy of time known as presentism. According to the presentist, the only time that's real is the present. The past stops existing once its past. On this view, you might think that the past is infinitely long, but since it's not really real (since only the present is real), it isn't the sort of infinity that should bother us.

I happen to be an A-theorist, and not a B-theorist. I also deny presentism. What's more, I deny that actual unbounded infinities can be real. Accordingly, I deny that the past is infinitely long. Even so, it's not clear to me that we get a first moment. Once again, all we have, once we've accepted that the past is bounded, is a limit, like the number 0. But that doesn't mean we have a first moment. The only way, it seems to me, to ensure that you have a first moment, is to add the assumption that time itself cannot be infinitely divided; that time is discrete (i.e., finitely divisible) rather than continuous (i.e, infinitely divisible).

If time is discrete, then there is a smallest unit of time that cannot be cut into two. Call it a squiggle! On this assumption, if history is bounded by moment 0, then the first actual moment will be the first squiggle after 0! Personally, I'm not sure whether to think of time as continuous or discrete. But I accept that the second premise of the kalām cosmological argument goes through as soon as you accept that:

1. Time is discrete; and
2. Either:
    a. The present had to traverse the entirety of the past to get to us; or
    b. There can be no actual infinities.

But what about the first premise (that things with beginnings require a cause)? William Lane Craig, the most prominent contemporary advocate for the kalām cosmological argument thinks that the first premise requires no defence. The premise:

> is so obvious … that probably no one in his right mind really believes it to be false. … The idea that anything … could pop into existence uncaused is so repugnant that most thinkers intuitively recognise that it is … incapable of sincere affirmation. … A sincere denial of this axiom is well-nigh impossible.
>
> (Craig, 1979, pp. 141-145)

I disagree. I readily admit that I'd be *shocked* to see something pop into existence without a cause. I'd probably *assume* the existence of a cause. I might *search* for a cause so long as I live. And yet, my conviction that there *must* be a cause to discover would only be an operative assumption. Can I be *certain*? If I *should* be certain, I don't see why. The first premise is plausibly true, but not – it seems to me – obviously or certainly true. Perhaps it's a good rule of thumb, but perhaps the universe itself is an exception to it. We can't assume otherwise without begging the question.

Presentism isn't stupid, even if turns out to be wrong. The B-theory of time also isn't stupid, even if it turns out to be wrong. Reasonable people disagree on these issues, just as they

disagree as to whether time is discrete or continuous, and as to whether unbounded infinities can be completed or actualised. Accordingly, the second premise is far from obviously true. Moreover, we don't have any grounds for certainty that the first premise is true.

Accordingly, even if it turns out that both of the premises are true, and that the argument is sound, we've been forced to recognise that, on its own, the *kalām* cosmological argument isn't sufficiently persuasive. Moreover, the being whose existence this argument hopes to establish might not be the God of any actual religion.

Teleological Arguments (The Argument from Design)

The teleological argument for God's existence concludes that God exists on the basis of evidence of purpose (in Greek – *telos*) in the universe. Accordingly, it's sometimes called the argument from design.

If you hit your foot upon a stone, while out walking in a field, and pick it up to examine it, you'll soon discover that it was a stone, and you'll have no inclination to think that it had been left there on purpose by some person before you. But, if you hit your foot upon a pocket-watch, even if you didn't know what a watch was, upon examining it, and seeing its intricate cogs keeping a steady rhythm, you'd assume that the clock had been designed and manufactured. You'd assume that the watch had a *designer*. William Paley (2009) argued that the more we understand about the intricate design of the universe, the more we come to recognise that the universe itself is more like a watch than a stone. It's the sort of object that testifies to the existence of a designer.

Here's the argument:

1. The universe bears the marks of design
2. Objects that bear the marks of design have a designer

---

3. The universe has a designer

Note: the fact that the universe has a designer doesn't mean that this designer is still alive, or that it cares about us. Moreover, the argument doesn't rule out the possibility that the universe is the product of a *committee* of designers rather than a *single* designer. In other words, the argument, even if sound, leaves many important questions unsettled. Even so, is it sound?

The second premise has been undermined by Charles Darwin. What Darwinism shows is that random genetic mutations will be passed on to the next generation of a species if the mutation gives the animal an advantage in its natural habitat. Over time, as the useful mutations take hold, and the harmful mutations get passed over, it will come to look like animals have been specifically designed to *survive* in their natural environment. This undermines the second premise. Things can *look* designed even without a designer.

The first premise is also wobbly. There seem to be numerous design flaws in the natural world. Richard Dawkins points out: even the human eye (much celebrated as an example of God's intricate design), contains a pretty obvious flaw.

> Any engineer would naturally assume that the photocells [in the eye] would point towards the light, with their wires leading backwards towards the brain. He would laugh at any suggestion that the photocells might point away from the light, with their wires departing on the side nearest the light. Yet this is exactly what happens in all vertebrate retinas. Each photocell is, in effect, wired in backwards, with its wire sticking out on the side nearest the light. The wire has to travel over the surface of the retina, to a point where it dives through a hole in the retina (the so-called 'blind spot') to join the optic nerve. This means that the light, instead of being granted an unrestricted passage to the photocells, has to pass through a forest of connecting wires, presumably suffering at least some attenuation and distortion (actually probably not much but, still, it is the *principle* of the thing that would offend any tidy-minded engineer!).
>
> (Dawkins, 2015, pp. 131-132)

Contemporary biology is thought to have destroyed the argument from design. And yet, in recent years, the basic argument has been resurrected because of developments, not in biology, but in physics.

Contemporary physics tells us: there are a number of important numbers, measuring things like the strength of the force of gravity, which could have been different. Had the force of gravity been ever so slightly weaker, the stars would never have become supernovae so as to spew out the heavier elements necessary for life (Carr & Rees, 1979). Had the force of gravity been slightly *stronger*, stars would have formed from smaller amounts of material, and would have been too short-lived to support the evolution of life (Barnes, 2012, p. 547).

Another of these numbers is called the cosmological constant. Neil Manson reports:

> When [the cosmological constant] is positive, it acts as a repulsive force, causing space to expand. When [it] is negative, it acts as an attractive force, causing space to contract. If [it] were not precisely what it is, either space would expand at such an enormous rate that all matter in the universe would fly apart, or the universe would collapse back in on itself immediately after the Big Bang. Either way, life could not possibly emerge anywhere in the universe. Some calculations put the odds that [it] took just the right value at well below one chance in a trillion trillion trillion trillion.
>
> (Manson, 2009, p. 272)

One of the most important things that we might want to explain is how life emerged. To be told that it emerged by *fluke* is to give up the scientific impulse itself. Some things *do* happen by fluke, but the scientist strives to reduce the number of occasions in which we resort to such unscientific "*explanations*". The appeal to fluke in response to such an important question would be profoundly unscientific. The (atheist) physicist, Leonard Susskind writes:

> When the laws of elementary particles meet the laws of gravity, the result is a potential catastrophe: a world of such violence that astronomical bodies, as well as elementary particles, would be torn asunder by the most destructive force imaginable. The only way out is for one particular constant of nature – Einstein's cosmological constant – to be so incredibly finely tuned that no one could possibly think it accidental.
>
> (Susskind, 2006, p. 11)

It's unlikely that unlikely things happen. It's exceedingly unlikely that exceedingly unlikely things happen. And yet, on a simple retelling of the Big Bang Theory, told from the perspective of an

atheist, the emergence of life was *exceedingly* unlikely. Surely, then, we should conclude that the story, so told, is exceedingly unlikely to be true.

Many Scientists agree. The fine tuning of the universe is *so* unlikely that "no one could possibly think it accidental". Our new version of the teleological argument looks something like this:

1. It is extremely unlikely that life would have evolved without a sufficiently intelligent and powerful designer overseeing the creation of the universe.
2. It is not at all unlikely that life would have evolved had there been a sufficiently intelligent and powerful designer overseeing the creation, interested in the evolution of life.
3. Life has evolved.

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4. It is much more likely than not that the universe has a designer, interested in the evolution of life, and sufficiently intelligent and powerful to have ensured that life evolves.

Can the atheist, committed to contemporary science, escape this argument? Yes. One way to escape it is to suggest that there are an infinite number of universes. If you're willing to accept that these countless universes are as real as our own, then it's no longer so strange that life should have evolved in *ours*.

We can all agree that it's very unlikely that you'll win the lottery. But if all of the possible tickets have been sold, then you can be absolutely sure that *somebody* will win. Likewise, if you've got an infinite number of universes, then the odds might be more than one in a trillion trillion trillion trillion that your universe will be hospitable to life, but *some universe or other* is bound to get lucky. Well done. You happen to be living in the winning universe. If you weren't so lucky, you wouldn't even be able to express your displeasure, because you wouldn't exist. This is a favourite explanation of atheist scientists, such as Susskind.

But note what we're doing here. To escape the existence of one powerful mind, guiding the creation; and to escape the absurdity of believing in an inexplicable fluke, the atheist has been forced to posit the existence of an *infinite* number of universes – some of those universes,

presumably, contain very powerful God-like beings of their own. All of this to escape from God! Which route is more economical? Which route seems most rational? Which route seems most *likely*?

This modern form of design argument, often called "the argument from fine-tuning" is compelling. If sound, it establishes that there likely exists a being who planned for the emergence of life. Is it a *kind* being? It certainly seems to have had an interest in the evolution of life, but why? What does it want from us? Why did it allow the universe to exist for so many billions of years *before* life emerged? Why does it allow for the existence of such cruel mechanisms in biology to select which species are to survive, as they compete to the death in a brutal war in which only the fittest survive? Why should we believe that the designer still exists, since all it had to do was to set the constants of physics – like gravity and the cosmological constant – to the right values before disappearing altogether? These questions are left unanswered by the argument.

Ontological Arguments

A hugely influential argument for the existence of God comes from the 11th Century Archbishop of Canterbury, St. Anselm. His basic idea was that, if God is defined as the being "than which nothing greater can be conceived," then God *must* exist. After all, if you imagine a non-existent God, then you're not exactly imagining a being *than which nothing greater can be conceived*, since the thing you're thinking of would be greater if it existed. The argument is intoxicating, I think, for its audacity. You can't just define things into existence, can you?

A famous parody of Anselm's argument suggests that we should be able to imagine an unsurpassably wonderful island, and then go visit it, since it must exist. If it didn't exist, it wouldn't be unsurpassably wonderful! This objection is relatively easy to resist because you might think that, even if there could be an unsurpassably excellent being, there might not even be the possibility of an unsurpassably wonderful island. You can always make an island more wonderful somehow, without ever reaching a peak of unsurpassability. But perhaps beings, in general, are different.

A more powerful argument against Anslem's ontological argument is that it treats existence just like any other perfection or description that might apply to a being. But existence is somehow different. To use the slogan that became associated with Immanuel Kant's response to the ontological argument: ""existence" is not a predicate." Think about it this way: you don't really add another perfection to an imaginary being when you add to it the claim that it exists. It doesn't make your imagined being any better, in your imagination, and it certainly won't make it exist outside of your imagination! But, in recent years, a new formulation of the ontological argument has emerged that doesn't require us to treat existence as a perfection in quite the same way.

This new formulation of the argument comes from Alvin Plantinga (1974). First I'll lay out the premises and conclusions, and then I'll do my best to explain what they mean:

1. If a being is unsurpassably excellent, then that being must be maximally great in every possible world
2. A being that is maximally great in every possible world is necessarily maximally great
3. A being cannot be necessarily maximally great without existing in our world (and in every other world)
4. Whatever is possibly necessary is actually necessary
5. It is possible that there is an unsurpassably excellent being, call it "God"

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6. It is possible that God is maximally great in every possible world (this follows from line 5 and line 1)
7. It is possible that God is necessarily maximally great (this follows from line 6 and line 2)
8. God is necessarily maximally great (this follows from line 7 and 4)
9. God exist in our world (this follows from line 8 and line 3)

If this argument is valid, and if the premises are true, then we don't just have a reason to believe in God; we have a logical *proof* that He exists; not just with omnipotence and intentions,

but with every conceivable perfection. This sounds much more like the God of classical religions. But what do the premises mean, and are they true?

Think of a possible world as just some way that this world *could* have been. Premise 1 is going to be accepted by all philosophers, since if a being were surpassed in greatness by other beings, even in a distant possible world, then that being wouldn't be *unsurpassably* excellent.

Possible world talk is just a way of talking about what's necessary, what's impossible, and what's merely possible. The things which are necessary are the things which occur at all possible worlds. The things which are impossible occur at no possible world. The things which are merely possible are the things which occur only at *some* possible worlds. Premises 2 and 3 are true just in virtue of what we mean by the word "necessarily."

Premise 4 follows from a powerful and popular system of logic called S5. It would be costly to deny it. It says that if something is possible, then it's necessarily possible. Or, to put in in a clunky, but hopefully helpful way, it's impossible for something possible not to be possible!

Your best bet, then, if you want to escape the conclusion of this argument, is to deny premise 5. Perhaps it's simply not *possible* for there to be an unsurpassably excellent being. Perhaps, in that respect, there's no difference between islands in particular and beings in general. There's just no such thing as unsurpassable excellence. But what's so tantalising about the argument is that, if it is sound, it demonstrates the existence of something that's uncontroversially akin to the God of classical religions. It also turns out that if God so much as possibly exists, then He must *actually* exist. But until we find reason to convince people that premise 5 is true – that God's existence is a possibility – it won't likely work as a proof.

The Moral Argument

Immanuel Kant was adamant that ethical conduct is demanded by rationality alone. But how can it be rational to do good, and avoid evil, if we see wicked people often prosper and righteous people suffer? Kant concluded that we're forced, as a matter of practical necessity, to assume the existence of a God who will play a role in making sure that, ultimately – if only in the afterlife – justice prevails (Kant, 1956, Book II, Chapter 5). But even if Kant is right – such that

we're forced to assume that God exists – it still doesn't follow that God actually *does* exists! Is there a better argument from morality to the existence of God?

Can there be ethical facts if there's no God?

Yes. There are all sorts of abstract truths, whose universal existence seem to make sense without belief in God. For example, the fact that 2+2=4 doesn't exist in some place or time. It isn't a physical fact. It doesn't depend upon human agreement or convention. But it's still a fact. Why can't there likewise be an *ethical* fact that it's wrong to murder? Why can't that fact just exist, like mathematical facts do, without being physical, and without relying upon human agreement and convention?

We certainly know, from the history of humanity, that belief in God doesn't at all ensure that a person will act morally. We also know that atheism is quite consistent with being a thoroughly principled and ethically virtuous person. But, even if we can make sense of the existence of ethical facts without the existence of God, and even if we recognise that ethical behaviour doesn't require belief in God, there still seems to be, at least, one category of ethical fact that's going to be hard for the atheist to explain.

Can the atheist make sense of *obligation*? David Baggett (2018) suggests the following argument:

1. There are objective moral obligations
2. The best explanation of objective moral obligations is God

---

3. God (probably) exists

If you hit a pedestrian with your car, would you be morally obliged to stop, to get out of the car, and to help the pedestrian? Do you think that this obligation is merely *legal*, or do you think that it's more fundamental than that? Do you think that, above and beyond being the right thing to do, there would be an objective *moral obligation* to stop your car and help? If you *do*, then you accept the first premise of the argument.

The second premise is that theism provides us with the best explanation of moral obligation. Does it?

Secular philosophers try to account for objective moral obligation without appealing to the existence of God. But they tend to define moral obligation in terms of having an over-riding reason to act. If you hit a pedestrian, it would be wrong to drive on by. Recognising this wrongness gives you an over-riding reason to act. And thus, you have a moral obligation. But it's not clear that this definition of "obligation" really gets to the heart of the matter.

Moral obligation is more than merely having a compelling – even an over-riding – reason to act. Rather, to be an *obligation*, your reason to act has to involve: "a demand with which we must comply, one by which others can rationally blame us and reproach us for failing to do so, one for which we can rightly be held accountable and feel guilty for violating, and one that is rational to inculcate into others" (Copan & Flannagan, 2014).

Even if we can make sense of the existence of good and bad, without the existence of God, any account that doesn't appeal to an authoritative legislator is going to reduce moral obligation to something more akin to a very good reason to act. Perhaps you can come up with a better secular account of moral obligation; an account that *doesn't* strip obligation of its most distinctive features. But, if you can't, you might conclude that the existence of God really does provide us with the best explanation that we know of, of objective moral obligation. Evolutionary theories can, of course, explain why we might *feel* sensations of guilt. But only if there's an authoritative legislator can we say that the feeling is anything more than just a feeling.

In fact, the atheist is liable to be reductive about all sorts of feelings. According to Richard Dawkins, for example, monogamous romantic love can only appear irrational, and counter to the demands of evolution by natural selection. He writes, "Rather than the fanatically monogamous devotion to which we are susceptible, some sort of 'polyamory' is on the face of it more rational" (Dawkins, 2009, p. 214). Romantic love can serve a short-term Darwinian purpose: to engender loyalty to one co-parent for long enough to raise a human child. But there's no discernible evolutionary advantage to monogamy beyond that point.

Is our feeling of love and dedication to a single life-partner an irrational by-product of evolution? Such an account simply robs the experience of love – an experience that we know with more certainty than any scientific speculation – of its tremendous existential significance.

The theist has a better explanation. God loves us, and wants us to love Him too. As C. S. Lewis put it: the total commitment of erotic love "is a paradigm or example, built into our natures, of the love we ought to exercise towards God and Man" (Lewis, 1960, p. 110). The theist understands that love is a central experience of the human condition and central to the very meaning of life. For Richard Dawkins, it's a peculiar error in our evolutionary programming that promotes fanatic devotion for no good reason. Once again, the theist has an easier time making sense of feelings that we take to be deeply significant: moral obligation *and* romantic love.

Once again, these arguments are unlikely to work as proofs. The atheist can continue to deny that feelings of objective obligation are anything more than a useful product of evolution, and that romantic love is something of an evolutionary mistake. But, perhaps these arguments might cause an agnostic pause for thought.

Argument from Science

At the heart of the scientific endeavour is an unexplained mystery. Why is mathematics so exquisitely apt for framing the laws of nature?

In the words of Albert Einstein:

> The very fact that the totality of our sense experiences is such that by means of thinking… it can be put in order… is one which leaves us in awe, but which we shall never understand. One may say "the eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility."
>
> (Einstein, 2003, pp. 23-24)

Another Nobel Prize winning physicist, Eugene Wigner, framed his wonder in terms of "The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences". He writes:

> The miracle of the appropriateness of the language of mathematics for the formulation of the laws of physics is a wonderful gift which we neither understand nor deserve.
>
> (Wigner, 1960, p. 14)

It's as if the fundamental regularities of nature, and the deep structure of the universe, are carefully calibrated so as to be amenable to minds like ours to uncover; using mathematical concepts that come naturally to our way of thinking. It's almost unthinkable that science should ever be able to explain *why* this is so. Indeed, science only gets going once you assume that it *will* be so. This is why Einstein and Wigner express themselves in tones of awe and mystery.

The founding fathers of the scientific method were unapologetically open about the fact that their *theism* is what justified their most basic assumption; an assumption that underlaid their methodology; the assumption that the world has a systematic order to it; an order that can be discovered and described by human minds.

For example, Robert Boyle (1663, pp. 62-63) claimed that, through experiment, the patient scientist would be able "to read the stenography of God's omniscient hand." Newton explained why he thought it proper to assume that, beneath the chaotic appearance of a world in flux, we should be able to find simple mathematical regularities and laws. He wrote:

> Truth is ever to be found in simplicity, and not in the multiplicity and confusion of things. As the world, which to the naked eye exhibits the greatest variety of objects, appears very simple in its internal constitution when surveyed by a philosophic understanding, and so much the simpler, the better, it is understood, so it is in these visions. It is the perfection of all God's works that they are done with the greatest simplicity.
>
> (Newton, 1974, p. 120)

Boyle and Newton, and their contemporaries, knew that it was wise (at least in general) to keep God out of the laboratory. But they were convinced that God was propping the laboratory up from outside. If there was no intelligent designer, then there's no reason on earth to assume that the world should conform to elegant mathematical regularities and laws; there's no reason to assume that scientific method should bear fruit; there's no reason to enter the laboratory to begin with.

Alvin Plantinga goes further and argues that without a belief in God, we have no reason to *trust* the findings of science. According to the best scientific account that we have of the origins of life, we emerged as the product of natural selection, in a struggle for survival, in which only the

best adapted genes got passed on to subsequent generations. If you take God out of this picture, then you have to assume that our cognitive faculties were shaped only by the survival needs of *Homo Sapiens* in Palaeolithic Africa. But why should we think that those survival needs would have given us mathematical and *scientific* intuitions and faculties worth trusting? How much theoretical physics, chemistry, and biology was necessary for our survival back then?

Imagine a frog who consciously believes that each fly he eats will kill him. In other words: he falsely believes that he's allergic to flies; even though – in fact – he needs to eat them in order to survive. Fortunately, whenever a fly flies by, his razor-sharp instincts kick in, his tongue zips out and catches the fly, and he swallows it down. As he digests it, he kicks himself for his stupidity, and his inability to control his instincts, sure that this one will kill him.

This frog's false beliefs won't harm his survival so long as his sub-conscious cognitive devices are still tracking the environment, and are appropriately tied to his muscles, such that passing flies get caught and consumed. Survival doesn't seem to require true beliefs. It requires appropriate behaviour.

Even if you think the example of the frog unlikely, and you think that evolutionary pressures *will* generally carve out reliable belief-forming mechanisms, why think that the mechanisms formed in our Palaeolithic ancestors are reliable in our very new environment? Why think that they would be reliable when forming beliefs about very abstract theories of philosophy and science, which have little bearing on our day-to-day survival?

The point can be put this way: the theory of evolution, coupled with atheism, will undermine itself. If the theory is true, then our species has very good reason *not* to trust that the outputs of our cognitive faculties are true, in our current environment, and especially when thinking about abstract philosophical and scientific topics, such as the origin of species.

But, if you plug *God* into the story, and you think of evolution as a mechanism by which God allows biological diversity to emerge, and if you assume that God has the power to influence the trajectory of the process, and if you believe that – as a function of His *goodness* – He desires to be known, and to enter into a relationship with cognitive beings, *then* you needn't distrust the theory of evolution when the evidence leads your cognitive faculties to believe in it (For Plantinga's full argument about evolution see Plantinga, 2011, Part IV).

Here's another way in which science can rely upon an underlying theism. When two competing theories agree on every prediction, and there's nothing else to choose between them, scientists opt for simplicity and elegance. Why? Why think that the universe respects our taste for elegance? Theism stands ready with an explanation:

> [W]e are inclined to think that simple explanations and hypotheses are more likely to be true than complicated epicyclic ones… If theism is true, then [we have] some reason to think [that] the more simple has a better chance of being true than the less simple; for God has created both us and our theoretical preferences and the world; and it is reasonable to think that he would adapt the one to the other. (If he himself favored antisimplicity, then no doubt he would have created us in such a way that we would, too.) If theism is not true, however, there would seem to be no reason to think that the simple is more likely to be true than the complex.
>
> (Plantinga, 2018, p. 472)

The role that God might play in making sense of scientific practice suggests the existence of a God who has a love of order and who wants that order (eventually) to be discovered. The atheist should see this as a challenge. Can she make sense of the ways in which she trusts her scientific methodology without introducing theistic commitments into her worldview? Perhaps she'll buckle down and say that scientific method is proven by the fact that it's always worked in the past. But this argument is famously circular. It assumes that since relying on how things have worked in the past has always worked in the past, it will continue to work in the future. The theist, by contrast, believes that the future resembles the past in terms of its general laws of nature because those laws were legislated by a law-loving and orderly mind, who wants us to discover the order of His world.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I haven't been able to assess all of the standard arguments for the existence of God. I haven't even had space to cover every family of argument. One important argument that we haven't explored is the argument from religious experience. How should we relate to those people who claim to have had experiences of God or of the transcendent? It's easy to write such

experiences off as neurological or psychological abnormalities. But their experiences (or some of them) deserve more attention than that, as does the argument according to which God must exist to explain what it is they've been experiencing. I refer interested readers to the reading list at the end of this chapter.

None of the arguments we've seen can serve as a decisive proof for the existence of God – even if the arguments are sound. Moreover, on their own, many of the arguments only support the existence of a being with *some* of the attributes commonly associated with the God of various religions. Perhaps the best argument there is for the existence of God is what Plantinga once dubbed "the argument from so many arguments." What makes theism attractive to those who embrace it is that it can play a role in explaining so many different pockets of reality. It can help to explain why there's something rather than nothing (via the cosmological argument), why the universe exhibits fine-tuning for life (via the teleological argument), why we're right to place such weight upon feelings of guilt, commitment, and love; and why we're right to trust the methods of natural sciences.

Bundled together, in this way, the arguments collectively add weight to the proposition that there is one being (and, for reasons of economy, only one being), who is powerful, knowledgeable, just, and desirous of a relationship with humanity. The problem is, as we shall see in chapter 5, however much evidence there might be for this claim, and however compelling the argument from so many arguments, there also exists powerful counterevidence, in support of atheism.

Further Reading:

In addition to articles and books cited in this chapter

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On the Philosophy of Time

Sam Barron and Kristie Miller, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Time* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018)

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Chapter 4: Arguments for Specific Religions

The last chapter looked at arguments for the existence of God, but you can believe in God without adopting any particular religion. This chapter examines a number of arguments designed to close that gap and motivate one religion or another.

An argument from the Resurrection of Jesus (for Christianity)

The following popular argument for Christianity is obviously valid. The question, of course, is whether it's sound:

1. Jesus was resurrected three days after dying.
2. If Jesus was resurrected three days after dying, then Christianity (in some form or other) is true.

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3. Christianity (in some form or other) is true.

Why should we accept the first premise?

Any evidence we have for premise 1 is based upon testimony: documentary evidence according to which people saw his grave was empty, three days after he was executed, and according to which people saw him walking and talking after he had died. Documents may have been forged. Witnesses may have been lying. Alternatively, there may have been honest mistakes in the transmission of testimony over the two millennia between us and the events in question. Christian philosopher, Richard Swinburne doesn't deny that these are possibilities. But, based upon the sorts of arguments we discussed in Chapter 3, he comes to this evidence already believing in the existence of God.

Now, if you *already* believe that God exists, and if you believe this God to be perfectly good, and extremely powerful, then perhaps you should come to *expect* that, at some point in history, God will become incarnate in some human being. In fact, Swinburne presents three reasons why God might want to become incarnate:

1. To offer humanity a means of atonement.

2. To better identify with human suffering.

3. To provide us with a perfect example of how we should live our lives.

We can explain these three reasons in turn. First: All human beings commonly fall short of our ethical obligations. Perhaps we therefore *owe* God something – some sort of reparation. But anything we could give to God is already owed to God, so whatever we might seek to give to God in reparation can hardly be considered sufficient, unless, of course, we were somehow able to offer up a human being who was somehow identical to God, because: "The only human life not owed to God would be a human life led by God himself, God Incarnate that is; for God can owe nothing to God" (Swinburne, 2003, p. 41). That's how God becoming incarnate would offer humanity a means of atonement.

The other two reasons are easier to understand. Only by living a human life could God properly identify with human suffering. And only by living a human life could God show us, in the clearest, most direct way, how we human beings are supposed to behave.

Given all of this – Swinburne claims – it's at least as "probable as not that, if there is a God, he will become incarnate..." (Ibid., p. 50). Recognizing that God exists, and recognizing that it's as least as likely as not that God will become incarnate at some point, entails that the amount of evidence required to believe that God *has* become incarnate, at some point in history, is less than it otherwise would have been. After all, we were *expecting* this thing to happen, weren't we?

If you're an atheist, you have absolutely no reason to believe that premise 1 of our argument is true. Why on earth would we think that Jesus was resurrected? You can point to all sorts of evidence, but however much evidence there is, by way of testimony preserved (in primary and secondary sources) over thousands of years, some sort of witting or unwitting deception is a much more likely explanation of this evidence than the claim that Jesus really was resurrected. But, if you're a *theist*, and you think that God *could* resurrect a person, and if you're half-expecting God to become incarnate at some point, then that's going to alter what you take to be likely and what you take to be unlikely. Now add the following two claims:

1. If God *does* become incarnate in some human person, in part to show us how to live, He should give us good grounds for believing that that person is really and truly God incarnate (otherwise we might miss our opportunity to gain from the incarnation).

2. If a human lived a life that made him or her as good a candidate as can be imagined for being God incarnate, and if God wrought a miracle that led people to believe that this candidate really was God incarnate, then God would be guilty of bringing about a massive deception.

To motivate the first point, Swinburne writes:

> If God is to give us good grounds for believing that some prophet is God Incarnate, he must provide some further evidence, evidence of some kind of divine signature on that life which could not be produced by normal processes but only by God himself ... The prophet's life needs to be signed by a super-miracle.
>
> (Ibid., p. 62)

Given the second point, if any person could credibly have been God incarnate, and God allows that person to be raised from the dead, then that person must have truly been God incarnate.

Swinburne comes to the evidence, already with reason to think it as likely as not that God would have become incarnate at some point, and that a super-miracle attached to a human life would be an expected side-effect of incarnation, and that one wouldn't expect to see half-decent evidence for such a super-miracle attached to an exemplary human life, if that human hadn't been God incarnate. He even claims to have reason to assume that if God was *going* to become incarnate, He would likely do so in the land of Israel during the first century. According to Swinburne, this would have been the first context in human history in which humans would have been ready to expect an incarnation and interpret it as such. Consequently, the testimonial evidence that we do have for the claim that Jesus lived an exemplary life in the land of Israel during the first century and was resurrected becomes – according to Swinburne – massively compelling.

