Part Three
Philosophy of Religion: Reason and Faith
It is morally necessary to assume the existence of God. —Immanuel Kant

God is dead. —Friedrich Nietzsche

What is the difference between a theologian and a philosopher of religion? Let’s back up about four steps and get a running start at the question.

If you subscribe to a religion, and the opinion polls say you most likely do, then you also accept certain purely philosophical doctrines. For example, if you believe in a nonmaterial God, then you believe that not all that exists is material, and that means you accept a metaphysics of immaterialism. If you believe you should love your neighbor because God said you should, then you are taking sides in the debate among ethical philosophers concerning ethical naturalism. You have committed yourself to a stand against naturalism.

Your religious beliefs commit you as well to certain epistemological principles. A lot of people who make no claim to have seen, felt, tasted, smelled, or heard God still say they know God exists. So they must maintain that humans can have knowledge not gained through sense experience. To maintain this is to take sides in an important epistemological issue, as you know from Part One.

These and many other metaphysical, ethical, and epistemological points of view and principles are assumed by, and incorporated in, religion, and it is the business of the philosophy of religion to understand and rationally evaluate them.

Of course, theology also seeks clear understanding and rational evaluation of the doctrines and principles found in religion, including those that are metaphysical, ethical, and epistemological. But, for the most part, theologians start from premises and assumptions that are themselves religious tenets. The philosopher of religion, in contrast, does not make religious assumptions in trying to understand and evaluate religious beliefs.
The religions of the world differ in their tenets, of course. Therefore, a philosopher of religion usually focuses on the beliefs of a specific religion or religious tradition, and in fact it is the beliefs of the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition that have received the most discussion by Western philosophers. Philosophers of religion may focus on the beliefs of a specific religion, but they will not proceed in their inquiries from the assumption that these beliefs are true, even though they may in fact accept them as a personal matter.

What are some of the metaphysical, ethical, and epistemological beliefs of the Judaeo-Christian tradition that philosophers have sought to understand and evaluate? Many of these beliefs have to do with God: that he exists, that he is good, that he created the universe and is the source of all that is real, that he is a personal deity, that he is a transcendent deity, and so forth. Many have to do with humans: that humans were created in the image of God, that they have free will, that they can have knowledge of God’s will, that the human soul is immortal, and so on. Other beliefs have to do with features of the universe: for example, that there are miracles, that there is supernatural reality, that there is pain and suffering (a fact thought to require reconciliation with the belief in a good and all-powerful God). And still others have to do with language: that religious language is intelligible and meaningful, that religious utterances are (or are not) factual assertions or are (or are not) metaphorical or analogical, that terminology used in descriptions of God means the same (or does not mean the same) as when it is used in descriptions of other things.

This is a long list of issues. To simplify things, we will concentrate here only on the philosophical consideration of the Christian belief in the existence of God. Let’s begin with two Christian greats, St. Anselm and St. Aquinas.

**TWO CHRISTIAN GREATS**

Other chapters have begun with discussions of ancient Greek philosophers, and we could have begun this chapter, too, with the ancient Greeks. Many modern religious beliefs contain ideas that were discussed by, and in some cases originated with, the Greeks. But we have narrowed the focus here to the philosophical consideration of the Judaeo-Christian belief in God’s existence, and it is appropriate to begin with the man who was abbot of Bec and, later, archbishop of Canterbury.
Anselm

**St. Anselm** (c. 1033–1109) was among the first to evaluate the belief in the Christian God from a purely philosophical perspective, that is, from a perspective that does not make religious assumptions from the outset. Nonetheless, Anselm never entertained the slightest doubt that God exists. Further, he made no distinction between philosophy and theology, and he thought it impossible for anyone to reason about God or God’s existence without already believing in him.

Still, Anselm was willing to evaluate on its own merit and independently of religious assumptions the idea that God does not exist.

**The Ontological Argument**

This idea, that God does not exist, is attributed in Psalms 14:1 to the “fool,” and Anselm thought it plain that anyone who would deny God’s existence is logically mistaken and is indeed an utter fool. Anselm reasoned that the fool is in a self-contradictory position. The fool, Anselm thought, is in the position of saying that he can conceive of a being greater than the greatest being conceivable. This may sound like a new species of doubletalk, so we must consider Anselm’s reasoning carefully. You may find it helpful to read the box “Reductio Proofs” before we begin.

Anselm began with the premise that by God is meant “the greatest being conceivable,” or, in Anselm’s exact words, “a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.”

Now, the fool who denies that God exists at least understands what he denies, said Anselm charitably. Thus, God at least exists in the fool’s understanding. But, Anselm noted, a being that exists both in the understanding and outside in reality is greater than a being that exists only in the understanding. (That is why people prefer real houses and cars and clothes and vacations to those they just think about.)

But this means, Anselm said, that the fool’s position is absurd. For his position is that God exists only in the understanding but not in reality. So the fool’s position, according to Anselm, is that “the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived.” And yes, this silliness is something like doubletalk, but Anselm’s point is that the denial of God’s existence leads to this silliness. Hence, God exists: to think otherwise is to be reduced to self-contradiction and mumbo-jumbo.

This line of argument, according to which it follows from the very concept of God that God exists, is known as the **ontological argument**. It represents Anselm’s most important contribution to the philosophy of religion. If Anselm’s argument is valid, if Anselm did establish that it is self-contradictory to deny that God exists and hence established that God does exist, then he did so without invoking any religious premises or making any religious presuppositions. True, he made, in effect, an assumption about the concept of God, but even a non-Christian or an atheist, he thought, must concede that what is meant by God is “the greatest being conceivable.” Thus, if the argument is valid, even those who are not moved by faith or are otherwise religious must accept its conclusion. Anselm, in effect, argued that the proposition “God exists” is self-evident and can no more be denied than can the proposition “A square has four sides,” and anyone who thinks otherwise is either a fool or just does not grasp the concept of God.
Anselm gave another version of the ontological argument that goes like this:

Because God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived, God’s nonexistence is inconceivable. For anyone whose nonexistence is conceivable is not as great as anyone whose nonexistence is not conceivable, and thus is not God.

Are you convinced? Many are not. Many regard the ontological argument in any version as a cute little play on words that proves absolutely nothing.

Gaunilo’s Objection  One who found the argument unconvincing was a Benedictine monk from the Abbey of Marmontier, a contemporary of Anselm whose name was Gaunilo [GO-nee-low]. One of Gaunilo’s objections was to the first version of the argument, which, he argued, could be used to prove ridiculous things. For example, Gaunilo said, consider the most perfect island. Because it would be more perfect for an island to exist both in reality and in the understanding, the most perfect island must exist in reality, if Anselm’s line of reasoning is sound. For if this island did not exist in reality, then (according to Anselm’s reasoning) any island that did exist in reality would be more perfect than it—that is, would be more perfect than the most perfect island, which is impossible. In other words, Gaunilo used Anselm’s reasoning to demonstrate the necessary existence of the most perfect island, implying that any pattern of reasoning that can be used to reach such an idiotic conclusion must obviously be defective.

Anselm, however, believed that his reasoning applied only to God: because God is that than which a greater cannot be conceived, God’s nonexistence is inconceivable; whereas, by contrast, the nonexistence of islands and all other things is conceivable.

As you will see in the selection from Anselm at the end of the chapter, which contains the first version of his ontological argument, Anselm was able to express his thought with elegant simplicity. Please accept our invitation to figure out what, if anything, is wrong with his reasoning.
Do not be confused when Anselm says that God is “something than which nothing greater can be thought.” He just means, in plain English, “God is the being with the following characteristic: when you try to think of a greater or higher being, you cannot do it.”

**Aquinas**

About a century and a half after Anselm died, St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274), whom we have discussed in earlier chapters, interpreted Aristotelian philosophy from a Christian perspective. Aristotle, as we have had occasion to mention, emphasized the importance to philosophy of direct observation of nature. In keeping with his empiricist, Aristotelian leanings, Aquinas regarded the ontological argument as invalid. You cannot prove that God exists, he said, merely by considering the word God, as the ontological argument in effect supposes. For that strategy to work, you would have to presume to know God’s essence. The proposition “God exists,” he said, unlike “A square has four sides,” is not self-evident to us mere mortals. Although you can prove God’s existence in several ways, he asserted, you cannot do it just by examining the concept of God. You have to consider what it is about nature that makes it manifest that it requires God as its original cause.

The ways in which the existence of God can be proved are in fact five, according to Aquinas. Although Aquinas’s theological and philosophical writings fill many volumes and cover a vast range of topics, he is most famous for his **Five Ways** (but some philosophers—discussed later—do not regard Aquinas’s proofs of God as his best philosophy). It would be surprising if you were not already familiar with one or another of Aquinas’s Five Ways in some version. In any case, they are included as a reading selection at the end of the chapter.

**The First Way** The first way to prove that God exists, according to Aquinas, is to consider the fact that natural things are in motion. As we look around the world and survey moving things, it becomes clear that they did not put themselves into motion. But if every moving thing were moved by another moving thing, then there would be no **first mover**; if no first mover existed, there would be no other mover, and nothing would be in motion. Because things are in motion, a first mover must therefore exist that is moved by no other, and this, of course, is God.

We should note here that Aquinas is usually understood as meaning something quite broad by motion—something more like “change in general”—and as including under the concept of movement the coming into, and passing out of, existence. Thus, when he says that things do not put themselves into motion, do not suppose that he thought that you cannot get up out of your chair and walk across the room. He means that things do not just bring themselves into existence.

**The Second Way** Aquinas’s second way of proving God’s existence is very similar to the first. In the world of sensible things, nothing causes itself. But if everything were caused by something else, then there would be no first cause, and if no first cause existed, there would be no first effect. In fact, there would be no
second, third, or fourth effect either: if no first cause existed, there would be no effects, period. So we must admit a first cause, to wit, God. (This is a good time to read the box on the next page, “The Big Bang.”)

Note that Aquinas did not say anything in either of the first two proofs about things being moved or caused by earlier motions or causes. The various motions and causes he is talking about are simultaneous. His argument is not the common one, that things must be caused by something earlier, which must be caused by something earlier, and so on, and that because this chain of causes cannot go back infinitely, there must be a first cause, God. In Aquinas’s opinion, there is no philosophical reason that the chain of causes could not go back infinitely. But there cannot be an infinite series of simultaneous causes or movers, he thought.

The Third Way Aquinas’s third way is easily the most complicated of the Five Ways. Many consider it his finest proof, though Aquinas himself seemed to prefer the first.

Many paraphrasings of the third proof are not faithful to what Aquinas actually said, which is essentially this: In nature some things are such that it is possible for them not to exist. Indeed, everything you can lay your hands on belongs to this “need-not-exist” category; whatever it is, despite the fact that it does exist, it need
not have existed. Now, that which need not exist, said Aquinas, at some time did not exist. Therefore, if everything belongs to this category, then at one time nothing existed, and then it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist—and thus even now nothing would exist. Thus, Aquinas reasoned, not everything is such that it need not exist: “There must exist something the existence of which is necessary.”

This is not quite the end of the third proof, however, for Aquinas believed that he had not yet ruled out the possibility that the necessity of this necessary being might be caused by another necessary being, whose necessity might be caused by another, and so on and so on. So, he asserted, “It is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another.” Conclusion: There must be some necessary being that has its own necessity, and this is God.

We said the third way was complicated.

**The Fourth and Fifth Ways** Aquinas’s fourth way to prove God is to consider the fact that all natural things possess degrees of goodness, truth, nobility, and all other perfections. Therefore, there must be that which is the source of these perfections, namely, pure goodness and truth, and so on, and this is what we call God.

And the fifth way or proof of God’s existence is predicated on the observation that natural things act for an end or purpose. That is, they function in accordance with a plan or design. Accordingly, an intelligent being exists by which things are directed toward their end, and this intelligent being is God.

