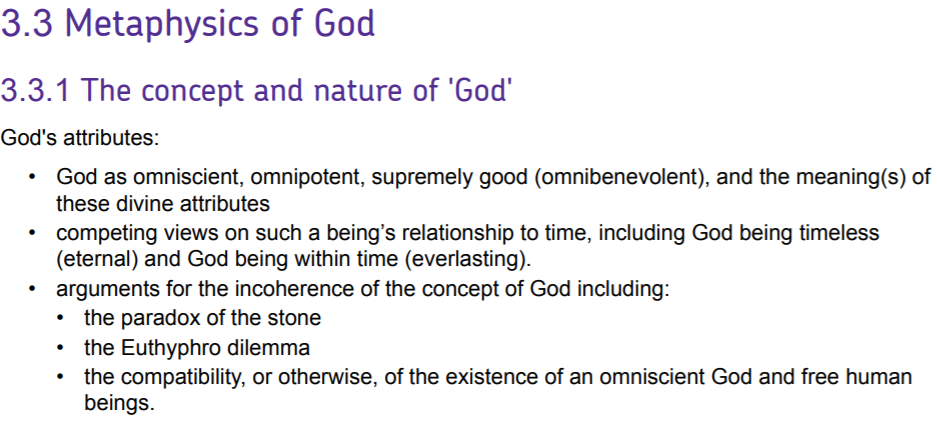
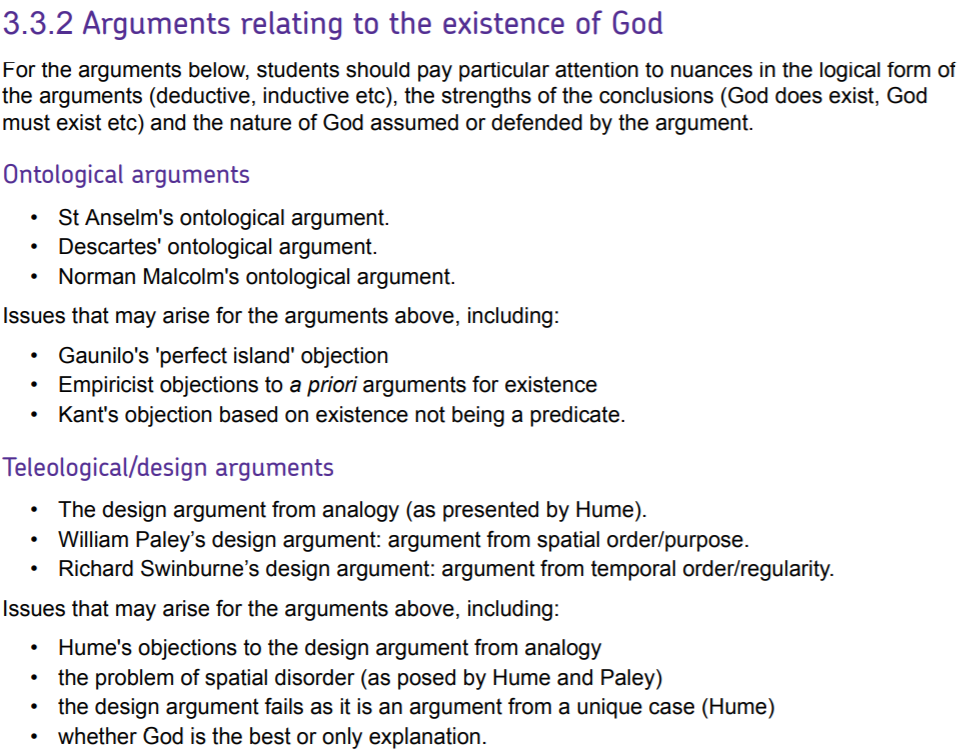
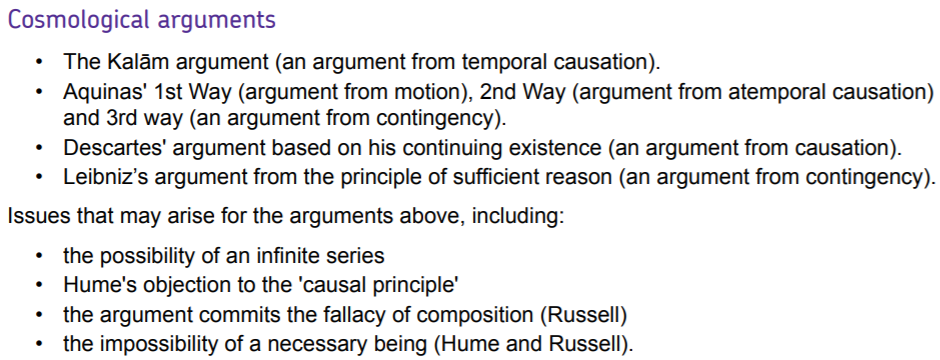
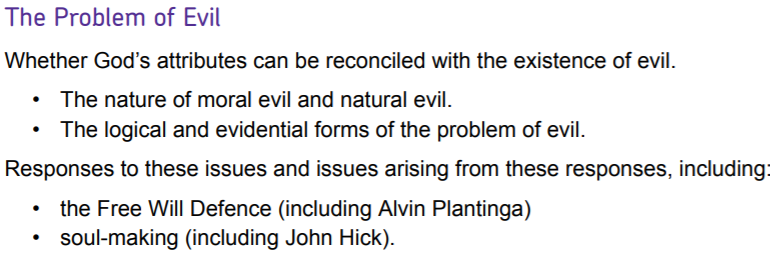
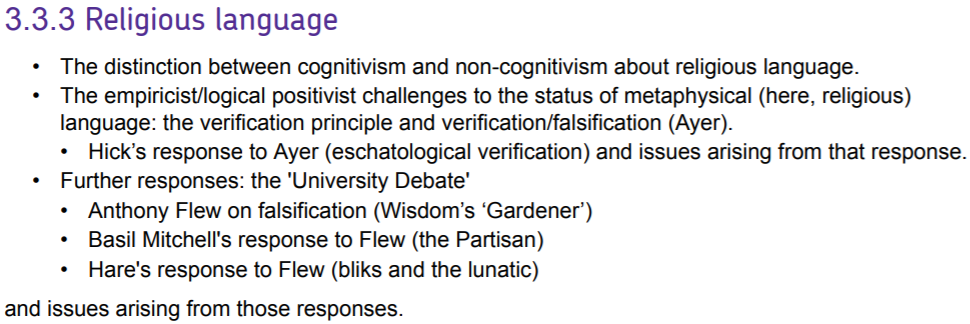


Metaphysics of God









1. The Concept and Nature of ‘God’

In this section, we will ask how the concept of God has been understood. There are many concepts of God around the world, and different religions have different views on the nature of God. However, almost all agree that God is ‘maximally great’ – that nothing could be greater than God. This is the conception of God we will start with. But we develop it more narrowly, and the properties of God we will discuss are those which Judaism, Christianity and Islam – the three great monotheistic traditions – have thought central. Even more narrowly, we will look only at how the debate over God’s attributes has been understood and developed in the Western Christian tradition.

# Perfection and reality

We start with the thought that nothing could be greater than God. Another way this thought has been expressed is that God is perfect. In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine says that to think of God is to ‘attempt to conceive something than which nothing more excellent or sublime exists’. But just thinking of what does exist, and thinking of God as the most excellent of these things, may be too limited. Some philosophers claim that God is the most perfect being that *could* exist. If God exists, then not only does nothing that is greater than God exist, but it is impossible for anything greater than God to exist.

The idea of perfection has often been linked to the idea of reality in two ways. First, what is perfect has been thought to be more real than what is not. Imperfections involve something failing to exist in a better way. Second, perfection has also been thought to involve complete self-sufficiency – i.e. not to be dependent on anything, and not to lack anything. Again, this connects with being the ultimate reality: that which is not the ultimate reality will depend on that which is, and so not be perfect. So God, as the most perfect being, is traditionally thought of as the ultimate reality – the ground or basis for everything that exists.

# Omniscience

Perfect knowledge is usually taken to mean ‘omniscience’. The most obvious definition of omniscience is ‘knowing everything’ (Latin *omni-*, ‘all’; *scient*, ‘knowing’). But we need to remember that God is the most perfect *possible* being, and perhaps it is *impossible* to know everything. For example, if human beings have free will, then perhaps it is not possible to know what they will do in the future. So let us say for now that omniscience means ‘knowing everything that it is possible to know’.

Omniscience is not just a matter of *what* God knows, but also of *how* God knows. In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas argues that God knows everything that he knows ‘directly’, rather than through inference or through understanding a system of representation (such as language or thinking in terms of propositions). To perfectly know something, Aquinas thought, the form of knowledge must match the nature of the object, e.g. we know visible things best through sight. Furthermore, to know each thing as the particular thing it is, rather than just to have general knowledge, is better. Knowing each tree as the tree it is is more perfect than knowing general facts about trees. So direct knowledge of particulars is superior to knowledge that is mediated by concepts. This is a bit like our knowing objects through sense experience, or better, knowing what you are doing when you are doing it, since everything that exists, thinks Aquinas, exists as a result of God’s activity.

Other philosophers disagree about whether God’s knowledge must always take the form Aquinas claimed. They argue that if God doesn’t know all true propositions, then there is something that God doesn’t know; so God has conceptual and propositional knowledge as well as direct knowledge.

# Omnipotence

Power is the ability to do things. As perfect, God will have perfect power, or the most power possible. The most obvious definition of omnipotence is ‘the power to do anything’ (Latin *omni-*, ‘all’; *potent*, ‘powerful’). But once again, we should consider that God is the most perfect possible being, and therefore God’s power may be the power to do anything possible and no more. Should we think that the power to do anything includes, for instance, the logically impossible; or is this not a possible power? Could God make 2 + 2 = 5? Could God create a married bachelor? Some pious philosophers have wanted to say yes – logic is no limit on God’s power. However, there is simply no way we can meaningfully say this.

Aquinas argues that the correct understanding of God’s omnipotence is that God can do anything possible. What is impossible is a contradiction in terms – the words that you use to describe the impossible literally contradict each other. So any description of a logically impossible state of affairs or power is not a meaningful description, because it contains a contradiction. What is logically impossible is not anything at all.

Thus, the *limits* of the logically possible are not *limitations* on God’s power. Even if God can’t do the logically impossible, there is still nothing that God can’t do.

# Supreme goodness (omnibenevolence)

There are two ways of understanding perfect, or supreme, goodness. If goodness just is perfection, then saying God is perfectly good is just to say that God is perfectly perfect – or the most perfect possible being. There is more than one way to be perfect (including, as we’ve seen, perfect power and perfect knowledge), and God is perfect in all ways. This is a metaphysical sense of ‘goodness’.

The other, more usual, sense of ‘goodness’ is the moral sense. In this sense, ‘God is perfectly good’ means that God’s will is always in accordance with moral values.

Plato and Augustine connect the two understandings of perfect goodness. What is perfect includes what is morally good; evil is a type of ‘lack’, a ‘falling short’ or absence of goodness. Evil doesn’t have a positive aspect – it isn’t a genuine ‘force’ or an aspect of reality that stands against goodness. What is evil simply fails to be what is good. If evil is a ‘lack’ or ‘failure’, what is morally good is more real than what is not. And so what is morally perfect and what is metaphysically perfect are the same thing.

# God and time

Being perfect, God is self-sufficient, dependent on nothing else for existence. If something brought God into existence, God would be dependent on that thing to exist. If there were something that could end God’s existence, then God is equally dependent on that thing (not exercising its power) to continue to exist. If God depends on nothing else, then nothing can bring God into existence or end God’s existence. And so (if God exists) God’s existence has no beginning or end.

There are two ways in which this can be expressed. If God exists in time, then having no beginning or end, God exists throughout all time. God is a temporal being that is *everlasting*. If God exists outside time, then God is an atemporal being, timeless. In this case, God’s existence is *eternal*. God has no beginning or end because the ideas of beginning and end only make sense in time – something can only start or stop existing in time. God is not in time, so God cannot start or stop existing.

This idea of God’s ‘eternal’ existence says very little – just that God is atemporal – and even this is negative (God does *not* exist in time). Furthermore, while we can say this, it is very hard to understand what we could mean. What is it for a being, such as God, to exist ‘outside time’? We explore this question at length in the section ‘God and eternity’.

The Paradox of the Stone

On a traditional Christian conception of God, God is the most perfect possible being. This is thought to include perfect power – omnipotence. But is the concept of omnipotence coherent? If not, then the concept of an omnipotent being – God – is also incoherent. In this handout, we discuss an apparent paradox that the concept of omnipotence gives rise.

# Omnipotence

Power is the ability to do things. As perfect, God will have perfect power, or the most power possible. The most obvious definition of omnipotence is ‘the power to do anything’ (Latin *omni-*, ‘all’; *potent*, ‘powerful’). But if God is the most perfect *possible* being, and therefore God’s power may be the power to do anything possible and no more. Should we think that the power to do anything includes, for instance, the logically impossible; or is this not a possible power? Could God make 2 + 2 = 5? Could God create a married bachelor? Some pious philosophers have wanted to say yes – logic is no limit on God’s power. However, there is simply no way we can meaningfully say this.

Aquinas argues that the correct understanding of God’s omnipotence is that God can do anything possible. What is impossible is a contradiction in terms – the words that you use to describe the impossible literally contradict each other. So any description of a logically impossible state of affairs or power is not a meaningful description, because it contains a contradiction. What is logically impossible is not anything at all.

Thus, the *limits* of the logically possible are not *limitations* on God’s power. Even if God can’t do the logically impossible, there is still nothing that God can’t do.

# The paradox of the stone

Can God create a stone that he can’t lift? If the answer is ‘no’, then God cannot create the stone. If the answer is ‘yes’, then God cannot lift the stone. So either way, it seems, there is something God cannot do. If there is something God can’t do, then God isn’t omnipotent. Indeed, no being can be omnipotent. The concept of an omnipotent being is incoherent, because no being could have the powers to create a stone it can’t lift and to lift that stone.

One reply to this paradox argues that it fails because it presupposes the possibility of something logically impossible. The claim that someone, *x*, can make something that is too heavy for *x* to lift is not normally self-contradictory. However, it becomes self-contradictory – logically impossible – when *x* is an omnipotent being. ‘A stone an omnipotent being can’t lift’ is not a possible thing; as a self-contradiction, it describes nothing. So ‘the power to create a stone an omnipotent being can’t lift’ is not a possible power. If God lacks it, God still doesn’t lack any possible power.

But this reply begs the question. It *assumes* that we can coherently talk of an omnipotent being. It assumes that in the phrase ‘a stone that an omnipotent being can’t lift’, there is no problem with the term ‘omnipotent being’. But if the concept of an omnipotent being is self-contradictory, then this isn’t true. Until we know that the concept of an omnipotent being is a coherent concept, we can’t legitimately use the concept, for example in arguing that ‘a stone that an omnipotent being can’t lift’ is a logically impossible state of affairs. Now, the reply is supposed to be trying to *show* that the concept is not self-contradictory, but in order to do this, it has to assume that the concept is not self-contradictory. This is the fallacy of begging the question – an argument that assumes the truth of its conclusion in order to show the truth of its conclusion. So this reply fails.

A better response to the paradox is this. Suppose we allow that God can lift any stone, but cannot create a stone that he can’t lift. ‘God cannot create a stone which God cannot lift’ only means that ‘if God can create a stone, then God can lift it’. God can create a stone of any size and can then lift that stone. So is there a stone that God can’t create? No. There is no limit on God’s power of lifting stones, and so there is no limit on God’s power of creating stones. That God cannot create a stone that he can’t lift is no limit on the stones that God can create. So God lacks no power related to lifting or creating stones.

God and Eternity

What is the relationship between God and time? Many religions hold that God is self-sufficient, dependent on nothing else for existence. If something brought God into existence, God would be dependent on that thing to exist. If there were something that could end God’s existence, then God is equally dependent on that thing (not exercising its power) to continue to exist. If God depends on nothing else, then nothing can bring God into existence or end God’s existence. And so (if God exists) God’s existence has no beginning or end.

There are two ways in which this can be expressed. If God exists in time, then having no beginning or end, God exists throughout all time. God is a temporal being that is everlasting. If God exists outside time, then God is an atemporal being, timeless. In this case, God’s existence is eternal. God has no beginning or end because the ideas of beginning and end only make sense in time – something can only start or stop existing in time. God is not in time, so God cannot start or stop existing.

This idea of God’s ‘eternal’ existence says very little – just that God is atemporal – and even this is negative (God does not exist in time). Furthermore, while we can say this, it is very hard to understand what we could mean. What is it for a being, such as God, to exist ‘outside time’? We discuss this question through an article by Eleanore Stump and Norman Kretzmann entitled ‘Eternity’.

# Boethius on eternal being

Stump and Kretzmann begin their analysis of eternity with a famous definition by Boethius in his *Consolations of Philosophy*. An eternal being such as God, Boethius says, is one that has ‘the complete possession all at once of illimitable life’. This life is possessed in its ‘whole fullness’, ‘such that nothing future is absent from it and nothing past has flowed away’. Instead, it is ‘always present to itself’.

In another work, *On the Trinity*, Boethius argues that this means that we need to understand the idea of ‘now’ differently for an eternal being. ‘Now’ for us, as beings that exist in time, marks the present moment in time and the passage of time. ‘Now’ is always becoming the past; it is only ever ‘now’ for an instant. But for an eternal being, ‘now’ remains and doesn’t move – it marks out the whole eternal life of the being.

These are very difficult ideas, and it will take considerable discussion to understand them. But as a start, we can say that an eternal being

1. has ‘life’;
2. cannot have a beginning or an end, since it is ‘illimitable’ – not only limitless, but can’t be limited;
3. is atemporal in possessing its whole life all at once, giving a distinct meaning to ‘now’; and
4. involves a special kind of duration, as no part of its life is ever absent.

We need to understand each of these claims. (1) is fairly straightforward (at least in theory!). The ‘life’ of eternal being can’t be physical or biological. What is physical or biological is temporal. It exists in time and undergoes change. So the life of eternal being must be a ‘psychological life’.

(2) is similarly straightforward. This psychological life of an eternal being is not limited. If something has a beginning or an end, then it is limited – it does not exist before its beginning or after its end. So this is a life that has no beginning or end.

These first two conditions are compatible with God being everlasting – existing throughout time but with no beginning or end in time. (3) rejects this interpretation of God’s relationship to time and is much harder to understand. The events that constitute the life of an eternal being do not, from its perspective, follow one another in time. Its whole life is experienced as ‘now’, i.e. as ‘present’. That ‘present’ isn’t flanked by past or future, it is not a moment in which future becomes past. It is a non-temporal present.

How can we understand this claim and the relation of an atemporal being, such as God, to temporal beings, such as ourselves? We will need to unpack the idea of ‘now’. But first, it may help to have a picture in mind. We are used to thinking of time in timelines, with beings that exist at the same time – simultaneously – as overlapping one another on the line. We can figure out whether two beings exist at the same time by drawing straight lines at right angles to the timeline. A line at right angles to the timeline picks out a particular ‘moment in time’ – a moment that was, at that time, ‘present’. Whatever occurs in the same moment is simultaneous – it occurs at the same time. So we can see that, for part of their lives, Descartes, Locke and Leibniz were all alive at the same time (1646-1650).

Descartes

Locke

Leibniz

1550 1600 1650 1700 1750

But we cannot show where an eternal being fits using this picture, because it isn’t in time at all. The timeline is a picture of how future time becomes present and then past. Whether an event is future, present or past depends where on the timeline one is. But an eternal being doesn’t have future or past, only present. It needs to be in a different dimension from the timeline.

Boethius suggests picturing the whole of time as the circumference of the circle and God as the centre point of the circle. From the centre of the circle, we can draw a line at right angles to any point on the circumference (the timeline). God is simultaneous with every point in time.

In this diagram, we can map every different moment in time onto just the one moment of God’s entire existence.

These are only pictures, and they can be misleading (e.g. Boethius is not suggesting that time goes in a circle!). But they may help us understand the complexity of ‘now’ or ‘simultaneity’ when talking about an eternal being. We said there was a time when Descartes, Locke and Leibniz all lived simultaneously. An eternal being is simultaneous with every point in time. We cannot mean ‘simultaneous’ in the same sense in both sentences. We cannot say that an eternal being exists at the same time as events in time, since it doesn’t exist in time. So what can we mean?

# Types of simultaneity

Stump and Kretzmann propose two new concepts of simultaneity to explain the relationship of God to time. The familiar concept of simultaneity is that two things are simultaneous if they exist or occur at one and the same time. But this is, obviously, a definition that presupposes that the two things are in time. Call our familiar concept ‘T-simultaneity’ (for temporal simultaneity). Part of the life of Descartes was T-simultaneous with part of the lives of Locke and Leibniz. (See the handout ‘God and eternity: further thoughts’ for Stump and Kretzmann discussion the relativity of simultaneity, given Einstein’s theory of space-time.)

For an eternal being, its whole life is present. This is a new idea of simultaneity, call it ‘E-simultaneity’ (for eternal simultaneity). Two events or beings are E-simultaneous if they exist or occur in one and the same eternal present. Any two events in God’s life will be simultaneous, since all events in God’s life are present, in the eternal ‘now’. This is an atemporal concept of simultaneity.

We can use these two concepts of simultaneity to create a third concept which will explain the relationship of an eternal being to time, to say that God is simultaneous with any (and every) event in time, ‘ET-simultaneity’ (for simultaneity between something eternal and something temporal). The concept is more complicated because we can’t say that the two simultaneous things exist at the same time (since one is atemporal) nor that they exist in the eternal present (since one is temporal).

Let’s take the event in time as your reading this paragraph. From God’s perspective, your reading this paragraph is present and so is the whole of God’s eternal life. Your reading this paragraph is present in the temporal sense – it is ‘now’, in between past and future; and the whole of God’s life is ‘now’ in the eternal present. From your perspective, your reading this paragraph is now in time, and God is eternally present.

More generally, from our temporal perspective, because God is ET-simultaneous with every moment in time, then God is present at every moment in time. God is never past or future, and no part of God is past or future (so talk of how God ‘used to be’ or how God ‘will be’ makes no sense). From God’s perspective, every event in time is observed as occurring in the present, ET-simultaneous with all of God’s life. As Stump and Kretzmann put it, ‘From a temporal standpoint, the present is ET-simultaneous with the whole infinite extent of an eternal entity’s life. From the standpoint of eternity, every time is present, co-occurrent with the whole of infinite atemporal duration.’ So God experiences every moment in time as present together, and the whole of God’s existence is simultaneous with each moment in time.

