

Philosophy of religion

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Philosophy of religion is the philosophical study of the meaning and nature of religion. Such study includes careful analyses of religious concepts, beliefs, terms, arguments, and practices of religious adherents. Philosophical reflection on religion is by no means a new endeavor; it has been part and parcel of the philosophical enterprise from the earliest times in both the east and the west. However, historically much of the work done in philosophy of religion has been primarily focused within the various theistic religions. More recent work often involves a broader approach – taking into consideration a plethora of religious traditions and topics from across the religious spectrum.

There are a number of themes which fall under the domain of philosophy of religion as it is commonly practiced in philosophy of religion departments, but the focus here will be limited to five: (1) religious belief and language; (2) religious diversity; (3) philosophical theology; (4) arguments for and against the existence of God; and (5) problems of evil.

Religious belief and language

Philosophy, especially in the analytic tradition, prides itself on precision of terms and clarity of concepts. Religious language, however, is often imprecise and veiled in mystery. This imprecision was challenged in the mid-twentieth century with the rise of logical positivism. Logical positivists were philosophers who used a principle of verifiability to reject as meaningless all non-empirical claims; only the tautologies of mathematics and logic, along with statements containing empirical observations or inferences, were considered meaningful. Many religious statements, however, such as claims about the transcendent, are neither tautological nor empirically verifiable. So certain fundamental religious claims and beliefs (such as “Yahweh is good,” or “Atman is Brahman,” or “Nirvana is beyond Ultimate Reality”) were taken by the positivists to be cognitively meaningless utterances. Positivism became a dominant philosophical approach and for a time, for this and related reasons, philosophy of religion as a discipline became suspect.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, however, the philosophical tide began to turn with respect to religious language. Many philosophers argued that the positivists’ empiricist criteria of meaning were unsatisfactory and problematic. Due to the philosophical insights on the nature and meaning of language provided by the later Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), the rise of a pragmatic version of naturalism offered by W. V. O. Quine (1908–2000), and other factors, logical positivism began to wane. For these reasons, along with the exemplary work of such analytic philosophers of religion as Alvin Plantinga (1932–), Richard

Swinburne (1934–), John Hick (1922–), and others, by the 1970s discussions about religious (and metaphysical and ethical) concepts were revived and soon became accepted arenas of viable philosophical and religious discourse.

With the collapse of positivism, two different streams emerged in philosophy of religion: realism and non-realism. Probably the vast majority of religious adherents are religious realists – defined here as those who hold that their beliefs are about what really exists (or are so believed to exist) independent of the human beings who are having those beliefs. Assertions about Allah, for example, or Brahman, or Yahweh, are true if there are actual referents for them. While they are in the minority, there are also religious non-realists – those who hold that religious claims are not about realities which transcend human language, concepts, and social forms; religious claims are not about something “out there.” Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), for example, believed that there are no referents for religious beliefs about transcendent entities such as God, the dao, and so forth. Instead, religion is an illusion and religious beliefs are merely manifestations of this illusion. Belief in God, for him, is simply the projection of a father image.

Other non-realists have been more favorable toward religion. Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example, took religion very seriously. He was, however, opposed to natural theology – the attempt to demonstrate the existence of God from evidence in the natural world – and to the development of religious doctrines. He was more interested in religious symbol and ritual. In his later works, Wittgenstein understood language to be not a fixed structure directly corresponding to the way things actually are, but rather to be a human activity susceptible to the vicissitudes of human life and practice. Language does not offer a picture of reality, he argued, but rather is a set of activities which he described as “language games.” In teaching language, one needs to be able to respond to words in certain contexts; speech and action work together. In many cases, then, the meaning of a word is its use in the language. For Wittgenstein, this is true in religious discourse as it is elsewhere. Thus in speaking of God or Brahman or nirvana or the dao, the meanings of such words have more to do with their use than with their denotation. The language games of the religions reflect the practices and forms of life of the various religious adherents, and so religious claims should not be taken as providing literal pictures of reality which somehow lie beyond those activities.