Aquinas’s first three proofs of God’s existence are versions of what today is called the **cosmological argument**. The cosmological argument is actually not
one argument but a type of argument. Proponents of arguments of this type think that the existence of contingent things, things that could possibly not have existed, points to the existence of a noncontingent or necessary being, God, as their ultimate cause, creator, ground, energizer, or source of being. Note the difference between the cosmological argument and ontological arguments, which endeavor to establish the existence of God just by considering his nature or analyzing the concept of God, as we saw attempted by Anselm.

Aquinas’s fourth proof, which cites the existence of goodness or good things, is called the moral argument. Here again, the term does not refer to just one argument but rather to a type of argument, and, as we will see, some of the “versions” of the moral argument resemble one another only vaguely.

Arguments like Aquinas’s fifth proof, according to which the apparent purposefulness or orderliness of the universe or its parts or structure points to the existence of a divine designer, are called arguments from design, or teleological arguments.

Let’s summarize all of this. Between them, Anselm and Aquinas introduced what have turned out to be the four principal arguments for God’s existence. These are

- the ontological argument
- the cosmological argument
- the teleological or design argument
- the moral argument
Notice that none of these four arguments rests on any religious assumptions. They should therefore require the assent of every nonreligious person, if they are sound.

To a certain extent, the history of the philosophy of religion is a continuing discussion of various versions and aspects of these four arguments. Therefore, understanding each type of argument provides you with a good grasp of the basics of the philosophy of religion.

Now, before we leave Aquinas, we should call your attention to the fact that the distinction we drew at the beginning of this chapter between theology and the philosophy of religion is pretty much the same as the distinction Aquinas drew between theology and philosophy.

According to Aquinas, if your thinking proceeds from principles that are revealed to you in religion and that you accept on religious faith, then your thinking is theological, though he did not often use the word *theology*. If your reasoning proceeds from what is evident in sensory experience, then your thinking is philosophical.

According to Aquinas, some theological truths, truths of revelation, are such that philosophy could never discover them. For example, philosophy cannot establish that the universe had a beginning and is not eternal. And not everything discovered by philosophy is important for salvation. But philosophy and theology, although separate disciplines, are not incompatible; in fact, they complement each other, he thought (in contrast to some other Christian thinkers who thought that philosophy could lead to religious errors).

From the standpoint of theology, that God exists is a given, a truth that you start out knowing. From the standpoint of philosophy, that God exists is not a given but may be inferred from your experience.

Thus, Aquinas’s proofs of God’s existence are philosophical proofs. They do not depend for their soundness on any religious principles.

**Mysticism**

Quite a different approach to God may be found in the writings of the anchoress Julian of Norwich (1342–1414?), one of the great mystics of all time.

Anchoress? That is a person who had the great fortune to be anchored for life to a church. You will find more information on this in the nearby Profile on Julian.

Why do you believe in God, if you do? Perhaps at some point you had a “mystical experience”—you experienced God directly; God came to you. If you have had this type of experience, you may be unable to offer a justification or argument for your belief, and your inability to do so may not bother you in the slightest. If you have had a mystical experience of God, this whole business of debating the strengths and weaknesses of arguments about God may strike you as just so much mental exercise.

It is, however, one thing to say, “God came to me” and quite another to explain why this mystical experience is a reliable form of knowledge. Before we go any further, let’s be clear. We are not talking about hunches—as in when you have a hunch that something good or bad will happen, and it does. We are talking about serious
Her name was Julian, but sometimes she is called Juliana. She lived in the English cathedral city of Norwich during a nasty time in history. The Hundred Years’ War, the Great Schism in the Church, the ruthless suppression of the Peasant’s Revolt in Norwich, and the condemnation of John Wycliffe for heresy made the mid-fourteenth century a rough time for Norwich. The fact that the Black Plague hit Norwich when Julian was six, again when she was nineteen, and again when she was twenty-seven did not exactly make Norwich a fun place to live.

Julian became an anchoress. It was the custom at that time to “anchor” someone to a church. Anchoring was a kind of permanent grounding of a scholarly nun or priest (it was an honor, not a punishment). The lucky person, someone known for saintly behavior and devotion to theology, was walled up alive in a small cell within the outer wall of the church. Food, books, and other items would be passed through a window, and occasionally the anchoress would be allowed to talk through the window to important clergy and nobility. She spent her life there, and when she died, she was entombed in a crypt in the church.

Julian wrote two versions (one short and one long) of her Booke of Showings (revelations). The short version is a partial description of a series of visions she had in 1373 when she was seriously ill. She became an anchoress soon after that experience. That left her lots of time for study, thought, and religious discussion. Many theologians and philosophers visited her to discuss the “showings” she described in the short version. She spent the next twenty years revising the manuscript, including fuller details and much analysis of what she thought the revelations meant.

Back then, women were not supposed to claim to have any religious or philosophical authority (or any other kind of authority, for that matter). To avoid criticism for having the crust to act as if she knew something, a woman writer typically began her text with a “humility formula.” Here is Julian’s as she wrote it:

Botte god for bede that ye schulde saye or take it so that I am a techere, for I meene nou3t soo, no I mente neve re so; for I am a womann, leued, febille and freylle.

Some of Julian’s words had special religious and philosophical meanings that her readers would have understood. What she is saying is: “God says do not you act like I am a teacher. I do not mean to claim to be, and I never meant so. For I am a woman, ordinary (‘lewd’), morally weak (‘feeble’), and likely to fall from virtue (‘frail’).” Having disclaimed any authority, Julian went on to write seven hundred pages of philosophy.

Julian’s interests are in the nature and certainty of religious knowledge. She held that there were three sources of religious knowledge: natural reason, teachings of religious leaders, and visions given by God. As God gives visions to whomever God chooses, and God loves everyone, in theory everyone is a candidate for mystical revelations. Julian of Norwich lived during the Crusades, when heretics were claiming that the Catholic religion was based on false ideas. How can someone tell true religious claims from false ones? Might God make revelations to ordinary people? Julian and many other mystics, including Hildegard of Bingen, St. John of the Cross, and his teacher St. Teresa of Avila (all of whom are known as philosophers), thought so. To claim that only religious leaders have a direct line to God suggests that God has limited ability to communicate. Julian called God “Christ, Our Mother” and “God, our Father.” In her mind, God was both male and female, mother and father. God made us and nurtures us through the hard times.
beliefs people hold on the basis of this peculiar form of experience, beliefs like
“God is real” or “Jesus has touched me.”

In a very rich mystical experience, one that comes with all the accessories, the
mystic is often unconscious, appears to be delirious, or seems to be having what
today is sometimes called an out-of-body experience. The mystic may be dream-
ing, awake, or in a trance. He or she may see visions or hear voices. Commonly,
those who have such experiences report being told things by God. Sometimes
they are told to write down what they experience or to teach others. Before the
development of rationalism in the seventeenth century, back before philosophers
mostly believed that reason was the premier tool for acquiring knowledge, mystical
experiences like this were given more credence. Today, there is something of a ten-
dency, at least among sophisticates, to discount such experiences as malfunctions
in brain chemistry or temporal lobe disturbances or the like.

Julian of Norwich was a mystic, but she also analyzed her mystical experiences,
or “showings,” as she called them. Her analysis focused on the nature of personal
religious and moral knowledge as well as on whether it is possible to know God.
She denied that there is any meaningful difference in the validity of mystical reve-
lations made directly to one’s soul and knowledge derived through reason. She
held, indeed, that it is mistaken to divorce reason from experience, especially from
mystical experience.
Julian also emphasized the importance of the “not showns”—what logically should have been part of the vision but was missing. She believed God intended her to use insight, instinct, and reason to figure out what was not being communicated directly and to piece together the missing parts of the puzzle.

In Julian’s view, God lives in us and we in God; we are one with God and are nurtured and fed knowledge of God and of ourselves by our divine parent. Thus, she believed we could know God only partly through revelation; further knowledge comes through loving God. In addition, she maintained we could come to love God by loving our own souls.

Thomas Aquinas (who had recently been made a saint) had analyzed visions as the language God uses to convey God’s meaning. Julian went beyond analysis to attempt to make the experiences of visionaries relevant to others. She believed that ordinary people could learn from visionaries and find comfort and reason to hope in their visions. Hope, we can imagine, must have been a valuable commodity in mid-fourteenth-century England, faced with seemingly endless outbreaks of plague, war, and religious disputation.

**SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY PERSPECTIVES**

For our purposes here, we can now pass lightly over some three hundred years from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance to the seventeenth century. This is not to suggest that the time was unimportant for the history of religion. Europe had seen a mixture not only of enlightenment and religious revolution but also of reaction and intolerance; it had brought forth not only printed books and open discussion but also gunpowder and the stake. Luther had challenged the very foundations of Catholic doctrine, and Protestantism had spread throughout Europe. In England, Henry VIII had forced creation of the Anglican Church so that he could marry young Anne Boleyn and then, through a liberal use of execution, secured a loyal following. A new disorder had been rung in by the time of Descartes’ birth, and before his death modern science was offering its own challenge to the established orthodoxy.

But all of this, though of great significance to the history of religion, was only indirectly important to the history of the philosophy of religion. The main point for our purposes is that the seventeenth century was the age of scientific discovery amid intellectual uncertainty and political and religious instability, an age in which past authorities, institutions, and truths were questioned and often rejected or discarded.

**Descartes**

The next figure with whom you should be familiar in the philosophy of religion is **René Descartes** (1596–1650). Descartes, longing for an unshakable intellectual footing, made it his primary business to devise what he thought was a new method for attaining certainty in his turbulent age. When he employed his new method, however, it revealed to him the certain existence of God.
As we saw in Chapter 6, Descartes’ method was to challenge every belief, no matter how plausible it seemed, to ascertain which of his beliefs, if any, were absolutely unassailable. Employing this method, Descartes found that he could not doubt his existence as a thing that thinks: *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). He also found that he could not doubt the existence of God, for basically three reasons. These three reasons are Descartes’ proofs of God.

**Descartes’ First Proof** Having established as absolutely certain his own existence as a thinking thing, Descartes found within his mind the idea of God, the idea of an infinite and perfect being. Further, he reasoned, because there must be a cause for his idea, and because there must be as much reality or perfection in the cause of an idea as there is in the content of the idea, and because he himself therefore certainly could not be the cause of the idea, it follows, he concluded, that God exists.

Let’s call this Descartes’ first proof. It is a simple proof, although Descartes makes it seem somewhat complicated because he has to explain why his idea of God could not have arisen from a source other than God, and, of course, it is difficult to do this.

As you can see, Descartes’ first proof is sort of a combination ontological-cosmological argument. It is ontological in that the mere idea of God is held by Descartes to entail that God exists. It is cosmological in that the existence of some contingent thing—Descartes’ idea of God—is considered by Descartes to require God as its ultimate cause.

**Descartes’ Second Proof** Descartes had two other proofs of God’s existence. His second proof is only subtly different from the first and is basically this:

1. I exist as a thing that has an idea of God.
2. Everything that exists has a cause that brought it into existence and that sustains it in existence.
3. The only thing adequate to cause and sustain me, a thing that has an idea of God, is God.
4. Therefore, God exists.

In this second proof, God is invoked by Descartes as the cause of Descartes, a being that has the idea of God; whereas in the first proof, God is invoked by Descartes as the cause of Descartes’ idea of God. In the second proof, Descartes also utilizes the important notion that a thing needs a cause to conserve or sustain it in existence. You will encounter this idea again.

**Descartes’ Third Proof** In contrast with the first two, Descartes’ third proof is a straightforward and streamlined version of the ontological argument:

1. My conception of God is the conception of a being that possesses all perfections.
2. Existence is a perfection.
3. Therefore, I cannot conceive of God as not existing.
4. Therefore, God exists.
Now, assuming that this argument successfully gets you to conclusion (3), how about that move from (3) to (4)? Descartes had no difficulty with that move and said simply, “From the fact that I cannot conceive God without existence, it follows that existence is inseparable from Him, and hence that He really exists.” He also offered what he thought was a parallel argument to support the move, and it was to this effect: Just as the fact that you cannot conceive of a triangle whose angles do not equal $180^\circ$ means that a triangle must have angles that equal $180^\circ$, the fact that you cannot conceive of God as not existing means that God must exist.