The formal definition of ET-simultaneity is this:

Assume x is some temporal event and y is some eternal event. x and y are ET-simultaneous iff

1. for an eternal being, A, x and y are both present, x observed as temporally present and y as eternally present; and
2. for a temporal being, B, x and y are both present, x observed as temporally present and y as eternally present.

Because you are temporal, existing over a period of time, and God is eternal, we should not say that you and God exist at the same time. In other words, you and God do not exist T-simultaneously. Likewise, you do not exist eternally. So you and God do not exist E-simultaneously. But (if God exists and is eternal) you and God exist ET-simultaneously – at each moment when you exist, God also exists eternally.

A last point. Descartes existed (for a time) T-simultaneously with Locke, and Locke existed (at that same time) T-simultaneously with Leibniz. From knowing this, we can infer that Descartes existed (for a time) T-simultaneously with Leibniz. T-simultaneity is a ‘transitive’ relation. (A transitive relation is just one in which if it holds between x and y, and between y and z, then it holds between x and z. For example, if x is bigger than y, and y is bigger than z, then x is bigger than z.) If x happens at the same time as y, and y happens at the same time as z, then x and z also happen at the same time.

It is important to notice that ET-simultaneity is not transitive. If your reading this paragraph is ET-simultaneous with God, and another temporal event, say your 10th birthday is also ET-simultaneous with God, this doesn’t mean that your reading this paragraph is ET-simultaneous, or even T-simultaneous, with your 10th birthday. (If it is your 10th birthday, I’m very impressed, and happy birthday!)

# Atemporal duration

The final idea we need to look at is (4), God’s existence as a special kind of duration. We said that our present is a moment in time, an instant at which future becomes past. The eternal present, God’s present, is not like that, because there is no future or past. What it is like is hard, perhaps impossible, to imagine. It is a type of limitless, pastless, futureless duration. Perhaps the best way to try to understand this is to think about our concept of ‘duration’.

Something that ‘endures’ lasts through time. It persists through time, it continues to exist. It isn’t ephemeral or fleeting. These concepts have a resonance for us – endurance, persistence, substance, permanence. But what does the existence of any temporal thing, you for instance, really amount to? You exist through time, in the past, the present and the future. When your life is finished, you no longer exist. But right now, you exist. But how? The past does not exist and the future is yet to exist. You existed in the past, but you don’t any more – that part of your life is gone. The past of your life does not exist. You will exist in the future, but you don’t yet – that part is yet to exist. The future of your life does not exist. So it seems that your existence is only in the present. But what is that? Just a fleeting moment at which the future becomes the past! To exist in time is barely to exist at all, it seems!

We said that something that endures, that has duration, is not fleeting or ephemeral. Yet the existence of anything in time seems to consist in no more than existence in a fleeting moment. Most of its ‘existence’ is either past or future, so not in existence at all! If God existed in time, even if God is everlasting, this would be just as true of God as of you. God’s past would not exist, nor would God’s future. Only that part of God that is present would exist.

But now think of a form of existence in which no part of one’s existence has disappeared into the past or has yet to come into existence in the future, an existence the whole of which is present. This is existence in which none of the existence of the thing has already gone and none of which is yet to come. That is what atemporal duration is, and according to Boethius, Stump and Kretzmann, it is the form of existence that God has. Everything that God ever ‘was’ or ‘will be’ always ‘is’.

God’s Omniscience and Free Human Beings

Can God know what we will do in the future? On a traditional Christian conception of God, God is the most perfect possible being. This is thought to include perfect knowledge – omniscience. The most obvious definition of omniscience is ‘knowing everything’ (Latin *omni-*, ‘all’; *scient*, ‘knowing’). But we need to remember that God is the most perfect *possible* being, and perhaps it is *impossible* to know everything. That then raises the question of whether, if human beings have free will, God knows what we will do in the future. In this section, we discuss the tension between God’s omniscience and our free will.

# The problem

If God is eternal, existing outside time, the answer would seem to be ‘yes, God knows what we will do in the future’. Being outside time, God’s knowledge of all events is ‘simultaneous’. Past, present and future are all the same to God. God knows what happens in that period of time which we call ‘future’, just as he knows what has happened in the past. We can argue that this is part of what it is for God to be omniscient.

But then if God knows what we will do in the future, are our actions free?

P1. For me to do an action freely, I must be able to do it or refrain from doing it.

P2. If God knows what I will do before I do it, then it must be true that I will do that action.

C1. Therefore, it cannot be true that God knows what I will do before I do it and be true that I don’t do that action.

P3. If it is true that I will do that action, then nothing I can do can prevent it from coming true in the future that I am doing that action.

C2. Therefore, if God knows what I will do before I do it, then I cannot refrain from doing that action in the future.

C3. Therefore, if God knows what I will do before I do it, then that action is not free.

The argument does not claim that we aren’t free. It claims that if God knows what we will do before we do it, then we aren’t free. If God is omniscient, then the antecedent is true – God does know what we will do before we do it. In that case, the argument claims, the consequent follows – we aren’t free.

We can also argue the other way around. If we are free, then this argument entails that God does not know what we will do before we do it. So there is something God does not know, and so God is not omniscient.

We could simply conclude that God is omniscient and we are not free. However, freedom – free will – is a great good that allows us to do good or evil and to enter willingly into a relationship with God or not. Without free will, we couldn’t choose how to live or what kind of person to be, so our lives would not be meaningful or morally significant. As supremely good, God would want our lives to be morally significant and meaningful, so he would wish us to have free will. If we are not free, God is not supremely good.

Now it seems we have a dilemma concerning our concept of God. We are either free or we are not. If we are free, then God is not omniscient. If we are not free, then God is not good. So either God is omniscient or God is good, but not both. To avoid this conclusion, it seems that we need to understand how God’s omniscience could be compatible with human free will. But is this possible?

# Three solutions

## 1. God is Everlasting

One solution is to argue that God is not eternal, but everlasting. We can then argue that it is impossible, even for God, to know the future, because of the existence of free will. And so God’s not knowing what we will do before we do it is not a restriction on God’s knowledge, since omniscience only involves knowing what it is possible to know. God still knows everything it is possible to know at any given time.

This reply accepts the argument above, but claims that the argument does not show that God isn’t omniscient. The solution makes God’s omniscience compatible with human free will, but we can question, first, whether this is a satisfactory view of omniscience, and second, whether it is a satisfactory view of the relationship between God and time.

## 2. Compatibilism

A second solution is to argue that God knows what we will do before we do it, but this does not mean that we aren’t free. (P2) is ambiguous. By definition, no one can know what is false, so it must be true that if God knows that I will do some action, then I will do that action. (The conditional is necessarily true.) However, while it is true that I will do that action, this doesn’t mean that it must be true that I do that action. (The consequent is not necessarily true.) We can know lots of contingent truths, e.g. that Paris is the capital of France. Just because this is true doesn’t mean that it must be true – the capital of France could have been some other city.

Likewise, just because I will do some action in the future doesn’t mean that I must do that action. I won’t refrain from doing it, but that doesn’t mean that I can’t refrain from doing it. So for God to know what I will do in the future, it only needs to be the case that I don’t do something else. It doesn’t mean that I can’t. So God can know what I will do, and I can still do what I do freely. So God’s omniscience is compatible with free human beings.

We may object that this doesn’t solve the problem. If I can refrain from doing what God knows I will do, then I can change what God knows (even if I don’t). But, it seems, God already knows what I will do. So changing what God knows I will do means changing the past. And that’s not something I can do. (Alternatively, if I can refrain from doing what God knows I will do, I can make God’s belief false, and so not knowledge at all. But this means that I can make God not omniscient. And that’s not something I can do.)

We can press the objection by asking how it is that God knows what I will do. Start by thinking about how we know what each other will do. For instance, perhaps you can accurately predict that a friend of yours will help this old lady across the street, because he is a kind person, in a good mood, and has just said that this is what he will do. In this instance, your belief is not only true, but justified as well, so we are happy to say that you know what your friend will do. Or again, if your beliefs about what your friend does are generally reliable, then you know what he will do. Clearly, simply having a true belief that someone will do something doesn’t mean that they are not free.

But we cannot suppose that God’s knowledge of what I will do is like this. Because God is omniscient, his beliefs are not merely reliable, but complete and infallible. How can there be complete and infallible knowledge of what someone will choose to do if that choice is not already determined in some way? The justifications we offered above, e.g. knowing someone’s character, might give you knowledge of the general shape of their choices and actions, but not every minute detail. And it certainly won’t be enough for knowledge of what they will be doing in the distant future. If God knows now what I will be doing on 23 May 2026, this can’t simply be because he knows my character well! For a start, God must know whether I will be alive then, and he could only know that if the future is fixed in some way. But if the future is fixed, can we act freely?

## 3. Understanding eternity

Our third solution argues that the discussion so far has misunderstood what it is for God to be eternal. Once we understand this correctly, and we understand the implications for what it means to say that God knows what we will do, we will see that God’s omniscience is compatible with human freedom. The rest of this handout follows the handout ‘God and eternity’. You will need to read that handout first.

In their discussion of the nature of God’s existence as eternal, Stump and Kretzmann also discuss a number of implications of their view. One of those concerns God’s omniscience and human free will.

Because God’s existence is atemporal, all of God’s life, including all events in time, is ‘present’ to God, part of the eternal ‘now’. Every moment in time is ‘ET-simultaneous’ with God, i.e. every moment in time is experienced as temporally present and simultaneous with God’s eternal present. This means that some event in the future to us is present to God. This isn’t to say that the future ‘pre-exists’, as though the future was now in time, but simply that God is ET-simultaneous with both today and any date in our future. Both days are present to an eternal being, but in the sense of the eternal present, not the temporal present. God is atemporally aware of both ‘at once’.

If we don’t understand this correctly, then it can appear to lead to contradictions. For instance, take a future date after my death. God knows that I am ‘now’ alive and that I am ‘now’ dead. But how can I be both at once?? The answer is that ‘now’ and ‘at once’ are ambiguous, between the temporal now and the eternal now. I am alive in the temporal present, but will be dead in the temporal future. So I am not both alive and dead in time. But nor am I both alive and dead in the eternal present. As a temporal being, I am only alive and dead in time. I am not a being that exists in the eternal present. However, both my life and my death are ET-simultaneous with the eternal present.

About God’s knowledge, we should say this: God knows future events because all temporal events are present to God. But what this means is not that God knows now (in time) what will happen in the future. God’s knowledge is not in time. God can’t know anything ‘now’ in the temporal sense. God’s knowledge is in the eternal, atemporal now. So God cannot foresee future events, i.e. God does not know about events in time before they happen. There is no ‘before’ for God. God’s knowledge of events in time is ET-simultaneous with when they happen. In other words, God only ever knows what is happening as it is happening. God is aware of all events in time in the (eternal) present.

Once we understand this, we can see that (P2) contains a confusion. In talking about God knowing what we will do before we do it, it supposes God’s knowledge is in time. But God can’t know what we will do before we do it, since God’s knowledge is not ‘before’ anything. God’s omniscience consists in God knowing what we do, but God knows this ET-simultaneously with our doing it.

This doesn’t cause any obvious difficulty for human free will. We and other people know what we are doing when we are doing it – our knowledge is T-simultaneous with our actions. But this doesn’t stop those actions being free. The same can be said of God’s knowledge of what we do

The Euthyphro dilemma

What is the relationship between God and morality? Is morality something independent of God or is morality whatever God wills it to be? Can God make right be wrong, or good bad, or not? The answer, it seems, must be one of the following two options:

1. Morality is independent of what God wills. To be good, God’s will must

conform to something independent of God. God wills what is morally right because it is right.

1. Morality is whatever God wills. What is morally right is right because God

wills it.

There are reasons to think that, assuming a traditional Christian concept of God as both omnipotent and morally good, neither answer is satisfactory, creating a dilemma. If (1) is correct, then we place a constraint on God. God would no longer be omnipotent, because God cannot turn wrong into right. But if (2) is correct, then God can change wrong into right by an act of will. For example, if murdering babies were commanded by God, then it would be morally right of us to murder babies. This violates our sense of morality.

Neither answer is satisfactory, but logically, the relationship between God and morality must be either (1) or (2), then we may question whether our concept of God is coherent (assuming our concept of morality is coherent). In this handout, we discuss this dilemma and the challenge it poses to thinking coherently about God.

# Plato’s dilemma

The debate derives from a discussion of a closely related issue in Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*. In his dialogue, Plato considered the question ‘what is piety?’ Is piety doing whatever the gods want or do the gods want what is pious? Our version is different in two respects. First, it substitutes ‘morality’ for ‘piety’ and the classical monotheistic concept of God for Plato’s ‘gods’. Second, Euthyphro’s dilemma also focuses more on the difficulty of defining what piety is without circularity; our dilemma is more about the coherence of the concept of God in relation to morality.

In response to Socrates’ questioning, Euthyphro’s first formal definition of piety is ‘that which is dear to the gods’ or again ‘what the gods love’. Socrates then asks whether something – an action, say – is pious because it is loved by the gods, or whether the gods love the action because it is pious. Euthyphro’s definition is ambiguous. Which of these two does it mean?

Euthyphro answers that the gods love what is pious because it is pious. This makes piety independent of the gods’ love – it would count as piety whether or not the gods loved it. It is pious and so the gods love it. That some action is dear to the gods doesn’t make something an act of piety. If they love pious actions because they are pious, there must something that qualifies them as pious independent of the gods’ love.

Socrates objects that this can’t be right. Whatever ‘is dear to the gods is dear to them because it is loved by them, not loved by them because it is dear to them’. Since piety is dear to the gods, it must be dear to them because they love it. Curiously, Plato doesn’t support this objection with any arguments. The thought is that what the gods value, they value because they love that thing. To accept this means accepting that their piety isn’t a reason for the gods loving what they do. Why do the gods love certain actions? Whatever the answer, it isn’t piety. An action qualifies as pious simply because the gods’ love it. On this view, if the gods love something, doing that thing – whatever it is – is pious.

But suppose we persist in the face of this objection, and agree with Euthyphro that piety is independent of what the gods love. Then what is it? Euthyphro suggests it is justice in relation to the gods. But what is it to treat the gods justly? It is to please them in prayers and sacrifices. This doesn’t bring them any benefit; it simply pleases them. But now, piety = justice = what is pleasing to the gods. And so, objects Socrates, piety once more becomes whatever pleases the gods – what is pious is pious because the gods love it. They happen to love prayers and sacrifices, and so these actions become pious. Euthyphro has found it impossible to say what piety is, independent of what the gods love.

# Omnipotence and morality

Having looked at the origin of the Euthyphro dilemma, we return to our version of it. On our best understandings of God and morality, should we think of morality as dependent on God or as independent of God? (The discussion assumes that morality is not a matter of purely subjective human responses. If God exists and is supremely good, then this assumption is reasonable.)

First, can we defend (1), the independence of morality from God? Perhaps there are ways to show that what is morally good must be good and cannot be evil, that what is wrong cannot be right. If so, then God cannot turn good into evil or wrong into right but this is no limitation of God’s omnipotence, since it is logically impossible for moral good and right to be other than they are. This thought is supported by the idea, mentioned above, that even if God commanded us to murder babies, it still wouldn’t be right to murder babies, because such an action can’t be right.

But if this is true, why is it true? It seems wrong to say that it is logically impossible. For instance, ‘murdering babies is right’ isn’t (obviously) a contradiction in terms. What is morally right and wrong doesn’t seem, at least, to be a matter of pure logic. We were able to argue that an omnipotent being can’t do what is logically impossible, since what is logically impossible is nothing at all. But if ‘murdering babies is right’ isn’t logically impossible, then why couldn’t an omnipotent being make it true? Whatever makes moral wrong and moral right what they are must be something about the way the world is. Surely an omnipotent being can change the way the world to be any way that is logically possible. Not being able to change the world does seem like a lack of power.

Put another way, if moral wrong can’t become right, what explains why the world must be this way? If the explanation doesn’t refer to logic, and it doesn’t refer to God, then won’t it refer to something that places a constraint on what God can do?

We can develop this thought by starting again from the concept of God. If the concept of God we are discussing is roughly right and God exists, then it would be very strange to think that morality (for human beings) is completely independent of God. Nothing that exists is independent of God. If God exists and is supremely good, then everything that is morally good must relate back to God as the ultimate reality. If it is impossible for what is good to be evil, for what is wrong to be right, this may be because what is good depends on God’s nature, and it is impossible for God not to be God.

God’s omnipotence, then, requires that we reject (1).

So can (2), the claim that morality depends on God, be defended more successfully? We have already seen the objection that the view also entails that it would be right to murder babies if God willed it, and this doesn’t seem right! Certainly, we would no longer think that God is good if God ordered such a thing, which suggests that we understand morality to be independent of what God wills.

Second, a challenge to the coherence of the concept of God begins to arise with this thought: if what is good or right is whatever God wills, then ‘God is good’ doesn’t say anything substantial about God. Whatever God wills is by definition good – even murdering babies. So what can we mean by ‘good’ any longer if even this could be good? ‘God is good’ means no more than ‘God wills whatever God wills’. It states a tautology. This empties the idea that God is good of any meaning.

We can develop this thought in a different direction. Saying that what is good is whatever God wills threatens to make morality arbitrary. Why does God will what he wills? There is no moral reason guiding what God wills because God invents morality. For example, the suffering of children is not yet a reason for God to think that it is morally wrong to command their death, because there is no moral right or wrong until God wills them. The suffering of children could just as easily be a reason for God to think it morally right to command their death. It would not be against reason for God to will the death of children or their care. In other words, facts about the suffering of children don’t function as reasons at all, supporting one act of will over another. But if God has no reasons to will what he does, this means that there is no rational structure to morality. God’s will is arbitrary.

These objections take us back to (1): there must be some independent standard we are implicitly relying on to say that what God wills is, in fact, morally good. But (1) is incompatible with God’s omnipotence. The dilemma leaves us struggling to say that God is omnipotent or to say that God is good – we cannot, it seems, say both meaningfully. This challenges whether our concept of God is coherent.

**Possible solutions**

One reply to the dilemma is to argue that although God’s will does not respond to anything independent of it, it is not arbitrary. To defend this claim, we can appeal to God’s other attributes, such as love. God’s will is structured by God’s love, and it is this that creates morality. God wills what he does because he loves.

Yet we may still ask: why does God love what he does? Is this arbitrary? If God loved something else, then morality would be different.

But could God love something different? For instance, suppose God loves all reality. Then there is nothing God doesn’t love. Or again, given God’s nature, could God love differently? If we can’t form a clear conception of God loving differently and still being God, then the objection fades away.

## **Possible solution 2: Good is the same property as what God wills**

One development of this position draws a distinction between concepts and properties to explain how morality is the same thing as what God wills, but ‘God is good’ is not a tautology. The thought is that ‘God’ and ‘morally good’ are different concepts. It is not an analytic truth that goodness is what God wills. However, goodness is the same property as what God wills.

A different example will help. ‘Water’ and ‘H2O’ are different concepts, and before the discovery of hydrogen and oxygen, people knew about water. They had the concept of water, but not the concept of H2O. And they didn’t know that water is H2O. So ‘water is H2O’ is not analytically true. However, water and H2O are one and the same thing – the two concepts refer to just one thing in the world. Water is identical to H2O.

The same account can be given of ‘good’ and ‘what God wills’ – they are different concepts, and people can have and understand the concept of goodness without the concept of God. So ‘God is good’ is not an analytic truth. However, what is good is the same thing as what God wills. It is not something separate which provides a standard for God’s will. Morality is dependent on God. This is a metaphysical truth (about what exists) but not a conceptual truth about morality.

But how can we establish that goodness and what God’s will are the same thing? Unless we have an independent standard of goodness, we cannot claim that what God wills meets this standard and so can be identified with what is good.

This is true, but it only applies to how we know what is good, not what goodness turns out to be. We can only judge that water is H2O if we have some independent idea of what water is. But that doesn’t mean water is not H2O. Likewise, to judge that what is good is what God wills, we need, at least initially, independent concepts of what is good and of what God wills. Which is fine, since we do form these concepts in distinct ways. But once we think that water is H2O, we will say that whatever is H2O is water. Likewise, once we come to believe that what is good is what God wills, we may use what we believe God’s will to be to start judging what is good. Our understanding of Gods wills, we may argue, is our best source of knowledge about what is good.

2. Existence of God

Ontological Arguments

Ontological arguments claim that we can deduce the existence of God from the concept of God. Just from thinking about what God is, we can conclude that God must exist. Because it doesn’t depend on experience in any way, the ontological argument is a priori.

Ontological arguments have held a fascination for philosophers, and almost every major historical philosopher discussed them. In this handout, we discuss St Anselm’s version.

# St. Anselm’s argument

The idea of God as the most perfect possible being has a long history. And perfection has also been connected to reality: what is perfect is more real than what is not. Anselm’s argument makes use of both these ideas.

In the *Proslogium*, Anselm starts from the concept of God as a being ‘greater than which cannot be conceived’. Why define God like this? If we could think of something that was greater than the being we call God, then surely this greater thing would in fact be God. But this is nonsense – God being greater than God. The first being isn’t God at all. We cannot conceive of anything being greater than God – if we think we can, we’re not thinking of God.

Anselm then argues that if we think of two beings, one that exists and one that doesn’t, the one that actually exists is greater – being real is greater than being fictional! So if God didn’t exist, we could think of a greater being than God. But we’ve said that’s impossible; so God exists.

P1. By definition, God is a being greater than which cannot be conceived.

P2. (We can coherently conceive of such a being, i.e. the concept is coherent.)

P3. It is greater to exist in reality than to exist only in the mind.

C1. Therefore, God must exist.

Anselm goes on to explain (P3) further. Conceive of two almost identical beings, *X* and *Y*. However, *X* is a being which we can conceive not to exist; *X*’s not existing is conceivable. By contrast, *Y*’s not existing is inconceivable. We can conceive of such a being, a being who *must* exist. This idea of *necessary* existence is coherent. *Y* is a greater being than *X*, because a being that must exist is greater than one who may or may not exist. Therefore, the greatest conceivable being is a being who, we conceive, must exist. It is inconceivable that the greatest conceivable being does not exist.

