

The Philosophy of Religion

Religion, Ritual, and Rationality

Gregory W. Dawes

Department of Philosophy
University of Otago



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A Word to the Student Reader

Willow: *How is it you always know this stuff?*

You always know what's going on. I never know what's going on.

Giles: *Well, you weren't here from midnight until six researching it.*

Willow: *No, I was sleeping.*

(Buffy the Vampire Slayer)

The coursebook you have in your hands is the textbook for PHIL 229/239, Philosophy of Religion. (Students will receive a separate Course Outline – at no extra cost – containing practical information regarding practical matters, such as internal assessment.) It follows the outline of the lectures – each chapter corresponds to at least one lecture – and contains the material I shall discuss in class. To gain the most from your course of study, you should read the material relating to each class before attending. That will mean reading about eight pages (on average) for each session.

Since it functions as a textbook, the coursebook has a lot of information in it. But having read this material, don't think you can safely miss classes. It's unlikely you'll understand the key ideas without attending classes and taking part in discussions. Nor will reading other textbooks substitute for class attendance. The content of this course overlaps, but is not identical with, that of any other textbook. Nor is it particularly easy. Philosophy is not an easy option. Students sometimes suffer from the misapprehension that philosophy is 'just about ideas.' They think that in order to gain good marks in an essay all they have to do is to write down a few ideas, off the top of their heads. This is not true. We hope you will have some ideas of your own. But your ideas are unlikely to be worth anything unless you have read and understood the great thinkers who have preceded us.

Since philosophy is difficult, don't be alarmed if, on first reading the material, you have only the faintest idea what it is about. Don't panic! Take it slowly. Read the material once, go away and have a

coffee, then come back and read it again, highlighting the main points. Then write down some questions and bring them to class. By the time you have done this *and* attended the corresponding lecture, the issues should be reasonably clear. If they are not, contact me, so we can discuss it. Don't let yourself get behind in your reading and comprehension. Keep in mind that for the exam, you will have a choice of topics. You don't have to achieve equal mastery of all the issues dealt with in the course.

Apart from reading widely and deeply, the main skill you will require for this course is that of writing well. You'll need to be able to set out the ideas you are discussing as clearly as possible, avoiding vagueness and ambiguity. Philosophy does not just deal with ideas; it deals with facts. But many of the facts are facts of logic – facts about how persuasive arguments are – rather than facts that can be tested in a laboratory. There are good arguments and bad arguments and your primary task, as a philosophy student, is to identify arguments of both kinds. Clarity of expression is essential to this task. I have tried to make this coursebook a model of clear writing. If you think the ideas could be more clearly expressed, please let me know.

Writing clearly is not just a matter of 'style.' If I cannot understand what it is you are trying to say, I cannot give you marks for it. In any case, confused writing is generally a sign of muddled thinking. As the nineteenth-century German scholar David Friedrich Strauss once remarked,

we are apt to combine many things half-dreamily in our own minds which, when called upon to give them distinct outlines in the form of words and sentences, we discover to be wholly incoherent.

In a similar way, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said that you think with the tip of your pen. These days we are more likely to think with our fingers on a keyboard. In either case, you are thinking by giving ideas 'distinct outlines in the form of words and sentences.' So if you are not confident you can write clearly, do seek help. (The University's Student Learning Centre has some useful material.) It's a skill you can learn and it will serve you well, whatever you do.

INTRODUCTORY ISSUES

1. What is Religion?

It is notoriously difficult to produce an adequate definition of religion. There are many reasons for this. The first is that almost any proposed definition leaves out some set of beliefs and practices that we normally regard as religious. For instance, if we assume that religion involves belief in gods, what about Theravada Buddhism? Most Buddhists believe in gods, but you do not need to believe in gods to be a Buddhist (Williams and Tribe 2000: 4–5).

A second difficulty arises from the fact that our modern concept of a religion emerged within the worlds of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. So it is not clear that it is a useful concept to apply to other cultural contexts. Is there any such thing as ‘Hinduism,’ for instance, or did Western observers invent the term as a way of singling out and then lumping together a series of quite diverse Indian cultural traditions?

A third, related difficulty has to do with the way we use the term. In the academic study of religions, ‘religion’ is used to refer to a particular set of beliefs and practices (e.g. Christianity), comparable to other sets of beliefs and practices (e.g. Islam). The problem is that there have been other, quite different ways of using the term (Smith 1978: 15–50). In any case, no serious believer regards his religion as simply ‘a religion.’ Followers of the theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968), for instance, insist that the Christian revelation must be distinguished from all forms of ‘religion.’ Believers customarily regard other peoples’ religions either as mere human inventions, of no religious value, or as corruptions of their own divinely-revealed truth. Medieval European thinkers, for instance, tended to regard Islam, not as another religion parallel to Christianity, but as a heresy (Daniel 1993: 209–13).

A fourth difficulty arises from the fact that what we call ‘religions’ are not self-sufficient and clearly-defined units. Religious traditions overlap, have fuzzy edges, and are dependent on each other in complex ways.

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1.1 Definitions of Religion

Despite these difficulties, many attempts have been made to offer a definition of religion. There are at least four classes of definition on offer (Clark and Byrne 1993: 4–6). A first category is that of *experiential* or *attitudinal* definitions. These seek what is common to religions in some alleged experience of the divine or – in more detached treatments – in the attitude of believers towards what is thought of as divine. Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), for example, believed the heart of religion to be the experience of ‘the holy,’ as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* – an awe-inspiring but attractive mystery (Otto 1950: 5–7). Similarly, Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), the founder of sociology, thought that the common feature of all religions was a certain collective attitude towards sacred things, which are thought of as radically different from profane realities. Communication with the sacred can be dangerous, and those who wish to enter the world of the sacred must first be transformed (Durkheim 1915: 38–40).

A second category is that of *substantive* definitions of religion, which focus on the content of religious beliefs. E. B. Tylor (1832–1917), for instance, who was the founder of the field of anthropology, described religion simply as “belief in Supernatural Beings” (Tylor 1913 1.424). This view dropped out of favour for a time, but has been revived by Robin Horton, who unashamedly describes his approach to religion as ‘neo-Tylorian’ (Horton 1993: 53). Still more recently, cognitive scientists have come to be interested in the content of religious beliefs. A leading figure here is Dan Sperber, whose ideas have been taken up by thinkers such as Justin Barrett, Pascal Boyer, and Scott Atran. These thinkers are of particular interest to philosophers, since philosophers have always been predisposed to think of religion in terms of belief. This study is no exception: its focus will be on religious beliefs, even though it will try to locate these beliefs in a wider context.

A third category is that of *functional* definitions of religion, which define religion in terms of the role religious beliefs and practices

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play in people's lives. Their question is not so much 'What *is* religion?' as 'What do religions *do*?' What roles do they play, in the lives of individuals or society as a whole? A well known functional definition of religion is offered by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. A religion, he writes, is

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with an aura of factuality so that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz 1993: 90)

A perhaps more clearly functional definition is offered by Keith Yandell. A religion, Yandell writes, is

a conceptual system that provides an interpretation of the world and the place of human beings in it, bases an account of how life should be lived given that interpretation, and expresses this interpretation and lifestyle in a set of rituals, institutions, and practices (Yandell 1999: 16.)

Yandell is a philosopher and, as one might expect, his definition focuses on religious beliefs.

Traditionally, attempts to define religion have followed one of two paths (Alston 1967: 140–41). Some seek to identify what philosophers call *necessary and sufficient conditions*, that is to say, features that are common to all religions and characteristic only of religion. Others try to identify what we might call the *essence* of religion: the central feature that makes something religious. But there is a third path, advocated by many recent thinkers. These argue that the best we can achieve is a *family-resemblance* approach to religion. (See, for instance, Alston 1967: 141–43.) The family-resemblance view argues that we are justified in calling these diverse cultural phenomena 'religions' even if there is no single quality they all have in common. What unites religions is "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing," to use Ludwig Wittgenstein's phrase (1958: §66 [32]). In this respect, we may compare the term 'religion'

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to the term ‘game.’ It seems there is no single feature that is common to all games. You can’t define a game as something played for pleasure (some are played for profit), or as being competitive (some are played by oneself), or as having winners and losers (consider a game of make-believe). Yet if we regard activity *A* as a game – it might be our paradigm case of a game, in the sense of an undisputed application of the term – we may regard activity *B* as a game if it is in some way similar to *A*. Activity *C* may be then regarded as a game by virtue of its similarity to *B*, and so on.

There is something to be said for each of these approaches. Which you favour will depend on what you are trying to do. If you feel the need to justify the use of the term ‘religion’ for phenomena as different as Confucianism and Orthodox Judaism (for example), then Wittgenstein’s discussion of *family resemblances* is a good place to start. Anthropologists, because they are interested in the role played by religion in particular societies, are more likely to adopt a *functional* definition. Philosophers, in turn, have a different set of interests. They are interested in the justification (or at least the rationality) of religious beliefs. This leads them in the direction of a *substantive* definition of religion. Religion, or at least the particular form of religion they are studying, is defined in terms of a certain set of beliefs.

1.2 Classical Theism

The form of religion that philosophers of religion generally take as their starting-point is what I shall describe as *classical theism*, or (for simplicity’s sake) simply *theism*. Theism is a philosophical statement – what some philosophers call a ‘rational reconstruction’ (Reichenbach 1938: 5–6) – of the underlying principles of the three great Middle-Eastern religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. More precisely, it is a formulation of the doctrine of God that is to be found in the classical thinkers of all three traditions. One thinks, for example, of Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) in Judaism, Thomas Aquinas

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(ca. 1225–74) in Christianity, and Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali in Islam (1058–1111). What is this foundational theistic doctrine?

It is the view that there exists a god who is

a person without a body (i.e. a spirit), present everywhere, the creator and sustainer of the universe, a free agent, able to do everything (i.e. omnipotent), knowing all things [omniscient], perfectly good, a source of moral obligation, immutable, eternal, a necessary being, holy, and worthy of worship. (Swinburne 1979: 2)

There are Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers who would not subscribe to aspects of this definition – process theologians, for instance, deny that God is immutable – but it does represent the historically dominant view of God. It is not always articulated by religious believers. In practice they are more likely to say things like “God gave Moses the Torah on Mt Sinai” or “Jesus died for the sins of the world” or “Muhammad is the last and greatest of the prophets.” But of course each of these propositions presupposes belief in God, a belief that is articulated by philosophically minded religious thinkers.

1.3 Restricted and Expanded Theism

I have defined theism in terms of belief in a creator God and have set out a couple of descriptions of what we mean by ‘God.’ You may have noticed how minimal such definitions are when compared to the rich bodies of doctrine we find in actual religions. Judaism, for instance, certainly takes for granted the existence of such a God, but it goes on to speak of God’s choice of Abraham and his descendants, the giving of the *Torah* (Law) to Moses on Sinai, the revelations made through the prophets throughout Israel’s history, and the varying responses that Israel made to these revelations. Christianity builds on these ideas to speak of the dire state of human beings, entrapped by sin, the sending of the Son of God in human flesh to deal with sin, the founding of the Church and the sending of the Holy Spirit, as well as the promised consummation of this plan in the end-times. Islam has

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its own account of God's dealings with humanity, culminating in the sending of the prophet Muhammad as the last and greatest of God's messengers, who came with guidance for humanity. To be a theist has traditionally been thought to be a *necessary* condition of being a religious Jew, a Christian or a Muslim, but it is by no means a *sufficient* condition.

William Rowe has highlighted this point by means of a distinction between *restricted theism* and *expanded theism*. Classical theism as I have defined it corresponds to restricted theism. It is the belief that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being who created the world. Expanded theism is the same belief "conjoined with certain other significant religious claims, claims about sin, redemption, a future life, a last judgment, and the like" (Rowe 1990: 161). So expanded theism takes a variety of forms, depending on the religious tradition with which one is dealing. While I shall normally use the unqualified term 'theism' in the discussions that follow, it should be understood in the sense of *restricted* theism. When I do deal with expanded theism, the prime example will be that of *Christian* theism.

This distinction has an interesting implication. You might, for example, be convinced by one or more of the traditional proofs for the existence of God, but still have no reason to join any particular religious communities. In Rowe's terminology, you might be convinced of the truth of *restricted* theism, but remain unconvinced regarding any particular form of *expanded* theism. So whether or not one can be a Christian (for example) without being a theist, it does seem possible to be a theist without being a Christian (Jew or Muslim). This option, or something resembling it, is sometimes referred to as 'deism.' It is a historically significant position – one can argue that many of the founding fathers of the United States were deists rather than traditional Christians – but once again it is a minority view.

2. Religion as Communal Activity

However we define religion, it is important to note that religion is a communal activity. This fact has not always been appreciated by scholars of religion, who have suffered from a kind of Protestant Christian bias, in which the focus is on the individual and his or her relation with God (Neusner 1988). The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), for example, remarked that

religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness.... if you are never solitary, you are never religious. Collective enthusiasms, revivals, institutions, churches, rituals, bibles, codes of behaviour, are the trappings of religion, its passing forms. (Whitehead 1926: 6–7)

In a similar way, another philosopher, William James (1842–1910), deliberately ignored the institutional dimensions of religion, in order to focus on what he called

the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine (James 1928: 31).

This focus may be defensible if what you are interested in is religious *experience*, as James was. But it seems too narrow even then. Even if my experience is caused by some external object – such as my experience of the coffee cup on the desk in front of me – the way in which I understand that experience will be shaped by the language which I speak and the culture to which I belong. My cat also perceives the coffee cup, but does not perceive it *as* a coffee cup. In a similar way, one cannot understand religious experiences without understanding how they are shaped (if not created) by the individual's existing concepts and beliefs. Those concepts and beliefs are largely inherited, from the community to which the individual belongs.

In fairness to Whitehead, he does recognize this. In an approach that is very similar to the one I shall be adopting, he suggests that

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religion begins with ritual, which is essentially a communal activity. But as religion develops, he argues, it becomes more and more focused on the individual and its central insights are developed by individuals in solitude. As Whitehead writes,

the great religious conceptions which haunt the imaginations of civilized mankind are scenes of solitariness: Prometheus chained to his rock, Mahomet brooding in the desert, the meditations of the Buddha, the solitary Man on the Cross. It belongs to the depth of the religious spirit to have felt forsaken, even by God. (Whitehead 1926: 9)

Well, perhaps it does. But the understanding of the God by whom you feel forsaken is not a product of the individual alone; it is first and foremost inherited from the community.

The communal nature of religion was emphasized by the founder of sociology, Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). For Durkheim, the key category for the study of religion was that of the sacred, which embraces things set apart from the everyday, or the profane. It is not just supernatural beings that are considered sacred, but certain people, objects, myths, beliefs, and rituals. On this view Buddhism is a religion, even if it does not demand belief in gods, for “it admits the existence of sacred things, namely the four noble truths and the practices derived from them” (Durkheim 1915: 37). Nonetheless, Durkheim insists that we don’t have a religion until we have a community united by the recognition of the sacred. He defines religion as

a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them. (Durkheim 1915: 47)

Interestingly, for Durkheim it was this communal dimension that distinguished the rituals of religion from those of magic. Magic is resorted to by individuals, rather than recognized by a community: “there is no Church of magic” (Durkheim 1915: 44). Durkheim is an important figure for this discussion. The anthropological descrip-

tions of religion I shall use are indebted to Durkheim, not just in their focus on the category of the sacred, but also in their recognition that religion is a communal phenomenon.

2.1 Community, Tradition, and Ritual

There are two important points to note about the communal dimension of religion. The first is the connection between religion and tradition. Religious believers do not invent their beliefs and practices; they inherit them. They do not necessarily inherit their religion from their parents, although that is probably true of most believers. After all, people do convert to religions, embracing a faith that was not that of their family. But converting to a religion means entering into a tradition that pre-existed you.

Nor do religious believers generally reshape that tradition, at least not in any radical way. The tradition is considered authoritative, in ways we shall explore. It is to be accepted rather than changed. Often, indeed, the tradition is thought to be of divine origin: it is a *sacred* tradition. What it means for a tradition to be considered sacred is a question to which I shall return (in chap. 6). But one of the things it means is that certain beliefs are considered to be unquestionable.

Secondly, a vital element of any religious tradition is ritual. Ritual is going to play an important role in my discussion, partly because philosophers are inclined to overlook it, focusing as we do upon beliefs. I shall also focus on belief, but I shall insist that belief is rooted in ritual, which is in one sense more fundamental. R. R. Marett (1866–1943) wrote about the religion of tribal societies that it

is something not so much thought out as danced out; that, in other words, it develops under conditions, psychological and sociological, which favour emotional and motor processes, whereas ideation remains relatively in abeyance. (Marett 1914: 31)

Marett's point seems true of religion in general: it is enacted in rituals as well as believed; indeed it may be enacted in rituals *before* it is

believed. What it is important to note here is that those rituals are communal rituals. Even when they are enacted by “individual men in their solitude,” they are rituals they have inherited from the community to which they belong.

2.2 Science and Religion

You might respond that while this is true, it is true of practically all cultural activities. They are all communal in this sense. Individuals can be creative – they can bring about something new – but even their creativity normally takes the form of developing ideas and practices that pre-existed them. The history of modern science is often depicted as a succession of individual geniuses: Galileo, Newton, Faraday, Maxwell, Einstein, and so on. But it, too, can only be understood as a communal activity. The modern sciences are not successful merely because they employ particularly reliable forms of reasoning or good experimental methods. A key factor in their success is that their practitioners are organised into particular kinds of communities, which have distinctive procedures (Hull 1988). (Peer-review, for example, is a communal procedure, as is the granting of credit for new discoveries.)

As I hope will become clear, however, the collective procedures of scientific communities are very different from those of religious communities. The procedures of scientific communities involve the formulation of testable hypotheses, which are responsive to new experiences and may be entirely overhauled or abandoned if better hypotheses emerge. The procedures of religious communities involve the acceptance by means of ritual of a particular set of narratives and beliefs, which in themselves are considered unquestionable and to which the individual’s life is expected to conform. So the question is not whether religion and science are both communal realities – they certainly are – but what kind of community is characteristic of each.

3. Religion and Obligation

Some elements of what I've just said about religion and science may be controversial. But here's one that is not. One way in which religious belief differs from the acceptance of a scientific theory is that religious belief involves a commitment to live a certain kind of life. It involves the acceptance of an obligation to live in a particular manner, as a member of a particular community. Religious utterances have, in other words, not only a communal but also an ethical dimension.

The point is made vividly by Clifford Geertz, whose definition of religion we've already encountered (1.1), Geertz points out that religions embody not merely a *worldview* but also an *ethos*.

Religion is never merely metaphysics. For all peoples the forms, vehicles, and objects of worship are suffused with a deep moral seriousness. The holy bears within it everywhere a sense of intrinsic obligation: it not only encourages devotion, it demands it; it not only induces intellectual assent, it enforces emotional commitment. ... Never merely metaphysics, religion is never merely ethics either. The sources of its moral vitality is conceived to lie in the fidelity with which it expresses the fundamental nature of reality. The powerfully coercive 'ought' is felt to grow out of a comprehensive factual 'is'... (Geertz 1993: 126)

There is, perhaps, a sense in which the worldview is fundamental, since the ethos is supported by the worldview (not *vice versa*). But the important thing to note is that religious belief is never a matter of worldview alone.

3.1 The Theory of Speech Acts

One way of thinking about this is by way of what is called 'speech act theory.' The philosopher J. L. Austin (1911–60) famously pointed out that we use words not merely to state facts, but also to bring about new facts, new states of affairs. We can do so in a variety of ways.

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Perhaps the simplest is that of making a request. When I say to you at table, “please pass me the salt,” I am attempting to change your behaviour, by requesting you to perform a certain action. Unlike some other kinds of speech acts, this doesn’t work automatically – you might refuse to do so – but that’s my intention in uttering it. When I say, on the other hand, “I promise to return the exam papers on Monday,” I have performed a slightly different kind of speech act. It commits me to behaving in a particular way. This *does* bring about a certain effect automatically: not, of course, the action to which it refers – I might fail to bring the papers – but the existence of a certain obligation. Another kind of speech act is illustrated by my uttering, “I, Greg, take you Kristin to be my wife,” in the appropriate context. Once again, this automatically brings about a certain effect, namely the existence of a new instance of a social institution, namely marriage, which brings with it certain rights and privileges.

John Searle has argued that there are five different types of speech acts. These are

- (a) *assertives*, which state matters of fact, describing how things are,
- (b) *directives* (orders, command, and requests), whose intention is to get others to behave in a certain way,
- (c) *commissives* (promises, vows, pledges, and so on), which commit the speaker to a particular course of action,
- (d) *expressives*, which express the speaker’s feelings or attitudes, and
- (e) *declarations* (like that involves in the pronunciation of a marriage vow), in which “we make something the case by declaring it to be the case.” (Searle 2010: 59)

Searle argues, in fact, that these are the *only possible* kinds of speech acts, but we need not follow that argument here. What I am interested in is the question, What kind of speech acts are religious utterances, such as those that profess belief in God?

3.2 Religious Utterances

A key idea that I shall emphasize in this study is that religious utterances cannot be thought of as simply assertives, or statements about the way the world is. When a Christian pronounces the words of the Creed, which begins “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth,” she is not merely saying that she judges it to be the case that God exists. She *is* saying this, of course: I shall argue later (in chap. 9) that the followers of Ludwig Wittgenstein neglect this fact to their peril. But the believer’s profession of faith also commits her to a particular way of life. It is a different kind of utterance from, “I believe that the earth orbits the sun.” The latter does not commit me to a certain way of living: the acceptance of a Copernican view of the solar system carries with it no corresponding set of moral obligations. But profession of the Christian creed does commit me to a certain way of life.

This is perhaps even clearer in the case of Islam. It’s very easy to become a Muslim. All one must do is to pronounce the *shahāda*, the profession of faith (literally, a ‘bearing witness’), in Arabic, three times before two Muslim witnesses. The *shahāda* reads

لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ (lā ‘ilāha ‘illā l-Lāh, Muhammadun rasūlu l-Lāh)

There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God.

This looks very much like what Searle calls a *declaration*: it not only states what is thought to be a fact (as an *assertive* would), but it also brings about a new state of affairs. Having made this declaration, I have gained a new status, that of being a Muslim, and a new set of obligations, that of living according to the *sharī‘a*, the “straight path” revealed to the Prophet.

3.3 Direction of Fit

Another way of thinking about this is in terms of ‘direction of fit.’ Philosophers often distinguish beliefs and desires by saying that they have differing relations to the states of affairs to which they refer. We can think of both beliefs and desires as *intentional states*, states of mind that have a relation to the world (they are ‘about’ something, as we say). Each aims at a particular kind of right relation between the mind and reality, a particular way in which that intentional state can be ‘satisfied’ (Searle 2010: 29). But the relation between mind and reality differs between beliefs and desires. When I say, “I believe that it is raining,” the appropriate direction of fit is from my utterance to the world: what must change if my intentional state is to be satisfied is my utterance. What I say, in other words, ought to reflect the way the world is. But if I say, “I wish it were raining,” what I am expressing is a desire that the world should conform to the content of my utterance. So the appropriate direction of fit here is from the world to my utterance: what has to change if my intentional state is to be satisfied is the world.

This may all seem a bit abstract. But Elizabeth Anscombe (1919–2001) offers a lovely illustration (Humberstone 1992: 59). Imagine a man going shopping with a shopping list while being trailed by a private detective who is recording his purchases. If we compare the man’s shopping list with what is actually in his trolley and we find the two do not agree, the failing lies in the man’s ability as a shopper. He has failed to bring some actual state of affairs (the contents of the trolley) into agreement with the list. The direction of fit here is from trolley to list. But if the private detective fails to make an accurate list of what the man is purchasing, the failing lies in his ability to make an accurate list. The detective has failed to bring his list into conformity with the contents of the trolley. The direction of fit here is from list to trolley: the list must match the trolley.

What’s characteristic of religious utterances is that they normally have a double direction of fit. They are – to use another common dis-

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tinction – both ‘models of’ and ‘models for’ (Geertz 1993: 93). (Scientific models, by way of contrast, are simply *models of* some aspect of the world.) Religious utterances both state what is thought to be some fact and commit the speaker to bringing his or her life into conformity with that fact. And not just his or her life. In modern liberal democracies, we are used to a certain separation of church and state, as it were. But this is by no means the case elsewhere, nor was it normally the case in the Christian world before the eighteenth century. Religious believers are often committed to bringing not just their own lives, but the entire social world into conformity with what they believe to be a divinely sanctioned (and therefore unquestionable) order. Religious beliefs often have a strongly political dimension, as well as an ethical one. That’s one of the features that makes religion such a powerful force in the contemporary world.

4. God and Morality

The discussion so far has brought us to the first of our substantive philosophical discussions, that of the relation between religion and ethics. It is worth pausing for a moment to examine this issue more closely. Just what is the relation between religion and morality?

“If there is no God, everything is permitted.” In Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov* this sentiment is attributed to the character of Ivan (Dostoevsky 1994: 87, 330). What Ivan articulates so strikingly is a view that many people share. Religion and morality, they argue, go hand in hand. So if we value morality, we cannot afford to abandon religion. This suggestion can take quite sophisticated forms. No less a figure than the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), while confessing his own lack of belief, argued that the maintenance of religion was necessary for society as a whole (Malinowski 1936: 62). But is this true? Do we need religion if we are to act morally?

4.1 Religion and Motivation

It is often suggested that we need religion in order to live well. But it is not always clear what this means. One interpretation is that without the sanctions that religion provides, we would not have any *motivation* to obey moral injunctions. Many religions offer the hope of heaven to those who act virtuously and the fear of hell to those who act badly. Surely this is important? Well, it may be or it may not. If it were, then we would expect religious believers to behave better than atheists. Is this the case?

It is often assumed that it is, but hard evidence is difficult to come by. What studies there have been yield results that are, perhaps, surprising (Argyle 2000: 198–99). Except for ‘hedonistic’ crimes, associated with alcohol or drugs, religious people show little propensity to be more law-abiding than their non-religious fellow-citizens. With regard to personal morality, those who belong to close-knit religious

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communities are less likely to engage in extra-marital or pre-marital sex. But there are striking exceptions. With regard to contraception and abortion, for instance, Roman Catholics, seem to pay little heed to the teachings of their church. Religious people do seem more likely than their non-religious neighbours to engage in voluntary work, but overall they also display higher rates of prejudice against minority groups. In other words, depending on what you take as your indicator of moral behaviour, religious belief may or may not appear to be an important source of motivation. The evidence is at best ambiguous.

A more serious objection to this argument regarding motivation is that a morality that depends upon promised rewards and threatened punishments would be a poor kind of morality. Religious and non-religious thinkers alike agree that the motivation for moral behaviour should not be merely self-interest. Many religious thinkers have insisted, for example, that God should be worshipped and obeyed because he is God, not because he has promised to reward his worshippers and punish those who ignore him. The eighth-century Sufi mystic Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya is said to have gone one day through the streets of her town (Basra) with a jug of water and a burning torch. When asked what she was doing, she replied:

I am going to light fire in Paradise and to pour water onto Hell so that both veils may completely disappear ... and the servants of God may see Him, without any object of hope or motive of fear. (Smith 1994: 123)

The same woman is reported to have prayed:

O my Lord, if I worship Thee from fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship Thee from hope of Paradise, exclude me thence, but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake then withhold not from me Thine Eternal Beauty. (Smith 1994: 50)

Once again, God is to be worshipped for his own sake, not for the sake of his rewards or because of fear of his punishments. Similar sentiments could be found in other theistic traditions.

4.2 The Metaethical Question

The relation between religion and morality does, however, raise an important philosophical question. I have argued that in making a religious commitment I am assuming a particular set of obligations. These ethical obligations are supported by a particular view of the world. One way in which they are often supported is to say that they represent the commands of a god, or – in the case of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – the one God, who is himself morally perfect. But is this an adequate basis for moral obligations?

The classic starting-point for this discussion is Plato's *Euthyphro* dialogue. This is normally understood to place the religious person in a dilemma: she is faced with just two choices, neither of which is acceptable. The setting of the dialogue is outside the royal court of Athens, where Socrates is awaiting his own trial on the charge of corrupting the young. There he meets a certain Euthyphro, who is there prosecuting his own father. On his father's estate a labourer, in a drunken rage, had killed one of his fellows. Euthyphro's father had bound the murderer and left him in a ditch while deciding what to do with him. While lying untended in the ditch, the murder had himself died. Euthyphro, who is presented as a deeply religious man, believes that the pious thing to do is for him to bring a charge against his father. He holds that the gods would approve of this action, however repugnant that might appear on other grounds. Socrates expresses astonishment that Euthyphro should be so confident about the demands of piety and presses him to explain just what piety is. In the course of their conversation, Socrates poses the question "whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved by the gods" (*Euthyphro* 10a; Plato 1970: 1.46).