Not only has Swinburne justified (to his satisfaction) belief in premise 1 – that Jesus was resurrected from the dead, he's also justified belief in premise 2, since God would only allow a

person with the ethical reputation of Jesus to have his life signed with a super-miracle, such as resurrection, if he really was God incarnate. And, if Jesus was God incarnate, who died to bring about atonement for our sins, then it seems fair to say that Christianity (in some form or other) is true.

Should we really think that humans need to pay God anything analogous to reparations for their sins? Would paying God back with the sacrifice of his own human incarnation do any good? It's far from obvious to me that the answer to either of these questions is "yes." Nor is it clear to me that God is the sort of being that could be, in any meaningful sense, identical to a human being to begin with. Perhaps it's conceptually impossible for God to become a human being. For any of these reasons, you might be a theist who, unlike Swinburne, is not half-expecting, at some point in time, for God to become incarnate.

If you're not expecting God ever to become incarnate, you will likely agree with the atheist that the evidence for Jesus's resurrection is more likely the result of a hoax, perhaps even a well-intentioned hoax. Alternatively, you might think that the "testimony" arose through a process of wishful thinking, or collective delusion, or through some other natural process, witting or unwitting, innocent or malign. All of this would be more likely than a dead person coming back to life after three days, unless – like Swinburne – you take yourself to have reason to *expect* such an event to occur. For this reason, I don't take myself to have any compelling reason to believe the first premise of our argument.

Even the second premise of the argument can be questioned. According to the Hebrew Bible – which is authoritative scripture for both Christians and Jews – Moses explicitly prophesised that there would be false prophets sent to test the faith of the Israelites. Those false prophets would be able to perform signs and wonders (Deuteronomy 13:3-4). Moses tells the Israelites that any prophet who teaches them to contravene the laws of Moses, for instance by worshipping other gods, is to be considered a false prophet.

Even though Swinburne is expecting an incarnation signed by a super-miracle, the Jews at the time of Jesus, primed by the teachings of Moses, were expecting, as well as true prophets, for there to be false prophets capable of working miracles. If that's the case, it doesn't

automatically follow from Jesus being resurrected that he *was* God incarnate. He could, instead, have been one of the false miracle-working prophets sent to test the Israelites.

Admittedly, and unlike the false prophet warned of in Deuteronomy, Jesus claims to have come to *embody* the law of Moses, rather than to abrogate it (Matthew 5:17–18). But his church quickly came to disregard the binding authority of Jewish law, even for Jewish followers of Jesus (Galatians 3). According to the New Testament, since the coming of Jesus, large segments of the law of Moses no longer apply; perhaps because Jesus fulfilled them so fully as to render them defunct. But still, might that not count as a prophet enticing the Israelites to abandon the law of Moses?

Moreover, when Jesus claimed that he was the "the way and the truth and the life," and that no one can access the Father except through him (John 14:6), he really might have been claiming some sort of divinity for himself. That too might be interpreted as his seeking to lead the Israelites away from their unadulterated relationship with God, just as Moses had warned. This raises questions even over the second premise of our argument, since it allows that Christianity might be a false religion *even* if Jesus was resurrected.

The philosophical background to this argument concerns the nature of evidence and how it should interact with our prior-expectations. What should we have been expecting prior to the life of Jesus, and given those expectations, how much evidence do we need before it becomes reasonable to believe the claims of the Christian religion? The question of the interaction between expectation and evidence stands at the heart of Bayesian probability theory. Accordingly, what's so interesting about this argument, and what makes it a distinctive contribution to the analytic philosophy of religion is that it applies mathematical rigour to a question of religious import. Indeed, Swinburne goes so far as to run through the formal calculations so as to demonstrate just how close to certain we should be that Jesus was God incarnate. Ultimately, I reject the argument because I reject both of its premises, but I admire the attempt to bring these sorts of tools to the question at hand.

<u>An Argument for the Inimitability of the Quran (for Islam)</u>

Here's a popular argument for truth of Islam (in some form or other):

1. The Quran is inimitable.
2. If the Quran is inimitable, then Islam (in some form or other) is true.

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3. Islam (in some form or other) is true.

The argument is valid. Is it sound?

The Quran challenges unbelievers to try to imitate it, by writing something like it (Quran 2:23; 10:38; 11:13; 17:88; 52:34). This challenge implies a belief that attempts at imitation will fail.

Nobody denies that someone could write a *bad* imitation of the Quran. To do so would surely be impious, by Muslim lights, but not *impossible*. Instead, the claim must be that nobody could produce an imitation of the Quran that lives up to the Quran. But, in what respect? Nobody doubts that somebody could write a book with exactly the same number of *words* as the Quran. That's not the respect in which the Quran is purportedly inimitable.

Bassam Saeh, a scholar of the Arabic language and its pre-Quranic history, writes:

> [W]hen we discover the density and frequency of the innovative phenomena that run through the Qur'an's verses and surahs; when we see how one follows on from the other nonstop – in a single breath, without breaks or gaps of any kind; and when we see how every word, structure and expression in the Qur'an conceals wonders of expressive innovation of all colors and shapes, we begin to perceive the true linguistic miraculousness of the Qur'an and the impossibility of mimicking or forging it.
>
> (Saeh, 2015, p. 14)

The Quran contains such literary innovation, when compared to pre-Quranic texts, that it becomes something of a wonder that its original audience were able to understand it at all, and yet they did, and found it remarkably compelling (Ibid., p. 15). In the very first surah of the Quran, for example, which is comprised of just 29 words, Saeh documents 58 new linguistic developments found nowhere in pre-Quranic Arabic (Ibid., p. 20).

Quranic style is so *distinctive* that any speaker of the language with a cursory knowledge of Quranic style would, according to Saeh, be able to pick out a verse of the Quran from a lineout

of almost identical non-Quranic sentences (Ibid., pp. 19, 31). If that's true, then we are, indeed, talking about a book that would be very difficult to imitate.

Some scholars of Arabic *do* criticise Quranic style. As Shabbir Akhtar, the Muslim philosopher, readily concedes, "The Quran is rhymed prose (*saj*') usually without poetic rhythm (metre); it breaks the rules of rhymed poetry by repeating a rhyme or using false rhymes." When non-Muslims are confronted by these details, they're liable to dismiss Quranic prose-poetry as poorly executed. Muslims, by contrast, generally "dismiss this assessment as unfair since we are judging the Quran's poetic merit by using technical criteria when the book persistently denies its poetic status" (Akhtar, 2008, p. 142). Judgement here is likely clouded, on both sides, by implicit bias. Not being able to speak Arabic myself, it becomes difficult to know whom to trust.

Regarding the structure of the Quran, Akhtar concedes:

> A few chapters begin or end abruptly and thus seem disjointed… There are many awkward or abrupt transitions from one theme to another… implying defective organization and lack of competent editing.
>
> (Ibid., p. 147)

Obviously, a believer will relate to this as part of the mysterious beauty of the text. The unbeliever might relate to it as bad writing and editing. Once again, who to trust?

Judged not in terms of its rhyme, metre, or structural organisation, Akhtar claims it to be a consensus among scholars of Arabic (Muslim and non-Muslim alike) that the Quran is an impressive literary achievement:

> Even disbelieving Arabists eventually concede that the Quran's Arabic is outstandingly stylish: most of them reverse, after a whole lifetime of study and reflection, their own earlier dismissive judgements made in the active heat of juvenile 'scholarship' and missionary zeal. All competent authorities agree that while a translation could successfully convey the sense and the learned nuances of its fecund and mysterious vocabulary, it can never register the sheer range of its emotional effect.
>
> (Ibid., p. 144)

But who gets to define what constitutes "competent authority?" It sounds as if any Arabist who isn't impressed by the literary qualities of the Quran is disqualified by definition; dismissed because they're clearly still working in the heat of a "missionary zeal" that will one day dissipate. In fact, Arabists who criticise the Quran for its "glaring idiosyncrasies, including peculiarities of diction as reflected in syntax, vocabulary and grammatical accuracy" get labelled, dismissively, by Akhtar as "Jewish and Christian polemicists" (Ibid., p. 146).

It's just too difficult to assemble a jury that can't be accused of prejudice, one way or the other, to pronounce upon the question of Quranic style. Accordingly, premise 1 can't easily be established to the satisfaction of nonbelievers. The Quran could be an unparalleled literary innovation, miraculous both in its production and in the fact that it was even understood by its initial audience. Alternatively, a more cynical reader might think it a poorly structured, idiosyncratic text, embraced by a credulous population more because of the charisma and growing political power of its human author, than because of its actual literary qualities.

Other Muslim thinkers have proposed that the Quran is inimitable for another reason entirely. According to these thinkers, no human composition from that period could have known the scientific discoveries that it pre-empted. Close readings of the Quran reveals that it hides knowledge about the formation of embryos, plate tectonics, the expansion of the universe and more. This is taken to prove the miraculousness of the Quran.

But, as it turns out, appreciation of the scientific secrets of the Quran relies upon equally subjective issues of interpretation. For example, like the Hebrew Bible, the Quran claims that the first man was created from mud, rather than emerging from other hominid species by a process of natural selection. In cases of conflict between the Quran and the findings of contemporary science, and if the scientific data really can't be denied, believers would tell us to read the relevant verses metaphorically. Likewise, if a scientific *discovery* is made that can be read *into* a verse, but only by taking it metaphorically, then we're instructed to take it metaphorically, so that we can wonder at the fact that these discoveries were waiting for us in the text. In other contexts, we're advised to take the teachings of the Quran quite literally. What principles are guiding this methodology?

Reading the Quran this way looks *ad hoc* to unbelievers. It also threatens to damage the beauty of the Quran:

> The text buckles under the pressure of detailed scientific meanings attached to vague and innocent expressions… The Muslim apologist celebrates the undiscovered scientific potential of his book while the outsider is amused and puzzled by this facile and ingenuous handling of scripture.
>
> (Ibid., p. 171)

A more promising route by which to defend premise 1 is to point to the effect that the Quran, as a book, has had on individual people, and cultures. It's widely documented that public recitals of the Quran, in Arabic, even to audiences who don't understand the words, are often the instigators of profound religious experiences. The sort of mystical ecstasy known to other religions more in the context of prayer seems to be brought on, for numerous people, simply by the public or private reading of the text of the Quran. As Jeffrey Lang reports:

> [O]ne does not have to be a Muslim to feel this intrinsic power of the Qur'an, for many of them chose Islam after, and because of, such moments. Also, many a non-Muslim scholar of the Qur'an has reported it. The British scholar of Arabic, Arthur J. Arberry, recalled how the Qur'an supported him through a difficult time in his life. He stated that listening to the Qur'an chanted in Arabic was, for him, like listening to the beat of his own heart. Fredrick Denny, a non-Muslim writer, recalls the "wonderfully disturbing experience" one sometimes has when reading the Qur'an, when the reader starts feeling "an uncanny, sometimes frightening presence." Instead of reading the Qur'an, the reader begins feeling the Qur'an is "reading" the reader!
>
> (Lang, 1997, p. 139)

The inimitability of the Quran is transformed here into a claim not about its literary qualities, nor its hidden scientific wisdom, but about its measurable effect on audiences. Surely it *would* be difficult to manufacture a text on your own that could have that effect on that number of people. And though the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are hugely influential texts that have shaped Western culture and have been a vital part of people's religious lives, there is

something remarkable about the *speed* with which the Quran gave birth to a civilization, "moving Arab cultures from oral to literate status in decades" (Akhtar, 2008, p. 154).

When read as a claim about the dramatic and almost immediate effects that the book had over an entire civilization, and continues to have over the lives of believers, it becomes harder, I think, to deny the first premise of our argument. At the very least, it would be extremely difficult for any given person to manufacture a text that would have comparable effects.

The next problem to face the argument, however, concerns the second premise. If you already believe in the existence of God, then one of the options on the table is that the inimitability of the Quran was caused by its Divine origin. But if you're an atheist, or even an agnostic, dozens of other explanations would strike you as more plausible. Perhaps the geo-political circumstances of the Arabian peninsular in the fifth century were especially ripe for the reception of a text like the Quran, making it difficult to replicate in other circumstances.

If you're deeply committed to atheism, and you become convinced that the Quran is an *especially* difficult book to explain, then – I suppose – you'll still be more open to the claim that it was written by aliens from a distant planet than you would be willing to concede that it came from a God in whom you don't believe!

A believing Jew, in comparison, would be more likely to accept that Mohammad was a false prophet, even if he was somehow capable of working miracles. Indeed, as we've seen, Moses pre-warned the Jews that such things would occur. And, from a Jewish point of view, it's more likely that God sent some sort of test to the Jews, for various reasons – and, indeed, a test that might have had beneficial consequences for the gentile world – than it's likely that thousands of years after the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai, God had to come down to Mohammed to correct the record on various issues. A believing Christian would surely make a similar claim. And thus we see, once again, that what you already believe plays an important role in what counts as sufficient evidence for what.

If you're not already a theist, or if you're already committed (for one reason or another) to the truth of some other religion, the argument won't be *compelling* (even if it turns out to be sound). And that's why Akhtar is right to conclude that: "Neither the powerful, even hypnotic,

effect of the Quranic rhythm, nor its disputed ability to frustrate the poets [who seek to imitate its eloquence], can conclusively support the truth of its claims" (Ibid., p. 156).

An Argument from the Kuzari Principle (for Judaism)

Here is a popular argument for the truth of Judaism:

1. If it is a widespread belief among the Jews today that there was a revelation to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai, then there *was* a revelation to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai.
2. There *is* a widespread belief among the Jews today that there was a revelation to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai.
3. If there was a revelation to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai, then Judaism (in some form or other) is true.

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4. There was a revelation to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. (Follows from lines 1 and 2)
5. Judaism (in some form or other) is true. (Follows from lines 3 and 4)

What seems vaguely ridiculous about this argument is the idea, encoded in the first premise, that we should believe that something happened just because certain people believe it happened. But that premise is supposed to be bolstered by something known as the Kuzari principle.

The principle gets its name from a book, *The Kuzari,* written by Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi (1075-1141). The idea is something like this: call an event a **national unforgettable** if it was (a) remarkable, (b) witnessed by the majority of a nation, and (c) its memory was alleged to have been passed down in an unbroken chain within the community who witnessed it. The Kuzari Principle is just this: reports of national unforgettables are reliable.

Widespread beliefs are very often false. But premise 1 can be believed because the claim that there was a revelation to the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai is a claim about a national unforgettable. Given the Kuzari principle, it's the sort of claim that can be trusted to be true when widely believed by the people to whom the event reportedly occurred.

Tyron Goldschmidt strengthens the argument by finessing the Kuzari principle. He calls *his* principle, the 'Jumbled Kuzari Principle.' It states that:

> A tradition is likely true if it is (1) accepted by a nation; describes (2) a national experience of a previous generation of that nation; which (3) would be expected to create a continuous national memory until the tradition is in place; is (4) insulting to that nation [e.g. it calls them stiff-necked and lists their sins]; and (5) makes universal, difficult and severe demands on that nation.
>
> (Goldschmidt, 2019, p. 223)

Traditions that meet all five criteria can be trusted to be true. Goldschmidt writes:

> Just imagine trying to convince the Nepalese that three hundred years ago Napoleon visited their country for fifty years, and that everything he touched turned into gold. And also that: most everyone he visited tried to molest him, and so he put a curse on them—their enemies will enslave them unless they fast once a week, and tell the story to their children every day. And that they did tell the story to their children every day. It's not going to happen. The Nepalese would not believe this unless it happened.
>
> Now imagine adding such aspects [drawn from] the Jewish tradition: that e.g. God commanded them to give up work one day every week, to give up agricultural work one of every seven years, not to eat many foods, to refrain from physical contact with spouses for a period every month, that they must constantly retell the tradition and make literary and symbolic reminders of it, and that they did do this continuously, etc. What is the relevant difference between this story [about the Jews] and the previous one [about the Nepalese]? Nothing. Except that it happened. The Israelites did believe this. They would not have believed this unless it happened.
>
> (Ibid., p. 233)

People will accuse Goldschmidt of naivety; of failure to attend to the subtle and sophisticated ways in which cultures and national narratives emerge. But until you can find a clear example of a tradition that is widely believed by a nation which meets all five of the criteria that Goldschmidt lists, and which we know to be false, it's difficult to deny the force of the principle.

Having said that, we can certainly imagine ways in which the Jewish people could have come to believe in the story of the revelation at Sinai without it actually having happened. Consider the following scenarios put forward by Yehuda Gellman (2016, pp. 81-87):

Scenario 1: a charismatic leader inspires a deep spiritual experience in the Israelites, and informs them, as sincerely as mistakenly, that God was appearing to them.

Scenario 2: the leader takes advantage of a lightning storm, convincing the Israelite band that God was appearing to them.

Scenario 3: the leader *stages* a revelation with secret accomplices, lighting fires and banging drums to fool the band into thinking God was appearing to them.

Scenario 4: he slips the Israelite band hallucinogens, and then hypnotizes them into thinking that God was appearing to them.

Over the years, the story born from any one of those four scenarios is embellished. Alternatively:

Scenario 5: At some point in history, the Israelites, or proto-Israelites, were suffering and despondent. Their revered leader taught them that God chose to appear to them. The story comforts them, and so they make themselves believe it, and relay it to their descendants, who eventually embellish it by adding that their ancestors *always* believed it.

Scenario 6: The leader has a dream in which God reveals how he appeared to the nation, in the distant past, and also commands the leader to tell the nation about it. The leader superstitiously believed the dream and taught it to the nation. Since they revere the leader, they accept the story without question, and assume that there must be some reason or other why the story was forgotten in the intervening years.

Scenario 7: The nation have abandoned God for idol worship. A prophet rebukes them. He tells them how God appeared to their ancestors and commanded them to worship God alone. He explains how the events were forgotten in their turning to idolatry. He scares them with promises of punishment for further abandonment of God. In their fright they accept his stories.

Scenario 6 or 7 might seem particularly plausible. The Biblical account of Jewish history paints a picture of a culture in which polytheism was *rife*. The God of the Hebrew Bible was often regarded as one of many regional gods, competing for the affection of the Israelites. These attitudes were the bane of the prophets' existence. "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is god, follow him" (I Kings 18:21). This was the demand of a frustrated Elijah, who wanted the Jewish people to make their minds up.

If Jewish commitment to Judaism waxed and waned, then there may have been times when the transmission of the tradition was broken altogether. This would make room for something like scenario 6 or 7. But, in fact, there is no evidence that God had been *forgotten* about at any point in the Biblical narrative. People wavered between multiple gods, but nobody forgot about the God of Israel, or the basic story of the Jewish people, even as commitment and knowledge of ritual law waxed and waned. Indeed, we know of no time in which the transmission of Jewish tradition was broken so thoroughly as to make room for scenario 6 or 7.

But what about the other scenarios? I return to a recurring theme of this chapter. What strikes a person as likely depends upon their background beliefs. It's definitely *strange* for a nation to embrace so enthusiastically a story that demands a heavy ritual burden, especially when it also insults their ancestors as stiff-necked sinners and contains the claim that the story had already been passed down continually. We know of no historical parallel where a nation has a belief of this nature that's false. But then again, if you don't believe in the existence of God, surely you'll think that any one of Gelman's seven scenarios listed above, however unparalleled and implausible, would be more likely than the theory that God (in whom you don't' believe) really orchestrated a revelation at Sinai, having split the sea, and led the nation out of slavery.

That's Gellman's point. The Kuzari principle is *not* strong enough to bring atheists to Jewish belief. But what happens when you come to the data, *already* believing in the existence of God*?* Violations of the Jumbled Kuzari Principle are *surprising*, if they ever occur. Gellman's seven scenarios are not impossible. But we know of no other nation that has adopted a false narrative that so *clearly* violates the Jumbled Kuzari Principle. It's at least *surprising* that the principle could be so flagrantly violated. Now, a surprise like this isn't overwhelming evidence. But, if you already believe in the existence of a Divine being, capable of willing things for a people and

capable of *revealing* that will to a people through an event like the Sinai revelation, premise 1 might now strike you as compelling.

Given a commitment to premise 1, and given that premise 2 is uncontroversially true, it would seem to follow that there really was a revelation at Sinai. As I've already conceded, along with Gellman, this won't be compelling to atheists (or even, perhaps, to agnostics), but it should seem pretty compelling to a theist. Consequently, it's unsurprising (or perhaps it's just my Jewish biases breaking free) that most western monotheists *do* accept that such an event occurred – Jews here are joined by believing Christians and Muslims; all of whom tend to accept that there was a revelation at Sinai. And yet even for theists, the sticking point of the argument is going to be premise 3.

Muslims believe that the content of the revelation at Sinai was corrupted over time by the Rabbis. Christians believe that the New Testament came to over-ride or complete the covenant sealed at Sinai. Muslims and Christians would deny premise 3.

Elsewhere, I have argued that, if the Sinai event is understood as an event *within* the life of a particular nation, then it should be understood as giving some sort of Divine stamp of approval to the religious traditions that evolve, in *response* to Sinai, *within* that nation (Lebens, 2020, §7.2.2). Accordingly, at the point at which Christianity became a movement that was (mainly) *external* to the life of the nation of Israel, it broke with its connection to the Sinai event, and lost any sort of warrant that it might otherwise have received from Sinai. Likewise, the Muslim claim that the tradition became corrupted is undermined if you believe that the Sinai event was acting as a Divine stamp of approval for an evolving tradition. To the extent that God was giving the Jewish tradition a seal of approval, He was also giving authority to the Rabbis, scholars, and elders of the nation to interpret and determine the law, such that it cannot readily be corrupted, since the law is (to a large extent) just what the Rabbis say it is. But here, of course, I'm being swayed by a very Jewish-centric conception of what the Sinai event may have meant.

Perhaps you believe that the revelation occurred, but give it a different interpretation. Perhaps you don't see it as an event that was internal to the life of just one nation. Once again, the argument might be sound – for all we know – and it will be compelling to some. But it doesn't amount to a universally compelling proof.

An Argument for (some form of) Buddhism or Hinduism

Rene Descartes pointed out, long ago, that it's not all that easy to doubt that you exist. If you didn't exist, then how could you be doubting whether you exist!?

We do more than just exist. We tend to think of ourselves as beings that form beliefs and make decisions as to how we want to act, and that, to a large extent, we do, indeed, control our actions. According to Robert Wright (2017), this has all been undermined by multiple sources, including:

- Research about split-brain patients, who had the right and left hemisphere of their brains disconnected (as a treatment for severe epilepsy), which reveals that when one hemisphere has no idea what the other hemisphere is doing, it will try to come up with a plausible explanation, so that the "conscious self" can convince itself that it's in control (even when it clearly isn't).
- Cognitive science, which explains our thoughts, feelings, and actions as the product of multiple often conflicting *modules*, and
- Neuroscience, which seems to demonstrate that our conscious mind, far from calling the shots and making the decisions, is often the last to know what the brain has decided to do, and only experiences the *illusion* of choosing to act after the decision has already been made.

If the conscious self isn't in the driving seat, and your decisions, feelings, and beliefs, are caused by an amalgam of different bits and bobs in your brain and body, and if your brain and body are part of a physical universe that's all interconnected, so that the border between where you stop and where your environment begins becomes ever harder to delineate, what conclusion should we draw?

This science seems to point to the bizarre conclusion that, in some fundamental sense, you don't really exist, and, if you take seriously the claim that all things in the physical universe constantly rely for their existence on other things, then not only are *you* not a substantial entity in your own right, but nothing out there beyond you is all that substantial either.

These conclusions, drawn from the sciences, amount to the two most central claims of traditional Buddhism – the doctrine of "not-self" (that the self is an illusion) and the doctrine of *emptiness* which is the claim "that the things we see when we look out on the world have less in the way of distinct and substantial existence than they seem to have" (Ibid., p. 26).

The natural sciences have revealed to us that we're living under an illusion; an illusion that ourselves and the world in which we live are more substantial than they are. What's more, various meditative practices can help us to escape from these delusions, despite the powerful hold that they have over us, and to escape from these delusions makes way for a blissful state of being, which you could call *nirvana*.

Moreover, evolutionary psychology has revealed to us why we sometimes get stuck in a "hedonic treadmill" of addiction, to unhealthy food, for example, or to destructive patterns of behaviour. In a nutshell, it's because our sense of what's pleasurable, and what's painful, evolved for our survival needs in Paleolithic times, which all but ensures that they will radically misfire in their new surroundings.

Since our feelings are more in control than our so-called conscious selves, we end up doing a lot of harm, falling into patterns of behaviour that we seem powerless to stop. And yet, meditative practices – as have been developed over the centuries by practitioners of Buddhism – are uniquely well placed, and scientifically proven, to help us to break free of the hold of these deceptive and destructive feelings.

Buddhism has been vindicated. Hundreds of years before the scientists could catch up, Buddhism had the right diagnosis of our delusions, and the right practical suggestions as to how to overcome them and how to live without the constant suffering and dissatisfaction – the *dukkha* – that emerge when we allow ourselves to be controlled by the feelings and urges with which we've been lumbered by natural selection.

Accordingly, Wright calls his book *Why Buddhism is True.* And yet, towards the end of the book, he concedes that his entire argument could equally push in the direction of the Hindu school of thought, known as Advaita Vedanta. Instead of taking the interdependence of all things as an argument for the insignificance of all things, we could equally well take it as evidence that all that's really real is the whole that we are all a part of – which is, perhaps, some massive and

supreme experience or mind. In Hindu terminology, this is to say that *atman* (i.e., the self) is somehow one with the underlying reality of which it is merely a part, namely *brahman* – the world-soul.

Now, as Wright is fully aware, "the very birth of Buddhism, its distinct emergence within an otherwise Hindu milieu, is thought to lie largely in the *denial* that *atman* exists" (Ibid., p. 220). And yet, as far as Wright is concerned, the same scientific evidence could point in either way – either there's no self at all, and there's no world at all, because all things are too insubstantial to merit being counted as existing at all; or, the radical interdependence of all things could be taken as evidence that all things exist, but *only in so far* as they are parts of the whole. Wright speculates:

> [M]aybe the deepest meditative experiences had by Buddhists and the deepest meditative experiences had by Hindus in the Advaita Vedanta tradition are basically the same experience. There is a sense of dissolution of the bound of self and an ensuing sense of continuity with the world out there. If you're a Buddhist (at least, a Buddhist of the mainstream type), you're encouraged to think of it as a continuity of emptiness, and if you're a Hindu, you're encouraged to think of it as a continuity of soul or spirit.
>
> (Ibid., p. 221)

Wright's book is fascinating, but leaves a lot of room for philosophical concern. First, we could ask: do the various scientific disciplines and experiments to which he refers really demonstrate that there is no self, or that the self has little to no executive control over our behaviour? Wright presents these findings with a great deal of confidence, but in fact, one of the most important experiments, which seemingly demonstrated that the conscious mind only experiences making a decision once the decision is made, was recently discovered to have been poorly designed (Gholipour, 2019). Once the design flaw in the experiment was corrected, neuroscientists were unable to find any lag whatsoever between the subjective experience of making a conscious decision, and the brain's enacting that decision.

Moreover, the mediative techniques that Wright champions seem to demonstrate, even in scientific tests, the ability had by the conscious mind to restructure one's own neurology. If

anything, these techniques are powerful evidence for the *existence* of a conscious mind, and its powerful ability, through mindfulness, to overcome all sorts of neurological stumbling blocks (Lardone, et al., 2018).

We could also raise concerns about the metaphysics. Would the interdependence of all things really entail that nothing exists, or that only one thing really exists?

An even bigger worry looms over the horizon. Hinduism, in any of its forms, is more than just the claim that *atman* is dependent upon and part of *brahman.* Buddhism, in any of its forms, is more than just the claims of not-self and emptiness. Admittedly, Wright concedes that the form of Buddhism that he's defending is not traditional. His is a highly westernised form of Buddhism, as that tradition has developed in recent years in North-America. Moreover, it's a naturalised form of the religion that rejects any of the supernatural beliefs that many traditional Buddhists continue to hold – belief in spirits, reincarnation, and gods, for example.

Even if Wright's arguments are right, and he has managed to demonstrate the truth of some kernel of Buddhism or Hinduism, shorn from its traditional context, and stripped of any commitment to the supernatural; is what's left – the vindicated kernel – worthy of being called a *religion*?

This question is similar to questions we've asked already in this chapter. Even if we accept that Jesus was resurrected, would that entail that the Christian religion (in some form or other) is true? If we accept that the Quran is inimitable, in some important respect, would that entail that Islam (in some form or other) is true? Or, if we accept that there was a revelation at Sinai, would that entail that Judaism (in some form or other is true)?

Likewise, we could ask: if some central claims of Buddhism or Hinduism, about the self and its relationship to the universe, are found to be true, does that entail that a given religion in its entirety has been vindicated?

Wright is adamant that what remains of Buddhism (or Hinduism), once he's dismissed those parts that his argument doesn't defend, is still worthy of being regarded as a religion. He bases this claim on a definition of religion he adopts from William James, according to which, religion

is, at root, "the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto" (James, 2008, p. 41).