Of course, it can *seem* like we can think ‘God does not exist’. Anselm notes that we can have this thought, we can think this string of words. But, he argues, in having this thought, we fail to understand the concept of God fully. We fail to understand that the greatest conceivable being is one that must exist. Once we fully understand the concept, we can no longer affirm the thought that God does not exist, because we recognise that it is incoherent.

Compare: you can have the thought ‘there are male vixens’, but once you understand the concept VIXEN as ‘female fox’ and understand that what is male is not female, then you recognise that your thought ‘there are male vixens’ is incoherent. Or perhaps, as another analogy, you can believe that ‘256 x 3645 = 933,140’. But once you do the calculation again carefully, you’ll discover that this is a mistake. 256 x 3645 = 933,120, and there is no way that 933,140 = 933,120. If you understand the concepts of each number and multiplication correctly, and you are able to think clearly with these concepts, you’ll recognise that 256 x 3645 must be 933,120. There is no coherent alternative.

# Gaunilo’s ‘perfect island’ objection

Anselm received an immediate reply from a monk named Gaunilo. The essence of his most famous objection is that the conclusion doesn’t follow from the premises.

How great *is* the greatest conceivable being? Well, if it doesn’t exist, it is not great at all – not as great as any real object! We can *conceive* how great this being *would be if it existed*, but that doesn’t show that it *is* as great as all that and so must exist.

Gaunilo argues that Anselm’s inference must be flawed, because you could prove anything which is ‘more excellent’ must exist by this argument. I can conceive of an island that is greater than any other island. And so such an island must exist, because it would be less great if it didn’t. This is ridiculous, so the ontological argument must be flawed.

(Gaunilo slips from talking about the *greatest* conceivable being to talking about conceiving of a being that is *greater* than all other beings. So he talks of an island that is greater than other islands. But this doesn’t work. It is possible to conceive of the being which, as it happens, is greater than all other beings as not existing. So let’s correct Gaunilo here, and talk of ‘an island greater than which is inconceivable’.)

Suppose we grant that, unlike the island, the non-existence of God is inconceivable. This still doesn’t show that God actually exists. First, we need to establish that God does exist. And then from understanding his nature, we can infer that he must exist.

# Anselm’s reply

In his *Apologetic*, Anselm replies to Gaunilo that the ontological argument works *only* for God, and so this is not a counterexample. Why? Anselm reasons that there is something incoherent in thinking ‘the greatest conceivable being doesn’t exist’. By contrast, the thought ‘the greatest conceivable island doesn’t exist’ *is* coherent. When we have this thought, we are still thinking of an island. There is nothing in the concept of such an island that makes it *essentially* or *necessarily* the greatest conceivable island. Compare: an island *must* be a body of land surrounded by water. An island attached to land is inconceivable. But islands aren’t essentially great or not. Instead, the thought of an island that is essentially the greatest conceivable island is itself somewhat incoherent. For example, what features would make it the greatest conceivable island?

By contrast, argues Anselm, God *must* be the greatest conceivable being – God *wouldn’t be God* if there was some being even greater than God. So being the greatest conceivable being is an essential property of God. But then because it is greater to exist in reality than merely in the mind, if we think of God as not existing in reality, we aren’t thinking of God at all. So to be the greatest conceivable being, God *must* exist.

However, even if Anselm is right about the island, it isn’t clear that he has answered the essence of Gaunilo’s objection. Gaunilo’s point is that although we conceive of God *as* the greatest conceivable being, this doesn’t show that God *is* the greatest conceivable being, because if God doesn’t exist, God isn’t any being at all. And if God isn’t a being, then God isn’t the greatest conceivable being. We can only say that *if* God exists or were to exist, then God is or would be the greatest conceivable being. So before we can say that God is the greatest conceivable being, we must first demonstrate that God exists.

If this objection is right, Anselm’s ontological argument fails.

Descartes’ ontological argument

Descartes provides three arguments for the existence of God, his Trademark argument, a cosmological argument, and an ontological argument. Ontological arguments claim that we can deduce the existence of God from the concept of God. They argue that once we understand the concept GOD, we understand that a being corresponding to this concept, God, must exist.

# Descartes’ argument

Descartes’ argument relies heavily on his doctrine of clear and distinct ideas (for more on this doctrine, see the handout on ‘Reason, intuition and knowledge’). He opens *Meditation* V by explaining how we can explore our concepts in thought to gain knowledge. For example, you may think that there can be triangles whose internal angles don’t add up to 180 degrees, but reflection proves this impossible. Our thought is constrained in this way. The ideas we have determine certain truths, at least when our ideas are clear and distinct. Once you make the idea of a triangle (the concept TRIANGLE) clear and distinct, you understand that the internal angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees, and this shows that this is, in fact, true.

We can now apply this method to the concept of GOD. Descartes’ argument is very brief:

The idea of God (that is, of a supremely perfect being) is certainly one that I find within me . . .; and I understand from this idea that it belongs to God’s nature that he always exists.

We can understand this passage either in terms of rational intuition of the clear and distinct idea of GOD or as a very short deduction from such a clear and distinct idea. Understood the first way, Descartes is arguing that careful reflection on the concept of GOD reveals that to think that God does not exist is a contradiction in terms, because it is part of the concept of a supremely perfect being that such a being has existence. Thus, we can know that it is true that God exists.

In fact, it shows that God must exist. A contradiction in terms does not just happen to be false, it must be false. So to say ‘God does not exist’ must be false; so ‘God exists’ must be true.

As in the case of the triangle, it is not our thinking it that makes the claim true. Just as the concept triangle forces me to acknowledge that the internal angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees, so the concept GOD forces me to acknowledge that God exists.

Furthermore, I cannot simply change the concept in either case; I can’t decide that triangles will have two sides nor that it is no part of the concept of a supremely perfect being that such a being exists. I haven’t invented the concept of GOD.

One striking puzzle is why Descartes thinks that the concept of a supremely perfect being includes the thought that such a being exists. Spelling this out (P4 below) gives us a short deductive argument:

P1. I have the idea of God.

P2. The idea of God is the idea of a supremely perfect being.

P3. A supremely perfect being does not lack any perfection.

P4. Existence is a perfection.

C1. Therefore, God exists.

But why should we accept (P4)? In the main body of the *Meditations*, Descartes doesn’t say. However, in an appendix to the *Meditations*, known as ‘Objections and Replies’, Descartes explains that God’s existence is entailed by the other perfections of God. For example, a supremely perfect being is omnipotent, possessing all power it is logically possible to possess. An omnipotent being cannot depend on any other being for its existence, since then it would lack a power, viz. the power to cause its own existence. An omnipotent being has this power and so depends on nothing else to exist. Such a being exists eternally, never coming into being or going out of being. As a supremely perfect being, God is omnipotent by definition, and so God must exist.

God is the only concept that supports this inference to existence, because only the concept of God (as supremely perfect) includes the concept of existence (as a perfection). We can’t infer the existence of anything else this way.

# An Empiricist response to Descartes’ ontological argument

Empiricists claim that nothing can be shown to exist by a priori reasoning. It is not self-contradictory to say that God does not exist. Hume provides an example of this response. Hume’s fork separates what we can know a priori – ‘relations of ideas’ – from claims about what exists – ‘matters of fact’. Matters of fact can’t be established by a priori reasoning, but require experience. So anything that can be established by a priori reasoning must be a relation of ideas.

In his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, David Hume provides an objection to Descartes’ argument:

P1. Nothing that is distinctly conceivable implies a contradiction.

P2. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent.

C1. Therefore, there is no being whose non-existence implies a contradiction.

We can put the argument another way: If ‘God does not exist’ is a contradiction, then ‘God exists’ is an analytic truth. But this can’t be right, because claims about what exists are matters of fact, synthetic propositions.

Descartes could respond in either of two ways. He could claim that ‘God exists’ is a synthetic truth, but one that can be known by a priori reflection. Or he could claim that ‘God exists’ is an analytic truth, though not an obvious one. Because he doesn’t have the concepts ‘analytic’ and ‘synthetic’ (they were invented 150 years later, by Kant), he doesn’t, of course, say either. Instead, he defends his claim as the product of rational intuition (and perhaps deduction).

On these grounds, he rejects Hume’s (P2). Because our minds are finite, we normally think of the divine perfections, such as omnipotence and necessary existence, separately and so we don’t notice that they entail one another. But if we reflect carefully, we shall discover that we cannot conceive of one while excluding the other. It is a contradiction to deny that God exists.

Kant’s objection to ontological arguments

Ontological arguments claim that we can deduce the existence of God from the concept of God. Just from thinking about what God is, we can conclude that God must exist. Because it doesn’t depend on experience in any way, the ontological argument is a priori.

# Two ontological arguments

In the *Proslogium*, Anselm starts from the concept of God as a being ‘greater than which cannot be conceived’. Anselm then argues that if we think of two beings, one that exists and one that doesn’t, the one that actually exists is greater – being real is greater than being fictional! So if God didn’t exist, we could think of a greater being than God. But we’ve said that’s impossible; so God exists.

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P3. It is greater to exist in reality than to exist only in the mind.

C1. Therefore, God must exist.

Descartes presents a different version. First, he argues that the ideas we have determine certain truths, at least when our ideas are ‘clear and distinct’. Once you make the idea of a triangle (the concept TRIANGLE) clear and distinct, you understand that the internal angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees, and this shows that this is, in fact, true. We can now apply this method to the concept of GOD. Descartes’ argument is very brief:

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Understood the second way, we get this argument:

P1. I have the idea of God.

P2. The idea of God is the idea of a supremely perfect being.

P3. A supremely perfect being does not lack any perfection.

P4. Existence is a perfection.

C1. Therefore, God exists.

# ‘Existence is not a predicate’

Kant presents what many philosophers consider to be the most powerful objection to any ontological argument. Ontological arguments misunderstand what existence is, or what it is to say that something exists. Premise (3) of Anselm’s argument and premise (4) of Descartes’ argument are both false. Things don’t ‘have’ existence in the same way that they ‘have’ other properties. So existence can’t be a perfection or make something ‘greater’.

How does Kant argue for this claim? Consider again whether ‘God exists’ is an analytic or synthetic judgement. In claiming that ‘God does not exist’ is a contradiction, it seems that Anselm and Descartes take ‘God exists’ to be an analytic judgement. Now, an analytic judgement, such as ‘A triangle has three sides’, unpacks a concept. The concept in the predicate, THREE SIDES, is part of the concept in the subject, TRIANGLE. And so the analytic truth ‘A triangle has three sides’ tells you something about what triangles are. By contrast, saying ‘*x* exists’ does *not* add anything to a concept of what *x* is. It doesn’t tell you anything more about *x*. ‘Dogs exist’ doesn’t inform you about what dogs are.

In fact, not only does it not unpack a concept, EXISTENCE doesn’t add anything to the subject at all. Put another way, ‘existence’ isn’t a real predicate. If I say ‘The kite is red’, I add the concept RED onto the concept KITE, and can create the new concept of a red kite. But if I say ‘The kite exists’ or ‘The kite is’, this adds nothing to the concept of the kite to create a richer or more detailed concept. The concept of existence is not a concept that can be added into the concept of something.

So what does ‘x exists’ actually mean? It simply claims that something corresponds to my concept in the world. ‘x’ is an object of possible experience.

Once we understand how ‘x exists’ works and how analytic statements work, we can see that the claim that *x* exists is not an analytic statement. It is, instead, a synthetic statement, one that will need to be verified against experience. But if ‘x exists’ is a synthetic statement, it is not contradictory to deny it.

This applies even in the case of God. ‘God exists’ is just ‘God is’; it doesn’t add anything to, or unpack, the concept of God. Suppose we try to add the concept EXISTENCE to another concept. This makes no difference to that other concept. For example, there is no difference between the concept of 100 real thalers (the money of Kant’s day) and the concept of 100 possible thalers. Adding the concept of EXISTENCE to the concept of THALERS does not make the thalers exist. Likewise, we can’t add the concept of EXISTENCE to GOD and draw the conclusion that God exists.

We can formalise Kant’s argument like this:

P1. If ‘God does not exist’ is a contradiction, then ‘God exists’ is an analytic truth.

P2. If ‘God exists’ is an analytic truth, then EXISTENCE is part of the concept GOD.

P3. Existence is not a predicate, something that can be added on to another concept.

C1. Therefore, EXISTENCE is not part of the concept GOD.

C1. Therefore, ‘God exists’ is not an analytic truth.

C2. Therefore, ‘God does not exist’ is not a contradiction.

C3. Therefore, we cannot deduce the existence of God from the concept of God.

C4. Therefore, ontological arguments cannot prove that God exists.

Malcolm’s Ontological Argument

Ontological arguments claim that we can deduce the existence of God from the concept of God. Just from thinking about what God is, we can conclude that God must exist. Because it doesn’t depend on experience in any way, the ontological argument is a priori. In this handout, we discuss Norman Malcolm’s ontological argument from ‘Anselm’s ontological arguments’. This handout follows the handout ‘Kant’s objection to ontological arguments’. You should read that handout first.

# MALCOLM’s argument

In the first version of his ontological argument, Anselm compares a being which exists with a being that does not exist, and argues that the former is greater. He then goes on to compare a being whose non-existence is inconceivable and a being whose non-existence is conceivable, and argues that the former is greater. In making this second comparison, Malcolm points out, we aren’t comparing what exists with what doesn’t, but the concept of something that, by its nature, may or may not exist with the concept of something that, by its nature, must exist.

In his objection to ontological arguments, Kant argues that we cannot think of existence as a ‘property’ or ‘predicate’ – something that an object ‘has’ or not. Existence cannot, therefore, be something that makes a being ‘greater’. Malcolm accepts this argument as it applies to existence. However, he argues, the same is not true of *necessary existence*. Anselm’s second comparison works where his first does not.

We can show that necessary existence is part of the concept of God. ‘God is the greatest possible being’ is a logically necessary truth – it is part of our concept of God. Therefore, God’s existence cannot depend on anything – because a being that depends on something else for its existence is not as great as a being whose existence is completely independent of anything else. So God cannot depend on anything for coming into existence or staying in existence.

Malcolm continues: Suppose God exists. Then God cannot cease to exist – nothing can cause God to cease to exist. In that case, God’s non-existence is inconceivable. So if God exists, God exists necessarily. Suppose God doesn’t exist. Then if God came into existence, God’s existence would then be dependent on whatever caused or allowed God to exist. This, we said, is impossible. So if God does not exist, then God’s existence is impossible.

P1. Either God exists or God does not exist.

P2. God cannot come into existence or go out of existence.

P3. If God exists, God cannot cease to exist.

C1. Therefore, if God exists, God’s existence is necessary.

P4. If God does not exist, God cannot come into existence.

C2. Therefore, if God does not exist, God’s existence is impossible.

C3. Therefore, God’s existence is either necessary or impossible.

Malcolm now adds two further premises to complete the ontological argument:

P5. God’s existence is impossible only if the concept of God is self-contradictory.

P6. The concept of God is not self-contradictory.

C4. Therefore, God’s existence is not impossible.

C5. Therefore (from (C3) + (C4)), God exists necessarily.

One objection to Malcolm’s argument is that he has not shown that (P6) is true; is the concept of God coherent? Malcolm admits that he can think of no general proof that it is. But there should be no presupposition that the concept is incoherent, so the argument is sound unless we can *show* that the concept of God is incoherent.

# Malcolm’s reply to Kant

Malcolm agrees with Kant that *contingent* existence is not a property, but argues that Kant does not show that *necessary* existence is not a property. Kant discusses the claim ‘God exists’, but he doesn’t satisfactorily distinguish it from the claim ‘God exists necessarily’. The two claims are not equivalent. To say that ‘God exists necessarily’ *is* to unpack the concept of God. It tells us more about what the concept GOD is a concept of. So it is an analytic judgement, not a synthetic one. Not all claims about existence have the same kind of meaning. Or again, the concept NECESSARY EXISTENCE has a different logic from the concept EXISTENCE.

Kant accepts that it is part of our concept of the greatest possible being that such a being would exist necessarily. But what this means, he says, is that ‘if God exists, then God exists necessarily’. And this doesn’t entail that God exists. In other words, the claim ‘if God exists, then God exists necessarily’ is compatible with the possibility that God doesn’t exist at all.

Malcolm responds that this is confused. If we accept that ‘God exists necessarily’ is an analytic truth, derived from our concept of God, then this rules out ‘it is possible that God doesn’t exist’. ‘God doesn’t exist’ is necessarily false.

# A response to Malcolm

But is Malcolm right? Is ‘God exists necessarily’ an analytic truth that we can derive from our concept of God? Or is the analytic truth that we can derive, only ‘if God exists, God exists necessarily’, as Kant claims?

Malcolm understands necessary existence as a property. It is the *type* of existence that God has if God exists. The concept of God entails that God’s existence does not depend on anything. This means that if God does not exist, then God cannot be *brought* into existence (because then God’s existence *would* depend on something). In *this* sense, if God does not exist, God’s existence is impossible. But this impossibility is not the same as the existence of something logically impossible. So *(P5) is false*. If God does not exist, what makes God’s existence impossible is not the self-contradictory nature of the concept of God, but the self-contradiction in the idea of bringing into existence something that does not depend on anything for existence.

This has implications for (C4). Let’s allow that the concept of God is coherent. We still cannot conclude that God’s existence is not impossible. If God does not exist, then God’s existence *is* impossible. Given our concept of God, whether God’s existence is impossible or not depends on whether God exists or doesn’t. The problem is, we still don’t know whether God exists or not!

The only conclusion that we can draw from Malcolm’s argument is that ‘if God doesn’t exist, God’s existence is impossible’ and ‘if God exists, God exists necessarily’. Not depending on anything characterises the nature of God’s existence, if God exists; but existence does not characterise God. Or put another way, for it to be true that God exists necessarily, it must be true that God exists. Until we know whether God exists, all we can say is that God would exist necessarily if God were to exist.

Cosmological Arguments

**Aquinas’ First and Second ‘Ways’**

Aquinas’ First and Second ‘Ways’ are forms of cosmological argument, presented in *Summa Theologica*. The question at the heart of cosmological arguments is ‘why does anything exist?’ The argument is that unless God exists, this question is unanswerable. To understand his arguments, we need to make a distinction between temporal and sustaining causes.

# Temporal and sustaining causes

A **temporal** cause brings about its effect after it – the effect follows the cause in time – and the effect can continue after the cause ceases. For instance, the cause of my existence is my parents, and I can continue to exist after they die. Or again, if someone throws a ball, the ball continues to move after their action of throwing is finished.

A **sustaining** cause brings about its effect continuously, and the effect depends on the continued existence and operation of the cause. It operates continuously rather than at a time. That I am sitting on a chair is a continuing state of affairs that has causes, namely gravity and the rigidity of the chair. Should either of those sustaining causes change, then I would no longer be sitting on the chair. I’d either be floating (no gravity) or sitting on the ground (collapsed chair).

Here is another example, this time of a process of change that depends upon other processes to keep going. Plants grow by photosynthesis, and they need a continuous supply of various things to do this, e.g. sunlight and certain atmospheric conditions. So plant growth causally depends on the processes in the sun that produce sunlight and on a huge variety of factors that ensure that the Earth has an atmosphere with water and oxygen. These factors may in turn causally depend on other processes, e.g. in the sun, nuclear fusion that turns hydrogen into helium, emitting light.

In both his First and Second Way, Aquinas is interested in the causal dependencies of sustaining causation, not a sequence of causes occurring over time. We shall look at Aquinas’ Second Way first as it is easier to understand.

# Aquinas’ Second Way

We can summarise Aquinas’ second way as follows:

P1. We find, in the world, (sustaining) causes and effects.

P2. Nothing can causally depend on itself. (To do so, it would have to have the power to sustain its own existence, but for that, it would already have to exist.)

P3. (Sustaining) causes follow in (logical) order: the first causally sustains the second, which causally sustains the third, etc. (Think of nuclear fusion sustaining sunlight sustaining plant growth.)

P4. If you remove a cause, you remove its effect.

C1. Therefore, if there is no first cause, i.e. a sustaining cause that does not causally depend on any other cause, there will be no other causes.

P5. If there is an infinite regress of causes, there is no first cause.

C2. Therefore, given that there are (sustaining) causes, there cannot be an infinite regress of causes.

C3. Therefore, there must be a first cause, which is not itself caused.

P6. God is the first cause.

C4. Therefore, God exists.

## **Why God?**

The thought of (C1) is that any relations of causal dependency must come to an end with something that doesn’t causally depend on anything else – not so much a cause that is first in time, but a cause that is ‘ontologically first’.

But why think that this thing is God (P6)? Aquinas doesn’t here try to spell out what he means by ‘God’. But in claiming that the first cause is God, Aquinas is assuming a number of things about our concepts of God and of natural things. Our concept of natural things is that they are causally dependent. Their existence isn’t ‘self-sufficient’. By contrast, it is part of our concept of God that God does not depend on anything for his existence. This follows, for example, from his omnipotence. Are there any other concepts of things that exist and are not causally dependent in any way on something further? Not obviously. So God fits the bill as a first cause; nothing else does.

# Aquinas’ First Way

Aquinas’s First Way is said to be an argument from ‘motion’. But by ‘motion’, Aquinas means change, how the properties of something change from one thing to another. Aquinas understood change in terms of ‘actuality’ and ‘potentiality’. When a change happens, something that was only ‘potential’ becomes ‘actual’. For instance, when I heat a pan of water, the water starts cold. Cold water has the potential to become hot, under the right conditions. With heating, it changes – its potential to be hot (and its actually being cold) are replaced by the water actually being hot.

Things can only change in ways in which they have the potential to change. Water can be hot or cold, it can be ice or steam, but it can’t change into a rock! And something cannot have a property both potentially and actually at the same time. If water is hot, it makes no sense to say it has the potential to be hot. It is hot. (It now has the potential to be cold.) If something is stationary, it has the potential to move. But if it is moving, it doesn’t have the potential to move.

Change can only be brought about by something that is actual. For instance, a pan of cold water sitting on a hob will not get hot unless the hob is turned on (or some other actual source of heat is applied). The hob has the potential to change the water, but its potential needs to become actual – it needs to be turned on – before it can change the water.