We can spell out this question in more modern terms. "Are morally good acts good because God wills them, or does God will them because they are morally good?" If the theist chooses the second answer to this question – that God commands certain things be-

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cause they are good – she is faced with what we can call the independence problem. This answer implies that the good exists prior to God's command and that moral facts are independent of God. But if God is to be truly God, nothing ought to be independent of him. Worse still, it implies that there is a higher authority to which God himself is bound. So the theist may well be attracted to the first option, a divine command view of ethics: things are morally good because God commands them. This has the advantage of offering what might appear to be the most objective of all foundations for our moral codes, as well as an explanation of why they are prescriptive. It also has the advantage (for the theist) of making religion indispensable as the foundation of morality.

But the divine command theorist is also faced with a problem, indeed two problems. The first is what we may call the emptiness problem. The proposition "God is good" now becomes an empty formula. More precisely, the proposition "God's actions are good" reduces to the trivial "God's actions are God's actions" or "God's actions correspond to God's commands." To say that God is morally perfect would be to say no more than that he acts consistently. This leads to the second problem, that of abhorrent commands. If God is not bound by any pre-existing moral standards, he could wake up tomorrow morning (speaking metaphorically) and decree that torturing small children is now good. Worse still, if what it means for something to be good is simply that it is commanded by God, torturing small children would then be good. But this is surely a repugnant doctrine.

It may be, however, that a modified divine command theory is defensible. Following J. L. Mackie (1917–81), this view distinguishes the descriptive and the prescriptive element in ethics. The descriptive element of a religiously-based ethic could be taken to be the way of living that is "most appropriate for human beings" (Mackie 1990: 230). Aristotle would have said that it is the way of life that will lead to *eudaimonia* ('well-being' or 'happiness'). Indirectly, of course, this way of living would derive from God, insofar as God is the one who

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created human beings in the first place. But it would be a fact about human beings that would be in principle independent of any divine command. God himself could not alter it without altering human nature, that is to say, without re-creating us. Alongside this descriptive element in ethics, Mackie argues, there is a prescriptive element. It is here that the theist could make reference to the divine command. God commands us to act in a way that corresponds to how we are created and that will lead to human well-being. This explains why ethical principles are action-guiding. This solution would enable the theist to combine the best of the independence thesis with the best of a divine command theory of ethics. Nor is this solution entirely hypothetical. Something closely akin to this view is in fact held by the followers of the medieval Catholic theologian, Thomas Aquinas.

My immediate purpose here, however, has been to point out that there is an intimate connection between religion and ethics, however one thinks about the nature of that connection. The connection means that religious utterances, in the appropriate context and with the appropriate intention, create moral obligations. It follows that the speech acts involved in religious utterances are rarely, if ever, purely assertive. This insight should reshape how we think about the philosophy of religion, which is my next topic.

PART ONE: THE STRUCTURE OF RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

5. The Logic of Religion

I have argued that religious utterances most commonly take the form of a particular kind of speech act: one that does not merely state what is thought to be a fact, but also commits the speaker to living in a certain way. What I want to argue now is that the propositions that are uttered in such contexts also ‘hang together’ (as it were) in a very particular manner. We can think of this as the *structure* of religious discourse, understanding structure here as *logical* structure. What I am about to examine are how propositions that are regarded as sacred – the kinds of propositions that are used in religious contexts – fall into classes and are related to one another.

This kind of analysis is not commonly done by philosophers of religion, who are inclined to (a) regard religious propositions as primarily assertive and (b) treat them all in the same way, as explanatory claims about the world. Much of the philosophy of religion has consisted in examining just how plausible these proposed religious explanations are. What evidence is there that God exists and what reason is there to deny God’s existence? It is perfectly legitimate to take religious propositions in this way: I shall do so myself when discussing the justification of religious discourse. But a logic of this kind is very different from that which prevails among religious thinkers. What I am interested in here is the kind of logic that actually prevails within religious communities, rather than the logical structure imposed upon religious beliefs by philosophers. The philosophers’ question is, “Do we have adequate reason to believe these propositions to be true?” or, perhaps, “Are we acting rationally in holding them to be true?” As we shall see, that is a question rarely asked by religious thinkers.

I am not, however, completely abandoning philosophy in favour of anthropology, for the analysis that follows is based on a work by a twentieth-century philosophy, Polish logician, Józef Maria Bocheński (1902–95). In a work entitled *The Logic of Religion*, Bocheński speaks about four or perhaps five classes of religious

propositions. His analysis has more recently been picked up and developed by an anthropologist, namely Roy A. Rappaport (1926–97), whose *magnum opus*, completed just before he died, is entitled *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. His early book, *Pigs for the Ancestors* (1968), was based on field work among the Tsembaga Maring people in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. So Rappaport's work gives us some reason to think that the analysis is applicable not just to the three great monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), but to religion more generally.

5.1 Ultimate Sacred Postulates

The first and most important class of religious propositions consists of what Rappaport calls “Ultimate Sacred Postulates” (Rappaport 1999: 263). These are the central claims of religions, which are implicit in their key rituals and (in more developed religions) expressed explicitly in statements of faith and creeds. They correspond to what Bocheński calls “rho-sentences” – the “rho” here referring to the Greek letter (ρ) – such as “There is a God,” “Christ is the Son of God,” or “Muhammad is the Prophet of God” (Bocheński 1965: 59–60).

Such propositions have two important characteristics. The first is that they are considered sacred. Indeed, the truths they are thought to express are often being thought to be divinely revealed. The second and related characteristic is that they are considered unquestionable (Rappaport 1999: 281). These key claims are considered necessarily, not contingently true, and they are considered necessarily true in the strongest possible sense of this phrase. They are most emphatically **not** held in the way in which scientific hypothesis are held, as explanatory claims that could be revised. As Rappaport puts it, they are “not taken to be true because they have survived tests that, assessing them against facts, could have found them false. They are not amenable to such tests” (Rappaport 1999: 294).

Another way of putting this is that the ultimate sacred postulates are considered to enjoy the greatest conceivable degree of certainty. As Bocheński puts it, focusing on the question of the perceived certainty of these postulates, all such sentences

have to be considered as possessing the probability 1. In most theologies it is even asserted that the certainty of the ρ -sentences is by far greater, indeed belongs to a quite different order, than the certainty of any other sentence. This, however, is a psychological matter; logically there is no probability higher than 1. (Bocheński 1965: 61)

Logically, of course, this is true: no proposition can have a degree of certainty great than 1. But believers can and do consider their central beliefs to have a higher degree of certainty than any other form of knowledge. This psychological fact is important, for it relates to conflicts between claims based on religious faith and those based on human knowledge, such as science. If the ultimate postulates of religion are thought to enjoy a greater degree of certainty than the theories of science, then it is not hard to see which will be given priority when they come into (at least apparent) conflict.

5.2 Heuristic Rules

Given the importance of ultimate sacred postulates, it is vital to know which propositions belong in this category. So religions will have rules that specify how one is to identify the sacred propositions: those whose content is considered unquestionable. The very fact of being represented and embodied in a ritual gives a particular status: coupled with what I shall call ‘the basic dogma’ (5.3), the fact of being embodied in the religion’s central rituals will single it out as one of the ultimate postulates (Rappaport 1999: 290–91). But developed religions will also have explicit rules, ‘heuristic rules,’ as we might call them, for singling out the ultimate postulates.

These rules have two functions. First, they make it clear where we can find the ultimate postulates. For many religions, for example, such postulates are to be found in Sacred Scripture, which is sacred

because it is thought to have been revealed or inspired by God. This is, however, often combined with the acceptance of some human authority. In Islam, for instance, the example of Muhammad – embodied in his *sunna* or ‘practice’ – is considered to have an authority which is practically equal to that of the Qur’an.

The second function of heuristic rules is a hermeneutical one. Hermeneutics (itself named after Hermes, or Mercury, the messenger of the gods) is the art or science of interpretation, particularly the interpretation of texts. It is not enough to say that the ultimate postulates are to be found in Sacred Scripture; religions also need to spell out how Scripture is to be interpreted. In Roman Catholic Christianity, for instance, the Bible is to be interpreted in the light of the traditions and authoritative teachings of the Church, while in Protestant Christianity it is believed that the Bible can be rightly interpreted by each individual, with the inner guidance of the Holy Spirit. It follows that here, too, human authorities may play an important role, as divinely authorized interpreters of the Sacred Scripture or community traditions.

5.3 The Basic Dogma

What Bocheński calls the ‘basic dogma’ of a religious tradition is not always made explicit, but it is an assumption that plays an important role in religious thought. It is a kind of meta-statement about the first two classes of propositions. It states that whatever is specified by the heuristic rules to belong to the set of sacred postulates is to be accepted as unquestionably true.

I have used the phrase ‘*accepted as true*’ deliberately, for it seems a better description of the required attitude than *belief*. After all the basic dogma states an attitude that you ought to have, indeed which you are required to have, as a member of the community. This implies that it is somehow under your control. But belief – the propositional attitude of considering something to be true – doesn’t seem to be something we can directly control. The idea that we *can* choose to

believe something is often called ‘belief voluntarism,’ but it seems, on the face of it, implausible. (Give it a go. Try to believe – actually believe, not just imagine it – that there was a cat sitting on my desk as I wrote these words.) But we can choose to accept something.

What does acceptance mean in this context? L. Jonathan Cohen, for instance, has defended an idea of acceptance that distinguishes it from belief. To accept some proposition p , Cohen argues,

is to have a policy of deeming, positing, or postulating that p – that is, of going along with that proposition (either for the long term or for immediate purposes only) as a premiss in some or all contexts for one’s own and others’ proofs, argumentation, inferences, deliberations, etc. (Cohen 1989: 368)

Acceptance can be a voluntary act, whereas belief typically lies beyond our immediate control (Cohen 1989: 369–70; 1992: 44–48). And while acceptance may sometimes go hand-in-hand with belief – in deed it may often lead to belief – there are other occasions when it does not. Acceptance means acting *as if* something were true, but this is not the same as *considering* it to be true. A scientist, for example, might accept a theory, but be reluctant to say she believes it (McMullin 2002: 275). I shall come back to the question of belief and acceptance shortly (in chap. 6). It is not clear that theistic religions demand *belief* in God, at least in the first instance. But they do demand an *acceptance* of God’s existence.

5.4 Sanctified Sentences

There is a fourth category of religious proposition that Bocheński calls “tau-rho” ($\tau\rho$) sentences, but which Rappaport (less obscurely) calls *sanctified sentences*. These articulate propositions that are sacred, but not in an unquestionable way: they derive their sanctity by virtue of their relation with the ultimate sacred postulates. They are, therefore, revisable, at least in principle, if the revision can be seen as consistent with the ultimate postulates.

Particular ethical commands can be understood in this way. Insofar as they are thought to be derived from Sacred Scripture (or the teachings of some other authority specified by the heuristic rules), they are sacred. But unless they are *explicitly* stated in Sacred Scripture, their sanctity will be of a lesser standing than that of the ultimate sacred postulates. Within Islam, for instance, the commands explicitly stated in the Qur'an or the reports of the *sunna* (practice) of the Prophet are generally considered unquestionable. But there are other commands that are derived from the Qur'an and *sunna*, by (for instance) analogical reasoning. Often these deal with new situations that have arisen since the time of the Prophet. (Is it permissible, for instance, for an infertile couple to make use of third-party donor insemination in order to have a child?) Muslims are expected to adhere to the consensus view of the scholars on such issues, if indeed there is a consensus. But that consensus may change over time. Similarly, within Roman Catholic Christianity, there are certain papal teachings that are considered unquestionable: they cannot be changed, since on the occasions when they are put forward the Pope is considered infallible. But there are other papal teachings that Catholics are expected to adhere to, but which most theologians do *not* consider to be unquestionable. An example would be current papal teachings regarding contraception.

Claims regarding institutions and people can also be sanctified by being derived in some way from the ultimate postulates. Kingship, for instance, in medieval Europe was often seen as a divinely established institution. Kings and queens in England are still anointed by church authorities and are considered to rule by the grace of God. But their authority is not considered utterly unquestionable. Even in societies that have apparently thrown off the idea of divinely appointed rulers, we find that sacred authority is invoked to help ensure the reliability of testimony. Witnesses can be asked in court to swear on the Bible, or some other set of Sacred Scriptures. The United States may have a constitutional separation of Church and State, but it

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portrays itself to itself as ‘One Nation under God,’ its motto is ‘in God we Trust,’ and it swears officials into office with their hands upon the Bible. Its founding document grounds the rights of man whose security, it states, constitutes government’s reason for being, not only in nature and in reason, but in God. (Rappaport 1999: 318–19)

As I noted earlier (1.3), there is reason to think that many of the founders of the United States were deists rather than orthodox Christians. Nonetheless, these references to God as the ultimate guarantor of the legitimacy of their constitutional arrangements is striking.

Incidentally, when religions adapt, it is generally by altering propositions of this kind. The ultimate sacred postulates tend to speak of beings and forces that lie beyond observation: they occupy a spiritual world that interact with, but is distinct from, that of everyday life. But then ways must be found of specifying what their existence and operation means in the world of everyday life. Very often, that is the task of the sanctified sentences. So while the ultimate postulates are unquestionable, their implications are often unclear. The sanctified sentences spell out these implications, but they are not themselves unquestionable. It is this combination of (a) unquestionable ultimate postulates and (b) questionable sanctified sentences that give religious traditions their flexibility (Rappaport 1999: 248). As one Anglican minister in New Zealand said recently, “belief in God is not up for grabs, but we can choose to celebrate the marriage of a gay couple if we want to.”

6. A Theory of the Sacred

At this point, I can draw some of these ideas together in order to set out what we might call ‘a theory of the sacred,’ a way of understanding how certain propositions come to be regarded as sacred. This is, strictly speaking, not a matter of philosophical analysis. It is an empirically testable theory about religion. It does seem to be supported by historical and anthropological evidence, but it remains simply a proposal.

I mentioned earlier that a vital element in any religious tradition is ritual (2.1). Following Roy Rappaport, I want to suggest that religious rituals are a kind of performative act, of the type analyzed by J. L. Austin and John Searle (3.1). Religious rituals bring about a new state of affairs within the social world, just as (for example) a marriage rite or a coronation brings about a new state of affairs in the social world. Rituals create (or, at least, help to create) the sacred.

6.1 The Creation of the Sacred

I am not, incidentally, suggesting that religious rituals create gods, spirits, and demons. It is tempting to say this, but it would be seriously misleading. There *are* non-realist interpretations of religious language, which regard talk about gods as simply metaphorical, a way of expressing truths that are ultimately about appropriate human behaviour. I shall be examining such views shortly (in chaps. 9 and 10). If you hold to this view, you could say that we create the *concept* of God, which we may choose to retain because it serves some useful purpose. But not even a theological non-realist can say that we create God himself. If gods, spirits, and demons exist, they exist independently of our rituals. If, on the other hand, they do not exist, then our rituals cannot bring them into existence.

Rappaport employs a useful distinction here: that between the divine and the sacred. God, if he exists, is divine. Realities that are di-

vine are (if they exist) independent of us. But the sacred is a status that is bestowed on certain propositions, people, and institutions. Just as the ritual of coronation bestows a new status on the person who is crowned, making that person into a king or queen with a new set of rights and obligations, so religious rituals give a new status to certain beliefs, making them sacred and unquestionable. This is true in two senses. On the level of social reality, rituals are automatically efficacious: they bestow this status on doctrines merely by being performed. Roman Catholics, for example, believe (or are supposed to believe) that once a doctrine has been solemnly defined by a Pope, by virtue of that very act it becomes unquestionable. Within the Catholic community, it has the status of foundational doctrine. But the efficacy of ritual is also a fact on the level of individual psychology. As we shall see in a moment, ritual is a particularly powerful way of creating both acceptance and belief.

6.2 The Context of Religious Utterances

To appreciate the power of ritual, it is important to appreciate the typical context within which religious propositions are deployed. It is a mistake to think of religious beliefs as mere propositions, comparable in their structure and function to scientific theories (5.1). As we shall see (in chap. 9), it doesn't follow that religions are not making factual claims, of a kind that resemble and at times overlap those made by the sciences. Religious beliefs do embody factual claims, propositions about the world. But they are not *mere* propositions; they are propositions that are expressed in a very particular kind of utterance. What is particular about these utterances is that they are customarily enacted; they are *performed* as much as *pronounced*. In particular, the beliefs in question are articulated in the context of rituals. To treat religious beliefs as mere propositions and to ignore the context within which they are uttered is to miss something vital about their character.

Let me take an example. Some years ago I was teaching a course that compared the traditions about Abraham in the Bible, Jewish post-biblical traditions, and the Qur'an. We were flicking through our copies of the Qur'an, looking for particular texts, when one of my Muslim students suddenly said, "This isn't how we use the Qur'an." She was, of course, entirely correct. The Qur'an is traditionally not read silently, as we might read a textbook, in order to extract information. It is recited, and it is recited within a very particular context. Moreover, the Qur'an is not normally simply read aloud; it is 'intoned' or 'chanted,' according to a number of pre-established forms. There is both a simple style, for everyday use, and a more elaborate style, used by specially trained reciters on special occasions. Moreover, the recitation is set apart from secular speech by an opening and closing formula, the opening formula being, "I take refuge in God from the accursed Satan," and the closing formula, "God has spoken truly."

Most philosophers – I include myself until very recently – have treated the ritual context of religious utterances as though it doesn't really matter, as though propositions can be extracted from it and treated in isolation. The followers of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) are at least partly aware of this problem, but they often commit the opposite error of assuming that religious utterances make no factual claims at all (9.2.2). Once again, it is important to realize that religions do make factual claims and those factual claims *can* be treated in isolation. But if we do this, we lose sight of their sacred status and what it entails. If my proposal is right, that sacred status is bestowed first and foremost by religious rituals.

6.3 The Power of Ritual

How, then, do religious rituals create the sacred, bestowing unquestionable status on the ultimate postulates of religious traditions. As I noted a moment ago, if rituals are performative acts, then they can create a new social reality by virtue of this fact alone. More pre-

cisely, they can do so by virtue of the convention that grants them this power. To ask how this works would be as odd as to ask how a marriage ceremony can give a couple the new status of being married. That's just what a marriage ceremony does. The more interesting question is: How do rituals create in those individuals the sense that certain key beliefs are unquestionable?

6.3.1 Performance and Acceptance

First of all, to participate in a ritual is already to accept the assumptions that it embodies. Rappaport defines ritual as “*the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers*” (Rappaport 1999: 24). The definition is a bit compressed, but its key idea here is that the formal acts and utterances that make up a ritual pre-exist any particular performance. They are acts and utterances to which the individual submits herself in order to perform them. Ritual, in this sense, is inseparable from authority and conformity. The ritual is authoritative and demands that the individual conform herself to it. To put it bluntly, taking part in a ritual is **not** an act of self-expression. As one Jewish writer put it,

in a sense, our liturgy is a higher form of silence. It is pervaded by an awed sense of the grandeur of God which resists description and surpasses all expression. The individual is silent. He does not bring forth his own words. His saying the consecrated words is in essence an act of listening to what they convey. *The spirit of Israel speaks, the self is silent.* (Heschel 1954: 44)

Taking part in the liturgy does not – at least in the first instance – demand *belief* in the propositions that it embodies. But it does involve acting *as if* these propositions were true. It entails, in other words, that one *accepts* the propositions in question, whether or not one believes them. This is not to say that belief is not important. It is. Religious ritual tends to lead to belief and will not have its full effect without belief, as I shall argue later (7.1–7.2). My point here is

that even taking part in the ritual demands an initial act of acceptance.

6.3.2 The Invariance of Ritual

There is a second way in which rituals create a sense of the unquestionableness of the beliefs they express. This is more subtle, and has to do with the invariance of ritual. Religious rituals are typically prescriptive: they prescribe just what has to be done, with little room for variation. The very invariance of the ritual implies that there is no alternative to the messages that they embody. The manner in which these beliefs are conveyed gives the impression that they are certain (Rappaport 1999: 286).

A more sophisticated way of putting this appeals to the theory of communication developed by Claude Shannon (1916–2001). On this view, information can be thought of as the reduction of uncertainty. Information is conveyed when there exists a range of possible messages and one message is selected from among this range. Here is a simple example.

Imagine your friend invites you to dinner for the first time. When you arrive at the building where he lives you find that you have misplaced his apartment number. He lives in a building with 4 floors and 8 apartments on each floor. If a neighbour passing by tells you that your friend lives on the top floor, your uncertainty about where he lives reduces from 32 choices to 8. By reducing your uncertainty, the neighbour has conveyed information to you. (Ghahramani 2002)

The point about ritual is that its predetermined form reduces the number of possible messages to practically zero. (I say ‘practically’ zero only because there is always *some* room for variation.) As another anthropologist, Anthony Wallace (b. 1923) writes,

a sequence of signals whose order is fixed, so that the receiver always knows what signal will follow the last, will have no information value because there is no uncertainty to be reduced by the outcome of each successive event (Wallace 1966: 64).

This is not to say that rituals cannot convey meaning. They do convey meanings, but the meanings they convey are not represented as a choice from a range of possible meanings.

6.3.3 Religious Experience and Ritual

Finally, rituals have the ability to reinforce the messages conveyed by associating them with powerful experiences. I shall argue later (in chap. 13) that religious experiences, when critically examined, turn out to have little or no evidential force. But those who undergo such experiences rarely consider them critically. For the most part they are simply taken as confirmation of the messages being conveyed.

Once again, it is Anthony Wallace whose work highlights this. Wallace argues that religious experiences can bring about what he calls 'ritual learning,' a kind of reprogramming of the individual's responses to religious symbols (Wallace 1966: 67). What is significant here is the way in which rituals isolate sacred realities from everyday life. Transitional rituals, which mark the break with everyday life (and a return to it), are common in religious contexts. An example would be the formulas mentioned earlier that precede and follow the recitation of the Qur'an (6.2). Another example would be the sign of the cross, which in Roman Catholic usage marks off devotional activities from the everyday. Similarly, practitioners of Wicca begin their rituals by drawing a 'magic circle' (Luhrmann 1989: 222–23). Such actions bring about a kind of *dissociation* of the religious from other kinds of knowledge, as well as a focus on the messages to be conveyed. This heightens the effect of the ritual and makes for a more rapid process of restructuring the individual's beliefs.

In the history of religions, even more dramatic means can be found of bringing about this dissociation. Wallace mentions a number of these:

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- (a) deprivation of sensory contact with previously significant features of the environment through such devices as physical isolation, darkness, distracting noise;
- (b) the use of drugs, such as mescaline, which interfere with the ability to assign meaning to previously familiar sensory data;
- (c) the imposition of extreme physical distress – through pain, fatigue, sleeplessness, hunger and thirst, or even actual trauma or illness – which restricts attention;
- (d) the presentation of monotonous and repetitive stimuli, such as drumming, flashing lights, dancing, which (as in hypnosis) induce a trance. (Wallace 1966:68)

Such techniques not only heighten learning, but can give rise to experiences that can be understood by participants as union with the divine. Within Islam, the *dhikr* ceremonies engaged in by members of Sufi orders provide a vivid illustration of techniques of this kind, the most famous examples of which are the ‘whirling dervishes’ of Turkey. In Western Christian practice, the dissociation brought about by camps and retreats can be used to bring about similar, if, perhaps, less dramatic effects.

7. Gods, Spirits, and Demons

So much for the sacred character of religious utterances and the rituals in which they occur. But what about the gods, spirits, and demons, the divine or quasi-divine beings of which they speak? How does belief in God, which is the focus of much discussion within the philosophy of religion, fit into this view of religion?

7.1 Acceptance or Belief?

Most social institutions do not demand *belief* of their members. Their effectiveness does not depend on any kind of inward consent. All they demand is *acceptance*: the commitment made in the course of the ritual to live by the obligations that it imposes. Acceptance, as Rappaport notes, is public, whereas what is going on in the heart is private and (to some degree) unknowable by others. If I have put in a bid at an auction and had it accepted, I have entered into a legally binding contract. There's no point my protesting later that I was only joking, that I never intended my bid to be taken seriously. Similarly, I may be deeply sceptical about our politicians. I may suspect that they are in the pay of large corporations and that their professions of concern for the common good are a mere ideological fig leaf, intended to hide their naked and shameful greed. But in order to live as a free individual within a society such as ours, I need to accept their authority. Indeed I do so implicitly every time that I pay taxes or abide by the laws governments establish. As John Searle writes, "one can recognize and act within institutions even in cases where one thinks the institution is a bad thing" (Searle 2010: 57).

I argued a while ago (6.3.1) that the performance of a religious ritual does not demand belief from its participants; all it demands is acceptance. But it is also the case that a religious ritual will not have its full effect without belief. After all, in many religions it is not the mere performance of a ritual that gives the ultimate postulates of a religion their unquestionable status; it is the belief (expressed in the

ritual) that they have a divine origin or a divine sanction. To put it crudely, the authority of a religion depends on people failing to realize, or forgetting, that it has been created by human beings.

Take, for example, the authority of the Pope, whose teachings (along with that of Sacred Scripture) act as a heuristic rule for Roman Catholics (5.2). In modern liberal democracies we accept the authority of our governments knowing full well that their authority is based on series of conventions and (ultimately) on the consent of the governed. Indeed a key idea in the development of modern societies was that political authority was not some natural right enjoyed by a particular family or a particular group of people. It was something that arose from a social contract among those who require the order and stability governments provide.

Papal authority, however, is quite different. It is not thought of as depending on the consent of the governed. Popes may be elected by a College of Cardinals, but they are not elected by the Roman Catholic people as a whole. Nor can they be deposed by the will of the people. Their authority is thought to come from God. If Roman Catholics began to regard the authority of the Pope in the same way as that of modern governments, it would radically alter their idea of papal authority. (Something like this has happened in some Protestant Christian churches.) If we think of ‘institutional facts’ as facts established by a particular kind of social consensus, and if we assume that Papal authority is a kind of institutional fact, then a strange quasi-paradox emerges. Papal authority as an institutional fact functions “only because it is not believed to be an institutional fact,” but “a brute, intentionality-independent fact about the universe” (Searle 2010: 119).

7.2 From Acceptance to Belief

So religious rituals will have their full effect only when accompanied by belief. But in any case, acceptance tends, as a matter of psychological fact, to lead to belief. This fact was already noted in the seventeenth century, when Blaise Pascal put forward his famous argu-

ment for belief in God based on the idea of a wager. You will recall the basic structure of the argument: that belief in God carries with it a finite risk but the promise (if God exists) of an infinite reward. Failure to believe, on the other hand, carries with it an infinite risk (the possibility of eternal punishment, if God exists) while only a finite reward. It follows that one is acting rationally in choosing to believe. The problem is (5.3): Can we choose to believe? Possibly not. But Pascal is relying on the fact that even if we cannot choose directly to believe, we can choose to act in a way that is likely to produce belief. In fact, this is precisely what Pascal is suggesting, as the following passage reveals.

You would like to attain faith, and do not know the way; you would like to cure yourself of unbelief, and ask the remedy for it. Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions... Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe, and deaden your acuteness. (Pascal 1932: §233)

The same point has been made more recently by Tanya Luhrmann, an anthropologist who has studied modern-day witchcraft (Wicca) movements. Indeed it is implicit in the title of her book, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*. There is a sense in which practitioners of Wicca are precisely that: they embrace a certain kind of practice, with its associated ways of thinking. They don't, initially, think of themselves as believers. But there occurs what Luhrmann calls a "slow shift" or "drift" towards belief. As she writes,

I use the term 'drift' because the transformation seems accidental, unintended. The once-non-magician certainly intends to become a magician and to practise magic. But that is rather different from intending to believe. Rather: the once-non-magician begins to do what magicians do, and begins to find magical ideas persuasive because he begins to notice and respond to events in different ways. (Luhrmann 1989: 312)

It seems, then, that not only does religion require belief for its rituals and practices to have their full effect, but the acceptance it initially demands has a tendency to turn into belief over time.

7.3 The Transmission of Beliefs

I have argued that it is ritual, in particular, that creates and reinforces adherence to a particular set of beliefs. But this view requires qualification. Rituals certainly embody certain beliefs about the world. They often include utterances – statements of faith – that make those beliefs explicit. The same rituals are, however, open to a variety of interpretations. Even when their meaning is spelled out in words, those words can be variously understood. As we shall see (8.2), language about the divine is very different from language about things we can observe directly. Its implications are far from clear. Those who lead the ritual – religious officials of one kind or another – may intend their rituals to transmit a particular set of doctrines. But there is no guarantee they will do so.