Descartes’ three proofs may be novel, but certain objections instantly spring to mind. A common criticism made of the first two proofs is that it seems possible to devise plausible alternative explanations for one’s having an idea of God, explanations other than that given by Descartes. Descartes himself anticipates this objection and endeavors to show why the most likely alternative explanations fail.

The third proof—Descartes’ version of the ontological argument—is more difficult to criticize, but about one hundred fifty years later, Immanuel Kant formulated what became the classic refutation of ontological arguments. More about this when we turn to Kant.

A different sort of objection to Descartes’ proofs is that, given Descartes’ method—according to which he vowed not to accept any claim that is in the least bit doubtful—Descartes should not have accepted without question either the principle that he and his ideas must be caused or the principle that there must be as much perfection and reality in the cause as in the effect. Although Descartes regarded his proofs of God as providing certainty, they seem to rest on principles that many people would think of as less than certain. Yet Descartes seems to accept these principles without hesitation.

Nevertheless, Descartes’ proofs are important in the history of our subject, for they raise the important question—at least the first two proofs raise this question—just how does a person come to have the idea of an infinite being?
You may recall the name of Gottfried Wilhelm, Baron von Leibniz, or at least the “Leibniz” part, from our discussion in Chapter 6. **Leibniz** (1646–1716) was one of the Continental rationalists of the seventeenth century (Descartes and Spinoza were the other two). He is remembered for developing calculus independently of Newton and for his metaphysical doctrine of **monads**—the individual nonphysical units of activity that, he said, are the ultimate constituents of reality. Remember also that the Leibnizian metaphysical system is, or so Leibniz believed, derivable logically from a few basic principles, including, perhaps most famously, the principle of sufficient reason.

### Leibniz and the Principle of Sufficient Reason

The **principle of sufficient reason** is used by Leibniz as a proof of God. According to this principle, there is a sufficient reason why things are exactly as they are and are not otherwise. To see how the proof works, consider any occurrence whatsoever, say, the leaves falling from the trees in autumn. According to the principle in question, there must be a sufficient reason for that occurrence. Now, a **partial** reason for any occurrence is that something else happened, or is happening, that caused or is causing the occurrence—in our example, the days turning cold. But that happening is only a partial reason for the occurrence in question because it, too, requires a sufficient reason for happening. Why did the days turn cold?

So it is plain, thought Leibniz, that as long as you seek the sufficient reason for an occurrence from within the sequence of happenings or events, you never get the complete, final, sufficient reason for the occurrence. You only get to some other event, and that itself needs a reason for having happened. (The days turned cold because of a shift southward in the jet stream. The jet stream shifted southward because of a reduction in solar radiation. The solar radiation was reduced because of changes in the earth’s orientation relative to the sun. And so forth.) So, unless there is something outside the series of events, some reason for the entire series itself, there is no sufficient reason for any occurrence.

Therefore, reasoned Leibniz, because there is a sufficient reason for every occurrence, it follows that there is something outside the series of events that is its own sufficient reason. And this “something outside,” of course, is God. Further, because God is a sufficient reason for God’s own existence, God is a **necessary** being, argued Leibniz.

In this way, then, the principle of sufficient reason, coupled with the fact that something has occurred or is occurring, leads straightaway to a necessary being, God—at least according to Leibniz.

This proof is yet another cosmological argument, and it is very much like Aquinas’s third way. In fact, there is a tendency in the literature to interpret Aquinas’s third way in this Leibnizian mode. Further, Leibniz’s “argument from sufficient reason” is thought by many contemporary philosophers to be the soundest cosmological argument and the soundest proof of God of any type ever put forward. As you will see directly when we turn to David Hume, however, not everyone is impressed with the argument.
Later, we will mention that Kant thought that the cosmological argument depended on the ontological argument. Kant thought this, apparently, because Leibniz’s version ends up seeming to prove the existence of a necessary being, and it is the concept of God as a necessary being that is the foundation of the ontological argument. But it does seem doubtful that Leibniz’s argument depends on the ontological argument or in any way assumes the existence of a necessary being. Instead, the argument seems to prove the existence of a necessary being.

Leibniz thought other proofs of God were sound, including an amended version of Descartes’ ontological argument and a couple of others that rest on Leibniz’s metaphysics. Leibniz, however, is most noted for the cosmological argument we have explained here.

Leibniz and the Problem of Evil  Unfortunately, pain and suffering are undeniably real. Cancer, natural disasters, war, poverty, racism, murder, animal cruelty—the list of causes is almost endless. How can it be said that the Creator is good, when little animals freeze to death or are incinerated in forest fires, when innocent men are tortured or beheaded by their fellow men, or when innocent women and children burn to death in atomic bomb attacks. Yes, much of the problem is due to evil in man; but the question then arises, Why would a good Creator create men who are evil? After all, He knew in advance, when he created people, that some of them would do such things.

This is the Problem of Evil, perhaps first posed by Epicurus, though not in these exact words. Obviously, if you believe that God is good and the all-knowing, all-powerful Creator of All, you need to confront this problem. Theodicy was Leibniz’s word for an argument in defense of God’s goodness despite the existence of evil, though the first to wrestle with this problem in a detailed way was St. Augustine (354–430 C.E.). Augustine’s line of defense is widely accepted even today and includes the following elements:

- Human evil results when humans use their free will to turn away from God.
- Evil is the privation, or lack of good, that results from this turning away.
- Because a lack of something is not something, this evil is not something God created.
- Human sin is canceled out in the end by divine retribution.
- Our view of the world is limited and finite, meaning that we are not in a position to judge its overall goodness.

Now, Leibniz, remember, subscribed to the principle of sufficient reason, which logically entails (he thought) that God exists. It also requires that this must be the most perfect of all possible worlds, for otherwise God would not have chosen this world for existence. So Leibniz owed his readers an explanation of how evil got into the picture.

Leibniz’s explanation, briefly, is that, for God to create things other than himself, the created things logically must be limited and imperfect. Thus, to the extent that creation is imperfect, it is not wholly good, and thus it is “evil.”
Further, Leibniz argues, you have to look at the entire painting. You cannot pronounce it bad if you look at this or that small part, for if you do that, all you will see is a confused mass of colors. Likewise, you have to look at the world from a global perspective and not focus on this or that unpleasant aspect of it.

Not everyone, of course, finds this explanation of evil satisfactory. The optimism expressed in Leibniz’s dictum that this is the best of all possible worlds was skewered with dripping sarcasm by Voltaire (1694–1778) in his famous novel Candide. Leibniz was of the opinion that one must look at evil from a global perspective, from which unfortunate events might be perceived as part of a larger fabric that, taken as a whole, is a perfect creation. This notion, in Voltaire’s opinion, is meaningless from the standpoint of the individual who suffers a dreadful misfortune, and Voltaire had no difficulty in ridiculing it. If you look at the events of the world with a sober eye, Voltaire suggested, you will see anything but a just, harmonious, and ordered place. What you are more likely to see is injustice, strife, and rampant disorder.

“When death crowns the ills of suffering man, what a fine consolation to be eaten by worms,” he wrote. You get the idea.

EIGHTEENTH- AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY PERSPECTIVES

Recall now Aquinas’s fifth way, a version of the teleological argument, which also often is called the argument from design. The basic idea of this type of proof of God’s existence is that the world and its components act for a purpose and thus exhibit design; therefore, the world was created by an intelligent designer. One of the most famous criticisms of the design argument was made by the British empiricist David Hume.
David Hume (1711–1776) was born some sixty years after Descartes died, during a period of European history that saw the clear emergence of two rivals, science and religion. Between Descartes’ Meditations and Hume’s writings on religion, science had made strong advances, especially in 1687 with the publication of Sir Isaac Newton’s Principia Mathematica. Although Newton himself did not question God’s existence, his system seemed to confirm scientifically what Hobbes earlier had concluded philosophically (see Chapter 6) and what Descartes seemed most to fear: that the universe is an aggregate of matter in motion that has no need of, and leaves no room for, God. Hume’s case-hardened doubts about religion could make blood pressures soar, but by the time Hume put them in print, they were by no means considered capital offenses.

Hume’s empiricist epistemological principles (if valid) in fact rule out the possibility of any meaningful ontological argument. But this is complicated business and need not detain us, because it is Hume’s harsh criticisms of the cosmological and especially the teleological arguments that have been most influential in the philosophy of religion. The most important criticism of the ontological argument comes from Kant, anyway. (Hume’s thinking on the subject of miracles has also been influential; we discuss it in the box “Miracles.”)

Hume and the Argument from Design

Hume stated the teleological argument (that is, the argument from design) and then went on to criticize it severely. Here is his fair and balanced statement of the argument:

Look round the world; contemplate the whole and every part of it: you will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions, to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy, which ravishes into admiration all men, who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it

Miracles

Some Christians regard miracles as evidence of divine action. Hume, however, was highly skeptical of reports of miracles.

A miracle, he reasoned, is a violation of a natural law, such as that water flows downhill or that fire consumes wood. Thus, before it is reasonable to accept a report of a miracle as true, the evidence that supports the report must be even stronger than that which has established the natural law.

Because the evidence that a natural law holds is the uniform experience of humankind, it is almost inconceivable that any report of a miracle could be true. Therefore, before it would be reasonable to accept such a report, it would have to be a miracle in its own right for the report to be false. In fact, the report’s being false would have to be a greater miracle than the miracle it reports.

“No testimony,” wrote Hume, “is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact that it endeavors to establish.”
much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of men; though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed. By this argument a posteriori, and by this argument alone, we do prove at once the existence of a Deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence.

Now note that in this proof of God, as stated by Hume, the reasoning is from an effect (the “world,” i.e., the universe) and its parts to its cause (God). Further, this is an argument by analogy, in which the effect (the world or universe) is likened to a human contrivance, the cause is likened to a human creator, and the mechanism of creation is likened to human thought and intelligence. Hume’s criticisms of the proof are mainly related to (1) the appropriateness of these analogies, and (2) the legitimacy of this particular instance of effect-to-cause reasoning.

Hume began his criticism by noticing that, in an effect-to-cause proof, we cannot attribute to the supposed cause any qualities over and beyond those required for the effect. For example, is the world absolutely perfect? Is it free from every error, mistake, or incoherence? No? Then you cannot say that its cause is absolutely perfect either. Does the world reflect infinite wisdom and intelligence? Hume’s own opinion is that, at best, the world reflects these qualities to some degree; and, therefore, though we perhaps can infer that the cause has these qualities to a similar degree, we are unauthorized to attribute to it these qualities in a higher degree, and we certainly are not authorized to attribute to it these qualities in an infinite degree.

We also are not authorized to attribute to it other qualities, such as pure goodness or infinite power. The existence of evil and misery, in Hume’s opinion, certainly does not indicate that the cause of the world is pure goodness coupled with infinite power. His point was not that the existence of pain and misery necessarily means that the creator of the world is not good or omnipotent. Rather, his point was just that, given the existence of evil and misery in the world, we cannot legitimately try to prove that the creator is all-good and all-powerful by looking at the world. To do that is to attribute something other to the cause than is found in the effect.

Hume also questioned whether we even know how perfect or good the world is. Given the limitations of our position, given that we have no basis for a comparison, can we be sure that the world does not contain great faults? Are we entitled to say that the world deserves considerable praise? If an ignorant chucklehead pronounces the only poem he has ever heard to be artistically flawless, does his opinion count for much?

Further, he noted, in the design proof of God, a cause is inferred from a single effect, namely, the world. But, Hume asked, is it legitimate to infer a cause from a single effect? If I learn (to take a modern illustration of the point) that a certain weird kind of sound is caused by a new type of electronic instrument, then when I hear that kind of sound again, I can infer that it was caused by a similar instrument. But if it is the first time I hear the sound, I cannot say much at all about its cause, save perhaps that it was not made by a trombone or guitar. In other words, if we have experience of only a single instance of the effect, as seems to be the case with the world, then it is not clear “that we could form any conjecture or inference at all concerning its cause.”
Of course, we have had experience with the building of machines and ships and houses and so forth. But can the world really be compared to any of these? Can we pretend to show much similarity between a house and the universe? To speak of the origin of worlds, wrote Hume, “It is not sufficient, surely, that we have seen ships and cities arise from human art and contrivance.”