Religious non-realists often note the alleged failure of realism to provide evidences for the objective truth of any particular religion, or of religion in general. Whether referring to arguments for the existence of God, or evidences for resurrection or reincarnation, for example, non-realists argue that such projects in natural theology are abject failures. Non-realists are convinced that since there are no conclusive reasons to believe that a particular religion is true, a better way of approaching religious claims and beliefs is to understand them non-realistically.

Another point made by non-realists is that religious claims, beliefs, and practices exist within a given social context and involve human language and concepts. Since religious claims and activities are always within a particular human context, and since the mind structures all perception within that context, the meanings of these claims are determined and limited by that context. A person is simply unable, it is argued, to posit objective, transcendent realities beyond human language and cognition.

Realists have responded to these claims in different ways. Regarding the claim that there is no rational justification for religious beliefs, some realists (such as the fideists noted below) agree. Nevertheless, they claim that religion does not require evidence and justification; religion is about faith and trust, not evidence. Other realists, as we will see, disagree and

claim that while faith is crucial to religion (at least to some religions), there are in fact good arguments and evidences for religious truth claims.

With respect to the point that religious claims, beliefs, and so on exist only within a given social context, some realists have responded by noting that while much of what occurs in religious discourse (and practice) is of human origin, one need not affirm a reductionist stance in which all religious meanings and symbols are reducible to human language. And some even argue that there are solid reasons and arguments for believing that religious claims are true, and that there are objective referents for their claims. Several of these arguments will be explored below.

Religious diversity

Philosophy of religion in the western context has emphasized themes related to Ultimate Reality understood *theistically* – themes such as the nature and existence of God, challenges to the existence of God, language about God, and so on. In recent times there has been a growing interest in religions and religious themes beyond the scope of the theistic traditions. This should not be surprising given the influx of religions in the west and the growing awareness of the wide variety of non-theistic religious traditions. While awareness of religious diversity is not a new phenomenon, philosophers of religion from both the east and the west are becoming increasingly more aware of and interactive with religious others. It is now fairly common to see contributions in western philosophy of religion literature on Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and African religions, for example.

This rising interest in eastern religion and in comparative religion by philosophers in the west has brought about a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the different non-theistic religious traditions. But it has also brought to the fore an awareness of the many ways the different traditions conflict. Consider some examples: for the Advaita Vedantan, the concept of Ultimate Reality is pantheistic monism in which only Brahman exists, whereas Muslims affirm theistic dualism in which Allah – the one and only God – exists as distinct from human beings and the other created entities; for the Christian, salvation is the ultimate goal whereby human beings are united with God forever in the afterlife, while the Buddhists' ultimate goal is nirvana – an extinguishing of the individual self and complete extinction from all suffering. Numerous other examples could be cited as well.

How is one to respond to this diversity of fundamental beliefs? Different answers have been offered. One response to diversity is to deny or minimize the doctrinal conflicts, or to maintain that doctrine itself is not as important for religion as religious experience and that the great religious traditions are equally authentic responses to Ultimate Reality. This is one form of religion pluralism. John Hick, a leading defender of pluralism, denies the claim (widely held by atheists and others) that religion is solely a human projection. Utilizing Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) distinctions of noumena (things as they are in themselves) and phenomena (things as they are experienced), Hick argues that a person's experiences – religious and non-religious – depend on the interpretive frameworks and concepts through which one structures and understands them. Thus, while some people experience and understand Ultimate Reality in personal, theistic categories (as Allah or Yahweh, for example), others do so in impersonal, pantheistic ways (as nirguna Brahman, say). Yet others experience and understand Ultimate Reality as non-personal and non-pantheistic (as with the Tao). One common illustration of the pluralist view of experiencing God uses the Hindu parable of the blind men and the elephant to capture this point. In this parable God is like an

elephant surrounded by several blind men. One man touches the elephant's tail and believes it is a rope. Another touches his trunk and believes it is a snake. Another touches his leg and believes it is a tree. Yet another touches his side and believes it is a wall. Each of them are experiencing the same elephant but in very different ways from the others. In our experiences and understandings of Ultimate Reality, we are very much like the blind men, for our beliefs and viewpoints are constricted by our enculturated concepts.