If ‘motion’ in Aquinas’ argument means a change from potential to actual, then a ‘mover’ is what causes or brings about the change. Because change can only be brought about by something that is actual, a ‘mover’ must itself first be actual to bring about a change in something else from potential to actual.

Having clarified the concepts he uses, we can now state Aquinas’ argument:

P1. Some things in the world undergo change.

P2. Whatever changes is changed by something, i.e. change is caused. The cause must be something else. Something potential can only be made actual by something that is already actual. A property can’t cause itself to exist.

P3. If A is changed by B, and B is changed, then B must have been changed by something else again.

P4. If this goes on to infinity, then there is no first cause of change.

P5. To remove a cause is to remove its effect.

P6. Therefore, if there is no first cause of change, then there are no other causes of change, and so nothing changes.

C1. Therefore, there must be a first cause of change, i.e. something that causes change but is not itself changed.

P7. The first cause of change is God.

C2. Therefore, God exists.

## **Discussion**

In this argument, the idea of a ‘first cause of change’ is the idea of something that is actual and not potential – an ‘unmoved mover’. This must be something that exists already and (unlike the hob) does not need to be changed in order to bring about changes in other things.

Although it is possible to read his argument as talking about temporal causes, this isn’t the best understanding of Aquinas’ thought. He isn’t concerned with these dependencies of being changed from potential to actual as dependencies in time. Instead, the thought is that whatever is only potential must depend on what is actual. Each thing that changes was, at some point, only potential. So as long as we explain change in terms of other things that change, our account is incomplete. To explain how anything changes, we need to find something that does not – that is entirely actual, and never potential. The idea is not a first cause in time, but something that is ontologically prior – it is actual while other things are only potential.

# Objections

Aquinas’ two arguments share two claims. One is that things (that exist or undergo change) do not exist uncaused. The second is that an infinite series of causes is impossible, whether the sustaining cause is of existence or a cause of a change from potentiality to actuality. We can raise doubts about both claims.

## Hume on the causal principle

The causal principle is the claim that everything has a cause. But is it true? Must everything be sustained in existence by causal dependency on something else? Must every change be caused?

In *A Treatise of Human Nature,* Hume argues that the causal principle is not analytic; we can deny it without contradicting ourselves. (That every *effect* has a cause is analytic. But is everything an effect?) Without contradiction, we can assert ‘something can come out of nothing’ or ‘some natural things exist or change uncaused’. Logically, these claims may be true or false. That means that these claims are not only not analytic, they are also not *certain*. If they are not analytic, we can only know them through experience. Now, our experience supports these claims; they are probably true. But experience cannot establish that a claim holds *universally*, without exception. So we can’t know (for certain) that everything, without exception, has a cause.

Applying Hume’s objection to sustaining causes, do we even need to believe that everything that exists (except God) has a sustaining cause? For instance, perhaps at the most fundamental level of physical processes (e.g. the nuclear fusion in the sun), there is no further sustaining cause. Fundamental physical particles are simply ‘brute’ – they exist, but nothing keeps them in existence.

Or again, perhaps there are no sustaining causes at all – there are only highly complex and rapid temporal causes, each of which brings about the immediately succeeding part of the process (e.g. some nuclear fusion occurs in the sun, immediately followed by the emission of light, followed – eight minutes later – by the arrival of that light on Earth, followed by a little bit of plant growth).

One response to Hume’s objection to the causal principle is to accept that it shows that Aquinas’ First and Second Ways don’t *prove* that God exists. However, even Hume accepts that we have *very good reason* to think that everything has a cause. So we have good reason to accept these premises. As long as the conclusions follow from the premises, we therefore still have good reason to accept the conclusion.

## The possibility of an infinite series

Aquinas claims that there cannot be an infinite series of causes. Before going further with this thought, can’t we just cut it short by invoking science? We don’t need to show that an infinite series of causes is impossible, because cosmology shows that the universe started with the Big Bang, just under 14 billion years ago.

However, there are two problems with this response. First, it deals with temporal causes – a sequence of causes in time – not sustaining causes. The universe isn’t the kind of thing that is self-sustaining – not itself causally dependent on anything. And that it has a beginning shows that it does not first exist as an actuality, but only as potentiality, brought into actuality. So there must be something actual its beginning depends on. In other words, we can ask what caused or causes the universe?

At this point, the possibility of an infinite series arises afresh. Even if *this* universe has a cause, perhaps it was caused by a previous (or another) universe, and so on, *infinitely*. Current speculation in physics suggests several different ways in which universes might be related to each other, including the idea that our universe is just one aspect of an infinite ‘multiverse’. But could there be an infinite series of causes in this sense?

An infinite series is not a very long series. Infinity is not a very large number. It is not a number at all. An infinite series of causes, quite literally, has no beginning. Because the universe exists, to claim that it is part of an infinite series of causes is to claim that an actual infinity – something that is in fact infinite – exists. This is quite different from talking about the idea of infinity. The idea of infinity makes sense; but does it make sense to think that something infinite actually exists?

Here’s a popular example. Suppose there is a hotel with infinite rooms. Even when the hotel is completely full, it can still take more people! You cannot add any number to infinity and get a bigger number: ∞ + 1 = ∞. Suppose, when the hotel is full, infinitely more people show up. They can all be accommodated! ∞ + ∞ = ∞. But it is impossible for the hotel to be full and still have room for more guests. So there cannot be an ‘actual’ infinity.

We can apply the point to an infinite series of causes. Each thing that begins to exist in the universe – stars, planets, people – is caused to exist by something before it, and whatever caused each thing is itself caused by something before it. But if there is an infinite chain of causes, that series of causes never has a starting point. The process never gets started, because it has always been going on. So each new cause doesn’t add one more cause to the series, since ∞ + 1 = ∞. But surely each cause is one more cause. And we would never have reached the point in the series of causes at which we are now if it were an infinite series. How could anything exist if there were an infinite number of levels of sustaining cause below it? So we have good reason to think that an infinity of causes – temporal or sustaining, within the universe or across universes – is impossible.

In response, we may appeal again to Hume. The claim ‘there cannot be an infinite series of causes’ is not an analytic truth, nor can we have experience of this matter. It seems conceivable, therefore, that something has always existed, and each thing has in turn caused the next.

But this is too quick. An actual infinity (of causes or hotel rooms or whatever) leads to paradoxes. If these paradoxes cannot be resolved, then they are genuine self-contradictions (e.g. that each new cause adds to the number of causes and that it does not). Anything that entails a contradiction must be false. So, if we cannot solve the paradoxes, Hume is wrong: we can deduce that there cannot be an infinite series of causes. We do not need experience to establish the claim.

But perhaps the paradoxes are the result of limitations on how we are thinking about infinity. Mathematicians (following Georg Cantor) argue that we are mistaken to apply intuitions about finite numbers to infinity, and new ways of thinking are needed (e.g. about different ‘sizes’ of infinity).

There might be some evidence of mistaken thinking about infinity in Aquinas. He argues, in both his First and Second Ways, that if we remove the ‘first’ cause, no other causes follow. But an infinite chain of causes isn’t like a finite chain of causes with the first cause removed. It is simply a chain of causes in which every cause is itself caused. An infinite series of causes doesn’t mean that there isn’t a ‘first cause’ in the sense that some effect occurs without a cause (which would violate the causal principle). It sounds like Aquinas defends the impossibility of an infinite series of causes on the grounds of the causal principle, but this involves a mistaken idea of an infinite series of causes.

So what, if anything, is problematic with the idea of actual infinite series of sustaining causes? Here are two possible responses.

The first we already saw in relation to the causal principle. We may grant that we cannot demonstrate the impossibility of an infinite series of causes. However, we may argue that an explanation for the universe on the basis of such an infinite series of causes is improbable. Cosmological arguments don’t work deductively, but they may be good inductive arguments for a first cause (and hence God).

A second response claims that if there is not a first cause, we cannot explain the *whole series* of causes. This could be what Aquinas has in mind in thinking that all subsequent causes depend on the first cause. We can explain one cause in terms of the one before, but not why there is a series of causes at all. In *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Hume dismisses this – ‘uniting’ the individual causes into a series is ‘an arbitrary act of the mind’. The series doesn’t have any separate existence that needs causing or explaining. All that explanation requires is that each cause in turn is explained.

# Aquinas’ Third Way

Aquinas’ ‘Third Way’ is a third cosmological argument. His two previous cosmological arguments appeal to concepts of causation. His third appeals to ideas of ‘possibility’ or ‘contingency’ and ‘necessity’. To understand the argument, we need to distinguish between contingent existence and necessary existence. Something exists contingently if it is possible for it to exist and for it not to exist. Something exists necessarily if it must exist, i.e. if it is impossible for it not to exist.

We can summarise Aquinas’ argument, presented in his *Summa Theologica*, like this:

P1. Things in the universe exist contingently.

P2. If it is possible for something not to exist, then at some time, it does not exist.

C1. If everything exists contingently, then it is possible that at some time, there was nothing in existence.

P3. If at some time, nothing was in existence, nothing could begin to exist.

C2. Since things do exist, there was never nothing in existence.

C3. Therefore, there is something that does not exist contingently, but must exist.

P4. This necessary being is God.

C4. God exists.

## Discussion

(P3) states an implication, the causal principle, the claim that everything has a cause. In *A Treatise of Human Nature, David* Hume argues that the causal principle is not analytic; we can deny it without contradicting ourselves. (That every *effect* has a cause is analytic. But is everything an effect?) Without contradiction, we can assert ‘something can come out of nothing’. Logically, this claim may be true or false. That means that these claims are not only are they not analytic, they are also not *certain*. If they are not analytic, we can only know them through experience. Now, our experience supports these claims; they are probably true. But experience cannot establish that a claim holds *universally*, without exception. So we can’t know (for certain) that everything, without exception, has a cause. As a result, we cannot know that (P3) is true.

(P2) is puzzling, and looks false. Just because it is possible for something not to exist doesn’t mean that it actually does not exist at some time. We have no reason to think that everything that is possible actually occurs. It may be that Aquinas is thinking of things that we have experience of, since he talks of our experience of things coming into existence and going out of existence. And of these things, it seems true of any of them, that at some time, they did or will not exist. Alternatively, Aquinas might reply that if there was something that always existed, then we need a very peculiar explanation for how this could be so given that its existence is not necessary.

A similar point, however, may be made about the inference to (C2). We should agree that it is possible that, if everything exists contingently, then at some point, nothing exists. But, again, from the fact that it is possible, it doesn’t follow that there actually was nothing in existence. It is equally possible that there has always been, and always will be, some contingent thing in existence. However, this response presupposes an infinite sequence of contingent things, and as such would face the difficulties of claiming that an actual infinity exists.

# Leibniz’s argument from contingency

In his *Monadology*, Leibniz refocuses the argument from contingent existence. We don’t need the difficult premises in Aquinas’ argument to make the argument work. We can put aside the question of whether nothing ever existed, and even whether the causal principle is true. Suppose that the Big Bang was the beginning of the universe, and even that it was uncaused. Stopping there is unsatisfactory. We have no explanation of the Big Bang. As Aquinas says, everything in the universe – and we may want to add, the universe itself – exists contingently. It doesn’t have to exist. So there is no reason why the Big Bang had to occur. It was possible that it never took place. So why did it occur?

Leibniz begins his argument with a commitment to the idea that there must be an answer to that question.

P1. The principle of sufficient reason: every true fact has an explanation that provides a sufficient reason for why things are as they are and not otherwise (even if in most cases we can’t know what the reason is).

P2. There are two kinds of truth: those of reasoning and those of fact.

P3. Truths of reasoning (e.g. mathematical truths) are necessary, and their opposite is impossible. When a truth is necessary, the reason for it can be found by analysis. We understand the reason for it by understanding why it is necessary.

P4. Truths of fact (e.g. truths about physical objects) are contingent, and their opposite is possible. For contingent truths, reasons can be given in more and more detail, because of the immense variety of things in Nature. But all this detail only brings in other contingent facts. For example, if we want to explain why I am as tall as I am, we have to refer to many factors, such as genes and upbringing, but each of these truths is itself contingent.

C1. Each of these further contingent facts also needs to be explained. For example, why do I have the genes I do, why did I have the upbringing I did?

C2. Therefore, when we give explanations of this sort we move no nearer to the goal of completely explaining contingencies. The sequence of contingent facts doesn’t contain the sufficient reason for any contingent fact.

C3. Therefore, to provide a sufficient reason for any contingent fact, we must look outside the sequence of contingent facts.

C4. Therefore, the sufficient reason for contingent facts must be in a necessary substance.

P6. This necessary substance is God.

P7. This necessary substance is a sufficient reason for all this detail, which is interconnected throughout.

C5. So there is only one God, and this God is sufficient.

# Discussion

Both arguments from contingency focus on the distinction between what is possible and contingent and what is necessary, between things which do not have to be the case and things which do. The belief that everything that exists is contingent leaves us with an inadequate explanation of what exists, the argument claims. Only if there is something that must be the case – a necessary being – can we understand why there is anything at all. Again, why God? Because only God is the kind of being that exists necessarily.

## Russell on the fallacy of composition

We said above that in Aquinas’ Third Way, the inference to (C2) was puzzling. Even if we grant that each contingent thing does not exist at some point (P2), why think that this means that at some point, there were no contingent things at all? Aquinas could reply that because each contingent thing exists contingently, then all contingent things (e.g. the universe) as a whole exist contingently. Therefore, according to (P2), all contingent things did not exist at some point.

We can object that just because each thing exists contingently, it doesn’t follow that the collection of all things exists contingently. Bertrand Russell presented a version of the objection.

Russell accepts that of any particular thing in the universe, we need an explanation of why it exists, which science can give us. But it is a mistake to think that we can apply this idea to the universe itself. Just because everything in the universe is contingent (and so needs an explanation), it doesn’t follow that the universe is also contingent or needs an explanation. The universe, he says, is ‘just there, and that’s all’.

Russell is arguing that the argument commits the fallacy of composition. This fallacy is an inference that because the parts have some property, the whole has the property, too. For instance, each tissue is thin, so the box of tissues is thin. Not true. Thus we can’t infer from the contingent existence of each thing in the universe that the universe is contingent.

We can argue that Leibniz implicitly makes the same fallacy in (C2), which seems to say that in explaining one contingent thing in terms of another, we don’t have a sufficient reason until we can explain all contingent things. To explain each contingent thing in turn is not to provide a sufficient reason for each of them.

One reply is that the explanations of each part are in terms of other contingent things. So this will lead to an infinite regress of explanation, which is unsatisfactory. But why?

Perhaps a better response is that inferring from parts to whole does not always commit the fallacy of composition. For instance, each part of my desk is wooden, so my desk is wooden. We can argue that the same applies in the cosmological argument. For instance, if every part of the universe ceased to exist, so would the universe. This shows that just as everything in the universe is contingent, so is the universe. As a contingent being, the universe requires an explanation. There is no other contingent being we can appeal to, since the universe comprises all contingent beings, so we must appeal to a necessary being.

But is the universe contingent? Is it possible for every thing in the universe to cease to exist at the same time? Perhaps, suggests Hume in *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, if the argument shows that a necessary being must exist, then it is matter/energy (in some form) that is the necessary being, rather than God. For example, a fundamental law of physics is the conservation of energy: the total amount of matter/energy in the universe remains constant, it cannot be increased or decreased. If a version of this law applied even at the beginning and end of this universe and others, then matter/energy is a necessary being.

We can respond that we have no reason to believe that this law does apply at the beginning (and possibly the end) of the universe. The Big Bang theory suggests that matter/energy was created, along with time and space, i.e. the universe came into existence – so it is contingent.

If the argument doesn’t commit the fallacy of composition, Russell needs to find some other objection to the principle that all contingent beings, including the universe, require an explanation for their existence. We could develop such an objection from Hume, applying Hume’s fork to Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason (P1). It is not an analytic truth that all contingent beings have an explanation, any more than it is an analytic truth that everything has a cause. Thus, Russell remarks that while scientists will look for causes, that doesn’t imply that they can find them everywhere. Likewise, we should leave open the possibility that the universe has no explanation.

We can avoid the objection by giving up the deductive form of the cosmological argument, to claim that it is an inference to the best explanation instead. God’s existence is certainly a better explanation than no explanation at all!

## The impossibility of a necessary being

The arguments from contingency conclude that some being exists necessarily. The final objection we will discuss targets this conclusion, rather than the arguments for it. The objection doesn’t try to show that the arguments don’t work, but it provides an independent reason for rejecting the conclusion. And if the conclusion can’t be true, then something must be wrong with the arguments, even if we don’t know what that is.

Both Hume and Russell argue that the concept of a being that necessarily exists is problematic. Hume argues

P1. Nothing that is distinctly conceivable implies a contradiction.

P2. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent.

C1. Therefore, there is no being whose non-existence implies a contradiction.

Russell agrees. If there were a being that exists necessarily, it would have to be self-contradictory to deny its existence. But it isn’t self-contradictory to deny the existence of something. So the concept of a being that exists necessarily is confused – it is the concept of something that is logically impossible (like a square with three sides). So there can be no such being.

We can respond that Hume and Russell are wrong to think that the concept of a being that exists necessarily is confused. The concept of God is a concept of such a being. For example, both Descartes and Norman Malcolm argue that God’s omnipotence entails that God exists necessarily.

Now both Descartes and Malcolm think that this in itself shows that God exists (which is why they defend ontological arguments). We needn’t accept that. All we need to respond to Hume and Russell is to show that the concept of God, as a being that exists necessarily, is coherent. In other words, we only need to argue that if God exists, then God exists necessarily. This helps us see where Hume and Russell go wrong.

Hume and Russell think that a being that exists necessarily is one whose existence we cannot deny without self-contradiction, i.e. they assume that ‘God exists necessarily’ means ‘The sentence ‘God exists’ is necessarily true’. But, following Malcolm, we should distinguish between existence and necessary existence. Hume and Russell are right that we can deny ‘God exists’ without self-contradiction. But, we may argue, we cannot deny ‘if God exists, God exists necessarily’ without self-contradiction. And this is enough to reject their conclusion that a being that exists necessarily is logically impossible.

‘God exists necessarily’ tells us not that God exists but what kind of existence God has – necessary, not contingent. And Hume and Russell have offered no reason to think that it is impossible for a being to have this kind of existence, if it exists at all. The cosmological argument from contingency then supplies a reason to think that such a being exists.

Descartes’ cosmological argument

Descartes provides three arguments for the existence of God, his Trademark argument, a cosmological argument, and an ontological argument. Cosmological arguments for God’s existence start from (some version of) the question ‘Why does anything exist?’.

# The argument

At this point in the *Meditations*, the only thing that Descartes knows to exist is himself. Why so? Descartes is seeking to find out what he can know as true. To achieve this, he has decided to avoid believing anything that is not ‘completely certain and indubitable’. He then argues that he can doubt his senses, his memory and even that he has a body (note that these are all a posteriori claims we would use perception to establish). Descartes supposes that all that he perceives and remembers is an illusion; that he has no body or senses at all; that in believing anything else, he is being deceived by a ‘supremely powerful and cunning deceiver’, an ‘evil demon’. The demon could make it seem that he sees a tree when he doesn’t, that he has a body when he doesn’t, and so on. But he has managed to establish his own existence as a ‘thinker’, and is now meditating on this and the implications of the concepts that he finds in his mind.

So, Descartes asks what causes his existence. As the argument is long and complicated, I have divided it into sections.

P1. If I cause my own existence, I would give myself all perfections (omnipotence, omniscience, etc.).

P2. I do not have all perfections.

C1. Therefore, I am not the cause of my existence.

P3. A lifespan is composed of independent parts, such that my existing at one time does not entail or cause my existing later.

P4. My existence is not uncaused.

C2. Therefore, some cause is needed to keep me in existence.

P5. I do not have the power to cause my continued existence through time.

C3. Therefore, I depend on something else to exist.

P6. I am a thinking thing and I have the idea of God.

P7. There must be as much reality in the cause as in the effect. (See the handout ‘Descartes’ Trademark Argument’ for discussion of this claim.)

C4. Therefore, what causes my existence must be a thinking thing and have the idea of God.

P8. Either what causes me is the cause of its own existence or its existence is caused by another cause.

P9. If its existence is caused by another cause, then the point repeats: this second cause is in turn either the cause of its own existence or its existence is caused by another cause.

P10. There cannot be an infinite sequence of causes.

C5. Therefore, some cause must be the cause of its own existence.

P11. What is the cause of its own existence (and so, directly or indirectly, the cause of my existence) is God.

C6. Therefore, God exists.

Descartes adds a further argument, picking up (P3) and (C2).

C2. Some cause is needed to keep me in existence.

P12. There cannot be an infinite chain of causes because what caused my existence also causes my continued existence in the present.

P13. My parents, or any other supposed cause of my existence, do not keep me in existence.

P14. The only cause that could keep me in existence is God.

C7. Therefore, God exists.

## The cause of continued existence

Why does Descartes say that not only the start of his existence, but his continued existence through time, needs to be caused (C2)? For instance, we might object that my continued existence doesn’t require a cause, because nothing changes – I simply continue to exist. If I cease to exist, that requires a cause.

But this misunderstands both causation and continued existence. I am sitting on a chair – nothing is changing. But there is a cause of this continued state of affairs, namely gravity and the rigidity of the chair. Should either of those standing conditions change, then I would no longer be sitting on the chair. I’d either be floating (no gravity) or sitting on the ground (collapsed chair). That people don’t die at any given instant is the result of whatever it is that keeps them alive. Therefore, we should accept that my continued existence does require a cause. It is worth noting that what causes my continued existence must itself continue to exist – it can’t be a cause in the past, since my continued existence must be caused from moment to moment (just as my sitting on a chair is).

We might object, however, that my continued existence is simply dependent on the immediately preceding state of affairs, and so we don’t need to say that what caused me to exist in the first place also keeps me in existence. For instance, my bodily processes keep me alive at any moment, but they didn’t give me life.

But, first, this forgets that Descartes is talking about his self, which is his mind, not his body. Descartes has argued that he, his mind, is an entirely separate substance from the body. So what keeps a mind in existence through time? If it was something in his mind itself, he would know, he claims (C1). If he could cause his own existence at the next moment, he would give himself all perfections (P1). And it can’t be his parents – they only gave existence to him originally, but don’t keep him in existence. Second, even if we allowed that our bodily processes keep us alive from moment to moment, what are they causally dependent on? This line of thought triggers the argument from (P7). Bodily processes aren’t the cause of their own continuation. If Descartes’ existence is causally dependent on something else, and an infinite regress of causal dependency is impossible, then, Descartes argues that something must exist that is not causally dependent on anything else for its existence. This is God.