Hume laid a great deal of emphasis on the limitedness of our viewpoint. We, who are but a part of the universe, use our intelligence and thought to build cities and machines. And so we suppose there must be a divine creator who used thought and intelligence to create the universe. But we and our creations are but a tiny aspect of the universe, and human thought and intelligence are just one of hundreds of known principles of activity. Is it legitimate, Hume asked, for us to suppose that the mechanism by which one small aspect of the universe rearranges little bits of wood and steel and dirt is the same mechanism by which the entire universe was originally created?

Further, even if we can liken the creation of the world to the building of a house or boat, there is this further problem, said Hume: If we survey a ship, we would be tempted to attribute a great deal of ingenuity to its builder, when in fact its builder may be a beef-brained clod who only copied an art that was perfected over the ages by hundreds of people working through a series of trials, mistakes, corrections, and gradual improvements. Can we be sure the world was not the result of a similar process of trial and error and even intermittent bungling, involving a multitude of lesser “creators”?

For that matter, Hume asked, is it even proper to liken the world to a ship or watch or machine or other human artifact? Is not the world arguably as much like a living organism as a machine? And are not living organisms produced by processes radically different from those by which human artifacts are made?

This, then, is the substance of Hume’s complaints about the design argument. Given what seemed to him to be its several difficulties, Hume’s own conclusion was just this: There is an apparent order in the universe, and this apparent order provides some slight evidence of a cause or causes bearing some remote analogy to human intelligence. But that is all the evidence warrants, Hume thought.

**Hume and the Cosmological Argument**  
A cosmological argument, in the version Hume examines, says that anything that exists must have a cause (or reason or explanation) that is different from itself. But because the series of causes cannot go to infinity, there must be a first uncaused cause, God. A variation of the basic argument allows that the causal series can go to infinity but still stands in need of an uncaused cause that causes the whole infinite series. In either case, the uncaused cause cannot not exist. Thus, the uncaused cause is a necessary being.

Hume’s objections to these lines of argument are that, first, as far as we can make out, the universe may itself be “the necessarily existent being”; second, if you maintain that everything has a prior cause, it is contradictory also to maintain that there was a first cause; and third, if I explain the cause of each member of a series of things, there is no further need for an explanation of the series itself as if it were some further thing.

**A Verbal Dispute?**  
Hume also had the startling idea that the dispute between theists and atheists might be only a verbal dispute. This was his reasoning:
Theists say that the universe was created by the divine will. But they concede that there is a great and immeasurable difference between the creative activity of the divine mind and mere human thought and its creative activity.

But what do atheists say? They concede that there is some original or fundamental principle of order in the universe, but they insist that this principle can bear only some remote analogy to everyday creative and generative processes or to human intelligence.

Thus, atheist and theist are very close to saying the same thing! The main difference between them seems to lie only in this, Hume said: The theist is most impressed by the necessity of there being or having been a fundamental principle of order and generation in the universe, whereas the atheist is most impressed by how wildly different such a principle must be from any creative activity with which we are familiar. But then the more pious the theist, the more he will emphasize the difference between divine intelligence and human intelligence; the more he will insist that the workings of God are incomprehensible to mere mortals. The more pious the theist, in short, the more he will be like the atheist!

Kant

This brings us to Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), whose contribution to the philosophy of religion equals in importance his work in epistemology and ethics. Kant invented one of the most famous moral arguments for God’s existence. But Kant’s criticisms of traditional proofs of God have seemed to many commentators to be more cogent than his proof, and in any case they are among the most important criticisms in the literature.
According to Kant, there are only three (traditional) ways of proving God’s existence, and none of them works.

**What Is Wrong with the Ontological Proof?** First is the ontological argument. Remember that, according to Anselm’s version of the argument, God is the greatest being conceivable. Hence, if you suppose that God does not exist, you are supposing that the greatest being conceivable is not the greatest being conceivable, and that is nonsense. According to Descartes’ version, God possesses all perfections, and because existence is a perfection, God exists.

Now, we are sure you will agree there is something very sneaky about the ontological argument, in any version. It seems intuitively wrong, somehow; yet it is difficult to pin down exactly what the problem is.

Kant provided a criticism that has withstood the test of time, though in recent years there have been challenges to it. What is wrong with the argument, Kant said, is that it assumes that existence is a predicate, that is, a characteristic or an attribute. Because Anselm assumed that existence is a characteristic, he could argue that a being that lacked existence lacked an important characteristic and thus could not be the greatest being conceivable. Because Descartes assumed that existence is a characteristic, he could argue that God, who by definition possesses all perfections, necessarily possesses the characteristic of existence.

But existence, said Kant, is not a characteristic at all. Rather, it is a precondition of having characteristics. Is there any difference between a warm day and an existing warm day? If you state that the potato salad is salty, do you further characterize the salad if you state that it is salty and exists? If you tell the mechanic that your tire is flat, do you further enlighten him if you add that the tire also exists? The answer to all such questions, in Kant’s view, is obviously “no.” To say of something that it exists is not to characterize it: existence is not a predicate.

So, to apply this lesson first to Descartes: Existence is not a perfection or any other kind of characteristic. Certainly, if there is a being that possesses all perfections,
then God exists, for existence is a precondition of something’s having any perfections at all. But this fact does not mean that God actually exists.

And to apply this lesson to Anselm: Existence is not a characteristic, and so it is not one that belongs to greatness. Certainly, if the greatest being conceivable exists, then God exists, because God by definition is that being, and something cannot possess any aspect of greatness without existing. But that fact does not mean that such a being exists.

**What Is Wrong with the Cosmological and Teleological Proofs?** The second way of proving God’s existence, according to Kant, is the cosmological argument, which, he asserts, reduces to this: If something exists, an absolutely necessary being must likewise exist. I, at least, exist. Therefore, an absolutely necessary being exists.

This is certainly a simple and streamlined version of the cosmological argument compared with the arguments set forth by Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, and Hume. Unfortunately, Kant, who generally did not try to make things easy for his reader, made up for this unusual lapse into simplicity and clarity by submitting the argument to several pages of exceedingly subtle and confusing analysis.

Kant’s basic criticisms of the cosmological argument, however, are two: First, the argument really rests on the ontological argument. His explanation of why and how this is so is notoriously obscure and probably unsound; let’s just let it go. Second, and more important anyway, the argument employs a principle (that everything contingent has a cause) that has significance only in the experienced world. The argument then uses that principle, Kant maintained, to arrive at a conclusion that goes beyond experience. (Kant, as we tried to make clear in Chapter 7, believed that causality is a concept applicable only to things-as-experienced. Why Kant held this position is too complicated to repeat here, but his case against the cosmological argument rests on his being correct about causality, which some people are inclined to doubt.)

The third and final way of trying to prove God’s existence, according to Kant, is the teleological argument, the argument that cites the purposiveness and harmonious adaptation of nature as proof of the divine designer. Kant’s main criticism is that at best the argument proves only the existence of an architect who works with the matter of the world, and not a creator. A similar line of thinking was found in Hume, as we saw.

**Belief in God Rationally Justified** Despite Kant’s criticisms of the three traditional proofs for God’s existence, Kant believed in God. Further, amazingly to some, he thought this belief is rationally justified for any moral agent. Here, as almost always, his thinking is complicated, but what he had in mind was this:

Although we do not have theoretical or metaphysical knowledge of God, although we cannot prove or demonstrate that God exists, we must view the world as if it were created by God. Why? Because, Kant said, only if we assume the existence of God can we believe that virtue will be rewarded with happiness. Virtue, Kant held, is worthiness to be happy and is the supreme good. But without believing in God, the virtuous individual cannot be certain that the happiness of which he is worthy will in fact be his or that, in general, a person’s happiness will be proportionate to his moral worth.
Thus, in Kant’s opinion, God’s existence cannot be proved but can and must rationally be assumed by a moral agent. That God exists, Kant said, is a postulate of practical reason. This particular argument for assuming that God exists is another version of the moral argument that we first encountered with Aquinas.

Kierkegaard

It is interesting to contrast Kant’s philosophy with that of the Danish philosopher **Søren Kierkegaard** (1813–1855), who was born a little before Kant died. Neither philosopher thought you could rationally prove God exists. But the similarity between the two ends there.

For Kierkegaard, “to exist” is to be engaged in time and history. Because God is an eternal and immutable being, “existence” does not even apply to God. But God as Christ existed, for Kierkegaard. Christ, however, is a paradox that the human intellect cannot comprehend, for in Christ the immutable became changing, the eternal became temporal, and what is beyond history became historical.

In short, Kierkegaard thought that God is beyond the grasp of reason and that the idea that God came to us as a man in the person of Jesus is intellectually absurd. Yet, at the same time, Kierkegaard’s primary mission was to show what it is to be a Christian, and he himself was totally committed to Christianity. How can this be?

First, the notion that we can sit back and weigh objectively the evidence about God’s existence pro and contra, that we can conduct an impartial investigation of the issue and arrive at the “truth,” is totally rejected by Kierkegaard. He would not have bothered reading this chapter.

In fact, Kierkegaard mocks the whole idea of objective truth as giving meaning to life. Truth, he said, is subjective. Truth lies not in what you believe, but in how you live. Truth is passionate commitment. For example, think of a person who worships the “true” God but does so merely as a matter of routine, without passion or commitment. Compare this person with one who worships a mere idol but does so with the infinite commitment of his soul. In fact, said Kierkegaard, “The one prays in truth to God though he worships an idol; the other prays falsely to the true God, and hence worships in fact an idol.”

Second, Kierkegaard rejected completely the Aristotelian idea that the essential attribute of humans is their capacity to reason. For Kierkegaard, the most important attribute of man is not thought but will. Man is a being that makes choices.

But if truth is not objective, then there are no external principles or criteria that are objectively valid and against which one might judge one’s choices. How, then, are we to choose, if there are no objective, rational criteria, and we have only our own judgment to rely on? This problem—the problem of knowing how and what to choose in the absence of objective truth—became, after Kierkegaard, the central problem of existentialism.

Kierkegaard’s answer is that we must commit ourselves totally to God. Salvation can be had only through a leap of faith, through a nonintellectual, passionate, “infinite” commitment to Christianity. “Faith constitutes a sphere all by itself, and every misunderstanding of Christianity may at once be recognized by its transforming it into a doctrine, transferring it to the sphere of the intellectual.”
What Kierkegaard said must not be confused with what earlier Christian thinkers had maintained. Earlier Christian thinkers had said that faith precedes understanding and had held that you must have faith in God before rational thought about him can begin. But thinkers such as Augustine and Anselm had still looked for, and had fully expected there to be, rational grounds for confirming what they already accepted by faith. Kierkegaard, in contrast, thought that no such rational grounds exist: God is an intellectual absurdity.

Further, he held that rational grounds for believing in God, if there were any, would actually be incompatible with having faith. “If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast to the objective uncertainty [of God],” he said. The objective uncertainty of God, for Kierkegaard, is thus essential to a true faith in him. Only if there is objective uncertainty, he wrote, can “[I] remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith.”

Nietzsche

“God is dead,” said Nietzsche. By this infamous remark, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) did not mean that God once existed and now no longer does. He meant that all people with an ounce of intelligence would now perceive that there is no intelligent plan to the universe or rational order in it: they would now understand that there is no reason why things happen one way and not another and that the harmony and order we imagine to exist in the universe is merely pasted on by the human mind.

Nietzsche, however, would have regarded very few people as having this required ounce of intelligence, and he in fact had a way of denigrating everyone in sight. For the mass of people, Nietzsche thought, God certainly is not dead. But these people, in Nietzsche’s opinion, are pathetic wretches governed by a worldview inculcated by religion, science, and philosophy, a worldview that in Nietzsche’s opinion makes them feeble losers who are motivated mainly by
resentment. They view the world as a rational, law-governed place and adhere to a slave morality that praises the man who serves his fellow creatures with meekness and self-sacrifice.