Hick argues for the pluralistic hypothesis – that Ultimate Reality or the “Real” is ineffable and beyond the understanding of our conceptual systems. Nevertheless, the Real's presence can be experienced (in various forms) through various spiritual practices and linguistic systems. He uses analogies to describe his hypothesis, including an ambiguous picture of a duck-rabbit which Ludwig Wittgenstein used in his influential work, *Philosophical Investigations*. A culture that has ducks but no familiarity with rabbits would see the ambiguous diagram as a duck. People in this culture would not even be aware of the ambiguity. So too with the culture that has rabbits but no familiarity with ducks. People in this culture would see the diagram as a rabbit. Hick's point is that the ineffable Real is experienced in the different traditions *as* Yahweh, or *as* Allah, or *as* Vishnu, or *as* the Tao, etc., depending on one's religious concepts through which his or her individual experiences occur.

An objection to the pluralistic hypothesis is that it stands over the traditions and makes an exclusive (non-pluralistic) claim about the Real and salvation/liberation; namely, that the Real is experienced equally legitimately among the different traditions and that they each offer valid expressions of the soteriological goal. None of them is correct in contrast to the others; rather, they are all in a sense true. This claim, some have argued, is self-contradictory, for in asserting that no religious position in reference to the Real and the soteriological goal is superior to or truer than another, one has done just that – asserted that this pluralistic view is truer than and superior to all others.

Another way of responding to the conflicting claims of the different traditions is to remain committed to the truth of one set of religious teachings while at the same time agreeing with some of the central concerns raised by pluralism. One way of accomplishing this is through what Joseph Runzo calls “religious relativism,” whereby the correctness of a religion is relative to the worldview of its community of adherents. On this view the different religious traditions are comprised of various experiences and mutually incompatible sets of truth claims, and the traditions are themselves rooted in distinct worldviews that are incompatible with, if not contradictory to, the other worldviews. Runzo maintains that these differing experiences and traditions emerge from the plurality of *phenomenal* divine realities experienced by the adherents of the traditions. On this relativistic view, a person's worldview (that is, her total cognitive web of interrelated concepts and beliefs) determines how she comprehends and experiences Ultimate Reality. Furthermore, there are incompatible yet adequate truth claims which correspond to the different worldviews, and the veracity of a religion is determined by its adequacy to appropriately correspond to the worldview of which it is subsumed. Thus, an important difference between the religious relativist and the pluralist is that for the former, and not for the latter, truth itself is understood to be relative.

While relativism may offer a more accurate account than pluralism of the actual cognitive beliefs of religious adherents, it is sometimes argued that it nevertheless falls short of their *actual* beliefs. Muslims, for example, have not historically held that Allah is the true God *only within the Islamic religion*. To the contrary, for Muslim adherents the claims about Allah (as well as all other claims) described in the Koran are taken to be unequivocally and objectively true. For the Islamic believer, then, Allah is the one and only true God regardless of what

one's religion or worldview happens to be – regardless of whether a person believes it or not. So too among the other major faith traditions; their beliefs are typically understood to be true in an objective and absolute sense. In effect, adherents of the major religious traditions have historically been exclusivists rather than relativists (or pluralists), and this leads to yet another response to religious conflict.

A third response to the apparent conflicting truth claims of the religions is exclusivism. As with pluralism and relativism, there are different meanings of the term “exclusivism” when used in religious discourse. The major element in this context is that the central tenets of one religion are true and any claims which are incompatible with those tenets, including those of other religions, are false. For example, from the exclusivist perspective, if the Jewish claim that Yahweh is the one true God who literally spoke to the biblical prophets in space and time is true, then the Advaita Vedantan claim that Brahman (God) is *nirguna* – without attributes – must be false, for these two understandings of Ultimate Reality are contradictory. This does not mean that exclusivists are not self-critical of their own beliefs, nor does it rule out the practice of dialoguing with or learning from religious others. But it does mean that religious differences are real and that there are intractable disagreements among religious adherents. Some form of religious exclusivism is historically the most widely held position among the adherents of the major world religions, although pluralism and relativism are currently on the rise.