# Empiricist responses to Descartes’ cosmological argument

Descartes assumes that his existence has a cause (P4). He also assumes that an infinite series of causes is impossible. We can raises doubts about both claims.

## Hume on the causal principle

The causal principle is the claim that everything has a cause. But is it true? Must everything be sustained in existence by causal dependency on something else? Hume argues in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, that we cannot know whether everything has a cause.

The claims ‘everything has a cause’ and ‘something cannot come out of nothing’ are not analytically true. ‘Some things do not have a cause’ is a not a *contradiction in terms* like ‘Some bachelors are married’ is. Of course, from our experience, we have good reason to think that everything has a cause, but this is still only a contingent truth; it may be false. We cannot show that it holds without exception. Thus (P4) and (C2), we may object that it is possible that Descartes’ existence is uncaused; we cannot show otherwise by rational intuition and deduction. What causes what is a matter of fact, and this can only be established by experience.

Second, if we can’t know that it is impossible for something to come out of nothing, then we can’t know, either, that a cause must contain at least as much ‘reality’ as its effect. Rather, ‘anything may produce anything’. What causes what is something we must discover from experience; we cannot know it by a priori reason. Thus to (P7), we can object that we cannot know that a cause must have as much ‘reality’ as its effect. What the cause of a ‘thinking thing’ is we must discover through experience, and cannot know not a priori. There is no a priori reason to think that matter cannot produce thought, and experience would indicate that matter does indeed produce thought. So we cannot infer that either the first cause or what sustains Descartes’ continued existence as a mind must itself be a mind, let alone one that has the perfections attributed to God.

## The possibility of an infinite series

Descartes claims that there cannot be an infinite series of causes. Before going further with this thought, can’t we just cut it short by invoking science? We don’t need to show that an infinite series of causes is impossible, because cosmology shows that the universe started with the Big Bang, just under 14 billion years ago.

However, there are two problems with this response. First, it deals with a sequence of causes in time, while Descartes is interested in what keeps him in existence now. Second, it doesn’t get rid of the problem of an infinite series of causes. The universe isn’t the kind of thing that is self-sustaining – not itself causally dependent on anything. We can ask what caused or causes the universe? At this point, the possibility of an infinite series arises afresh. Even if *this* universe has a cause, perhaps it was caused by a previous (or another) universe, and so on, *infinitely*. Current speculation in physics suggests several different ways in which universes might be related to each other, including the idea that our universe is just one aspect of an infinite ‘multiverse’. But could there be an infinite series of causes in this sense?

An infinite series is not a very long series. Infinity is not a very large number. It is not a number at all. An infinite series of causes, quite literally, has no beginning. Because the universe exists, to claim that it is part of an infinite series of causes is to claim that an actual infinity – something that is in fact infinite – exists. This is quite different from talking about the idea of infinity. The idea of infinity makes sense; but does it make sense to think that something infinite actually exists?

Here’s a popular example. Suppose there is a hotel with infinite rooms. Even when the hotel is completely full, it can still take more people! You cannot add any number to infinity and get a bigger number: ∞ + 1 = ∞. Suppose, when the hotel is full, infinitely more people show up. They can all be accommodated! ∞ + ∞ = ∞. But it is impossible for the hotel to be full and still have room for more guests. So there cannot be an ‘actual’ infinity.

We can apply the point to an infinite series of causes. Each thing that begins to exist in the universe – stars, planets, people – is caused to exist by something before it, and whatever caused each thing is itself caused by something before it. But if there is an infinite chain of causes, that series of causes never has a starting point. The process never gets started, because it has always been going on. So each new cause doesn’t add one more cause to the series, since ∞ + 1 = ∞. But surely each cause is one more cause. And we would never have reached the point in the series of causes at which we are now if it were an infinite series. How could anything exist if there were an infinite number of levels of sustaining cause below it? So we have good reason to think that an infinity of causes is impossible.

In response, we may appeal again to Hume. The claim ‘there cannot be an infinite series of causes’ is not an analytic truth, nor can we have experience of this matter. It seems conceivable, therefore, that something has always existed, and each thing has in turn causes the next. We cannot infer, then, that something that is its own cause – God – exists and is the cause of everything else.

But this is too quick. An actual infinity (of causes or hotel rooms or whatever) leads to paradoxes. If these paradoxes cannot be resolved, then they are genuine self-contradictions (e.g. that each new cause adds to the number of causes and that it does not). Anything that entails a contradiction must be false. So, if we cannot solve the paradoxes, Hume is wrong: we can deduce that there cannot be an infinite series of causes. We do not need experience to establish the claim.

But perhaps the paradoxes are the result of limitations on how we are thinking about infinity. Mathematicians (following Georg Cantor) argue that we are mistaken to apply intuitions about finite numbers to infinity, and new ways of thinking are needed (e.g. about different ‘sizes’ of infinity).

The Kalam cosmological argument

The Kalam argument is an argument that puts together ideas about causation, time and the world.

P1. The universe is composed of temporal phenomena – things that occur and exist in time – that are preceded by other temporal phenomena that are ordered in time.

P2. An infinite regress of temporal phenomena is impossible.

C1. Therefore, the universe must have a beginning.

P3. Everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence.

C2. Therefore, there is a cause of the existence of the universe.

To get to the conclusion that God is the cause of the universe, we have to add further premises to the Kalam argument.

(P1) is obviously true – we live in a universe that is in time, not an atemporal world. Things that occur in time occur in an order in time – one happens before the next before the next, and so on. (P2) and (P3) are more contentious.

If we deny (P3), it seems we have to say that something can come out of nothing. There can be nothing, and then something just starts to exist. This is so strange that (P3) seems likely enough for now (we will discuss it further below).

That leaves (P2). Given that the universe is temporal, (P2) claims that the universe cannot have always existed. If the universe has always existed, there is an infinite sequence of things existing in time, each caused by and following earlier things existing in time. Such an infinite series would also mean that the universe is infinitely old. If this is impossible, we can infer (C1), that the universe must have a beginning. But should we accept (P2)? Why think it is impossible for the universe to be infinite in time or for there to be an infinite series of temporal phenomena?

# Infinity

Infinite time is not a ‘very long time’, and an infinite series is not a very long series. Infinity is not a very large number. It is not a number at all. If the universe is infinite in time, then, quite literally, it has no beginning, ever.

Because the universe exists, to claim that the universe has always existed is to claim that an actual infinity – something that is in fact infinite – exists. This is quite different from talking about the idea of infinity. The idea of infinity makes sense; but does it make sense to think that something infinite actually exists?

Defenders of the Kalam argument think not, because it would lead to impossible paradoxes. Here’s a popular example. Suppose there is a hotel with infinite rooms. Even when the hotel is completely full, it can still take more people! You cannot add any number to infinity and get a bigger number: ∞ + 1 = ∞. Suppose, when the hotel is full, infinitely more people show up. They can all be accommodated! ∞ + ∞ = ∞. But it is impossible for the hotel to be full and still have room for more guests. So there cannot be an ‘actual’ infinity.

Applying this to the universe, we can generate other paradoxes. For example, the universe gets older as time passes, we naturally think. But this couldn’t happen if the universe were infinitely old. If the universe is infinitely old, it is not getting any older as time passes! Or again, to have reached the present, an infinite amount of time would need to have passed. But it is not possible for an infinite amount of time to have passed, since infinity is not an amount. So if the universe was infinitely old, it could never have reached the present.

If these paradoxes show that an infinite sequence of temporal phenomena is impossible, then that establishes (P2).

# Objections

Despite these initial arguments supporting the premises, we can question both P2 and P3.

## Hume on the causal principle

The causal principle is the claim that everything has a cause. The Kalam argument narrows this to (P3) ‘Everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence’. But is this true? Could some things come into existence without being caused?

In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume argues that the causal principle is not analytic; we can deny it without contradicting ourselves. (That every effect has a cause is analytic. But is everything an effect?) Without contradiction, we can assert ‘something can come out of nothing’. Logically, this claim may be true or false. That means that this claim is not only not analytic, it is also not certain. If it is not analytic, we can only know it through experience. Now, our experience supports this claim; it is probably true. But experience cannot establish that a claim holds universally, without exception. So we can’t know (for certain) that everything that begins to exist, without exception, has a cause.

Furthermore, we may argue that we have no experience of such things as the beginnings of the universe. The beginning of the universe is not an event like events that happen within the universe. For instance, it doesn’t take place in space or time, since both come into existence with the universe. We cannot apply principles we have developed for events within the universe, such as ‘everything has a cause’, to the universe as a whole. So perhaps the universe began but was not caused to begin.

One response to Hume’s objection is to accept that it shows that the Kalam argument doesn’t prove that God exists. However, even Hume accepts that we have very good reason to think that everything has a cause. So we have good reason to accept these premises. As long as the conclusions follow from the premises, we therefore still have good reason to accept the conclusion.

## The possibility of an infinite series

The Kalam argument claims that there cannot be an infinite series of things that begin and exist in time. Infinite time and an infinite series of events in time are impossible. Before going further with this thought, can’t we just cut it short by invoking science? We don’t need to show that an infinite series of events in time is impossible to know that the universe has a beginning, because cosmology shows that it did – the Big Bang, just under 14 billion years ago.

Appealing to science, then, initially supports the claim of the Kalam argument, that universe is not infinite but had a beginning. If we allow that the beginning of the universe has a cause, we can ask what caused the Big Bang? And at this point, the possibility of an infinite series arises afresh, this time an infinite series of causes. Even if this universe has a beginning, perhaps it was caused by a previous (or another) universe, and so on, infinitely. Current speculation in physics suggests several different ways in which universes might be related to each other, including the idea that our universe is just one aspect of an infinite ‘multiverse’. The Kalam argument would likely reject the idea that there could be an infinite series of universes, each causing another.

However, the Kalam argument is only concerned to reject an infinite temporal series of events. But physics also tells us that space-time exists as part of the universe. Therefore, whatever caused the universe doesn’t exist in time – or rather, it doesn’t exist in the time of this universe. One universe doesn’t precede another ‘in time’ if each universe has its own time. Once physics gets into more ‘dimensions’ than the four dimensions of space and time, our everyday ways of talking about how things exist tend to break down.

The Kalam argument uses the paradoxes of an actual infinity to argue that there can’t be an infinite temporal series of events. The paradoxes we discussed, e.g. the universe not becoming older, were related to an infinite series in time. Multiverse explanations of the beginning of the universe don’t appeal to a single time line. So do the same problems arise when we are dealing with causes that aren’t in the same time dimension?

We may argue that they do: the paradoxes support the idea that there can’t be any kind of actual infinity. For instance, paradoxes arise for an infinite series of causes as well as infinite series of temporal events. All actual infinities raise paradoxes. So we have good reason to think that an infinity of temporal phenomena or causes within the universe or across universes is impossible.

In response, we may appeal Hume. The claims ‘there cannot be an infinite series of temporal phenomena’ and ‘there cannot be an infinite series of causes’ is not an analytic truth, nor can we have experience of this matter. It seems conceivable, therefore, that something has always existed, and each thing has preceded (or caused) the next.

But this is too quick. An actual infinity (of temporal phenomena or causes or hotel rooms or whatever) leads to paradoxes. If these paradoxes cannot be resolved, then they are genuine self-contradictions. Anything that entails a contradiction must be false. So, if we cannot solve the paradoxes, Hume is wrong: we can deduce that there cannot be an infinite series of anything. We do not need experience to establish the claim.

But perhaps the paradoxes are the result of limitations on how we are thinking about infinity. Mathematicians (following Georg Cantor) argue that we are mistaken to apply intuitions about finite numbers to infinity, and new ways of thinking are needed (e.g. about different ‘sizes’ of infinity).

Design Arguments

Paley’s Design Argument

It is common to feel wonder and amazement at the complexity and intricacy of living creatures. The way in which living things work requires a huge coordination of lots of tiny bits, each doing their specific job. The eye provides a common example. The eye is for seeing, and its parts work together to make this possible. For example, the muscles attached to the lens change its thickness so that it can focus light from different distances onto the retina. Without the lens, the muscles, and the retina, the eye wouldn’t work properly. The parts serve the purpose of the whole.

The whole of life has this structure, with parts of cells working together to serve the purposes of cells, and cells working together as tissues, and tissues working together as organs, and organs working together to support the life of the organism. What we find is order, ‘regularity’, throughout nature. But it could have been very different – the universe could have had no order, no regularity. So what explains the order that we find?

The coordination and intricacy of interrelations between parts in living things working together for a purpose suggests that living things have been *designed*. If they are designed, then we can infer that there is a designer. Teleological or design arguments infer from the order and regularity that we see in the universe, the existence of a God that designed the universe.

In this handout, we’ll look at William Paley’s design argument and objections to it.

# Paley’s argument

In *Natural Theology*, William Paley begins his version of the design argument by comparing our responses to finding a stone lying in a field and finding a watch lying in a field. If I wondered how the stone came to be there, I might rightly think that, for all I knew, it had always been there. But if I found a watch, I wouldn’t feel that the same answer is satisfactory. Why not?

Because, says Paley, the watch has parts that are organised and put together for a purpose, and without the parts being organised as they are, the purpose would not be fulfilled. This property – having parts that are organised for a purpose – is the mark of design. We therefore conclude that the watch must have been designed and made according to that design.

Suppose now that after a while the watch, on its own, produces another watch. It contains within itself all the robotic parts and tools for constructing a new watch. The second watch has been made by the first watch. Does this explain the design of the second watch? No, says Paley. The first watch simply mechanically constructs the parts of the second watch according to a design that it follows, but it doesn’t come up with that design. The design of the watch is only explained by its being designed by a designer.

Paley then argues that ‘the works of nature’ have the same property as the watch, namely parts organised for a purpose (he discusses the examples of the eye and the ear). He notes that living things create new living things (reproduction). But as with the watch, this doesn’t explain the organisation of living things, including their ability to produce new living things. Plants don’t design their seeds, and hens don’t design their eggs. Rather, plants and hens simply mechanically produce seeds and eggs. Now, we rightly infer from the fact that the watch has parts organised for a purpose, that the watch is designed. Thus, Paley argues that we are right to infer from the fact that the works of nature have parts organised for a purpose, that they also have a designer.

Paley goes on to make two claims about the designer. First, to design requires a mind – consciousness and thought – because design requires that one perceives the purpose and how to organise parts to serve this purpose. So the designer is a mind. Second, the designer must be distinct from the universe, because everything in the universe bears the marks of design. To explain the design of things in the universe, we must appeal to something distinct from the universe.

So, Paley argues:

P1. Anything that has parts organised to serve a purpose is designed.

P2. Nature contains things which have parts that are organised to serve a purpose.

C1. Therefore, nature contains things which are designed.

P3. Design can only be explained in terms of a designer.

P4. A designer must be or have a mind and be distinct from what is designed.

C2. Therefore, nature was designed by a mind that is distinct from nature.

C3. Therefore, such a mind (‘God’) exists.

# Discussion

Paley claims that the organisation of parts for a purpose is evidence of design and that design can only be explained in terms of a designer. But are Paley’s claims in (P1) and (P3) convincing?

## Paley, analogy and inferring causes

In his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, David Hume objects to drawing an analogy between the universe and human artefacts. He argues that the products of human design, such as a house or a watch, are not much like nature or the universe as a whole. And the ‘great disproportion’ between a part of the universe and the whole universe also undermines the inference that something similar to human intelligence caused the universe. We cannot, therefore, reasonably infer that the cause of nature is anything like a human mind.

However, Paley can escape these objections, because Paley *doesn’t offer an argument from analogy*. He does not argue that natural things are like watches, so their causes are like the causes of watches. He is arguing that watches have a property – the organisation of parts for a purpose – which supports the inference of a designer. Everything that has this property has this cause. Natural things have exactly this property as well and so have exactly that cause. Thus, he says ‘Every observation which was made… concerning the watch, may be repeated with strict propriety . . . concerning . . . all the organized parts of the works of nature’. ‘With strict propriety’, not ‘by analogy’. Natural things have the same property, so they too have a designer.

However, Hume challenges this argument as well. Are we right to think that *anything* that has parts organised for a purpose is designed? We can, he says, only know the cause of some effect when we have repeated experience of the effect following the cause. In the case of products of human design, we have repeated experience of a designer bringing about the arrangement of parts for a purpose. But we don’t have any such experience in the case of nature. What causes the arrangement of parts for a purpose in nature? We don’t know that it is a designer, since we have no experience of a designer bringing about this effect in natural things. The arrangement of parts for a purpose does not, *on its own*, show that the cause is a designer – because we can only know what causes what from experience. Without experiencing the cause as well as the effect, we don’t know what brings about the effect. So we can’t infer that the cause of order in nature is a designer.

However, according to Paley’s argument, Hume’s objections should apply just as much to our inference regarding the watch. If we found a watch in a field and had never previously experienced a watch, then if Hume were right, we cannot reasonably infer that it was designed. If we have no previous experience of watches, we don’t *yet* know that the watch is a product of human design.

But perhaps Hume is right. If we have never experienced a watch or anything relevantly similar, then, on Hume’s argument, we cannot reasonably infer that it is designed. We can only make the inference from the organisation of parts for a purpose to a designer in those cases in which we have the relevant experience. With watches, in fact, we do; but in Paley’s thought experiment, we should assume that we don’t. In Paley’s thought experiment, we don’t know anything about watches or watch-makers. We only have the experience – our very first experience – of the watch to go by. In such a situation, Hume would say, then we can’t infer a designer. And that is the situation we are in regarding the natural world.

Hume also notes that our concept of causation includes the concept of ‘constant conjunction’: whenever you have the cause, you get the effect. So to make a claim about cause and effect, we need *repeated* experience of the cause and effect occurring together in order to infer that one thing causes another. But the universe is a unique case. To make *any* inference about the cause of the universe, we would need experience of the origins of many worlds. We don’t have this kind of experience, so we simply cannot know what caused the universe.

Suppose again we had never come across watches before. If Hume were correct, then if we found a watch in a field, this would be a unique case for us. And so we could not reasonably infer that it was designed.

But Paley argues, even if we had never seen a watch being made, even if we couldn’t understand how it was possible, even if we couldn’t tell if it could be done by a human being or not, we would still be perfectly correct to conclude, by examining the watch, that it was designed by some designer. We know enough about the causes of the organization of parts for a purpose to be able to infer, whenever we come across such organization, that it is the result of a designer.

We should say exactly the same in the case of nature. Paley rejects Hume’s claim that we don’t know enough to infer a designer. All we need to know is the organisation of parts for a purpose. This is sufficient to infer that something is designed, and hence a designer exists. We would say this in the case of the watch, and the case of nature is no different.

## Inference to the best explanation

Hume has a further objection. To infer a designer of nature, we need to rule out alternative explanations of the order we see in nature. For example, suppose that matter is finite but that time is infinite. Given that there are only a finite number of possible arrangements of matter, over infinite time, all the arrangements of matter – including those we experience as design – would occur. Can we show that this is not just as good an explanation as appealing to a designer?

Paley argues that we can. He considers and rejects alternative explanations. He accepts that it is possible that finite matter has taken all possible combinations of an infinite time. But, he argues, this is clearly a worse explanation than the proposal of the existence of a designer, because we have no evidence that matter constantly pushes into new forms or that all possible combinations of matter (plants, animals) have been tried in the past. (We may add that we now know that the universe began around 13.8 billion years ago, so time isn’t infinite, and we know that matter doesn’t organise itself randomly, but follows very particular laws of nature.) And, Paley claims, minds supply the only explanation of design we know of. Thus, the existence of a designer is the best explanation of the organisation of parts for a purpose.

## Evolution by natural selection

However, Paley was wrong to say that the organisation of parts for a purpose can only be the effect of a mind. And if some other explanation is as good as or better than invoking the existence of a designer, then Paley’s argument will fail. Neither Hume nor Paley knew or anticipated the explanation of the organisation of parts for a purpose that is now very widely accepted. Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection provides an excellent account of how the appearance of design can come about without being the result of a designer.

Millions of alterations in the traits of living creatures randomly take place. Most disappear without a trace. But some trait that coincidentally helps a creature to survive and reproduce slowly spreads. That creature and its descendants reproduce more than others without the trait, so more and more creatures end up with it. It’s not that the feature is ‘selected’ in order for the creature to live better and so reproduce more. Instead, the feature simply enables the creature to reproduce more, so its descendants also have that feature and they reproduce more and so on. One very small change is followed by another. Over time, this can lead to great complexity, such as the eye. In time, creatures appear to be designed when they are in fact the product of coincidence. So we don’t need to say that living things are actually designed by a designer.

This is a better explanation because it is simpler: we aren’t inferring the existence of something new, but appealing only to what we already know exists.

# The problem of spatial disorder

Paley’s design argument appeals regularities of ‘spatial order’, in which different things, e.g. parts of an eye, exist at the same time in an ordered way, e.g. being organised to serve a purpose. However, what we are supposed to explain is the whole universe. And that contains a great deal of spatial disorder, vast areas of space in which there is no organisation of parts, no purpose. Why should we take the order to be more striking or important than the disorder when considering the cause of the universe? What reasons are there to suppose that the order outweighs the disorder?

Paley’s response questions the strength of the objection. He claims that the inference from the organisation of parts for a purpose to a designer is correct even if the watch sometimes went wrong or if some of the parts don’t contribute to its purpose. Likewise, evidence of some imperfections and irregularities in nature does not undermine the inference that it, too, is designed. His point is that the balance of spatial order and disorder isn’t crucial. We needn’t weigh one against the other to tell that the organisation of parts for a purpose must be explained in terms of a designer.

Swinburne’s design argument

It is common to feel wonder and amazement at the complexity and intricacy of living creatures. The way in which living things work requires a huge coordination of lots of tiny bits, each doing their specific job. The eye provides a common example. The eye is for seeing, and its parts work together to make this possible. For example, the muscles attached to the lens change its thickness so that it can focus light from different distances onto the retina. Without the lens, the muscles, and the retina, the eye wouldn’t work properly. The parts serve the purpose of the whole.