In Nietzsche’s opinion, the negative morality of these pitiful slaves—the mass of humankind, ordinary people—must be reevaluated and replaced by life-affirming values. The new morality will be based on the development of a new kind of human being, whom Nietzsche calls the Übermensch (“overman” or “superman”). Such a one not only accepts life in all its facets, including all its pain, but also makes living into an art. Among the forerunners of the overman, Nietzsche cites Alexander the Great and Napoleon.

Nietzsche’s thesis that there is no God and its apparent corollary, that there are no absolute and necessary criteria of right and wrong, were accepted by such twentieth-century existentialist philosophers as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. For these thinkers, the fundamental problem of philosophy is how to live one’s life, given the absence of absolutely valid standards by which to evaluate one’s choices and decisions.

Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and some existentialists would all have agreed that the various rational discussions about God’s existence to which this chapter is devoted are impotent and meaningless. (However, for an interesting alternative view, you might like to read the box “Religion: Illusion with a Future,” which discusses the views of Sigmund Freud.)

James

William James (1842–1910) published his first major work, The Will to Believe and Other Essays, in 1897. By the year 1900, there was a marked increase in agnosticism and antagonism between the religious view of the world as a divinely created paradise planned for the sake of human spiritual growth and the supposedly scientific
Few philosophers have been better writers than William James, whose catchy phrases gave life and succulence to even the driest philosophical subjects. James had a knack for words, and he was able to state complex ideas with easy elegance. This might be expected because James was the older brother of Henry James, the great American novelist.

The James children were raised by their wealthy and eccentric theologian father in an intellectually stimulating atmosphere that promoted their mental development. The Jameses benefited from diverse educational experiences in several schools both in America and in Europe and were largely free to pursue their own interests and develop their own capacities. They became refined and cosmopolitan.

William James had wide-ranging interests. Though fascinated with science, he decided, at age eighteen, to try to become a painter. But he was also wise enough to see very soon that his artistic urge exceeded his ability.

So James went off to Harvard and studied science. Then he entered the college’s medical school, though he did not intend to practice medicine, and in his late twenties he received his medical degree. A few years later, he joined the Harvard faculty as a lecturer on anatomy and physiology and continued to teach at Harvard until 1907. From 1880 on, he was a member of the Harvard Department of Philosophy and Psychology. You should not think that James got interested in philosophy all of a sudden. He had always been fond of the subject and tended to give a philosophical interpretation to scientific questions.

James suffered from emotional crises until he was able to resolve the question of free will and to answer the compelling arguments for determinism. Around 1870, in the ideas of the French philosopher Charles Renouvier, he found philosophical justification for believing in free will, and with it, apparently, the cure to his episodes of emotional paralysis.

In 1890, James published his famous Principles of Psychology, thought by many to be his major work. Equally important from a purely philosophical standpoint was his The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy (1897). In this work is James’s solution to the problem of free will, in the essay “The Dilemma of Determinism.” Other important works include The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), Pragmatism (1907), A Pluralistic Universe (1909), The Meaning of Truth (1909), Some Problems in Philosophy (1911), and Essays in Radical Empiricism (1912).

William James was perhaps the most famous American intellectual of his time. Yet today some philosophers think of him as a lightweight—a popularizer of philosophical issues who failed to make a substantial contribution to technical philosophy (whatever that is). He is thought to bear the same relation to Hume or Kant, say, that Tchaikovsky bears to Mozart or Bach, the philosophical equivalent of the composer who only cranks out pretty melodies. But this is all a mistake. The discerning reader will find in James a great depth of insight.

view of the cosmos as a blind churning of material particles in accordance with physical laws. Over the past two hundred years, the blind-churning view had become more and more congenial to Western intellectuals. Around mid-century, Darwin had explained how the origin of species need not be divine, and Karl Marx had pronounced religion to be the opiate of the people. Hume and Kant did not force philosophers to question the old proofs of God, the times did. Before the end of the century, Friedrich Nietzsche could proclaim that God was dead.

But God was not, and is not, dead for everyone. In fact, for very many, the question of God’s existence was at the time, and still is (1) a live issue and
furthermore (2) a momentous one. For William James it is both. It is also, according to James, (3) forced, which means you cannot suspend judgment in the matter. For James, to profess agnosticism and to pretend to suspend judgment is in fact “backing the field against the religious hypothesis” (that is, deciding against God).

James argued for deciding the issue of God’s existence in favor of God. He began his argument, not a simple one, by noting that “our nonintellectual nature does influence our convictions.” Indeed, usually our convictions are determined by our nonintellectual or “passional” nature, rather than by reason, he maintained. Sometimes we even deliberately will what we believe, James held.

Having argued that our nonintellectual nature influences our opinions, James next distinguished between the two commandments of rational thinkers. These are

1. to believe the truth
2. to avoid errors

Some individuals, James noted, favor (2) over (1): they would rather avoid errors than find the truth. “Better go without belief forever than believe a falsehood” is the creed dictated to them by their passion: better dead than misled. But favoring (2) over (1) is not James’s creed. There are worse things than falling into error, he said. In some cases, he argued, it is best to regard “the chase for truth as paramount, and the avoidance of error as secondary.”

It is this way in religious matters, he said. When it comes to religion it is better to yield to the hope that all of it may be true than to give way to the fear of being in error. If you permit the fear of error to rule you and say to yourself, “Avoid error at any cost!” then you will withhold assent to religious beliefs. Doing so will, of course, protect you from being in error—if the religious beliefs are incorrect. But if you withhold your assent to religious beliefs, then you will also lose the benefits that come from accepting those beliefs. And it is worse, James thought, to lose the benefits than to gain the protection from erring.

Further, if the religious beliefs are true but the evidence for them is insufficient, then the policy “Avoid error at any cost!” effectively cuts you off from an opportunity to make friends with God. Thus, in James’s opinion, the policy “Avoid error at all cost!”—when applied to religion—is a policy that keeps you from accepting certain propositions even if those propositions are really true, and that means that it is an irrational policy.

James stressed that he was not saying that you should believe what, as he put it, “you know ain’t true.” His strategy applies, he said, only to momentous and living issues that cannot be resolved by the intellect itself. It applies only to issues like God’s existence.

Applying the same strategy to the question of whether we have free will, James focused not directly on the question itself but rather on the outcomes that attend acceptance of the alternative viewpoints. Acceptance of determinism is unsatisfactory, James believed, because it entails never regretting what happens (what happened had to happen, according to determinism, so it is illogical to feel that it should not have happened). Thus, acceptance of determinism is inconsistent with the practices of moral beings, who perceive themselves as making genuine choices that can affect the world for better or for worse.
James’s reasoning elicited much criticism. Skeptics and believers both took issue with it. Skeptics thought James had elevated wishful thinking to the status of proof, and believers questioned James’s implicit assumption that God’s existence cannot be established. Still others said that belief grounded in James’s way was not the uncompromising and unqualified faith in God demanded by religion. From their perspective, James’s belief in God amounted to a gamble akin to Pascal’s wager (see the box on the next page) rather than to true religious acceptance of God.

James in any event takes us into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and we shall now consider more recent discussions of God’s existence. The first is something like an argument that God does not exist, but in actuality it is an argument that the whole issue is pretty meaningless to begin with.

**God and Logical Positivism**

In the late 1920s, a group of philosophers, mathematicians, and scientists led by Moritz Schlick, a philosopher at the University of Vienna, set forth a group of ideas known as logical positivism. A central tenet of this Viennese Circle and of logical positivism, as we saw in Chapter 9, is the verifiability principle, according to which the factual meaning of a proposition is the experience you must have to know it is true. What does it mean to say, “The sprinkler is on”? Well, to find out whether that proposition is true, you would have to look out the window or go out into the yard or otherwise do some checking. The experience required to do the checking is what the proposition means, according to the verifiability principle.

What this principle entails is that a pronouncement that is not verifiable has no factual meaning. Take the remark “The sprinkler stopped working due to fate.” What kind of checking would you do to see whether this was true? There is no experience a person might have that would verify this remark. Therefore, it is factually meaningless, the logical positivists would say.

Of course, some propositions are true by virtue of what their words mean: for example, “You are older than everyone who is younger than you.” Such analytic propositions, as they are called, are rendered true by definition rather than by experience, according to the logical positivists. But the proposition “The sprinkler stopped working due to fate” is not like that. It is not an analytic proposition, so it has to be verifiable in experience if it is to have factual meaning. And because it is not, it does not.

So, according to the logical positivists, the many philosophical assertions from metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics that are neither analytic nor verifiable are factually meaningless. These assertions may perhaps express emotional sentiments, but they are neither true nor false. Rudolph Carnap (1891–1970), one of the most famous members of the Vienna Circle, even declared, “We reject all philosophical questions, whether of Metaphysics, Ethics or Epistemology.”

Today, few philosophers would call themselves logical positivists, for reasons mentioned in Chapter 9. But most philosophers would still maintain that empirical or factual propositions must in some sense and to some extent be verifiable by experience.
Pascal’s Wager

The French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) is famous, among other reasons, for his wager-argument for God. Either God exists or he does not. By believing that he does exist, you lose nothing if he does not, and you gain a lot, namely, happiness and eternal life, if he does. So believing that God exists is a prudent wager; you will not lose anything, and you might gain much.

James denied that he was offering a version of Pascal’s wager in his argument for the existence of God. You may wish to consider whether his denial is warranted.

So what, then, about assertions such as “God exists” or “God loves us”? These look like factual propositions. But are they in any sense verifiable? A reading by Antony Flew at the end of the chapter addresses the issue from a positivist perspective, according to which the utterances “God exists” and “God does not exist” are both meaningless.

In recent years Professor Flew abandoned his “atheistic” position. His recent book *There Is a God*, published in 2007 and written with Roy Abraham Varghese, is what Flew called his last will and testament. In it he proclaimed, “I now believe there is a God!” His major reasons? God provides the best explanation of how the laws of nature came to be, how life originated from nonlife, and how the universe came into existence.

Unfortunately, controversy exists as to how much of the book represents Flew’s own thinking and how much represents the opinion of his coauthor. The arguments presented in the book stand or fall on their own merits, however.¹

Mary Daly: The Unfolding of God

An entirely different line of thinking about God is evident in what contemporary feminist scholar Mary Daly (1928–2010) said on the subject in *Beyond God the Father* (1973).

The biblical and popular image of God as a great father in heaven, Daly wrote, a father who rewards and punishes according to his mysterious and seemingly arbitrary will, arose in patriarchal societies. Furthermore, according to Daly, the image serves patriarchal society by making mechanisms for the oppression of women seem right and fitting. “If God in ‘his’ heaven is a father ruling ‘his’ people, then it is in the ‘nature’ of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated.” Given the biblical and popular image of God, “the husband dominating his wife represents God himself.” “If God is male, then the male is God.”

This image of God as Lord and Father, which has been sustained “by the usual processes of producing plausibility such as preaching and religious indoctrination,” perpetuates the artificial polarization of human qualities into the traditional sexual stereotypes, Daly maintained. This image of the person in authority and the popular

¹ For supposed evidence that Flew was in a state of mental decline when he wrote the book, see http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/04/magazine/04Flew-t.html?_r=1.
understanding of “his” role continually renew the eternal masculine stereotypes. They also nourish and justify domination and manipulation both toward persons and toward the environment. They perpetuate the eternal female stereotypes of emotionalism, passivity, self-abnegation, and the like.

Of course, a defender of the traditional image of God will probably protest that God is popularly conceived also as love. But, according to Mary Daly, the concept of God as love is split with the image of the “vengeful God who represents his chosen people.” This split has perpetuated a double standard of behavior. God, she wrote, is like Vito Corleone of The Godfather, a “marriage of tenderness and violence blended in the patriarchal ideal.” Given this image, worshipers feel justified in being intolerant. Thus, we should not be surprised by the numerous examples of fanatical believers who cruelly persecute “those outside the sacred circle.” Nor should we be surprised when those who are anointed by society—scientists and leaders, for example—are given the blessings of priests for inventing and using napalm and the like to perpetrate atrocities.