Responses to exclusivism include moral objections (such as that the exclusivist is arrogant, dishonest, oppressive, or the like) and intellectual or epistemic objections (including claims that the exclusivist holds unjustified or irrational beliefs).

Philosophical theology

Though the terms “philosophy of religion” and “philosophical theology” have sometimes been used interchangeably in past times, more recently they have developed distinct connotations. As already noted, philosophy of religion is philosophical reflection on religious ideas, concepts, and practices. Philosophical theology has come to mean the philosophical examination of the nature of Ultimate Reality and the various doctrines within the religions, most especially the theistic religions.

There are both theistic and non-theistic understandings of God, or Ultimate Reality. Monotheism, or what is sometimes referred to as “Ethical Monotheism,” is the doctrine or belief that God exists as a perfect being and that God's nature can be at least partly described as having attributes that set God apart from human beings. Traditionally, these attributes have included omniscience (being all-knowing), omnipotence (being all-powerful), omnibenevolence (being morally perfect), and timelessness (being eternal), among others. This is the view of God traditionally held by adherents of the three major monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as a longstanding theistic tradition within Hinduism. Much of the work in philosophical theology, then, focuses on the broadly theistic topics of the divine attributes, miracles, revelation, death and immortality, and others. It also commonly includes specific Christian theological issues such as the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation and Atonement, sin and salvation, and heaven and hell.

The coherence of theism is yet another major topic of discussion in philosophical theology. The logical consistency of each of the divine attributes of classical theism has been challenged, and in the last few decades the objections to them have come from both adherents and non-adherents of theism. Take the divine attribute of omniscience, for

example. If God has exhaustive knowledge of all future events, including human actions, how could one freely choose to do those actions? A recent position known as “open theism” defends a view of God’s knowledge which, unlike the historical concept of omniscience defended by Boethius, Anselm, Aquinas, and other traditional believers, posits a future that is undetermined, open, and uncertain. Adherents of open theism argue that their view allows for human freedom without denying God’s omniscience and thus maintains an element of orthodoxy and yet avoids the contradictions which arise from the traditional view of divine knowledge.

The challenges to the classical view of God are taken even further by Christian and Jewish scholars who hold to a position known as “process theism.” For process theologians and philosophers, many of the divine attributes as traditionally understood are denied. As these thinkers argue, many of the historic attributes of God are derived from ancient Greek philosophy and are not found in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. This process view, they maintain, in which God has persuasive power and not coercive power, for example, better fits the descriptions of God as described in the scriptures. Furthermore, they argue, God is not a substance in the classical sense of the term but rather is involved within the spatiotemporal world as an active participant – a *process* that is at work in and beyond the world.

While there have been many challenges to the classical attributes of God, there are also contemporary philosophers and theologians who have defended each of the attributes as traditionally understood. And there is much lively discussion currently underway by those defending both the classical and neo-classical views of God. But not all philosophers and theologians have believed that the truths of religious beliefs can be or even should be rationally justified, as noted above. Fideists, such as Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), for example, maintain that religious faith does not need the support of rational arguments. For fideists, attempting to prove one’s religious faith may even be an indication of a lack of faith. Natural theologians, on the other hand, maintain that faith can be supported by rational arguments and that God’s very existence can be demonstrated through the use of reason unaided by special revelation.

Arguments for and against the existence of God

Adherents of the theistic religions, as with adherents of non-theistic religions, do not typically affirm their religious convictions *because of* well-articulated, rational reasons or arguments in support of those convictions. Nevertheless, such reasons and arguments have historically been used by many believers to defend and advance their views. For over two millennia arguments have been offered in support of the belief that God exists. The God to which the conclusion of the various classical arguments points is the God of the theistic religions, primarily Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Three of the arguments which have been prominent historically and still receive special attention in contemporary philosophy of religion discussions are the ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments.