So we need to be clear just what kind of beliefs are transmitted by rituals. A first point to note is that individuals' religious beliefs do not generally form the kind of logically ordered system that theologians and philosophers are interested in. As I noted earlier (1.2), philosophers work with a 'rational reconstruction' of particular sets of religious beliefs. They arrange these beliefs into a system whose parts can be logically related, in the ways I indicated earlier (chap. 5). But for the most part, religious believers do not carry around a system of this kind in their heads. They appropriate patterns of thought and action not as an ordered whole, but as more or less separate items. These are invoked when needed, on particular occasions (Pyysiäinen 2003: 116).

A second point to note is that participants often emerge from a ritual with a great variety of understandings of what it was about (Bell 2009: 183–84). While all may agree that what the ritual conveys is sacred, they may not agree on what it conveys. When Christians

hear the biblical phrase, ‘the kingdom of God,’ for example, some will understand this as referring to a future life in heaven, while others will understand it as referring to a just society, to be created in the here-and-now (Stromberg 1981: 552). The biblical phrase allows for both interpretations. But while philosophers hate this kind of ambiguity, from the point of view of the religious community it is a strength (Bell 2009: 184). It allows for a common allegiance to a particular set of symbols, while also permitting some diversity in their interpretation.

So rather than saying that religious rituals transmit a certain set of beliefs, it might be better to say that they transmit patterns of thought and action which, through the ritual, are given the status of sacred symbols. These provide not so much an ordered set of beliefs as a set of resources for individual use. These patterns of thought and action are a resource from which individuals can construct both models of action and plausible ways of understanding their experience.

The distinction between the sacred symbols themselves and the meanings believers create from them corresponds to a distinction I made earlier (in chap. 5) between ‘ultimate sacred postulates’ and ‘sanctified sentences.’ The latter are open to renegotiation in ways in which the former are not. Individuals, of course, do not always distinguish these two levels. They are inclined to identify their own interpretation of the sacred with the sacred itself, and to attribute to the former the same unquestionable status as the latter. Christian fundamentalists, for instance, do not see their understanding of Genesis 1–3 (the creation story) as *one interpretation* of the biblical text. They see it as simply *the meaning* of the text. Similarly, militant Muslim revivalists do not see their understanding of *jihād* (struggle in the cause of God, often by means of warfare) as merely one interpretation of the Qur’anic doctrine. They see it as the only permissible interpretation, the one revealed by God. We are very familiar with the problems to which this leads.

PART TWO: THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

8. Knowing the Unknowable

Let's look a bit more closely at the nature of religious discourse, beginning with the problem of talk about God. Theistic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, speak about a God who is infinitely powerful, knowing, and good. But such a God so greatly differs from any reality we experience – outside of religious contexts – that it seems we could say nothing about him at all. Even if God himself were to give us the words that describe his being, it would be surprising if we could understand them. Wittgenstein famously said that if a lion could talk, we could not understand him, since his form of life is so different from our own (Wittgenstein 1958: 223). But one might argue *a fortiori* that if God were to speak, we could not understand him, either. It might seem, then, that religions claim to know what cannot be known. If this were true, it would reduce their propositions to meaninglessness.

8.1 Negative (Apophatic) Theology

The problem is frequently acknowledged by thoughtful believers. Theologians have long insisted that if God exists, there must be a limit to what we can know about him. Our finite intellects are incapable of fully grasping the nature of an infinite God. At times, this takes the form of a 'negative' theology, which asserts that all we can do is to *deny* that God has certain (finite) characteristics. Such a theology is known as *apophatic*, from the Greek *apophasis*, meaning 'denial' or 'negation.' Terms like 'infinite,' 'immutable,' and 'incorporeal' belong to a theology of this kind: they simply deny certain things about God. They insist that God is not finite, not subject to change, and does not have a body. It is true that when such terms are used of God, they must be literally true. As William Alston writes, God, if he exists, is literally 'incorporeal,' 'immutable,' and 'not-identical with Richard Nixon' or (as we might say) 'not identical

with John Key' (Alston 1996: 365). But in themselves, they have little or no positive content.

A purely apophatic theology does not seem very satisfactory. Believers presumably want to be able to do more than say that God is 'not this' and 'not that.' In response to this problem, the medieval Catholic theologian, Thomas Aquinas, developed a way of saying something positive about God, while recognizing the limits of human knowledge. Aquinas believed that, at least in this life, all knowledge comes by way of sense perception, that "nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses" (*De veritate* qu. 2, art. 3). So he rejected the idea that we have some intuitive knowledge of God. He also agreed with the apophatic theologians that "we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not" (*ST* 1a, qu.3). But he also insisted that creatures – created things – bear a certain relation to God. Created things are effects of God's creative activity. An effect will, he assumes, in some way resemble its cause (*ST* 1a qu.4, art. 3), no matter how faint that resemblance might be. It follows that we can know something of God by examining the things we has created.

8.2 Metaphor and Analogy

Aquinas did not think we could know very much about God in this way, that is to say, by means of 'natural reason.' We could know little more than that he exists and that certain properties must belong to him as Creator (*ST* qu.12, art. 12). Most knowledge of God must come from divine revelation. But even if we do receive a divine revelation, it does not resolve the problem of how we can speak about God. As I noted a moment ago, even if God were to tell us about himself, it is not clear that we would be able to understand it. Aquinas's view is that certain terms drawn from our everyday language can be appropriately applied to God, but that they can be applied to God only by way of metaphor or analogy.

Metaphorical claims are clear enough. When God is said to be a rock (Psalm 18: 2) or when Martin Luther writes "A mighty fortress

is our God” (*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*), it is clear that the terms ‘rock’ and ‘fortress’ are not to be taken at face value. One does not call in a geologist or a military engineer to discover the nature of God. What is the truth value of a metaphor? A metaphor is used because it is thought to point to some truth. But on the face of it, all metaphors are literally false. If I say, following Plautus (ca. 254–184 B.C.), that “man is a wolf to man” (*homo homini lupus*), I am **not** saying that human beings form a species of pack animal belonging to the genus *canis*. What I **am** saying will depend on the context in which I am uttering this claim and a set of commonplace beliefs about wolves. If I am speaking about the human capacity to exploit other people and we all believe – perhaps quite unfairly (Midgley 2004: 24–25) – that wolves are fierce and rapacious – my intended meaning will be fairly clear. In itself, however, a metaphor does not have a *meaning*; it has a *range of possible applications*. Metaphors are flexible; they are open to reinterpretation in new contexts. Our understanding of the wolf metaphor might change if we change our view of human beings or develop a less jaundiced view of wolves.

Analogy is trickier. Aquinas defends a very particular view of analogical language. This holds that there are terms we use about God which are literally true – they are not metaphors – but which cannot be understood in their usual sense. When we say, for example, that God is good, the term ‘good’ here is to be understood literally. But it is not true in the same sense that we apply the word ‘good’ to any created being. God is good, but not in the same way that human beings are good or that angels are good. To use the term of God, we must take our usual sense of ‘good,’ strip from it any of the limitations that arise from everyday use, and extend its positive implications to infinity. Once again, of course, we can hardly grasp what this would mean, since we cannot grasp the very nature of God. But such an operation allows us to use language about God, while recognizing that it is not being used in its ordinary sense.

The problem is that if the term is not being used in its ordinary sense, in what sense is it being used? We seem to have ended up

with “a being of which we can form no clear and distinct idea and of whose essence we can form no concept” (Mascall 1966: 88). God may indeed be good, but it seems we can form no clear idea of his goodness. But then what does it mean? What would count as evidence that God is not good? How would one falsify the statement that God is good, if we are unsure just what its implications are? More seriously, how do we know that ‘good’ when applied to God does not designate qualities that we would regard as evil if found in human beings?

The difficulty was spelled out by John Stuart Mill (1806–73) in a review of a book by H. L. Mansel (1820–71) on the limits of reason in matters of religion.

If in ascribing goodness to God, I do not mean what I mean by goodness; if I do not mean the goodness of which I have some knowledge, but an incomprehensible attribute of an incomprehensible substance, which for aught I know may be a totally different quality from that I love and venerate – and even must ... be in some important particulars opposed to this – what do I mean by calling it goodness? and what reason have I for venerating it? ... To say that God’s goodness may be different in kind from man’s goodness, what is it but saying, with a slight change of phraseology, that God may possibly not be good? (Mill 1979: 102)

Mill’s objection is one to which I shall return (21.3). For the moment, I wish to note merely the difficulty of either proving or disproving religious claims if we are uncertain just what is designated by their key terms.

9. Factual or Expressive?

Up until now, I have assumed that language about gods, spirits, and demons is intended to express facts, namely facts about the existence, attributes, and activity of supernatural beings. But there are those who question this, who suggest that religious language serves a quite different function. Prominent among these are the followers of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), who developed a distinctive approach to the philosophy of religion. This ‘Wittgensteinian’ approach to religion was particularly popular in the 1950s and 1960s. It no longer receives widespread support. But it still has its proponents, the best-known of whom is D. Z. Phillips.

9.1 A Preliminary Statement

What do I mean by the ‘Wittgensteinian’ view of religion? A good place to start is with a negative statement of the position, since it is easier to say what Wittgensteinians *reject* than what they *affirm*. We find this in an extended book review published in 1962 by George Hughes, for many years Professor of Philosophy at Victoria University in Wellington. Hughes is taking issue with a view put forward by C. B. Martin, that religious concepts are not so much false as simply confused. Hughes’s response is that any set of statements would appear confused if one were to judge them by way of an alien logic, applying criteria of consistency and coherence that are not appropriate in this particular field. If religion is to be properly understood, Hughes argues, we must “allow the actual use of religious terms and statements to determine their logic, rather than trying to force an alien logic upon them” (Hughes 1962: 214).

What does this mean? I shall assume that Hughes is not saying that religious thought is exempt from the requirements of logic, in the sense of the principles of correct reasoning. He was, after all, a logician himself, the co-author of a well-known textbook on modal logic. I am assuming that he intends ‘logic’ here to be taken in a

wider sense, to refer to the criteria appropriate for evaluating statements in a particular field. Hughes's complaint would then be that critics of religion often apply inappropriate standards of criticism.

Now it seems beyond dispute that different categories of proposition should be evaluated in different ways. If someone said, "Abortion is evil" and I were to respond by asking for biological evidence, I would be committing a category mistake. Ethical statements, whatever they do express, do not express the kinds of facts that can be discovered under a microscope. (Things that can be discovered under a microscope might *contribute* to shaping our ethical judgements, but that's another matter.) But one *can* give an account of what is distinctive about ethical statements: how they differ from statements about observable facts. As you would expect in philosophy, there is an entire subject, called *metaethics*, devoted to examining questions of this kind. So it would seem reasonable to ask the Wittgensteinian for an account of how religious propositions differ from, for instance, those found in everyday life or the sciences.

9.2 D. Z. Phillips on Religion

For an answer to this question we may turn to the work of D. Z. Phillips (1934–2006).

9.2.1 The Meaning of Religious Utterances

At the heart of Phillips's position is the idea that *the meaning of a religious utterance* is identical with (or can be understood as identical with) *the role that it plays in the life of the believer*. Let's take an example. Phillips holds that "metaphysics, magic and religion are misunderstood if they are treated as mistakes or blunders concerning the facts" (Phillips 1976: 111). With regard to religious statements, for example, what it might mean to say that *God cares for us all the time* (at least when such an utterance is "not superstitious")? The answer, Phillips writes, depends on the context of the utterance.

What believing that God cares for us all the time amounts to varies with different circumstances. The circumstances bring out the force of the belief... Suppose one witnesses a child falling overboard. One is unsure of one's chances of saving him or of surviving the effort to do so. Suddenly, one may say to oneself, "Jump! Trust in God!" This expression need not be connected with a belief that some supernatural agency is going to guarantee the safe return of either the child or oneself. No, it is a matter of not putting oneself first, weighing up pros and cons. One gives oneself to what has to be done. It is this giving of oneself without reserve – trusting it – which gives force to the expression 'Trust in God' in this context. (Phillips 1976: 111–12)

There are two ways of understanding this idea. At times, Phillips seems to be saying that religious language should *never* be construed as making factual claims. It is never used to refer to a supernatural being who might be expected to save you. But a weaker interpretation of his words is possible. It is that religious language *need* not be used to make factual claims. Yet it may be that sometimes it *is* understood in this way, not only by critics of religion, but by believers themselves.

It is the second of these two interpretations that seems more accurately to express Phillips's view. What Phillips is interested in spelling out is how religious utterances *might* be used in a manner other than to state facts. The utterance 'Trust in God,' we are told, *need* not be understood as referring to a supernatural agent. So despite his protestations, Phillips is not merely engaged in the *descriptive* task of asking "how language is in fact used" (Phillips 1976: 41). He is engaged in the *prescriptive* task of specifying which uses of religious language can be regarded as meaningful. His conclusion? That religious utterances may be meaningful when used *expressively*, as indicating a particular attitude. But they make no sense when understood *factually*, as assertions about supernatural entities.

9.2.2 The Functions of Language

Is this a tenable position? The problem here is that Phillips writes as though the *only* thing a religious utterance (properly so called) does is to express a particular attitude. But this is too narrow a conception of meaning. Utterances which convey very different meanings may serve the same expressive function. To take the example given above, faced with the need to save the child, an atheist would presumably *not* say to himself, “Trust in God!” He might think, “Go on! You can do it!” or even “Come on! Show those Christians atheists can act altruistically!” These three utterances may all have the same *function*: that of committing the person unreservedly to a course of action. But of course they have very different *meanings* and, more importantly, represent very different motivations. Phillips’s practice of interpreting a religious utterance in terms of *just one* of the roles it plays in the life of the believer obscures these differences.

It gets worse. At least some of the religious utterances Phillips discusses are propositional in form. They have the form of statements that make assertions about reality. “Trust in God!” is an imperative, but “It is God’s will” at least has the appearance of a statement of fact. It is of course true that such utterances may have many functions. They may have expressive functions, as Phillips suggests. In the context of rituals religious utterances can even have performative functions, bringing about the states of affairs to which they refer (6.3). Secular examples include “I bid five dollars” pronounced at an auction or “This bridge is now open” pronounced by a visiting dignitary. A religious example would be “I absolve you from your sins” when pronounced by a Roman Catholic priest. But even these performative utterances are not without descriptive content. Indeed their expressive or performative functions are *dependent on* their descriptive content. It is because “I bid five dollars” has descriptive content of a very specific sort (which is different from “I bid three dollars”) that it can function as it does in an auction. It is because “It’s God’s will” has descriptive content that it can function expres-

sively in the life of the believer. To set expressive and descriptive uses of language in opposition is not only a “false antithesis” (Mackie 1982: 223); it ignores the way the first is dependent on the second.

9.2.3 Towards a Theological Non-Realism

Whatever one makes of his position, it seems clear that Phillips is at least moving towards a non-realist understanding of language about God. The following passage, puzzling though it is in other respects, illustrates this point.

For the Christian, the necessity and unavailability of death show the essential contingency of all things, ... that all things are a gift, that nothing is his by right. His response to this is one of humility and gratitude. For example, he sees each new day as a gift from God. If someone were to try to understand the notion of a gift in this context ... in terms of one person making a gift to another, the sense in which a day can be said to be given would be destroyed. The same is true of the sense in which we speak of talents being given. Some people may speak of natural gifts and not be led to worship. For others, this sense of the given leads to prayer and worship. In the face of what is given, the believer kneels. Talk of ‘God’ has its sense in this reaction. It is not the name of an individual; it does not refer to anything. (Phillips 1976: 147–8)

If it is true that “talk of God ... is not the name of an individual” and “does not refer to anything,” then this seems a very different notion of religious language from that which most philosophers hold. Most philosophers – theist and atheist – assume that utterances about God are intended to refer to an all-powerful, all-knowing, and infinitely good being. But Phillips appears to be denying this. Indeed, he suggests that if religious utterances can be said to be true, it is apparently only in the sense that poetry can be said to be true. The language of religion, he writes, is like the language of poetry, insofar as it is not “referential or descriptive. It is an expression of value. If one asks what it says, the answer is that it says itself” (Phillips 1976: 147).

10. Theological Non-Realism

I have just suggested that the Wittgensteinian view of religion found in the work of D. Z. Phillips moves in the direction of a theological non-realism. I am describing this view as ‘non-realist’ since it resembles the view of the theoretical entities of science held by scientific non-realists, such as Bas van Fraassen (b. 1941). Scientific non-realists hold that talk about unobservable entities – such as electrons or quarks – should not be regarded as true. For all we know, it may be nothing more than a useful fiction that enables us to make successful predictions. In a similar way, theological non-realists hold that while religious utterances serve various useful purposes in the lives of individuals and communities, they do not involve asserting the existence of supernatural beings: gods, spirits, and demons. In older works, what I am calling ‘non-realism’ is sometimes referred to as *religious non-cognitivism*, where ‘cognitive’ means ‘pertaining to knowledge.’

The best known proponent of theological non-realism is the one-time Anglican priest and theologian, Don Cupitt (b. 1934). Cupitt’s starting point is a vigorous critique of the evidential basis of traditional Christian belief. Traditional theism, Cupitt argues, is no longer intellectually defensible. We do not have sufficient reason to believe that there exists a God who corresponds to the description offered by our monotheistic traditions. As Cupitt puts it,

we are and have been for many generations in a position where not one single religious doctrine (of the sort that mentions supernatural beings, events and causes) can be established by a reputable intellectual method. Not one. (Cupitt 1980: 82).

But while we would be acting irrationally in believing in the existence of such a God, it does not follow that we should simply become atheists. The idea of God is surely a fiction, but it is a useful fiction. It is a “myth we have to have” (Cupitt 1980: 166).

10.1 The Value of Religion

Why is the idea of God useful? Cupitt argues that there are values that our religious traditions embody which can continue to form the basis of a much-needed spirituality. What are these values? Cupitt lists six.

It is good that one should appraise oneself and one's life with an unconditional religious seriousness that tolerates no concealment or self-deception.

It is good that one should cultivate meditation and contemplative prayer, and especially the inner fortitude and resilience needed to combat evils of all kinds.

It is good that one should come to transcend the mean defensive ego and learn absolute disinterestedness and purity of heart.

It is good that one should commit oneself to existence in religious hope and receptivity to grace.

In spite of all the ugliness and cruelty in the world, it is good that one should at least sometimes experience and express cosmic awe, thanksgiving and love.

It is good that such values as these should not only be cultivated in and for oneself, but that they should shape our attitudes towards other people and be expressed in our social life. (Cupitt 1980: 82)

Insofar as they can help preserve and encourage these attitudes, Cupitt argues, religious practices should be maintained. But they should be reinterpreted in non-realist sense.

10.2 The Function of God-Talk

What does the term 'God' mean, from a non-realist perspective? What does it refer to, if it is not an omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect being? The term 'God' functions for Cupitt as a kind of a symbol. What we say about God should not be understood as statements about a supernatural being. People may, in fact, speak of God as if

he were a being, but to do so is to speak mythically. Once again, if a myth embodies a falsehood, it might be argued that we should simply abandon it. Atheists would say this. But Cupitt argues that this particular myth is a necessary myth. Why do we need this myth? We need the myth of God because the traditional attributes of God point to the requirements of the spiritual life. “*The doctrine of God*,” as Cupitt puts it, “*is an encoded set of spiritual directives*” (Cupitt 1980: 101). So the function of the term ‘God’ is that of “a unifying symbol that eloquently personifies and represents to us everything that spirituality requires of us” (Cupitt 1980: 9).

Cupitt’s view may be made clear by way of one of his own examples: the divine attribute of omniscience, the idea that God is all-knowing. Cupitt, of course, would insist that there *is* no omniscient being. But the doctrine of divine omniscience tells us something about ourselves; more precisely, it tells us something about the requirements of the spiritual life. What is the spiritual life, for Cupitt? It has to do with human autonomy, with our ability to act freely and generously, having been freed from the superficial cravings that so easily dominate our life. Or as he puts it,

the highest and central principle of spirituality (the religious requirement...) is the one that commands us to become spirit, that is, precisely to attain the highest degree of autonomous self-knowledge and self-transcendence. To achieve this we must escape from “craving” or “carnal lusts” and the false ego thereby created, and we must seek perfect purity of heart, disinterestedness, quiet and recollected alertness, and so on. (Cupitt 1980: 9)

To achieve this state requires a constant self-scrutiny. No aspects of one’s life are to be kept hidden: all must be brought into the open, examined, and set right. It is this truth – a truth about the spiritual life, not about a supernatural being – that is symbolized by the doctrine of divine omniscience. Indeed Cupitt makes the point that in the biblical writings, divine omniscience is not a matter of God “accumulating information for its own sake” (Cupitt 1980: 86). Rather,

God's knowledge of us is primarily practical and ethical. He knows not merely our external behaviour but the secrets of our hearts.

10.3 The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

On the one hand, then, Cupitt is quite open about what he is doing here. He accepts that his non-realist reinterpretation of talk of the supernatural is just that, a deliberate *reinterpretation* of language that in the past was often understood in a realist way. In Cupitt's words,

the realists will point out that religious language in prescientific times undoubtably did have a cosmological and descriptivist strain in it. Of course it did. Modern realism naturally appeals to and builds upon that observation, and I must admit that in so far as I am abandoning such claims as no longer defensible I am departing from tradition. In mitigation of this confessed heterodoxy, though, I plead that there is no merit in clinging to untruths. (Cupitt 1980: 125)

Here Cupitt differs from the Wittgensteinians, who sometimes speak as though language about God were *never* intended to be descriptive and referential (9.2.1). But that would be clearly false. To admit that such language was originally intended to be descriptive, but that we cannot use it that way – this seems a much more defensible option. While Cupitt is *reinterpreting* the theistic tradition, he is not *misinterpreting* it.

On the other hand, Cupitt insists that his non-realist views are not entirely new. They can find *some* support within the Christian tradition. This claim can, perhaps, be understood as a strategic move. If a theologian is to persuade his fellow-believers to adopt a new standpoint, he must stress the continuity between the old faith and the new (Cupitt 1980: 75). But Cupitt's claim to be in partial continuity with the tradition also has some basis in fact.

Look again at Cupitt's comments on the doctrine of divine omniscience. What he is highlighting is the gap between what Pascal

called “the God of the philosophers and scholars” and the “God of Abraham, ... Isaac, [and] ... Jacob.” Pascal seems right that there is such a gap. Indeed psychologists studying religion have shown that the concept of God employed in religious contexts is not identical with the ‘theologically correct’ description of God that lies at the heart of philosophical theism (Barrett and Keil 1996: 219–47). As Cupitt suggests, the God of the Bible has just those attributes that the biblical authors felt were required for him to fulfil his religious functions. The remaining attributes were added by philosophically-minded believers, who judged that these were the attributes such a deity required if he were to fulfil his religious function. A God who could scrutinize the human heart must by that very fact be able to know other things as well, to the point of omniscience. But much of what the philosophical theologian thereby affirms about God is religiously redundant. It has no religious function.

If one no longer needs to affirm that God exists, the religiously redundant attributes of God can be stripped away. One can return to a concept of God that is closer to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, although construed in a non-realist fashion. If you are affirming the existence of an actual entity, then your statements about him need to be consistent, as well as reconcilable with the rest of our knowledge. But if you are using the term ‘God’ as a symbol of the spiritual life, these requirements fall away. You can enjoy a great freedom in your use of religious language. Our concept of God need not be coherent, if we are using it in a merely instrumental manner.

PART THREE: THE JUSTIFICATION OF RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

11. Justified Religious Belief

My analysis so far has offered a particular view of religious belief, the persuasive force of which it sees as emerging from ritual actions (chap. 6). It has also examined some views – both realist and non-realist – of the nature of religious language. If we take a non-realist view of religious language, there is no point in asking if talk of gods, spirits, and demons is true or false, or if we have adequate reason to regard it as true or false. Non-realists, after all, claim that such language should not be understood as making factual claims about supernatural beings. In fact, our most prominent non-realist, Don Cupitt, claims that if religious language were understood in this way, we would have no reason to believe it. If we adopt a realist view of religious language, we should all be atheists.

The non-realist view is, however, a minority position. The vast majority of theistic believers have regarded their talk about God as talk about a supernatural being. Adopting then, for the sake of the argument, a realist view of talk about gods, spirits, and demons, do we have reason to think that any of this talk is true? Are people justified in making a religious commitment? Are religious believers acting rationally in continuing to hold such a belief? These three questions are not identical. A belief may be true, even when we lack reason to believe it. A commitment to live *as if* a belief were true might be justified even we lack evidence that it *is* true. And a person might be acting rationally in holding a false belief, provided that she holds it to be well founded. So we need to begin, in the time-honoured manner of philosophers, by making some distinctions.

11.1 Belief Formation and Justification

A first distinction is that between the origins of a belief and its justification. If my account (in chap. 6) of why religious people find their beliefs persuasive is at all correct, then there is something non-rational about the *origins* of religious belief. People do not, on the whole,

adopt or continue to hold religious beliefs as a result of following a line of argument resting on some body of evidence. But this does not entail mean that religious beliefs are false. People might hold true beliefs on non-rational grounds, if only by sheer chance. Nor does it mean that there are no other grounds – such as pragmatic reasons – for making a religious commitment.

To appreciate why this is true, it will be useful to look at a distinction often made by philosophers of science. It is the distinction between ‘the context of discovery’ and the ‘context of justification’ (Reichenbach 1938: 6–7, 382). The point being made here is that people can arrive at a true belief by all kinds of non-rational means. More importantly, having arrived at a belief they can test it and finds that it withstands scrutiny: there may be good reasons why we should accept it. What is important here are the results of the testing, not the process by which the belief was arrived at.

Intuition, for instance, can lead scientists to a true belief, which they can later test experimentally. The most famous example is the description given by August Kekulé (1829–96) of his discovery of the chemical structure of benzene.

During my stay in Ghent I resided in elegant bachelor quarters in the main thoroughfare. My study, however, faced a narrow side-alley and no daylight penetrated it. For the chemist who spends his day in the laboratory this mattered little. I was sitting writing at my textbook but the work did not progress; my thoughts were elsewhere. I turned my chair to the fire and dozed. ... the atoms were gamboling before my eyes. ... My mental eye, rendered more acute by repeated visions of the kind, could now distinguish larger structures of manifold conformation: long rows, sometimes more closely fitted together all twining and twisting in snake-like motion. But look! What was that? One of the snakes had seized hold of its own tail, and the form whirled mockingly before my eyes. As if by a flash of lightning I awoke; and this time also I spent the rest of the night in working out the consequences of the hypothesis. ... Let us learn to dream, gentlemen, then perhaps we shall find the truth. ... But let us beware of publishing

our dreams till they have been tested by the waking understanding.
(Kekulé, cited in Benfey 1958: 22)

Even more strikingly, the mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan claimed to receive formulas from the goddess of Namakkal while asleep (Hardy 1937: 139). But his fellow mathematicians were not bothered by this; what they were interested in was his proofs. So it does not matter if religious beliefs are arrived at by some non-rational means. Their claims can still be taken seriously *if* we can find evidence in their support.

11.2 Justification, Rationality, and Truth

Is there such evidence? Before we address this question, some further distinctions are required. A traditional definition of knowledge, going back to Plato, regards knowledge as *justified true belief*. (A paper published by Edmund Gettier in 1963 suggested that these are not *sufficient* conditions for knowledge, but they are *necessary* conditions.) It follows that a belief can be true without being an instance of knowledge: something more is required. I might, for example, have formed the belief (with no evidence whatsoever) that there are intelligent beings on a planet orbiting the Alpha Centauri star system. As it happens, that belief might be true. There may be intelligent beings on that planet. But if I have no grounds for this belief, or if it has not arisen as the result of some reliable belief-forming process, it would not count as knowledge. It is not, therefore, sufficient that a belief be true; it needs also to be justified.

We also need to distinguish the *rationality* of a belief from its *justification*. (Philosophers sometimes speak about the rationality of a belief as its *subjective* justification, but I prefer to use a separate term, to avoid confusion.) A belief is justified if it is actually supported by the available evidence or (on a different account) if it is produced by a reliable belief-forming mechanism. This is a simple matter of fact: a belief either is or is not justified. Rationality, however, is a characteristic not of the *content* of a belief, but of an *act of*

believing. My belief that, for example, the Arctic ice-sheet is retreating cannot be a rational belief. This makes no sense. A belief cannot be rational, although an act of believing can be. It could, however, be a justified belief and I might be acting rationally in holding it. Rationality, in other words, is a property of persons, not propositions.