Now, when Daly’s view is compacted as it is here, it may perhaps seem like an angry and exaggerated diatribe. But Daly countered that it would surely be unrealistic not to believe that the instruments for symbolism and communication, which include the whole theological tradition in world religions, have been formulated by males under the conditions of patriarchy. It is therefore “inherent in these symbolic and linguistic structures that they serve the purposes of patriarchal social arrangements.” If further proof is needed, one need merely consider (she said) the blatant misogyny of religious “authorities” from Augustine to Aquinas, Luther, Knox, and Barth, which has “simply been ignored or dismissed as trivial.”

The problem, then, Daly said, is how to transform “the collective imagination so that this distortion of the human aspiration to transcendence loses its credibility.” The
question is how to “cut away the Supreme Phallus”: “God”—the word, the image—must be castrated. Why, indeed, Daly wrote, must “God” even be a noun? Why not a verb—the “most active and dynamic verb of all,” the “Verb of Verbs,” the verb infinitely more personal than a mere static noun, the verb that conveys that God is “Be-ing”? “God,” as an intransitive verb, she wrote, would not be conceived as an object—which implies limitation—for God as Be-ing is contrasted only with nonbeing.

But the confrontation with “the structured evil of patriarchy” must go beyond mere tinkering with the language used to talk about God, she said. To stop at that level, she wrote, would be to trivialize the “deep problem of human becoming in women.”

And just what is the “deep problem of becoming”? It is a striving toward psychic wholeness, toward self-realization, toward self-transcendence—becoming who we really are. This becoming of women requires existential courage, Daly wrote, to confront the experience of nothingness. It is a “radical confrontation” with nothingness. We are all threatened by nonbeing, she wrote, and the only solution is self-actualization—not denial of self. An example of such denial of self provided by Daly is the woman who “singlemindedly accepts the role of housewife.” This individual “may to some extent avoid the experience of nothingness, but she also avoids a fuller participation in being which would be her only real security.” “Submerged in such a role, she cannot achieve a breakthrough to creativity.” The women’s revolution must, therefore, ultimately be religious. It must reach “outward and inward toward the God beyond and beneath the gods who have stolen our identity.”

According to Daly, three false “demons dressed as God” especially need expurgation: the God of “explanation,” who legitimizes suffering as due to God’s will; God the Judge, whose chief activity lies in issuing after-death rewards and promises compensation for women’s subjugation in this life; and, closely related, God the Judge of Sin, who maintains “false consciences and self-destructive guilt feelings.” This last god enforces the rules of the patriarchal game (and is most blatant in arch-conservative religions, Daly wrote).
Does this seem angry? From Daly’s perspective, women are dealing with “demonic power relationships” and “structured evil”; therefore, rage is \textit{required as a positive creative force}. Anger, she wrote, “can trigger and sustain movement from the experience of nothingness to recognition of participation in being.” According to Daly,

When women take positive steps to move out of patriarchal space and time, there is a surge of new life. I would analyze this as participation in God the Verb who cannot be broken down simply into past, present, and future time, since God is form-destroying, form-creating, transforming power that makes all things new.

\begin{flushright}
\textbf{Intelligent Design or Evolution?}
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The publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin’s \textit{On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection; or, the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life} (usually referred to as \textit{On the Origin of Species}) provoked responses from within Catholicism and conservative Protestantism. Pope Pius IX declared evolution a heresy in 1870 (though in 1996, in a message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, Pope John Paul II observed that, while the occurrence of evolution is more than a theory, “theories of evolution which, in accordance with the philosophies inspiring them, consider the mind as emerging from the forces of living matter . . . are incompatible with the truth about man”). In 1874 Princeton theologian Charles Hodge, a Presbyterian, asked, “What is Darwinism?” and answered, “It is atheism.”

Historian George Marsden, writing in 1984, found that, twenty years after the publication of \textit{On the Origin of Species}, Bible-believing American Protestant scientists and even conservative theologians did not make opposition to all forms of evolution a necessary test of faith. But reconciliationist positions began to lose favor in the evangelical community after the Scopes “monkey trial,” July 10–21, 1925, in Dayton, Tennessee.

Many fundamentalists retreated to a Christian subculture. Bible schools flourished, and many taught human origins from a perspective dubbed “creation-science.”

Contemporary defenders include John D. Morris of the Institute for Creation Research (ICR) in El Cajon, California, who wrote in a 1992 newsletter article that evolution “embraces strict naturalism, an anti-God philosophy, and results in a denial of the major doctrines of Scripture. . . . If no supernatural agency has been at work throughout history, then creation is dead. But if evolutionists even allow a spark of supernatural design in history, then evolution is dead, for evolution necessarily relies on solely natural processes.”

In the 1990s, three controversial books were published, spearheading the intelligent design movement. \textit{Intelligent design} is the idea that a complete explanation of the universe requires positing an intelligent designer. The three books were: \textit{Darwin on Trial} (first published in 1991) by Phillip E. Johnson (a graduate of Harvard University who has taught law at University of California, Berkeley, for more than three decades); \textit{Darwin’s Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution} (1996) by Lehigh University biochemist Michael J. Behe; and \textit{Intelligent Design: The Bridge between Science and Theology} (1999) by William A. Dembski, holder of a doctorate in mathematics from the University of Chicago and a doctorate in
philosophy from the University of Illinois at Chicago, whose more technical treatment of the subject had been published by Cambridge University Press the year before.

Johnson, Behe, and Dembski, leaders of the intelligent design movement, rejected the “young earth” position of ICR in favor of a more academically engaged critique of Darwinian foundations. In an essay published in the *New York Times* in 1996, Behe wrote that the theory of evolution founders in explaining cellular development. “Many cellular systems are what I term ‘irreducibly complex.’ That means the system needs several components before it can work properly. An everyday example of irreducible complexity is a mousetrap, built of several pieces (platform, hammer, spring and so on). Such a system probably cannot be put together in a Darwinian manner, gradually improving its function. You can’t catch a mouse with just the platform and then catch a few more by adding the spring. All the pieces have to be in place before you catch any mice.”

For Dembski, irreducible complexity is a specific case of a more general understanding of how to detect intelligent, as opposed to mere natural, causes: “Whenever we infer design, we must establish three things: contingency, complexity and specification. Contingency ensures that the object in question is not the result of an automatic and therefore unintelligent process that had no choice in its production. Complexity ensures that the object is not so simple that it can readily be explained by chance. Finally, specification ensures that the object exhibits the type of pattern characteristic of intelligence.”

Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, in *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986) and other works, responded that any appearance of purpose in biological systems is merely the result of time and chance. “To ‘tame’ chance means to break down the very improbable into less improbable small components arranged in series. No matter how improbable it is that an X could have arisen from a Y in a single step, it is always possible to conceive of a series of infinitesimally graded intermediates between them. However improbable a large-scale change may be, smaller changes are less improbable.”

Johnson, focused on a critique of evolutionism’s materialist assumptions, what he called “methodological naturalism.” The chemical or physical laws of nature, he wrote, “produce simple repetitive order, and chance produces meaningless disorder. When combined, law and chance work against each other to prevent the emergence of a meaningful sequence. In all human experience, only intelligent agency can write an encyclopedia or computer program.” Dawkins’s blind watchmaker (natural selection and mutation) cannot, Johnson insisted, create complex new genetic information. Johnson also presented a version of the claim that materialism is self-refuting. (The argument was popularized by the British writer C. S. Lewis and adopted by the American analytic philosopher Alvin Plantinga.) Johnson asked sarcastically, “If unthinking matter causes the thoughts the materialists don’t like, then what causes the thoughts they do like?” This takes us back to the problem of explanation. The materialist must explain human reason, and indeed the existence of anything at all, in terms of “unthinking matter.” If, for Dawkins, the appearance of purpose in evolution is merely an illusion, then what is the status of purposive human reason? If that, too, is an illusion, then there is no good reason to accept the argument. If it is not illusion, how can Dawkins explain the rise of genuine purpose or meaning from a purposeless flow of cause and effect?
In recent years, proponents of intelligent design and creationism have won and lost battles to make inroads in public education. Most notably, in 1999, the Kansas Board of Education, reflecting the views of its conservative majority, wrote new state science standards that ushered creationism back into mainstream debate. The board mandated the teaching of so-called microevolution (changes within species) as illustrative of the working of natural selection. But the teaching of macroevolution (the origin of new organs or species) was made optional at the district level. In the revised document, science was no longer defined as human activity that seeks natural explanations but as one that seeks logical explanations.

Two years later, however, in 2001, after an election that changed its composition, the Kansas school board reversed its earlier course. Evolution was reinstated “as a broad, unifying theoretical framework in biology.” But then elections in 2002 and 2004 changed the board again, and it again became more conservative. In 2005, the board approved science standards declaring that basic Darwinian theory is challenged by fossil evidence and molecular biology and rewrote the definition of science so that it was no longer limited to the search for natural explanations. The vote was regarded as a victory for advocates of intelligent design. But in the summer of 2006, when five of the ten seats on the board were up for election in the state’s primary election, the conservatives who had approved the standards again lost control of the Board of Education.

In another famous school board case, in October 2004 the board of the Dover (Pennsylvania) Area School District, about twenty-five miles from Philadelphia, became the first in the nation to require high school science teachers to teach the concept of intelligent design as an alternative to the theory of evolution. The next month, however, voters in the district ousted the eight school board members who were up for reelection. And right after that, in December, eleven parents filed a lawsuit challenging the policy. U.S. District Judge John Jones, an appointee of President George W. Bush (who backed the teaching of intelligent design) ruled that teaching intelligent design would violate the constitutional separation of church and state. Intelligent design, Jones held, is an untestable hypothesis grounded in religion and has no place in the science classroom. He described the school board’s decision as “breathtaking inanity” and those on the board who supported it as an “ill-informed faction.”

In 2009, the Texas Board of Education made changes in the language in the state’s curriculum that are thought to make it harder for creationism to be taught in Texas public schools.

God, the Fine-Tuner

In a recent book, Martin Rees, the Royal Astronomer of England, identifies six numbers that are a “recipe for the universe.” , for example, represents the strength of the forces that hold atoms together divided by the force of gravity between them. This and the other five numbers have an unusual property: they are precisely tuned for our universe to be. If any of them were the teensiest bit different, the universe could not have existed and observers would not be here to talk about them.

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On the face of it, it might seem unlikely that such remarkable fine-tuning could happen simply by chance. It is as if the six fundamental control knobs of the universe were set exactly right for stars, life, and observers to evolve. The knobs seem to have been set for our eventual arrival. The best explanation of this fine-tuning, according to some philosophers and scientists, is that the universe was created by a cosmic intelligence.

At the end of this chapter is an excerpt from Richard Dawkins’s book, *The God Delusion*, in which Dawkins considers this fine-tuning argument.

**Who Needs Reasons for Believing in God?**

For a belief to be rational, must we have supporting evidence for its truth? Maybe not, if the belief is a **basic belief**, a belief that is not inferred from evidence or from other beliefs but rather itself provides the rational foundation from which other beliefs are derived. For example, it seems rational to believe that there is an external world, that the past existed, and that other people have minds. Yet do we believe these things on the basis of evidence? On the contrary (it might be argued), we accept these beliefs just straight out and without evidence. Further, it is because we accept these things that we can even talk of evidence and rational inference in the first place. For example, unless we assume there was a past, the “evidence” we have that the car *now* has a flat because it ran over a nail does not make any sense—because without a past, there was no past for the car to have done anything.

Contemporary analytic philosopher **Alvin Plantinga** [PLAN-tin-guh] (1932– ) has argued that the theist may accept the belief in God as a “basic belief,” a belief that it is rational to hold without supporting evidence and that is foundational for the entire system of the theist’s beliefs. Rationally speaking, the theist has the right, Plantinga suggests, to **start from** belief in God. The belief need not be an **end product** of justification and inference.

Interested? An easy-to-read essay by Plantinga titled “Advice to Christian Philosophers” may be found in the journal *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 3 (July 1984), pp. 253–271.

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**SELECTION 13.1**

**Proslogion***

[This passage is St. Anselm’s famous ontological argument.]