The whole of life has this structure, with parts of cells working together to serve the purposes of cells, and cells working together as tissues, and tissues working together as organs, and organs working together to support the life of the organism. What we find is order, ‘regularity’, throughout nature. But it could have been very different – the universe could have had no order, no regularity. So what explains the order that we find?

The coordination and intricacy of interrelations between parts in living things working together for a purpose suggests that living things have been *designed*. If they are designed, then we can infer that there is a designer. Teleological or design arguments infer from the order and regularity that we see in the universe, the existence of a God that designed the universe.

# Spatial order and temporal order

However, the order that we have just described is a kind of ‘spatial order’. Design arguments that appeal to this kind of order face two significant challenges. First, it seems that we can explain the organisation of parts for a purpose in terms of evolution. No appeal to a designer is necessary. Second, the universe contains a considerable degree of spatial ‘disorder’. Why should we take the order to be more striking or important than the disorder when considering the cause of the universe?

In ‘The argument from design’, Richard Swinburne starts his design argument from the observation that the universe contains regularities of ‘temporal order’ – an orderliness in the way one thing follows another, e.g. how if you let go of something, it falls to Earth (or more precisely, how any two masses exert gravitational attraction on each other). These temporal regularities are described by the laws of nature.

Appealing to temporal regularities rather than spatial regularities as examples of design has two advantages. First, such laws are (nearly?) universal; there aren’t parts of the universe that exhibit temporal ‘disorder’ even if they exhibit spatial disorder. Second, we haven’t yet accounted for the order, the regularity, that enables matter to become organised into parts serving a purpose. Evolution works by the laws of nature, it doesn’t explain them. The spatial order that evolution produces is a result of the temporal order that evolution relies upon. So what temporal order?

Swinburne argues that the activity of a designer is the best explanation of the operation of the laws of nature. The design evident in nature, then, is in the laws of nature themselves.

# Swinburne’s argument

Swinburne argues that there is no scientific explanation for the operation of the laws of nature. For example, science explains why water boils when you heat it by appealing to the operation of the laws of nature on the initial state of the water and the application of heat. The explanation will be in terms of laws governing the effect of heat on the properties of molecules. If we want more, then a scientific explanation of these effects on these properties can be given in terms of other laws and properties, atomic and subatomic ones. Some further explanation of these may be possible, but again, it will presuppose other laws and properties. Laws can be explained in terms of more general laws, but that’s all. How do the most fundamental laws, whatever they are, work? Their operation can’t be explained by science (if they could, they wouldn’t be the most fundamental laws).

Put another way, science must assume the fundamental laws of nature in order to provide any explanations at all. It can’t explain why one thing succeeds another in accordance with these laws, because all scientific explanations presuppose laws. Therefore, scientific laws have no explanation unless we can find some other kind of explanation for them.

We use another type of explanation all the time, namely ‘personal explanation’. We explain the products of human activity – this handout, these sentences – in terms of a person, a rational, free agent. I’m writing things I intend to write. This sort of explanation explains an object or an event in terms of a person and their purposes. So we know of regularities in succession – things coming about because someone intentionally brings them about – that are caused by the activity of a person.

Can we explain the temporal order we find in laws of nature in this way? Yes – we can explain this temporal order, and so the laws of nature that describe this order, by supposing that there is a person that can act on the universe just as we can act by moving our bodies. This provides a personal explanation for the operation of the laws of nature, and so for the order of the universe. The regularities of temporal succession that the laws of nature describe are the actions of a person. We will call this person ‘the designer’ for now, understanding that the ‘design’ this person brings about is temporal order.

So Swinburne argues:

P1. There are some temporal regularities, e.g. related to human actions, that are explained in terms of persons.

P2. There are other temporal regularities, e.g. related to the operation of the laws of nature, that are similar to those explained in terms of persons.

C1. So we can, by analogy, explain the regularities relating to the operation of the laws of nature in terms of persons.

P3. There is no scientific explanation of the operation of the laws of nature.

P4. (As far as we know, there are only two types of explanation – scientific and personal.)

C2. Therefore, there is no better explanation of the regularities relating to the operation of the laws of nature than the explanation in terms of persons.

C3. Therefore, the regularities relating to the operation of the laws of nature are produced by a person.

C4. Therefore, such a person, who can act on the entire universe, exists.

# Swinburne’s response to Hume

Swinburne has offered an argument from analogy. The argument depends on (P2) and with it, (C1). So we may ask, how strong is the analogy between human action and the designer’s actions through the operation of the laws of nature? In his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Hume presents a similar challenge, although in the context of a design argument from spatial order. We can adapt his objections to apply them to Swinburne’s argument.

First, it seems that human actions and the laws of nature are very different indeed. Why choose human reason as a model for explaining the operation of the laws of nature, rather than anything else? Swinburne responds by thinking again about the best explanation. We should appeal to human reason because other causes of order in the universe rely on the operation of the laws of nature which they don’t themselves explain.

Second, Hume argues that, when thinking about what might explain spatial order, we need to consider the possibility that it could be the result of random changes in the distribution of matter. Could we apply that to temporal order as well? To do this, we need to say either that there are no laws of nature or that the laws of nature themselves change over time, randomly producing order or disorder.

Both alternatives are problematic. We have no reason to say that there are no laws of nature and every reason to think that there are. But then, could the operations of the laws of nature themselves change randomly over time, sometimes producing regularity, sometimes producing chaos? Perhaps, but given the amount of order in the universe, and the universal applicability of laws of nature, this is a poor explanation of our experience. Thus, Swinburne argues that explaining temporal regularities in personal terms remains the best explanation.

A third objection that Hume raises is that Hume also notes that our concept of causation includes the concept of ‘constant conjunction’: whenever you have the cause, you get the effect. So to make a claim about cause and effect, we need *repeated* experience of the cause and effect occurring together in order to infer that one thing causes another. We cannot make any inferences about unique cases, such as the universe.

Swinburne rejects this argument. He notes that cosmologists have drawn all sorts of conclusions about the universe as a whole. Uniqueness is relative to how something is described. For example, many of the processes involved in the universe as a whole, e.g. its expansion, can be identified repeatedly in other contexts.

# Is the existence of a designer a good explanation?

Even if the explanation in terms of a designer is technically the ‘best’ – because there is no other – we still might not accept it if it isn’t a good explanation.

One important criterion for this is whether it is simple. Ockham’s razor says ‘Do not multiply entities beyond necessity’. Swinburne’s explanation introduces a new entity – the designer.

But this is not yet an objection. If a designer is necessary to explain the laws of nature, then the explanation respects Ockham’s razor.

Nevertheless, we might object that for the designer to be a satisfactory explanation of design in nature, we would in turn need to explain the designer. A mind is as complex and as ordered as nature, so if the order in nature requires an explanation, so does the order of the designer’s mind. If we can’t explain the designer, then it would be better to stop our attempts at explanation at the level of nature.

Swinburne argues that this misrepresents explanation. Science is full of examples of explanation that don’t explain what is assumed in the explanation. Science will introduce an entity – like a subatomic particle – in order to explain something, e.g. explosions in a nuclear accelerator. However, these new entities now need explaining, and scientists don’t yet know how to explain them. This is absolutely normal, and has happened repeatedly throughout the history of science.

If we will always have something we can’t explain, why invoke a designer? Why not just say we can’t explain scientific laws? Because invoking a designer explains one more thing, namely the operation of scientific laws, and we should explain as much as we can. This is a principle of science and philosophy. If you give up on this, you give up on pursuing these forms of thought. So we can still say that the designer is a good explanation for the operation of scientific laws even if we can’t explain the designer.

Hume on the Design Argument

It is common to feel wonder and amazement at the complexity and intricacy of living creatures. The way in which living things work requires a huge coordination of lots of tiny bits, each doing their specific job. The eye provides a common example. The eye is for seeing, and its parts work together to make this possible. For example, the muscles attached to the lens change its thickness so that it can focus light from different distances onto the retina. Without the lens, the muscles, and the retina, the eye wouldn’t work properly. The parts serve the purpose of the whole.

The whole of life has this structure, with parts of cells working together to serve the purposes of cells, and cells working together as tissues, and tissues working together as organs, and organs working together to support the life of the organism. What we find is order, ‘regularity’, throughout nature. But it could have been very different – the universe could have had no order, no regularity. So what explains the order that we find?

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David Hume presents a version of the design argument that he goes on to criticise. In this handout, we’ll look both at the argument as he presents it, and then his reasons for thinking that it fails.

# Hume’s design argument from analogy

In his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Hume expresses the argument like this:

The intricate fitting of means to ends throughout all nature is just like (though more wonderful than) the fitting of means to ends in things that have been produced by us – products of human designs, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer by all the rules of analogy that the causes are also alike, and that the author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though he has much larger faculties to go with the grandeur of the work he has carried out.

By ‘the fitting of means to ends’, Hume is talking about the intricate coordination of parts to achieve some purpose that we commented on above. As Hume says, we can draw an *analogy* with human design. So Hume’s version of the argument is an argument from analogy.

P1. In ‘the fitting of means to ends’, nature resembles the products of human design.

P2. Similar effects have similar causes.

P3. The cause of the products of human design is an intelligent mind that intended the design.

C1. Therefore, the cause of nature is an intelligent mind that intended the design.

# Hume’s objections

## Objections to the analogy

Hume presents a series of objections attacking the analogy and its use. He begins by arguing that the analogy is not very strong. First, the products of human design, such as a house or a watch, are not much like nature or the universe as a whole. Second, the ‘great disproportion’ between a part of the universe and the whole universe also undermines the inference that something similar to human intelligence caused the universe. We cannot, therefore, reasonably infer that the cause of nature is anything like a human mind.

Even if we could infer from part to whole, there is no good reason to choose design by an intelligent mind as the explanation of the whole universe: ‘why would we select as our basis such a tiny, weak, limited cause as the reason and design of animals on this planet?’. Thought moves the bodies of animals – why take it to be the original cause of everything?

## Whether a designer is the only or best explanation

Even if the analogy was stronger, the argument faces a further problem. In order to infer that there is a designer of nature, we have to rule out other possible explanations of the organisation of parts for a purpose. Suppose that matter is finite but that time is infinite. Given that there are only a finite number of possible arrangements of matter, over infinite time, all the arrangements of matter – including those we experience as design – would occur.

Is this a better explanation? There are problems with this proposal, such as why the arrangement of parts should *benefit* organisms. But this doesn’t automatically make it a worse proposal, because there are problems with the proposal of a designer as well. For example, in all our experience, mind is joined to matter so that matter can affect mind (e.g. bodily processes can cause mental states, such as pain) just as much as mind can affect matter. Are we to suppose that the designer has a body? Or again, we have no clear concept of a mind that is eternal.

The right conclusion, then, is that neither explanation is clearly better. So the design argument doesn’t show that there is a designer. Instead, Hume concludes, we should suspend judgement.

## Arguing from a unique case

The argument makes an inference from an effect – the order and apparent purpose we find – to a possible cause – a designer. But we can’t defend this inference, argues Hume, because it is at odds with our idea of causation.

The idea of causation is the idea of a relation between two objects or events – the cause and the effect: whenever you have the cause, you get the effect. Hume calls this ‘constant conjunction’. Because causation involves *constant* conjunction, we cannot tell, from a *single* instance of some object or event, what its cause is. Think of one billiard ball hitting another and the second moving away. The second ball’s movement could follow many, many events – your breathing, someone walking about the room, a light going on . . . How do you know which is the cause? We need *repeated* experience of the cause and effect occurring together in order to infer that one thing causes another. Our repeated experience shows us that the event followed by the second ball’s movement is consistently the first ball hitting it. The second ball doesn’t consistently move after a light goes on or someone breathes etc. In general, then, we can only infer the cause of some effect when we have many examples of the effect and cause.

Here’s the objection: the origin of the universe is unique. To make *any* inference about the cause of the universe, we would need experience of the origins of many worlds. We don’t have this kind of experience, so we simply cannot know what caused the universe.

We can develop the point about restrictions on our knowledge of causation to the specific example of design. As just argued, we can only know the cause of some effect when we have repeated experience of the effect following the cause. In the case of products of human design, we have repeated experience of a designer bringing about the arrangement of parts for a purpose. But we don’t have any such experience in the case of nature. What causes the arrangement of parts for a purpose in nature? We don’t know that it is a designer, since we have no experience of a designer bringing about this effect in natural things. The arrangement of parts for a purpose does not, *on its own*, show that the cause is a designer – because we can only know what causes what from experience. Without experiencing the cause as well as the effect, we don’t know what brings about the effect. So we can’t infer that the cause of order in nature is a designer.

In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume adds a further development of the objection. The inference of a designer is ‘useless’. When we infer from a cause to an effect, we should only attribute properties to the cause that we need in order to explain the effect. Anything else is mere speculation. For example, if you find a squashed Coke can on the pavement, you can infer that it came under pressure from a force strong enough to squash it. But you can’t infer whether that was a foot, a stone, or a car.

Now, in most cases, we learn more about a cause through other means. This allows us to make informative predictions about both the cause and its effects. With human inventions, we can find out lots about human beings, so we can make predictions about their inventions, including ones we haven’t encountered. But with the designer of nature, *all* we have to go on is what we already know – nature. We can’t find out about other designers or other worlds to draw any useful conclusions about nature or the designer. So the hypothesis of a designer adds nothing to our knowledge.

The Design Argument: Is the designer God?

If design arguments succeed, can we also infer that the designer of the universe is God? This is the question we discuss in this handout.

# HuME’s objections

Suppose the argument for the existence of a designer appeals to the similarity between human inventions and the universe (or even human actions and the operation of the laws of nature). For example, the argument might go like this: We know that the organisation of parts for a purpose, when encountered in artefacts made by human beings, is the result of their design. Therefore, the organisation of parts for a purpose in natural things is similarly the result of design.

In his *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, Hume argues that such a line of thought ought to lead us to the conclusion that the designer is more similar to human beings than God is traditionally said to be. He presents six objections to inferring the existence of God from the design argument, based on this idea.

1. The scale and quality of the design reflect the power and ability of the designer. The universe isn’t infinite. So we can’t infer that the designer is infinite. As God is thought to be infinite, we can’t infer that the designer is God.
2. The universe gives us no reason to say that the designer is perfect. Illnesses and natural disasters could be evidence of mistakes in design. If so, we should say that the designer isn’t fully skilled, but made mistakes. At best, we can’t tell. By contrast, God is said to be omnipotent, omniscient and supremely good. So we can’t infer that the designer is God.
3. Designers are not always creators. Someone who designs a car may not also build it. So we can’t infer that the designer of the universe also created the universe. The creator could just be following someone else’s designs. But God is said to be the creator of the universe; so we can’t infer that the designer is God.
4. The design may have resulted from many small improvements made by many people. So we cannot infer that ‘the designer’ is just one person. More generally, we can’t infer that the powers to design and create a universe are all united in one being, rather than being shared out between lots of different beings. But God is said to be one. We have no more reason to believe in one God than lots of designers that are not divine.
5. We find mind always connected to body. There is no reason to think that the designer has no body. But God is thought to be just a mind, so we can’t infer that the designer is God.
6. Designers can die even as their creations continue. So the designer may have designed the universe and then died. God is said to exist eternally, so again, we can’t say the designer is God.

In summary, the argument from design doesn’t show that the designer is omnipotent, omniscient, the creator of the universe, just one being, non-corporeal, or even still in existence. So it doesn’t show that God – as a single omnipotent, omniscient, eternal creator spirit – exists.

# Swinburne’s response

In ‘The argument from design’, Richard Swinburne argues that argues that the activity of a designer is the best explanation of the operation of the laws of nature. The design evident in nature, then, is in the laws of nature themselves, rather than in the complex organisation manifest in living things. The natural process of evolution may be able to explain the latter, but it cannot explain the laws of nature themselves. Science must assume the fundamental laws of nature in order to provide any explanations at all. It can’t explain why one things succeeds another in accordance with these laws, because all scientific explanations presuppose laws. Therefore, scientific laws have no explanation unless we can find some other kind of explanation for them. We have another explanation of regularities in succession that are caused by the activity of a person: things coming about because someone intentionally brings them about. The laws of nature are the results of God’s direct action on the universe as a whole.

Swinburne accepts Hume’s objections (1) and (2) – if the designer is God, many of God’s traditional qualities will need to be established by some other argument.

In reply to (3) and (4), Swinburne invokes Ockham’s razor. Simplicity requires that we shouldn’t suppose that two possible causes exist when only one will do. If we can explain the design and creation of the universe by supposing that there is just one being capable of this, then we shouldn’t suppose that there is more than one being unless we have positive evidence that there is. If, for instance, different parts of the universe operated according to different laws, then that could be evidence for more than one designer being involved. But the uniformity of nature gives us good reason to suppose that there is just one designer, who is also creator.

In reply to (5), the explanation requires that the designer doesn’t have a body. Having a body means that one has a particular location in space and can only act on a certain area of space. If God’s effects are the operations of the laws of nature, and these hold throughout the universe, then God can act everywhere in space simultaneously. So it is better to say that God has no body.

In reply to (6), Swinburne asserts that the objection only works if we are thinking about things in spatial order, such as inventions. But temporal order – regularities in ‘what happens next’ – requires that the agent is acting at that time. To bring about order in what happens next, I must act. If I don’t act, then the operation of the laws of nature take over. But these operations of the laws of nature are exactly what we are explaining in terms of God’s activity. So God acts wherever the laws of nature hold. So God must continue to exist.

The Logical Problem of Evil and Free Will

The problem of evil is widely considered to be the most powerful argument against the existence of God. The central issue is whether evil, as it occurs in this world, either proves that God, as traditionally conceived, does not exist or at least makes the belief in such a God unreasonable.

# An outline of the problem

God is traditionally understood to be supremely good, omnipotent and omniscient. The existence of evil causes problems for believing that such a being exists. Here’s the argument:

P1. If God is supremely good, then he has the desire to eliminate evil.

P2. If God is omnipotent, then he is able to eliminate evil.

P3. If God is omniscient, then he knows that evil exists and knows how to eliminate it.

C1. Therefore, if God exists, and is supremely good, omnipotent and omniscient, then God will eliminate evil.

C2. Therefore, if a supremely good, omnipotent and omniscient God exists, evil does not exist.

P4. Evil exists.

C3. Therefore, a supremely good, omnipotent and omniscient God does not exist.

There are two versions of this argument. The *logical problem of evil* claims that the mere existence of evil is logically incompatible with the existence of God. In other words, the following claims cannot all be true:

1. God is supremely good.
2. God is omnipotent.
3. God is omniscient.
4. God exists.
5. Evil exists.

If any four of the claims are true, the fifth *must* be false. On this version, the argument above is deductive.

The *evidential problem of evil* makes a weaker claim. It claims that the *amount and distribution* of evil that exists is *good evidence* that God does not exist. On this version, the argument above is inductive, and we need to replace ‘evil’ with something like ‘unnecessary evil’.

# Two types of evil

To understand the argument, we need to be clear on what ‘evil’ means in this context. ‘Evil’ usually refers to the morally wrong actions or motives of human beings. So we say that Hitler was evil in trying to eradicate the Jews from Europe or that ethnic cleansing is an evil policy. This is *moral evil*.

But this isn’t the only kind of evil the problem of evil is talking about. There is also *natural evil*, which refers to *suffering* caused by natural events and processes, e.g. the suffering caused by earthquakes, diseases, the predation of animals on each other, and so on.

In the first instance, the two types of evil are distinct. What people choose to do to each other is not usually the result of natural events. Sometimes it is: famine may drive people to stealing and killing. And natural events are not usually the result of what people choose to do. Again, sometimes they are – the results of global warming could be an example.

We need to keep both types of evil in mind when we look at responses to the problem of evil. In particular, some responses may solve the problem of moral evil, but don’t answer the problem of natural evil.

# The logical problem of evil

The logical problem of evil claims that the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, supremely good God is logically inconsistent with the existence of evil.

One response to the logical problem is to give up one or other of the claims. For example, someone might deny that evil exists, arguing that what we call evil isn’t really evil. If evil doesn’t exist, then there is no problem of evil! An alternative is to deny that God is omnipotent. If God isn’t omnipotent, then perhaps he can’t prevent evil from occurring.

However, a more common response is to attempt to show that the existence of evil isn’t logically inconsistent with the existence of God. We will start with responses based on free will.

# free will

## A free will theodicy

Why does God allow evil? If we try to answer this question, to give a reason why God allows evil, we offer a *theodicy*. Perhaps the most famous theodicy argues that the answer is free will.

Free will is a great good. Without it, our lives would not be morally significant, because we could not choose to do what is morally good or evil. Furthermore, we would be unable to have a meaningful, personal relationship with God, because any relationship would not be willingly and freely entered into. A world without moral significance is not as good as a world which has moral significance. Being supremely good, omnipotent and omniscient, God creates a world with moral significance – and so human free will.

Being morally imperfect, we do not always use our free will for good, but sometimes bring about evil. Evil is the price that must be paid for free will. A world without evil would be a world without free will, which would be a morally meaningless world. So the existence of evil isn’t logically incompatible with the existence of God, since it is the result of free will, which is such a significant good that it outweighs the evil that we bring about.

Why, we may object, doesn’t God just make us choose what is good? Why not create a world with free will, but without evil? Because, the theodicy responds, this isn’t logically possible. To be free is for one’s choices not to be determined. If God *made* us choose good, then our choices would be determined, so we wouldn’t be free.

## Plantinga’s free will defence

Is the free will theodicy convincing? Is free will the reason why God allows evil to exist. Perhaps, we think, we don’t, or even can’t, know why, in fact, God allows evil. In *God, Freedom and Evil*, Alvin Plantinga argues that to solve the logical problem of evil, we don’t need to discover and defend *the true explanation* for why evil exists. All we need to do is show that the existence of God *is consistent* with evil. Two (or more) claims are consistent if they *can* both (or all) be true together. To show this, we don’t need to show that the claims *are* true. Plantinga calls this approach a ‘defence’ rather than a theodicy.

Plantinga begins his argument by clarifying his terms:

1. To be *free* is to be able to do or refrain from some action, not to be causally determined to act in one way or another.
2. A *morally significant action* is one which it is either right or wrong to perform. (An action that is permissible to do or omit, e.g. have a banana for breakfast, is not morally significant.)
3. A creature is *significantly free* if it is free to do or refrain from morally significant actions.
4. Moral evil is evil resulting from the actions of significantly free creatures. (This contrasts with natural evil.)