More importantly, a person might be mistaken about the justification of a belief. I might, for instance, believe that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is a reliable source of information. Furthermore, I might have what seem to me good grounds for believing this. If I do hold such beliefs about the IPCC, I would be acting rationally in accepting what they say. But perhaps the IPCC is **not** a reliable source of information. Perhaps evidence of which I am unaware shows their reasoning to be fatally flawed. In this situation, my belief would be rational but not justified. (If you prefer the alternative terminology, my belief would be *subjectively* but not *objectively* justified.) This means, incidentally, that even if we conclude that religious beliefs lack (objective) justification, we cannot immediately conclude that religious believers are acting irrationally. They may be acting rationally even when their beliefs lack justification.

11.3 Complete and Incomplete Justification

A final distinction needed here is that between complete and incomplete justification. The terms ‘complete’ and ‘incomplete’ refer to both (a) the scope of the justification and (b) the degree of confidence it warrants. A *complete* justification of a set of religious beliefs would provide adequate reason for holding *all* the beliefs in question with the *degree of confidence* with which they are in fact held.

We can couple this distinction with that mentioned earlier between restricted and expanded theism (1.3). We can ask if a particular argument provides evidential support for the *whole* set of beliefs that Christians, for example, or Muslims profess, or for merely one subset of those beliefs. An argument may, for instance, show nothing more than God exists. It would not show that Jesus is the Son of God

or that Muhammad is the last and greatest of the prophets. Such an argument would be useful for a Christian or a Muslim to have, but it would provide only an *incomplete* justification of her religious beliefs.

Similar considerations apply to the *degree of confidence* with which a belief is held. Richard Swinburne, for instance, has argued that it is very probable that the core elements of Jesus' teaching, as developed by the Church, are divinely revealed. He does some Bayesian calculations, based on what he admits are more or less arbitrarily chosen values, and decides that the probability in question is 0.97 (Swinburne 2007: 353). This is, to put it mildly, an optimistic estimate, but let's grant it for the sake of the argument. The problem is, as I have already noted, that religious beliefs are generally held to be the most certain of all beliefs: they are thought to have a probability of 1 (5.1). If both these statements are true, it follows that the believer's degree of confidence exceeds the degree of support offered by the evidence. In this situation, too, we can say the justification offered by the evidence is incomplete, even when it relates to the entire set of Christian beliefs.

If our estimate of the probability of the Christian faith turns out to be as generous as Swinburne's, this might seem mere nit-picking. Surely a probability of 0.97 is enough; it is sufficiently close to 1. But many arguments for the truth of the Christian faith will yield a much lower degree of probability. Alvin Plantinga has argued, for instance, that if you engage in Bayesian reasoning of the kind Swinburne advocates, you actually end up with a probability of 0.35 (Plantinga 2000: 279). Swinburne disagrees (2007: 354–56), but let's assume (again for the sake of the argument) that Plantinga is right. In this situation there will be a very serious discrepancy between the degree of confidence with which religious beliefs are held and that which is warranted by the evidence.

Section 1: Complete Justification

12. Evidential Justification

Let's start, then, with the question of complete justification. What possibilities are there for a *complete* justification of some version of expanded theism? Could one justify accepting, for example, the entire body of Christian beliefs, with a degree of conviction that mirrors what the religion in question demands?

12.1 John Locke on Faith and Reason

There are those who have argued that the evidence supports not merely belief in God, but also belief in a particular body of doctrines about God. We find such a view in the work of the seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke. Locke distinguishes between faith and reason, but does so in such a way that the act of faith is rationally warranted. If we have reasons to accept that the Bible, for instance, is a divine revelation, then we will also have reason to accept whatever it teaches. In this situation, the entire body of Christian belief would be rationally justified.

Let's start with Locke's distinction between faith and reason, which has to do with the source of what is believed.

Reason, therefore, here, as contradistinguished to faith, I take to be the discovery of the certainty or probability of such propositions or truths which the mind arrives at by deduction made from such ideas, which it has got by the use of its natural faculties; viz. by sensation or reflection. Faith, on the other side, is the assent to any proposition, not thus made out by the deductions of reason, but upon the credit of the proposer, as coming from God, in some extraordinary way of communication. This way of discovering truths to men, we call revelation. (Locke 1846: 4.18.2)

This is, as it happens, a traditional distinction. When we say that we know a proposition p on the basis of reason, it is because we can grasp the evidence that leads us to believe that p is true. But there are other things we can know to be true on the basis not of reason

but of authority. I may not be able to offer you the evidence that $e=mc^2$ (e being energy, m mass, and c the speed of light), because I don't know sufficient physics to do so. But I can still believe it to be true on the authority of those scientists who understand the theory on which it is based. Religious faith, says Locke, involves a similar belief in authority, the difference being that in this case the authority is that of God. And on divine authority we can believe things for which we have no direct evidence; their being divinely revealed is indirect evidence of their truth.

Of course, if we knew that something had been revealed to us by God, this would be an excellent reason for believing it, if we also had reason to believe that God was omniscient and morally perfect. (Such a being could be neither deceiving nor deceived.) And if we knew with certainty that something was revealed by God, we would also know with certainty that it was true, even if we could offer no other arguments in its support. It follows that if we know with certainty that the Bible was revealed by God, then we would know with equal confidence that whatever it says must be true.

Locke's key qualification, however, is that we need *reason* to believe that the Bible is revealed by God. More importantly, our confidence in the truth of what is revealed can never be greater than the evidence warrants. Indeed we need to be confidence not merely that the Bible is the word of God, but that we have understood it correctly. As Locke writes, when we believe something on the basis of an assumed revelation

we must be sure that it be a divine revelation, and that we understand it right: else we shall expose ourselves to all the extravagancy of enthusiasm, and all the error of wrong principles, if we have faith and assurance in what is not divine revelation. And therefore... our assent can be rationally no higher than the evidence of its being a revelation, and that this is the meaning of the expressions it is delivered in. (Locke 1846: 4.16.14)

So while faith goes beyond reason – it tells us (on the authority of God) of things we could never know otherwise – it also rests on reason, since we must have reason to believe that God has spoken and that we have understood what he has said. Analogously, while I may never understand the physics behind Einstein’s famous equation, I can believe it to be true, but that belief is legitimate only if I have reason to trust those authorities who have told me it is true.

What is interesting is that this view undercuts, in a certain sense, the very distinction from which it begins: that between faith and reason. There is still a distinction here, a distinction between believing those propositions for which I have *direct* evidence and believing those propositions for which I have only *indirect* evidence, namely the authority of the person telling me they are true. But if we believe what such a person tells us only when we have reason to believe she is reliable, then of course we are believing on the basis of reason: the reasons we have for believing she is reliable. And this means that all the beliefs to which we are entitled are believed on the basis of reason.

Such a view of faith is often described as an ‘evidentialist’ view, since it demands that even an act of faith requires evidence in its support. Locke himself seems to accept that such a view does, in a sense, undercut the distinction between faith and reason. He writes, for example, that while he treats of faith “as it is ordinarily placed, in contradistinction to reason,” in fact it is nothing other than “an assent founded on the highest reason” (Locke 1846: 4.16.14). Or, as he famously wrote elsewhere, “reason must be our last judge and guide in everything” (Locke 1846: 4.19.14). Are you surprised this is a popular view among philosophers?

12.2 Degrees of Belief

It is at this point, however, that we should introduce a further distinction: that between *flat-out* belief and *degrees of belief* (Frankish 2009). Flat-out belief involves a wholehearted acceptance of some

proposition. But there are occasions when we hold beliefs in a less wholehearted fashion, having merely some degree of confidence that the proposition in question is true. If I am asked “Do you believe it will rain today?” I may be inclined to think it will rain, but be reluctant to answer either “yes” or “no.” I am more likely to say that I am “reasonably sure” it will rain, where to be reasonably sure means to have a high degree of confidence. One could put this differently. One could say that in this situation I have a whole-hearted belief that it is very likely to rain. This would be to ascribe probability to the event, rather than taking it as a measure of belief. But a very common way of thinking about these matter is to regard probability as a measure of confidence and to speak of degrees of belief.

Religions such as Christianity demand a wholehearted acceptance of the doctrines in question (5.3). They demand, if you like, flat-out belief. The act of faith is supposed to exclude all doubt; indeed doubt is simply incompatible with faith. This is nothing distinctively Roman Catholic about this view, which is shared by all traditional Christian thinkers, but it is clearly expressed in the work of the Catholic theologian Avery Dulles (1918–2008). Dulles notes that Christian tradition has always insisted on “firmness of conviction”: religious faith is incompatible with regarding what is revealed as “merely probable” (Dulles 1994: 230). His point is not merely that the believer must regard what is revealed is *objectively* certain, because of its divine source. It is that the believer’s *subjective* attitude ought to be one of certitude: faith ought to involve a firm and unwavering assent.

How does this relate to the Lockean view of faith? We might, of course, disagree with Locke. We might doubt that there really is sufficient evidence to support the idea that the Bible (for example) is divinely inspired. But even if the evidence does support this claim, it will do so only with some degree of probability. It will warrant only a certain degree of confidence in what the Bible says. I have already noted Richard Swinburne’s optimistic estimate (11.3). He holds that the probability that the core elements of Jesus’ teaching are divinely

revealed is 0.97 (Swinburne 2007: 353). There is reason to be sceptical. Even if this were true, however, it does not grant to the doctrines believed a probability of 1, which is what religions traditionally demand.

Locke himself foresees this possibility. He argues that we should hold our religious beliefs only with that degree of confidence which is warranted by the evidence. As he writes,

if the evidence of its being a revelation, or that this is its true sense, be only on probable proofs, our assent can reach no higher than an assurance or diffidence, arising from the more or less apparent probability of the proofs. (Locke 1846: 4.16.14)

In fact, Locke seems to think that probable proofs are the most we can achieve in this area. Note that Locke is not at all hesitant about belief in God. He thinks this can be proven beyond reasonable doubt. What he is more sceptical about is the belief that particular religious doctrines have been divinely revealed. While he seems (understandably) reluctant to make this scepticism fully explicit, it seems to play a role in his support for religious toleration. If we cannot be certain about any allegedly revealed truths, then we should (within certain limits) be tolerant of competing claims regarding divine revelation.

In any case, the problem with this approach should be clear. A Lockean argument could, conceivably, offer a complete justification of a particular set of beliefs, from the point of view of their *content*. (This is certainly Swinburne's view, whether or not you are persuaded by his arguments.) But even if it does, it will not offer a complete justification of those beliefs, from the point of view of the *degree of confidence* that religious faith demands. If this is the case, then a complete evidential justification of any version of expanded theism seems to be impossible.

13. Faith as Basic Belief

Perhaps, on the other hand, Christians (or Muslims, or Jews) do not need evidence in order to be justified in holding their beliefs. This may seem an odd idea. But there are philosopher who hold that some beliefs enjoy a *prima facie* justification. We are acting rationally in holding them until we are given evidence they are false. Belief in the reliability of sense perception, in ordinary circumstances, is sometimes thought to be like this. We don't need to produce arguments that our senses are reliable in order to be acting rationally in accepting what they tell us. Our sense-perceptual beliefs are 'basic' or 'non-inferential' beliefs: we do not form them on the basis of any conscious process of reasoning. This view holds that we are acting rationally in so doing. So it is at least conceivable that some forms of religious belief might be like this. They, too, could enjoy a *prima facie* justification, being justified 'until further notice.'

13.1 Perceiving God

The simplest way of defending this idea would be to say that religious experiences – experiences understood as experiences of the divine – are analogous to sense perception. If sense-perceptual beliefs enjoy a *prima facie* justification, so would beliefs arising from religious experience. The most sophisticated defender of this view is William Alston (1921–2009).

Alston argues that there exist differing *doxastic practices*, different ways in which we form our beliefs. These include sense perception, reliance on memory, rational reflection, and reliance on religious experience. The key issue for Alston is that we cannot establish the reliability of any of these practices in a non-circular manner. He illustrates this point by reference to what he calls our "sense perceptual doxastic practice" (SP). On the one hand, this is surely the best-established of all our doxastic practices. On the other hand, Alston argues, we cannot demonstrate its reliability in a non-question-

begging fashion. All our arguments in support of SP either fall short of demonstrating that reliability or at some point take it for granted. If, for example, we argue that we know SP to be reliable because it has been shown to be reliable in the past, the sceptic could reply that we are relying on SP for evidence of its reliability.

If this is true, then our epistemic situation seems desperate. We cannot prove the reliability of any of the ways we form our beliefs. What are we to do? The only reasonable course of action, Alston argues, is to accept the outputs of our established doxastic practices. We cannot think at all without adopting some doxastic practice. Any alternative practices we came up with would almost certainly suffer from the same limitations. So it is perfectly reasonable for us to accept the practices we already have and to choose to regard their outputs as reliable, until we are given reason to think otherwise. But among our established doxastic practices are mystical perceptual practices, some of which are well established and sophisticated. Alston is particularly interested in what he calls “Christian mystical perceptual doxastic practice” (CMP). If it is rational for us to accept our other doxastic practices, he argues, it is rational to accept CMP. It is up to the sceptic to overturn the Christian’s presumption that CMP is reliable.

There are, however, at least three points at which this line of argument is vulnerable to criticism. The first has to do with the alleged parallels between SP and CMP. The second is related to the problem of religious diversity. The third has to do with the very idea of a doxastic practice.

13.1.1 Are SP and CMP relevantly analogous?

Alston’s argument rests on the idea that there exist significant analogies between SP and CMP. But we need to ask just how far these analogies extend. If there are significant *disanalogies*, then the argument will be weakened. The *disanalogies* may mean that we should not extend to the results of CMP the *prima facie* justification

that we (might) accord to the results of SP. Alston, of course, recognizes the existence of disanalogies, but believes they do not damage his case. But at least one of them is more serious than he seems to realize. It is the fact that CMP is a *voluntary* doxastic practice, while SP is not. Even if it is true that there is no non-circular way of demonstrating the reliability of sense perception, our adherence to SP is not a matter about which we have any choice. We are so constructed that we cannot avoid acting *as if* sense perception were reliable. As philosophers, we may consider it regrettable that we cannot give a non-circular justification of our practice. But that is no reason for compounding the evil. It is no reason to adopt another doxastic practice that cannot be justified in a non-circular fashion, when we know we can survive without it.

There is another fact about CMP that lends weight to this objection. It is the fact that CMP is far from firmly established. As it happens, it is not at all clear what makes a doxastic practice ‘established’ or whether a clear line can be drawn between ‘established’ (and thus respectable) and ‘non-established’ (and thus disreputable) practices. But even if these questions could be answered, Alston himself notes that some doxastic practices are more firmly established than others and that, in the case of a conflict, the more firmly established practice is to be preferred. What does it mean for a practice to be ‘more firmly established’? Alston writes:

I don’t have a precise definition, but it involves such components as (a) being more widely accepted, (b) having a more definite structure, (c) being more important in our lives, (d) having more of an innate basis, (e) being more difficult to abstain from, and (f) its principles seeming more obviously true. (Alston 1991: 171)

Even if there is no conflict between SP and CMP, by at least some of these criteria CMP is a weakly established practice. This seems to be all the more reason for not embracing CMP if we do not need to do so.

13.1.2 What About Religious Diversity?

These objections to Alston's position already seem fatal. Yet there is a still more serious objection which – as he himself notes – arises from the fact of religious diversity. The mystical perceptual doxastic practice (MPs) found in different religions seem incompatible. The beliefs that they produce cannot all be true. It may be that at least one of them is reliable, that it yields true beliefs. But the vast majority must be unreliable, yielding false beliefs. So how can I tell which MP is reliable? What non-question-begging reason can I give for thinking that my MP is reliable while other MPs are not? Let's say, for the sake of the argument, that I can give none. Let's assume that my Christian faith rests on an assumption of the reliability of CMP alone. In committing myself to CMP, I would be committing myself to a doxastic practice when – statistically speaking – is almost certainly unreliable. It follows that "it cannot be rational to engage in CMP; and by the same reasoning it cannot be rational to engage in any other particular form of MP" (Alston 1991: 269).

This seems a knock-down argument. How does Alston respond to it? He appeals to what we might call the 'incommensurability' of MPs. *Within* a particular doxastic practice it is clear how competing claims might be resolved, since each practice has its own criteria of assessment. But when it comes to comparing *different* doxastic practices – when it comes to deciding between them – things are not so simple. In this situation there are no common criteria of assessment. Different MPs have different criteria for constructing and evaluating beliefs on the basis of mystical experience. One cannot use the criteria which are specific to a particular practice to adjudicate disputes between them.

According to Alston, the lack of common criteria of assessment takes the edge off the religious diversity argument. If we knew of some way of choosing between competing MPs, then the critic would be right. It would *not* be rational simply to assume the reliability of my own. But we have no agreed criteria. It follows, in Alston's

words, that “the only rational course for me is to sit tight with the practice of which I am master and which serves me so well” (Alston 1991: 274). It is important to note that this argument applies to all the followers of any established MP. Not only Christians, but followers of other religions may be acting rationally in choosing to rely on different MPs. We see here how modest Alston’s conclusions are. He has not shown that CMP is a reliable doxastic practice. At best what he has shown is that the person who adheres to CMP, assuming its reliability, is acting rationally in so doing.

Yet even this modest conclusion is open to criticism. The most obvious has to do, once again, with the fact that MPs are *voluntary* practices. We are not forced to choose one form of MP over another, in the manner in which we are forced to rely on SP. Now the religious diversity argument suggests that the vast majority of MPs are unreliable and that it would be only by a lucky chance that our was the correct one. If we wish to avoid error, the most rational course of action would be to avoid adopting (or to abandon reliance on) MPs altogether. Alston does not consider this option.

13.2 Reformed Epistemology

Another thinker who holds that Christians, at least, do not need to justify their beliefs is Alvin Plantinga (b. 1932), whose view is known as ‘Reformed Epistemology.’ This involves three claims. The first is that the Christian faith can be a form of basic belief; the second is that if it is true, it is warranted; the third is that it is undefeated.

13.2.1 Christian Faith as Basic Belief

Plantinga’s starting-point is the idea that Christian faith may be, and often is, a form of basic (non-inferential) belief. He freely admits that we cannot produce arguments that would demonstrate the truth of the Christian faith. To this extent Plantinga is in agreement with the atheist. But this does not bother him, since he assumes that if Christian faith is a form of properly basic belief, it needs no sup-

porting arguments. As he writes, if Christian faith is a form of basic belief (and is properly so), then

the believer is entirely within his intellectual rights in believing as he does even if he doesn't know of any good theistic argument (deductive or inductive), even if he doesn't believe that there is any such argument, and even if in fact no argument exists... It is perfectly rational to accept belief in God without accepting it on the basis of any other beliefs and propositions at all. (Plantinga 1981: 42)

Let's look at this a bit more closely. Rather than saying that belief in God may be a form of basic belief, it would be more accurate to say that various beliefs *about* God may be properly basic. These include beliefs such as the following:

God is speaking to me.
God has created all this.
God disapproves of what I have done.
God forgives me.
God is to be thanked and praised.

Each of these entails the existence of God, but of course they entail much more than that. Hence Plantinga's proposal, if successful, offers support not just to belief in *God* (that God exists), but to an indefinite number of beliefs *about God*. If the Christian reads 2 Tim 3:16 ("all Scripture is inspired by God"), and believes this to be true in a properly basic way, then in that very moment, as if by magic, the whole body of biblical teachings receives justification. It seems, then, that this line of argument would offer a complete justification of Christian faith.

However, before we accept this, let's examine it more closely. What does it mean to say that such Christian beliefs may be *basic* beliefs? What are the circumstances in which such beliefs are formed? Well, on Plantinga's account it would seem that almost any circumstance can trigger the formation of such a belief about God. It may be perceiving the majesty or delicate beauty of nature, it may be

a feeling of guilt or of forgiveness, or it may be the fact of being in grave danger. In the case of distinctively Christian beliefs, the conviction of their truth normally arises on the occasion of reading Scripture or hearing these beliefs proclaimed.

We read Scripture, or something presenting scriptural teaching, or we hear the gospel preached, or are told of it by parents, or encounter a scriptural teaching as the conclusion of an argument (or conceivably even as an object of ridicule), or in some other way encounter a proclamation of the Word. What is said simply seems right; it seems compelling; one finds oneself saying, “Yes, that’s right, that’s the truth of the matter; that is indeed the word of the Lord.” ... And I may also think something bit different, something *about* that proposition: that it is a divine teaching, or revelation, that in Calvin’s words it is “from God.” (Plantinga 2000: 250)

This conviction may arise suddenly, or it may arise slowly. It may even arise with regard to a belief one has had since childhood. But “in each case,” Plantinga writes, “there is the reading or hearing, and there is the belief or conviction that what one reads or hears is true and a teaching of the Lord” (Plantinga 2000: 251).

What is important is that on Plantinga’s account the belief so formed is truly basic, in the sense of non-inferential. It is not the product of a process of argumentation. The experiences in question are the *occasions* of belief, not *premises* in an argument that leads to belief. As Plantinga writes,

one doesn’t argue thus: I am aware of the beauty and majesty of the heavens (or of my own guilt, or that I am in danger, or of the glorious beauty of the morning, or of my good circumstances): therefore there is such a person as God. The Christian doesn’t argue: “I find myself loving and delighting in the good things of the gospel and inclined to believe them; therefore they are true.” These would be silly arguments; fortunately they are neither invoked nor needed. (Plantinga 2000: 330)

There is no ‘argument from religious experience’ here, although some kind of experience is certainly involved. But it may be simply what Plantinga calls a “doxastic experience”: the experience of entertaining a proposition one believes to be true (Plantinga 2000: 183). (Contemplating the proposition $3 + 2 = 5$ *feels* different from contemplating the proposition $3 + 2 = 6$.)

13.2.2 Christian Faith as Warranted Belief

So much for Christian beliefs as *basic* beliefs. In what sense may they be said to be *properly* basic beliefs? At the heart of Plantinga’s position is the view that *if what Christians believe is true*, then their beliefs have warrant. What warrant do Christian beliefs have, according to Plantinga? There are two sources of warrant at work here. The first is what the Protestant Reformer John Calvin (1509–64) called the *sensus divinitatis* (sense of divinity), a tendency to form belief in God that is implanted in the hearts of every human being. The second is what Plantinga calls “the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit” (abbreviated IIHS), which corresponds to what Calvin called the “internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.” This refers to the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer, which produces a firm conviction regarding the truths God has revealed. While the *sensus divinitatis* is an innate cognitive mechanism, the IIHS is something *supernatural*: it is a special work of God. Strictly speaking, it is not a cognitive faculty at all, as the *sensus divinitatis* would be, but an external influence. But let’s leave that aside for the moment. Plantinga refers to the combined effect of both as the Aquinas/Calvin model of warrant.

How do we know of the existence of such mechanisms (if indeed we do know of them)? By way of the Christian faith, of course. No one but a Christian would believe that such mechanisms exist. Does this not make Plantinga’s appeal to the existence of such a warrant question-begging and circular? Plantinga argues that it does not. It is true that the warrant exists only if Christianity were true. If one’s

belief in the truth of Christianity *depended* on the warrant – if the warrant were the premise of an argument in support of the truth of Christianity – this would lead to a fatal circularity. But if belief in the truth of Christianity is a form of *basic belief*, this accusation of circularity has no force, since the believer is not producing an argument in support of her faith. And if there is no argument, there can be no circular reasoning.

Note that for Plantinga the Christian's belief may be warranted (if Christianity is true) whether or not she *knows* about this warrant. What we see at work here is Plantinga's thoroughly *externalist* conception of warrant. Whether a belief has warrant is an objective fact, pertaining to how the belief is produced. Here is his formal definition of warrant.

A belief has warrant for a person *S* only if that belief is produced in *S* by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for *S*'s kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth. (Plantinga 2000: 156)

As we have just seen, the Aquinas/Calvin model offers the believer warrant for her belief. But since that warrant has to do with the proper functioning of these cognitive mechanisms, it does not depend on the believer knowing *about* the Aquinas/Calvin model. It follows that the believer may be warranted in her belief while having “no second-order beliefs at all” about what she believes (Plantinga 2000: 179).

13.2.3 Christian Faith as Undefeated Belief

Plantinga claims that this view of Christian faith undercuts what he calls the *de jure* (as opposed to *de facto*) objections to belief. *De facto* objections are those that argue that certain central Christian beliefs are false, either because they are incoherent and therefore could not possibly be true or because there exists some fact that is incompatible with their truth. The argument from evil, Plantinga argues, may

be a *de facto* objection, as is the argument that certain Christian doctrines are incoherent. *De jure* objections, on the other hand, have to do with the rationality of Christian faith.

These are arguments to the effect that Christian belief, whether or not true, is at any rate unjustifiable, or rationally unjustified, or irrational, or not intellectually respectable, or contrary to sound morality, or without sufficient evidence, or in some other way rationally unacceptable, not up to snuff from an intellectual point of view. (Plantinga 2000: ix)

The *de jure* arguments suggest that the Christian is in some way violating her epistemic duties in believing as she does, at least if she is adequately informed of the facts. Plantinga claims that the *de jure* objection would have force only if one had proven that the Christian faith is not, in fact, true. After all, if it is true, it has warrant. What the atheist requires is a *de facto* objection. He needs to show that the Christian faith is not, in fact, true.

The problem for the atheist is that it is practically impossible to persuade the Christian of the falsity of her belief, if we begin from the assumption that her faith is a form of properly basic belief. Why is this? Well, let's look at some potential defeaters. First of all, there are naturalistic explanations of religion, similar to those offered by Karl Marx (1818–83) and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), that suggest that religion is the product of cognitive dysfunction. If these seemed more likely to be true than the Christian's claim regarding warrant, would this not undercut Christian faith? No, says Plantinga. It *would* do so if you had embraced the Christian faith as one explanatory hypothesis among many, to be judged on the basis of its explanatory power. But if your belief in God is a form of basic belief, you are not holding it on the basis of its explanatory power. "Hence the fact that there are better explanations of some range of phenomena (if there are) does not so far cast any doubt on belief in God" (Plantinga 2000: 371).

What about historical judgements of probability, of the kind that (as Hume argued) apparently undermine belief in miracles? These pose no difficulty for the Christian. Since (from Plantinga's point of view) she *already knows* (in a basic way) that Christianity is true, she has no reason to exclude this knowledge from her historical judgements. Only something like an outright contradiction between a well-established historical claim and what is known by faith (a rebutting defeater) might overturn that faith.

But what about the existence of horrifying and apparently gratuitous evils in the world? Surely this is a defeater for Christian faith? No, because insofar as this is a probabilistic argument – that a world with this degree of suffering is more probable on the assumption that there is no God than on the assumption that there is – the same considerations can be brought into play. An evidential challenge can be mounted against many of our beliefs. But if we have good independent reasons for holding those beliefs, that does not make them any less rational.

My friend has a cat named Maynard; I believe that Maynard is a cat and also (as my friend reports) that Maynard likes cooked green beans; the latter, however, is much more likely on the ... alternative hypothesis that Maynard is a Frisian, or possibly a Frenchman; so the belief that Maynard is a cat is evidentially challenged for me. I believe (naturally enough) that you are a human being; you and I are on a walk in the woods, however, so I also believe that you are in a forest; of course that proposition is vastly more likely on the ... alternative hypothesis that you are a tree; so the belief that you are a human being is evidentially challenged for me. (Plantinga 2000: 475–6)

I needn't continue. This will be enough to convey Plantinga's strategy. Once it has been established that Christian belief can be a warranted basic belief, then only the strongest sort of defeater, that is to say, one that arises from a contradiction between Christian faith and some other well-established proposition, has any chance of

defeating that faith. Any lesser objection – an argument which would merely reduce the likelihood that some Christian belief was true – can be ignored on the grounds that Christian belief is a form of basic belief. It is not the result of an argument and does not rely on the weighing of evidence.

13.2.4 What's Wrong with Reformed Epistemology

There are many objections that can be offered to this line of argument. The most decisive, in my view, arises from the “Great Pumpkin objection,” first raised by Plantinga himself.

If belief in God is properly basic, why can't *just any* belief be properly basic? Couldn't we say the same for any bizarre aberration we can think of? What about voodoo or astrology? What about the belief that the Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween? Could I properly take that as basic? And if I can't, why can I properly take belief in God as basic? ... If we say that belief in God is properly basic, won't we be committed to holding that just anything, or nearly anything, can properly be taken as basic, thus throwing wide the gates to irrationalism and superstition? (Plantinga 1981: 48)

Plantinga responds to this objection by reminding us that not just any set of beliefs have the property he is claiming for Christianity, that of being *warranted if true*. There other sets of beliefs that might seem to resemble the Christian's, but a set of beliefs is warranted *only if true*. Since these sets of beliefs sometimes contradict one another – Jesus cannot be, for instance, both the Son of God and merely another Prophet – they cannot all be true. But this means that they cannot all be warranted. Plantinga, of course, believes the Christian account is true and – if other accounts are inconsistent with it – only this account has warrant. And his belief that the Christian account is true is a basic belief. End of story.