Ontological arguments, first developed by St Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), take a variety of forms. The common theme among them is that they begin *a priori* – proceeding from the mere concept of God – and conclude that God must exist; in other words, if successful, ontological arguments demonstrate that God’s non-existence is impossible. They are unique among the traditional arguments for God’s existence in that they are *a priori* arguments, for they are based on premises that can allegedly be known independently of experience of the world.

Anselm begins his argument in a prayer to God, claiming that he knows that God is “a being than which nothing greater can be conceived”. He also knows that it is one thing to exist in the mind (in the understanding) and another to exist outside the understanding (outside one’s thoughts; in reality). He then asks which is greater, to exist in the mind or in reality. He concludes the argument this way:

Therefore, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, exists in the understanding alone, the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible. Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality.

(*Proslogion*, Chapter II, 54)

Thus, by the mere analysis of the concept of God, since it would be a contradiction to affirm that the greatest possible being does not exist in reality but only in the mind (because existing in reality is greater than existing in the mind), one is logically drawn to the conclusion that God must exist.

There have been many objections to this a priori argument for God. One of the most famous is based on the analogy of the greatest possible island and was developed by Anselm’s fellow monk, Gaunilo. Utilizing a *reductio ad absurdum*, he argued that if we affirm Anselm’s ontological argument, we must also affirm that the greatest possible island exists. Since that conclusion is absurd, so too is Anselm’s conclusion. Another important objection was offered by Immanuel Kant that existence is not a real predicate. Since existence does not add to the concept of a thing, and in Anselm’s argument existence is treated as a real predicate, the argument is flawed.

More recent modal versions of the argument have been construed that avoid the objections to Anselm’s original formulation, including one proposed by Alvin Plantinga. But their soundness has also been challenged on multiple fronts, including debates about the role modal logic should play in metaphysical discussions such as this one.

Cosmological arguments begin by examining some empirical or metaphysical fact of the universe, from which it then follows that something outside the universe must have caused it to exist. There are different types of cosmological argument, and its defenders include some of the most prominent thinkers spanning the history of philosophy: Plato, Aristotle, ibn Sina, al-Ghazali, Maimonides, Aquinas, Descartes, and Leibniz, to name a few. Three versions of the argument that have received much attention are the Thomistic contingency argument, the Leibnizian sufficient reason argument, and the kalam argument.

Regarding the Thomistic contingency argument (named after the medieval Christian theologian/philosopher Thomas Aquinas), the claim is made that contingent things exist in the world – “contingent things” ostensibly referring to those things which begin to exist and cease to exist. It is next argued that not all things can be contingent, for if they were there would be nothing to *ground* their existence. Only a necessary thing (or being) can account for the existence of contingent things – “necessary thing” ostensibly referring to a thing which never began to exist and which cannot cease to exist. This necessary thing (or being) is referred to as God.

A second kind of cosmological argument is the Leibnizian sufficient reason argument, so named after the German thinker Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716). In this version, an answer is sought to the question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” For

Leibniz, there must be an explanation, or “sufficient reason,” for anything that exists, and the explanation for everything that exists must lie either in the necessity of its own nature or in a cause external to itself. The argument concludes that the explanation of the universe must lie in a transcendent God since the universe does not have within its own nature the necessity of its existence.

One objection raised against both the Thomistic and the Leibnizian arguments is that they are demanding unnecessary explanations. If every individual thing in the universe can be explained (even an infinite set of things), why does the whole itself need a further explanation? Furthermore, an explanation must at some point come to an end – a brute fact. So why not end with the universe? Why posit some further transcendent entity?

A third type of cosmological argument is the *kalam* argument (the term “*kalam*” coming from medieval Islamic theology which came to mean “speculative theology”). The claim of this argument is that there must be a transcendent first cause of the universe which brought it into existence given that the following two premises are true: (1) whatever begins to exist needs a cause, and (2) the universe began to exist. This version of the cosmological argument has arguably been bolstered in recent times by empirical evidences from astrophysics and cosmology. For example, on one interpretation of the standard Big Bang cosmological model, the time-space universe came into being *ex nihilo* approximately 13.7 billion years ago. Such a beginning is best explained, argue *kalam* defenders, by a transcendent cause – namely God.