Plantinga then offers the following argument:

P1. A world containing creatures that are significantly free is better than a world containing no free creatures.

P2. God can create significantly free creatures.

P3. To be significantly free is to be capable of both moral good and moral evil.

P4. If significantly free creatures were caused to do only what is right, they would not be free.

C1. Therefore, God cannot cause significantly free creatures to do only what is right.

(C2. Therefore, God cannot create a world containing creatures that are significantly free but which contains no evil.)

C3. Therefore, God can only eliminate the moral evil done by significantly free creatures by eliminating the greater good of significantly free creatures.

If the conclusion, (C3), is asserted as a true claim, this argument is a form of the free will theodicy. The free will defence, however, only claims that (C3) is *possible* – it *could* be true. If it could be true, and assuming that a good God would not eliminate free will in order to eliminate evil, then the existence of evil is logically consistent with the existence of God. So the logical problem of evil does not prove that God does not exist.

# Natural evil

In the form we have discussed it so far, the free will theodicy and free will defence only address moral evil. We may grant that moral evil is compatible with the existence of God. But natural evil doesn’t seem to have much to do with free will. So can we make the existence of natural evil consistent with the existence of God?

One response, that Plantinga presents, is that natural evil is the result of the free will of Satan and demons. The traditional story goes that the Devil was an angel, created by God, endowed with free will. But he rebelled against God, and since then has sought to bring evil into the world. Natural evil is actually a form of moral evil, the result of Satan’s choices. Again, Plantinga does not claim this story is true, but that it is possible.

A different response is this. The logical problem of evil assumes that God has the desire to eliminate *all* evil. But this isn’t true if some evil is *necessary for a greater good*. Just as we argued that moral evil was the price that has to be paid for the greater good of free will, we can say the same about natural evil. In particular, there are virtues, such as sympathy, benevolence and courage, that require suffering to exist. Without danger, we don’t need or develop courage; without illness and poverty to respond to, we don’t need benevolence; without suffering, we don’t need sympathy. A universe without suffering would be a universe without these virtues; and a universe without either suffering or virtue would be a worse universe than one in which there is both suffering and virtue. The evil of suffering makes the good of virtue possible.

We may make a similar argument regarding human nature, which disposes us to evil. We only develop virtues in the face of temptation and weakness. If we had no fear, while we would act ‘well’ in the face of physical danger, we wouldn’t develop courage as we know it. It would take no more psychological effort than feeding ourselves when we are hungry. Likewise, if we were not tempted by selfishness, benevolence would not be the virtue it is.

Is this persuasive? If not, the theist can retreat from a theodicy to a defence. It is *possible* that what has been said is right, and that shows that natural evil is not logically incompatible with the existence of God. Because the logical problem of evil makes such a strong claim, this is all we need to show to defeat it.

The evidential problem of evil

# An outline of the problem

God is traditionally understood to be supremely good, omnipotent and omniscient. The existence of evil causes problems for believing that such a being exists. Here’s the argument:

P1. If God is supremely good, then he has the desire to eliminate evil.

P2. If God is omnipotent, then he is able to eliminate evil.

P3. If God is omniscient, then he knows that evil exists and knows how to eliminate it.

C1. Therefore, if God exists, and is supremely good, omnipotent and omniscient, then God will eliminate evil.

C2. Therefore, if a supremely good, omnipotent and omniscient God exists, evil does not exist.

P4. Evil exists.

C3. Therefore, a supremely good, omnipotent and omniscient God does not exist.

There are two versions of this argument. The *logical problem of evil* claims that the mere existence of evil is logically incompatible with the existence of God. In other words, the following claims cannot all be true:

1. God is supremely good.
2. God is omnipotent.
3. God is omniscient.
4. God exists.
5. Evil exists.

If any four of the claims are true, the fifth *must* be false. On this version, the argument above is deductive.

The *evidential problem of evil* makes a weaker claim. It claims that the *amount and distribution* of evil that exists is *good evidence* that God does not exist. On this version, the argument above is inductive, and we need to replace ‘evil’ with something like ‘unnecessary evil’.

# Two types of evil

To understand the argument, we need to be clear on what ‘evil’ means in this context. ‘Evil’ usually refers to the morally wrong actions or motives of human beings. So we say that Hitler was evil in trying to eradicate the Jews from Europe or that ethnic cleansing is an evil policy. This is *moral evil*.

But this isn’t the only kind of evil the problem of evil is talking about. There is also *natural evil*, which refers to *suffering* caused by natural events and processes, e.g. the suffering caused by earthquakes, diseases, the predation of animals on each other, and so on.

In the first instance, the two types of evil are distinct. What people choose to do to each other is not usually the result of natural events. Sometimes it is: famine may drive people to stealing and killing. And natural events are not usually the result of what people choose to do. Again, sometimes they are – the results of global warming could be an example.

We need to keep both types of evil in mind when we look at responses to the problem of evil. In particular, some responses may solve the problem of moral evil, but don’t answer the problem of natural evil.

# The evidential problem of evil

The evidential problem of evil argues that the amount of evil, the kinds of evil, and the distribution of evil are good evidence for thinking that God does not exist. Put another way, we can grant that evil as we know it does not make it impossible that God exists. But the fact that it is possible doesn’t show that it is reasonable to believe that God exists. Planets made of green cheese are logically possible; but it isn’t reasonable to think they exist. The evidential problem of evil tries to show that belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, supremely good God is unreasonable, given our experience of evil.

The problem of evil more naturally arises, as a challenge to belief in God, when we consider specific examples of evil. In wars and ethnic cleansing, people kill each other in the millions, perhaps the worst example being the Holocaust of World War II. People who have already suffered terribly may suffer more, without reprieve. Innocent children suffer agonising deaths. Natural disasters, such as the tsunami of December 2004, kill hundreds of thousands of people. Who suffers and how much, whether as a result of moral evil or natural evil, is very unfair. Animal suffering is also an issue, as they are eaten alive or develop chronic debilitating illnesses.

The examples are intended as illustrations of the kind, amount or distribution of evil that an omniscient, omnipotent, supremely good God would eliminate. We might respond that without evil, we could not be free or develop important virtues, such as courage and compassion. The evidential problem accepts that. But it challenges such a response. Are *all* these evils necessary for free will and virtue? It seems that a better world is possible, one that contains free will, virtues and some evil, but less – and less terrible – evil than exists. This is a good reason to believe that God does not exist.

# Plantinga’s free will defence

In *God, Freedom and Evil*, Alvin Plantinga develops a response to both the logical and evidential problems of evil, which he calls the free will defence. It is possible, he argues, that the moral evil that occurs could only be eliminated by God if free will is also eliminated. He doesn’t claim that this is true, but that it is possible. Furthermore, it is possible that natural evil is the result of moral evil, the result of the free will of Satan and demons. The traditional story goes that the Devil was an angel, created by God, endowed with free will. But he rebelled against God, and since then has sought to bring evil into the world. So natural evil is actually a form of moral evil. Again, Plantinga does not claim this story is true, but that it is possible.

A different way of developing the thought is that it is possible that this is the best possible world. It is possible that a world which contained less evil would also be a world in which there is no free will.

The evidential problem accepts that it is possible, but is very unlikely. But, Plantinga asks, why think this? How are we to assess how probable it is that there is no better balance between good and evil? Do we really have any evidence against the claim that evil cannot be reduced? Plantinga argues that we don’t. In particular, the amount of evil that exists, on its own, neither supports nor opposes the claim that a better balance of good and evil is possible. Therefore, it does not make it less likely that God exists.

## Discussion

Plantinga’s argument only considers the amount of evil, and in a very abstract way – the total amount in the universe. But the evidential problem also appeals to the kinds and distribution of evil. We may object that these are more difficult to dismiss as not providing evidence that a better balance of good and evil is possible.

In particular, we can consider whether free will is so good that it outweighs all the evil that exists. Even if free will is a great good, that doesn’t mean we should never interfere with it. For example, if we see someone about to commit murder and do nothing about it, it is no defence to appeal to how wonderful it is that the murderer has free will. To eliminate some evils, one has to eliminate certain instances of free will. But this type of selective interference is compatible with the existence and goodness of free will; it doesn’t eliminate a greater good. So God would interfere in this way.

We can challenge this. If God always interfered to prevent us from causing evil, then this is equivalent to his causing us to do good. In that case, we don’t have free will at all.

We can refine the objection. God could interfere just on those occasions on which we would bring about terrible evil. Or again, God could have given us free will without giving us the power to commit terrible evil. The point is that free will doesn’t seem such a good thing that each occasion of choosing freely is a good thing. Some choices are better eliminated. Wouldn’t a limited kind of free will have been better?

One response, from John Hick, in *Evil and the God of Love*, is that the value of free will depends on what one can do with it. A world in which we couldn’t harm each other – either because we didn’t have the power to do so or because God always interfered to stop us – would also be one in which we would have very little responsibility for each other’s well-being.

Whether or not this justifies the moral evil that human beings do, we can raise the objection again regarding natural evil. Appealing to free will to justify all the suffering not caused by human beings requires us to accept the story of Satan. But is the free will of Satan so good that it outweighs all the natural evil that he has caused? Surely a world without Satan would be a better world, and a world that God could have created. When it comes to natural evil, we can argue that appeals to free will fail against the evidential problem of evil.

# Hick’s ‘soul-making’ theodicy

In seeking to explain why evil exists, theodicies seek to justify it in terms of some greater good that evil enables, such as free will or the development of virtue. John Hick develops the argument that the existence of evil is necessary for us to become good people, for us to grow morally and spiritually.

Hick argues that we shouldn’t think that God has finished creating human beings. We are unfinished. The first stage of our creation is given by evolutionary history, which brings into existence creatures – us – who are capable of conscious fellowship with God. The second stage of our creation is both individual and more difficult. It involves bringing each person freely towards personal, ethical, and spiritual virtues and a relationship with God. This work of perfection is individual, rather than collective. It does not entail that the world as a whole is getting better, morally speaking.

The response to the problem of evil is that such virtuous development is impossible unless there is evil to respond to and correct. For example, we can’t be courageous unless there is danger, we can’t be benevolent unless people have needs, we can’t learn forgiveness unless people treat us wrongly, and so on. Through struggles and suffering, not only with natural disasters and illness, but also with our own motives and the actions of other people, we mature and develop spiritually. Both natural and moral evil are necessary. Defenders of the problem of evil often assume that God would seek to maximise pleasure and minimise pain. Such an environment may be suitable for perfected creatures, but it is no good for helping unperfected creatures like us develop. We can understand this world, then, as a place of ‘soul-making’.

God does not seek to reduce suffering. Instead, God seeks our development of virtues, and this requires suffering. Because God is good, he wants us to become good, and so he wants a world in which this is possible. It turns out that such a world must contain evil. And so the existence of evil is compatible with the existence of God.

God could have created creatures that had some version of the virtues immediately. But the virtues we achieve that result from challenges, discipline, and overcoming temptation, are ‘good in a richer and more valuable sense’ than the qualities of someone simply created good. In addition, Hick argues that there are some attitudes that God could not create, but must come through freedom. It is impossible to create free human beings that can be guaranteed to respond to God in authentic faith and love. Setting up human nature in this way would be tantamount to a form of manipulation, and so the attitudes would be inauthentic.

# Challenges from the evidential problem

We may object that the argument addresses the logical problem, but hasn’t yet offered a response to the amount, kind or distribution of evil. In essence, the theodicy only justifies all evil if all evil leads to spiritual growth. So we can object:

1. What about animal suffering? Animals don’t grow spiritually, so how is the natural evil that they suffer justified?
2. Is it plausible that terrible evils are really necessary for our moral and spiritual growth?
3. A great deal of evil doesn’t (appear to) contribute to spiritual growth. Many people suffer terribly in a way that breaks their spirit, e.g. children who never recover from being abused; others suffer at the end of their lives when there is little time to develop further; people die prematurely, before they have a chance of spiritual growth; people who need to grow spiritually don’t suffer much at all; others who are already leading good and mature lives suffer a great deal.

Hick discusses each objection in turn. But we first need to understand the value of pain and its distinction from suffering. Physical pain is valuable not primarily in the information it provides when we are ill, but in the lessons we learn about how to preserve ourselves, about risks and dangers. Life without pain would not be better – it would not be life as we know it at all, and it certainly would not be a life in which we were able to develop morally and spiritually. Pain and suffering are not the same thing. We endure pain without suffering in experiences of adventure, triumph over obstacles, etc. Much of our suffering – in its self-centredness, self-pity, desire to avoid weakness and mortality – is a result of our response to pain. Our response to pain needn’t be like this (which is not to say it is easy to respond differently!), and these aspects of our response can be understood as a result of our going wrong morally.

Bearing these points in mind, we can now turn to the objections.

1. Animals: We shouldn’t misrepresent the experience of animals. They live in the present without fear of death or of future pains or dangers. And, as just argued, to be alive is to be subject to pain. But why, if they don’t have souls to be perfected, should they exist (and so feel pain) at all? Wouldn’t a world without animals and their pain be better? Hick’s reply is that if we were the only living things or clearly set apart from the rest of nature, we would lose some of our cognitive freedom. If God proved that he exists, we would not really be free to choose whether or not to develop a relationship with him. For us to develop the best form of faith and love, there must be ‘epistemic distance’ between us and God. So the world needs to be one which we can understand as though God did not exist. The existence of animals and our close relationship to them serves that purpose. We have an account of our origin and place in nature independent of God. This provides the justification of animals and their pain – it is a necessary part of a world in which our souls may be perfected.
2. Terrible evils: Terrible evils are terrible in contrast to more ‘ordinary’ evils. If we remove the terrible ones, the next-to-terrible ones will seem exceptional and we will wonder why those are permitted. If we continue to remove the worst evils, eventually we arrive at a world in which there is little evil but also very little human freedom, moral responsibility, or the development of moral and spiritual virtues.
3. Pointless evil: What about the distribution of evil, evil that seems to fail to contribute to the purpose of soul-making? We cannot rationalise such evils, says Hick. They must remain a challenge and a mystery. However, we can understand that the existence of such irrational evils is part of the process of soul-making. Imagine a world in which we knew, on every occasion when someone suffered, that it was for the best. This would leave us without deep sympathy, the kind that is evoked precisely in response to suffering that is unjust and excessive. We may add that we would need neither faith nor hope, both of which depend on uncertainty and unpredictability. But faith and hope are two central virtues, two ways in which souls grow spiritually. So for our souls to grow spiritually, it must look like the distribution and amount of evil are unfair or unjustified.

None of Hick’s theodicy succeeds as a response to the problem of evil unless our souls are perfected. But we can object that this is frequently not the case. People die undeveloped, morally and spiritually immature or corrupt. Hick accepts the point. The theodicy only works if we also believe in a life after death. Indeed, we must believe in universal salvation as well: if there are wasted lives or unredeemed sufferings, he claims, then either God is not supremely good or not all-powerful.

Midgley on human evil and free will

The problem of evil is widely considered to be the most powerful argument against the existence of God. The central issue is whether evil, as it occurs in this world, either proves that God, as traditionally conceived, does not exist or at least makes the belief in such a God unreasonable.

Perhaps the most famous attempt to defend belief in the existence of God in the face of evil appeals to free will. Without free will, our lives would not be morally significant, because we could not choose to do what is morally good or evil. Furthermore, we would be unable to have a meaningful, personal relationship with God, because any relationship would not be willingly and freely entered into. God therefore creates us with free will. However, we do not always use our free will for good, but sometimes bring about evil. Evil is the price that must be paid for free will. This argument is known as the free will ‘theodicy’.

Without going any further in this argument, it is worth thinking in more depth about how we should understand the evil done by human beings and what free will is. In this handout, we discuss Mary Midgley’s account of these concepts in her book *Wickedness*.

# Human evil

There are two ways of attempting to explain the evil that human beings do which are both much too simple. The first is to refer simply to free will. Someone does something evil because they choose to do so. If they make such a choice repeatedly, this shows that they are an evil person. The second is to think that people are only caused to do evil as a result of their environment and upbringing.

Midgley argues that neither takes proper account of human nature and the complex interaction between individual human choices and society. Suppose we say that evil only arises from social causes, such as bad teaching, upbringing, or examples available to children, or from certain kinds of social organization, such as tyranny or political repression. Then how do any of these causes start? How do they spread? Suppose we explain evil just in terms of free will. Would evil develop unless we were prone to such emotions as spite, resentment, envy and cruelty? Neither explanation is complete.

To understand evil in human beings, we need to think carefully about how it works through individual psychology. Three points are central. First, evil is not aggression. Some aggression is good, e.g. in friendly competition and in the protection of what one needs to live. And much evil is brought about through motives such as fear, greed or laziness.

Second, someone who does evil need not be thoroughly evil or think of themselves as evil. Very often, people do evil actions on the basis of intentions that they understand as good. And they can act in good ways in other contexts. Likewise, political movements that end up causing much suffering, even Nazism, are typically mixed in their motivation, and seek to do some good even if their conception of that good and how it can be brought about is very misinformed.

Third, Midgley argues that evil is the result of a failure to live as we are capable. It arises out of our natural capacities, which can give rise to both good and evil. Human beings are, by nature, concerned with power. This concern is expressed in our capacities for aggression, for defending on our territory and possessions, our competitiveness and desire to dominate others. All of these ‘animal instincts’ have good aspects and can contribute to a flourishing human life. But each on their own does not aim at the overall good for a person, and the conflicts between people that they give rise to need to be carefully considered and resolved.

How is evil a ‘failure’ then? Our positive capacities for doing good logically entail the capacities for evil. For example, if we have a capacity for courage, then we have the capacity for cowardice. If we have a capacity to help others, we have the capacity to harm them. Evil is the absence of good. In fact, in our moral thinking, the idea of the evil comes first. Virtues are needed for a good life because of the dangers of vice. It is only because human beings have certain weaknesses – to self-indulgence, to greed, to fear – that certain traits of character – temperance, justice, courage – count as virtues and need to be actively developed.

Evil is often thought of as a positive force, something that motivates a person to act. And undoubtedly it can be powerful. But its motivating power does not make it positive – cold and dark are powerful motivators, yet they are also essentially negative, an absence of heat and light. Evil involves saying ‘no’ to what is good, as Goethe expresses it in the speech of the devil Mephistopheles in his drama *Faust*:

The spirit I, that endlessly denies

And rightly too; for all that comes to birth

Is fit for overthrow, as nothing worth;

Wherefore the world were better sterilized;

Thus all that’s here as Evil recognized

Is gain to me, and downfall, ruin, sin,

The very element I prosper in.

To argue that human beings have a ‘nature’ that inclines them to evil (and to good!) is not to deny that people have free will. Midgley argues that our motives concerned with power are natural, not that they are overwhelming. They don’t make evil inevitable, but it is impossible to explain evil without referring to them. The fact that we are naturally inclined to aggression, say, does not mean that when someone acts aggressively, they cannot be held morally responsible. To act on one’s motive is not to act involuntarily! There is an important moral difference between being hurt as a result of an accident and being hurt by someone’s deliberately cruel action.

Midgley’s approach connects the two types of evil with which the problem of evil is concerned. ‘Natural evil’ normally describes unavoidable, non-human disasters. ‘Moral evil’ describes deliberate evil-doing. But between the two is human nature. Human nature is natural, it is not chosen. And the natural impulses that can lead to evil cause great suffering. So moral evil has a ‘natural history’, a causal story about how and why it tends to occur in the species *homo sapiens*. Being aware of this connection can enrich our understanding of the problem of evil.

# Free will

The free will theodicy only works if it is, in fact, true that we *have* free will. But do we? And if we do, what is it?

The most important argument against free will claims that free will is incompatible with determinism. Determinism is a view about causality. In its most common form, it holds that everything that happens or occurs has a cause (‘universal causation’). Our idea of causality includes the idea of *regularity*, that the same cause will operate in the same way on different occasions. This allows us to formulate laws of nature. More controversially, many philosophers want to develop the idea of regularity into the stronger claim that, given a particular cause in a particular situation, only one outcome is *possible* (‘causal necessity’).

For example, suppose there is water on the kitchen floor. We assume that there is a causal explanation of how the water got there, even if no one knows what it is. If the mess was not caused at all, then we would consider it a miracle. Suppose a pipe burst. So we say ‘The burst pipe caused the kitchen floor to become wet’. This claim is about this one occasion. But we expect that on other occasions if a pipe burst in the kitchen, the floor would be wet. This is the idea of regularity. The same cause will lead to the same effect, and if the effect is different, then the cause must be different too. So if on another occasion, a pipe burst, but the floor remained dry, there must be something which is different between that situation and our original one. (For example, it might be that the whole house is well below freezing, so that the water in the burst pipe is and remains ice – so it stays where it is, and the floor remains dry.)

The idea of regularity can lead to the stronger thought that, given this cause – in exactly this situation – only one outcome is *possible*. In a different situation, a burst pipe might not lead to water on the floor; but in this situation, not only does the burst pipe lead to a wet floor, but it had to. For instance, it is not possible that in this situation, and any other situation exactly like it, the pipe could burst but the floor not become wet. The situation determines a unique effect. This is the idea of causal necessity.

It is worth pointing out that determinism is not an empirical discovery, something that science has proven true. We can’t show that every event has a cause. It isn’t an analytic truth and we can’t investigate every event to establish that the event does, indeed, have a cause. However, as science has progressed, it has explained more and more events, and discovered more and more general regularities in how the world works. Determinism is best understood as a commitment or an assumption that we make in doing science.

How does determinism threaten free will? Determinism is a completely general doctrine, which could be just as true of human beings, our choices and actions, as it is of physical objects. The argument runs something like this:

P1. Determinism is true.

C1. Therefore, our choices have causes. (For instance, those causes might be part of human nature, part of the external environment, our upbringing or social situation, or even previous states of the brain.)

C2. Therefore, each choice we make has a particular set of causes and takes place in a particular situation.

C3. Therefore, given those causes and situation, no choice is possible other than what we actually choose.

P4. If we couldn’t make any other choice, then we do not have free will.

C4. Therefore, we don’t have free will.

On the understandings of determinism and free will here, free will requires us to be able to choose and act outside or independent of causation. If our choices are caused, then they are not free.

If determinism is true and incompatible with free will, then the free will theodicy doesn’t succeed. One defence of free will is to accept that free will and determinism are incompatible in this way, but to reject determinism. However, Midgley argues that ‘incompatibilism’ misunderstands both free will and determinism.