And, since the naturalistic or secular form of Buddhism that Wright has defended *does* claim to free us from the illusions, foisted upon us by our psychology and natural selection, and since he *does* think that we can only hope to find inner-peace and best refine our character through meditation, he thinks that his streamlined form of Buddhism counts as a religion. It dissolves illusions, allowing us access to an "unseen order." It teaches us how to live in this newly understood world, making us ethically and psychology better off; therein lies our "supreme good" (Wright, 2017, pp. 282-283).

Is James' definition of religion viable? Does it admit of counterexamples? I leave that for you to decide, in conversation with chapter 1 of this book, but I would point out that, to the extent that religion is a sociological phenomenon, a religion that *doesn't* contain a sense of communal belonging, as an integral part, falls a long way short of what many might count as a paradigm case of a religion.

Is Buddhism or Hinduism, when shorn of its collective communal identity – or divested of the historical narrative in which one comes to partake when one sees oneself as follower of the Buddha, or as a Hindu, in fellowship with co-religionists, past, present, and future – still a religion? Alternatively, has Wright been arguing (whether successfully or not) for some very interesting conclusions that simply fall short of an argument for a *religion*?

An Argument for Religion X

Blaise Pascal is famous for his argument for Catholicism, his notorious *wager*. The argument was prefigured by Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali as an argument for Islam (see Alam, 2017). As we'll see, the argument – to the extent that it works at all – seems to work as an argument for different religions, depending upon the audience of the argument. I'll start with a version of Pascal's argument for Catholicism.

An eccentric wealthy person comes to you with a shiny pound coin. She's going to flip the coin and cover it up. You get to choose whether to play or to pass. If the coin falls heads up, and you

chose to play, then, she tells you, you'll win an extraordinary sum – one million pounds. But if you chose to play, and it falls *tails* up, then you'll win something measly in comparison, but hey, it's still free money; you'll win twenty-five pounds. Alternatively, you could choose to *pass*. If you do so, you'll win nothing if the coin comes up heads, and you'll win a hundred pounds if it comes up tails. The following table represents the game of this eccentric millionaire.

		
Play	**£1,000,000**	**£25**
Pass	**£0**	**£100**

Decision theory gives the choice to play a value of £500,012.50. The choice to *pass* receives a value of £50. That's because, if the chances are 50-50, the person who plays such a game will walk off, on average, £499,962.50 richer than the person who passes. It's a no brainer, you should definitely play and not pass.

Now, imagine that heads-up represents Christianity being true, that tails-up represents Christianity being false, that the coin is evenly weighted, that playing represents committing to Christianity, and that passing represents a life with no religion.

If you committed to Christianity and it was *true*, then you maximised your chances of eternal blissful life, expressed appropriate gratitude to God in your way of life, and likely brought others salvation too. You'd also receive the this-worldly goods associated with living a religious life. Indeed, Michael Rota, in reconstructing Pascal's wager, points to a wealth of scientific research. Apparently, committing to religion tends to generate "greater life satisfaction and a sunnier emotional life", an appreciable increase in life expectancy, and the likelihood that you'll engage with volunteering, charitable giving (to both religious and secular causes), and that you'll be more likely to embody other civic virtues too (Rota, 2016, p. 42).

There *will* have been some costs. You'll have spent more time praying than you would have done as a non-Christian. You'll have avoided certain pleasures from which Christians abstain. But these costs pale in comparison to the benefits, such as eternal bliss. We're avoiding talk of infinite values since the mathematics of infinity is notorious for throwing a spanner in the works for decision theory. So, let's just say you've won a million pounds.

If you committed to it, and Christianity turns out to be *false*, then what did you really lose? You still had a nice life, committed to noble ideals. You may have wasted some time praying, but don't forget the emotional benefits that those prayers gave you. There were some pleasures avoided that could have been enjoyed, but perhaps avoiding those pleasures played a role in shaping your moral character. It's hard to say that you'll have lost all that much. You'll probably have gained something from your life immersed in a religious community, but nothing like eternal bliss. Let's model this by saying that you won twenty-five pounds.

Using one million pounds to signify the prize you win for betting on Christianity if "the coin" comes up heads, and using twenty-five pounds to signify the prize that you win for betting on Christianity if it comes up tails, assuming a fair coin, then the value we should associate with playing will be – once again – £500,012.50.

And what if you *pass*? If the coin comes up heads, you'll have minimised your chances for eternal life, you'll have lost an opportunity to express gratitude to God, you'll have lost the opportunity to bring salvation to others, and you'll have lost out on the this-worldly goods associated with a religious life. We're being generous to say that this is like getting zero pounds,

rather than a fine (and we've not even factored in the notion of hell-fire). But let's be generous and symbolise the outcome of passing, when the coin comes up heads, as winning nothing.

If you pass, and Christianity is false, then perhaps you'll have had a better life than the Christian. You were noble and moral *without* Christianity. You had more time for certain pleasures and leisure than did the church-going, Bible-studying Christian. You might value the fact that you didn't commit your life to a *falsehood* (although you never get to find this out for sure). On the other hand, you lost the benefits associated with living a religious life. Let's be generous to the atheist and say that you come out better off than the Christian. You won't win a million pounds – there's no eternal life here. It's more like you've won a hundred pounds.

If the chances really are 50-50, and modeling the outcomes on our somewhat arbitrary but surely illustrative monetary values, then by betting on Christianity you can expect to come out, on average, with the equivalent of £499,962.50 more than you would have done by passing. We'd be crazy not to wager.

But what if the coin is weighted? What if the millionaire tells you that it hardly ever lands heads up? "In fact," she says, "it only lands heads up, on average, one in a million times." This dramatically alters the mathematics of the situation. The average winnings you could expect from playing, rather than passing, would be just £25.99, since the coin so rarely comes up heads. And the average winnings that you could expect from *passing* would be £99.99. And thus, with this heavily *weighted* coin, the person who chooses to pass walks off, on average, £74 better off than the person who chooses to play.

If the chances are 50-50 that Christianity is true, then you'd be crazy not to play. But the chances *aren't* 50-50. Isn't that a problem for Pascal?

Not necessarily. Imagine that the coin is weighted, but not *extremely* heavily. Imagine that the coin falls tails-up 75% of the time. In that case, you'd still be wise to play. The average winnings of those who play will be £250,018.75, whereas those who pass get just £75. Even if the chances are only one in a *hundred*, it's still a pretty good bet, despite the fact that the projected winnings would be radically diminished. At odds of one in a hundred, you'd still stand to win, on average, £10,024.75. The average winnings of those who pass will be just £99.

You might think the chances of Christianity being true are *less* that one in a hundred; you might think them to be less than one in a million. You might think it *impossible* that Christianity is true. If the coin is weighted *extremely* heavily to fall tails up, and – likewise – if the evidence renders Christianity *extremely* unlikely, then the smart wager might be to *pass*. But all the Christian needs to do, to make the wager attractive, is to show that Christianity has some slim chance of being true. A slim chance would be enough to render the wager a no brainer.

Pascal's argument is ingenious, but it faces an obvious problem. What if *Islam* is true? What if it's true under the interpretation that says that non-Muslims are damned to eternal hellfire? What if some form of Hinduism is true, and if I don't engage in certain Hindu rituals, I risk reincarnation into some horrible state of affairs? With these different options on the table, each promising a very different, but very extreme set of rewards and punishments, it's far from clear how I should bet. The decision that faces us isn't a simple coin flip between Christianity or nothing. The decision is more like a many-sided die roll between a dizzying array of religious options.

One way to respond is to recognise that not every religion is a "live option" for every person. If, for you, Christianity or nothing were the only thinkable choices, then the wager should be a very powerful consideration in favour of Christianity. But likewise, if for you, the only thinkable choices are Hinduism or nothing, then a very similar wager would be an equally powerful consideration, not in favour of Christianity, but in favour of Hindusim.

What do I mean by an option being *thinkable*? I call a thought 'unthinkable' if you cannot bring yourself to factor it into your practical reasoning. Sometimes it seems appropriate, and not at all worthy of criticism for you to find a thought unthinkable. For example, you might be waiting for a heart transplant for your loved one. You *know* that one way to save the day would be to find a healthy match, and drug them, in just the right way so as to cause a brain-stem death whilst giving the doctors time to salvage the heart. This strategy would work, but it's *unthinkable* for you. Rightly so. You do not factor it into your practical deliberations.

To be ethical makes some things unthinkable. To love somebody, or to be a committed member of a community will likewise make some things unthinkable to you. This isn't irrational, so long as it's rational for you to be moral, a friend, and/or a member of the community in question.

For example: a person who feels a strong sense of belonging and loyalty to the Jewish community will likely find it unthinkable that Jesus was the Messiah. This is nothing personal against Jesus or Christians. It's just that the Jewish community has for two millennia been defined, in part, by its rejection of Jesus. In almost every Jewish circle there is much more of a stigma attached to becoming a Christian than to becoming an atheist. The sorry history of Christian anti-Semitism clearly plays some role in informing this stigma.

A Jew who embraces Jesus does so at the cost of their communal bond to the mainstream Jewish community. It follows that, to the extent that a person is committed to their Jewish identity, the thought that Jesus is the Messiah will be unthinkable. Does this constitute close-mindedness? I think it depends.

We should distinguish between the philosophy seminar room and the outside world. In the philosophy seminar room, all intellectual options should be on the table. And, in the philosophy seminar room we're all capable of entertaining a wide range of intellectual options, even those that seem horrific to us outside of it.

Solipsism is a good example. It's the belief that you're the only person that exists. In the philosophy seminar room, it should be seriously entertained. In fact, it's not at all easy to construct compelling philosophical arguments against solipsism. But outside of the philosophy seminar room, as I reason practically about how to act, I don't so much as *consider* the possibility that I'm the only real person affected by my actions. Does this mean that I learnt nothing in the philosophy seminar room? Does it make me close-minded?

No. The philosophy seminar room helped me to improve my critical faculties. Moreover, if – in the philosophy seminar room – I come across *overwhelming* reason to adopt a theory that I wouldn't hitherto have considered *outside* of the seminar room, then reason dictates that I take that theory back with me into the world at large. In these ways, philosophy *can* change us, despite our rootedness. We are open to argument. We are open to being moved.

The Jew in the philosophy seminar room, just like anybody else, should be willing to entertain all evidence and arguments for other religions. She should listen with a patient and open-minded ear. But if the evidence isn't *overwhelming*, then she's licenced to leave those

arguments at the door, and to ignore them in her practical reasoning, just as we all do with solipsism.

So long as we're all encouraged to spend some time (so to speak) in the philosophy seminar room, and so long as when we're in there we're willing to listen to other opinions and to gather contrary evidence, and so long as there's a threshold beyond which the evidence *would* make inroads and *compel* us to bring the arguments home with us, from the philosophy seminar room into our outside lives, then it's far from obvious that a person is being unreasonably (or irredeemably, or culpably) closed-minded.

We should criticise you If you gather a sense of belonging and fraternity from your membership of the Ku Klux Klan. The organising principles of that community are inherently immoral. But rootedness in a community making certain things unthinkable for you is harder to criticise if your rootedness is a consequence of a sense of belonging that adds value to your life and to the world. Some belonging is praiseworthy. Accordingly, this has to be assessed on a case by case basis.

A number of Jews feel that they have a special obligation to their ancestors not to assimilate completely, given the huge sacrifices that those ancestors made to keep the Jewish identity alive. Moreover, holding a particular identity with pride can sometimes play a role in forming a person's confidence, self-image, and conceptual and emotional landscape, allowing them to flourish and grow as moral agents, which might benefit people way beyond the confines of any particular community.

If a Jew, Hindu, or Muslim, can hold her identity without neglecting her moral commitments to people beyond her community, and if it helps her to flourish as a person, and to respect the sacrifice of her ancestors, then it's going to be difficult to criticise her for her commitment to her cultural identity.

This line of thought can generate an argument for any religion. Call the religion in question, **religion X**. Then find a group of people, who belong to the community associated with religion X; these people are proud of their cultural identity, and rooted in their community, even though they're not all that religious. Let's call that group **audience A**. Audience A are, let us imagine, blamelessly rooted to their community in such a way as to render religion X thinkable, and

religions other than X unthinkable. For members of A, the only live choices to feed into their practical religious deliberations (until they receive overwhelming evidence for some other religion) will be commitment to X, or little-to-no commitment to X. Other religions are simply not live options.

Accordingly, if you're a member of the relevant audience, then Pascal's wager for Catholicism will be just as compelling as Michael Rota takes it to be. Such a Catholic can't be blamed for ignoring other religions, since those religions are non-culpably unthinkable for this audience (unless they're presented with overwhelming evidence for some other religion). But members of other audiences will swap Judaism, or Islam, or Hinduism, or what have you, for Catholicism, to create wagers that are equally compelling.

This argument even gives rise to a pleasing kind of pluralism. On this view, even if only one religion is true, so long as nobody is being culpably close-minded, a good and reasonable God can hardly be upset with people for following the religions that were most rational for them to follow given their social and cultural context, and without any overwhelming evidence to change their mind. Moreover, every believer in religion X should be able to recognise that, even though they were right to wager everything they've got on religion X being true, believers in other religions are not necessarily being any less rational than they are. This might be an important key for inter-religious respect and harmony.

But our modified wager has to respond to a number of other concerns to face Pascal's original argument.

The Avarice Objection: To wager on a religion is impious. It's as if you've said, "Well, I might as well commit to a religious life, since, if God *does* exist, He can do lots of good things for me." That's a selfish sort of religiosity. So even if the wager for religion X is compelling, it's not the right sort of reason for embracing a religion.

The Objection from Reason: There's something wrong about *trying* to believe when you lack sufficient evidence. We normally can't believe things just by choosing to believe. Instead, you'll have to trick yourself via some sort of self-hypnosis, or self-delusion. In the words of John Mackie, this sort of effort to convince yourself, in spite of no compelling evidence, "is to do violence to one's reason and understanding" (Mackie, 1982).

The Authenticity Objection: If you choose to commit yourself to religious practice – prayer, ritual, and the like – but you do so without *believing*, then your outward actions won't truly reflect your inward convictions. People will look at how you behave and infer that you believe things that you don't. Your prayers will also be inauthentic, and disingenuous. Your practice would be deceptive. Deceptiveness and in-authenticity are vices to be avoided (Gale, 1991).

Sadly, I have no more space, in this short book, to commit to a response to these problems. I think that many of them are best addressed by revisiting the distinction we drew in chapter 1 between faith and belief. Perhaps it can be authentic and sincere, and not at all deceptive, to embrace a religion, even when your confidence that the religion is true falls short of *belief* – since it might be the case that religion merely demands and expresses *faith.* But that's all that space will permit me to say.

Further Reading:

In addition to articles and books cited in this chapter

On the Argument from Resurrection:

William Lane Craig, *The Son Rises: Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2000).

On the Inimitability of the Quran:

Margaret Larkin, "The Inimitability of the Qur'an: Two Perspectives," *Religion & Literature* 20/1 (1988): 31–47.

Sophia Vasalou, "The Miraculous Eloquence of the Qur'an: General Trajectories and Individual Approaches," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 4/2 (2002): 23–53.

On the Interconnectedness of all things

Jonathan Schaffer, "The Internal Relatedness of All Things," *Mind* 119/474 (2010): 341-376

Samuel Lebens, "Nothing Else," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11/2 (2019):91-110.

On Pascal's Wager:

Paul Bartha & Lawrence Pasternack (eds.), *Pascal's Wager* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)

Anthony Flew, "Is Pascal's wager the only safe bet?" In: *The Presumption of Atheism* (New York NY: Harper & Row, 1976): 61-68.

Elizabeth Jackson, "Faithfully Taking Pascal's Wager," *The Monist* (forthcoming)

Chapter 5: Arguments Against God and Religious Belief

Over the last two chapters, we've explored some arguments in favour of key religious beliefs, or – indeed – in support of entire religions. In this chapter, I present a number of challenges and arguments that philosophers have raised *against* key beliefs shared by many religions, and even arguments against religion in general.

Some of the most central arguments against religion – to do with the effect that religion has had on the ethical conduct of individuals and communities – will have to wait until the next chapter, when we examine the relationship between ethics and religion. In this chapter we'll focus, instead, on the coherence of theistic belief and on the purported conflict between religion and science.

Problems with Omnipotence

Many religions claim to believe in a being, whether we call it God, Allah, Brahman, or Vishnu, who is omnipotent.

Of course, as we know from chapter 2, some theologians deny that we can say anything at all about God. They would deny that we say something literally true, when we say that God is omnipotent. Others will argue that God as He fundamentally is (which Kabbalists will call the *Ein Sof*, and which Advaita Vedanta Hindus calls *nirguna Brahman*) defies all description, but that God, as He *appears* to us, or as He is, in some *non-fundamental* sense (which Advaita Vedanta Hindus calls *saguna Brahaman*), is nevertheless, quite literally, omnipotent.

Moreover, if, like most religious believers on the street, you believe that you can say things that are literally true about God as He really is, then like most Jews, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus (for example, in the school of thought known as Vishishtadvaita Vedanta), you believe in a God who is omnipotent. And herein lies our first problem. Isn't the very notion of omnipotence incoherent? Consider the following argument.

1. If some being, call it God, could make a state of affairs obtain, then the state in question is possible (since God could make it happen)

2. If there were an omnipotent being (call it God) then it could make any state of affairs obtain

3. Assume, for the sake of argument, that there exists an omnipotent God

4. It follows from our assumption, and from line 2, that God can make even impossible states of affairs obtain

5. It follows from line 1 and line 4 that impossible states of affairs are possible, but that's a contradiction

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6. There doesn't exist an omnipotent God

It's hard to see where this argument goes wrong. If God could really make *anything* happen, then He must be able to make impossible things happen (otherwise He would be limited by the laws of possibility). But if He *can* make impossible things happen, then impossible things are possible, and that's a contradiction. Perhaps the theist should resist and say that nothing is impossible. But surely some things *are* impossible. Surely it's impossible for 2+2 to equal 5, for example.

Or, perhaps the theist could embrace the dialetheism that we mentioned in chapter 2, namely – the view according to which contradictions can sometimes be true. That would allow the theist to simply embrace the contradiction of line 5 and claim that impossible states of affairs are possible and impossible at the same time.

Faced with this sort of argument, and the ugly choices it presents the theist, most philosophical theologians seek to tweak their definition of omnipotence. This allows them to deny line 2 of our argument. To be omnipotent, they say, isn't to be able to do literally *anything*, or to make *any* state of affairs obtain. We need to be more modest in terms of what we imagine omnipotence to be. Perhaps we should say that omnipotence is the power to bring about any *possible* state of affairs. But doesn't this limit God in ways that conflict with the basic thought that God is unlimited? Not necessarily.

You might think that there's a deep distinction to be drawn between possible and impossible states of affairs. When you describe a possible state of affairs, there really is something that you've described – you've described some way that the world could be. But, when you've

described an *impossible* state of affairs, although you may *think* that you've described some way that the would could be, you haven't really described anything. What it means for your description of a state of affairs to be impossible is that you've actually failed to describe anything. When you describe a world in which 2+2=5, you've said nothing more than "bla bla bla!"

In that case, when you say that God can't make it the case that 2+2=5, you've said nothing more than "God can't make it the case that bla bla bla!" And that means that you haven't really said that there's something that he can't do. So, in a sense, we've returned to the claim that nothing is impossible, but we've sought to make sense of it. What we mean when we say that nothing is impossible is that, when we can call something impossible, all we're really doing, is saying that some description or other is *meaningless*.

This allows us to deny line 4 of the argument. When we say that God can do anything, we don't mean to say that He can do bla bla bla, because bla bla bla isn't a thing. When we say that God can do anything, we *don't* mean to say that he can make impossible states of affairs obtain. Impossible states of affairs aren't really things.

Fine. We seem to have rehabilitated omnipotence. Omnipotence is the power to make any *possible* state of affairs obtain. Nothing more. But there are still problems in store. Consider the following argument.

1. If somebody other than *me* makes it the case that I play football, then I'm not doing it freely
2. My freely playing football is a possible state of affairs
3. Assume that there exists an omnipotent being, call it God
4. God can make any possible state of affairs obtain (this follows from line 3, and our new definition of "omnipotence")
5. God can make it the case that I freely play football (this follows from lines 3 and 4)
6. If God makes me freely play football, then my football playing would be both free and unfree, this is a contradiction

7. There exists no omnipotent being

We started out saying that omnipotence is the power to make any state of affairs obtain. This led to a contradiction. So, we limited ourselves, and said that omnipotence is the power to make any *possible* state of affairs obtain. But even that definition led to contradiction. If omnipotence is shown to be an incoherent notion, then a gaping hole will have been shot through a central claim of many world religions. What can be done?

Contemporary philosophers of religion have suggested that the way to salvage the notion of omnipotence is to think about *comparative power*. Since nobody but me can make it the case that *I* play football freely, there is some power that only I have. But, compared to other beings, I could still be very weak indeed. Let's say that one being, call her Brenda, is more powerful than another being, call her Sally, if there are more states of affairs that Brenda can cause to obtain than there are states of affairs that Sally can cause to obtain. But just because Brenda is more powerful than Sally, it doesn't follow that Brenda can make Sally freely play football – that's a state of affairs that only Sally can bring about.

Armed with our notion of comparative power, Joshua Hoffman and Garry Rosenkrantz (1988) have suggested that we think of omnipotence as follows: a being is omnipotent so long as it isn't possible for any other being to be more powerful (and remember: to be more powerful is to be able to make more states of affairs obtain). This definition of omnipotence allows it to be the case that God is the most powerful being possible, and for it *also* to be the case that not even He could make me freely play football. Thank God for that.

At this point, a number of problems emerge for certain sorts of *Christian* theists. There are two claims that many Christians want to make that seem to raise new problems for the notion of omnipotence (problems not faced by non-Christian theists). The two claims are this:

1. There exists more than one omnipotent being, and
2. Some omnipotent being gave up its omnipotence in order to suffer, and to die on the cross.

Neither of these claims are essential to Christianity. Many Christians would deny them. It's true that Christianity is committed to the omnipotence of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,

but on many understandings of the Trinity, this only really commits them to the existence of *one* omnipotent being. The three persons of the Trinity are one God.

Likewise, though Christianity makes the claim that the second person of the Trinity became incarnate in Jesus, a Christian might deny that the second person of the Trinity actually suffered, and actually died, since – on their view – Jesus had two natures: human *and* divine. Perhaps only his human nature had to suffer and die.

But, if your Christianity is committed to these two claims – that the persons of the Trinity amount to three omnipotent beings, and that the second person of the Trinity gave up its omnipotence in order to suffer and die, then there are problems ahead!

If you have two omnipotent beings, then any time at which they want different things, contradictions and/or absurdities will arise. If one omnipotent being, Bill, wants to actualise a possibility that the other omnipotent being, Ben, wants to prevent from becoming actual, then either Bill will win, and it will turn out that Ben wasn't omnipotent, or Bill will win, and it will turn out that Ben wasn't omnipotent, or the world will somehow refuse either to actualise or not to actualise the state of affairs in question, which seems absurd, since all states of affairs have to either obtain or not obtain.

Richard Swinburne believes in three omnipotent beings, but He thinks that their perfection entails that they always want exactly the same thing, and since their wills never come into conflict, this problem doesn't arise. Do you agree? Do you think that perfect beings will always be in tune with one another on all matters? Perhaps they would on matters of ethics and obligation, and matters of fact, but would they always agree on matters of taste? What if the Father wanted a certain symphony to end in a minor key, and the Son wanted it to end on a major key? Is that sort of disagreement really ruled out by their perfection? And, if it isn't, can we make sense of their both being omnipotent?

The problem that emerges if you think that God (even temporarily) gave away His omnipotence (a belief that some Kabbalists share with Richard Swinburne) emerges from the famous puzzle of the stone. Can God create a stone too heavy for Him to lift? If you say yes, then you've shown that God isn't omnipotent since there could be a stone too heavy for Him to lift. If you say no,

then you've shown that God isn't omnipotent, since you've discovered something that He can't do, namely, make a stone too heavy for God to lift.

The puzzle is easy to avoid if you think that God is essentially (i.e., necessarily) omnipotent. Indeed, the ontological argument might have convinced you that a maximally excellent being simply *has* to exist. You might also think that, if God's omnipotence was less than essential to Him, that would render Him surpassable. So, you conclude that God is necessarily omnipotent. Well, if God is necessarily omnipotent, then the very idea of a stone that's too heavy for God to lift is a nonsense. Once again, to say that God can't lift such a stone is to say nothing more than "God can't lift a bla bla bla!" That's no limitation at all.

Richard Swinburne (2016), by contrast, seems committed to the notion that God's omnipotence isn't essential to God. God can *lose* His omnipotence, should He want to. Otherwise, how could God have suffered and died on the cross? Swinburne therefore needs another response to the puzzle of the stone. His response is to say that, at any given time, t_1, God can make it the case that a stone of mass *m* should exist. At some later time, t_2, God can make it the case that He's no longer omnipotent, and such that He cannot lift a stone of mass *m*. In that way, God *can* create a stone that's too heavy for him to lift, so long as the time of creation (t_1) isn't simultaneous with the time of the attempt to lift it (t_2).

Problems with Omniscience

Just as theists tend to think of God as omnipotent, they tend to think of Him as omniscient too. To be omniscient is, on a first attempt at a definition, to know all things. Famously, the idea that God knows all things raises questions about our freedom. If God knew, before I chose what socks to put on this morning, what colour pair I'd choose, then how could I have been free to choose some other colour? It's not like God could have been wrong.

A standard (although not universal) response is to place God outside of time. There's something somehow wrong about saying that God knew what I was going to *before* I did it, because that makes it sound as if God is in time with us, waiting for things to happen. Instead, some argue, God exists outside of time. It's as if all times are present to Him. Since we can't truly say that

God knew *before* I did something, that I was going to do it, we *can* say that God (timelessly) knows all things, and that my freedom isn't in trouble.

You might still be worried. If the future already exists, for God to be looking down upon, as He timelessly reviews the entire timeline, from His bird's eye point of view, then your future's already written. And, if your future is already written, then what becomes of your freedom to shape your own future?

Well, so long as it's the future you, rather than God, who, over there in the future, is causing you to do the things that you do, perhaps there's nothing to worry about. As long as *you're* the one that causes you to act in the ways that you do, then the existence of a future, along with a future you, doing all the things that you'll one day be doing, you haven't been robbed of your freedom, even if God always knows, before the present you does, what the future you is doing tomorrow.

Alternatively, if you think that God lives in time, alongside us, you might think that the future doesn't yet exist. And, since it doesn't exist, it isn't something to be known. This allows it to be the case that God knows all things, without knowing the future – since, in an important sense, the future *isn't* a thing. This school of thought is known as Open Theism.

Whichever way you choose to respond, it doesn't seem as if omniscience is doomed to get in the way of human freedom (if, indeed, you believe in human freedom). Rather, the problem is whether the very notion of omniscience is coherent.

John Perry describes the following, amusing, scenario:

> I once followed a trail of sugar on a supermarket floor, pushing my cart down the aisle on one side of a tall counter and back the aisle on the other, seeking the shopper with the torn sack to tell him he was making a mess. With each trip around the counter, the trail became thicker. But I seemed unable to catch up. Finally it dawned on me. I was the shopper I was trying to catch.
>
> (Perry, 1979, p. 3)

Here are some things that Perry knew:

1. Somebody has a torn sack of sugar in their cart

2. The person with the torn sack of sugar is making a mess

Here are some things that Perry *didn't* know:

3. John Perry is the person making the mess

4. I'm the person making the mess

What's interesting about 3 and 4 is that, although many people could have come to know 3 (perhaps Perry's friend was shopping with him, and came to know, before Perry did, that Perry was the one making the mess), only *Perry* can come to know 4. Other people wouldn't be expressing something true with the phrase, "I'm the person making the mess;" only Perry would. And even as uttered by Perry, the two phrases "I'm the person making the mess" and "John Perry is making the mess" don't seem to express exactly the same thought.

Imagine that Perry is suffering from amnesia and doesn't remember his name. He hears an announcement over the shop's tannoy system, "would John Perry please attend to the torn pack of sugar in his cart?" He comes to learn that John Perry is the person making the mess, but, because of his amnesia, he doesn't yet know that *he's* the person making the mess. He doesn't know, what only he can express, when he says that "I'm the person making the mess."

Some philosophers would resist the conclusion I've been gunning for. They'd say that sentences 3 and 4, when uttered by Perry, express exactly the same thought – a thought that anybody can come to know; that Perry is making a mess. The amnesia merely causes him to make a mistake, and so fail to recognise that sentences 3 and 4 express exactly the same thought. He does know that *he's* making the mess if he knows that John Perry is making the mess. He's just confused about what he knows, what he doesn't know, and who he is. That's all. But if, like me, you think that Perry's utterances of 3 and 4 express something slightly different, then you'll agree with me that his utterance of 4 expresses something that only Perry can know.

This means that there is something that, in principle, cannot be known by God (unless God is identical to Perry). Since we've found something, and – indeed – a whole class of things, like the fact that I'm currently typing this sentence – that God couldn't know, we seem to have discovered the incoherence of the notion of omniscience. God might know that Samuel Lebens is typing, but he can't know the truth of what only I can think and express when I say, "I'm

typing!" In fact, so long as there exists more than one subjective point of view from which to look out upon the world, and from which to use words like, "I" and "me", nobody can know everything.