The premise that the universe began to exist is also argued philosophically in two ways. First, it is argued that an actual infinite set of events cannot exist, for actual infinities lead to metaphysical absurdities. Since an infinite temporal regress of events is an actual infinite set of events, such a regress is metaphysically impossible. Thus, the past cannot be infinite; the universe must have had a temporal beginning. A second approach begins by arguing that an infinite series of events cannot be formed by successive addition (one member being added to another). The reason for this is that when adding finite numbers, one after the other, the new number is also finite. The addition of yet another finite number, *ad infinitum*, will never lead to an actual infinite. Since the past is a series of temporal events formed by successive addition, the past could not be actually infinite in duration. The universe must have had a beginning.

A number of objections have been raised against the *kalam* argument. For example, with respect to the alleged scientific evidence for a beginning of the universe, there are interpretations of the Big Bang model other than those which entail an *ex nihilo* beginning. There are also other cosmological models of the universe besides the Big Bang model, including eternal universe theories – views more in keeping with Hindu cosmologies than with traditional theistic concepts of the cosmos. In addition, responses have been offered to the philosophical challenges of an eternal universe as well, including the utilization of set theory and mathematical systems which employ actual infinite sets.

Teleological, or design, arguments extend back at least two millennia. In the east, as far back as 100 CE, the Nyāya school in India argued for the existence of a deity based on the order found in nature. In the west, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics offered arguments for a directing intelligence of the world given the order found within it. There is an array of teleological arguments, and a common theme among them all is the claim that certain characteristics of the natural world reflect design, purpose, and intelligence. These features of the natural world are then used as evidence for an intelligent, purposive designer as opposed to naturalistic explanations. One version of the design argument is based on the apparent fine-tuning of the cosmos.

Fine-tuning arguments include the claims that the laws of nature, the constants of physics, and the initial conditions of the universe are finely tuned for conscious life on planet Earth. For example, several dozen “cosmic constants,” such as the following, are offered as evidence for fine-tuning: (1) If the strong nuclear force (the force that binds protons and neutrons in the atom) had been either stronger or weaker by just 5 percent, life would be impossible; (2) If neutrons were not roughly 1.001 times the mass of protons, all protons would have decayed into neutrons, or *visa versa*, and life would be impossible; (3) If gravity had been stronger or weaker by one part in 10^{40} , life-sustaining stars (such as the sun) could not exist; thus life would most likely be impossible. While each of the individual calculations of such constants may be in error, it is argued that the number of them, coupled with their independence from one other, provides strong evidence of their being intentionally set with life in mind.

There have also been several important objections raised against fine-tuning arguments. According to an anthropic principle objection, if the laws of nature and physical constants were not finely tuned, there would be no observers to note this fact. Given that such observers exist, it should not be surprising that the laws and constants are just so. One way of accounting for such observers is the many-worlds hypothesis. On this view, there are very many universes, perhaps an infinite number of them, each with their own fundamental physical parameters. Most of these universes would include life-prohibiting parameters, but at least a minimal number of them would probably include life-permitting ones. As a result, it should not be surprising that one of them at least – ours, for example – is such. Much of the current fine-tuning discussion turns on the plausibility of the many-worlds hypothesis and the anthropic principle.