If this were the point of the Great Pumpkin objection, Plantinga's response would perhaps be adequate. But it is not, since it misses

the point of the objection. The force of this objection is not that any set of bizarre beliefs could *in fact* be warranted on the basis of Plantinga's arguments. It is that the holders of such beliefs could *claim* their beliefs to be warranted on the basis of Plantinga's arguments. They may of course be wrong. Indeed most of them would have to be wrong. But that's not the point. It is the fact that anyone *could* claim warrant in this way, for almost *any* set of beliefs, that is worrying.

The conditions under which this could occur are not very demanding. First, your belief would have to be arrived at in a non-inferential way. As soon as you are presented with these beliefs, a conviction regarding their truth arises in your heart. Secondly, among the things thus believed there would need to be the existence of a mechanism guaranteeing the truth of that belief. It doesn't matter how bizarre the belief may appear to be. The fact that it is a basic belief exempts you from having to assess its probability vis-à-vis our other beliefs. So it is very hard to defeat.

Are you not convinced? Then consider the following statement of my warranted, basic Zeeoplean faith. The Zeeopleans are members of a highly-advanced alien civilization. For some years now, one of their spacecraft has been in stationary earth orbit, directly above New Zealand. Its presence cannot be detected because, like the Zeeopleans themselves, it occupies another dimension of what we think of as space-time, one unknown to earthly science. (This is how the Zeeopleans have explained it to me, but they are, of course, speaking metaphorically, because of the weakness of my human intellect.) They are kindly disposed towards humanity and have chosen me to be their spokesman on earth. So you should listen carefully to me. But I should warn you. If you don't listen to me, the Zeeopleans have authorized me to use violence against you. While they *are* kindly disposed, they are prepared to allow some people to suffer, even to suffer horribly, for the good of humanity as a whole.

How do I know this to be true? I have no arguments – at least no arguments that you would see as convincing – in support of this be-

lief. It simply came to me one night as I was out walking, looking at the stars, and I immediately formed a conviction of its truth. So it is a *basic* belief. What makes me think it is a *warranted* basic belief? Well, one of the things the Zeeopleans have revealed to me is that when I was three years old they abducted me for a time – my parents thought I was lost in a shopping centre – and implanted in my brain a reliable cognitive mechanism. (I think of it as the *sensus alienorum*.) When a belief occurs to me, this mechanism enables me to discern if it is a message from the Zeeopleans. Why do I *alone* have this set of beliefs? Well, it's because I alone have the *sensus alienorum*. Does this seem odd? Why did they choose a messenger, especially one from a far-off country, rather than reveal themselves immediately to everyone? Yes, this does seem antecedently improbable. But lots of odd things turn out to be true. In any case, who am I to understand their intentions?¹

Are my arguments in support of my Zeeoplean faith different in kind from Plantinga's? Apparently not. It might be argued that my Zeeoplean faith could not withstand the various defeaters that might be brought against it. Perhaps it wouldn't. But bear in mind that I could deploy the same strategy against potential defeaters as does Plantinga. Whenever someone offered evidence against my view, I could simply reply that my belief in the Zeeopleans is not based on such evidence. It is a basic belief, one that does not arise by inference from my other beliefs. So the fact that my beliefs render my Zeeoplean faith 'evidentially challenged' matters not a whit, for the truth of that faith is evident to me, independently of any other be-

1 When I first came up with this example, I thought it was entirely fictional. But I have since learned about Nancy Lieder, who claims that a cognitive mechanism was implanted in her brain when she was younger, allowing her to channel messages from a group of aliens called 'Zetans,' from the star Zeta Reticuli. (My daughter, aged 10, suggested that it should be called Zeta Ridiculi, but in fairness, Zeta Reticuli is a real star.) Needless to say, Nancy has a website and a group of followers

liefs I hold. Such a strategy would make my Zeeoplean faith all but unassailable.

If this is the case, then something has gone badly wrong. What has gone wrong? On closer examination, we can see that Plantinga's central claim – if Christian faith is true, then it is warranted – is trivially true. Keep in mind that we know of the warrant in question (if we do know of it) only by way of the Christian faith. That the Christian faith is warranted, in other words, is itself one of the things Christians believe. What this means is that Plantinga's central claim reduces to a proposition of the same form as the following.

If *the cat is large* and *the cat is black*, then *the cat is black*.

This is, of course, true, but it is (as philosophers say) trivially true. Its conclusion tells us nothing more than we knew already.

To see how this applies to Plantinga's view, let "*a* and *b* and *c* and *d* and *e*" represent the conjunction of all Christian beliefs, with "*d* and *e*" being the two of these beliefs that relate to warrant, namely belief in the *sensus divinitatis* and the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. Plantinga's central claim – that if Christian faith is true, then it is warranted – can now be expressed as follows:

If (*a* & *b* & *c* & *d* & *e*), then (*d* & *e*).

It is a mystery to me why Plantinga should regard this as a matter of any philosophical interest. I certainly do not, and have wasted far too much time on it already. It's time to move on to something more interesting.

14. Pragmatic Justification

We've seen two options – an evidentialist (Lockean) option and a non-evidentialist (Alston and Plantinga-style option) – for producing a complete justification of some form of extended theism. Neither seems very promising. But there is third course open to the defender of theism. It is to abandon the idea that what we are trying to justify is *belief*, in the strict sense, that is to say, holding certain propositions to be true. Perhaps all we need to defend is *acceptance* (5.3): choosing to act *as though* these propositions were true. After all, there might be practical or pragmatic reasons for making a religious commitment, even when we lack evidence that the beliefs in question are true.

The most famous argument of this kind was that offered by Blaise Pascal in the seventeenth century, which is known as 'Pascal's wager.' The defence of what 'the will to believe' offered by William James (1842–1910) arguably falls into the same category. But what I want to examine is a more recent version of this line of argument, offered by Richard Swinburne. It may be that Swinburne is aware that his arguments for the existence of God and the truth of Christianity fall short of the kind of commitment that his religion demands. In any case, in his work entitled *Faith and Reason* he has produced a parallel line of argument. This line of argument is more pragmatic than evidential.

Swinburne's starting point here is a general distinction between two different kinds of belief. How are we best to characterize a belief that *p*, he asks, where *p* is any proposition? It is, Swinburne argues, best regarded not simply as a belief that *p* is true, but as a belief that *p* is more probably true than some alternative. Sometimes the alternative may be simply not-*p*. But on other occasions, it will be *q*, *r*, or *s*. For instance, the belief that New Zealand will win the next rugby World Cup may be a belief that it is more probable than not that New Zealand will win. But it might be the belief that it is more probable that New Zealand will win than that South Africa or Aus-

tralia or England will win. In both cases, there is a contrast-class: it is a belief that p rather than q . But the evidential considerations will be different as the contrast-class varies.

This distinction is particularly important then it comes to practical rationality, that is, reasoning about how I am to act. If I want to achieve a particular goal and I am faced with more than one possible course of action, what would be the rational course of action to follow? Presumably that which appears *more likely than any other* to reach the goal. If I want to drive to Queenstown, for example, and I'm faced with two roads, I should follow that which I believe is more likely to get me there.

14.1 Acting on an Assumption

So far, so good. The starting point seems relatively uncontroversial. But Swinburne makes a further point. What if I want to reach a goal, but lack sufficient evidence about the best means of achieving it? In this situation, he argued, I may justifiably act on an *assumption* as opposed to a *belief*. Indeed it may be reasonable (in the sense of practical rationality) to act on an assumption even if I have reason to believe that it is *not* true. As Swinburne writes,

a man in an underground cave may believe that none of the several exits lead to the surface. He may nevertheless take a certain exit, because only by taking some exit has he any chance of achieving his purpose of getting to the surface. We may say of him that although he does not believe that this exit leads to the surface, he is acting on the assumption that it does. To act on an assumption that p (or to act as if p) is to do those actions which you would do if you believed that p . (Swinburne 1981: 31)

It would not be reasonable for me to act in this way if I believed there was *no* chance that one of the paths led to the surface. But while there exists some chance (however small) that one of them will do so, it would seem reasonable to act on the assumption that it does. The greater my desire to reach the surface – it may be, for instance,

because I am trapped – the more reasonable it would be to act on this assumption.

The parallel to religious faith should be becoming clear. Religions, Swinburne argues, can be regarded as a means of attaining certain goals, which are spelled out in the beliefs of the religion in question. One of these is, of course, that of attaining salvation, however that is envisaged. So our choice is which of these differing religious paths to follow. But to make a reasonable choice, all we need to believe is that path *A* (e.g. the Christian one) is more likely to be true – thus more likely to lead to these goals – than path *B*, *C*, *D*, or *E*. Swinburne refers to this as a ‘weak’ as opposed to a ‘strong’ belief. A strong belief, by way of contrast, would be the belief that *A* is more likely to be true than not-*A*.

As it happens, Swinburne believes that the evidence about God warrants strong belief. He believes that the existence of God *is* more probable than not. Indeed he thinks it is highly probable that the main lines of Jesus’ teaching are true. But in *Faith and Reason* he argues that religious faith requires a much lower evidential threshold. As he writes, “all that is necessary for weak belief in the Christian Creed is a much less probable belief – say, putting it loosely, that there is a significant probability that there is a God” (Swinburne 1981: 175). How high need this probability be? Apparently not very high, for religious faith is primarily a matter of trust in God and this trust can be based on a mere assumption. Swinburne at one point offers the following analogy.

A man may put his trust in something which, on balance, he does not believe to exist. A man in prison may be told that he will be rescued by “The Big Chief” from the outer yard of the prison, if he can get there at night. On balance the prisoner does not believe this rumour; he does not think there is any such Big Chief. But the rumour has some plausibility; and the prisoner has no other hope of escaping. So he steals a file, files away the bars of his cell, and squeezes through the cell window to get into the outer yard of the prison. He is liable to be punished when all this is discovered,

unless by then he has succeeded in escaping. The prisoner is not inappropriately described as putting his trust in the Big Chief. (Swinburne 1981: 167)

Or, as Swinburne writes in his conclusion, “a man who prized salvation far above everything else, would pursue it despite having a belief that it was very unlikely that pursuit of any religious way would attain it” (Swinburne 1981: 199).

14.2 Critical Comments

There are various criticisms that could be made of Swinburne’s position. William Alston (1994), for instance, takes issue with Swinburne’s general conception of belief, arguing that we often form beliefs (and are acting rationally in doing so) without forming any judgement as to their comparative probability. But the question I wish to focus on is a different one. It is: Can this argument vindicate belief in the proper sense – holding a proposition to *be* true – or does it vindicate something weaker, namely living *as if* a proposition were true?

On Swinburne’s view of faith, the answer given will vary from case to case. It will depend on what degree of *evidential* support a particular religious commitment can claim. To the extent that the commitment in question depends on evidential considerations, it *can* support belief in the proper sense. If I believe that *p* (and act on that belief) because the Bible tells me that *p* is true *and I have good reasons to believe that the Bible is a reliable authority*, then there is nothing to distinguish my religious faith from any other form of justified belief, in this case, belief on the basis of testimony. This is, as we have seen, John Locke’s view (12.1). But insofar as Swinburne is defending a religious commitment *in the absence of adequate evidential considerations*, he cannot claim that it yields knowledge. It may be rational – in the sense of practical rationality – to act **as if** *p* were true even in the absence of sufficient reasons to believe that it is. But in these circumstances I cannot say that I **know** *p* to be true.

Nonetheless, Swinburne's argument could lend support to the rationality of making a particular religious commitment, at least for someone attracted by what religions promise. The rationality in question would be *pragmatic* rationality – the rationality of choosing the best means to a desired end – rather than *epistemic* rationality. But pragmatic rationality is still a variety of rationality. Nonetheless, we should keep in mind the all-too-human tendency to pass from acting *as if* something were true to forming the conviction that it *is* true (7.2). Those who make such a commitment may begin with the best of intentions, keeping in mind that it is based on prudential rather than epistemic grounds. But it is all too easy for them to forget this and, over time, to claim a degree of certainty in matters of faith which cannot be defended. In light of this tendency, Swinburne's account looks like an invitation to systematic self-deception. Do we really want to accept an invitation of this kind?

Section 2: Incomplete Justification

15. The Argument from Miracles

It seems, then, that if you are seeking a complete justification of religious belief, your chances are slim. It may be possible to find evidence that supports the idea that some version of extended theism is true. But that evidence will not lend support to the degree of conviction that religions customarily demand. It might be possible to justify something that falls short of belief – living *as if* these beliefs were true – on pragmatic grounds. But while this represents a defence of a religious *commitment*, it does not seem to be a defence of religious *belief* (5.3).

It might, however, be possible to produce evidence in support of one or more key religious beliefs. One might, for instance, produce evidence in support of belief in God, that is to say, a being who is all-powerful, all-knowing, morally perfect, and who created the world (1.2). Even if the evidence does not warrant this strong a conclusion, it might warrant belief in a being who has *some* of the traditional properties of God. An example of such evidence would be a reliable report of a miracle. If miracles occur, and if miracles are violations of the laws of nature, then there must exist some agent capable of overriding those laws (a ‘supernatural’ agent). Such an agent would have at least some of the characteristics of the God of classical theism.

In fact, reports of miracles do play an important role in the history of religion. Traditionally, they serve to bolster support for the claims of particular religious traditions. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, regards the fulfilment of prophecy, the worldwide spread of the faith, and the occurrence of miracles as the three most powerful arguments in support of the Christian faith (*SCG* 1.6, 1.9). In later Roman Catholicism miracles play so important a role that the first Vatican Council (1870) made belief in them an article of faith. As a Catholic you could be excommunicated if you deny (a) that miracles occur, (b) that they can be known for certain, or (c) that they serve to prove “the divine origin of the Christian religion” (*DS* 3034; *Flew* 1967: 348). Even the Protestant Reformer, John Calvin, despite his suspicion of Roman Catholic miracles, regards the miracles related

in Scripture as among the “external evidences” of biblical authority (*ICR* 1.8.5–6).

15.1 Hume's Argument

What is a miracle? The classic modern definition is that offered by David Hume. A miracle, Hume writes, is “*a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent*” (Hume 1902 §90 [115n.1]). More concisely, a miracle is “*a violation of a law of nature*” (Hume 1902 §90 [114]). If you wish to avoid the idea that a miracle ‘violates’ a ‘law,’ I am happy to do so. You might prefer the definition of a miracle offered by a contemporary Christian apologist, namely “an event which lies outside the productive capacity of nature” (Craig 1986: 29).

These definitions do, of course, raise a further question: How could we know that a particular event *is* a miracle? That’s not an easy question to answer. But there seems nothing incoherent about the idea of a miracle: miracles are not, as philosophers say, *logically* impossible. Furthermore, if miracles were to occur, they would lend support to the idea that there exists a ‘supernatural’ being, one who is capable of intervening in the workings of nature. It does not follow that this being would have the other attributes of God – he may, for instance, be merely very powerful rather than omnipotent – but a reliable report of a miracle would be at least the beginning of an argument for theism.

But has there ever been a reliable report of a miracle? Could we ever be justified in believing that a reported miracle occurred? The classic response to this question is that offered by David Hume, who clearly thought that his argument settled the issue, at least for those capable of appreciating it. As he wrote,

I flatter myself, that I have discovered an argument ... which, if just, will, with the wise and learned, be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion, and consequently, will be useful as long as the world endures.” (Hume 1902 §86 [110])

For many thinkers, whether religiously-inclined or not, Hume's discussion has indeed been decisive. But from the moment of publication its conclusion has also been hotly contested. So what is Hume's argument? Has it withstood criticism?

15.1.1 Weighing the Evidence

Hume was a historian as well as a philosopher. In his own lifetime he was best known for his six volume *History of England* (1754–62). This is not an irrelevant fact, because Hume approaches the question of miracles with the instincts of an historian (Flew 1967: 350–53). What does the historian do when faced with documents which claim to tell of past events? If he is a good historian, he doesn't just 'cut and paste' material from his sources. Rather, he acts in the manner of the detective interviewing witnesses to a crime. (The particular analogy is that of R. G. Collingwood [1961: 266–8]; compare Hume's comments about the judge [1902 §95 [122].) Witnesses are notoriously unreliable. Similarly, the historian knows that those who wrote his documents may be unreliable. So the historian has an obligation to weigh the evidence.

How does the historian go about weighing the evidence? If he has a report that claims a certain event occurred, he must take this report seriously. But he must also take two other factors into account. The first is the *prior probability* such an event should occur, that is to say, the probability that it should occur considered independently of the reports that it did occur. The basis on which he would normally make such judgements of probability is his knowledge of what has occurred in similar circumstances on other occasions. The knowledge of what has occurred in similar circumstances will also inform the historian's second judgement, which has to do with the *reliability of the reports* which testify to the event. In these particular circumstances, how likely is it that his informants are lying or mistaken? If, for instance, they contradict each other, or if they have a

vested interest in the truth of what they relate, the probability that they are deceived or deceiving may be high.

These relatively straightforward reflections give us the basic elements of Hume's argument. Part One of his essay deals with the first judgement, that of the prior probability that a miracle occurred. Part Two deals with the second judgement, that of the reliability of the testimony to the miracle. Let's now see if we can reconstruct his argument in a defensible form.

15.1.2 The Probability of Miracles

The argument of Part One of Hume's essay begins with the very idea of a miracle. Its starting-point is the observation that "nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happen in the common course of events" (Hume 1902 §90 [115]). This seems uncontroversial. If a miracle is an exception to the regular workings of the natural world, then it must be something unusual. It must *not* be an event that regularly occurs in similar circumstances. If it were, it would be "indistinguishable from a law of nature" (Gaskin 1988: 160); it would not be recognizable as a miracle.

Let's try to spell out what this means. Given any regularly-occurring set of circumstances (let's call it *C*), there is a regular outcome (let's call it *R*), which we know about on the basis of past instances. (For instance, our regular experience is that when someone dies and is buried, he remains dead.) If the same circumstances were to give rise to a miraculous outcome (let's call it *M*), such as a person rising from the dead, then to be seen as a miracle this would have to occur only very rarely. The proportion of miraculous to non-miraculous outcomes must be very small.

What follows? If we ask ourselves, before examining the reliability of our reports, which outcome, *R* or *M*, was the *more likely*, the answer can only be *R*. We would, in other words, assess the prior probability of *M* as very low. (I am talking here of *epistemic* probability, that is to say, with regard to our background knowledge.) Can we as-

sign a figure to this probability? It has recently been alleged that Hume is making an elementary error here: he thinks that if our experience of *R* has been without exception, then the prior probability of *M* is zero (Earman 2000: 22–32). If this charge is justified – I shall come back to it in a moment – it would mean (ironically!) that Hume as placing too much confidence in the power of inductive reasoning. (The irony here is that Hume elsewhere claims to be a sceptic about inductive reasoning.) But for the moment, let's take a more charitable interpretation of Hume's position. Let's assume that uniform past experience against an alleged miraculous event does not show it to be impossible. It merely shows its prior probability to be very low. This is all Hume's argument requires.

But low prior probability is not enough. If we did have a report whose reliability could not reasonably be doubted, then the fact that the reported event had a low prior probability would not justify its rejection. It would mean only that the evidence that it did occur would have to be very reliable. So Part Two of Hume's essay deals with the reliability of testimony to the occurrence of a miracle. Hume argues that it is all but impossible that the evidence in support of a miracle claim could outweigh its prior improbability. He offers four reasons. Firstly, there has never been a miracle report that clearly excludes the possibility that those who framed it were deceiving or deceived. Secondly, human beings have an appetite for wonders which, when combined with "the spirit of religion," will almost inevitably lead to fabrications. Thirdly, miracle reports are chiefly found "among ignorant and barbarous nations" and they diminish in number as one approaches the present. Fourthly, the miracle reports of the different religions, however well established they might appear to be, undermine each other's authority. All these claims are contestable, to a greater or lesser degree, but it is not vital to Hume's case that each argument be convincing. It would be a rash critic who would not recognise the possibility of deception or deceit when it comes to miracle reports. And even a small chance that a miracle report may be unreliable will be enough to discredit it.

Why is this? This question brings us to the heart of Hume's argument. As wise people, who proportion their belief to the evidence, when would we be justified in accepting a report of a miracle? *Only when it would be more improbable that the report be false than that the miracle occurred.* As Hume writes, with clear allusion to the resurrection of Jesus,

when anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. ... If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command by belief or opinion. (Hume 1902 §91 [116])

The force of the argument will become clear if we assign some figures to the probabilities involved. Any such figures will be admittedly arbitrary, but I shall take mine from one of Hume's more intemperate recent critics, John Earman. Let's say that on past experience the prior probability of the reported miracle occurring is one in a million. Let's say, too, that we have a highly reliable witness to the alleged miracle, one who has been reliable on ten occasions for every one that he has been mistaken. So the prior probability of his being mistaken on this occasion is 1/11. If we weigh up the two probabilities, we find that the probability of the reported event occurring is far lower than that of the witness being mistaken. So we should reject the miracle report. Unless we were faced with testimony of truly unprecedented reliability – testimony whose falsehood would be miraculous, as Hume puts it – we may assume that miracle reports are false.

15.2 Evaluating Hume's Argument

The key question here is: Are there any circumstances in which a follower of Hume might be forced to concede the possibility of a miracle? Towards the end of his essay, Hume suggests there are not.

Even if miracles are not logically impossible, there are no circumstances in which we could rationally believe a miracle report. If we received a report of an event that was truly without analogy (that is to say, truly a miracle), the event would be *ipso facto* so improbable that we may assume the report to be false. The only extraordinary events we should accept, on the basis of apparently undeniable testimony, are events that are analogous to events of which we already have knowledge. (This seems to be the point of Hume's contrast between the eight-day darkness and the alleged resurrection of Queen Elizabeth. Firm testimony to the first may be accepted; even firm testimony to the second may not.) But of course if the reported events *are* analogous to events of which we already have knowledge, then *ipso facto* they are not miracles.

This is surely a defensible view. Its major weakness is that it is very difficult to draw a line between these two sorts of events. Just when is a reported event so without analogy that we should reject it? The notion of analogy is here very vague. But of course this is a problem facing the theist as well, the problem of deciding just which extraordinary events *are* miracles, which events are (as we might say) "outside the productive capacity of nature." (For a discussion of how this might be done, see Dietl 1968.)

15.2.1 The Problem of Probability

There is, however, a problem with Hume's argument, which has to do with how one thinks about probability. Hume appears to assess the prior probability of an event by counting the number of previous known instances of that event. But this seems wrong-headed. It certainly flies in the face of scientific practice. As John Earman writes,

scientists not uncommonly spend many hours and many dollars searching for events of a type that past experience tells us have never occurred (e.g. proton decay). Such practice is hard to understand if the probability of such an event is flatly zero, and the

probability of the putative law asserting the non-occurrence of this type of event is unity. (Earman 1993: 297)

Yet Earman's comment also indicates a way forward. On what basis do scientists search for previously unobserved events? Presumably because they have a well-confirmed theory which predicts that this event will occur at some time, in these circumstances. The likelihood of the event occurring is dependent on the probability of the theory that predicts it. Applied to reports of miracles, this suggests that the prior probability of a miracle is dependent on the prior probability of the theistic hypothesis. To put this another way, it would be reasonable to accept a hypothesis that involved a miracle only if we already had reason to believe that there was a miracle-working God.

You might argue that even on these grounds, Hume's argument has some force. For as we have seen, what interested him was the use of miracle reports to establish the claims of some particular (Hume 1902 §99 [127]). If you are using miracle reports to prove there is a God, you cannot use the existence of God as a reason to believe the miracle report. That would be begging the question. But Hume's way of calculating probabilities has introduced some confusion into his argument.

15.2.2 Multiple, Independent Witnesses

Another factor that Hume did not take into account is the potential power of multiple, independent, and individually reliable witnesses. It was the mathematician Charles Babbage (1791–1871) – inventor of the world's first mechanical computer – who developed this idea. Babbage accepts the central argument of Hume's essay, which he argues “never has, and never will be refuted” (cited in Earman 2000: 203). But he then turns it against him. Babbage concedes that we can assign a very low prior probability to the allegedly miraculous event. He suggests, for instance, that the odds against a dead man being raised to life could be set at 200,000,000,000 to 1. So we would

need very strong testimony to outweigh it. Babbage then goes on to calculate the probability that several independent, reliable witnesses will give the same false testimony. He estimates, for instance, that if you have two independent witnesses, each of whom is reliable 99 times out of 100, the chance of their giving the same false testimony is $1/10,000$. As the number of independent witnesses grows, this figure increases very quickly. It is not too long before we reach the point where it is less likely that their testimony is false than that the event occurred. Babbage calculates that the odds against just *six* such independent witnesses giving false testimony to be 1,000,000,000,000 to 1. In the case of the alleged resurrection, this is five times as great as the improbability of the event which they relate. In these circumstances, a wise man, who proportions his belief to the evidence, will accept the miracle report.

The follower of Hume, it seems to me, has little choice but to accept this argument. But he could still argue that in practice this condition is never fulfilled. (This, of course, is the point of Part Two of Hume's essay.) It is worth noting here how cautious we are in other, non-religious contexts. We are reluctant to believe that multiple witnesses to an alleged, highly improbable event *are* both independent and reliable. If you don't believe me, then consider the analogous case of alien abduction reports. We have many instances of such reports. But does that lead *you* to take them seriously? If not, why not? You will probably deny that the required conditions apply. If this way of reasoning is justified, then Hume's argument does not permit an *a priori* dismissal of all miracle reports, but it does give us some important criteria by which we can assess them.

16. Ontological Arguments

Most arguments for the existence of God begin from some observable fact about the world. It may be the occurrence of **miracles**, as we have seen (chap. 15). It could be the very existence of the universe, which is thought to require explanation (the **cosmological** argument), or it may be some fact about the universe that suggests it was produced by an intelligent agent (the **teleological** argument or argument “from design”). To use a more technical term, all these arguments are *a posteriori* arguments: their starting points are observable facts. But there exists an *a priori* argument, which requires nothing more than the very idea of God. From examining the very idea of God, it is suggested, you can conclude that he exists. This argument is generally called the **ontological** argument.

This was first put forward in the eleventh century by St Anselm (1033–1109) and it has fascinated philosophers ever since. It was rejected by Thomas Aquinas (ca.1225–74), revived by René Descartes (1596–1650), opposed by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and revived in our own time by Norman Malcolm (1911–90) and Alvin Plantinga (b. 1932). Even Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), no friend to belief in God, was tempted by it when he was a student at Cambridge.

I remember the precise moment, one day in 1894, as I was walking along Trinity Lane, when I saw in a flash (or thought I saw) that the ontological argument is valid. I had gone out to buy a tin of tobacco; on my way back, I suddenly threw it up in the air, and exclaimed as I caught it, “Great Scott, the ontological argument is sound” (Russell 1944: 10).

This conviction did not last for long, but the fact that Russell took the argument seriously is testimony to its power.

16.1 St Anselm's Ontological Argument

The simplest form of the ontological argument is taken from chapter two of St Anselm's work, the *Proslogion*. As the name *Proslogion*

suggests, it was written in the form of a prayer, addressed to God. This is, in itself, interesting, since it suggests that Anselm conceives this as an argument in support of an existing act of faith: the act of faith comes first, the argument later. Indeed Anselm famously defines theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*: faith seeking understanding. He does **not** define it as *intellectus quaerens fidem*: understanding seeking faith. This lends support to an overall theme of this study: that faith is normally a non-rational act that is only later buttressed by rational arguments.

Let's return, however, to the prayer in which Anselm sets out his ontological argument. He writes, addressing the deity:

We believe that you are something than which nothing greater can be thought. So can it be that no such nature exists, since "The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God" [Psalm 14:1; 531]? But when this same fool hears me say "something than which nothing greater can be thought," he surely understands what he hears; and what he understands exists in his understanding, even if he does not understand that it exists [in reality]. For it is one thing for an object to exist in the understanding and quite another to understand that it exists [in reality] ... And surely that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot exist only in the understanding. For if it exists only in the understanding, it can be thought to exist in reality as well, which is greater. So if that than which a greater cannot be thought exists only in the understanding, then that than which a greater *cannot* be thought is that than which a greater *can* be thought. But that is impossible. Therefore, there is no doubt that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality. (Anselm 1995: 100)

The argument may be set out systematically in a more concise form (here adapted from Le Poidevin 1996: 19–20):

- (1) God exists either in our minds alone, or in reality also.