Perhaps the best response to this sort of puzzle is to say that 3 and 4 express the same thought but accessed in different ways. On this view, there isn't some thought or fact that only Perry can know. Rather, there's some way of *accessing* that thought, or fact, that's only open to Perry – call it the first-personal route. His amnesia causes a blockage such that his accessing a fact about himself third-personally won't automatically give him access to that same fact first-personally. That's all. It's still the same fact.

And if that's the case, then God *can* know everything that Perry can know – and everything that anyone can know – even if He can't always access facts and thoughts in the same way as others can. He can't access first-personally what Perry can, but that's no challenge to his omniscience.

Alternatively, you could follow the lead of Yujin Nagasawa (2003) and think of omniscience, not as a state of knowing all propositions, but as the exercise of a sort of a power. Just as God's omnipotence in general is limited by the logically possible, so too is God's power to know. Accordingly, God's omniscience can by analysed as his exercising the power to know all things that it's possible for one being to know.

Just as there are things that an omnipotent being can't *do* (such as make me freely play football), perhaps there are things that an omniscient being can't *know*. These limitations don't render omnipotence or omniscience incoherent. Moreover, Nagasawa's account of omniscience has an added benefit. One class of truths that God plausibly knows nothing about are things like: what it's like to suffer, what it's like to have a body, what it's like to eat ice-cream, what it's like to sin, etc. But once again, if God is the sort of being who couldn't possibly suffer, because of His omnipotence, and couldn't possibly have a body, because to have a body is to be limited in various respects, then God's not knowing what these things are like needn't impugn his omniscience, since his omniscience, just like His omnipotence, is limited by the bounds of logical possibility.

Alternatively, you could adopt the position of Linda Zagzebski, according to whom, God *does* know what all of these states feel like, from the inside, even though He can't experience them

for Himself. Because of His perfect empathy, Zagzebski would claim, God knows exactly what it feels like to be one of us – to taste ice-cream, to have a body, and even to sin – even if He can't be one of us Himself. This notion – that God knows what subjective states feel like from the inside, even if He hasn't had them for Himself – Zagzebski calls omnisubjectivity (Zagzebski, 2013).

There is, however, one more major challenge for the notion of omniscience to face (it's a little bit technical, so if you have a phobia of mathematics, you might want to skip to the next section, although I'll do my best to explain each step).

Patrick Grim's has argued, in a series of publications, that the notion of omniscience is incoherent on purely mathematical grounds. He defines omniscience as knowing every truth, and he shows that the notion of "every truth" is incoherent. Even if you have to qualify Grim's definition, in light of our previous discussion, such that it has a few exceptions, his argument will still get going. So, we could define omniscience as knowing every *third-personal truth* (to avoid problems raised by Perry's first-personal knowledge), or knowing every non-phenomenal truth (a phenomenal truth being a truth about how something feels from the inside, assuming that God doesn't know what it feels like to have a body), and the problem will remain. So, what's the problem?

First we need just a little bit of set theory. Set theory is the branch of mathematics that deals with the relationship between sets; a set being a collection of items, any old collection of any old things, including *the empty set*, being the set with no members at all. One of the pioneers of set theory was called Georg Cantor. One of the things that Cantor proved about sets is called *the power set theorem*. To understand the theorem, we first of all need to know what a *power set* is.

Take any set you like, for example, the set with three members, x, y, and z, symbolised as {x, y, z}. Call that set S. Now every set has a power set. We'll call the power set of S, P(S). You build up P(S) by finding all of the possible sets that you could build using just the members of S. Now, I said that S has three members, but it actually has four, because every set includes, as a member, the empty set, which we symbolise as Ø. With that background, we can figure out what the members of P(S) must be:

1. ∅ – i.e., the empty set
2. {x} – the set with just x as a member
3. {y} – the set with just y as a member
4. {z} – the set with just z as a member
5. {x, y} – the set with just x and y as members
6. {x, z} – the set with just x and z as members
7. {y, z} – the set with just y and z as members
8. {x, y, z} – S itself, which gets to be a member of its own power set.

The power set of S is just a set with those 8 sets as its members. Now, the power set theorem that Cantor proved tells us the following:

- If S is a set, its corresponding power set, P(S), will have more members than S.

This was a rigorously proven result. Bearing that in mind, let's imagine that there's a set called the set of all truths (or even the set of all third-personal truths, or all non-phenomenal truths). Call it T. Since T is a set, it will have a power set, call it P(T).

By Cantor's theorem we know that P(T) must have more members than T. Grim can show you that that *won't* be the case with the set of all truths. For each member of P(T) we can find a distinct truth. For instance, for each and every member of P(T), it will either be true that that member is identical to ∅, or that it's not-identical to ∅. And, since we've got at least one truth for every member of P(T), it follows that there are at least as many truths as there are members of P(T). But P(T) is supposed to be the power set of the set of truths. So, on pain of contradicting a theorem of set theory, P(T) *must* have more members than there are truths. We're stuck!

All we can do, Grim maintains, is to deny that it's meaningful to talk about a set of all the truths to begin with. And, if we can't make sense of a set of all the truths, then we can't make sense of a being who knows all of the truths (Plantinga & Grim, 1993).

Alvin Plantinga is unmoved by this argument (Ibid.). Let's put talk of all truths to one side for the moment. We *must* be able to talk about all *propositions*, since we can say obvious things like –

"all propositions are either true or false". But if Grim's argument is right, then we shouldn't be able talk about "all propositions", just as we can't talk about "all truths", since the set of all propositions would have to have a power set. We'd easily be able to demonstrate that there are at least as many propositions as there are members of this power set, since we could just assert, of every member of the power set, the proposition that it's a member of the power set of the set of propositions.

Now, we don't need to know exactly where the argument goes wrong, but surely we *can* talk about all propositions – for, example, when we say that all propositions are either true or false. And, if we *can* talk about all propositions, we can also talk about *all truths*. We can therefore say that God knows all truths. It would be interesting to know exactly where Grim's reasoning goes wrong, but it surely goes wrong *somewhere* because even the atheist would concede that we can talk about all propositions, when we say things like, all propositions are either true or false. So Plantinga would argue.

Graham Oppy, who is, by no means, a theist, is also unsympathetic to Grim's argument. First, he notes that there are alternatives to Cantorian set theory, albeit unpopular with contemporary mathematicians. Those alternative theories *do* allow for the existence of a universal set with the same number of members as its power set. An advocate of omniscience could adopt one of these competing systems of set theory. That would, admittedly, be quite a cost, but it's a possibility.

Oppy then argues that, even for *Cantor*, we have to accept that there is a *universe* of sets, even if there is no *set* of all of the sets. Describing exactly what the difference is between the *universe* of sets, which *does* exist, and the *set* of all sets, which *doesn't*, isn't straightforward. But why can't the theist make a similar move and talk about a *universe* of truths that God knows, without ever talking about a *set* of all the truths? Of course, you'd need a theory of *universes* and how they differ from *sets*, but it seems like mathematicians are anyway in need of such a theory. And thus, Oppy concludes:

> [W]e currently have no idea how to construct a fully satisfying theory of quantification over all propositions, and the like. But it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that there is a satisfactory theory of this kind to be discovered; and it also

> does not seem unreasonable to suppose that, when we have discovered a theory of this kind, we shall then see that the apparent difficulties that arise for the standard analysis of omniscience fade away.
>
> (Oppy, 2014, p. 243)

But if, unlike Plantinga and Oppy, you *do* take Grim's worry seriously, there might be other ways to define omniscience that side-step the problem entirely. For example, perhaps it suffices for omniscience to know all of some set of especially fundamental facts, and to have all of the powers of reason and inference necessary for inferring *less* fundamental facts from the fundamental ones. At no point, in such a definition, would you need to say that which Grim won't allow us to say, which is that there is some universal set of all truths to which God has access. Is this a satisfying analysis of omniscience? God only knows!

The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil is perhaps the most difficult philosophical (and existential) challenge to face the theist, so long as they believe in a God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent (completely kind). The problem is easy to state:

1. If God exists, He would be powerful enough to remove all evil (given omnipotence)
2. If God exists, He would be knowledgeable enough to know where the evil is and how to remove it (given omniscience)
3. If God exists, He would be loving enough to want to remove all evil (given omnibenevolence)
4. Evil exists

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5. If God exists, there would be no evil (from lines 1, 2, and 3)
6. God doesn't exist (from lines 4 and 5)

Perhaps we shouldn't expect to *know* why God does everything that He does. In fact, one *consequence* of theism, and of its belief in a transcendent wisdom, is that we shouldn't *expect* that we can always understand what God is up to. His ways are not our ways. And *thus*, just

because we can't understand why God allows bad things to happen, it doesn't follow that there's no sufficiently good reason. Accordingly, perhaps line 3 is false, even if we don't know what God's reason is.

Perhaps a theist should *expect* not to understand all of God's ways. This response to the problem of evil is known as skeptical theism. Skeptical theists believe in God, but they are skeptical that human beings could ever understand how God's actions are justified.

A second – and very different – response to the problem of evil would attempt to provide some sort of *explanation* as to how and why a perfectly good, powerful, and knowledgeable God would allow the sort of evil we see in our world. To defend theism, in this way, in the face of the problem of evil, is to offer what philosophers call a 'theodicy' – literally, a defence of God.

One, perhaps very primitive form of theodicy could be called *the punitive* theodicy. The Hebrew Bible says, in no uncertain terms, that terrible things will happen when humanity disobeys the will of God (see, for example: Leviticus 26:14-45, Deuteronomy 28:15-68). The Bible isn't alone, among religious scriptures, for saying things like this. You *think* that bad things happen to people who don't deserve it. According to the punitive theodicy, you're wrong! We *deserve* the bad that happens to us because we're *sinners*. When good things happen, it's because we deserve it too. This is, to be brutally honest, a horrible theodicy!

First of all, we have abundant evidence of innocent people – even new-born babies – suffering horrendous evil. What crimes could possibly justify such treatment? Secondly: we see plenty of wicked people prosper. Thirdly: were we to accept this theodicy, it would follow that we *shouldn't* fight injustice when we see it, because we never *really* see it. Wherever people *seem* to be suffering, they'll only ever be receiving their just deserts. And thus, to adopt such a theodicy would have horrific ethical consequences. It would undermine all attempts at alleviating suffering.

Many of these problems *can* be addressed. For example: you could maintain that suffering innocent babies are actually the reincarnation of dead sinners, receiving the punishment for the sins of their previous lives. This raises new questions, of course – how can it be fair to punish a person for sins that they no longer remember, and without even informing them that that's what you're doing? What about the suffering of the parents of these children? But even these

concerns can be addressed, if you're sufficiently creative (For a fascinating exploration of these issues in the Jewish tradition see Goldschmidt & Seacord, 2013).

Perhaps the wicked prosper in reward for the good deeds of past lives, or in order to receive the reward due to them for the few good deeds to their name, so as to make room for an afterlife of eternal punishment; or for their posthumous annihilation.

The great Rabbinic thinker, Rabbi Akiva, seems to endorse the punitive theodicy and yet he wants to alleviate people's suffering (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Baba Batra 10a). This is how he tries to justify his position. The relationship between God and human beings isn't governed by the logic of legislation alone, but also – and at the same time – by the logic of parenthood, and love. Accordingly, God might be punishing a person, but when he sees us extending kindness to that person, his heart warms, so to speak – because, after all, the suffering person is still God's beloved. Accordingly, perhaps there's room for the punitive theodicy to make *some* sense of our obligation to alleviate the suffering of others. Having said that, under pressure, even Rabbi Akiva seems to abandon this line of thought and rely, ultimately, upon the fact that the Bible *commands* us to help people in pain, even if we can't understand *why*, given that the punitive theodicy justifies their suffering (Ibid.).

The punitive theodicy seems much less abhorrent if it's not your *only* theodicy. It might explain *some* pain and suffering. If theism is true, we really can't rule out the possibility that *some* of the suffering we see around us is a consequence of divine punishment. But it's equally manifest to anybody uncomfortable with performing intellectual acrobatics, that we can't explain *all* pain and suffering in these terms; nor do we have a right to pronounce upon when punishment is in effect, and when it isn't.

We need, at the very least, to compliment the punitive theodicy with other explanations, other theodicies. One such theodicy is called the soul-making theodicy. On this view, we shouldn't judge a world by how comfortable it is, nor in terms of how much pleasure its inhabitants enjoy. We have to judge things differently.

Assume that the world was created by God. Assume that part of his purpose for creating us was to share His goodness with us. Assume also that reward is more enjoyable, and a greater good, when it has been truly earned. If we grant these assumptions, then God isn't going to make us

perfect to begin with. If we *had* been made perfect *ab initio* (i.e., from the beginning), then we wouldn't have *earnt* our reward, since we wouldn't have contributed to our own perfection. Instead, God would want to create *imperfect* beings with the potential to perfect *themselves*. If that's really the purpose of creation, then we shouldn't judge the world by how comfortable it is. We should judge it by how many opportunities it affords for its inhabitants to grow towards perfection.

Sometimes the pain and suffering that we experience really *does* serve as a catalyst for growth. But sometimes the pain and suffering are crushing. Victims perish without an opportunity so much as to reflect upon their plight. It seems unlikely that the soul-making theodicy can explain all suffering – but it's at least another theodicy to add to the collection.

On those occasions when suffering *does* help us to grow – *especially* when it helps its *victims*, in the long term, to become more perfect –the soul-making theodicy will say that that pain, at least, and that suffering, were no counter-evidence to the existence of God.

A parent will chide a beloved child. The parent does so as an expression of love, in the knowledge that the experience will contribute to the long-term growth of the child. Short-term pain for long-term gain.

Another theodicy that the theist can add to the collection is known as the Divine Intimacy Theodicy. This theodicy only really makes sense if you're willing to accept that God can, in some sense or other, suffer too. For that reason, the theodicy is tightly associated with Christianity, and its vision of God suffering and dying on the cross.

If the idea that God suffers is acceptable to you, then you have space for the Divine Intimacy Theodicy. Perhaps there's a certain sort of *bond* – a certain sort of communion – that can only be felt between people who share each other's pain. This bond is different to the equally profoundly felt bond between those who share each other's joy, or love. The greatest intimacy possible between God and man might require that we – so to speak – experience the full gamut of deep and profound emotions, and that we experience them together with God.

Once again, this theodicy will not be suitable to every situation of pain and suffering. But it sometimes is true that people who already believe in God feel a tremendous intimacy to him in

their moments of pain and suffering. This feeling of intimacy, when it occurs, goes some way towards suggesting that *their* pain and suffering isn't evidence for atheism.

The divine intimacy theodicy, it seems, will struggle in the face of suffering that pushes a person further away from theism. It will also be difficult to endorse if you find the notion of an omnipotent God in pain absurd.

The most popular theodicy among theists is probably the free will defence. Theists tend to think that God gave us free will. Why? Because freely performed goods are better, all things considered, than *coerced* goods. *Rightfully* earned reward is cherished more than arbitrary reward. Accordingly, God creates us *free* so as to give us the opportunity to earn *just* reward. The problem, of course, is that we can *abuse* our freedom. According to the free will theodicy, the evil that people do to one another is a price worth paying for the good of free will. Like the others, this theodicy can't work alone. At best it explains why God allows people to do bad things to one another, but it is silent in the face of natural evils – like disease, earthquakes, floods, and the like.

Stephen Maitzen (2013, p. 259) raises a powerful objection to the free will defence. No good God would allow a child to experience intense suffering, merely to preserve the free will of their abuser. If God sees an incident of child-abuse, and if He has the power to intercede, then why *doesn't* He? Could it really be that God doesn't intervene merely in order to give the abuser the gift of *freedom*?

Tyron Goldschmidt and I have argued that an all-powerful God would have the power to change the past (Lebens & Goldschmidt, 2017). This is a controversial claim. It requires a great deal of work in the logic of tenses, and the metaphysics of time. But I think that, in the end, we *can* demonstrate that the power to change the past makes sense – that it's coherent – and that if God is all-powerful, then it makes sense to think that He has *that* power too. Given the assumption that God has the power to change the past, Goldschmidt and I devised a new theodicy that, we think, improves upon the free will defence.

Imagine that God gives us free will and then, so to speak, He says, 'Take one'. Then we live our lives. We do some good and we do some bad. All of it is of our own creation. At the end of time, God says, 'Cut'. Imagine that scenes 1 and 3 are fantastic, but that scene 2 is horrific. Well then,

wouldn't God simply edit the film, and cut out scene 2, because, even after the scene has happened, God can change the past? Admittedly, this would leave a gap in the history of the world. But then God can say, 'Scene 2, take 2'. We'd then get another shot at linking scenes 1 and 3 together.

Take 2 of scene 2 would, once again, be of our own authorship. God is a patient director. We can do a take 3, or 4, or however many more takes are required. Every evil that now exists will one day never have existed (This thought cannot be easily expressed in English because English doesn't have the right sort of tenses to describe revisions of the past. You actually need hyper-tenses. The real claim is this: it *hyper*-will be the case that no evil ever happened. But hyper-tenses need to be explained at length. I refer interested readers to Lebens & Goldschmidt, 2017). These evils aren't just temporary; they are what philosophers might call *hyper*-temporary. A temporary evil is one that doesn't last forever. A *hyper*-temporary evil is one that will one day never have existed at all – once the past has been edited.

By allowing evils to exist *hyper*-temporarily, God can have the best results of free will — all goods will be of our own creation, and all rewards will have been justly rewarded — but eventually it will be the case that nobody will have done any bad, and nobody will have suffered. God can have his cake and eat it too. Even natural evils – such as earthquakes, diseases, and animal suffering – can be removed, although we can offer no explanation as to why those things had to occur in the early takes of this film called history. But either way, we have no reason to assume that they'll make the final cut.

On this theory, God is like a proof-reader who allows us to write our own biographies, but once we're finished, He asks us to rewrite the passages that need editing. Free will might not be a price worth paying for evils that are *always* going to exist (Goldschmidt and I can agree with Maitzen about that). However, free will might be worth the price of *hyper-temporary* evils that will one day never have existed.

Once you've grasped the threat of the problem of evil, you'll see that it doesn't really matter whether this "Divine Proofreader Theory" is true or not. What matters is that it *could* be true, and that it doesn't seem like an *ad hoc* explanation. We *can* understand why God might *want* to create a history in this proofreading way. And so, even if we don't know whether it's true, and

thus, even if we don't know why God *really* allows evil to surround us, what we *do* know is that the existence of evil is no slam-dunk proof against the existence of a loving and powerful God. For all we know, the evil might be hyper-temporary!

Peter van Inwagen (2006) suggests that a theodicy is an attempt to describe why God actually allows evil to exist in this world. He contrasts this with a defence. A defence is just a sketch of a possibility. As long as you can give even a *possible* explanation of why God might allow evil to exist, then you've shown that the problem of evil doesn't *prove* that atheism is true.

The fact that the Divine Proofreader Theory *could* be true is enough to rob the problem of evil of the devastating power that it had for theism. It might not be a theodicy, but it is – at least – a defence.

At this point, the atheist could try to argue that the Divine Proofreader Theory isn't even possibly true. But the logic and metaphysics of time, I would argue, are firmly on the side of the Proofreader theory. *We* might not be able to change the past, but an all-powerful being *would* have that power. Nevertheless, there are other complications that the atheist could seize upon. I therefore accept that the theory has to face numerous objections that I don't have the space to respond to here. If you're interested, I hope you'll pursue it further.

Once one recognizes the complex ways in which punitive, soul-making, divine-intimacy, free will, and proofreading theodicies could possibly *interact*, and the ways in which they might interact with belief in reincarnation, or other theories of the afterlife, and one recognizes the fact that theists shouldn't expect to understand all that God does, it becomes easier to say the following: Yes, the problem of evil is a serious problem for theism, but its force needn't be overwhelming. There are stories to be told, from a theistic perspective, that render the problem less devastating than it might appear to be. If you've got lots of good reasons to adopt theism (perhaps in light of arguments drawn from chapter 3), then the problem of evil – despite its significant weight – needn't be anything like a tie-breaker.

Divine Hiddenness

In recent years, John Schellenberg (2015) has developed his own argument against theism. He calls it, the argument from Divine Hiddenness. It runs as follows:

1. If a perfectly-loving God exists, then He would always be open to a personal relationship with all people, and would do whatever would be necessary to facilitate it.
2. If there were such a God, everyone would believe in Him, unless they actively resisted believing in Him.
3. Some people *have* non-resistantly failed to believe in God.
4. If no perfectly-loving God exists, then God does not exist.

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5. If a perfectly-loving God exists, no person, non-resistantly, fails to believe in Him (from 1 and 2).
6. No perfectly-loving God exists (from 3 and 5).
7. God does not exist (from 4 and 6).

The argument has four premises. If all four are true, then the argument is sound. Schellenberg defends line 1 in the following words:

> Imagine your friend … describing his parents: "Wow, are they ever great.… Granted, they don't want anything to do with me. They've never been around. Sometimes I find myself looking for them — once, I have to admit, I even called out for them when I was sick — but to no avail… But it's so good that they love me as much and as beautifully as they do!" … You'd think he was seriously confused. And you'd be right.… They could have set their son up in the best house in town, with money and things galore. But their attitude toward him … doesn't amount to the most admirable love.
>
> (Ibid., pp. 41-42)

If God loves us, He'd make Himself available to us for relationship. He wouldn't be as hard to believe in as He is.

There are many ways to respond to this assumption. For one thing: Perfect-love doesn't necessarily translate into wanting a *relationship*. Is God's perfect-love more like that of a parent for a child, as Schellenberg assumes, or more like the love displayed by a great philanthropist, or like the care that a good surgeon would have for patients (Rea, 2009; 2016)? Who's to say what

God's love should be like? Wanting a relationship might even be a selfish and *human* way to love. I wouldn't deign to say what God's love for us must be like.

Line 2 is also questionable. Some argue that a relationship with God is possible *without* believing that God exists. We could have a relationship with God without realizing as much. We could even have a rich, explicit, conscious, and reciprocal relationship with God on the basis of *hope* or *faith* that He exists. If that's true, then God wouldn't be under any obligation to provide sufficient evidence for us to *believe* that He exists, as long as he leaves room for hope.

Consider an example that I adapt from Andrew Cullison (2010): Robin meets Ashleigh on an online dating site. Robin knows that the site is populated by numerous automated chat-bots, and is therefore concerned that Ashleigh isn't a real person. Nevertheless, and despite these doubts, Robin perseveres in chatting with Ashleigh for a long time, and their relationship blossoms. Eventually, Robin's doubt dissipates. They meet in person. They marry. At what point did this rich, explicit, conscious, and reciprocal relationship begin? Can we really rule out the suggestion that it began even before Robin believed that Ashleigh exists? Is belief really necessary, at all stages, of a rich relationship? If not, we shouldn't expect that God would ensure that all people who don't resist Him would believe in Him.

Line 3 is the least controversial assumption. Some argue that *everyone* believes in God, sometimes unwittingly, and sometimes under another name (Wainwright, 2002). But if there's even a single case, in all of human history, of non-resistant non-belief — such as a tribal Amazonian who never heard of God and so failed to believe that God exists, without any sort of resistance — then line 3 stands.

Line 4, by contrast, is perhaps the most controversial of all of Schellenberg's assumptions. He stipulates that perfect-love is part of the definition of God. That's because God, for Schellenberg is a *person*, and a perfect person would be perfectly loving. But whether or not God is a person is a massive debate between theistic religions and within theistic religions.

Many devout Catholics would deny that God is a person, given a commitment to the doctrine of Divine Simplicity. For similar reasons, Maimonides didn't conceive of God as a person, neither do Advaita Vedanta Hindus. Does that make them atheists? Surely not! Schellenberg thinks that

if you believe in an ultimate being, of supreme value, but, if that being isn't a person, then you're not a theist, but an "ultimist"!

I suppose he can call them what he likes, but they think of themselves as theists, and they don't have to accept line 4 of Schellenberg's argument. Moreover, and as we've seen, the other three premises of Schellenberg's argument are also open to doubt. Even if hiddenness is surprising for the theist, it isn't decisive proof of God's nonexistence; nor is it even a decisive proof that God (if He exists) is impersonal.

Religion and Science

Some argue that religion in all (or most) of its forms is in conflict with science; that it poses an obstacle to the progress of science, and should be rejected in favour of a more scientific outlook.

Science is nothing more than the application of reason to empirical data. Religion, by contrast, is inherently unreasonable and irrational. Science progresses in line with our observations, whereas religion doesn't progress. Instead, religion decides matters of doctrine consulting Scriptures and religious authorities. As Bertrand Russell put the point:

> The men of science did not ask that propositions should be believed because some important authority had said they were true; on the contrary, they appealed to the evidence of the senses, and maintained only such doctrines as they believed to be based upon facts which were patent to all who chose to make the necessary observations.
>
> (Russel, 1947, p. 16)

There are, of course, sophisticated members of pretty much every religion. Those religious believers think themselves capable of reconciling their religious convictions with their scientific practice, and the findings of science. But one might ask whether, in general, religion is a phenomenon that promotes the sciences or whether, in general, it's a phenomenon that gets in the way of scientific progress?

There are fanatical communities among pretty much every world religion who stand in the way of providing a decent science education to the next generation – be it because they're opposed to the theory of evolution on Scriptural grounds, or because they fear that scientific literacy leads to assimilation. Christian fundamentalists push for intelligent design to be taught alongside Darwinism in school science classes. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party has been accused of trying to push Hindu astrology into university science curricula in India. These worrying phenomena have led some atheist thinkers to despair of the sophisticated followers of the world's religions. As Richard Dawkins puts his point:

> Fundamentalist religion is hell-bent on ruining the scientific education of countless thousands of innocent, well-meaning, eager young minds. Non-fundamentalist, 'sensible' religion may not be doing that. But it is making the world safe for fundamentalism by teaching children, from their earliest years, that unquestioning faith is a virtue.
>
> (Dawkins, 2009, p. 286)

On this understanding, moderate people of religious faith, who do not stand against the findings and methods of science act as a fig-leaf that allows for their fanatical co-religionists to prosper. Perhaps that's true, but isn't it equally possible that the moderate members of those religions are our best hope of reforming the fanatics over time? When attacked by secular idealogues, religious fanatics are likely to close ranks and become even more extreme. But when religious people are exposed to equally religious people who embrace the sciences, and see no conflict between revelation and reason, perhaps there's a chance of making progress.

Moreover, we've seen good reason – in chapter 3 – to think that, unbeknownst to atheistic scientists, scientific method itself stands upon *theist* assumptions. The practice of science only makes sense because of an expectation that disparate phenomena have an underlying rhyme and reason. But why assume such a thing to begin with, if not because, with Isaac Newton, you assume that, "It is the perfection of all God's works that they are done with the greatest simplicity" (Newton, 1974, p. 129); which is why we do not rest until we find the most simple explanation?

In fact, one of the perennial problems in the philosophy of science is why we should trust induction. Induction is a form of reasoning that science regularly relies upon. According to induction, we can trust that sufficiently similar causes always result in similar effects. This is why doing an experiment well just a few times can provide us with results that we can trust forever, without having to periodically check-in to make sure that the experiment still yields the same results. But why should we make that assumption? Why should we assume that induction is trustworthy? The best non-theistic answer to that is that induction has always been trustworthy in the past, so we should trust it in the future. But that's circular. That's using induction to justify using induction.

The theist, like Newton, by contrast, has a good reason to adopt induction, since he assumes that the world was created by an orderly being who made an orderly world intending for us to discover its order. This actually gives rise to its own argument for theism:

1. Assuming atheism, we have no reason to expect out inductive practices to be reliable
2. Under the assumption of *theism*, we *do* have reason to expect our inductive practices to be reliable
3. Our inductive practices *are* reliable

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4. The reliability of our inductive practices provides evidence for the truth of theism over atheism

Bradley Monton (2018) is unimpressed by this argument. He compares it to the following – obviously absurd – argument:

1. Under the assumption of naturalism, we have no reason to expect our next coin flip to land heads up (rather than tails up)
2. Under the assumption that a supernatural sprite who loves the head side of coins has just popped into existence in the room, we *do* have reason to expect our next coin flip to land heads up
3. Our next coin flip lands heads up

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4. The coin flip landing heads up provides evidence for the existence of the supernatural sprite, against naturalism.

From the perspective of pure probability theory, the sprite argument and the God argument both work. But if you find the existence of the sprite sufficiently unlikely to *begin* with, then the very slender evidence it gains from the coin flip landing heads up won't be enough to convince you that the sprite exists. Provided that the God hypothesis is *equally* unlikely, in your eyes, then the God argument, from the success of induction, is similarly doomed to failure. If anything, it seems somewhat silly to base your trust in science upon your belief in God, no less silly that explaining your coin flip on the basis of your trust in sprites.

This comparison between the God of monotheism and other allegedly comparable posits is commonly found in the writings of new atheists. Dawkins writes:

> I have found it an amusing strategy, when asked whether I am an atheist, to point out that the questioner is also an atheist when considering Zeus, Apollo, Amon Ra, Mithras, Baal, Thor, Wotan, the Golden Calf and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. I just go one god further.
>
> (Dawkins, 2009, p. 53)

But there's a big difference between Zeus, Apollo, Amon Ra, Mithras, Baal, Thor, Wotan, the Golden Calf, the Flying Spaghetti Monster, and Monton's head-loving sprite – on the one hand – and the God of monotheistic religions on the other. Unlike all of those other posits, God's power and perfection is unlimited. The sprite hypothesis is very specific. That's what makes explanations on its back *ad hoc*. It can only help to explain coin flips, and only when they land heads up. The hypothesis of an omnipotent God (a being the sort of which there can be, at most, one), by contrast, plays a large number of explanatory roles with relatively few resources. Moreover, the posit of God needn't stifle the desire to work out the natural causes of all phenomena. Instead, the posit of God makes sense of our faith that there are such causes to be found.