Other versions of the teleological argument have also been proposed which focus not on fundamental parameters of the cosmos but on different aspects of living organisms, including the emergence of living organisms, alleged irreducibly complex systems within living organisms, information intrinsic within the DNA of living organisms, and the rise of consciousness, in an attempt to demonstrate intelligent, purposive qualities of the world. At this time these biological and noological design arguments have not generally received as much attention as the fine-tuning argument by those engaged in natural theology or by the broader philosophical community. While a number of philosophers of religion hold that such scientific and philosophical evidences as offered by the cosmological and teleological arguments provide support for belief in a transcendent deity, there are also many who maintain that the evidence favors naturalism. Naturalism, as used here, is the view that natural entities have only natural causes, and that the world can be fully described and explained by the physical sciences. This view removes the need for a transcendent being to explain the world, and it denies that there are solid reasons or evidences to believe in such a being. And just as there are arguments for God's existence, there are also arguments against the existence of God and for naturalism. The most prominent of these arguments are of three types: responses to the positive arguments for God, arguments that theism is incoherent, and problems of evil.

One common objection to the traditional arguments for God's existence as a whole (cosmological, teleological, ontological, moral, arguments from religious experience, etc.) is that even if they are successful, they do not prove the existence of the God of any particular religion. Even if successful, the cosmological argument only provides evidence for a transcendent first cause of the universe, nothing more; at best, the teleological argument provides evidence for a purposive, rational designer, nothing more; and so on. But this is a far cry from the God (or gods) depicted in the Koran, or the Bible, or the Vedas.

Nevertheless, natural theologians maintain that the central aim of these arguments is not to offer a full-blown proof of any particular deity, but rather to provide some evidence or warrant for belief in a creator, or a designer, or a moral lawgiver, or the like. Some natural theologians argue that it is best to combine the various arguments in order to provide a cumulative case for theism. Cosmological arguments provide insight into God's creative providence; teleological arguments provide insight into God's purposive nature and grand intelligence; moral arguments provide insight into God's moral nature and character, etc. Taken together, they argue, the classical arguments offer a picture of a deity not unlike the God of the theistic religious traditions. Furthermore, they maintain, even if this approach does not prove the existence of any particular deity, it does nonetheless lend support to theism over naturalism.

Philosophical challenges to theism have also included the claim that the very concept of God makes no sense – that the attributes ascribed to God are logically incoherent (either individually or collectively). Much of this criticism has focused on God as understood in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but it is also relevant to the theistic elements found within Mahayana Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and certain forms of African and Native American religions. The question of whether theism is coherent is an important one not only because of what may be learned about the divine attributes but also because if there is reason to believe that theism is incoherent, then theistic belief is, in an important sense, undermined.

One important set of problems which arises from discussions of the coherence of theism has to do with the existence of evil and suffering.

Problems of evil and suffering

It is widely recognized by philosophers and theologians (both eastern and western) that there are problems for one who affirms the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God on the one hand and the existence of evil on the other. Since most streams of Hinduism and Buddhism do not have such a God, they do not have the problems of evil that the theistic traditions do. They do have the related problem of suffering, and offer their own responses to it as discussed below, but those traditions which affirm the existence of a good and all-powerful God are confronted with some troubling conundrums. Philosopher David Hume (1711–1776 CE), quoting the ancient Greek thinker Epicurus (341–270 BCE), expressed one of the problems this way:

Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?

(Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, Part X, 63)

This is one version of the problem which is often construed as a logical problem of evil. For the logical problem, it is asserted that the two claims, (1) an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God exists and (2) evil exists, are *logically incompatible*. Since evil ostensibly exists, the argument goes, God (as traditionally understood) must not.

Despite its historical sway, it is now widely acknowledged by philosophers of religion that the logical problem has been successfully rebutted. One reason for this is as follows. Claims (1) and (2) are not explicitly contradictory. If they are implicitly contradictory, there must be hidden premises or unstated assumptions which make them so. But what might those be? The