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Lord, who gives understanding to faith give to me as much as you deem suitable, that I may understand that You are as we believe You to be, and that You are what we believe You to be. Now we believe that You are something than which nothing greater can be thought. But perhaps there is no such nature since “the fool hath said in his heart: There is no
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SELECTION 13.2

Summa Theologica*

[St. Thomas Aquinas]

The existence of God can be proved in five ways. The first and more manifest way is the argument from motion. It is certain, and evident to our senses, that in the world some things are in motion. Now whatever is moved is moved by another, for nothing can be moved except it is in potentiality to that towards which it is moved; whereas a thing moves inasmuch as it is in act. For motion is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality. But nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality, except by something in a state of actuality. Thus that which is actually hot, as fire, makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot, and thereby moves and changes it. Now it is not possible that the same thing should be exist also in reality which is greater. So if that than which a greater cannot be thought exists merely in the mind, that very same thing than which a greater cannot be thought is something than which a greater can be thought. But surely this cannot be. Hence, without doubt, something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the mind and in reality.

Indeed, it exists so truly that it cannot be thought not to be. For something can be thought to exist which cannot be thought not to exist, which is greater than what can be thought not to exist. So, if that than which a greater cannot be thought can be thought not to exist, that very thing than which a greater cannot be thought, is not that than which a greater cannot be thought; which is impossible. So there exists so truly something than which a greater cannot be thought that it cannot be thought not to exist.

You are that very thing, Lord our God.
causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several, or one only. Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate cause. But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and runs thus. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to be corrupted, and consequently, it is possible for them to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which can not-be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything can not-be, then at one time there was nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist begins to exist only through something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence—which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary. But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes. Therefore we cannot but admit the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.

The fourth way is taken from the gradation to be found in things. Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble, and the like. But more and less are predicated of different things according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum, as a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest; so that there is something which is truest, something best, something noblest, and consequently, something which is most being, for those things that are greatest in truth are greatest in being. . . . Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus, as fire, which is the maximum of heat, is the cause of all hot things, as is said in the same book. Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world. We see that things which lack knowledge, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that they achieve their end, not fortuitously, but designedly. Now whatever lacks knowledge cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is directed by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.

SELECTION 13.3

Monadology*

[Leibniz explains the principle of sufficient reason and then uses the principle to prove that God exists.]

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exist, no statement correct, unless there were
a sufficient reason why it was thus and not
otherwise—even though those reasons will usually
not be knowable by us....

33. There are also two kinds of truth: those of
reasoning, and those of fact. Truths of reasoning are
necessary, and their opposite is impossible; those of
fact are contingent, and their opposite is possible.
When a truth is necessary, the reason for it can be
found by analysis, by resolving it into simpler
ideas and truths until we arrive at the basic ones....

34. Thus mathematicians use analysis to reduce
speculative theorems and practical canons to defi-
nitions, axioms, and postulates.

35. And finally there are the simple ideas, which
cannot be given a definition; and there are axioms
and postulates—in a word, basic principles, which
can never be proved, but which also have no need of
proof: these are identical propositions, the opposite of
which contains an explicit contradiction.

36. But a sufficient reason must also be found for
contingent truths, or truths of fact—for the series
of things which fills the universe of created things, that
is. Here the resolution into particular reasons could
be continued endlessly, because of the immense
variety of things in nature, and because of the
infinite divisibility of bodies. There are an infinite
number of shapes and of motions, present and past,
which play a part in the efficient cause of my present
writing; and there are an infinite number of tiny
inclinations and dispositions of my soul, present and
past, which play a part in its final cause....

37. But since all this detail only involves other
prior and more detailed contingencies, each one of
which also stands in need of a similar analysis in
order to give an explanation of it, we are no further
forward: the sufficient or final reason must lie outside
the succession or series in this detailed specification
of contingencies, however infinite it may be.

38. And that is why the final reason for things
must be in a necessary substance, in which the
detailed specification of changes is contained only
eminently, as in their source; and that is what we call
God....

39. Now, since this substance is a sufficient
reason for all this detail, which is interconnected
throughout, there is only one God, and that God is
enough.

40. We can also see that this supreme substance,
which is unique, universal, and necessary (because
there is nothing outside it which is independent
of it, and it is a straightforward consequence of
possible being), must be incapable of limits, and
must contain fully as much reality as is possible.

41. From which it follows that God is absolutely
perfect, since perfection is nothing but the total
amount of positive reality taken in the precise sense,
leaving aside the limitations or boundaries of things
that have them. And there, in something which has
no boundaries—in God, that is—perfection is
absolutely infinite....

42. It also follows that created things have their
perfections from the influence of God, but that they
have their imperfections from their own natures,
which are necessarily bounded. For that is what
distinguishes them from God.... This original
imperfection of created things is shown by the
natural inertia of bodies....

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**SELECTION 13.4**

**The Gay Science***

*Editor’s footnotes have been omitted. From *The Gay Science*
by Friedrich Nietzsche, translated by Walter Kaufmann,
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**The Meaning of Our Cheerfulness**
The greatest recent event—that “God is dead,”
that the belief in the Christian god has become
unbelievable—is already beginning to cast its first
shadows over Europe. For the few at least, whose
eye—the suspicion in whose eyes is strong and
subtle enough for this spectacle, some sun seems
to have set and some ancient and profound trust has been turned into doubt; to them our old world must appear daily more like evening, more mistrustful, stranger, “older.” But in the main one may say: The event itself is far too great, too distant, too remote from the multitude’s capacity for comprehension even for the tidings of it to be thought of as having arrived as yet. Much less may one suppose that many people know as yet what this event really means—and how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped by it, grown into it; for example, the whole of our European morality. This long plenitude and sequence of breakdown, destruction, ruin, and cataclysm that is now impending—who could guess enough of it today to be compelled to play the teacher and advance proclaimer of this monstrous logic of terror, the prophet of a gloom and an eclipse of the sun whose like has probably never yet occurred on earth?

Even we born guessers of riddles who are, as it were, waiting on the mountains, posted between today and tomorrow, stretched in the contradiction between today and tomorrow, we firstlings and premature births of the coming century, to whom the shadows that must soon envelop Europe really should have appeared by now—why is it that even we look forward to the approaching gloom without any real sense of involvement and above all without any worry and fear for ourselves? Are we perhaps still too much under the impression of the initial consequences of this event—and these initial consequences, the consequences for ourselves, are quite the opposite of what one might perhaps expect: They are not at all sad and gloomy but rather like a new and scarcely describable kind of light, happiness, relief, exhilaration, encouragement, dawn.

Indeed, we philosophers and “free spirits” feel, when we hear the news that “the old god is dead,” as if a new dawn shone on us; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, premonitions, expectation. At long last the horizon appears free to us again, even if it should not be bright; at long last our ships may venture out again, venture out to face any danger; all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again; the sea, our sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never yet been such an “open sea.”

SELECTION 13.5

Theology and Falsification*

[In this famous selection, British philosopher Antony Flew challenges those who believe in God to specify what they would accept as evidence that God does not exist or does not love us. Why should a believer try to do this? Flew explains why. In recent years, Flew has expressed more sympathy toward deism.]

Let us begin with a parable. It is a parable developed from a tale told by John Wisdom in his haunting and revelatory article “Gods.” Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, “Some gardener must tend this plot.” The other disagrees, “There is no gardener.” So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. “But perhaps he is an invisible gardener.” So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H. G. Wells’s “invisible man” could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. “But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.” At last the
Sceptic despairs, “But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?”

In this parable we can see how what starts as an assertion, that something exists or that there is some analogy between certain complexes of phenomena, may be reduced step by step to an altogether different status, to an expression perhaps of a “picture preference.” The Sceptic says there is no gardener. The Believer says there is a gardener (but invisible, etc.). One man talks about sexual behavior. Another man prefers to talk of Aphrodite (but knows that there is not really a superhuman person additional to, and somehow responsible for, all sexual phenomena). The process of qualification may be checked at any point before the original assertion is completely withdrawn and something of that first assertion will remain (Tautology). Mr. Wells’s invisible man could not, admittedly, be seen, but in all other respects he was a man like the rest of us. But though the process of qualification may be, and of course usually is, checked in time, it is not always judiciously so halted. Someone may dissipate his assertion completely without noticing that he has done so. A fine brash hypothesis may thus be killed by inches, the death by a thousand qualifications.

And in this, it seems to me, lies the peculiar danger, the endemic evil, of theological utterance. “Take such utterances as “God has a plan,” “God created the world,” “God loves us as a father loves his children.” They look at first sight very much like assertions, vast cosmological assertions. Of course, this is no sure sign that they either are, or are intended to be, assertions. But let us confine ourselves to the cases where those who utter such sentences intend them to express assertions. (Merely remarking parenthetically that those who intend or interpret such utterances as crypto-commands, expressions of wishes, disguised ejaculations, concealed ethics, or as anything else but assertions, are unlikely to succeed in making them either properly orthodox or practically effective.)

Now to assert that such and such is the case is necessarily equivalent to denying that such and such is not the case. Suppose then that we are in doubt as to what someone who gives vent to an utterance is asserting, or suppose that, more radically, we are sceptical as to whether he is really asserting anything at all, one way of trying to understand (or perhaps it will be to expose) his utterance is to attempt to find what he would regard as counting against, or as being incompatible with, its truth. For if the utterance is indeed an assertion, it will necessarily be equivalent to a denial of the negation of that assertion. And anything which would count against the assertion, or which would induce the speaker to withdraw it and to admit that it had been mistaken, must be part of (or the whole of) the meaning of the negation of that assertion. And to know the meaning of the negation of an assertion is, as near as makes no matter, to know the meaning of that assertion. And if there is nothing which a putative assertion denies then there is nothing which it asserts either: and so it is not really an assertion. When the Sceptic in the parable asked the Believer, “Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?” he was suggesting that the Believer’s earlier statement had been so eroded by qualification that it was no longer an assertion at all.

Now it often seems to people who are not religious as if there was no conceivable event or series of events the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people to be a sufficient reason for conceding “There wasn’t a God after all” or “God does not really love us then.” Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children. We are reassured. But then we see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his Heavenly Father reveals no obvious sign of concern. Some qualification is made—God’s love is “not a merely human love” or it is “an inscrutable love,” perhaps—and we realize that such sufferings are quite compatible with the truth of the assertion that “God loves us as a father (but, of course . . .).” We are reassured again. But then perhaps we ask: what is this assurance of God’s (appropriately qualified) love worth, what is this apparent guarantee really a guarantee against? Just what would have to happen not merely (morally and wrongly) to tempt but also (logically and rightly) to entitle us to say “God does not love us” or even “God does not exist?” I therefore put to the succeeding symposiasts the simple central question: “What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or of the existence of, God?”
[How is “God” an instrument of oppression? How do religious texts dehumanize women? Mary Daly offers her arguments in Beyond God the Father, from which this brief passage is excerpted.]

The biblical and popular image of God as a great patriarch in heaven, rewarding and punishing according to his mysterious and seemingly arbitrary will, has dominated the imagination of millions over thousands of years. The symbol of the Father God, spawned in the human imagination and sustained as plausible by patriarchy, has in turn rendered service to this type of society by making its mechanisms for the oppression of women appear right and fitting. If God in “his” heaven is a father ruling “his” people, then it is in the “nature” of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated.

Within this context a mystification of roles takes place: the husband dominating his wife represents God “himself.” The images and values of a given society have been projected into the realm of dogmas and “Articles of Faith,” and these in turn justify the social structures which have given rise to them and which sustain their plausibility. The belief system becomes hardened and objectified, seeming to have an unchangeable independent existence and validity of its own. It resists social change that would rob it of its plausibility. Despite the vicious circle, however, change can occur in society, and ideologies can die, though they die hard.

As the women’s movement begins to have its effect upon the fabric of society, transforming it from patriarchy into something that never existed before—into a diarchal situation that is radically new—it can become the greatest single challenge to the major religions of the world, Western and Eastern. Beliefs and values that have held sway for thousands of years will be questioned as never before. This revolution may well be also the greatest single hope for survival of spiritual consciousness on this planet. . . .