The God hypothesis provides explanations for fine tuning, for our trust in induction, and it rescues Darwinian evolution from being self-refuting since, if we evolved *without* God's guidance, we'd have good reason to think that our theories of biology shouldn't be trusted,

since accurate abstract biology carries very little evolutionary advantage. The God hypothesis, as we've seen, might also help us to explain the existence of ethical obligation.

And thus, the God hypothesis can boast a certain sort of simplicity and explanatory power *not* held by the heads-of-a-coin-loving-sprite hypothesis (which explains at most one phenomenon); nor can this theoretical advantage be said to attach to the Zeus, Apollo, Amon Ra, Mithras, Baal, Thor, Wotan, Golden Calf or Flying Spaghetti Monster hypotheses.

A perennial sticking point between science and religion emerges when religious devotees take their scriptures literally. A literal reading of the book of Genesis, or the Quran, leaves no room for the notion that the universe is billions of years old, or that humans are the product of natural selection. Over time, literal readings give way, under pressure.

Galileo says that the earth moves round the sun. The church resists – until the evidence becomes overwhelming, and then – all of a sudden – the church finds a metaphorical reading of the scriptures that had once been taken literally and had been the source of the opposition. This pattern repeats again and again. It's unsurprising to find atheists complain that the religious authorities are cheating here. They keep changing the rules of the game, in the middle of the game. Doctrines that were once taken literally are suddenly read allegorically, but only when it becomes sufficiently uncomfortable to carry on with the charade of talking things literally.

I would argue, however, that the phenomenon of taking scripture literally, in the first place, as a source of scientific and historical fact, is the thing that's new-fangled, and was – in my opinion – a mis-step in the (relatively) modern history of religion. The question that we have to ask, and that simply isn't asked enough, is to what genre does your holy scripture belong?

I'll relate to the Scripture I know best – the Hebrew Bible – but I imagine that the argument extends to the scriptures of other religions too – especially if the religions are sufficiently ancient.

So, what genre is the Hebrew Bible? That seems like a question that's too broad. The biblical canon extends over *many* genres. Some parts are poetry. Some parts are prose. But the genre of *history*, as we know it today, didn't emerge until Herodotus and Thucydides (in the fifth century before the common era). The genre of *natural* history (i.e., history of the evolution of geology

and biology) didn't emerge until much later. Folklore and epic legend predate scientific natural history as literary genres by many generations.

Jewish tradition contends that the Bible is divinely inspired, and that five books of it were divinely *authored*. Many other religions make similar claims about their scriptures. But divine inspiration, and even divine authorship, doesn't settle the question of what genre it is, or which genres it includes. Divinely written folklore, and divinely written legend, would still be *true*, and *reliable*, given its divinity. But, what it would *mean* for folklore to be true or reliable folklore isn't the same as what it would mean for a natural history to be a true or reliable natural history.

The truth, and supreme importance, of divinely authored legend, despite its divine authorship, wouldn't licence any quick and easy inference from its narratives to propositions about the natural world and its history. What a person is licenced to infer about the real world, from a piece of literature, however reliable the author, is highly sensitive to the genre of the literature in question.

To relate to the first two chapters of Genesis, for example, as natural history is both anachronistic, and literarily naïve. As a story, it has many of the literary marks of an entirely different type of genre. Its style and presentation almost beg for allegorical interpretation. What's so bad about eating *fruit*? What does that fruit actually *symbolize*? Could snakes really talk? Did they really once have legs? Or, is the snake a *symbol* for something? What's more, the genre of the Bible seems to change from passage to passage and book to book. So, if we have a more historically accurate (and not a newfangled) understanding of our scriptures, we might see that there's less need for science and religion to conflict.

Even scriptures that emerged after the rise of history as a scientific discipline are likely mis-characterised – even by believers – as accurate works of history. Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848*, an example I pick at random, is an influential work of history, and is regarded so by our culture. But note: *we* haven't designed any rituals to re-enact its main scenes. We may want to read it, criticize it, and agree or disagree with it, but we don't try to *relive* it. That's not the sort of attitude we adopt towards a work of history, but it *is* the sort of attitude that religious people adopt towards Scripture. It strikes me that religious believers are

confusing their own relationship to their Scripture if they take it to be some sort of science or history text-book.

Once you recognise that science and religion are, largely, doing different things, it becomes possible to unravel the conflict between them. Stephen Jay Gould, the influential biologist went so far as to describe science and religion as *non-overlapping magisteria*: two completely independent fields of inquiry; one to do with ethically neutral facts, and the other do with value. Or, as the Rabbi, Lord Jonathan Sacks, memorably put it: "*Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean*" (Sacks, 2012, p. 2, italics in the original).

You might also think, given what we said above about induction, that religion can play a role in holding the sciences up, from outside.

Recently, Hud Hudson (2014) has shown that there are other ways, than non-literal interpretations of scripture, to resolve the conflict between science and religion.

Remember the idea that God can change the past? Hudson uses the idea to propose an ingenious reconciliation between the Biblical account of the creation of the universe, taken quite literally, and contemporary cosmology.

Imagine the following story. God created the world in six days. He created Adam and Eve and placed them in a garden. He told them that they could eat of any of the fruits of the garden apart from one. He also put a talking snake in the garden. It convinced them to disobey God. Accordingly, they ate from the forbidden fruit.

At that point, God said to Himself: "Right… these human beings don't deserve to be the pinnacle of this wondrous creation that I gave them. They don't deserve to inhabit a world that was created just for them. For that reason, I'm going to rewrite their past, and the past of the entire universe that houses them. I'm going to make them the product of millions of years of evolution."

At that point, God added billions of years to the past — a past that is best described by contemporary science. In this newly created past, there was a Big Bang. There were dinosaurs. There were billions of years of evolution. Adam and Eve had parents.

If this is how things happened, it turns out that the Bible is a completely accurate account – not of how the past is hyper-now, but of how the past hyper-used to be. In other words: the Bible is an accurate account of the hyper-past past (the past before God changed it). Contemporary science, on this story, can, for all we know, be a completely accurate account of how the past is *now*, a completely accurate account of the hyper-present past.

Despite his ingenious reconciliation, Hudson is not a Biblical literalist. He doesn't endorse the story we just told. He's happy to read the book of Genesis allegorically. But he's making an important point. If people were more imaginative about their metaphysics, it could turn out that they'd be less room for conflict between religion and science. In both directions, the conflicts we see between science and religion, in modern times, might have more to do with a failure of imagination than a failure either of science or of religion *per se*.

Further Reading:

In addition to articles and books mentioned in the footnotes to this chapter

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<u>On Omnipotence:</u>

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Patrick Grim, "Against Omniscience: The Case from Essential Indexicals," *Noûs*, 19/2 (1985): 151–180.

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William Hasker, *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God* (New York: Routledge, 2013 – 2nd edition, including reply to critics)

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Divine Hiddenness:

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Daniel Howard-Snyder & Paul Moser (eds.), *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Divine Personhood:

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Ryan Mullins, *God and Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Elements Series), 2020)

Anastasia Scrutton, *Thinking Through Feeling: God, Emotion and Passibility* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011)

Eleonore Stump, *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2016)

Simon Kittle and Georg Gasser (eds.), *The Divine Nature: Personal and A-Personal Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022).

Robert Koons and Jonathan Fuqua (eds.), *Classical Theism: New Essays on the Metaphysics of God* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022)

On the Conflict between Religion and Science:

Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2011).

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Jeffrey Koperski, *The Physics of Theism* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015).

Chapter 6: On Religion and Ethics

Opiate of the Masses and the Evils of Religion

As we mentioned in chapters 1 and 2, Karl Marx accused religion of being an *opiate*: a drug that numbs our pain (Marx, 1982, p. 131). If you're poor, and others are rich, it must somehow be an expression of the will of God. If there's injustice in the world, God will one day make it right. This attitude, according to which all things are fair, or according to which anything *unfair* will be rectified by God, makes human political activism unnecessary. This is known as religious quietism.

Religion encourages people not to ask questions, not to challenge the status quo, and to accept with equanimity all that life throws at us. Only if religion is abolished, Marx argued, will people be able to find true happiness and real justice.

Speaking within the Jewish tradition, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks was adamant that Marx was wrong:

> Opium of the people? Nothing was ever less an opiate than this religion of sacred discontent, of dissatisfaction with the status quo. It was Abraham, then Moses, Amos, and Isaiah, who fought on behalf of justice and human dignity – confronting priests and kings, even arguing with God Himself … In Judaism, faith is not acceptance but protest, against the world that is, in the name of the world that is not yet but ought to be … The Bible is not metaphysical opium but its opposite … The Bible is God's call to human responsibility.
>
> (Sacks, 2005, pp. 27-28)

Perhaps it's because Judaism doesn't believe that the Messiah has come that it's able to look at this world and to see it for the broken place that it is. Perhaps Christianity, by contrast, given its foundational claim that Jesus brought salvation with him more than 2000 years ago, is forced to look at the world through anesthetizing rose-tinted lenses. Indeed, it would be hard to deny that the Church played some role in upholding the rigidity of the feudalistic class system, with all of its injustice, in pre-modern Europe. Perhaps Islam, which literally means *submission,* is essentially concerned with submitting to the will of God in ways that make quietism an

inevitability. But these criticisms cannot hold water. It simply depends upon the thread within the Christian and Muslim religion upon which you focus.

Perhaps Marx's critique applies particularly well to Hinduism, with its regimented caste system. Members of different castes were traditionally forbidden from intermarrying, eating together, and more. But, once again, it will depend upon the *forms* and *manifestations* of Hinduism in any given place and time, and the way that the religion is interpreted by its practitioners.

Mahātmā Gandhi, for example, was always opposed to the notion of *untouchability* – the idea that people born outside of the caste system (born, so to speak, *below* the bottom caste), should be socially, economically, and physically ostracised. Gandhi thought that Hinduism was "flexible" enough to eradicate the notion of *untouchability*; a notion which he related to as an "excrescence" – i.e., an unnatural, and even "Satanic" outgrowth of authentic Hinduism (Ghandi, 1966). He went so far as to argue that, should he discover that the doctrine of untouchability was really an essential element of the religion, then he'd personally come to "renounce and denounce Hinduism" (as quoted in Biswas, 2018, p. 71).

Gandhi and the philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who served as the second president of India, began their public lives *defending* what they took to be the basic principle of the caste system, whilst utterly rejecting the notion of untouchability. Their strategy was to understand, or reinterpret, the caste system in purely spiritual and psychological, rather than political, genetic, or ethnic terms (For a detailed account of Radhakrishnan's evolving views on the caste system, see Minor, 1997).

Various Hindu texts divided humanity into four categories of person. But, as these more progressive thinkers would insist, this categorisation had little or nothing to do with one's birth, but only with one's temperament, sensibilities, and proclivities. As Radhakrishnan put it, "The author of the *Bhagavadgita* [a central holy text] believes that the divisions of caste are in accordance with each man's character and aptitude" (Radhakrishnan, 1948, pp. 131-132). And thus, properly understood, the caste system would allow for, and even insist upon, the possibility of social mobility.

Being born into a given caste needn't prevent a person ending up in a *different* caste. In fact, the forces that led to class-injustice in India, according to Radhakrishnan, weren't really down to

Hinduism, but to “privilege and snobbery” (Radhakrishnan, 1956, p. 27). Hindu caste, on this progressive re-reading, is about temperament and nature, not birth, and not a person’s value or rights.

Having tried to soften the institution from within, both thinkers eventually changed course, and came to reject the entire notion of the caste system. Gandhi wrote that, “The sooner public opinion abolishes [the caste system], the better” (as cited in Biswas, 2018, p. 78), and Radhakrishnan followed suit, writing, “The system of caste whatever its historical significance has no contemporary value. Today it injures the spirit of humanity and violates human dignity” (Radhakrishnan, 1960, pp. 162-163).

What we’ve seen is that Orthodox Hindu thinkers were able to make their peace, first with a reinterpretation, and then with the absolute abolition, of the caste system (although their calls for abolition still haven’t translated into its disappearance in practice). Their eventual rejection of the caste system didn’t seem to come at the cost of their rejecting their Hinduism. Consequently, it seems, a caste-less vision of Hinduism was always a conceptual possibility. Indeed, Ram Mohan Roy was already advocating a caste-less conception of Hinduism from the early nineteenth century. Religions can evolve.

Rabbi Sacks was faithful to a major strain of Jewish thought, in the words I cited above – according to which Judaism is a religion of social protest. But that doesn’t mean that Judaism hasn’t had its own share of quietists. A small but vocal contingent of Ultra-Orthodox Jews, for example, believe that the Jews have been cursed, by God, to live in exile from their homeland. Accordingly, those Jews are resolutely anti-Zionist. They claim that it isn’t appropriate for Jews to be politically active, or to attempt to shape their own destiny through political means. Instead, they should wait patiently for God to rescind the curse, without doing anything to agitate for their own autonomy. Another minority in the Jewish world takes its rejection of quietism to such extremes that it adopts a messianic, militant Zionism, that sees no room for compromise or co-existence in the promised land.

Religions are diverse tapestries of thought and sensibilities. This is true of Judaism, as it is for any world religion. So, even if Marx’s critique could be applied to a certain type of Christian thought; a strand of Christianity that had, perhaps, encouraged quietism, or desensitized people

to injustice, we also can't ignore the fact that Christianity has had its fair share of radical and progressive voices; not least in the figure of Jesus himself, who railed against injustice.

In Latin America, in the 1960s and 70s, a movement known as liberation theology, within and around the Catholic church, came to focus heavily on the fact that God appears in the Hebrew Bible to crush an oppressive empire, and to free a nation of slaves; on the fact that Jesus was a revolutionary figure who stood against injustice and oppression, whilst associating himself with social outcasts. This form of Christianity was overtly political and often aligned itself with armed revolutionary forces. The notion that Christianity should be an opiate to pacify the masses becomes an absurdity in the face of liberation theology.

If Marx wants to argue that religion is inherently oppressive, or regressive, or that it's designed to anesthetize people against injustice, then the argument fails. There are religions to which these criticisms simply don't stick. More importantly, even if they can be made to stick to one form or manifestation of a given religion, it's unlikely to stick to every form or manifestation of that religion. And, if the criticism can be made to stick to a particular strand of a particular religion at a particular time, it might still be sticking only to some element of the religion that can, in the fullness of time, be transcended, as the religion in question evolves.

The same pattern emerges with other criticisms: that religion is inherently racist, sexist, or homophobic. Despite horrible instances, right throughout religious history, of all of these evils, the criticism simply won't stick to religion *per se*. Religion is too diverse a phenomenon for such a wide and sweeping critique to fit uniformly. If an accusation of racism, sexism, homophobia, or institutional corruption, truly does apply to a specific religion, or religious community, at a specific time, it then needs to be seen to what extent it sticks to the whole religion, or only onto specific threads or sub-movements, and to what extent that religion has the internal resources to transcend the ethical failing in question.

We can all find verses in the scriptures of the world's religions that we find offensive. But the question is how those verses are understood, what those scriptures are taken to mean in the wider context of the evolving faith, and what authority a simple reading of the verse is taken to hold.

The sweeping notion that all would be well if only the world had no religion is barely worthy of comment. Religion is a hugely varied phenomenon. Some manifestations of it are benign and uplifting. Others are hateful and disfiguring. Every one of them seems to evolve over time. Moreover, hatred, violence, and structural injustice have causes that are orthogonal to the religious life. For that reason, secular totalitarian states, under Hitler, Stalin, or Pol Pot, can do just as much damage to the moral fabric of a society as can any theologically inspired madness.

The ethical criticism of religion, it seems to me, can operate only on a case by case basis. It can play an important role in encouraging given religions to evolve towards greater justice. Therefore, and so long as we don't presume to criticise an entire tradition in ways that tar all people of one community with the same brush, we shouldn't be timid about criticising what we take to be ethical failures in the beliefs and practices of others. Having said that, no such critique can hope to prove that religion itself is somehow ethically corrupt.

The Ethical Advantage of Atheism

We saw, in chapter 3, an argument for the existence of God, known as the moral argument. According to this argument, the only way to explain the existence and force of certain ethical facts is to believe in a Divine lawgiver. Stephen Maitzen (2013; 2019) presents an argument for a radically different conclusion. Only if God *doesn't* exist, he argues, can we make any sense of the moral universe.

One could boil his argument down into an argument for the truth of atheism, in the following steps:

1. There exists an obligation to prevent or relieve the terrible suffering of a child when we easily can do so.
2. If God exists, then there can be no obligation to prevent or relieve the terrible suffering of a child when we easily can do so.

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3. God doesn't exist.

By "God," Maitzen means a being with omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence (total power, knowledge, and goodness). The first premise is obviously true. But why should we accept the second premise?

If God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, then surely He wouldn't allow a child to suffer merely so as to give freedom to those who abuse the child. That would be to exploit the child for the good of others. No perfect being would do such a thing. A good God couldn't simply exploit a child for the good of another and then compensate them for their pain in the afterlife. Compensation shouldn't be confused with justification, after all. The future bliss of a child in heaven doesn't count as retroactive *consent* from that child to be exploited. Future bliss can *swamp* but it cannot *justify* the pain that was suffered on earth. Accordingly, child suffering can be justified, on the assumption of theism, only if it's actually for the child's own benefit, right now. It follows that if God is allowing a child to suffer, without intervening, it must somehow be for the *child's* own good. We would be wrong to intervene. That's the basic argument for premise 2.

As far as Maitzen is concerned, if theism cannot make sense of the obligation to prevent the suffering of children, then it can make no sense of morality at all.

> If we never have a moral obligation to prevent suffering by children – a consequence implied by the core doctrine of theism – then which moral obligations *do* we have? None, as far as I can see. I can't see how we can be objectively obligated to refrain from theft, fraud, bigotry, or slander if we never have the even more basic obligation to prevent suffering by children. If we lack a moral obligation to prevent even the worst suffering by children, then morality falls apart, or at best it becomes frivolous because it no longer concerns the most serious kinds of harm.
>
> (Maitzen, 2013, pp. 260-261)

Richard Swinburne (1995), hopes to escape from this sort of argument with the claim that God has a right to use us as a means to an end – so long as (1) He ensures that our existence over the course of our lives (in this world and the next) is over all a good thing for us, and (2) the suffering He causes us serves some good purpose (such as allowing people to be free). The

reason for this exception to the general principle that we shouldn't use people as a means to an end stems from the fact that God is our creator and benefactor, to whom we owe our existence.

This response doesn't work. Maitzen imagines cloning himself, using a single skin cell, and then treating the resulting human being sublimely, before torturing it remorselessly only for the last minute of its life, so as to teach passers-by just how horrible violence can be.

> The child owes its existence to me (via my use of technology), and I'm on balance its benefactor, treating it well for all but the final minute of its life. Moreover, its horrific death isn't purely gratuitous; it serves as an object lesson for the benefit of others, not only deterring some potential child abusers but also protecting children they might otherwise have abused. Nevertheless, in this story I behave imperfectly, to say the least. Yet I behave just as Swinburne imagines God does.
>
> (Maitzen, 2013, p. 261)

Is the only thing that's wrong with Maitzen's argument that he doesn't give the child as much bliss in its life as God can give us in heaven? That doesn't seem to be the issue.

As I mentioned in chapter 5, I sympathise with Matizen's claim that no good God would allow children to suffer merely so as to allow abusers to have an unfettered free will. I also mentioned how Tyron Goldschmidt and I have argued that God has the power to change the past (Lebens & Goldschmidt, 2017). If that's right, then God isn't trading even the *temporary* suffering of a child to secure the unfettered freedom of others. Rather, He's trading their *hyper-temporary* suffering. That means that it will one day be the case that nobody ever suffered anything. If that's right, then we can't infer from a person's suffering right now, that it's a good for them, and we *can* know that if we do the good deed of trying to relieve their suffering, then something of our good deed will somehow remain in the final cut of history, even if the suffering is edited out. We therefore still have an incentive (and an obligation) to do good, even though God (who has a power that we don't have, to change the past once all has been said and done) has no reason to intervene.

Now of course, you might find this far-fetched. In fact, even I do. But my point is this: perhaps we're not being imaginative enough about the resources that God has at His disposal; resources that might justify God's inaction, at this point in history (or hyper-history), that in no way

interferes with our obvious and intuitive duty to alleviate all suffering. Certainly, as we've seen, the existence of this suffering is counter-evidence for the existence of God, to begin with. But, if we take it that we have good reason to believe, nevertheless, in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being, then perhaps we should be willing to accept that we can't always fathom what justifies His inaction, even though we *can* know, if only by ethical intuition, that we have a duty to act, and to alleviate the pain of others. This might be one way for the theist to respond to Maitzen's argument.

I also mentioned, in chapter 5, the Rabbinic thinker, Rabbi Akiva, who argues that God's relationship to humans is complex. He is both a legislator *and* a parent. In the original context in which this view came up, Rabbi Akiva was responding to an objection that was much like Stephen Maitzen's. I'll quote the relevant passage from the Talmud:

> [Turnus Rufus said to Rabbi Akiva:] I will illustrate this to you with a parable. To what is [charity] comparable? It is comparable to a king of flesh and blood who was angry with his slave and put him in prison and ordered that he should not be fed or given to drink. And one person went ahead and fed him and gave him to drink. If the king heard about this, would he not be angry with that person?
>
> (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Baba Batra 10a)

If Theism is true, says this ancient precursor to Stephen Maitzen, then there can be no obligation to give to charity and to alleviate suffering. This was Rabbi Akiva's response:

> I will illustrate the opposite to you with a different parable. To what is this matter comparable? It is comparable to a king of flesh and blood who was angry with his *son* and put him in prison and ordered that he should not be fed or given to drink. And one person went ahead and fed him and gave him to drink. If the king heard about this once his anger abated, would he not react by sending that person a gift?
>
> (Ibid.)

Rabbi Akiva's thought seems to be that the relationship between God and man is complex. It is governed by both the logic of a legislator and by the logic of a loving father, and so – even if God has a reason to allow certain people to suffer – that reason shouldn't necessarily get in the way of our having a reason to alleviate that suffering, and even to please God in so doing. I think that

this is a response worth considering. Perhaps Maitzen is trading upon too shallow a conception of what God is and how God relates to the world, by comparison to what we are, and how we relate to one another.

When the metaphor of God as our father was placed under pressure, Rabbi Akiva resorted to a different argument. He said that we give to charity because God commands it. Fleshed out in a certain way, and for certain religious believers, this also seems like a decent response to Maitzen. On the assumption that God has revealed His will for human beings to us through scripture, or religious tradition (or via scripture through the prism of religious interpretation), or perhaps even through the inner-revelation of our conscience, the theist can respond to Maitzen as follows: "Sure, it's something of a mystery as to why God allows innocent people to suffer on earth. That might lead us to think that our ordinary morality is somehow untrustworthy. But, thankfully, revelation has come to inform us that even if we can't fathom *God's* reasons for allowing people to suffer, our general moral intuitions, which tell us that *we* have a duty to alleviate all suffering, can be trusted." This response to Maitzen combines what we called skeptical theism, in chapter 5, with belief in some form of revelation.

Having looked at some ethical challenges to religion, from Marx to Maitzen, the rest of this chapter is dedicated to two further questions concerning the relationship between ethics and religion. The first is a riddle at the heart of theistic conceptions of ethics. The second provides an example of what religious traditions might have to contribute to secular ethics.

The Euthyphro Dilemma

Socrates was the teacher of Plato. In one of his early books, called *Euthyphro,* Plato presents a conversation between Socrates and Euthyphro. In the course of the conversation, Socrates – who had a habit of asking tricky questions – asks, "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?"

"The pious," in this context, is just a more eloquent way of speaking about *good deeds*. Euthyphro wants to be a pious person. He wants to be a good person. He wants to do the right thing. But what does it mean for the right thing to *be* the right thing? Euthyphro suggests that to do the right thing is to do the will of the gods. And that's when Socrates raises his dilemma: If

X is a good deed, do the gods want us to do X *because* X is good, or – does the fact that the gods love it when people do X *make it the case* that X is a good thing to do? Let's call these two options, option-A and option-B, and translate them into a monotheistic context:

Option-A: God wants us to do good deeds because good deeds are good.

Option-B: What makes a good deed good is the fact that God wants people to do it.

To use slightly more advanced philosophical jargon, option-A claims that goodness is *explanatorily prior* to God's will. That means that, if you want to explain why God likes the things He likes, you have to have a prior grasp of the concept of goodness. Why? Because God's will always follows the good. Consequently, the concept of the good takes the lead.

Option-B, by contrast, claims that God's will is explanatorily prior to goodness. In other words: if you want to explain what makes good things good – if you want to give a theory of what goodness *is* – you have to have a prior grasp of the concept of God's will. Why? Because what's good is nothing more than what God wills.

Only one of these options can be true. If they were both true, we'd get stuck in a loop – an *explanatory circle* – in which we could only explain goodness in terms of God's will, and we could only explain God's will in terms of goodness. In the original text, by Plato, it's pretty clear that Socrates (and by extension Plato) favoured option-A. But we can still call the choice on offer *a dilemma* because it turns out that either side carries some uncomfortable consequences.

The problem with option-A is that it seems to place some sort of standard or principle *beyond* God. It maintains that God must be bound by this standard or principle, called "goodness." In other words, goodness – according to option-A – is something seemingly *external* to God, and – worse still – it implies that God, to the extent that He is good, is committed to obey this thing called goodness. This seems to severely restrict God's sovereignty. Having said that, there does seem to be some precedent for adopting this option in the Abrahamic traditions. As the Cambridge Platonist, Benjamin Whichcote, pointed out: one might not be able to ask Abraham's question, "Shall the judge of all the earth not act justly?" (which he asks in the book of Genesis 18:25), unless you assume that there is some moral code independent of God, to which God can be held accountable.

Having said that, God's being bound by something external to God is going to be problematic for the theist. Furthermore, in light of the moral argument for God's existence (which we saw in chapter 3), it's clear that there's a temptation to *explain* moral obligation, and therefore to ground all of ethics, somehow in the existence of God.

Any fleshing out of option-B faces problems of its own. Following Christian Miller (2013), we can group those problems together under three headings: (1) the divine goodness objection, (2) the anything goes objection, and (3) the arbitrariness objection.

The divine goodness objections to option-B asks, quite simply, what makes God good? If goodness is just what God desires, or wants, or commands, then in what sense is God good Himself? Is God good because He commands that God is good? Is God good because He loves Himself? Doesn't that get things backwards? Isn't it the case that God only loves Himself because and to the extent that He's good? We seem to be pushed back towards option-A.

One response to the divine goodness objection draws upon a distinction we drew back in chapter 3, when we discussed the moral argument for God's existence. The version of the argument I presented *accepts* that the atheist can make sense of the existence of ethical values like goodness, badness, evil, and righteousness. Rather, the argument suggests that without the existence of a Divine *commander*, we can't make sense of the existence of *obligation*. This is to make a distinction between value, on the one hand, and duty, on other; between ethics and obligation, or, to use the really technical jargon, between *axiology* (the study of value) and *deontology* (the study of duty).

Once we've drawn this distinction, we can say, along with Robert Adams (1999), that goodness itself is to be identified somehow with God. Things are good to the extent that they are related in the right way, or to the extent that they're similar in the right respect, to God Himself. So, to ask what makes God good is to ask a question that's basically empty. It's like asking what makes goodness good. But, when we want to talk about *duty*, we should – on this theory – appeal to God's *command* (or, if you prefer, you can appeal to His intentions, or desires). In this way, we can adopt option-B and yet bypass the divine goodness objection.

The anything goes objection takes us back to Abraham. God informs Abraham that He plans to wipe out two entire towns. Abraham's response is remarkable, he says (Genesis 18:25): "Far be

it for you to do such a thing, to kill the innocent with the wicked, so that the innocent should be like the wicked. Far be it from You! Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" But, if option-B is true, and God decided to kill the innocent along with the wicked, then doing so would – by definition – become the right thing to do. God can do anything, and it *would* be righteous. Anything goes! But surely that's not right. Slaughtering the innocent for no reason cannot become a good thing just because God wants to do it.

Robert Adam's response is to define duty in terms of the commands of a *loving* God. If God is loving by nature, then He wouldn't ever command the slaughter of the innocent for no reason. The idea is that God's commands are only the basis for obligation because God is the very source of goodness. In a sense then, God's nature prohibits Him from doing, wanting, or commanding evil things. Now, the notion that God is bound by certain standards, such that He simply couldn't bring Himself to command something evil sounds a little like we've collapsed into option-A. But notice that the only thing that's binding God here is God's own nature – and not something external to God.

The arbitrariness objection asks a simple question: why does God command (or desire, or want) the actions that He does? There only seem to be two possible responses. One response is to say that God has *no* reasons for commanding (or desiring, or wanting) the things that He does. But if that's true then the content of the ethical life starts to seem arbitrary. We're obligated, for example, to help people in pain. Why? Because God says so. Why does God say so? To answer this question by saying that God has no reason for telling us to help people in pain is to render our obligations somehow arbitrary.