- (2) Something that exists in reality is greater than something which exists in the mind alone.
- (3) If God existed in our minds alone, we could think of something greater, namely something that really exists. [From (2).]
- (4) We cannot, however, conceive of anything greater than God. [By definition.]

From (1) – (4) it follows that

- (5) God does not exist in the mind alone, but in reality also.

What can we say about this argument? Well, if its premises were acceptable, it might appear to be a sound argument. But in fact only (4) is uncontroversial, and that's because it is simply a matter of definition. Premise (3) depends on (2). So we need to look carefully at (1) and (2). Premise (1), at least as currently worded, depends on the idea that something can be said to 'exist' in the mind. But this is a murky idea. We may, perhaps, say that there exist *representations* of things in the mind. But if we are to make any sense of this idea, we need to examine the content of such representations. For if a representation is a mental state, it is an *intentional* state. It has an object, to which it makes reference. That object may be either fictional or real. So premise (1) of Anselm's argument may be re-expressed as follows:

- (1*) God is either a fictional object or a real object.

But this brings us to premise (2), which may be restated as

- (2*) A real object is greater than a fictional object.

But is this true? Let's take an example. A unicorn is a fictional object. As such, it has certain attributes. (These are, I suppose, established by convention, since no such creatures exist. But even fictional creatures have certain characteristics.) Each of us has enough knowledge of what makes a unicorn a unicorn to recognise one when we see one. Many of the unicorn's attributes it shares with a horse,

while its distinctive attribute is its single horn. If you wanted to describe a unicorn, you could do so briefly by saying that a unicorn is “a horse-like creature with a single horn.” But let’s say a real unicorn was discovered tomorrow and you wanted to describe this real unicorn. Assuming that it shares the attributes of the fictional unicorn, what *further* attribute (if any) would it have by virtue of being real? Would you describe the real unicorn as “a horse-like creature with a single horn *that exists*”? Or does that sound a little odd? Is ‘existing’ an attribute, a property that you might predicate of something? Is ‘existing’ comparable to ‘having a single horn’?

Criticism of the ontological argument has centred on this question: the question of whether existence is a property or (if you prefer) a predicate. Let me look at the classic response to Anselm’s argument first, that which suggests that existence cannot be regarded as a property. I shall then examine a more recent response, one which concedes that in certain circumstances it can.

16.1.1 If Existence is Not a Predicate...

The key figure here is Immanuel Kant, who discussed the ontological argument in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787). Kant approaches this question in a variety of ways. But I shall cut straight to the most persuasive of his arguments. Let’s begin with Kant’s own words.

‘Being’ is obviously not a real predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something that could be added to the concept of a thing. ... If we take the subject (God) with all its predicates (among which is omnipotence), and say ‘God is,’ or ‘There is a God,’ we attach no new predicate to the concept of God, but only posit the subject in itself with all its predicates, and indeed posit it as being an *object* that stands in relation to my *concept* ... By whatever and by however many predicates we may think a thing ..., we do not make the least addition to the thing when we further declare that this thing *is*. (Kant 1929: 504–5 [a598-599; b626-627])

In his usual obscure fashion, Kant is here making an important point. One should distinguish the characteristics that something has (“horse-like creature with a single horn”) from the judgement that this thing exists (“My goodness, there’s a *real* unicorn!”).

Modern logicians mark the distinction by way of logical notation, by using what is called the “existential quantifier” ($\exists$). So the ordinary-language sentence “A unicorn exists,” could be symbolised as $(\exists x)(x \text{ is a unicorn})$, which may be read “There exists an x such that x is a unicorn,” or perhaps $(\exists x)(x \text{ is horse-like being with a single horn})$. But if this symbolism frightens you, don’t worry. In everyday English we mark this same distinction by using the phrase “There is an X ,” which must be completed with a description (or term indicating a description).

Kant’s immediate target is Descartes’s formulation of the ontological argument. But his argument is equally applicable to Anselm’s formulation. For Anselm’s argument also assumes that existence is a property, indeed a ‘great-making’ property, without which what we might call ‘God’ would not really be God at all. So it is tempting to ward off all forms of the ontological argument by wielding as a talisman the Kantian phrase ‘Existence is not a predicate.’ (The same phrase could perhaps ward off other evils, such as talk of Being with a capital B, and commit to the flames books with titles such as *Being and Time* [see Hume 1902 §131 (165)]. But that’s another issue.)

16.1.2 If Existence Can Be a Predicate ...

However, the issue is not as simple as it first appears. J. L. Mackie, himself no friend to the ontological argument, has raised an interesting objection to this Kantian response. He argues that the use of the existential quantifier cannot do justice to many of our ordinary-language sentences about particular individuals. Among his examples are “David Pears exists,” “This tree exists,” “I exist,” and “God exists” (Mackie 1976: 253; 1982: 47). In such sentences, he argues, ‘exist(s)’ is being used as a predicate. So the doctrine that existence is not a

predicate is simply untenable. This is a difficult question, which I shall not try to settle. To give the ontological argument as much credit as possible, let's assume that Mackie is correct and that the above criticism fails. Let's assume that there *could* exist an individual whose essence includes existence, that is to say, one that has existence as one of its essential properties. Following Mackie, let's call this individual *X*. What would follow?

Well, it follows that the sentence "The *X* does not exist" contradicts itself. The subject of the sentence, 'the *X*,' possesses the property of existing. So to say "the *X* does not exist" is equivalent to saying "the *X* which exists does not exist." This is the point that Anselm and his followers have picked up. If we grant for the sake of the argument that existence can be a predicate, this seems to be correct. But, Mackie argues, we do not contradict ourselves if – taking our lead from the existential quantifier – we reformulate the sentence as "It is not the case that there is an *X*" or "There are no *Xs*" (Mackie 1982: 48). This may be paraphrased as, "There is no being which has existence as one of its properties." There is no self-contradiction here.

In other words, even if God's essence did include existence, it would by no means follow that God must exist. What would follow is the much weaker conclusion that if God existed, then he would exist necessarily. If there did exist such a being – one who had existence as a property – he would always have existed and he could not cease to exist. This is a weaker sense of 'necessary existence' than the ontological argument requires, but it may be the most it can warrant.

16.2 Alvin Plantinga's Modal Ontological Argument

An apparently more powerful version of the ontological argument has been offered by our old friend, Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga's argument involves some of the insights of modal logic, which deals with the notions of necessity and possibility. (Modal logic is so called because originally it dealt with the *modes*, or *ways*, in which a proposi-

tion may be said to be true, either necessarily or contingently.) There are various forms of possibility that may be invoked here, but the most widely used is that of *logical* possibility. Note that this is a much broader category than that of physical possibility. It may be *physically* impossible – in violation of the laws of nature – that pigs should fly. But it is not *logically* impossible. There is no contradiction in the idea of a flying pig, as there is (for example) in the idea of a square circle.

A popular way of approaching this topic is by way of the idea of *possible worlds*. A possible world is a comprehensive state of affairs that is possible in this broad, logical sense: it can be described in a way that is consistent, that avoids self-contradiction. The concept of a possible world is attractive because it makes it easier to work with the difficult concept of *necessity*. It enables us to say that a necessary truth is one that is true in *every* possible world. Does this help? Some philosophers, such as Jonathan Harrison think not (Harrison 1999), but this is not a question I shall discuss. I shall use ‘possible worlds’ talk, despite the confusions it can create, because Plantinga does so.

16.2.1 Plantinga's Argument

Plantinga begins by defining a couple of notions. The first is that of ‘maximal greatness.’ A being has maximal greatness only if it has ‘maximal excellence’ in every possible world. What is maximal excellence? It is the property of enjoying “omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection” in every world (Plantinga 1975: 111). Plantinga then employs these notions to construct his modal ontological argument, which may be set out as follows.

- (1) There is a possible world in which maximal greatness is instantiated. [= There is nothing contradictory about the idea of maximal greatness.]
- (2) Necessarily, a being is maximally great only if it has maximal excellence in every possible world. [By definition.]

- (3) Necessarily, a being has maximal excellence in every possible world only if it has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection in every world. [By definition.]

From (1) – (3) it follows that

- (4) Maximal greatness is instantiated in every possible world.

What this means will (I hope) become clear if I add a couple of premises.

- (5) Maximal greatness entails having the qualities of God in every possible world. [From (2) and (3).]

- (6) The actual world is a possible world. [What is actual must be possible.]

The conclusion follows, namely that

- (7) God exists in the actual world.

What Plantinga has apparently done here is to deduce the *existence* of God from the mere *possibility* that God might exist. This is a very neat trick and at first sight he might appear to have pulled it off. After all, all Plantinga asks of us is to concede the mere *possibility* of maximal greatness. It might seem unreasonable of the atheist not to do this.

Why would you not make this concession? You might argue that the qualities attributed to God – omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection – could not exist within the one being. (A classic modern discussion can be found in Kenny 1979.) This is an important question (Himma 2001), for if it is right, there is *no* (logically) possible world in which God exists. But given the mysteriousness of the notion of God (chap. 8), it is difficult to make a watertight case for the incoherence of the divine attributes. So let's give the theist the benefit of the doubt and concede that the idea of an omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect being is not self-contradictory. What, then, what can we say? Has St Alvin done what St Anselm failed to do?

16.2.2 A No-Maximality Argument

At the very end of his discussion of the modal ontological argument, Plantinga concedes that one could construct a parallel argument, leading to the conclusion that God's existence is impossible. All one needs is to admit the possibility of some property whose existence is *incompatible* with that of maximal greatness. The simplest candidate here is the property of *no-maximality*, "the property of being such that there is no maximally great being" (Plantinga 1974: 218). There seems to be a possible world in which this property is instantiated. In other words, it is possible that God might *not* exist. But if the property of no-maximality *were* instantiated, it would of course exclude the possibility that there exists a being enjoying maximal greatness. In this case, God *could* not exist. One can set out the argument as follows:

- (1) No-maximality is possibly exemplified.
- (2) If no-maximality is possible, then maximal greatness is not.
- Therefore
- (3) Maximal greatness is impossible.

To put this more simply, if God is, by definition, a being who exists in every possible world, then if there is one possible world in which he does *not* exist, then he does not exist in *any* possible world. In a word, if God's non-existence is possible, his existence is impossible.

Now this is an important concession. What is Plantinga's response? He concedes that his ontological argument fails as a piece of 'natural theology,' since it does not begin with a premise that any reasonable person would be forced to accept. The opponent is free to start with a different premise, or perhaps to remain agnostic about the possibility of a being enjoying maximal greatness. But, Plantinga continues, if the theist chooses to begin with the premise that favours theism, there is nothing "improper, unreasonable, [or] irrational" about this choice. Well, perhaps there isn't. One response is that such a choice does rather beg the question, particularly if it is

being made (as Plantinga admits) for the sake of theology. After all, his opponent can offer at least one *independent* reasons for accepting a no-maximality premise, namely that this is more parsimonious.

Keep in mind, too, that the first premise of Plantinga's ontological argument is not as innocuous as it may appear at first sight. To accept this premise is not *merely* to accept the possibility of an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect being. It is to accept the possibility of an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect being *whose existence is necessary*. We might be prepared to concede that there could exist a being who is omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect. But why should we make the further conceptions that such a being might *exist necessarily*? It is true that there is nothing obviously self-contradictory about this idea. But so what? Does logical possibility entail actual (metaphysical) possibility? (See van Inwagen 1998.) In any case, there is nothing obviously self-contradictory about the no-maximality premise either. So why should we prefer one to the other?

In a word, the modal ontological argument is fiendishly clever, but – as Plantinga himself concedes – it is unlikely to satisfy anyone who does not already accept its conclusion. Such a person has no need of an argument.

17. Cosmological Arguments

It was Immanuel Kant who suggested the threefold classification of arguments I am using here: ontological, teleological and cosmological. The ontological argument, as we have seen, begins from the very idea of God. The teleological argument begins from some particular fact about the world and suggests that God is required as the explanation of this fact. What I want to examine here is the cosmological argument, that which begins (as Kant wrote) from the “experience of existence in general” (Kant 1929: 500 [a591; b619]). To keep things manageable, I shall offer just one form of this argument, which is my own invention. But it is the strongest form of the argument I can think of and will illustrate the assumptions which underlie any form of cosmological argument.

Before I do so, however, I would like to remind you that the argument I am about to present is not yet an argument for the existence of God. It is an argument for the existence of a cause of the universe. It takes us only *part* of the way towards demonstrating the existence of God. It would not show that this cause is a personal being – or even that it is one being (Mascall 1966: 70, 70n.1) – let alone that it is a being who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect. So an argument for the existence of God based on the cosmological argument would need to have two parts.

The first part, depending on which version we pursue, is an argument to establish the existence of a first cause, necessary being, or a being that accounts for the existence of the world. The second part is an argument to establish that the being established in the first part is God, that is, has the properties associated with the theistic concept of God. (Rowe 1998: 6)

We should not underestimate the difficulty of this second task. The difficulty was set out clearly by David Hume. Hume argues that in positing a cause of some observable effect we should never ascribe to that cause “any qualities, but what are exactly sufficient to pro-

duce the effect” (Hume 1902: §105 [136]). Now the universe would appear to be a finite entity, or collection of entities. If we accept Hume’s principle, it would appear to rule out positing an infinite cause to explain this finite effect. (Even Aquinas seems aware of this difficulty: see his *ST* 1a, 2.2, obj. 3.) The theist may be able to evade this objection, by arguing, for instance, that an infinite deity is a ‘simpler’ hypothesis than a finite deity (Swinburne 2004: 97–98). Perhaps. That would require a further discussion. All I can do here is to indicate that Hume’s principle creates a further hurdle for the theist.

For the moment, however, let’s have a look at my sample cosmological argument.

- (1) The existence of the universe is a contingent fact.
- (2) All contingent facts have a cause.
- (3) Nothing can be the cause of itself.

Therefore:

- (4) The universe has a cause that is distinct from itself.

This appears to be a valid argument, but is it sound? There are three assumptions on which it rests, corresponding to its three premises. The first is that the existence of the universe is a contingent fact. The second is that all contingent facts have a cause. The third is that nothing can be the cause of itself. Are these assumptions justified?

17.1 Nothing Can Be the Cause of Itself

Let me begin with the last premise, which seems the least problematic. It states that nothing can be the cause of itself. At first sight, this seems almost self-evidently true. To be responsible for its effect, a cause needs to be distinct from the effect. Of course, it would also rule out the traditional formulation which says of God that he is *causa sui* (cause of himself). But perhaps this is a price worth paying if it lends support to belief in God’s existence.

One philosopher, Quentin Smith, does argue that for what appears to be an alternative view. In particular, he argues for the view that “the reason the universe exists is that it caused itself to exist” (Smith 1999). This appears to entail the unlikely idea that the universe is indeed *causa sui* (cause of itself). But what Smith is actually arguing is slightly different, namely that the existence of each part of the universe, or each state of the universe at a particular time, can be explained by reference to other parts or temporal states of the universe. Given the possibility of instantaneous causation – a cause that occurs at the same time as its effect – it follows, Smith argues, that we can explain the *beginning* of the universe without reference to anything other than the universe itself.

I’m not sure what to make of this argument. It seems to run up against the common-sense objection first put forward by Abu Nasr Muhammad al-Farabi (A.D. 870–950), who argued that “a series of contingent beings which would produce one another cannot proceed to infinity or move in a circle” (Craig 1980: 83). But then perhaps common sense is not a good guide here. In any case, Smith’s argument has force only against those theists who invoke the so-called ‘Big Bang’ cosmology, which suggests that the universe had a beginning. For if one accepts that everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence, this might appear to lend support to the idea of a creator God. It doesn’t seem to have any force against that form of cosmological argument which suggests that the very *existence* of a universe requires explanation.

17.2 The Existence of the Universe is Contingent

Let’s turn, then, to the second assumption. Is the existence of the universe a contingent fact? To say that it is a contingent fact is to say that the universe might not have existed. But how could we know that to be true? Defenders of theism often point out that the idea of the non-existence of the universe does not lead to a contradiction. (It is not like the idea of a square circle.) The non-existence of

the universe is therefore *logically* possible. Since its non-existence is conceivable, they argue, its existence requires explanation. But is that last step valid? What follows from the statement that some state of affairs is “logically possible”? Very little, I would suggest. After all, what is logically possible may be actually impossible, in the sense that it could never occur. (A flying pig is not logically impossible, but it does seem impossible on other grounds.) So while it may be true that we can speak of the non-existence of the universe without contradicting ourselves, it does not follow that the universe, in fact, might not have existed.

However, there may be other grounds for believing that the existence of the universe is a contingent fact. You might, for instance, be persuaded by those cosmological theories that suggest the universe had beginning, some 15 billion years ago. (Of course, if the initial event, the Big Bang, was the beginning of time, then the universe did not have a beginning *in* time; the beginning of the universe was the beginning *of* time. But it was still a beginning.)

17.3 All Contingent Facts Have a Cause

So let’s assume, for the sake of the argument, that the existence of the universe *is* a contingent fact. Is this a fact of which we could expect to have an explanation? Defenders of the modal cosmological argument assume that any contingent fact does (in principle) have an explanation. But to assume this is to assume some version of what Leibniz described as the “principle of sufficient reason” (PSR).

17.3.1 The Principle of Sufficient Reason

In the classic formulation of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), the principle of sufficient reason holds that

we can find no true or existent fact, no true assertion, without there being a sufficient reason why it is thus and not otherwise, although most of the time these reasons cannot be known to us. (Leibniz 1995 §31–32 [217])

In other words, for all contingent facts – facts which could have been other than they are – there must be some reason why they are as they are. At least my form of the cosmological argument seem to require the PSR. Without it we could rest content with the existence of the universe as a brute fact, that is to say, a contingent fact that has no explanation. After all, the cosmological argument involves an odd kind of explanatory claim, one that has to do not just with particular beings and events but with the universe in its entirety. Only some form of the PSR would justify pushing the demand for explanation to this point.

It does seem that something resembling the PSR underlies much of our reasoning, both everyday and scientific. Faced with an unexplained phenomenon, we do not first ask, “Does it have an explanation?” We assume it has an explanation and strive to discover what it is. If we come across events that apparently lack a sufficient reason – perhaps free actions, conceived in a libertarian manner, or the behaviour of certain subatomic particles – we often feel there is something unsatisfactory about this. (Albert Einstein seems to have felt this way about the notion of indeterminacy in quantum mechanics.) But in the face of apparent counterexamples, few contemporary philosophers would defend the PSR in the strong form in which it is expressed by Leibniz. Some reject the principle altogether. They regard it as merely a pious hope (more technically, a ‘regulative principle’), which guides our enquiry, but insist we have no reason to expect it will turn out to be true. Others prefer to defend a weaker form of the PSR.

Various weaker forms are on offer. One is the ‘causal principle’ articulated and defended by William Lane Craig: “Everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence” (Craig and Smith 1993: 57). This version is of particular significance in discussions of Big Bang cosmology, where a key issue is what one means by a ‘cause.’ William Rowe opts for a broader version of the PSR, carefully worded:

For every kind of being such that beings of that kind can be caused to exist ... there must be a sufficient reason for the existence of each being of that kind and for the general fact that there exist beings of that kind. (Rowe 1998: xviii)

A similarly cautious principle, but still wider in scope, has recently been offered by Alexander Pruss: “If p is a true proposition and possibly p has an explanation, then p actually has an explanation” (Pruss 2004: 166). But whatever form of the PSR you opt for, there are two questions that need to be asked. How do we know it is true and how broad is its scope?

17.3.2 The Status and Scope of the PSR

The first question has to do with the status of this principle. Is it a necessary truth, known *a priori*? If so, one would expect it to be either *self-evident* (“if a is larger than b and b is larger than c , then a is larger than c ”) or *analytic* (“brothers are male siblings”)? But it seems to be neither. As Hume argued in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1.3.3), we can apparently conceive of an event without a cause. And as Quentin Smith writes,

a case in point is the universe. I can conceive of the universe existing at a certain time t (say the time of the Big Bang singularity), such that (a) there is no time earlier than t , (b) nothing else exists at t , (c) nothing timelessly exists that causes the universe to begin to exist, and (d) there are no closed timelike curves whereby ‘later’ parts of the universe cause the universe to exist at t . (Craig and Smith 1993: 182)

You may find that you cannot *imagine* such a thing. You may find its occurrence astonishing, or the theory that it had occurred deeply implausible, but it is not evidently impossible.

Perhaps, on the other hand, the PSR is what Kant would have called a synthetic *a priori* truth, which is neither analytic nor known by experience. (If such things exist, an example might be “no body is at the one time red and green all over.”) But the classic (Kantian)

justification for the existence of such truths is that they represent the necessary conditions of any experience. Again, this does not seem to be true of the PSR. We *could* experience something coming into existence without a cause. Indeed sometimes it is suggested that we have done so. So if the PSR is true, it would appear to be a contingent truth, known *a posteriori*, and justified (if it is justified at all) only to the degree to which it has been borne out by experience.

The answer we give to the first question will determine what answer we give to the second, which has to do with the scope of the PSR. If we regard our chosen form of the PSR as a contingent truth, known *a posteriori*, then two things follow. First, even if the principle had been justified by our experience to date – and it is not clear that it has – we may yet come across something that lacks a sufficient reason. (This is the familiar problem of induction.) Second, the cosmological argument would involve applying the PSR to a reality (the universe) which is very different from those to which it is normally applied. We have, for instance, no experience of universes in general coming into existence. We know of just one universe. So what *a posteriori* grounds could we have for arguing that the universe could not come into existence without a cause? Some caution is surely required here about what we can claim to know.

17.4 Bringing Explanation to an End

At what conclusion have I arrived? If we accept (a) that the existence of the universe is a contingent fact, (b) that all contingent facts have a cause, (c) that nothing can be the cause of itself, and (d) that the cause of the universe can be shown to have the other attributes of God ... well, under these conditions my cosmological argument looks like a pretty good argument for the existence of something resembling God. But does it fulfill all its promises? In particular, does it bring our explanatory quest to an end? After all, if one applies the principle of sufficient reason to the universe, one can also apply it to God. There must also be a reason why God exists. What is it?

Religious thinkers have traditionally denied that this question can be asked. They have argued that it is of the very nature of God to exist. God is, they insist, a necessary being, one who could not *not* exist. Everything else requires explanation, they argue, but God's existence does not. But is this a tenable idea? Is the idea of a necessary being a coherent one? And does positing the existence of such a being represent the "ultimate" explanation that so many people seek?

17.4.1 The Idea of a Necessary Being

The idea of a necessary being is a puzzling one. For it seems to entail something like Anselm's idea that existence is a predicate, a perfection. God, on this account, is the one being whose essence includes existence, indeed whose essence *is* his existence. But the difficulties facing Anselm's ontological argument recur in this context. Even if we concede that existence can be a predicate, even if we concede that God's essence includes existence, it does not follow that God must exist. This was J. L. Mackie's criticism of the ontological argument (16.1.2). Even if it is of the essence of God to exist, it does not follow that he does in fact exist.

Why does this matter? After all, the theist who employs the cosmological argument is not arguing from a definition of God to the existence of God. That *would* be the ontological argument and he rejects it. He is arguing from the existence of the universe to the existence of a being who explains it. Richard Dawkins suggests that to explain the machinery of life "by invoking a supernatural Designer is to explain precisely nothing." Why? Because it "leaves unexplained the origin of the Designer" (Dawkins 1988: 141). But this is surely wrong. Many of our most successful explanations raise new puzzles and present us with new questions to be answered.

A drought may explain a poor crop, even if we don't understand why there was a drought; ... the big bang explains the background radiation, even if the big bang is itself inexplicable. (Lipton 1991: 24)

So the fact that we apparently cannot explain God's existence does not necessarily undermine its explanatory power. But that's not the question I'm considering here. My question is: Would invoking the existence of God bring explanation to an end?

It would *apparently* do so only if God's existence requires no explanation. And it would require no explanation if the theologians were right and God were a necessary being, one that could not *not* exist. As we have seen, however, it is difficult to make sense of this idea. And even if one concedes that there *could* exist a being whose essence includes existence, it does not follow that this being *does* exist. So to posit a being whose essence includes existence is not to bring the regress of explanations to an end. The existence of such a being would still require explanation. This is the element of truth in the much-criticised suggestion by Kant that the cosmological argument depends on the ontological (Kant 1929: 512 [A611 B639]).

17.4.2 A 'Possible Worlds' Alternative

Could a contemporary theist not avoid this difficulty? Could he not simply redefine what it means for God to be a necessary being? He does not need to speak of existence as if it were a predicate. St Anselm's *ontological* argument requires such talk, but a *cosmological* argument does not. The theist could simply suggest that God is a necessary being in the sense of one that exists *in every possible world*. But this strategy would meet another obstacle, one highlighted by Robin Le Poidevin (1996: 40–41). What we are trying to explain is what we are assuming to be a contingent fact, namely the existence of the universe. A contingent fact is one that is the case only in some possible worlds. But a necessary being (as here defined) exists in all possible worlds. So merely positing the existence of such a being fails to pick out what is distinctive about this world (in which a universe exists) as compared to other possible worlds (in which no universe exists). (Remember that "world" here means simply a possible state of affairs.)

We could avoid this difficulty by postulating some contingent fact about this necessary being. Perhaps God freely chose to create the world so it would produce creatures whose actions would be morally significant. We would then have to show that the existence of a being acting with this intention is the best explanation of the world as it is. (This would be no mean feat, particularly given the existence of evil.) But then our initial problem recurs. Insofar as the intention ascribed to God is a contingent fact (as it must be, if it is to explain), it invites further explanation. It invites the question, "Why did God choose to act in this way?" The regress of explanations continues. If the freedom of God is understood in a strong sense, as libertarian freedom, the theist may argue his decision to create the world is a brute fact, that is to say, a contingent fact that has no 'sufficient reason.' This *would* bring an end to the regress of explanations. But if you are affirming brute facts as your stopping-point, the existence of the universe itself would be a less controversial one.

What moral can we draw from this discussion? Merely positing the existence of a necessary being does not bring the regress of explanations to an end. Indeed it seems that the task of explanation can never be brought to an end, except by affirming some fact that cannot itself be explained. There can be no ultimate explanation, even if that explanation posits the existence of God

18. Teleological (Design) Arguments

Kant's third type of argument for the existence of God is the teleological argument (from the Greek *telos*, meaning a purpose, goal, or end) or 'argument from design.' An argument of this kind begins from our observation of the "order, beauty, and complexity of things" (Wilkerson 1976: 150) and arrive at the conclusion that this can only be accounted for if there exists a designer. In fact, such arguments are better described as arguments *to* design or arguments *for* design, for if there is design, then by definition there must be a designer. (One can describe biological organisms as 'designed' by natural selection, but this is a metaphorical use of the term.) The question is: Are there features of the world that we are forced to regard as the work of a personal agent, that is to say, one acting intentionally?

18.1 Traditional Design Arguments

The high-point of the teleological argument was reached in the eighteenth century. It was a time when many people were struck by the complexity of the natural order that was gradually being revealed by the modern sciences. The best-known example of an extended design argument is the *Natural Theology* of William Paley (1743–1805). And the best known eighteenth-century criticism of such arguments is to be found in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, first published in 1779. The design argument received what appeared to be a fatal blow with the work of Charles Darwin (1809–82), whose *Origin of Species* came out in 1859. But in our own day it has undergone a remarkable revival.

The revival has occurred as a result of developments in two very different fields of science, namely cosmology and molecular biology. From physics and cosmology, proponents of design draw arguments about the so-called 'fine-tuning' of the universe, which (they argue) was destined from its earliest period to produce life. From molecular biology, they draw arguments about what they call the 'irreducible'

or ‘specified’ complexity of the basic units of organic life, a complexity which they argue could only be the result of intelligent (or, more precisely, intentional) design. The literature on the latter – ‘intelligent design theory,’ as it is known – is enormous, but of relatively little philosophical interest. Intelligent design arguments are very similar in form to those offered by William Paley and the key evidence for or against comes from biology. But after a quick glance at Paley’s argument and Hume’s response, I shall examine a more philosophically interesting modern version, namely the ‘fine-tuning’ argument.

18.1.1 William Paley’s Design Argument

William Paley’s *Natural Theology* was certainly an influential book – even the young Charles Darwin found it impressive – and it was “informed by the best biological scholarship of his day” (Dawkins 1988: 5). Paley made it very clear what *needs* to be explained, which was the organised complexity of the natural world. This continues to require explanation. If you reject his theistic explanation, you will need to offer another. Within Paley’s book the best passage with which to start (if only because it is the most famous) is that with which it begins, namely the analogy of the watch.