two assumed premises/assumptions appear to be these: (a) an omnipotent God could create any world, and (b) an omnibenevolent God would prefer a world without evil over a world with evil. Given these two claims, (1) and (2) would be logically incompatible. However, it turns out that (a) and (b) need not be true, even on a classical theistic account. It could be that a world which has creatures with free will is more valuable than a world which has no free creatures. And it could be that such free creatures cannot be *caused* or *determined* to do only what is morally right and good – even by God. If this is so, in order for God to create beings who are capable of moral good, God had to create beings who are capable of moral evil as well. If this scenario is a logical possibility (and it seems to be so), then assumption (a) is not necessarily true: God cannot create just any world. Furthermore, assumption (b) is not necessarily true either. For all we know, God could use evil to achieve some good end. As long as (a) and (b) are possibly false, the conclusion of the argument is no longer necessarily true, and so it loses its deductive force. This response to the logical argument from evil is called a *defense*, which is distinguished from a *theodicy*. A defense is an attempt to demonstrate that anti-theistic arguments from evil, such as the one just mentioned, are unsuccessful on their own terms. A theodicy, on the other hand, is an attempt to justify God given the evil in the world. Both defenses and theodicies have been used by theists in responding to the various problems of evil.

However, even granting that the logical problem of evil has been rebutted, this does not solve every problem related to evil for the theist. One of the most discussed problems in recent times is the evidential problem of evil in which it is argued that the vast amount and horrific nature of the many evils which exist make it unlikely or improbable that an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God exists.

When assessing arguments of this sort, some important questions for consideration are these: what is the claim probable or improbable with respect to? And what is the relevant background information with respect to the claim? For example, the plausibility of the claim “God’s existence is improbable with respect to the evil in the world” considered alone may well be very different from the plausibility of the claim “God’s existence is improbable with respect to the evil in the world” when considered in conjunction with, say, one or more of the arguments for God’s existence noted earlier. Furthermore, the theist can offer other hypotheses which may raise the probability of evil given God’s existence. For example, the major theistic traditions affirm the belief that God’s purposes are not restricted to this earthly life but extend on into an afterlife as well. In this case, there is further opportunity for God to bring moral good out of the many kinds and varieties of evil in this life. Thus the full scope of the considerations and evidences for and against theism may well raise the probability of God’s existence above that of taking into account only a part.

Besides theistic considerations of evil, non-theistic religions have also offered accounts of its nature and existence, specifically with respect to suffering, and for Hindus and Buddhists these considerations are rooted in karma and reincarnation. In its popular formulations, reincarnation is the view that the conscious self transmigrates from one physical body to the next after death. Each human being has lived former lives, perhaps as another human being or maybe even as another kind of organism. Reincarnation is connected to the doctrine of *karma*. Karma (Sanskrit for “deed” or “action”), as typically understood within Hinduism and Buddhism, is a concept of cause and effect in which all actions are shaping past, present, and future events. It is, in effect, the idea that one reaps the good and bad consequences of her or his actions, either in this life or in another.

Those who affirm reincarnation and karma often point to a difficulty they see with the theistic religions: it seems exceedingly unfair that one child is born healthy into a wealthy,

loving family, for example, whereas another child is born sickly into a poor, cruel environment. If there is a Creator God who brought these two persons into the world, such a God seems to be unloving and unjust. However, if the two children are reaping the consequences of actions they performed in previous lives, this seems to provide a justification for the inequalities. The effect of one's karma determines the circumstances of our past, present, and future lives; we reap what we sow.

A number of objections have also been raised against the doctrine of karma. For one, does it really offer a plausible explanation for the inequalities found in this life? According to the karmic law of cause and effect, a person's present life circumstances are explained by her actions in a previous life. And her life circumstances in that life are explained by her life circumstances in a life previous to that one. And so on indefinitely. So the solution we hoped for regarding inequalities seems to never come to an end; it ends up being relegated to the dustbins of the infinite past. Furthermore, does it really seem fair that when a person who has lived a long life dies and is reincarnated, she must start all over again as a baby with her maturity, life experiences, wisdom, and memories completely gone? As with the theistic replies to evil, they may be helpful at some level, but they nevertheless leave one with less than complete solutions to the variety of problems of evil.

The field of philosophy of religion is flourishing and expanding in new and exciting directions. Beyond those areas noted, there are many other significant currents emerging and developing as well, including feminist and continental approaches to philosophy of religion, emphases on religion and the environment, race and ethnicity, science and faith, religious experience, and religious rites.

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