The second option is to say that God *does* have a reason for commanding (or desiring, or wanting) the things that He wants, but then it seems as if God's reasons for telling us to help those in pain are what really generate the obligation, rather than the mere fact that God tells us to. Surely, this collapses back into option-A! On this account, it's the goodness of good actions that causes God to command them (or desire them, or want them).

One way to avoid the arbitrariness objection is to say that God has reasons for commanding (or desiring, or wanting) the things He does, but that those reasons themselves are not *external* to God – they don't therefore establish some moral standard outside of God, to which God is held

accountable. Why, for example, does God command us to alleviate suffering? Perhaps because that is the most loving thing to do. Why does God command that we perform the most loving actions available? Because God's *nature* is loving (see Miller, 2009).

Alternatively, and to return to our exploration of the moral argument for God's existence, you might think that there's a difference between having a *reason* to act and having an *obligation*. If that's a distinction that makes sense to you, then you might think that whatever reasons God has for commanding you to help someone count equally well as reasons for *you* to help them without God's command. Even so, you might think that you don't have an *obligation* to act in this way, in addition to having a *reason*, until God issues His command.

It makes sense for the theist somehow to base the existence of ethical facts – if you think that such things exist – in God. To do so is to adopt option-B of the Euthyphro dilemma. But what we've seen is that various conundrums lie in wait, threatening to force us back towards option-A. There do exist, as I've tried to show, various ways to resolve the conundrums in the face of option-B, but those resolutions require various fine distinction, such as the distinction between axiology and deontology, and the distinction between *reasons to act* and *obligation*. To defend these distinctions requires a fair bit of work in philosophical ethics. Debates over these distinctions and theories continue to rage many centuries after Socrates had his fateful conversation with Euthyphro.

Jainism and Ecology

In recent years, there has been a degree of soul-searching among ethicists regarding climate change and ecology. To what extent are our western theories of ethics equipped with the conceptual resources to make sense of our duties to the environment? Perhaps inspired by the Biblical notion, according to which humans are created in the image of God, western ethics has tended to place a premium on human lives and human interests at the expense of the lives and the interests of other creatures. This feature of western ethics can be called androcentrism, since it places humans at the center of the ethical universe.

On a purely androcentric ethic, we *can* explain why we should protect the environment, but only to the extent that doing so is good for human beings. If some species of animal will go

extinct in the Amazonian rain forest, and if its disappearance will barely make a dent on human experience, then an androcentric ethic is going to struggle to appreciate the evil of the extinction event.

Admittedly, ecosystems are so delicately balanced, that it's unlikely for a species to go extinct without various unforeseen consequences. But imagine, for the sake of argument, that the consequences of this particular extinction don't impact human life. If we're going to do justice to the intuition that many of us have, according to which ecological conservation is a worthwhile activity, even when the benefits are not directly consequential for human beings, then we might need to revise the fundamental assumptions at the heart of our ethical theories.

In recent times, thinkers like Peter Singer, have sought to extend the parameters of the ethical universe. According to Singer, the beings that deserve the greatest ethical consideration are not humans but *persons* (Singer, 1993, pp. 90-91). As far as Singer is concerned, a being is a person as soon as it is both self-aware and capable of viewing itself as a single individual throughout an extended period of time. This means that a great number of dolphins, chimpanzees and others are people too. Perhaps your pet dog is a person.

Moreover, Singer is a utilitarian. Utilitarianism claims that the best action is always the one that maximizes net pleasure, and minimizes net pain throughout the universe. Persons tend to have the ability to experience particularly extreme and prolonged forms of pleasure, and particularly harsh and disfiguring pain. That's the reason why persons are, for Singer, worthy of special consideration. But above and beyond personhood, any organism capable of experiencing pleasure or pain has to be accounted for when we calculate the potential consequences, and therefore the moral worth, of an action.

If a single action will give one unit of pleasure to a person, but two units of pain to a flock of birds (assuming for the sake of argument that pain and pleasure can be quantified neatly in unit-measures), then the action is, according to Singer's utilitarianism, *bad*. Singer's form of utilitarianism takes us away from androcentrism, in the direction of biocentrism – the idea that any organism should feature centrally in our ethical deliberations. But does it go far enough?

Imagine a far-away planet. Imagine that it's so far away from earth that no human being will ever see it, let alone go there. In fact, imagine that it's so far away from any sentient life

anywhere in the universe, that no human or alien will ever see it. But now, imagine that, over millions of years, on this planet, there evolves a diverse, vibrant, and beautiful eco-system of flora and fauna. None of this abundant life is sentient. None of the life forms on this planet can hear, or see, or think, let alone experience pleasure or pain. Nevertheless, plants and mushrooms and great forests flourish in an exquisitely balanced circle of non-sentient life. Does this hidden planet have any ethical significance? Nothing on it can experience pleasure or pain, so Singer would have to say no.

Imagine that there's a button in my office. If you press the button, the hidden planet will be blown to smithereens. How is that possible, if the planet is millions of light-years away? I don't know. Philosophers have arranged it such that the button works. Moreover, and somewhat bizarrely, the pressing of the button creates an indescribable burst of pleasure in the person who presses it. Would you blow the planet to smithereens, for this short burst of pleasure? The delicate eco-system that you destroy will not feel any pain, and no sentient being, anywhere in the universe, will miss out on anything, because they were never going to see the hidden planet anyway. Singer's utilitarianism would have no problem with your pressing that button. But surely this goes to prove that the sort of ecological concerns that many have become sensitive to, in recent years, are not accommodated by Singer's ethical theory. It doesn't prove that pressing the button is okay.

Holmes Rolston tries to address this problem by suggesting an ethics based not on pain and pleasure, but on autopoiesis. Autopoiesis refers to a system that's able to maintain itself over time by managing its own growth and maintaining its structure. An autopoietic system resists the external pressures of the environment and makes efforts to repair itself, if and when damaged. There are no sentient beings on the hidden planet, but there are plenty of autopoietic beings there. Perhaps an ethical framework, capable of making sense of the duties we take ourselves to have towards the natural world – a truly biocentric ethic – has to build a respect, not just for sentience, but for autopoiesis, into its foundations. In the words of Rolston:

> A merely physical object has nothing to conserve. Though conservation of mass and energy takes place during the various events that happen to a rock ... a rock conserves no identity. It changes without conservation goals. ... Biological organisms,

> by contrast, conserve an identity—a metabolism maintains itself and an anatomy over time. Organisms have a life, as physical objects do not.
>
> (Rolston, 1994, p. 168)

The interests of individual humans might matter a whole lot more than the interests of individual trees, but Rolston's point is that trees still deserve a place on the ethical map, and not just because of the goods that they provide for humans and other animals. Their interests should be given *some* independent weight. An ethic that gives pride of place to autopoiesis can accommodate that fact. Janna Thompson seeks to ridicule Rolston's view. If trees are worthy of individual ethical concern on such slender grounds as Roltson provides, then shouldn't we be caring about rocks and carbon molecules too? As she writes:

> Rocks, rivers, and molecules are not alive, but they seem capable of being understood as having goods in the biocentrist's worldview. These objects have certain structures enabling them to resist some threats from outside. The rock will not shatter when subjected to just any blow; the river washes away the mud slide that would otherwise divert it; and so on.
>
> (Thompson, 1990, p. 153)

If we value the fact that an object resists threats from outside in order to maintain its structural integrity over time, then there's really no reason not to admit a rock or river, or even a carbon molecule, into the universe of our moral concern. It might not technically count as autopoiesis, but it's hard to see the ethically salient difference between the threats that face the integrity of an organism, from the threats that face the structural integrity of a rock. For Janna Thompson, that's supposed to illustrate just how absurd biocentrism becomes if we're not careful. Some would respond and say that *life* rather than autopoiesis is what should matter. After all, don't we often say that life is sacred? That's why plants count for something, and rocks don't. But, I'm not so sure.

Imagine another hidden planet, let's call it River World. This planet has no life on it at all. It's also hidden, in just the way that our previous planet was. No sentient life will ever visit River World, or see it from a far. And yet, as a matter of fact, the planet is home to a complex array of rivers. The rivers are empty of life. There's no fish, frogs, insects, or vegetation in them. But over

millions of years, these rivers have carved their way through the rocky landscape of River World to create intricate, beautiful, deep gorges and canyons.

Once again, philosophers have arranged it such that there's a button in my office. Press this button and River World is blown to smithereens, and you'll get a guaranteed burst of pleasure. Do you press the button? Thompson would say you should. Why not? Even Rolston can't really complain if you do. Strictly speaking, nothing on River World counts as an autopoietic system. On this question, perhaps our intuitions will differ. Some of you press the button, and some of you might not. But the conservation minded among us, it seems to me, would say that a short burst of pleasure probably isn't worth destroying an environment that took millions of years to take shape. But if that's right, it seems like we need something more radical even than a biocentric ethic if we want to make sense of our conservationist intuitions. Can a river have rights?

Some have argued that the Jain religion is a repository of metaphysical and ethical thinking with the resources to make sense of our strongly held conservationist intuitions; that Jainism can do so better than the theoretical frameworks provided by western thought.

The Jain believes that sentience is more widely spread throughout our universe than we may have realized. Besides the human souls, heavenly spirits, and "hell beings" (*nārakis*) that populate the universe of the Jain, there are five other categories of sentient being, divided according to how many senses they have. Humans are possessed of six senses: touch, taste, smell, sight, hearing, and the intellectual sense of rationality. Five-sensed beings have touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing without a heightened sense of rationality. Four-sensed beings, like butterflies and wasps, have touch, taste, smell, and sight. Three-sensed beings have touch, taste, and smell. Two-sensed beings have just touch and taste. And one-sense beings have only a sense of touch.

This very broad categorisation of beings allows the Jain to think of what we might think of as a purely physical being as, at the very least, possessed of one sense – the sense of touch. Now, you might – at first – think it absurd to think that a rock, or a body of water, should have a sense of touch. But in actual fact, it's a very hard philosophical question to determine exactly where sentience begins. There are about 100 billion neurons in the human brain. Organised in the right way, those neurons give rise to, or make space for the emergence of sentience. But if 100,000,000,000 neurons can do the trick, then so could 99,999,999,999. And if 99,999,999,999 neurons can do it, then presumably, we'd be okay with 99,999,999,998.

If taking away one neuron from a conscious being is never sufficient to rob that being of consciousness, and if there's no magic number that constitutes the minimum number of neurons possible for the possession of consciousness, then who's to say that a single solitary neuron isn't, all on its own, a little conscious being? Certainly, a solitary neuron wouldn't have the rich world of sense-experience that we human beings enjoy. The neuron has no eyes, or ears. But perhaps, nonetheless, there's something that it's like to be a neuron; some very impoverished state of sentience.

If there's something that it's like to be a neuron, why shouldn't there be something that it's like to be an electron? Why can't an electron be a one-sensed sentience, possessed of a sense that's associated merely with having a spatiotemporal location? Why would neurons be special in this regard? The view that every physical being has some form of sentience, however impoverished, is known as panpsychism. I'm no expert on Jainism, and it's far from clear to me that Jains are panpsychists because it seems that their view is that earth, air, wind, and fire are merely *capable* of hosting sentient souls, but not that they're *always* sentient. But either way, it's clear that Jainism bears a striking similarity to panpsychism.

Jainism takes this view and then draws outs its ethical implications. If all things are (if only potentially) sentient, and if sentience, in general, *enjoys* its existence, then ending the existence of any being is always (at least potentially) to cause harm. The almost tragic consequence of this view is that a human can't flourish without doing lots of harm. What follows is that we're constantly required to weigh up the good that a given action might do with the various degrees of harm that cascade from every human action, many of which only a panpsychist or a Jain is sensitive to.

In practice, the Jain community divides itself into two. On the one hand, we have monks and nuns who take it upon themselves to render as little harm as is humanly possible to render whilst preserving their own lives in being. Jain monks and nuns avoid "harming plant life by not walking on greenery or touching a living plant; air-bodied beings by not fanning themselves; fire-bodied beings by not kindling or extinguishing fire; water-bodied beings by not swimming, wading, using water for bathing, or drinking water that had not been properly boiled; and earth-bodied beings by not digging in the earth" (Wiley, 2002, p. 46). Famously, this community isn't merely vegan, but even avoid the eating of root vegetables, since uprooting them is to kill them.

It is recognised that not everybody can (or perhaps that not everybody even should) live this way. Indeed, the community of monks and nuns would be unlikely to survive without the material support of the wider Jane community. The monks and nuns function as something of an inspiration to this wider Jain community, but as a matter of practical necessity, the wider community allow themselves a wider range of activities than their monks and nuns.

The human activities of the wider Jain community inevitably cause more harm than the activities of their monks and nuns, but inspired by their monks and nuns, they are, at least, constantly aware of the cost-benefit analysis that measures the potential benefits of their actions against their multifarious dimensions of harm. They can do so in the knowledge that one-sensed beings can't experience suffering in as vivid a sense as can two-sensed beings, and that two-sensed beings can't experience suffering in as vivid a sense as can three-sensed beings, and so on and so forth. But it remains the case that all beings potentially possessed of sentience are worthy of *some* consideration. The Jain wouldn't press the button to blow up either of my hidden planets.

In this brief excursion into Jain ethics, it hasn't been my intention to convince you that (a) panpsychism is true or that (b) Jainism really does hold the keys to the articulation of an ethical framework capable of accommodating our conservationist and ecological intuitions. Indeed, both of these claims are controversial (see, for example, the reservations of Paul Dundus 2002). Instead, I wanted to demonstrate that when thinking about religion and ethics, we should be open to the possibility that various religious traditions might function as repositories of ethical wisdom; wisdom that doesn't depend upon belief in God (indeed, Jainism isn't a theistic religion), but wisdom which secular ethicists may not have imagined on their own.

Further Reading:

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Chapter 7: Religious Rituals and Practices

Consider, for a moment:

- The Muslim practice of fasting each day for an entire month, eating and drinking only during the nights;
- The Jewish observance of the weekly Sabbath upon which it is forbidden (according to Orthodox understanding) to directly manipulate electricity (including the use of computers and telephones), to travel by car, train, or plane, to kindle a flame, or to write;
- The Sikh practice of fanning their holy book (the *Guru Granth Sahib*) as if it were a human dignitary;
- The wearing of sacred undergarments by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (widely known as Mormons); and
- The flagellation practiced by many Shiite Muslims to commemorate the Day of Ashura, striking themselves on the back with chains and sharp objects to mourn the death of the Prophet's grandson.

The anthropologist wonders at the diverse array of customs and cultures displayed by the human race.

The *philosophical* anthropologist, by contrast, wants to know, for any of these rituals, what conception of the world must a person have in order to render these behaviours rational, or even *mandatory*?

In addition to that question, the philosopher wants to know, do these rituals achieve anything, beyond a feeling of satisfaction and communal togetherness, for those who conduct them, and if so, how?

In this chapter, I focus on three religious practices that are very widespread: prayer, worship, and meditation. For each of these practices, I will raise a number of philosophical conundrums, and explore some potential responses. None of these practices are as difficult to explain,

perhaps, as the Catholic belief that wine and bread can turn into the flesh and blood of Jesus (a belief, the justification of which would require some pretty complicated metaphysics). None of these rituals are as controversial as the circumcision of baby boys (a ritual whose philosophical defense would take us into areas of political philosophy and medical ethics). But all of these rituals are common to *multiple* religions and, despite their seeming simplicity, they give rise to significant philosophical puzzles of their own.

Prayer

For the purposes of this discussion, by "prayer" I really mean *petitionary prayer*. Petitionary prayer is any act, be it verbal, purely mental, or enacted through various rituals and rites, by which a person or a community request something from God (or from spirits, or from the departed, or from local deities, etc.).

Few people would doubt that the act of petitionary prayer can bring various psychological and social benefits in its wake (although, presumably, there are times in which recourse to petitionary prayer might also be harmful – if, for example it prevents a person from acting in order to better their situation, and thereby promotes a self-destructive from of religious quietism). But one of the most philosophically interesting questions is whether petitionary prayer, in addition to any other benefits it may have, can be effective. Is it possible that God might act, in response to your prayer, so as to bring about the state of affairs for which you prayed?

Of course, an expressivist about religious language (see chapter 2) will claim that the question misunderstands what prayer is all about. Taken literally, the words of a petitionary prayer may take the form of a request on the part of she who prays. But we shouldn't take such language literally. The prayer is, instead, an expression of hope, despair, solidarity, or some other emotional state (see, for example Phillips, 1981 and Brümmer, 2008).

The problem with this account, of course, is that it seems to be radically revisionary. It doesn't capture what most (or at least a great many) people who pray would tell you they were doing. There's no doubt that their petitionary prayers, are – *in part* – an expression of various emotions. But, presumably, they'd tell you that there's more to it than that. In addition to the

emotions expressed, the person who utters a petitionary prayer is actually *asking* for something; asking God to act on her behalf. So the question stands. Can a petitionary prayer be effective, if what we mean by "effective" is that God brings about the requested state in response to the prayer?

Well, clearly, if God doesn't exist, then petitionary prayer cannot be effective in this sense. But even if God does exist, the answer to our question is far from straightforward. Some philosophical theologians (which just means *people who think philosophically about God*) have thought that God must be both immutable and impassable. Immutability is the property of never changing. Impassibility is the property of never being caused to act, or react, by external forces. If God is unchanging, then we can't say that our prayers can change His mind. And, if our prayers can't change His mind, then it what sense can He be said to bring about a state of affairs in response to our prayers? Worse still, if God is impassable, then our prayers cannot have any effect upon God.

Perhaps God can respond to our prayers without ever changing because He always knew that we were going to pray, and so without ever changing His mind, or His plans for history, it could be the case that He was always going to bring about a certain state of affairs at time t_1 in virtue of the fact that He always knew that we were going to pray for that state of affairs at some earlier time, t_0. If God's response to our prayer could be written into His plans for history before we prayed, because of God's foreknowledge that we would one day pray, then God's immutability needn't get in the way of the potential efficacy of petitionary prayer. Moreover, God's responding to our prayers needn't compromise His impassability. It's not that our prayers *cause* God to act in a certain way. Rather, our prayers might give God a *reason* to act in a certain way. A reason needn't be the same thing as a cause.

An Open Theist (see chapter 5) thinks that God exists in time, and that time is unfolding: the past is settled, the present is happening now, and the future doesn't exist until it becomes the present. If that's true of God and time, then God anyway has to change as time unfolds. He can't know the future until it becomes the present, because the future doesn't exist. And when the future *does* move into the present, God will have to update His knowledge, perhaps even altering His plans so as to keep up with the changes. So, for the Open Theist, there's no mystery as to how our prayers might be changing God's mind. God is anyway a being that constantly

changes. Since God is in time, for the Open Theist, He'd be quite imperfect if He *didn't* change – He'd be like a broken watch.

Putting to one side the notions of immutability and impassability, other problems for the cogency of petitionary prayer lie in wait for us in virtue of God's omnibenevolence, omnipotence, and omniscience.

If God is omnibenevolent, then He loves us. If God love us, then He wants what's best for us. If God is omniscient, then He knows what's best for us – in fact, He knows better than we do what's best for us. If God is omnipotent, then He can bring about what's best for us. Moreover, so long as there exists no good reason for God to act otherwise, His omnibenevolence should entail that He always will do what's best for every one of us. So why should we ever need to pray?

If outcome X is best for us, and doesn't have hidden costs that we're unaware of, then God will bring it about. If X is bad for us, but we pray for it, thinking it to be good for us, then God will refuse to bring about. He knows best. Given that fact, why should we ever pray for things like X? Petitionary prayer makes no sense given a belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God.

Eleonore Stump (1979) argues that, at least for some limited set of goods, God might have good reason to wait for us to pray before bestowing them upon us. The idea is that God wants to be in a relationship with us. In fact, being in a relationship with God is in our best interests. But the danger of a relationship between finite beings, like us, and God, is that we might either be overwhelmed by God's goodness, or spoiled by it. In order to strike a balance between these extremes, and to make space for a meaningful and healthy relationship, God might reserve some goods to be bestowed only if we reach out to Him in petitionary prayer.

Something similar might even occur regarding our prayers for others. You might think that, if it's best for the world that person Y recovers from illness, then God would bring that about whether or not we pray for person Y. But Michael Murray and Kurt Meyers (1994) argue that by bestowing some goods – even personal goods like the recovery of person Y – only in response to communal prayers, then God encourages the formation of bonds of interdependence and

community. Or, perhaps, by reserving some goods only for communal prayer to unlock, God gives us an increased responsibility for the well-being of others.

On the other hand, you might think that such a policy would amount to God *using* people, like person Y and her illness, as a means to an end. It would count as a form of exploitation. That would be incompatible with God's goodness (Basinger, 1983).

The medieval Jewish tradition suggests a different response to this question. Why would a good God hold back certain goods and only then bestow them in response to prayer? Rabbi Hasdai Crescas argues that the act of prayer itself accrues merit to the person praying. This means that the person after the prayer is a more refined being than he or she was before the prayer. This, in turn, might entail that what the person didn't deserve before the prayer, she deserves now. This general account might also extend to communal prayer. To the extent that the ethical quality of the world is changed by people getting together (physically or in spirit), Divine plans and decrees that may have been relevant beforehand may be rendered null and void. On this approach, it isn't that efficacious prayer changes God's mind. It's that efficacious prayer changes the petitioners, and indeed, the world itself, to such a degree that the plans and decrees that God had previously issued for them, can no longer apply (see Crescas, 2018, Book III, Part II, Chapter 1, pp. 321-323).

Moreover, even if we can't make sense of petitionary prayers being answered affirmatively, we might still have good reason to issue them. Once you've done all that you can reasonably do to make a situation better – once you realise that there's nothing more that you can realistically (or practically) do to improve a situation – to issue a petitionary prayer can still be an important part of the moral life, because it allows you to stand, if only symbolically, for the good (for more on the notion of symbolic goods, see Adams, 1999, ch. 9).

Another question that occupies a number of philosophers is whether and when we can *know* that God has answered our prayers. Certainly, it's often said that all of our prayers are answered, even if sometimes the answer is "no." But, generally, when we say that our prayers have been answered, we mean that they've been answered *affirmatively*. But how can we ever know for sure? If you pray for X to occur and it *does* occur, how can you know whether it occurred because of your prayer, or because it was going to occur anyhow? And, if no such

knowledge is possible, what consequences should that have for the institution of petitionary prayer?

A final question worth raising, before we move on, is the extent to which our prayers are ethical. Saul Smilansky provides the following example (among others):

> A mother has just heard from her son's doctor that her son, who lies in the next room, unconscious and with acute liver failure, will certainly die within hours unless a donor near the son's age is found. Because the end is approaching so rapidly, the son's only chance seems to be that a traffic accident involving such a donor occurs nearby very soon. The woman begins to pray that a donor be found.
>
> (Smilansky, 2012, p. 207)

Is this woman's very human prayer not equivalent to the prayer that a healthy person dies in some sort of tragedy, at some point very soon? If she believes that her prayer might work, then isn't her prayer immoral? And, if she doesn't believe that her prayer might work, then isn't she wasting her time?

Admittedly, Smilansky accepts that many people offer such prayers with what you might call a tacit "moral escape clause." What this means is that, even if they don't announce it explicitly in their prayer, they're asking God to bring about a situation, but only if it can be done in a way that is consistent with God's goodness and justice, all things considered. So, the mother is praying that her son receives a transplant, but only should it be somehow possible for God to make it the case that a transplant becomes available without relying upon some moral or natural evil. Smilansky isn't convinced that this escape clause will get many people off the hook. Many people pray to God in times of need without being certain that He exists. It seems to follow *a fortiori* (i.e., all the more so) that many people pray to God in times of need without being certain that God is *perfectly good*. Given that uncertainty, it counts as a dereliction of duty to ask God to intercede in a morally problematic situation.

To ask God to intervene in a delicate situation if you can't be absolutely certain that He'll do so justly, is a little bit like my parents' decision to task my teenage brother with choosing a movie for my 9th birthday party. He chose *Terminator II* and traumatized most of my friends!

Perhaps the lesson to take from Smilansky's argument is that, if we believe in the potential efficacy of petitionary prayer, then we have an ethical obligation to be careful what we pray for, and this obligation is more severe to the extent that we lack conviction or certainty that God can be trusted always to act in ways that are perfectly just.

Having said that, Aaron Segal makes a fascinating point that draws from a distinction we drew in chapter 6 between axiology (values) and deontology (duties). Given that, on some accounts, God is the source of duty, it might follow that God – despite being perfectly good by nature – has no obligations. This means that God is in a very different ethical situation to us creatures. With this in mind, Segal (in an online symposium about Smilanksy's argument) asks us to imagine a situation in which two people, let's call them Bill and Ben, are castaway on a desert island. Bill has a canteen with just enough water for him alone to survive, until help comes, but he's a terrible person, such that – measured from an objective perspective – it would be a much better state of affairs for Ben to have the water, and for Bill to die of thirst.

Given the obligations and duties that fall upon Ben, as a creature of God, he might be obligated not to steal the water from Bill, even if he knows that he's a much better person than Bill. But it's not obvious to me – or to Aaron Segal, who raises this example – that God ought not to bring about that state of affairs. So, there may be some cases in which it would be ethically permissible to pray for something that it would be unethical to try to bring about by yourself.

Worship

Many of our prayers are not, or not exclusively, petitionary. Many prayers are simply acts of worship. Acts of worship, even when we put petitionary prayer to one side, also give rise to philosophical puzzles of their own.

In 2006, Tim Bayne and Yujin Nagasawa wrote an article called, "The Grounds of Worship" (Bayne & Nagasawa, 2006). The aim of the paper was to articulate a number of problems that emerge from the claim that, as many religious people maintain, we have an *obligation* to worship God.

Before they get down to business, their paper begins with a list of questions about worship that they *wouldn't* be addressing. Those questions divide into three distinct categories, in addition to the fourth set of questions, which they *do* address.

The first set of questions deal with the *definition* of worship. Clearly, what counts as *proper* worship differs from religion to religion. If you get the words or the movements wrong, depending on the tradition to which you belong, your action might not count as worship at all. But behind the culturally specific details of how to perform a given ritual of worship, is there something internal – some intention, or state of mind – that all acts of worship must have in common? How does that intention or state differ, if at all, from other states of mind that are like it?

The second set of questions has to do with what you might call the *ethics* of worship. Abrahamic religions, in particular, are deeply opposed to idolatry, which might be thought of as worshiping the *wrong* thing or things. But what's so *bad* about worshiping the wrong thing? It's not as if we could possibly harm God, or hurt His feelings by bowing to some fictional deity, is it? Do we somehow harm ourselves by worshiping inappropriate objects? What sorts of objects are worthy of worship, and what sorts of objects are not?

One could add to this set of questions, issues to do with *modes* of worship. Are some modes of worship more appropriate than others? Is animal sacrifice – for example – an appropriate, or an immoral way, to express your gratitude and awe of God? Why do Muslims, Jews, and various forms of Protestant, tend to eschew what many other Christians embrace in terms of iconography in worship, or the worshipful veneration of saints? What would make one mode of ritual appropriate, and another inappropriate? Bayne and Nagasawa continue:

> A third issue is *epistemological* [i.e., to do with knowledge and belief]: what reasons do we have for thinking that God is worthy of worship? A fourth issue concerns the *grounds* of worship. What kinds of properties could make it reasonable to worship God? What kinds of properties might make it obligatory to worship God? Might worship have multiple grounds, or is there a single property in virtue of which it is reasonable and/or obligatory to worship God?
>
> (Ibid., p. 300)

All four sets of questions are interesting in their own right (and are beginning to be addressed in the academic literature), but for the purposes of this chapter, which is merely to give readers a taste of what the philosophy of worship might hold in store, I'll focus, with Bayne and Nagasawa, on the fourth set of issues that they raise: the *grounds* of worship.

Their argument begins with the observation that many theists think that God is essentially worthy of worship, and to such a degree that beings like us must have an *obligation* to worship Him. To illustrate their point, they quote a couple of Christian philosophers:

> According to Thomas V. Morris, we 'have a duty to worship God and be thankful for his benefits'. Swinburne sounds a similar note: 'Worship is obligatory – it is the proper response of respect by man to his creator.'
>
> (Ibid., p. 303)

For want of a better word, Bayne and Nagasawa call the property that God must have, so as to render worship of Him obligatory, "worshipfulness." In other words: if and only if God is worshipful would we have an obligation to worship Him. Their question is: "What might the basis of God's worshipfulness be?"

Various philosophical accounts have been given of God's worshipfulness. Bayne and Nagasawa call one of them the "creation-based account" (Ibid., p. 304). The idea of this account is that, in virtue of the fact that God brought us into being, and sustains us in being, He is worshipful. But for various reasons, this account struggles to withstand scrutiny.

Imagine a finite being that wasn't created by God. Perhaps I'm asking you to imagine something impossible – maybe nothing could possibly exist without God's act of creation and sustenance – but even if it's impossible, it's at least something that we can *imagine*. Should such a being not be moved to worship God almighty? Even if what I'm saying is a counter-possible (that's to say, a conditional claim whose condition could never be met, since there could never be such a being), it still seems to be true: a non-created being, so long as it were capable of worship, should probably worship God. The truth of this counter-possible undermines the creation-based account of God's worshipfulness.