In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a *stone*, and were asked how the stone came to be there: I might possibly answer, that for any thing I knew to the contrary, it had lain there for ever ... But suppose I had found a *watch* upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place; I should hardly think of the answer which I had before given, that, for any thing I knew, the watch might have always been there. Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch as well as for the stone? ... For this reason, and for no other, viz. that, when we come to inspect the watch, we perceive ... that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose, *e.g.* that they are so formed and adjusted as to produce motion, and that motion so regulated as to point out the hour of the day; that, if the different

parts had been differently shaped from what they are, of a different size from what they are, or placed after any other manner, or in any other order, than that in which they are placed, either no motion at all would have been carried on in the machine, or none that would have answered to the use that is now served by it. (Paley 1825: 3)

On finding such a mechanism, what could we conclude regarding its origin? The only defensible conclusion, writes Paley, is that

the watch must have had a maker; that there must have existed, at some time, and at some place or another, an artificer or artificers, who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use. (Paley 1825: 4)

By analogy, then, we should arrive at the same conclusion when faced with biological mechanisms such as the eye, which seem exquisitely shaped to achieve a particular purpose, in this case, sight.

Most of Paley's work consists of citing instances of such mechanisms. In fact, a latter-day Paley could mount a stronger case than did his predecessor, for we know so much more than he did about the complexity of the natural world. (As Richard Dawkins writes, "how Paley would have loved the electron microscope!" [Dawkins 1988: 15].) In fact, it is the discovery of the internal mechanisms of the cell which has given rise to one version of the recent 'intelligent design' argument (Behe 1996). So I shall not follow Paley through his numerous examples and illustrations. Any textbook of biology will provide the raw material that could be taken to support his claims.

Before moving on, however, I shall note a couple of points about Paley's watch analogy. Firstly, it *is* an analogy. Paley's argument rests on the idea that the mechanisms of the natural world *are* in some relevant sense analogous to objects we already know to have been designed. Secondly, we may distinguish two things about the watch that Paley sees as requiring explanation. The first is that the

watch serves a purpose that is useful to humans (telling the time). The second is that it is exquisitely adapted to fulfil that purpose: any alteration to its internal structure would render it useless. The two features are, of course, closely connected, but they are not identical.

18.1.2 David Hume on Design

David Hume is often credited with having undermined the argument from design. But of course he, too, lived before Darwin. In common with his contemporaries (*pace* Dawkins 1988: 6), Hume was struck by the order, beauty, and complexity of nature. And at the end of the day he had no alternative, naturalistic explanation that seemed in any way compelling. It was only Darwin, it seems, who made it possible to be “an intellectually fulfilled atheist” (Dawkins 1988: 6).

Hume’s most important work on this topic, his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, are not like Plato’s dialogues, where Socrates’s opponents are mere foils for the master’s brilliance. In Hume’s *Dialogues*, opposing positions are strongly represented and it is not always clear to which position Hume himself adheres. For the most part his position seems to be that of the philosophical sceptic, Philo. What surprises many of Hume’s readers is that at the end of the *Dialogues* (Part XII), after having produced many powerful arguments against natural theology, Philo accepts that the world does offer us evidence of design.

A purpose, an intention, a design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker; and no man can be so hardened in absurd systems, as at all times to reject it. *That nature does nothing in vain*, is a maxim established in all the schools, merely from the contemplation of the works of nature, without any religious purpose; and, from a firm conviction of its truth, an anatomist, who had observed a new organ or canal, would never be satisfied till he had discovered its use and intention. One great foundation of the Copernican system is the maxim, *that nature acts by the simplest methods, and chooses the most proper means to any end*; and astronomers often, without thinking of it, lay this

strong foundation of piety and religion. This same thing is observable in other parts of philosophy: And thus all the sciences almost lead us insensibly to acknowledge a first intelligent Author; and their authority is often so much the greater, as they do not directly profess that intention. (Hume 1993: 116–17)

Philo's acceptance is hedged about with qualifications. He is quick to insist that there is nothing that can be said about the cause of this design, other than that it "bears some remote analogy to human intelligence" (Hume 1993: 129). Even if one concedes the legitimacy of the inference to a designer, it remains true that "the universal cause of All" may be "vastly different from mankind, or from any object of human experience and observation" (Hume 1993: 68 [Part V]). The cause of this design may not be an infinite being, for a less than infinite creator could have created the world. He may not be perfect, for even if the world shows signs of perfection, it may be the result of a long process of trial and error. He is surely not morally perfect, given the evil that exists in the world. Indeed, if there a deity, he seems to be amoral, indifferent to the welfare of his creatures. But we may not even assume that there is just one author of everything that exists. The world may be the product of a committee of deities.

So a strong case can be made for the idea that Hume was not an atheist in our modern, everyday sense, namely one who affirms that there is no God. If Philo's views express Hume's position, he would perhaps be better described as an agnostic. (Of course, the latter term had not yet been coined; it is first found in the work of T. H. Huxley [1825–95].) With regard to religion as with regard to other matters, Hume is anxious to point out the limits of our knowledge. In Parts VI–VIII of the *Dialogues*, Philo offers a range of increasingly outrageous scenarios regarding the origins of the universe. The point is not that these are being offered as viable alternatives to traditional theism. Rather, it is that once we begin to speculate on these matters, we can draw no certain conclusion. At the end of Part V Philo sums up his argument.

18. Teleological (Design) Arguments

In a word, Cleanthes, a man who follows your hypothesis, is able, perhaps, to assert, or conjecture, that the universe, sometime, arose from something like design: But beyond that position he cannot ascertain one single circumstance, and is left afterwards to fix every point of his theology, by the utmost licence of fancy and hypothesis. The world, for aught he knows, is very faulty and imperfect, compared to a superior standard; and was only the first rude essay of some infant Deity, who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance; it is the work only of some dependent, inferior Deity; and is the object of derision to his superiors: it is the product of old age and dotage in some superannuated Deity; and ever since his death, has run at adventures, from the first impulse and active force, which it received from him. (Hume 1993: 71)

It follows that “a total suspense of judgment is here our only reasonable resource” (Hume 1993: 88–89 [Part VIII]).

18.2 The Fine-Tuning Argument

Despite Hume’s criticisms and Darwin’s theory, the design argument has not gone away, and its most interesting modern manifestation of the so-called ‘fine-tuning’ argument. The basis of this argument is a fact about the universe, the significance of which has been highlighted by recent developments in cosmology. It appears that the values of certain ‘cosmic parameters’ (to use Neil Manson’s phrase) are contingent. They could have been other than they are. But if they had been other than what they are, by even a very small margin, the universe could not have sustained life or (in a weaker form of the argument) would have been much less favourable to life. In this sense the universe could be said to have been fine-tuned for life. How can we explain this fact, it is argued, if not by positing the existence of a celestial tuner, a cosmic designer?

18.2.1 The Form of the Argument

There are many such cosmic parameters that are cited in the literature. Robin Collins offers a list of six, which he regards as “solid

cases of fine-tuning” (Collins 2003: 180). First, there is the *cosmological constant* (customarily represented as L), which is a measure of the force which determines both the expansion and contraction of space. Second, there is the *strong nuclear force*, which keeps the protons and neutrons together in the atom. Third, there are the various factors involved in the conversion of helium to *carbon and oxygen* within stars, the key issue here being the balance that must be struck between carbon and oxygen production. Fourth, there is the difference in mass between *neutrons and protons*. If the mass of the neutron were even fractionally higher, stars would not be able to convert hydrogen to helium. If it were fractionally lower, the universe would be composed of little more than helium. Fifth, there is the *weak force*, which controls radioactive decay. If this were not within a relatively narrow range of values, the ratio of neutrons to protons produced within the first seconds of the Big Bang would have produced a universe much less favourable to life. Sixth, there is the strength of *gravity*, which must also fall within relatively narrow limits if life as we know it is to survive. What is striking here, of course, is not merely the precise value of each constant, but their coincidence, producing a universe capable of supporting beings like ourselves.

The scientific accuracy of such claims is a question for a physicist, not a philosopher. All I can do here is to examine the argument that is constructed on this basis. In its simplest form, the argument claims that these values (and their coincidence) would be much *less surprising* if the universe were fine-tuned to produce life by some intelligent agent than if it were not. If these values were the result of chance, this would represent an incredible coincidence. But if these values were the result of design, they are what you might expect. (Proponents of the argument assume that chance and design are the only alternatives, but I’ll leave that aside.) If the evidence we have is less surprising on the design hypothesis than on the chance hypothesis, then the evidence *favours* the design hypothesis over its rival.

That was an informal presentation of the fine-tuning argument. Let me set out its central claim more formally. The argument rests on a judgement of probability. More precisely, it rests on a judgement of comparative probability, the probability that the parameters in question have the life-supporting values they do (let's call this fact E), given the design hypothesis (D), over against the probability that they have the values they have, given the chance hypothesis (C). The claim is that the probability (or 'likelihood') of E given D is greater than the probability of E given C. Using a customary set of symbols, one can express this as follows:

$$\Pr(E|D) > \Pr(E|C).$$

There are two sets of probabilities to be calculated here, namely $\Pr(E|D)$ and $\Pr(E|C)$. There are, as we shall see, difficulties associated with both calculations.

But there is a more important feature of the argument, which is often overlooked. It is that even if we had demonstrated this central claim, we would not yet have demonstrated the *probable truth* of D. All we would have shown is that the observations in question are more *likely* on the basis of D rather than C. (To use a more technical term, this is what is known as a 'likelihood argument.') This would lend some support to D, but it would not (yet) have shown that D is true. The point may be illustrated with a simple example from Elliot Sober. When you hear noises in the attic, the hypothesis that "there are gremlins up there bowling" would certainly explain the noises (Sober 2003: 29). If it were true, it would make the noises less surprising. But we would not normally conclude that the gremlin hypothesis *is* (probably) true. Similarly, even if we had shown that the evidence (E) is unsurprising on the basis of hypothesis (D), we would not have shown that the hypothesis (D) is true. The observation would lend some support to the design hypothesis, over against its rivals. But we would not have shown that the universe is *in fact* the result of design.

To do that, we would need to show that the probability of D, given the evidence, is greater than that of C. This means reversing the terms within the brackets, so that the resulting formula is:

$$\Pr(D|E) > \Pr(C|E).$$

To see if this were true we would need to take into account (among other things) the *prior probability* of D, that is to say, its probability given everything else we know. A low prior probability for the hypothesis can swing the case. To take Sober's example, the probability that you would hear the noises in the attic (N) if there *were* gremlins (G) – $\Pr(N|G)$ – is high. But the probability that there *are* gremlins in the attic – $\Pr(G|N)$ – is low, since we have other reasons to believe there are no gremlins. The gremlin hypothesis fails to be a *plausible* hypothesis.

To note that the fine-tuning argument could not, in itself, establish the probable truth of theism is not to say it is worthless. It could form part of a useful, cumulative case for theism. But by itself the best it can do is to lend some support to the design hypothesis (McMullin 1993: 381–82). The question is: Does it succeed in doing even that?

18.2.2 The Anthropic Selection Effect

One response to this argument is simply to deny that there is any mystery to be resolved, that there is anything surprising about the facts on which the argument is built. One could, of course, try to do this on *scientific* grounds, by showing that the parameters in question had to be more or less as they are. But what I am interested in here is a *philosophical* response, one that points out the 'selection effect' involved. The problem here is a simple one, which has to do with how data are gathered or observations are made. Let me take a simple example, based once again on one offered by Elliot Sober. Let's say you were to catch a sample of fish from Otago Harbour and you found that all the fish were more than ten centimetres in length. Would this observation lend support to the hypothesis that *all* the

fish in the harbour are more than ten centimetres in length? Well, it would depend on how you caught the fish. If your net had holes so wide that fish fewer than ten centimetres in length escaped, your sample would be worthless (for this purpose). It would lend *no* support to the hypothesis. In these circumstances, what other result would you expect?

The analogy here has to do with our very presence as observers within the universe. As we have seen, the probability (or “likelihood”) calculation at the heart of the fine-tuning argument is

$$\Pr(E|D) > \Pr(E|C).$$

But this way of presenting this issue does not take a key fact into account. It is the fact that if the universe were not such as to support life, we would not be here to observe it. Let’s call this fact A.

(A) If we exist, then E must be as it is.

For completeness we can add the fact that we exist (W). So a more accurate presentation of the fine-tuning argument would be

$$\Pr(E|D \& A \& W) > \Pr(E|C \& A \& W).$$

But is this true? No, it is not. For the probability of *E* (given the truth of *W* and *A*) is 1.0, and it remains 1.0 no matter which hypothesis is being considered. To put this in terms of our formula,

$$\Pr(E|D \& A \& W) = \Pr(E|C \& A \& W) = 1.0.$$

In other words, given that we exist “the constants must be right, regardless of whether the Universe was produced by intelligent design or by chance” (Sober 2003: 44).

This is an expression of what Brandon Carter called the “weak anthropic principle” (WAP), namely that “what we can expect to observe must be restricted by the conditions necessary for our presence as observers” (Sober 2003: 44–45). A more precise term would be the *anthropic selection effect*. It is a “What else would you expect?” principle, which at first sight dispels the mystery that the fine-tuning argument is intended to solve. A less esoteric example of the fallacy

might help. One could argue that if the force of gravity were greater than it is, we wouldn't be able to stand upright. Does it follow that the force of gravity was fine-tuned for our sake? Of course not. To claim that it was would be to put the cart before the horse.

But not everyone accepts this argument. Richard Swinburne, for example, offers what he considers to be a counterexample, based on an analogy from John Leslie.

On a certain occasion, the firing squad aim their rifles at the prisoner to be executed. There are twelve expert marksmen in the firing squad, and they fire twelve rounds each. However, on this occasion, all 144 shots miss. The prisoner laughs and comments that the event is not something requiring any explanation because if the marksmen had not missed, he would not be there to observe them. But of course, the prisoner's comment is absurd; the marksmen all having missed is indeed something requiring explanation; and so, too, is what goes with it – the prisoner's being alive to observe it. (Cited in Sober 2003: 46)

This seems intuitively plausible, but does the analogy fit? Elliot Sober believes it does not. He responds by pointing out the difference between the situation of the prisoner and that of a bystander. The prisoner, he argues, suffers from a blindspot. "A proposition p ," he writes, "is a blindspot for an individual S just in case, if p were true, S would not be able to know that p were true" (Sober 2003: 48). Or, to put this differently, "if p is a blindspot for S , then if S makes an observation to determine the truth value of p , the outcome must be that not- p is observed" (Sober 2003: 48). It follows that the bystander, but not the prisoner, is able to use his observations to argue that the survival of the prisoner happened by design rather than by chance.

How does this apply to the fine-tuning argument? In the case of the fine-tuning argument, p is the proposition, "The constants were wrong." What is special about the fine-tuning argument is that we are all in the position of the prisoner; we all suffer from a blindspot.

Whatever observation we make, it will inevitably support the conclusion not-*p*. A bystander could, perhaps, argue from the value of these cosmic parameters to the existence of a designer. But we cannot do so, since we are not bystanders. Swinburne's analogy appears persuasive only if we adopt the viewpoint of the bystander. Or, to put this another way, the prisoner's proper response should have been, "Given that I am able to make observations, I must be alive, whether my survival was due to intelligent design or chance" (Sober 2003: 47). Only this response would recognise the existence of a selection effect.

18.2.3 The Probability of E, Given Design

Is Sober correct? I'm not sure. But let's give the fine-tuning argument the benefit of the doubt and assume he is wrong. Let's assume that the fine-tuning phenomenon is not just a pseudo-problem, the product of a selection effect. Let's assume, too (*pace* Manson 2000), that its proponents can produce an adequate, non-question-begging description of the phenomenon to be explained (and that it still requires explanation). At the heart of the fine-tuning argument, as we have seen, is the following claim:

$$\Pr(E|D) > \Pr(E|C).$$

What is important to appreciate is that the design hypothesis does not win by default. It is not enough to say that E is highly improbable, given chance. The theist must argue that E is more probable, given design. I have already discussed the difficulties inherent in estimating $\Pr(E|C)$. Can we estimate $\Pr(E|D)$, the probability that these cosmic parameters should have the value they do, given the design hypothesis?

Proponents of the fine-tuning argument often assume that we can. More precisely, they simply take it for granted that the probability of E is high, given design. The assumption is that if there were a God, who intended to create beings such as ourselves, then he would set up the constants of physics so that they would have the

values we observe. But would he? Some opponents of design arguments argue that we simply cannot answer this question. The posited divine agent is so unlike any agent with which we are familiar that we have no idea how he might be expected to act. (See, for instance, Sober 2003: 38.) But if they are correct, if we *cannot* estimate $\text{Pr}(E|D)$, then the fine-tuning argument (indeed any design argument) collapses immediately. For all we know, it may be the case that its value is lower than that of $\text{Pr}(E|C)$. I disagree with this view. I think we *can* estimate $\text{Pr}(E|D)$, on the assumption that the divine agent is acting rationally, that is consistently with his posited intentions and his character. (This rationality assumption, by the way, characterises *all* intentional explanations – those which appeal to the purposes of an agent – and theistic explanations are intentional explanations.) But what is the result? How likely is E, given D?

The question here is: If we assume that the posited designer is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect, and if E is the history of the universe as we know it, does E represent the way in which we would expect him to create beings like ourselves? This is the question which Hume once posed:

Is the world considered in general, and as it appears to us in this life, different from what a man or such a limited being would, *beforehand*, expect from a very powerful, wise, and benevolent Deity? (Hume 1993: 107 [Part XI])

I won't try to answer that question here. But then I haven't seen any proponent of the fine-tuning argument answering it, either. There are at least two issues which would have to be taken into account here. The first is the problem of evil, particularly in the light of Darwin's account of human origins, where suffering seems to be a necessary condition of the emergence of sophisticated forms of life. The second is that even if the initial conditions of the universe were fine-tuned to produce life, the emergence of sophisticated life-forms was by no means guaranteed. Would God have left so much to chance? I

don't know. (On this topic, see Quentin Smith's comments in Craig and Smith 1993: 200–1.) But again, these are questions which need answering.

What, then, can we make of the fine-tuning argument? It is difficult to know precisely what 'fine-tuning' might mean and, insofar as we do understand it, the phenomenon in question may not be as puzzling as it appears at first. It may even be a non-issue, the product of a selection effect or of the units of measurement with which it is described (see Manson 2000). If there is a real question here, if it *is* improbable that these cosmic parameters should have taken the precise value they have by chance, then it may also be improbable that they should have taken the precise value they have by design, at least on the assumption that the designer is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect. Is the former (the chance hypothesis) *more* improbable than the latter (the design hypothesis)? Since it seems impossible to quantify one or the other, I really don't know. But if neither hypothesis renders what we observe probable, the most rational response is surely to refrain from adopting either, in the hope that a better alternative will emerge.

One such alternative is the 'multiverse' scenario. This is the idea that there exist at present, or have existed in succession, many universes, causally disconnected from one another, with different laws of nature. Given a sufficient number of such universes, it would be not be surprising that one like ours has emerged. Is this a better alternative? On the face of it, it seems both *ad hoc* and extravagant, a fairly blatant violation of Ockham's razor. One would certainly want to have independent evidence of its truth. And if the posited universes *are* causally disconnected from our own, it is hard to see what form that evidence could take. But to discuss this option further would take us too far afield. My point is merely that if there *is* a so-called 'fine-tuning' problem, then none of the currently available solutions seems terribly satisfactory.

PART FOUR: ARGUMENTS AGAINST BELIEF

19. Logical Arguments from Evil

Since ancient times, the existence of apparently senseless and horrendous evils, both in the sense of moral evil and in the sense of human and animal suffering, has been recognized as an argument against belief in an all-powerful and benevolent deity. David Hume attributes the following formulation of the argument to Epicurus (341–270 B.C.)

Epicurus's old questions [about God] are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil? (Hume 1993: 100)

Although this does not seem to correspond to anything the ancient Greek philosopher wrote, it remains a good question.

19.1 Logical and Evidential Arguments

In its basic outline, that *is* the argument from evil. But we need to be more precise. There are two ways in which this argument can be developed. The first is sometimes referred to as the *logical argument from evil*. It suggests that there is some kind of incompatibility between the existence of God and that of evil. It simply could not be true, the argument runs, that God exists and that evil exists. I shall examine one form of this argument based on a famous 1955 article by J. L. Mackie. If a logical argument from evil were to be successful, it would be a knock-down argument, a proof that settled the question once and for all. The best-known response to this argument is the freewill defence, of which Alvin Plantinga has recently offered a new form. This is not as convincing as many of its advocates assume, but it does indicate the kinds of difficulties the logical argument faces.

A second argument for atheism is sometimes referred to as the *evidential argument from evil*. In the following chapter, I shall look at the most convincing form of this argument, that offered by Paul Draper. Draper sets up his argument by comparing the explanatory

power of theism with that of an alternative, naturalistic hypothesis, which he calls “the hypothesis of indifference.” The most popular theistic response to the evidential argument from evil is what is sometimes called *sceptical theism*. I shall briefly explore two forms of this position, that put forward by Stephen Wykstra and that offered by Peter van Inwagen, and assess their adequacy.

19.2 The Logical Argument

Let’s turn first to the logical argument from evil and the theistic defences that have been offered in response. What has come to be regarded as the classic statement of this argument is to be found in a 1955 article by J. L. Mackie. In its simplest form, Mackie writes, the argument goes as follows:

- (1) God is omnipotent.
- (2) God is wholly good.
- (3) Evil exists.

As it stands, however, these three propositions are not obviously inconsistent. Some additional premises must be added to construct a complete argument. Mackie’s suggestions are the following, at first sight uncontroversial claims:

- (4) A good being always eliminates evil as far as it can.
- (5) There are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do.

Since an omnipotent being is capable of eliminating evil, from these it follows that

- (6) A good omnipotent being eliminates evil completely.

Then, given (1) and (2) it follows that

- (7) There is no evil.

But (7) contradicts (3). So what have we found? If we join together two statements of theistic belief (1 and 2) with two apparently uncontroversial further premises (4 and 5), the result contradicts an apparently indisputable fact about the world (3). What kind of contradiction are we dealing with here? It seems that what we are deal-

ing with are statements whose conjunction is necessarily false, that is to say “false in every possible world” (Plantinga 1974: 165). In other words, it just *could not be the case* that all seven propositions are true. Since the existence of evil is more obvious than the existence of God, it is the latter that has to go.

19.3 Theistic Defences

Or is it? What other premises might be challenged? The theist could try to deny the existence of evil. There is a long-standing theological tradition that sees evil as merely a privation, the absence of goodness (*privatio boni*). But whatever one makes of that as a metaphysical claim, it will not take us very far in this context. After all, the fact that darkness is the absence of light does not mean that there are no dark rooms or dark objects. By analogy, what one would have to deny is the existence of *evils*, that is to say, instances of suffering or of moral wrongdoing. This is not something that many theists are prepared to do. (Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of the Christian Science movement, is perhaps an exception.)

19.3.1 The Freewill Defence

A more promising line would be to challenge one of the additional premises (4 and 5). A simple response would be to note that (4) requires modification, for there may be goods that cannot be attained without permitting some degree of evil. A modified version would read

- (4a) A good being always eliminates evil as far as it can, *so long as that evil is not a necessary condition of a greater good.*

If the theist can suggest goods that God might seek and that would require the toleration of a certain amount of evil, the logical argument from evil will be defeated. The most common suggestion, dating back to St Augustine (A.D. 354–430), has been that free will represents such a good. The existence of creatures enjoying some degree of moral autonomy is a great good, but one that could not be had

without God's willingness to tolerate some degree of moral evil (and its non-moral consequences). This is what has become known as the *freewill defence*.

19.3.2 Mackie's Initial Response

The problem (for the theist) is that there is an obvious response to the freewill defence. It is that God *could* have created beings who always freely chose the good. As Mackie writes,

if there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or on several, occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion. God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong: there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right. Clearly his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good. (Mackie 1955: 209)

So if the freewill defence is to work, this possibility must be excluded. This would mean challenging proposition (5). More precisely, for the freewill defence against the *logical* argument from evil to work, one must show that there exists a possible world in which God could *not* have created beings who always freely chose the good. For remember, at the heart of the logical argument from evil is the idea that the conjunction of propositions (1) to (7) is false in every possible world. So let's replace (5) with

(5a) There is a possible world in which even an omnipotent being could not eliminate all evil.

If this were true, the logical argument from evil would be defeated.

19.3.3 Plantinga's Freewill Defence

But is there such a possible world? Yes, says Alvin Plantinga. In what has become a famous expansion of the freewill defence, Plantinga has argued that there could exist a possible, although

tragic, condition called *transworld depravity*. Plantinga illustrates this possible state of affairs by reference to the character of Curley Smith, a fictional mayor whose great weakness is taking bribes. If Curley suffers from transworld depravity, it means that his character (technically, his *essence*) is such that in whatever world he existed, he would freely choose to take a bribe.

Now it is possible that not only Curley, but everyone should suffer from transworld depravity. If we all suffered from transworld depravity, then what would follow? Since this depravity is a *transworld* depravity – one that would be realised in any possible world – there would be no possible world in which God could eliminate evil. This depravity would ‘fill up’ (as it were) the space of possible worlds. What does this show? Assuming that our decisions are free (in a strong, libertarian sense), this argument shows that (5a) above is true. There is a possible world – one in which transworld depravity prevails – in which not even God could eliminate all evil.

But what about natural evils, such as the suffering caused by earthquakes, diseases and floods, which do not appear to be the result of human free choices? Surely this modified freewill defence does not cover them? Well, says Plantinga, it could. Once again, to defeat the logical argument from evil, all one needs is a *possible* state of affairs. Well, here is one. The natural evils we experience could be caused by the free choices of *non-human beings*, namely the fallen angels led by Satan. Once again, this is part of a traditional Christian theodicy, which has its own problems (Hick 1966: 367–69). But Plantinga is merely offering a defence, so he feels he can ignore those difficulties (which in any case he is inclined to minimize). If this scenario were true, then the existence of natural evils also fall within the scope freewill defence. Since this is also a possible state of affairs, it follows that the logical argument from evil fails.

19.3.4 Mackie's New Response

Or does it? Mackie responds to Plantinga's argument in his posthumously published *The Miracle of Theism* (1982). He recognises that

the logical argument from evil cannot be considered a conclusive refutation of theism, because there is always a possibility of adjusting the additional premises it requires so as to avoid contradiction (Mackie 1982: 176). But he insists that this has not yet been done. In particular, he argues vigorously against Plantinga's expanded freewill defence. Once again, Mackie's argument rests on the idea that there is nothing contradictory about the idea that human beings, while remaining free, would always choose the good. So if God is omnipotent and if omnipotence implies the ability to do anything that is logically possible, God could have created human beings who always freely chose what was right. (Presumably God could have created angels who did the same.)

It is true that if you hold to a libertarian view of freedom, Mackie's argument does not *automatically* go through. It requires a further premise: the idea that at the moment of creating a world God would *know* that the individuals he was creating would freely choose the good. Luis de Molina (1535–1600) referred to this as 'middle knowledge,' insofar as it stands between God's knowledge of what is necessary and what is contingent. (Contemporary discussions speak of 'counterfactuals of freedom,' statements about what a particular person would freely choose given particular situations.) The possibility of middle knowledge is a hotly contested idea, but it happens to be one that Plantinga accepts. From a theist's point of view, you can understand why. The rejection of this idea transforms the omnipotent God of traditional theism into a being who took "literally, a hell of a risk" in creating free creatures (Mackie 1982: 176).

What about Plantinga's apparent *coup de grâce* against the logical argument from evil, namely the possibility of universal transworld depravity? The existence of universal transworld depravity *would* place limits on God's omnipotence. It would mean that there *is* a possible world in which God could not have created beings that always chose the good. If so, the logical argument fails. Well, says Mackie, under what conditions would transworld depravity be actualised? The existence of transworld depravity would imply that, prior to the

act of creation, God was faced with a limited range of creaturely essences from which to choose. For it seems that he did not have the choice of creating beings who would always freely choose the good. But since such creatures are not logically impossible, what could have imposed such a limitation on an omnipotent God? Mackie concludes that Plantinga's expanded freewill defence "is simply incoherent" (Mackie 1982: 174).

In his two presentations of his argument, Plantinga seems aware that this is a possible objection. Could God not have created other people, who do not suffer from transworld depravity? His response is: "Perhaps. But then again, perhaps not" (Plantinga 1974: 187; cf. 1975: 49.) His point here may be that there exists a *possibility* that God could not have done so and a mere possibility is enough to defeat a logical argument from evil. It remains, however, a weak claim, which will be of use to the Christian only if we accept Plantinga's other view, namely that Christian faith can be a form of warranted, undefeated, basic belief (chap. 13). Given that view, nothing short of a successful logical argument from evil need disturb the Christian's conviction (13.2.3). But if we reject that view of faith, there remains another form of argument from evil that threatens to undermine any form of traditional theism. This is the evidential argument from evil.