## Determinism and fatalism

We can and should accept determinism if we understand it properly, says Midgley. Determinism says we should view events as intelligibly connected and occurring according to laws. As a result, events are predictable in principle in advance, given suitable evidence. But determinism should not be understood as claiming that events are *forced* to happen. Saying that ‘only one outcome is possible’ can encourage a false picture of the regularity that connects events. It can lead us mistakenly from determinism to ‘fatalism’. (In a different sense of fatalism, the term means a resigned acceptance of things that one cannot change. This can be rational, e.g. accepting that one will die.)

Fatalism, as the term is being used here, is the belief that human action is useless – that whatever one does, the outcome will be the same. It is the thought that human choices and action have no influence on how things are or future events. If we think determinism is incompatible with free will, we turn determinism into fatalism. We shift our responsibility onto the laws of nature – ‘There was nothing else I could do, I was made to do it, it wasn’t me but the laws of nature’.

It is true that we cannot change the laws of nature, but if we understand them, we can use them. Through our actions, things become possible that would not be possible otherwise. For example, a farmer who lives by the Nile cannot change the regular flooding of his land, but he can use the flooding to his advantage. By planning when to plant, he can grow more crops rather than having the crops destroyed. The regularities of nature enable human action. This is not fatalism, but its opposite.

The confused fatalist interpretation of determinism has appeared in various forms in Western thought. An early debate concerned God’s omniscience. If God knows the future, then God knows what we will do. But – and here is a direct implication for the problem of evil – God created us, knowing that we would do evil. And so God is responsible for the evil that we do. ‘God’ is later replaced with various forms of scientific determinism – natural laws, evolutionary theory and human nature, history and the external social environment. In each case, the implication is drawn that we are helpless in the face of such forces (natural, evolutionary, historical or social). But, once again, Midgley argues, the fact that we cannot change some law or situation does not mean that we have lost all ability to choose how to act in response to it.

## Compatibilism

The argument so far shows that Midgley does not accept that free will involves acting outside causation. So how is free will compatible with determinism?

The opposite of free will, she says, is slavery to external forces or internal constraints on our capacity to choose. Free will doesn’t require omnipotence, nor is it random. We expect normal people to act in ways that stem from their life and character so far. Not to do so, to act in a way that doesn’t grow from one’s previous life, is a kind of psychological disorder. Even as people change, we expect them to change in ways that result from their previous motives and to preserve some form of continuity with who they already are. Free will is rational – it involves understanding and overcoming difficulties, whether they are external or psychological. To be free is to think and act in this way.

All this shows that we assume psychological regularities as well as physical ones. We should not try to defend free will by thinking that human actions are unpredictable. Without accepting that we have a nature, we would have no idea how people would be like in other cultures or epochs. We could make no general claims about people, and history and social science would be impossible. Being able to predict what someone will do is compatible with free will if the prediction rests on good reasons for acting in a certain way and/or appeals to general truths about human nature.

Someone who holds that determinism and free will are incompatible can try another line of argument. If determinism is true, then each state of someone’s brain can be predicted in advance. Assuming that their thoughts and choices depend on the physical states of their brain, this means that we can predict their thoughts and choices in advance, not on the basis of their reasoning, but by using neurophysiological laws. This isn’t compatible with free will.

Midgley replies that things are more complicated than this. Take the example of Pythagoras coming up with his famous theorem. Here’s the problem he’s thinking about: how long is the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle? From knowing the state of his brain, could we predict his solution, that the square of the hypotenuse equals the sum of the squares of the two other sides? Midgley argues that

*even if we could make the physical prediction* [of what brain state followed next] we would still not be able to read off the theorem from it, unless we had a complete account of the relation between brain-states and thought. But if we had that, we would already have a complete description of Pythagoras’ thoughts, as well as of his brain-states. And this is what we should have to use to discover the theorem, because accounts of brain-states simply do not mention matters like triangles and hypotenuses at all. In trying to predict thought, we should have to use existing thought as our only possible starting-point. And in order to do this, we should have to drop the attempt at prediction and start instead to work out the problem for ourselves. Given all Pythagoras’ data, we might even come up with his solution. But this would be quite a different feat from predicting that *he* would come up with it… In this ways, we would have become colleagues in his enterprise, instead of mere predictors. If we had stuck only to the physical data, we would have made no headway with his problem at all.

There are two key points in this passage. First, the physical processes of the brain do not ‘force’ our thoughts to occur as they do, as though thoughts are only along for the ride and contribute nothing. Rather, mind and brain (if we think of them as distinct at all) are interdependent – we can predict physical states of the brain on the basis of thought and thoughts on the basis of the brain. Thinking – the process of one thought leading to another – is not an illusion. Second, when it comes to reasoning – which is where free will shows itself – we can only understand it if we move from trying to predict it to joining in with it. The creativity of Pythagoras in discovering his theorem is a creativity we all share in every decision we make, albeit usually in a lesser degree. This individual creativity isn’t at odds with the general regularities discovered by

Religious Language

What are we doing when we are talking about God? Are we stating truths, facts, how things are? Or is religious language meaningful in some other way, e.g. expressing an attitude or commitment toward the world, rather than trying to describe it? Is talk about God meaningful at all?

# The distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism

We can draw a distinction between two families of answer to the question of whether and how religious language is meaningful. Cognitivism claims that religious language expresses beliefs. Beliefs can be true or false, so religious claims that can be true or false. To believe that God exists is to believe that the sentence ‘God exists’ is true. Religious language aims to describe the world. Cognitivists do not have to claim that this is *all* that religious language does. But they argue that it is how religious language is meaningful.

Non-cognitivism claims that religious language does not express beliefs, but some other, non-cognitive mental state. And so religious claims do not try to describe the world and cannot be true or false. They express an attitude toward the world, a way of understanding or relating to the world. (We may still want to talk of religious ‘beliefs’ but this is better understood as ‘faith’ or ‘belief in God’ than as ‘belief that God exists’.)

# Discussion

Arguments concerning the existence of God typically assume that cognitivism is true. First, they assume that the statement ‘God exists’ is, in some sense, a statement of fact. If the arguments establish their conclusion, then ‘God’ refers to a being that exists, and ‘God exists’ is a belief that is objectively true. Second, they assume that the belief – or knowledge – that God exists is something that *could* be supported, or established, by reasoning. In other words, the existence of God can be deduced or inferred as the best explanation from premises that are more certain or plausible than God’s existence. Third, they assume that God is a being that exists independently of (and prior to) human beings and religious beliefs. For example, to be the cause of the existence of the universe *in a literal sense*, God must exist independently of the universe.

However, these are not assumptions that all philosophers of religion – or all people who believe in God – accept. Non-cognitivists point out that people don’t normally acquire religious beliefs by argument or testing evidence. Instead, they come to an understanding of the world that is expressed in values and a way of living. When someone converts to a religion, what changes isn’t so much intellectual beliefs, but their *will*, what they value and how they choose to live. This supports the claim that ‘God exists’ is not a statement of fact, but has meaning as an expression of a non-cognitive attitude or commitment. These attitudes – which include attitudes towards other people, nature, oneself and human history – present the world in a certain light and support commitments to act in certain ways and to mature as a spiritual being.

However, we can raise two important objections to non-cognitivist accounts of religious language. First, an important implication of these theories is that we can’t criticise or support religious beliefs by using *evidence*. Religious beliefs cannot be criticised on the grounds that they are *not true* or highly *improbable*, because this presupposes that religious language makes factual claims, and it does not. So, for example, both design arguments and the problem of evil are irrelevant as attempts to prove or disprove the existence of God. ‘God exists’ is not a claim that is true or false, and so it cannot be shown to be true or false. This, we can object, cuts religious belief off from reason too severely.

A non-cognitivist can respond that, as part of human life, religious belief still needs to *make sense* of our experiences. The problem of evil could be relevant here. Not any set of attitudes and commitments makes sense in light of our experience. The difficulty now, however, is to know what it is for a non-cognitive attitude to ‘make sense’, given that it doesn’t make any claims about what is true and what is not.

A second objection is that non-cognitivism conflicts with how many believers think of God and their faith. For example, it makes *what you believe* much less important, as if religious faith is only about how we live. Yet many religious believers who act in similar ways and hold similar values argue that there is something distinctive and important about the different beliefs they hold. Furthermore, within the history of any religion, there have been heated arguments about how to interpret a particular doctrine (e.g. in Christianity, the Incarnation), when it is very difficult to see how the different interpretations could make any impact on different ways of living. All this suggests that religious language is intended to be true, i.e. fact-stating, and not just expressive.

We can allow that non-cognitivists are right that religious language is expressive of people’s emotions and attitudes. However, just because religious beliefs express attitudes, this does not show that they cannot *also* be cognitive. There is no reason to think that they cannot be *both*. After all, religious believers *do* think they are saying something factual when they say ‘God exists’. But this fact has enormous significance to people’s lives, and so our emotions and attitudes to the world respond to it and are expressed in our talk about it.

Verificationism and religious language

In the 1930s, a school of philosophy arose called logical positivism, concerned with the foundations of knowledge. It developed a criterion for when a statement is meaningful, called the principle of verifiability, also known as the verification principle. On A. J. Ayer’s version, the verification principle says that a statement only has meaning if it is either analytic or empirically verifiable. He explains and defends the principle in *Language, Truth and Logic*. The verification principle is a cognitivist view of language generally. It says that language is only (literally or semantically) meaningful if it is cognitive.

A statement is analytic if it is true or false in virtue of the meanings of the words. For example, ‘Bachelors are unmarried’ is analytic and true; ‘Squares have three sides’ is analytic and false. A statement is empirically verifiable if empirical evidence would go towards establishing that the statement is true or false. For example, if I say ‘The moon is made of green cheese’, we can check this by scientific investigation. If I say ‘The universe has 600 trillion planets’, we can’t check this by scientific investigation in practice, but we can do so in principle. We know how to show whether it is true or false, so it is ‘verifiable’ even though we can’t actually verify it. Furthermore, we don’t need to be able to prove that an empirical claim is true or false. For empirical verification, it is enough for empirical evidence to raise or reduce the probability that a statement is true.

According to the verification principle, we must say that religious language is cognitive if it is meaningful at all. But there are there limitations on what we can meaningfully talk about. So what can we say about the proposition ‘God exists’ and other claims about God? Despite the best attempts of ontological arguments, Ayer argues, we cannot prove ‘God exists’ from a priori premises using deduction alone. So ‘God exists’ is not analytically true. On the other hand, if ‘God exists’ is an empirical claim, then it must be possible to imagine the conditions under which we would say that it was or was not a fact. But we cannot empirically test whether God exists or not. If a statement is an empirical hypothesis, it predicts that our experience will be different depending on whether it is true or false. The claim ‘God exists’ makes no predictions about our experience. So it is not empirically verifiable.

P1. The verification principle: all meaningful claims are either analytic or empirically verifiable.

P2. ‘God exists’ is not analytic.

P3. ‘God exists’ is not empirically verifiable.

C1. Therefore, ‘God exists’ is not meaningful.

Because most religious language depends on ‘God exists’ being meaningful, we can argue that most religious language is also meaningless.

Some philosophers argue that religious language attempts to capture something of religious experience, although it is ‘inexpressible’ in literal terms. Ayer responds that whatever religious experiences reveal, they cannot be said to reveal any facts. Facts are the content of statements that purport to be intelligible and can be expressed literally. If talk of God is non-empirical, it is literally unintelligible, hence meaningless.

# Objections

## ‘Eschatological verification’

One response to Ayer’s argument is to question whether he is right that religious claims cannot be verified empirically. In ‘Theology and verification’, John Hick understands verification to involve removing rational doubt, ignorance or uncertainty about the truth of some proposition through experience. An empirically verifiable claim makes some prediction about how our experience would be under certain conditions, e.g. ‘There is a table next door’ can be verified by sight or touch, but it requires us to go next door. Hick agrees with Ayer that ‘God exists’ is not a claim that we verify through our current experience. The disagreement between theist and atheist is not about what to expect in life.

However, this isn’t enough to show that religious language is meaningless. Hick develops the idea of ‘eschatological verification’, verification in the afterlife or at the end of time. In believing that God exists, the (traditional Christian) theist believes that there will be unambiguous experiences of God in life after death. The atheist denies this.

Does this show that ‘God exists’ is meaningful? First, it must be meaningful to speak of an afterlife. All empirically verifiable statements are conditional – they predict what we will experience under certain conditions of observation. However, for this to apply to the afterlife, the concept of personal existence after death must be logically possible. Second, we must be able to form some conception of what an experience of God could be. Hick argues that we already have some sense of this, since we are aware that our experience in this life is ambiguous – it doesn’t establish or disprove God’s existence. He suggests that an experience of our personal fulfilment and relation to God could serve as verification.

## Rejecting the verification principle

Hick’s response to Ayer’s challenge accepts the verification principle in some amended form. But a more common response is to reject it. According to the verification principle, the principle itself is meaningless. The claim that ‘a statement only has meaning if it is analytic or can be verified empirically’ is not analytic and cannot be verified empirically. But if the principle of verification is meaningless, then what it claims cannot be true. So if the principle is true, it is meaningless, and so not true. Obviously, if it is false, it is false. Either way it is not true. Therefore, it does not give us any reason to believe that religious language is meaningless.

Ayer claims that the principle is intended as a definition, not an empirical hypothesis about meaning. In other words, it is intended to reflect and clarify our understanding of ‘meaningful’ uses of words. Ayer accepts that the principle isn’t obviously an accurate criterion of ‘literal meaning’, but that is why he provides arguments in specific cases, such as religious language, which support it.

But in that case, the verification principle is only as convincing as the arguments that are intended to show that it is the right definition of ‘meaningful’. If we do not find the arguments convincing, the principle provides no independent support. However, the challenge remains: if religious language is cognitively meaningful, how is this so?

# Verification and falsification

One response to the difficulties facing the verification principle is to replace it with a ‘falsification’ principle. A claim is falsifiable if it is logically incompatible with some (set of) empirical observations. We can suggest, then, that a claim is meaningful only if it rules out some possible experience. For example, ‘There is a fork there’ is incompatible with – rules out – the experience of reaching out and grasping nothing but thin air where we see the fork.

One apparent advantage of falsification is how it deals with generalisations. A claim such as ‘All swans are white’ threatens to be meaningless according to the verification principle, because no experience will prove it true – there might always be a swan out there somewhere which isn’t white. However, it is easy to prove false – observing a single non-white (black) swan will do it!

However, this advantage is balanced by distinct disadvantages. Hick notes that there are particular claims that are easy to verify but impossible to falsify, such as ‘There are three successive 7s in the decimal determination of π’, 3.141592 . . . . As soon as we find three 7s in a row, we have verified the claim. But because the decimal determination of π is infinitely long, we can never show that it is false (if it is false), because there may always be three 7s together later in the series. Or again, as Ayer notes in *The Central Questions of Philosophy*, existence claims are very difficult to falsify. ‘There is a yeti’ is easier to know how to prove true than false. So are claims about the future, e.g. ‘The sea will one day encroach on this land’. And so are probability claims. ‘There is a one-in-six chance the rolled die will show a six’ is not falsified by 20 sixes in a row, since the probability of one-in-six may be restored over a larger number of throws. And this is always true, no matter how many times you roll the die.

So a falsification principle that requires a meaningful statement to entail some decisive, refuting empirical experience is unacceptable. Many meaningful statements do not clearly entail an observation with which they are logically incompatible. If, on the other hand, we weaken falsification to talk about evidence which would ‘count against’ the truth of some claim, then this is not different from Ayer’s version of the verification principle. As explained above, for a statement to be ‘verifiable’, we know what experiences will support or reduce the probability of a claim. It is already part of Ayer’s theory that we need to know what empirical experiences would lead us to reject a claim as well as what experiences support it.

The ‘University’ debate

What are we doing when we are talking about God? Are we stating truths, facts, how things are? Or is religious language meaningful in some other way, e.g. expressing an attitude or commitment toward the world, rather than trying to describe it? Is talk about God meaningful at all? In a debate published in the journal *University* under the title ‘Theology and falsification’, Anthony Flew, Richard Hare and Basil Mitchell discussed the meaning of religious language. Before discussing their debate, we need to put in place a distinction between two families of theories about how religious language might get its meaning.

# Flew’s challenge

Flew opened the debate with a story from John Wisdom’s article ‘Gods’. Two explorers come across a clearing in the jungle in which both flowers and weeds grow. One claims that the clearing is the work of a gardener; the other disagrees. They try to detect the gardener by various means – first keeping watch, then an electric fence, then dogs – but never discover him or her. At each stage, the ‘believer’, however, rejects the claim that their failure is evidence that the gardener doesn’t exist, saying first that the gardener must be invisible, then intangible, then leaves no scent and makes no sound. The ‘sceptic’ finally asks how the claim that there is such a gardener differs from the claim that the gardener is imaginary or doesn’t exist at all.

Flew’s point is that for a claim to be meaningful, for it to be asserting something, there must be something it is denying. In other words, there must be some way of establishing that it is false, something that leads us to withdraw the claim. If we know what the claim rules out, we can understand what the claim means. But if there is nothing it rules out, then the claim is not a genuine attempt to say something true. What would lead the believer to say that there is no gardener? If nothing would, then saying that there is a gardener doesn’t say anything. Another example: the theory of evolution by natural selection rules out aliens coming to Earth and demonstrating that they had planted ‘fossils’ (which they had made) for us to find. If this happened, we would give up the theory of evolution.

If ‘God exists’ is a real claim, then there should be some possible experience that would lead us to accept that it is false. Something should be able to ‘count against it’, e.g. the existence of evil. If religious believers are not prepared to accept that anything could show that God doesn’t exist, then saying ‘God exists’ states nothing at all. Flew objects that this is the case – many religious believers refuse to accept that anything could show that God doesn’t exist. Instead, they keep qualifying what it means to think that ‘God exists’. For example, they might argue that the existence of evil only shows that we don’t understand God’s plans. This deprives religious claims of meaning.

P1. For a truth claim to be meaningful, there must be some possible state of affairs it denies or rules out.

C1. To meaningfully assert a claim, someone must accept that it rules out some possible state of affairs.

P2. The occurrence of a state of affairs that a claim rules out demonstrates that the claim is false.

C2. To meaningfully assert a claim, someone must be willing to withdraw it if the state of affairs it rules out were to occur.

P3. Religious believers refuse to specify which state of affairs would lead them to withdraw the claim that ‘God exists’.

C3. When religious believers say ‘God exists’, they do not rule out any state of affairs.

C4. The claim that ‘God exists’, when made by religious believers, is meaningless.

# Mitchell’s response

Mitchell accepts Flew’s cognitivism and his argument that for an empirical claim to be meaningful, we must allow something to count against it (P1). But he disagrees with Flew’s claim that an assertion is only meaningful if we are willing to withdraw it as false in light of certain experiences (C2).

Suppose there is a war in which someone’s country has been occupied, and he joins the resistance movement. One day, this partisan meets a stranger who tells him that he is the leader of the resistance. The partisan is very impressed by the stranger and trusts him deeply. However, the stranger later acts in ambiguous ways, sometimes seeming to help the resistance and other times apparently helping the enemy. But the partisan, because he trusts the stranger, continues to believe that the stranger is on the side of the resistance, and so must have some good reason for his ambiguous behaviour.

If the partisan refused to count the ambiguous actions of the stranger even as evidence against the claim that the stranger is on the side of the resistance, this would be irrational. Such a view would empty religious language of its meaning. But while recognising that there is evidence against his belief, the partisan is not rationally required to simply relinquish it. His trust sustains his belief in the stranger, and we cannot say, in the abstract, just how much evidence against his belief is needed before his belief becomes irrational and should be given up as false.

Likewise, religious language makes assertions, but these claims are not simply provisional hypotheses, to be discarded in the face of contrary experiences. They involve a certain commitment as well. A claim can be meaningful without us being able to say what experiences would lead us to relinquish it, as long as we recognise that experiences can count against it.

Flew accepts Mitchell’s response. However, he argues, that the logical problem of evil is insoluble. We are unable to find any justification of evil that is compatible with an omniscient, omnipotent, supremely good God, and the only way out for religious believers is to qualify what they mean by God or his purpose for us.

We can now object, though, that this is now no longer an argument about whether religious claims are meaningful, but about whether they are either true or coherent.

# Hare’s ‘bliks’

Hare responds to Flew in a very different way. He rejects Flew’s form of cognitivism. Religious beliefs are not like assertions that can be shown to be true or false. Instead, they are part of someone’s attitude toward or view of the world (or some aspect of it), which Hare calls a ‘blik’.

Hare gives a number of examples of bliks. First, someone may be paranoid that university lecturers want to murder him. He doesn’t count anything as evidence against this view (this is a normal feature of delusions). But the difference between his view and the view of the rest of us is meaningful, important and makes a difference to how we live. Another example is someone who trusts the properties of steel or the continued ability of a road to support cars v. someone who doesn’t; or someone who thinks everything happens by chance v. someone who believes in laws of nature. A disagreement in bliks can’t be decided by empirical experience, and two people who disagree may not assert anything different about what to expect from experience. Yet the disagreement is meaningful. To hold that God exists is a blik, as is the view that God does not exist.

It is unclear whether Hare thinks bliks – and so religious language – are cognitive or not. On the one hand, there is a truth of the matter (whatever one believes) whether university lecturers are trying to kill you or not or whether everything happens by chance or not. So it seems bliks can be true or false, which suggests that they are cognitive. On the other hand, because bliks can’t be falsified, Hare claims that they work more like attitudes or commitments than beliefs. This would suggest that they are non-cognitive. But notice that any empirical claim which would normally be held as a (cognitive) belief (about the motives of university lecturers, the properties of steel, the explanations of science) could be held as a (non-cognitive) blik. The difference is how the person thinks about it.

When someone holds a blik about some claim, while the rest of us just hold falsifiable beliefs, we tend to think that the person is irrational in some way. Does Hare’s analysis entail that religious believers are irrational? If not, why not? Hare doesn’t say. As Flew objects, Hare’s theory that religious belief is a blik is very unorthodox and fails to make sense of what religious believers actually say. If religious claims aren’t assertions, then a claim such as ‘You ought to do it because it is God’s will’ becomes ‘You ought to do it’ (since ‘it is God’s will’ is not an assertion, but the expression of a blik). But this is not what religious believers mean.