Moreover, not everybody would say that they were benefited by being brought into existence. Some people live lives full of unrelenting misery and pain. Like Job, they might curse the day they were born. If, in some sense, these people would have been better off never being created, would they have no obligation to worship God? The creation-based account would seem to have this consequence. But most theists would claim that we all have an obligation to worship God, however miserable our lives may be, and however hard the challenge.

Finally, Bayne and Nagasawa claim that the creation-based account "domesticates" worship (Ibid., p. 306). The idea here is that, if we owe worship to a being merely because we owe our existence to it, then it would seem to follow that we should worship all sorts of beings other than God; our parents for example, or the government and society that allows us to survive and thrive. This domestication of worship shows how reductive the creation-based account becomes. Worship, we might think, includes much more than gratitude for our being. The veneration at the heart of worship seems to outstrip any such gratitude, however sincerely held it might be.

Perhaps the combination of properties that God has – such as omnipotence and omniscience – provide a basis for His worshipfulness. But as Bayne and Nagasawa note:

> Worshipping God for His power or His knowledge seems to smack of fascism. The idea that *moral* perfection obligates worship is less objectionable, but not unproblematic. Most of us recognize various other persons as our moral superiors, yet few of us suppose that we have obligations to worship such persons.
>
> (Ibid., p. 307)

Perhaps the most promising candidate property for grounding God's worshipfulness would be His holiness. One problem with this account, however, is that God is rarely thought to be the only holy being.

> Certain individuals are described as holy, and there are strains of thought within many religious traditions according to which the faithful become holy. This suggests that holiness per se cannot ground worship, for if it did then we would have obligations to worship other holy beings [which theists don't tend to recongise]…
>
> (Ibid., p. 308)

I don't think that this problem is all that crippling for a holiness-based account of God's worshipfulness. Other beings might be holy, but it doesn't seem at all peculiar to claim that God is the source of all holiness. Other things are only holy in virtue of God's sanctifying them, or in virtue of some other relation that they hold to God. It is God's being the *source* of holiness which might be the ultimate grounds of His unique worshipfulness. Having said that, we have very little grasp as to what holiness actually is. This is another reason why Bayne and Nagasawa dismiss the holiness-account. It seems fair to wonder how explanatory our theory could be if all we can offer is an analysis of God's worshipfulness that trades in terms of some other property that we don't have much of a grasp over: i.e., His holiness.

Prudential accounts of God's worshipfulness argue that something about us, rather than God alone, grounds our obligation to worship Him: "As Augustine put it in his *Confessions*, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. Perhaps it is this fact that forms the basis of our obligation to worship God" (Ibid., p. 309). Bayne and Nagasawa have a strong reason to reject a prudential account of our obligation to worship:

> Even if it is true that we would be better off worshiping God, authentic worship should not be motivated by self-interest. Consider an analogy. Suppose that I've offended Sarah and I feel guilty about it. Even though it may be true that I will feel better if I apologize to her, my apology should be motivated by my desire to repair my relationship with Sarah, not by my desire to feel better about myself. Similarly, even if it is true that worshipping God brings with it prudential rewards, it should not be motivated by the prospect of such rewards.
>
> (Ibid.)

Authentic worship shouldn't be grounded in self-worship.

Bayne and Nagasawa go so far as to suggest that the problem they've raised may be the first step towards an argument against the existence of God. After all, if God is a being who, were He to exist, would be essentially worshipful, and if there is no coherent explanation of God's worshipfulness, then it might turn out that the notion of God itself is incoherent. This would be akin to the atheistic arguments we saw in chapter 5 that sought to prove the non-existence of God by conceptually undermining the notions of omnipotence and omniscience.

One response could be to deny that there is an obligation to worship God. Worshipping God might be a good idea, and a wonderful thing to do without being obligatory. Alternatively, I would suggest that an account of God's worshipfulness really could be given in terms of His being the source of all holiness, but I recognize that in order to make this account at all respectable, we'll need to develop a separate account of what holiness is, and how God functions as its source.

Meditation, and Mystical Experience

In chapter 4, if only in passing, we mentioned the Buddhist notion of emptiness. According to the classical Buddhist philosopher, Paramaartha, we can experience this *emptiness* in the midst of meditation (see Forman, 1989). Robert Forman has argued that what occurs in these mystical experiences can be described as the occurrence of a state of pure consciousness; a conscious state that isn't shaped at all by concepts or ideas or content (see the introduction to Forman, 1993). In such a state we can perhaps come to know what the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness really means.

The notion that there can be such a thing as a "Pure Conscious Event," or a PCE, has become a major debate among philosophers of mysticism. Philosophers discuss how these states should be defined, and described, and whether they're possible at all. Steven Katz, for example, argues that PCEs are impossible because of the "kind of beings" that we are (Katz, 1978, p. 59). Human conscious experience is constructed with the aid of memory, language, expectations, and a treasury of concepts that we inherit from our cultural surroundings. To describe a state of "pure" awareness, empty of any content at all, is to describe something that we're simply not wired to experience.

Matthew Bagger (1999, pp. 102-103) argues that even if a PCE were the sort of thing that could occur, nobody could ever know that they'd had one. They couldn't know, *during* the PCE, that they were having one, because the experience is supposed to be empty of all conceptual content. They also couldn't know that they'd had one by remembering it, since there would be no content in the experience to remember. Memory, so to speak, would have nothing to cling onto. A subject couldn't even come to know, by inference, that they'd had a PCE, by, for

example, remembering the moment just before they fell into it, and the moment in which they emerged out of it, and inferring that there must have been a PCE in the middle. Bagger points out that this method would fail to distinguish a PCE from simply falling unconscious, or perhaps, even going to sleep.

If it turns out that PCEs are impossible then this might be taken to undermine a whole thread of mystical experience, especially in various Buddhist traditions, according to which the experience of some sort of emptiness is often held to be a key to enlightenment itself.

Now, perhaps we've just misunderstood what mystics mean when they describe their *empty* experiences. Perhaps they're presenting their ideal goal as if it has actually been achieved, even though it hasn't been *fully* – but only partially – achieved. In chapter 1, for example, I mentioned the Zen practice of *zazen*, in which the practitioner is supposed to picture herself as being identical to her breath. Some would argue that this simply isn't possible. You are simply not the sort of thing that *could* be identical to a breath. To form a picture of that would be no less impossible than forming a picture of a square circle. At best, this impossible task can function as some sort of unreachable goal – a regulative ideal – that guides your meditation, but don't think you'll ever achieve it! Okay. But then, perhaps when people claim to have achieved a PCE, they are, without intending to deceive anybody, reporting a partial, rather than a *complete* success. They may have had an experience that had markedly less content than their regular experiences, without there being no content at all.

Or perhaps we've misunderstood what emptiness really amounts to. Perhaps what's really going on is that the mystic empties out the sort of content that their *regular* experiences have, in order to make room for a content that only *mystical* experiences can have. Typical of this, suggests Jerome (Yehuda) Gellman, "is the Christian mystic Jan Ruysbroeck who wrote that emptying oneself is but a prelude to the mystical life of contemplating God through an act of Divine grace" (Gellman, 2019). On this understanding of what happens at the apex of certain meditative or mystical experiences, there is no PCE – conceived of as a moment of consciousness without any content at all. Rather, one experiences a consciousness that's saturated with a completely different and elevated sort of content.

Having said that, Gellman is far from convinced that PCEs are the conceptual and empirical impossibility that Bagger and Katz present them to be. His first point is that, since we clearly had conscious experience before we were acculturated into a specific linguistic and conceptual landscape (i.e., before we learnt to talk) – even if Steven Katz (1988, p. 755) describes these experiences as "brutish" and "infantile" – Gellman nots that, it's "hard to see why in principle we could not retrieve such an unconceptualized level of experience" (Gellman, 2019).

In response to Bagger's concern that we could never know that we had undergone a PCE, Gellman notes that it entirely depends on your epistemology (i.e., your theory of knowledge). According to the school of thought known as *reliabilism,* a belief is knowledge if it's generated by a reliable cognitive mechanism – that's to say a mechanism that reliably generates true, rather than false, beliefs. On a reliabilist account of knowledge, if the feeling of emerging from a PCE reliably produces the belief that you've just had a PCE (whereas the feeling of waking up from a deep sleep doesn't), then you might well be entitled to claim that you know that you've had a PCE.

Alternatively, perhaps an experience counts as being a PCE so long as the subject isn't conscious, at the time, of any content in the experience. This makes space for the possibility that a PCE can *have* content, but that the subject only becomes aware of that content later on, upon reflection. On this account of what a PCE is, Gellman concludes that, "it should be possible for a mystic who endures a PCE to recall immediately afterward the very awareness that was present in the PCE, even though that awareness was not an object of consciousness at the time of the PCE" (Ibid.).

Furthermore, Gellman points to neuropsychological studies which seem to substantiate the claim that PCEs occur. These events are explained by reference to occurrences in the brain that cut off ordinary brain activity from the centers of consciousness. Gellman rightly concludes that this theory, "if upheld, would provide physiological support for episodes of pure consciousness" (Ibid., referring to d'Aquili & Newberg, 1993; 1999). Accordingly, if a religious ritual, such as mediation, is thought to aim for PCEs, then there are avenues to explore in defense of the practice.

The notion of a PCE could allow for a PCE to have content that is only recovered later. Alternatively, it could function as a regulative ideal for meditative and mystical practice, without ever being achieved in its entirety. More ambitiously, a defense of PCEs could marshal evidence drawn from developmental psychology about pre-linguistic experience, reliabilist epistemology, and/or contemporary neurology, to defend the notion against the attack of Bagger, Katz, and others.

Further Reading:

In addition to articles and books cited in this chapter

On Transubstantiation

(*i.e.*, the Catholic belief that bread and wine transforms into flesh and blood):

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Robert Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999)

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Chapter 8: Religion, Pluralism, and the State

In the wake of the horrors of the holocaust, there was a palpable desire on the part of many to create a new atmosphere of inter-faith harmony, so that the slogan of "Never Again," shouldn't ring hollow. The soul searching wasn't universal. A mere three years after the holocaust, a German Evangelical Conference met at Darmstadt and proclaimed the Jewish suffering in the holocaust to be the work of God, and called upon them to "cease their rejection and ongoing crucifixion of Jesus" (Sacks, 1990, p. 145). Genocide, as far as they were concerned, was the punishment for deicide (i.e., the murder of God).

Much more remarkable than these pockets of traditional Christian anti-Semitism, however, was the revolution that was ushered in by the Second Vatican Council. The council sought to initiate a new era in Christian-Jewish, Christian-Muslim, and inter-faith cooperation in general. Indeed, in contrast to the Evangelicals at Darmstadt, the council declared, on behalf of the Catholic Church, that "the Jews should not [any longer] be presented as rejected or accursed by God," and that it "reveres the work of God in all the major faith traditions."

A major post-Holocaust question was, to what extent could the major faith traditions be true to their own beliefs while making room for the legitimacy, in some sense or other, of the faith-convictions of others. The Second Vatican Council was a major step in that direction, on the part of Catholicism.

Many Eastern religions would find no need to adjust their doctrines at all. Sikhism had taught from its earliest days that all faiths lead to the same God. Its holy text, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, using the Arabic word *qudrat* to mean a manifestation of the One, teaches (GGS: 464):

> What we see is the One's *qudrat*,
> What we hear is the One's *qudrat*,
> *Qudrat* is at the core of happiness and fear,
> The skies, the nether regions and all that is visible is the One's *qudrat*
> The Vedas, the Puranas, the Quran, indeed all thought is *qudrat*,
> Eating, drinking, dressing up is *qudrat*, so is all love *qudrat*!

The holy scriptures of every religion – form the Quran of the Muslims to the Puranas and the Vedas of the Hindus – they are all a revelation of the One. Similarly, Hinduism had a long tradition of viewing each and every "god" as a manifestation of an underlying unity. As David Lawrence explains:

> According to one popular formula, there are 330 million gods in Hinduism. Nevertheless, most Hindus have believed that there is ultimately one deity, and that the diversity of other gods are his or her emanations or manifestations, representing his or her agency in particular contexts. Hindus freely worship one deity after another as the manifestations of the same God. Many Hindus have held a "pluralistic" position that the various expressions of theism are equally legitimate … "Exclusivism," which maintains that only one's own deity is real, is rare in Hinduism…
>
> (Lawrence, 2013, pp. 78-79)

Sikhism and Hinduism don't insist that we all become Sikhs or Hindus. Similarly, the Dalai Lama is reported to have said, "Don't try to use what you learn from Buddhism to be a better Buddhist; use it to be a better whatever-you-already-are" (Wright, 2017, p. xiv).

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – by contrast – are generally committed to the notion that *their* religion is true and that other religions are, at least in various and important respects, *false* (although there have always been more pluralistic streams of these religions, especially among mystics).

Judaism taught that despite the falsehood of other religions, it was possible for Gentiles to earn a place in the afterlife without converting to Judaism. Christianity and Islam, for their part, tended towards a more exclusivist conception of the afterlife, such that only believers in the true religion could receive full salvation. And thus, the project of promoting some sort of religious pluralism – which took on a newfound urgency in the wake of the holocaust – was always going to be a harder sell in the West (and Middle East) than in the East.

In this chapter, we will cover three topics related to this turn towards pluralism. The first section looks at the pluralism of John Hick. The second section explores the ethics of religious persuasion. The final section looks at the relationship between religion and Multi-Cultural States.

John Hick

Among analytic philosophers of religion, John Hick was probably the thinker that did the most to advance the cause of religious pluralism and to provide it with intellectual foundations. His work was designed to enable a Christian, Muslim, or Jew to embrace the sort of pluralism that's more characteristic of Sikhism and Hinduism, but it would also (if it works) give the pluralism of Sikhism and Hinduism a rigorous philosophical articulation.

The basic idea at the heart of Hick's pluralism is borrowed from Immanuel Kant. Famously, Kant drew a distinction between the *phenomena* and the *noumena*. The *phenomena* refers to the way that the world appears to us. The *noumena* refers to how the world really is behind that veil of appearance. The only access we have to the *noumena* is via the *phenomena.* In other words, the only access we have to *reality as it really is*, is via *reality as it appears to us to be*.

The basic possibility at the heart of John Hick's pluralism is that, perhaps at the level of the noumena, there's just one God, but perhaps the *reality* of that one God is refracted through the various cultures, languages, and religions of the world, so that when it is experienced, at the level of religious phenomena, it will be experienced as Vishnu by some, and as the God of Abraham by others. In this way, Hick wanted to make space for all religions (or at least for many religions) to be true at once. Each religion was grasping the same Divine reality through a different prism.

There are two main readings of the central theme of Kant's philosophy. You could call them the *one world* reading and the *two worlds* reading. On the one world reading, what Kant is trying to say is that the noumenal is the one real world, and that the phenomenal is merely the way that the noumena appears to us. The phenomenal, so to speak, has no real existence of its own. It is just the noumena appearing to us.

On the two worlds reading, by contrast, what Kant is trying to say is that there exist two worlds – the world of reality, and the world of appearance. The former gives being to the latter. That is to say, the phenomenal world couldn't exist without the noumenal world upon which it depends, but even so, the two worlds both exist.

George Mavrodes was a critic of John Hick who accuses him of the same ambiguity that we find in Kant (Mavrodes, 1995). Moreover, whichever way you try to disambiguate what Hick has to say, you end up in hot water.

The one world reading of Kant corresponds to a one-God reading of Hick. On this reading, there is one God who appears very differently to different religions. Mavrodes offers an analogy of a prince who sometimes dresses up as a commoner, so as to gather information about the lives of his subjects. Sometimes he dresses up as a monk, sometimes as a stonemason, and so on and so forth. Mavrodes calls this the *disguise model*. There is, on this model, only one person who appears in all of these different guises: "The (apparent) monk is identical with the prince, and the (apparent) stonemason is identical with the prince, and therefore the monk is identical with the stonemason" (Ibid., p. 274). This model would allow Hick to say that Vishnu is identical to the Trinity, which is identical to the Unitarian God of Islam and Judaism. It's all one being, appearing in different guises.

But this reading of Hick doesn't really generate the pluralism for which he guns. It just means that every religion is deceived, in different ways. Just as those who meet the prince in his various disguises are misled about his properties, the various religions of the world will be deceived about the nature of God – deceived by *His* disguises. We don't even achieve the disappointing, but still egalitarian result that all religions are equally far from the truth. Some of the disguises worn by the prince may be more deceptive than others. If he's a young man, and some of his costumes don't cover-up his age, and some of his costumes make him look very old, then those who see him in the latter disguise end up with a less accurate conception of the prince (at least in terms of appreciating his age). So, for all we know, some religions are more true than others. There may be a hierarchy here.

The two worlds reading of Kant, by contrast, gives rise to a many-gods reading of Hick. Mavrodes offers the analogy of a group of non-representational painters. They all set out to paint a picture of the same landscape. But, given their highly personal styles, once they're all done, we'll find little resemblance between the paintings they paint. In fact, there might be nothing in any of the paintings that, in any obvious way, corresponds to the visual form of anything in the landscape that inspired the painting. So yes, the landscape has given rise to the

paintings. But the paintings are not identical to the landscape, and they're not identical to one another.

Mapped back onto Hick's philosophy of religion, the following picture emerges. There's one noumenal God, but the way that different religious cultures *react* to that God, like the ways in which the painters react to the landscape, ends up creating a number of culturally conditioned artefacts that represent in some abstract way the God that inspired them. If that's right, then the noumenal God exists and so does the God that Hinduism constructs, and the God that Christianity constructs, and the God that Judaism constructs, etc. etc. None of these gods are identical to the noumenal God and none of them are identical to the other. So, if the first model led to a non-egalitarian hierarchy of more and less false religions, then the second model has led to a form of polytheism that certainly couldn't be accepted by any monotheist.

For his part, Hick contends that he's been misrepresented by Mavrodes. Neither of the analogies – the disguises or the paintings – do justice to the Kantian insight that he wanted to develop. Instead, Hick presents us with his own analogy, drawn from physics, albeit "very imperfectly." His analogy looks to:

> … the way in which the light of the sun is refracted by the earth's atmosphere into the different colors of a rainbow. In order to affect us the light has to pass through the earth's atmosphere, which divides it into the different perceived colors. Religiously, the 'light' of the universal presence of the Real is refracted by the human religious cultures into the different Gods and Absolutes.
>
> (Hick, 2011, p. 199)

My own worry with this analogy is that it makes very little progress, conceptually, beyond the disguise model proposed by Mavrodes. It perhaps guarantees that no religion is more true, and that no religion is less true, than any other, just as no colour in the rainbow is somehow closer to, or further removed from, the nature of the light before it refracted. But, as I'll try to illustrate in a moment, it still means that most (if not all) religions labour under a massive illusion.

Most Christians think that God is essentially Triune (which is to say that their one God is somehow made up, essentially, out of three persons). Jews and Muslims think that God is essentially unitary. Some religions relate to God more as an impersonal Absolute being. Others

relate to God as a person. But, if Hick is right, then all of these religions are wrong. All they've managed to describe with any accuracy is how God appears to *them*, but not how God really *is*. They may all be *equally* false. But they're all false.

Hick has a response to this concern, which takes us back, in a sense, to the topic of chapter 2 of this book – religious language. Generally, when a person makes an assertion, they aim at truth. And though it's a philosophically controversial matter as to how truth should be defined, it seems right to say, at the very least, that your assertion is true if it accurately describes the way that things are. Hick argues that, in *religious* contexts, our assertions don't aim for, and certainly don't achieve, truth. Instead, they aim for, and often achieve, at least a degree of, *mythological truth*. He defines mythological truth as the property that attaches to any utterance about X, so long as that utterance tends to evoke (in speakers and listeners) an appropriate attitude towards X (Hick, 1989, p. 348).

No religion can hope to express literal truths about the noumenal God. Instead, they trade in mythologies. A true religious myth will be one that "evoke[s] in us attitudes and modes of behavior which are appropriate to our situation vis-à-vis the Real" (Ibid., p. 351). Hinduism might do the trick for some people in some circumstances. Christianity might do the trick for other people in other circumstances. And those two religions, like any two religions, only conflict if you take them to be expressing literal truths rather than mythological truths. In this way, all religions can be equally true. None need be false. And, we escape the concern that we've inadvertently collapsed into polytheism.

Alvin Plantinga raises three pretty crushing concerns with Hick's pluralism, so construed. First, Plantinga worries that it isn't really possible to embrace, with any deep sincerity or authenticity, a religious faith, based upon the knowledge that to do so is to embrace literal falsehoods. Can this really be done without "bad faith" or "doublethink" (Plantinga, 2000, pp. 61-62)?

In fact, even if religious statements *do* have the power to evoke appropriate attitudes towards an ineffable noumenal God, you might think that those statements will only hold that power if they are spoken *sincerely*; if they are undergirded by *belief*. The worry is that, "Once I am sufficiently enlightened, once I see that those doctrines are not [literally but only mythologically] true, I can no longer take the stance with respect to them that leads to the

hoped-for practical result" (Ibid., p. 61). What power does a myth hold over a person once they've seen through it, to recognize that it's merely a myth?

Plantinga's second concern is that Hick's praiseworthy desire to render all religions true has backfired. His pluralism was, Plantinga assumes, motivated by a desire to avoid the "intellectual imperialism" and "self-exultation" that comes with thinking that your religion is true and that others are false. But, since a devout adherent to a religion *does* tend to think that her religion, or some of it, or most of it, is *literally* true, Hick has, in essence, told them that they are *all* wrong:

> We and our graduate students know the truth; everyone else is sadly mistaken. Isn't this to exalt ourselves at the expense of nearly everyone else? Those who think there really is such a person as God are benighted, unsophisticated, unaware of the real truth of the matter, which is that there isn't any such person (even if thinking there is can lead to practical fruits)… I find it hard to see how this attitude is a manifestation of tolerance or intellectual humility: it looks more like patronizing condescension.
>
> (Ibid., p. 62)

Finally, Plantinga is concerned that Hick never actually produced an *argument* for his conclusion that no religion could be closer to the truth than any other. He seems to have been guided more by a deep desire to make peace between cultures, and a spiritual sensitivity that was able to see wisdom in many cultures, than by any solid argumentation. Peace between cultures and religions is an admirable aim. But it cannot be achieved by wishful thinking. It cannot be achieved by pretending that all of the world religions, if only we understood them aright, already live in intellectual harmony.

In the next section, we shall explore the ethics of religious persuasion. Once we bring that discussion to a close, we shall (I hope) see the possibility of a completely different form of religious pluralism. So, let's move on.

Religious Persuasion

To proselytise is to try to persuade a person, outside of your faith community, to commit to your religion. Willard Van Orman Quine said: "If someone firmly believes that eternal salvation and damnation hinge on embracing his particular religion, he would be callous indeed to sit tolerantly back and watch others go to hell" (Quine, 1987, p. 208). Some religions include an obligation to proselytise. They would be callous not to. Other religions don't think that you're damned for not being a member. Those religions tend not to proselytise.

Some people feel particularly aggrieved when they are targeted by missionaries. They feel as if they've been attacked, or as if their privacy has been violated. It's as if there's an unwritten rule for living in a friendly multi-cultural society: (within certain parameters) we *can* try to persuade each other about our scientific, political, and artistic opinions, but we should leave people's religions alone. But can that attitude be justified? Isn't the following claim pretty obviously true:

> **Persuasion:** For any person *x*, and for any truth *p*, such that *p* would be important for *x* to know, if you come to believe that *p*, you have an *obligation* to try to persuade *x* that *p* is true.

Why should religious truths be an exception to this intuitive rule, especially if people are going to be damned to hell for getting things wrong?

Daniel Statman (MS) cites various psychological studies (such as Alicke, 2000 and Alicke, et al., 2018) showing that biases and self-aggrandizing agendas are central to the psychology of *blame*. Moreover, negative motivation, he argues, usually undermines the reliability of an assertion. Given all of this, and given that proselytism always contains a critique of the target's lifestyle (even if only tacitly), the endeavour will therefore tend overwhelming towards inflating the ego of the proselytiser. Perhaps we should conclude:

1. You shouldn't try to proselytise, since you can't do so without manifesting negative motivation.

2. A person is justified in discounting the claims of proselytisers since negative motivation renders them unreliable.

Perhaps this explains why it's both pointless and immoral to apply our rule about persuasion to religious truths. But, personally, and however annoying I might find those who try to convert me

to their religions, I would say that it's unreasonable for a believer in a religion to place a fear of (the mere possibility) of ill-will over the callousness of refusing to proselytise. Keeping people out of hell is surely more important than the fear of possible ego inflation.

Perhaps the proselytiser fails to "do unto others as she would have done unto her." Mormon missionaries, for example, probably don't relish the prospect of opening their doors to Jehovah's Witnesses. Perhaps this constitutes an ethical double standard. Why should they expect people to listen to *them* when they don't listen to others? But this argument doesn't stand up. Who's to say that a missionary *won't* be willing to open their door to proselytisers from other faiths? At the very least, they may see it as an opportunity to hone their skills in apologetics. Moreover, even if the missionary *isn't* open to the arguments of others, the problem isn't with proselytism *per se*. Missionaries should be more open minded, but that's not an argument against proselytism (here I'm following David Shatz, 2013, pp. 168-169).

Think back to chapter 3. There I proposed a variation of Pascal's wager that applies to different religions depending upon the audience that it addresses. In our discussion of that wager, and in our discussion of its conception of rationality, and the roots of rationality, I conceded that a rational person, outside of any religious community should treat the evidence for all religions equally. But, we also came to a surprising conclusion. Namely: a rational person rooted *within* a religious community need *not* treat the evidence for every religion equally. We cannot straightforwardly criticise her for this. For her, every religion other than the religion (or religions) embraced by her community will be *unthinkable*. To embrace *her* religion, she needs evidence. To embrace *other* religions, she requires *overwhelming* evidence. Without overwhelming evidence, other religions can remain unthinkable, and she can't straightforwardly be criticised for this.

Your affiliation to a religion might be based (at least in part) upon evidence – and, your positive embrace of a religion *should* be based upon (having at least some) evidence – but it will almost certainly be based upon lots more than that; on all sorts of personal details: family history, communal belonging, your sense of identity, etc. The point is this:

- You roots in a community, family, and culture tend to be deeply implicated in religious commitment.

David Shatz notes that this seems to be "different in the sciences and politics, even though it may [sometimes] be granted in those domains, too" (Ibid., pp. 172-173). Change a person's favoured interpretation of quantum mechanics, and you're unlikely to devastate their social standing, communal belonging, and sense of self. Changing a person's *religion* can often be a much more dangerous endeavour.

Joining a faith group is sometimes bound to strain pre-existing bonds of family, friendship, and community. There is a sense in which something stands to be *broken*. Some sort of social fabric stands to be ripped asunder. I can barely imagine the fall out to my family if, for example, I converted away from Judaism. For this reason, and in this sense, I've gone so far as to characterise proselytism as a form of *violence*. Martin Marty writes:

> The fabric of social relations is gossamer, easily pulled at and torn. Bombarded from all sides by advertisers, public relations experts, strangers, and seducers, people have few psychic defenses that will help them keep to boundaries and uphold traditions. The proselytiser violates boundaries and disrupts traditions… Be caught off guard, and, whether or not one succumbs, there is a challenge to personal and social identity.
>
> (Marty, 1999, p. 2)

Just as physical violence is sometimes *appropriate*, so too, the proselytiser might argue, is epistemic violence. If the stakes are high enough – if eternal salvation is the reward for being right, and eternal damnation the punishment for being wrong – we can recognise that proselytism damages something valuable when it tears at the fabric of social relations but insist that the damage would be worth it.

But hold your horses! If a person's epistemic rootedness is a function of *unobjectionable* and even *praiseworthy* attitudes – for instance, a person wants to maintain their Jewish or Navaho identity out of respect for the multiple generations that risked life and limb to pass that identity down – then it seems that she is within her rights to demand overwhelming evidence before she converts to any religion that might disrupt that identity.

Admittedly, many Messianic Jews (that is, Jewish believers in Christianity) would argue that a Jew can convert to Christianity and maintain a Jewish identity. Demographically speaking,

however, one wonders how well that holds up in terms of transmitting a strong and distinctive Jewish identity over multiple generations after conversion to Christianity. Moreover, it can hardly be denied that the Jewish convert to Christianity is likely to be alienated from the mainstream Jewish community which (rightly or wrongly) tends to shun Messianic Jews, seeing them as a threat.

Now, consider the following assumption:

> **Assumption:** No good and reasonable God could possibly condition salvation upon a person doing or believing that which is practically irrational for them to do or believe, so long as they're not to *blame* for being in a state that renders that action or belief irrational.

If you recognise that the communal and familial connections rooting a person against a particular conversion are blameless (and even *valuable*), then you *shouldn't* think that that person's salvation requires their conversion.

A proselytiser might cite scriptural reasons to disregard our assumption. "My holy book says you'll burn if you don't convert!" But to the extent that the assumption is an *a priori* truth (i.e., a truth that is obvious to all, even without the need for empirical investigation), and to the extent that scripture is to be interpreted in the light of *reason*, I would suggest that scriptural challenges should be overcome. If someone says that a good and reasonable God *demands* conversion from all people, even when (for no fault of their own) it's neither rational nor reasonable for that person to do so, you should tell them that that makes no sense. If their religion tells them otherwise, I would argue, you should tell them to go back and reinterpret their sources.