20. Evidential Arguments from Evil

Even if the logical argument from evil could be defeated, there remains another weapon in the atheist's arsenal: the evidential argument from evil. In its simplest form, this argument suggests that the existence of evil is evidence *against* the existence of God, which outweighs any evidence *for* his existence. Given such evils as we see about us, the balance of probabilities is on the side of the non-existence of an all-powerful and morally perfect God. But that's a very informal presentation of the argument. Let's look at a more formal one. The best of these is that of Paul Draper (b.1957).

20.1 Paul Draper's Hypothesis of Indifference

The basic form of any evidential argument from evil is the idea that theism, or what we might call 'the theistic hypothesis,' cannot explain the evil we find in the world. To the question "If God exists, why is there such evil in the world?" the theist (it is argued) can offer no satisfactory answer. Draper argues that the traditional discussions have overlooked the fact that theistic hypothesis is best tested over against its competitors. In the case of the existence of evil, there is an alternative, which Draper calls the hypothesis of indifference (HI).

HI: neither the nature nor the condition of sentient beings on earth is the result of benevolent or malevolent actions performed by non-human persons. (Draper 1989: 332)

The facts to be explained here are not just those regarding suffering and evil; they include the existence, distribution and quantity of pleasure as well as of pain. So we may now ask: Which hypothesis, the theistic hypothesis or the hypothesis of indifference, better explains these facts? Or, as Draper puts it, on the basis of which hypothesis are these facts *less surprising*?

20.1.1 Arguments for HI

It is easy to give an intuitive answer to this question, but rather more difficult to offer a precise one. Draper's argument centres on three facts which he argues are less surprising on the basis of HI than on the basis of theism. The first relates to the fact that pain and pleasure have both biological functions and moral significance. But the actual distribution of pain and pleasure seems to reflect only one of these, namely their biological functions. This is unsurprising on the basis of HI. An indifferent universe or creator will (by definition) have no concern for the moral value of pleasure and pain. But if God existed, one would expect that the distribution of pleasure and pain would reflect their moral value. God would have a reason to create pleasure even if it served no biological function and a reason not to permit pain unless it served a sufficient moral purpose.

The second fact is that sentient beings who are not moral agents (non-human animals and very small children) also experience pleasure and pain. This is unsurprising given HI, for the pleasures and pains that Draper includes in this category serve a useful biological function. If HI is true, then biological function is the only significant consideration. But the *suffering* of non-moral agents is surprising given theism. If theism were true, one would expect God to permit only those pains that can play a moral role in people's lives. Why would God permit beings who are not moral agents – who enjoy neither free will nor the possibility of moral growth – to suffer pain?

The third fact is that sentient beings experience pains and pleasures that seem to have *no* biological function. Now for the reasons given above, the existence of *pleasures* that serve no biological function would be unsurprising on theism and surprising given HI. But the existence of *pains* that serve neither a biological function nor (it seems) a moral function is surprising on the basis of theism. What about HI? Well, the existence of pains and pleasures that serve no useful biological function is probably an epiphenomenon. It is a consequence of either the breakdown of biologically useful systems

(pathological pain) or from the functioning of biologically useful systems in extreme situations (biologically appropriate pain). For instance, it is biologically useful that beings feel pain when exposed to fire, but that function breaks down when the fire is severe enough to kill. The existence of such – sometimes unpleasant and morally regrettable – epiphenomena is unsurprising given HI. After all, nature (on this view) simply doesn't care. But it *is* surprising given theism, both for the reason given above and because one would expect an omnipotent and morally perfect creator to arrange things better.

20.1.2 Theodicies and Probability

What about theodicies? Do these not raise the probability of theism to the point that it might be a serious rival to HI? Draper considers the free will theodicy, which is the most popular. He notes first of all that the freedom to perform right and wrong actions does not of itself entail the existence of pain. "God could have given humans freedom without permitting pain" (Draper 1989: 341). So something more is needed than the assertion that God wanted to create free creatures. It might be the idea that having created free creatures, God *could not* prevent them inflicting pain. Or it might be the idea that God might *use* pain to influence people to perform morally right actions. The problem is, once again, that the actual distribution of pain seems indifferent to such considerations, a fact that is less surprising given HI than given theism. Draper considers one further development of the free will theodicy: the idea that the existence of pain was necessary for humans to have *morally significant* choices. But if God existed, one would expect him, like a good parent, to proportion our capacity for evil-doing to our moral development. Once again, the facts about evil-doing are less surprising on the basis of HI than on the basis of theism.

20.1.3 A Likelihood Argument

Note that Draper's argument is what I earlier called a 'likelihood argument' (18.2.2). It compares the likelihood that the world would be as we observe it to be (O), given theism (T), with the likelihood that it would be as we observe it to be, given the hypothesis of indifference (HI). It does not pretend to settle the question of which is probably true, which would involve taking into account the *prior probability* of each. More technically, the argument claims that

$$\Pr(O|HI) > \Pr(O|T).$$

It does not claim that

$$\Pr(HI|O) > \Pr(T|O).$$

Nonetheless, if it is successful, Draper's argument provides us with evidence against theism and in support of the hypothesis of indifference.

20.2 The Sceptical Theism Defence

There are two theistic responses to Draper's argument, which are sometimes combined. The first is Alvin Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology, which I discussed earlier (13.2). The second is what is sometimes called 'sceptical theism.' I shall use this phrase to refer to any position that wards off the argument from evil by pointing to the limitations of our knowledge. It is not a new position. What some philosophers call 'the mystery defence' was familiar to generations of Roman Catholic schoolchildren: their more difficult questions regarding the faith were regularly met with the response, "it's a mystery." The good sisters who taught them were, of course, merely echoing the well-established theological view, namely that the content of revealed truth often exceeds the capacity of human understanding. Because you are accepting these truths on the authority of God, you can believe them without fully understanding them. Within the philosophical literature, many of the themes of sceptical theism were first outlined in an article by Ninian Smart (1961), to which

both J. L. Mackie (1962) and Antony Flew (1962) offered responses. But it is only in recent years that it has been developed in a systematic way.

20.2.1 Varieties of Sceptical Theism

Sceptical theism is an umbrella term: there are several different positions which it covers. We may distinguish these by distinguishing three kinds of claims regarding which the sceptical theist may be sceptical. The first has to do with the *greater goods* the preservation of which may justify the existence of evil. Given God's omniscience and our cognitive limitations, it is argued, it is surely to be expected that God will know of goods that we are unaware of, goods that can be attained only by permitting evil. In support of this view, Stephen Wykstra has coined the clever term CORNEA, for Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access. CORNEA reads:

On the basis of cognized situation *s*, human *H* is entitled to claim "It appears that *p*" only if it is reasonable to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if *p* were not the case, *s* would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her. (Wykstra 1990: 153)

In some instances (such as sense perception in ordinary circumstances or memory) this condition is met and the phrase "it appears that" has some epistemic significance. But why should we assume that it does so in this situation? Why should we pay any attention to the atheist's claim that there *seems* to be no good that would outweigh a certain evil? Even if there were such goods, we would be in no position to know about them.

A second form of scepticism has to do with the kinds of world that God might have created in order to preserve those greater goods. Such scepticism is sometimes described as *modal scepticism*, since it has to do with the possibilities open to even an omnipotent creator. Peter van Inwagen is the best-known exponent of this position. Van Inwagen denies that we can make reliable, intuitive judgements

about what is possible in “circumstances remote from the practical business of everyday life” (van Inwagen 1998: 70). A good case can be made for the reliability of *certain* everyday modal judgements. We know, for instance, that the table placed under the window could have been placed a metre to the left. Experience shows that we are often successful in making such judgements. And given what we know of our cognitive mechanisms and their evolutionary history that success is unsurprising. We evolved precisely in order to deal with such situations. But why should we assume that our capacity for modal judgements goes beyond these everyday matters? How can we expect to know, for example, what kind of a world an omnipotent deity could have created?

Van Inwagen identifies a third form of scepticism, which he calls *moral scepticism* (van Inwagen 1991: 151). This is related to but not identical with Wykstra’s scepticism regarding goods. Van Inwagen’s moral scepticism has to do with our ability to make judgements regarding the comparative moral value of different states of affairs. For instance, if God were continually to intervene to prevent suffering, this would introduce a disorder into the world. Its regularity would be disrupted. In suggesting that God should do so, the atheist assumes that the suffering of non-moral agents is a greater defect than such irregularity. But how does he know this?

20.2.2 Sceptical Scenarios

How does van Inwagen make use of these sceptical observations? Given both modal and moral scepticism, van Inwagen can offer a variety of theistic scenarios that would each account for evil. It may be that each scenario needs to be *not improbable* given theism (although van Inwagen vacillates on this one), but the sceptical theist does not need to show that they are *probable*. He need only show that given these possible scenarios, we cannot be certain about our ability to make such judgements. Van Inwagen’s method is parallel to that of the lawyer who presents the jury with a range of possible scenarios, each of which would exonerate his client. His aim would

be not to suggest that any of them is true, but to convince them that his client cannot safely be convicted.

Van Inwagen's favoured theistic scenario involves two posits. (In fact, it involves three, but I'll just examine two here.) The first is that a world that contained less suffering would be massively irregular, in the sense of having no consistently-applicable laws of nature. We cannot say this is not the case (modal scepticism). The second is that being massively irregular is a defect in a world that outweighs the defect of containing this much suffering. We cannot say this is not the case (moral scepticism). So we have reason not to accept the atheist's claim that God could have created a world in which sentient beings did not suffer (or suffered only as a result of their own wrong actions). Responding to Draper's argument, van Inwagen denies that we can compare the probability of the suffering we see on the basis of HI with its probability on the basis of theism. We simply do not know what its probability on the basis of theism is.

20.2.3 The Implications of Sceptical Theism

Now there is a lot to be said for scepticism. But there is also a lot to be said against it, especially from the theist's point of view. The first kind of scepticism – that regarding goods and their connection with evils – is a double-edged sword. It may work as a defence, warding off the atheist, but it leaves the theist without any explanation for the facts of evil (a theodicy). This is true of sceptical theism in all its forms. It may succeed in fighting off *external* challenges to theism but at the cost of undermining any attempt to solve the problem of evil that is *internal* to theism. Of course, modal and moral scepticism also offers an explanation for the existence of this internal problem. If we are unable to make reliable judgements about God and evil, then it is not surprising that the theist cannot adequately account for the existence of evil. But the theist's failure would be even less surprising if theism were false, for the problem would be revealed as a pseudo-problem.

One could also extend sceptical theistic arguments to the judgements involved in the traditional proofs of the existence of God. Van Inwagen himself criticises the ontological argument on these grounds (van Inwagen 1991: 152, 1998: 67). But the cosmological argument is also vulnerable. It, too, relies on modal intuitions regarding the contingency of the world and the need for a necessary being to undergird its existence. But if our intuitions about God and evil are unreliable, surely the same could be said of our intuitions regarding contingency and necessity? And does this scepticism not cast doubt on our ability to affirm that God is the cause of all that exists? (This is not an everyday use of ‘cause.’) If the theist wants to employ any of these arguments – those who accept Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology (13.2) will not – there had better be some limits to her scepticism.

More seriously, if it is true that we can make no judgements regarding logical possibility, it is hard to know what meaning can be attributed to the theistic belief that God is omnipotent. Traditionally, this has been taken to mean that God can do anything that is logically possible. But if we can give no meaning to this latter phrase, what sense does it have to speak of divine omnipotence? And if we could not judge how an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect being might be expected to act, then any kind of religious explanation becomes impossible. It may be that a consistent modal and moral scepticism would lead to agnosticism, unless, of course, you believe you are in possession of a divine revelation. But then how would you know this?

20.2.4 A Merely *Ad Hoc* Defence

So far, my criticism is merely that sceptical theism may have unpalatable consequences for its advocates. It does not show that it fails to do what it sets out to do, namely undermine the argument from evil. However, there are other arguments against sceptical theism, which suggest that it *does* fail to undermine the atheist’s arguments. With regard to *moral* scepticism, for instance, Michael Tooley

has suggested that there are judgements in this area that we can safely make, even given our limited knowledge. For instance, we can judge that God would be justified in inflicting suffering on an individual only if that suffering were likely to benefit that same individual. This is a relatively uncontroversial application of a widely-accepted principle of justice (Tooley 1991: 112–13). So the atheist's conclusion that the suffering of non-moral agents is incompatible with the existence of God, *even given the free will defence*, would seem justified.

But I can offer a more general criticism, one that addresses itself to the general strategy of offering merely possible theistic scenarios (i.e. defences). If you accept Draper's way of setting up the evidential argument from evil, this strategy is worthless. To explain what I mean, let me refer to two cases offered by van Inwagen as parallels to the sceptical theism. The first case is that of the ancient Greek atomist faced with objections to his claim that the air is made up of tiny particles. The second is the modern searcher for extraterrestrial intelligent life faced with objections to her belief that such life exists. What sort of objections might each of these face? The ancient atomist might be faced with the objection that if the air were made of tiny particles, eventually it would all settle on the earth. Similarly, the believer in extraterrestrial life intelligent (the 'extraterrestrialist') might be faced with the objection that if intelligent extraterrestrials existed, we would expect to have detected signals indicating their existence.

How might the atomist or extraterrestrialist respond to these objections? Van Inwagen argues that he could legitimately construct a *defence*, a scenario that *might* be true, for all anyone knows. The atomist might speculate that his atoms are covered with long spikes that keep them at a distance from one another. The extraterrestrialist might speculate that any intelligent extraterrestrial civilization that developed would destroy itself before being able to send out such signals. The more such defences each could produce, the better. Since for all we know (or, in the case of the atomism defence, for all

an ancient Greek knew), such things *might* be true, no judgement can be made regarding the probability of what we observe on the basis of the given theory. It is therefore rational to maintain the belief.

But is it? What van Inwagen is advocating appears, at first sight, to be the elaboration of *ad hoc* auxiliary hypotheses to save a theory. He is suggesting that we extend the theory in ways that protect it from refutation, in the absence of any independent evidence. The fact that van Inwagen is offering these defences as *mere possibilities* only highlights the *ad hoc* nature of his strategy. Now it may be that at times scientists do this. But most would regard it as a temporary expedient, defensible only if it lent support to a research programme that was proving successful in other respects. So the recourse to defences of the sort van Inwagen advocates *might* be defensible if theism were proving to be a fruitful explanatory hypothesis in comparison with its naturalistic rivals. But who would be prepared to argue that?

Why is van Inwagen apparently unconcerned by such criticisms? It is probably because he does not accept Draper's way of setting up the argument. He does not believe that the theist needs to *argue for* her position. If so, this makes the theist's task much easier. If theism is not being defended as a hypothesis that must show its value by doing some useful explanatory work, then my objections would be undercut. If the theist can claim to know her beliefs about God to be true by some other means, perhaps by faith, or by way of some basic form of knowledge inaccessible to the atheist (who can be presumed to be blinded by sin or lacking divine grace), then how much simpler her job is. Then a defence *would* suffice to undercut the atheist's arguments. This may help to account for the attraction of Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology, although to many of us it seems a trivial and uninteresting position (13.2.5).

21. Atheism as a Moral Imperative

Let me now turn to a quite different response to the existence of evil, namely that of rebellion against God. I say ‘rebellion against God’ because the rebel does not necessarily deny God’s existence. What he does do is to affirm that if God were to exist, he would be morally negligent, even wicked, to have created a world which contains such evils. It follows, the rebel argues, that we have *a moral obligation to rebel against God*. It is often assumed, in popular discourse, that atheism goes hand in hand with immorality. (Some dictionary definitions of atheism preserve this meaning.) But what this response highlights is that those who rebel against God, may be motivated by moral considerations. A good person, they argue, will reject the claims of religion because those claims are morally abhorrent. Even if there were reason to believe God existed, we should not submit to his will.

21.1 Ivan's Rebellion

The classic starting point for any discussion of what Peter Fosl (1997) calls “the moral imperative to rebel against God” is Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. A key moment in the novel is a dialogue between the elder brother Ivan and the younger Alyosha. In the course of this dialogue, Ivan presents his devout brother, a young monk, with an almost unbearable account of the suffering of children. (Incidentally if you want an updated version, which – at least if you are a parent – is almost too painful to read, try the first couple of pages of Peter Fosl’s article.) Here’s an extract from Ivan’s words.

‘A little girl of five was abused by her parents, “decent and respectable people, well educated and cultured.” ... Those educated parents subjected that poor little five-year-old to every conceivable torture. They beat her, whipped her, kicked her till she was black and blue, all for no reason. Finally, they thought of the ultimate

punishment; they shut her up all night in the outside privy, in the cold and frost, because she wet herself at night (as if a five-year-old, sleeping soundly like an angel, could excuse herself in time) – for this, they smeared her face with excrement and forced her to eat it, and it was her mother, her mother who did this to her! And that mother slept unconcernedly at night, oblivious to the sobs of the poor child shut up in that foul place! Can you understand such a thing: that small child, unable even to comprehend what is being done to her, in the dark and the cold of that foul place, beating her little panting breast with her tiny fists, sobbing, weeping humble tears of bloodstained innocence, praying to “Dear Father God” to protect her – do you understand this obscenity, my friend, my brother, my holy and meek monk, do you understand why such an obscenity should be so necessary, and what is the point of it?” (Dostoevsky 1994: 303)

Ivan then offers a still more horrifying account of a child torn apart by dogs in front of his mother because he had offended a rich landowner. After running through a variety of answers to his question – accounts of why such evils must exist for the sake of some greater good – Ivan suggests that even if such theodicies could be shown to be true he would reject them.

‘Oh, Alyosha, I’m not blaspheming! I understand how the universe will shake when heaven and earth all unite in a single paean of praise, and all that lives and has lived will cry out, “You are just, O Lord, for your ways are revealed to us!” When the mother embraces the murderer whose dogs tore her son apart, and all three shall cry out weeping, “You are just, O Lord” – that, of course, will be the summit of all knowledge, and all will be explained. But here’s the snag; that’s just what I can’t accept. ... You see, Alyosha, perhaps it really will happen like that, and I shall live to see it or be resurrected, and then perhaps I too, seeing the mother embracing the child’s torturer, will cry out in unison with them, “You are just, O Lord,” but it will be against my will. While there’s still time I want to guard myself against this, and therefore I ab-

solutely reject that higher harmony. It's not worth one little tear from one single little tortured child, beating its breast with its little fists in its foul-smelling lock-up, and praying with unexpiated tears to its "Dear Father God!" No, it's not worth this ... if the suffering of children is required to make up the total suffering necessary to attain the truth, then I say here and now that no truth is worth the price. ... Tell me honestly, I challenge you – answer me: imagine that you are charged with building the edifice of human destiny, whose ultimate aim is to bring people happiness, to bring them peace and contentment at last, but that in order to achieve this it is essential and unavoidable to torture just one little speck of creation, that same child beating her breasts with her little fists, and imagine that this edifice has to be erected on her unexpiated tears. Would you agree to be the architect under those conditions? Tell me honestly!' 'No, I wouldn't agree,' said Alyosha quietly. (Dostoevsky 1994: 307–8)

The point is so powerfully made that further comment seems superfluous. Nonetheless, let me try to spell out Ivan's view. Ivan is not an atheist. As he himself says, "it's not that I don't accept God, Alyosha; I'm just with the utmost respect, handing Him back my ticket" (Dostoevsky 1994: 308). Rather, he is a rebel against God. He does not deny that God exists; he does not even deny that God has permitted evil for the sake of some greater good. He simply finds this way of acting intolerable. He suggests that no person of any moral sensitivity could agree to act as God has apparently acted.

Ivan Karamazov's response to evil was that of rebellion against a God whose existence he acknowledges. Is this atheism? Well, it is not atheism in the sense of denying the existence of a supernatural creator. But it is atheism in the sense of denying the existence of a morally perfect creator. For to rebel against God on moral grounds is to deny that whatever god exists is worthy of worship. This, in turn, is equivalent to affirming that the Christian (Jewish, and Muslim) God, who by definition *is* perfectly good, does not exist. As Michael Tooley points out, the argument from evil for the non-existence of

God may be converted at will into an argument from evil for the wickedness (or at least indifference) of God (Tooley 1991: 103–4). So perhaps these are not different arguments after all. However, what is worth noting about Ivan’s protest is that it starts off precisely where the defences and theodicies end. It accepts that the defences are successful and that the theodicies may be true. But then it asks, “O.K., but what does this tell us about God?” If you want to know why so many atheists are passionate in their rejection of theodicies, this may be a good place to start.

21.2 Why Rebel?

Let’s try to spell out Ivan’s reasoning. Why did he feel compelled to rebel against God? Are these good reasons? Could such an apparently shocking attitude as rebellion – one that Christianity attributes to the devil himself – be justified?

21.2.1 Ends and Means

One issue that apparently bothers Ivan has to do with ends and means. Most theodicies come perilously close to suggesting, if they do not in fact suggest, that God treats human beings as a means to an end. Either he is prepared to sacrifice the happiness of individuals for the alleged greater good of some abstract ideal, such as the existence of human freedom, or he is prepared to sacrifice the happiness of some individuals for the sake of the happiness of others. Some theist philosophers are prepared to bite this particular bullet and justify such a course of action, Peter van Inwagen being among them (see Levine 2004: 160). But many atheists would argue that it would not be morally admirable for God to act in this way. No moral agent – “not even ... God” (Kant 1997: 109 [5.131]) – should treat human beings simply as means to an end.

While Kant, for instance, restricted this principle to rational creatures, one could strengthen the rebel’s arguments by extending it to non-human animals. Free will and moral growth – the alleged

‘greater goods’ commonly posited by theodicies – are goods only for those who can enjoy them. All but one species of sentient being apparently cannot. So if God were to permit animal suffering for the sake of a good that only humans can enjoy, this could easily be seen as a morally reprehensible choice (Tooley 1991: 111). “Perhaps,” the theist may respond, “this was unavoidable. Animal suffering is the inevitable cost of human freedom.” Well, then, it would have been better for God not to create a world at all than to create one in which such goods could be achieved only at such cost.

21.2.2 The Silence of God

There is a second issue that is troubling about theistic defences and theodicies. It is the apparent *silence* of God in the face of suffering. Theists often compare God to a loving parent. They point out that even the most loving parent may permit her child to suffer if that is necessary for the child’s welfare. But what parent would do so without making it clear to the child why this must be done? And what parent worthy of the name would not stay with the child during her suffering, offering constant affirmations of her love and concern? But as William Rowe notes, this is not the case with God (if he exists). “Countless numbers of human beings go through periods of horrendous suffering without any awareness at all of God’s being consciously present to them” (Rowe 2004: 18). The silence of God in the face of suffering suggests that if there is a God, he lacks the qualities we would expect of any human parent. What parent whose child was suffering would abandon the child and go on holiday? But as Rowe notes, “it is as though God has been on holiday for centuries ... while his creatures undergo extensive suffering and painful deaths” (Rowe 2004: 18).

21.3 “God’s Ways Are Not Our Ways”

One common theistic response to such arguments is to suggest that “God’s ways are not our ways”: the divine qualities of justice and

mercy are inscrutable. We cannot convict God of injustice or indifference, for whatever such terms mean when applied to God, they cannot mean what they would mean in ordinary use. This is another kind of sceptical theism, but one that is sceptical regarding what we can affirm of God. It is true that by our standards God may appear wicked or indifferent. But God's standards, it is suggested, are not our standards. That this is a common response is indicated by a Google web search I performed on 26 April 2006, for the biblical phrase "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Isa 55:8). It was found on 52,600 webpages. The most commonly accessed of these pages used this phrase to explain why God does not act as we might expect a loving God to act. Why, for instance, did he allow Hurricane Katrina to cause so much damage in August 2005? Why are my prayers apparently not answered? Why does God allow innocent people to suffer? The answer to all these questions? It is because "his ways are not our ways."

I have already examined John Stuart Mill's response to a similar suggestion (8.2). It is true that if there is a God, then by the very nature of the case he will be a mysterious being, whom we cannot hope fully to understand. But what bothers Mill is that theists appeal to the mysteriousness of God in order to attribute behaviour to God that in a mere human being we would consider reprehensible. As he writes,

that we cannot understand God; that his ways are not our ways; that we cannot scrutinize or judge his counsels ... have often ... been tendered as reasons why we may assert any absurdities and any moral monstrosities concerning God, and miscall them Goodness and Wisdom (Mill 1979: 90)

After criticising such views, Mill concludes with a marvellous rhetorical flourish.

If, instead of the "glad tidings" that there exists a Being in whom all the excellences which the highest human mind can conceive, exist in a degree inconceivable to us, I am informed that the world

is ruled by a being whose attributes are infinite, but what they are we cannot learn, nor what are the principles of his government, except that “the highest human morality which we are capable of conceiving” does not sanction them; convince me of it, and I shall bear my fate as I may. But when I am told that I must believe this, and at the same time call this being by the names which express and affirm the highest human morality, I say in plain terms that I shall not. Whatever power such a being may have over me, there is one thing which he shall not do: he shall not compel me to worship him. I shall call no being good, who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow creatures; and if such a being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go. (Mill 1979: 103)

Mill’s point is crystal clear. If you can salvage the goodness of God only by redefining ‘goodness’ so that the word no longer has its usual meaning, you are not speaking in a straightforward manner. As Mill writes, “to assert in words what we do not think in meaning, is as suitable a definition as can be given of a moral falsehood” (Mill 1979: 102).

CONCLUSION: THE RATIONALITY OF RELIGION

22. Faith and the Non-Rational

Even if one is not convinced by the arguments against belief in God, what the above analysis has shown is that arguments in support of religious beliefs inevitably fall short. It is at least conceivable that one could offer a complete rational justification of a particular set of religious beliefs, in the manner outlined by both John Locke (in the seventeenth century) and Richard Swinburne (in the twentieth). But while such an argument might justify the *content* of a particular faith, it could never justify the *degree of certainty* that religious propositions are customarily granted. There are, of course, pragmatic grounds on which one might defend a religious commitment (living *as if* certain beliefs were true), but while this involves a kind of practical rationality, it does not demonstrate the truth of the beliefs in question. If the rationality in question is that which relates to the truth of beliefs, then there is inevitably a non-rational element in any religious commitment. If there *are* any philosophers who argue that one could offer a complete rational justification of religious belief, they are simply mistaken.

In one sense this will come as no surprise to traditionally-minded believers. Religious thinkers have customarily made a sharp distinction between faith and reason. Faith, on this view, is not belief on the basis of an authority for whose reliability we have good evidence, as John Locke argued (12.1). It is belief in the basis of something that is quite distinct from human reason. Thomas Aquinas, for example, held that a belief on the basis of human reasoning would not be *religious* faith at all. It would be the sort of faith of which even demons are capable (*ST* 2a 2ae qu. 5 art. 2). After all, demons have angelic intellects and can therefore appreciate the force of the arguments. But one could acknowledge the force of the arguments in support of God's existence while also defying God and refusing to live a life of obedience.

Aquinas, of course, regards religious faith not as an outcome of human reasoning, but as a gift of God. But the idea that religious is

not a product of a process of reasoning is more widely shared. We find it, for instance, in the work of the anthropologist, Roy Rappaport, whose analysis of ritual has been discussed earlier (6.2.1). From both points of view – that of the theologian and that of the anthropologist – religious belief begins with a non-rational act of acceptance. Another anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, makes the same point.

It is best to begin any approach to this issue with the frank recognition that religious belief involves not a Baconian induction from everyday experience – for then we should all be agnostics – but rather a prior acceptance of authority which transforms that experience. ... The basic axiom underlying what we may perhaps call ‘the religious perspective’ is everywhere the same: he who would know must first believe. (Geertz 1993: 109–10)

Is such a non-rational act of faith defensible? Well, an act of acceptance might, perhaps, be defensible on pragmatic grounds, of the kinds described by Swinburne (chap. 14). But acceptance is not the same as belief. In any case, if the evidence in favour of religious belief falls short of offering a complete justification of that belief, we would seem to be obliged to take into account the arguments against belief. Unless one thinks that there exists a sound, logical argument from evil (chap. 19), then it would seem that these, too, are not conclusive. But they may indicate that the existence of God is less likely than not. If this is true, then on the assumption that “a wise man proportions his belief to the evidence” (Hume 1902: 110), it seems we would be unwise to believe, at least with the degree of confidence that religions customarily demand. Whether this conclusion is warranted, however, is a decision I must leave to you.

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