Is our assumption really an *a priori* truth? To many, it seems to be. Moses Mendelssohn called the thought "ridiculous" that those who have guided "people to virtue in this life" should be "damned in the next one" for having had the wrong religion (Mendelssohn, 2017, p. 288). Once you realise that people have good reason to be connected to communities, cultures, and histories, and that these connections can render foreign religions unthinkable, one can more easily see one's way to the truth of our assumption.

There may *sometimes* be an obligation to proselytise, but only in situations in which doing so will not interfere with a person's blameless rootedness, or in cases where the proselytiser has access to overwhelming evidence.

Some people are rootless. A rootless person being embraced by a community upon being convinced of the truth of a religion couldn't be conceived as an act of violence. Having said that, and if my argument stands up, there will often be situations in which to proselytise with anything less than overwhelming evidence would be immoral. The only way out would be to argue that the cultural and familial ties of people beyond *your* religious community are always *worthless* or *unreasonable* such that God could *condemn* them for having such roots. That, I think, would be a tall order. I think it much more reasonable to amend our rule about persuasion to:

> **Persuasion*:** For any person *x*, and for any truth *p*, such that *p* would be important for *x* to know, if you come to believe that *p*, you have an *obligation* to try to persuade *x* that *p* is true, but only so long as the harm done to *x* in learning *p* would be outweighed by the good that would come to *x* through knowing it.

It is for this reason that perhaps it's right to respect certain boundaries in a multi-cultural society. At the end of the last section, I said that this section would wind its way back to a form of religious pluralism. I think we have.

John Hick attempted to defend what might be called a metaphysical pluralism. Metaphysical pluralism tries to maintain that there can be multiple, even conflicting, *truths*. Metaphysical pluralism about religion would claim that multiple, seemingly conflicting, religions are simultaneously true. The pluralism that seems to emerge from my reflections about religious persuasion, by contrast, could be called an epistemological pluralism.

Epistemological pluralism claims that rational disagreements are possible. It claims that people can come to conflicting and even mutually exclusive conclusions and yet they can both have done so with an equal amount of reason, and without any culpability. They can't both be right, but they can both be equally justified. In such cases, guided by our assumption, which turns out to be an *a priori* truth, in such cases, they can't be damned for being wrong.

Epistemological pluralism needn't entail universalism – the doctrine that all people will eventually achieve salvation. But it does entail the falsehood of exclusivism – the doctrine that *only* believers in one religion can be saved – unless you're willing to engage in some quite fancy footwork. For instance, you might be able to salvage the doctrine that there can be no salvation outside of the church (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*), and the doctrine that there can be no relationship with God other than through Jesus, with the claim that when Buddhists, or Jews, or what have you, *do* have a relationship with God, and/or *do* achieve salvation, they are, in fact, and unbeknownst to them, doing it through Jesus and/or the Church. But generally, epistemological pluralism entails the falsehood of exclusivism.

Given epistemological pluralism, adherents of multiple religions can look one another in the eye and respect that each person has come to their conclusions based on the dictates of rationality, given their different contexts and life stories; that there's little point, and much harm to be done, in trying to change the faith of the other. Instead, they can try to learn from one another the wisdom that can be shared between them, so long as that wisdom doesn't outright contradict the key claims of any of their religions.

As Robert Nozick is reported to have said, when the end of days finally arrive, the Christian and the Jew can approach the Messiah and ask whether this is the first or the second coming. Until that point, they can respectfully agree to disagree. This too is a form of pluralism; less ambitious than Hick's perhaps, but truer, I would argue, to the Orthodoxies of the religions that we're looking to create harmony between.

Religion and State

The fact that we live in a multi-cultural and multi-faith world, and indeed, that many of us live in countries with very diverse populations, makes it incumbent upon philosophers to think about the relationship between the State and the many faiths of its citizens, and between the State and those of its citizens who have no religious faith at all.

Some liberal democracies make a concerted effort to separate religion and state. This often ends up with peculiar consequences. Liberal states lend financial support to all sorts of cultural endeavours (from football to opera). They use their resources to support particular conceptions

of the good. For example, the state might support a national theatre, museums, and a school system that seeks to inculcate various civic virtues among its citizenry. It might sponsor campaigns to promote healthy eating, and to encourage people to give up smoking. But, so long as there is a separation of religion and state, the government will *not* provide any funds or resources to support the flourishing of *religious* culture or of specifically *religious* virtues. What, if anything, justifies this distinction?

Other liberal democracies make no effort to withhold public funds from expressions of religious culture, and are sometimes happy to promote specific religious values. Some of these states even have a particular church or religion that it supports more than other churches or religions, thereby showing a preference to one religion or church over others. In fact, this is the norm in Europe (Sapir & Statman, 2019, pp. 12-13). And yet, these countries are not automatically branded illiberal in virtue of having an established church. Why not? How is fair to use the tax money of all of your citizens – who belong to many faiths, and many of whom belong to none – to support the institutions and goals of one particular religion over others?

Even in states where there is a separation of religion and State, there are sometimes laws that make exceptions for religious people. Some liberal countries, for example, allow citizens to bypass otherwise compulsory military service on the grounds of religious belief. How is that fair? Why should religious grounds justify an exemption from a national burden, when other people have no choice but to carry it?

In their comprehensive study of these issues, Gideon Sapir and Daniel Statman (2019) come to the following conclusions:

1. Liberal political theory does not entail that there must be a separation between religion and state;
2. nor does it prohibit a state from supporting one religion over others (given certain provisos); and
3. there should be no specifically *religious* exemptions from laws that are passed in a liberal democracy, but there should be a broader category of exemptions for matters of

conscience, if and when a particular law would force a person directly to act in opposition to deeply held convictions.

Their third conclusion doesn't allow a person to withhold paying their taxes just because they're unhappy with how those taxes are being spent, since the spending of government funds isn't performed *directly* by the general tax payer. Even if you're adamantly opposed to abortion, for example, and even if tax money in your country is sometimes used to facilitate the performance of abortion, and even if your opposition is religiously motivated, you would have no reasonable exemption from paying your taxes; since – however deep your opposition to abortion – the law isn't forcing you to *act* against that conviction. Having said that, Sapir and Statman's conclusions *would* allow a doctor to exempt herself from performing an abortion directly, on grounds of conscience.

How do Statman and Sapir come to these conclusions? In a nutshell, their conclusions seem to follow from the basic premise that religious convictions and religious conceptions of the good are not different, in any salient respect, from any other convictions or conceptions of the good that might be found among the citizens of a state.

Some citizens have no problem with smoking. This doesn't stop a liberal government from financially supporting and promoting conceptions of the good that are *opposed* to people smoking (including anti-smoking education campaigns and taxes that effectively disincentivise smoking). Some citizens hate opera. This doesn't stop a liberal government from lending financial support to a National Opera company. So, why should the fact that some citizens have no religion, or the fact that some citizens have a different religion to the majority, prevent a liberal government from lending financial support to certain (non-coercive) ends that stem from the religion of the majority?

Of course, the right of a liberal State to support a religion (or multiple religions) has various provisos attached. It cannot support any policy that would infringe upon the rights of people to pursue their own, competing, conceptions of the good. Moreover, the support of a majority religion is only justified to the extent that it is conducted "with sensitivity to the potential effect of such preferences on the sense of belonging and self-respect of those who hold other values" (Ibid., p. 29). But so long as those sensitivities are on display, and so long as nobody is

compelled to adopt a particular religion or its practices, there's no reason to object to State support for religion.

Kent Greenawalt disagrees. He writes: "if a person is compelled by the state to contribute financially to a religion in which she does not believe ... that infringes on her religious conscience" (Greenawalt, 2008, p. 8). But is this really any more coercive than using the tax money of someone who hates opera to support a National Opera company? Maybe it is. Opera isn't a matter of conscience, after all. But is it any more coercive that using the tax money of a passionate libertarian to fund job-seekers allowance, against his deeply held political beliefs; or using the tax money of a pacifist to fund the army?

> [M]odern states could not exist if citizens did not pay their taxes even in cases where they had reservations about the way the tax money is used (unnecessary wars, maybe, or unjust social policies, and so on). Hence, the existence of social and political order depends on the readiness of citizens to fund policies that they strongly oppose.
>
> (Sapir & Statman, 2019, p. 22)

The notion that religious conceptions of the good are no different to other conceptions of the good is what motivates Sapir and Statman's first two conclusions. Liberal states don't *have* to establish a religion. That's up to the electorate. But there's no conceptual reason, according to Sapir and Statman, why a state shouldn't do so. Nobody, they claim, has managed to provide an argument to establish that religion is somehow different to the other conceptions of the good that shape public policy.

Their third conclusion also stems from the notion that religion isn't special. For example, the European Union insists that animals slaughtered for their meat should be pre-stunned. This procedure is thought to invalidate any subsequent religious slaughter in both Muslim and Jewish law. The European Union therefore allows member states to offer a religious exemption such that animals slaughtered for the kosher and halal markets don't require pre-stunning (Ibid., p. 80). By Sapir and Statman's lights there is no reason why liberal political theory should feel compelled to offer any such exemption merely to assuage the feelings of religious citizens.

A ban on animal slaughter without pre-stunning doesn't *force* religious citizens to act in ways opposed to their faith, since the Muslim and Jewish faith allow for people simply to refrain from eating meat at all (Ibid.). There is no religious *obligation* upon them to eat meat (even if in the Jewish faith, for example, there is thought to be a religious preference for meat on the Sabbath). If Sapir and Statman are right, then advocates for religious slaughter should argue (as many do) that their methods of slaughter are equally humane. But, they shouldn't argue that their religious identity grants them an exemption from the humane treatment of animals over which liberal states have started to see themselves as having some duty of care.

Brian Barry (2001, p. 44) uses the same reasoning to argue that, if a law should require motorcyclists to wear a helmet, there is no reason to think, on the basis of liberal political theory alone, that Sikhs should be granted an exemption. Sikhs may see themselves as religiously obliged to wear turbans that interfere with the wearing of motorcycle helmets, but laws that require the wearing of such helmets don't actually violate their religious freedom. Instead, law-abiding Sikhs in such a state only have to give up riding motorcycles (see also Bedi, 2007).

Accordingly, for Sapir and Statman, the acceptability of religious exemptions from laws is somewhat narrower than many might hope. On the other hand, they recognize that a community can have a right to its culture. This communal right doesn't trump any of the rights of individual citizens. Individual rights have always been more fundamental to the liberal conception of justice than group rights. But a communal right to a culture isn't something that a liberal state should allow itself to ignore, even if it's something that can be trumped by other considerations.

Your state might be host to a relatively weak minority group whose cultural survival is threatened by the risk of assimilation into the majority culture. In that case, you might have good reason to extend certain exemptions from various legal obligations to the relevant community, if said obligations might have a detrimental effect on the continued flourishing of their minority culture. *This* sort of reasoning might provide new grounds upon which to establish an exemption regarding ritual slaughter, or from an obligation to wear a helmet – depending on the circumstances in question (Sapir & Statman, 2019, p. 101). But in that case,

what you'd be trying to protect is a *culture*, not a religion *per se*. Once again: for Sapir and Statman religion isn't special.

Notice, however, that in the previous section of this chapter, I argued that religion is, in a sense, *special*. I argued that the ethics of persuasion entail that you should be much less willing, in general, to persuade others of your *religious* beliefs, in comparison to your beliefs about other matters. In political philosophy, this ethical attitude towards religious persuasion, often translates into something known as the doctrine of public reason – most closely associated with the political philosopher, John Rawls. The doctrine comes in two forms (Ibid., p. 138):

> **The Weak Doctrine of Public Reason**: religious arguments ought not to provide the basis for state laws or for actions that impose restrictions on the liberty of nonbelievers.
>
> **The Strong Doctrine of Public Reason:** religious arguments ought not to provide considerations even for laws and actions that do not impose restrictions on liberty.

Religious debate as an intellectual exercise is to be encouraged, since people rooted in a religion have nothing to fear. If there's no overwhelming evidence, nobody should expect you to change your practice. And, if there *is* overwhelming evidence, then you should be happy to be led from falsehood to truth. But, on matters of religion, there is rarely (if ever) overwhelming evidence to be shared. Consequently, religious debate should very rarely (if ever) be aimed at actually changing people's *practice*. If that's the case, then doesn't it immediately follow that when we're talking about writing and passing laws to rule over every citizen, we should keep the terms of the debate away from *religion*?

No. That doesn't follow. To change a person's belief on an isolated matter by appeal to religious reasons isn't the same thing as trying to change a person's whole religion. I might use arguments drawn from the Bible to convince you that something is true, without trying to convert you to Judaism. Arguments for specific policies drawing upon religious reason shouldn't be compared to *attempts to proselytise.*

To get matters straight, we'd need to know what counts as a religious reason, and what doesn't. Sapir and Statman suggest, for the sake of argument, that a religious reason would be any argument "based on premises about God, the Bible, religious authorities, and so on" (Ibid.). But,

as we saw in chapter 1, it's not so clear that belief in God, or belief in the Bible is necessary or sufficient for making a person religious, or for making a set of beliefs a religion. Accordingly, it's going to be hard to find anything that counts as a distinctively *religious* reason for holding a position.

You might think that we could do justice to the doctrine of public reason by prohibiting, not just *religious* reasons, but *supernatural* reasons. Any argument that relies upon premises about supernatural entities, properties, or forces, you might think, should be excluded from political debates. But this would just give rise to two new problems:

1. Until we've completed the natural sciences, we don't actually know what the limits of nature are, and so we're not yet in a place to draw a hard and fast distinction between the natural and the supernatural.

2. It's not at all obvious that ethical properties are *natural* properties. Accordingly, if a state is allowed to promote certain conceptions of the *good* (as it does when it tries to promote civic virtues in its schools, for example), then it seems as if liberal States don't have to steer clear from non-natural properties in its policy-making.

But, let's pretend, for the sake of argument, that we are able to define, once and for all, what counts as a religious reason for a law and what counts as a non-religious reason for a law. On what grounds should we think that only non-religious reasons should be allowed to play a role in public debates?

Robert Audi (1993) has defended the weak doctrine of public reason. This is his argument: it is only acceptable to coerce a person to perform an action in a given situation if the following three conditions obtain: (a) the person has a moral obligation to perform this action in this situation; (b) if the person was completely rational, and adequately informed about the situation, they would *recognize* that they have an obligation to act in this way; and (c) the action is one that is reasonably believed to have significant effects on others. Any sort of coercion that doesn't meet these three criteria, Audi insists, would be contrary to the principles of liberalism which is all about personal autonomy, and minimizing state coercion.

The reason why this basic principle of liberalism entails a weak doctrine of public reason, Audi insists, is that even if a person was completely rational, and adequately informed about a given situation, there is no guarantee that she would come to agree with a *religious* reason to act. We know this to be so because we are fully aware of religious disagreement obtaining between people who seem to be both adequately informed and equally as rational as anybody else is.

But think again Are we to say that if only everybody was sufficiently rational and adequately informed, they'd all agree as to which tax policies are correct, and that's why it's legitimate to take their money against their will? Statman and Sapir (2019, p. 143) think that any such argument would be "naïve at best, and arrogant at worst." But if states are allowed to enact controversial fiscal policies that restrict the liberty of their citizens, "it is hard to see why restrictions based on controversial religious reasons are unacceptable" (Ibid.).

Some people have argued for the strong doctrine of public reason on the basis that secular people simply can't understand religious reasons. It's unfair to pass binding laws upon fully competent adult citizens using reasons that those citizens are unable to comprehend. But this argument is very difficult to substantiate. As Jeremy Waldron writes:

> The difficulties of intercultural or religious-secular dialogue are often exaggerated when we talk about the incommensurability of cultural frameworks and the impossibility of conversation without a common conceptual scheme. In fact, conversation between members of different cultural and religious communities is seldom a dialogue of the deaf ... Humans are enormously curious about each other's ideas and reasons, and, when they want to be, they are resourceful in listening to and trying to learn from one another across what appear to be insurmountable barriers of cultural comprehensibility.
>
> (Waldron, 2007, p. 112)

Not only is it contentious to say that secular people simply *don't understand* religious reasons, it's a counterproductive development for political discourse to take, since religious people can equally well claim that they don't understand purely secular reasons for legislation. We can all play that game, if we want to. As Sapir and Statman illustrate:

> Consider restrictions on the treatment of animals based on the idea that animals too have rights. It is easy to imagine people who would say that "they just can't understand" how animals could be said to have rights.
>
> (Sapir & Statman, 2019, p. 145)

But this failure of people to understand doesn't mean we should disallow appeal to animal rights in our public debates about law and policy.

Liberal political politics requires people to cooperate in spite of their political disagreements. For this reason, Statman and Sapir are correct to expect citizens of liberal states to do their best, whenever possible, to find ways of articulating their political positions that as many people as possible will understand. But, what happens if they can't? "If they can't, we expect them, as conscientious individuals, to be faithful to their views and try to promote them in the best possible manner" (Ibid., p. 150).

In fact, the very attempt to exclude religious considerations from the public sphere will tend to encourage insincerity (Ibid., p. 154). That can't be a good thing for our political culture. We should try to find arguments for our political positions that will encourage as many people to back them as we can. That makes good political sense. But we shouldn't *hide* the fact that, in addition to whatever arguments we bring to the table, we have religious motivations too, if that happens to be the case. Moreover, the very attempt to block "religious arguments is liable to strengthen uncompromising, conservative interpretations of religious positions" (Ibid., p. 155). That wouldn't be good for the health of a liberal political climate.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks claims that, when he brings Jewish perspectives to public debates, he is contributing to public reason, and not detracting from it. Whether or not he was deliberately trying to subvert the doctrine of John Rawls is unclear. He writes:

> One of the most important ideas of Harvard political philosopher John Rawls is that of 'public reason', the process by which people in political debate use a language and a logic accessible to all so that we can – in the prophet Isaiah's phrase – 'reason together'. The idea of reasoning together was dealt a fateful blow in the twentieth century by the collapse of moral language, the disappearance of 'I ought' and its

> replacement by 'I want', 'I choose', 'I feel' … In setting out a Jewish perspective on matters that concern us all, I am making a commitment to public reason.
>
> (Sacks, 2002, p. 3)

Far from abandoning public discourse, appeal to religion is often an appeal to something that seeks a greater level of objectivity than the subjective whims of the moment. For that reason, appeal to religious reasons can actually help to restore the shared moral language that used to make room for reasoning together.

We each have our own cultural, familial, historical, and experiential relationship with religion. These deeply personal factors can make it the case that nothing short of overwhelming evidence could ever make it rational for you to change your religion, if you have one to begin with. But, as I argued in chapter 4, we all have an intellectual duty to examine the evidence for different religions, and against religion. This is what I call, entering the philosophy seminar room.

Perhaps doing so will introduce us to overwhelming evidence we didn't know of before. Perhaps it will shape us and our experiences in more subtle ways, increasing our sensitivity to the wisdom of others. Perhaps it will soften our defenses such that we'll become open to religious experiences of a transcendent reality that had previously been beyond our grasp. Perhaps, by contrast, it will reinforce your belief that religion is a human construct designed to provide solace in a meaningless life. But, whatever we get from a free and frank exchange of religious ideas (so long as we're not trying to convert rooted others), our public spaces, I would argue, stand to be enriched, by allowing every religious, philosophical, and ideological voice a seat at the table – on the proviso that nobody seeks to coerce people to act in ways that directly violate their conscience.

Further Reading:

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Glossary

A priori – A proposition can be known a priori if its truth can be apprehended without empirical investigation.

Advaita Vedanta – A school of Hindu philosophy according to which the entire universe is just an appearance or manifestation of Brahman — which is the ultimate, transcendent and immanent God. On this view, each and every person – each self or *atman* – is, in fact, one with Brahman.

Agnostic – Somebody who neither believes that God exists, nor believes that God doesn't exist.

Androcentrism – The view that human beings are worthy of special ethical consideration by dint of their humanity.

Apophaticism – Sometimes known as Negative Theology, apophaticism is the claim that God or ultimate reality can only be known via a process of negation. We can know what God or ultimate reality isn't, but in some significant sense, we cannot know what God or ultimate reality is.

Atheist – Somebody who believes that God does not exist.

A-theory – A conception of time according to which the present is an objective feature had by one moment of time. It contrasts with the B-theory according to which no time is objectively *the present*, but that all times *appear* to be present to those who happen to be located there.

Atonement – A process by which a person (or community) repairs the breach between herself (or themselves) and God caused by sin. Through this process, a person (or community) becomes, so to speak, at one with God; hence "at-one-ment."

Axiology – The study of value.

Bayesianism – a set of views according to which belief (or confidence that some proposition is true) comes in degrees, and according to which those degrees are supposed to obey certain rules derived from probability theory.

Biocentrism – The view that biological organisms are worthy of special ethical consideration by dint of their being alive. This view is generally accompanied with a rejection of androcentrism, such that human beings are not worthy of any special ethical consideration in addition to the consideration due to them by dint of their being alive.

Brahman – The ultimate foundation of all being according to Hindu tradition.

B-theory – A conception of time according to which no moment is objectively *the present*. Rather, every moment appears to be the present to those who happen to be located there.

Contextualism – In epistemology, this is the view that the standards that govern whether belief counts as knowledge change from context to context. Just as there is contextualism about "knowledge," there can also be contextualism about "belief," according to which the degree of confidence required for belief differs from context to context. There can also be contextualism about "faith." Outside of epistemology, there can be contextualism about all sorts of words. For example, the word, "tall" picks out different minimum heights in different contexts.

Cosmology – The study of the physical universe (i.e., the cosmos). The cosmological argument for the existence of God suggests that God must exist to serve as the cause of the physical universe.

Deontology – The study of duty.

Dialetheism – The view according to which a contradiction can sometimes be true.

Ein Sof – The name of God as He is in Himself before and beyond the creation, in the Kabbalistic tradition. It literally translates from the Hebrew to "without end."

Emptiness – A central doctrine of Buddhism, according to which all things are devoid of intrinsic existence. All things are, in some important sense, insignificant and unreal.

Epistemology – The branch of philosophy that studies knowledge and belief.

Ethics – The branch of philosophy that studies moral value and duty.

Exclusivism – In religion, "exclusivism" tends to refer to the view that only members of the true religion will ultimately receive salvation.

Expressivism – A view in the philosophy of language according to which some group of sentences don't express a proposition, but instead express an emotion. Expressivism as a theory in meta-ethics suggests that sentences that seem to be about ethical facts don't really express propositions, but merely express the subjective feeling of the speaker. Expressivism as a theory in the philosophy of religion says that same thing about sentences that seem to be about religious facts.

Faith – An attitude that can be held towards people, things, ideas, God, and propositions. To have faith towards a proposition is to want that proposition to be true. According to some, you also need to *believe* that the proposition is true. According to others, it's possible to have faith that a proposition is true without *believing* that it's true. To have faith in things or people that are not propositions is often related to having trust in those things or people.

Fictionalism – A view in the philosophy of language according to which some group of utterances that appear to be assertive are not really used to make assertions so much as to make "pseudo-assertions" or "pretend assertions." Applied to the philosophy of religion, fictionalism would suggest that apparently religious assertions are not really asserted by their speakers who (whether they realise it or not) don't really believe the content of the sentences that they utter.

Fine-tuning – The property apparently had by the universe, such that the constants that govern the universe as very finely balanced for the emergence of biological life.

Formal properties – According to John Hick, a formal property is a property that all things trivially have – such as the property of being identical to themselves.

Immutability – The property of being unchanging and unchangeable.

Impassability – The property of being invulnerable to any external cause.

Incarnation – The word literally means "embodied in flesh." If we have a soul, our soul is incarnate in our body. Christians standardly believe that God was incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth.

Kabbala – A mystical tradition within the Jewish faith.

Liberation Theology – A loosely defined movement primarily associated with Christianity in South America, focussing on social and economic justice; often affiliated with Marxist and Revolutionary politics.

Metaphoricism – The view, sometimes called 'panmetaphoricism,' according to which all substantial and non-semantically reflective claims about God are literally false, and according to which all the substantial and non-semantically reflective claims that we're able to communicate about God can be conveyed only by metaphor.

Metaphysics – A branch of philosophy (of which ontology is a sub-discipline) that studies the nature of ultimate reality, and the fundamental categories of being.

Mutakallimūm – Is the Arabic word for those who practice *kalam*, which is the Arabic for speculative theology. As such it is the name of a prominent school of early Islamic thought. In its earliest stages it was primarily interested in defending the Islamic faith against Christian and other competitors. As it developed into a distinctive style of apologetic religious philosophy, there later emerged Jewish and Christian practitioners of *kalam* concerned to defend the foundations of their own faiths.

Negative Theology – See Apophaticism.

Nirguna Brahman – Brahman in its transcendence. Compare with Saguna Brahman.

Nirvana – The state one reaches when one breaks free from suffering and from the circle of death and rebirth; associated with Buddhism.

Non-doxastic – Literally "non-belief" – Accordingly, a non-doxastic account of faith is an account, according to which, faith doesn't require belief.

Noumena – In Kantian philosophy, it is the underlying reality that exists beyond all appearances.

Omnibenevolence – The property of being perfectly good.

Omnipotence – Although there is some controversy as to how this property should be defined, it refers to something in the neighbourhood of being all powerful.

Omniscience – Although there is some controversy as to how this property should be defined, it refers to something in the neighbourhood of being all knowing.

Omnisubjectivity – The property that God is said, by some, to have, of knowing what all subjective states feel like from the inside, for other people/subjects, even if God is unable to experience those states for Himself.

Ontology – The study of existence, or being.

Open Theism – A species of theism according to which God is a temporal being (i.e., He is a being who experiences the passage of time as do we). On this view, God is neither immutable nor impassable, but He is still omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent.

Panpsychism – The view, in the philosophy of mind, according to which all things are conscious.

PCE – A conscious state that isn't shaped at all by concepts or ideas or content.

Phenomena – In Kantian philosophy it is how reality appears to us, in contrast to the noumena, which is how reality really is beyond all appearances.

Pluralism – Metaphysical pluralism is the doctrine that conflicting beliefs can all be true. Epistemological pluralism is the view that different people can be equally justified in holding their mutually exclusive beliefs (even if those beliefs can't all be true).

Polytheism – The belief that there exists more than one god.

Possible World – A possible world is some way that this world could have been. According to most philosophers, a possible world isn't a real place. It is more like a description of a real place, that is to say – a description of how this world could have been.

Presentism – The view according to which all past and future moments, and all beings that are wholly in the past or the future, don't exist. All that exists is the present and its content.

Proposition – A is a claim that a person can assert. More accurately, a proposition is the unit of meaning expressed by a declarative sentence. For example, the sentence "snow is white" expresses the same proposition as does the sentence "la neige est blanche."

Proselytism – The idea that we should try to persuade people, outside of our faith community, to commit to our religion.

Public reason – A doctrine, according to which religious arguments ought not to provide official considerations in favour of laws and governmental action.

Pure Consciousness Event – see PCE

Reductio ad absurdum – A form of argument that assumes the opposite of what it hopes to prove. It succeeds if it can show how the assumption leads to absurdity.

Reflectively semantic properties – The properties had by an entity purely in virtue of how language relates to it.

Reliabilism – A theory of epistemology according to which a true belief counts as knowledge if it's generated by a reliable cognitive mechanism – that's to say a mechanism that reliably generates true, rather than false, beliefs.

Saguna Brahaman – Brahaman as it appears to us, rather than as Brahaman really is. Compare with Nirguna Brahman.

Saṁvṛti – According to the two-truths doctrine of certain streams of Buddhism, *Saṁvṛti* refers to the non-ultimate or non-fundamental truth; the truth as it appears to us, rather than truth that really is.

Simplicity – A property that comes in two forms. Mereological simplicity is the property of having no parts, such that a simple object cannot be divided into parts. Conceptual simplicity is the property of being logically prior to all distinctions. If a conceptually simple entity were to exist, we wouldn't be able to talk about its properties, since it would transcend the very distinction between an object and a property.

Skeptical Theism – The theory according to which God must have a good reason for allowing pain and suffering in this world, but according to which we are not in a position to be able to know what that good reason is.

Soundness – The property that an argument has if it is valid and if all of its premises are true.

Teleology – The study of purpose. The teleological argument for the existence of God contends that the universe displays evidence of having a purpose, and that only the existence of God can explain this evidence.

Theist – A person who believes in the existence of God (see also, Ultimism).

Theodicy – A defence of God in the face of the problem of evil. According to those who make a distinction between a defence and a theodicy, a theodicy aims to tell us why God actually allows pain and suffering in the world whereas a defence merely attempts to provide a possible reason why God might.

Theology – The study of God.

Ultimism – According to some, a person doesn't count as a theist if they don't believe that God is a person. According to those people, if you believe in an impersonal being of supreme value, and think of that being as responsible for the existence of the universe, then you are an utlimist but not a theist.

Universalism – The doctrine that all people, irrespective of their religious beliefs, and irrespective even of the life they may have led on earth, will receive salvation.

Validity – The property that an argument has if its premises jointly entail its conclusion. A valid argument is one whose conclusion cannot be false if all of its premises are true.

Vishishtadvaita Vedanta – A popular school of Hinduism according to which all things are part of a unifying whole. This school of thought is related to Advaita Vedanta, but where Advaita Vedanta is unwilling to admit that there are any sorts of distinctions that can be drawn in ultimate reality, Vishishtadvaita admits that, even if ultimate reality is a Unified Whole, it still admits of internal differentiation.

Worshipfulness – A property which, if had by a being, would generate an obligation upon others to worship that being.