Beyond the Inadequate God

The various theologies that hypostatize transcendence, that is, those which in one way or another objectify “God” as a being, thereby attempt in a self-contradictory way to envisage transcendent reality as finite. “God” then functions to legitimize the existing social, economic, and political status quo, in which women and other victimized groups are subordinate.

“God” can be used oppressively against women in a number of ways. First, it occurs in an overt manner when theologians proclaim women’s subordination to be God’s will. This of course has been done throughout the centuries, and residues remain in varying degrees of subtlety and explicitness in the writings of twentieth-century thinkers such as Barth, Bonhoeffer, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Teilhard de Chardin.

Second, even in the absence of such explicitly oppressive justification, the phenomenon is present when one-sex symbolism for God and for the human relationship to God is used. The following passage illustrates the point:

To believe that God is Father is to become aware of oneself not as a stranger, not as an outsider or an alienated person, but as a son who belongs or a person appointed to a marvelous destiny, which he shares with the whole community. To believe that God is Father means to be able to say “we” in regard to all men.

A woman whose consciousness has been aroused can say that such language makes her aware of herself as a stranger, as an outsider, as an alienated person, but as a son who belongs or who belongs to a marvelous destiny. She cannot belong to this without assenting to her own lobotomy.

Third, even when the basic assumptions of God-language appear to be nonsexist, and when language is somewhat purified of fixation upon maleness, it is damaging and implicitly compatible with sexism if it encourages detachment from the
reality of the human struggle against oppression in its concrete manifestations. That is, the lack of explicit relevance of intellec­tion to the fact of oppression in its precise forms, such as sexual hierarchy, is itself oppressive. This is the case when theologians write long treatises on creative hope, political theology, or revolution without any specific acknowledgment of or application to the problem of sexism or other specific forms of injustice. Such irrelevance is conspicuous in the major works of “theologians of hope” such as Moltmann, Pannenberg, and Metz. This is not to say that the vision of creative eschatology is completely irrelevant, but that it lacks specific grounding in the concrete experiences of the oppressed. The theorizing then has a quality of unreality. Perhaps an obvious reason for this is that the theologians themselves have not shared in the experience of oppression and therefore write from the privileged distance of those who have at best a “knowledge about” the subject.

Women’s Liberation and Revelatory Courage

I have already indicated that it would be unrealistic to dismiss the fact that the symbolic and linguistic instruments for communication—which include essentially the whole theological tradition in world religions—have been formulated by males under the conditions of patriarchy. It is therefore inherent in these symbolic and linguistic structures that they serve the purposes of patriarchal social arrangements. Even the usual and accepted means of theological dissent have been restricted in such a way that only some questions have been allowed to arise. Many questions that are of burning importance to women now simply have not occurred in the past (and to a large extent in the present) to those with “credentials” to do theology. Others may have been voiced timidly but quickly squelched as stupid, irrelevant, or naïve. Therefore, attempts by women theologians now merely to “up-date” or to reform theology within acceptable patterns of questioning are not likely to get very far.

Moreover, within the context of the prevailing social climate it has been possible for scholars to be aware of the most crudely dehumanizing texts concerning women in the writings of religious “authorities” and theologians—from Augustine to Aquinas, to Luther, to Knox, to Barth—and at the same time to treat their unverified opinions on far more imponderable matters with utmost reverence and respect. That is, the blatant misogyny of these men has not been the occasion of a serious credibility gap even for those who have disagreed on this “point.” It has simply been ignored or dismissed as trivial. By contrast, in the emerging consciousness of women this context is beginning to be perceived in its full significance and as deeply relevant to the worldview in which such “authorities” have seen other seemingly unrelated subjects, such as the problem of God. Hence the present awakening of the hitherto powerless sex demands an explosion of creative imagination that can withstand the disapproval of orthodoxy and overreach the boundaries cherished by conventional minds.

**SELECTION 13.7**

**The God Delusion***

*British science expositor Richard Dawkins here considers the “Anthropic Principle,” according to which, because observers of the universe exist, the universe had to be such as to permit their eventual emergence.*

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**The Anthropic Principle: Cosmological Version**

We live not only on a friendly planet but also in a friendly universe. It follows from the fact of our existence that the laws of physics must be friendly enough to allow life to arise. It is no accident that when we look at the night sky we see stars, for stars are a necessary prerequisite for the existence of most of the chemical elements, and without chemistry...
there could be no life. Physicists have calculated that, if the laws and constants of physics had been even slightly different, the universe would have developed in such a way that life would have been impossible. Different physicists put it in different ways, but the conclusion is always much the same. Martin Rees, in *Just Six Numbers*, lists six fundamental constants, which are believed to hold all around the universe. Each of these six numbers is finely tuned in the sense that, if it were slightly different, the universe would be comprehensively different and presumably unfriendly to life.

I won’t go through the rest of Rees’s six numbers. The bottom line for each of them is the same. The actual number sits in a Goldilocks band of values outside which life would not have been possible. How should we respond to this? Yet again, we have the theist’s answer on the one hand, and the anthropic answer on the other. The theist says that God, when setting up the universe, tuned the fundamental constants of the universe so that each one lay in its Goldilocks zone for the production of life. It is as though God had six knobs that he could twiddle, and he carefully tuned each knob to its Goldilocks value. As ever, the theist’s answer is deeply unsatisfying, because it leaves the existence of God unexplained. A God capable of calculating the Goldilocks values for the six numbers would have to be at least as improbable as the finely tuned combination of numbers itself, and that’s very improbable indeed. This is exactly the premise of the whole discussion we are having. It follows that the theist’s answer has utterly failed to make any headway towards solving the problem at hand. I see no alternative but to dismiss it, while at the same time marvelling at the number of people who can’t see the problem and seem genuinely satisfied by the ‘Divine Knob-Twiddler’ argument.

Hard-nosed physicists say that the six knobs were never free to vary in the first place. When we finally reach the long-hoped-for Theory of Everything, we shall see that the six key numbers depend upon each other, or on something else as yet unknown, in ways that we today cannot imagine. The six numbers may turn out to be no freer to vary than is the ratio of a circle’s circumference to its diameter. It will turn out that there is only one way for a universe to be. Far from God being needed to twiddle six knobs, there are no knobs to twiddle.

Other physicists (Martin Rees himself would be an example) find this unsatisfying, and I think I agree with them. It is indeed perfectly plausible that there is only one way for a universe to be. But why did that one way have to be such a set-up for our eventual evolution? Why did it have to be the kind of universe which seems almost as if, in the words of the theoretical physicist Freeman Dyson, it ‘must have known we were coming’? The philosopher John Leslie uses the analogy of a man sentenced to death by firing squad. It is just possible that all ten men of the firing squad will miss their victim. With hindsight, the survivor who finds himself in a position to reflect upon his luck can cheerfully say, ‘Well, obviously they all missed, or I wouldn’t be here thinking about it.’ But he could still, forgivably, wonder why they all missed, and toy with the hypothesis that they were bribed, or drunk.

This objection can be answered by the suggestion, which Martin Rees himself supports, that there are many universes, co-existing like bubbles of foam, in a ‘multiverse’ (or ‘megaverse’, as Leonard Susskind prefers to call it). The laws and constants of any one universe, such as our observable universe, are by-laws. The multiverse as a whole has a plethora of alternative sets of by-laws. The anthropic principle kicks in to explain that we have to be in one of those universes (presumably a minority) whose by-laws happened to be propitious to our eventual evolution and hence contemplation of the problem.

It is tempting to think (and many have succumbed) that to postulate a plethora of universes is a profligate luxury which should not be allowed. If

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1 The physicist Victor Stenger (in *God, the Failed Hypothesis*) dissents from this consensus, and is unpersuaded that the physical laws and constants are particularly friendly to life. Nevertheless, I shall bend over backwards to accept the ‘friendly universe’ consensus, in order to show that, in any case, it cannot be used to support theism.

2 I say ‘presumably,’ partly because we don’t know how different alien forms of life might be, and partly because it is possible that we make a mistake if we consider only the consequences of changing one constant at a time. Could there be other combinations of values of the six numbers which would turn out to be friendly to life, in ways that we do not discover if we consider them only one at a time? Nevertheless, I shall proceed, for simplicity, as though we really do have a big problem to explain in the apparent fine-tuning of the fundamental constants.

3 Susskind (2006) gives a splendid advocacy of the anthropic principle in the megaverse. He says the idea is hated by most physicists. I can’t understand why. I think it is beautiful— perhaps because my consciousness has been raised by Darwin.
Given that the number of particles of any one type, say electrons, is large, Swinburne thinks it too much of a coincidence that so many should have the same properties. One electron, he could stomach. But billions and billions of electrons, *all with the same properties*, that is what really excites his incredulity. For him it would be simpler, more natural, less demanding of explanation, if all electrons were different from each other. Worse, no one electron should naturally retain its properties for more than an instant at a time; each should change capriciously, haphazardly and fleetingly from moment to moment. That is Swinburne’s view of the simple, native state of affairs. Anything more uniform (what you or I would call more simple) requires a special explanation. ‘It is only because electrons and bits of copper and all other material objects have the same powers in the twentieth century as they did in the nineteenth century that things are as they are now.’

Enter God. God comes to the rescue by deliberately and continuously sustaining the properties of all those billions of electrons and bits of copper, and neutralizing their otherwise ingrained inclination to wild and erratic fluctuation. That is why when you’ve seen one electron you’ve seen them all; that is why bits of copper all behave like bits of copper, and that is why each electron and each bit of copper stays the same as itself from microsecond to microsecond and from century to century. It is because God constantly keeps a finger on each and every particle, curbing its reckless excesses and whipping it into line with its colleagues to keep them all the same.

But how can Swinburne possibly maintain that this hypothesis of God simultaneously keeping a gazillion fingers on wayward electrons is a *simple* hypothesis? It is, of course, precisely the opposite of simple. Swinburne pulls off the trick to his own satisfaction by a breathtaking piece of intellectual *chutzpah*. He asserts, without justification, that God is only a *single* substance. What brilliant economy of explanatory causes, compared with all those gigazillions of independent electrons all just happening to be the same! . . .

. . . What could be simpler than that?

Well, actually, almost everything. A God capable of continuously monitoring and controlling the individual status of every particle in the universe *cannot* be simple. His existence is going to need a mammoth explanation in its own right. Worse (from the point of view of simplicity), other corners of God’s

we are going to permit the extravagance of a multiverse, so the argument runs, we might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb and allow a God. Aren’t they both equally uparisons ad hoc hypotheses, and equally unsatisfactory? People who think that have not had their consciousness raised by natural selection. The key difference between the genuinely extravagant God hypothesis and the apparently extravagant multiverse hypothesis is one of statistical improbability. The multiverse, for all that it is extravagant, is simple. God, or any intelligent, decision-taking, calculating agent, would have to be highly improbable in the very same statistical sense as the entities he is supposed to explain. The multiverse may seem extravagant in sheer number of universes. But if each one of those universes is simple in its fundamental laws, we are still not postulating anything highly improbable. The very opposite has to be said of any kind of intelligence.

Some physicists are known to be religious (Russell Stannard and the Reverend John Polkinghorne are the two British examples I have mentioned). Predictably, they seize upon the improbability of the physical constants all being tuned in their more or less narrow Goldilocks zones, and suggest that there must be a cosmic intelligence who deliberately did the tuning. I have already dismissed all such suggestions as raising bigger problems than they solve. But what attempts have theists made to reply? How do they cope with the argument that any God capable of designing a universe, carefully and foresightfully tuned to lead to our evolution, must be a supremely complex and improbable entity who needs an even bigger explanation than the one he is supposed to provide?

The theologian Richard Swinburne, as we have learned to expect, thinks he has an answer to this problem, and he expounds it in his book *Is There a God?* He begins by showing that his heart is in the right place by convincingly demonstrating why we should always prefer the simplest hypothesis that fits the facts. Science explains complex things in terms of the interactions of simpler things, ultimately the interactions of fundamental particles. I (and I dare say you) think it a beautifully simple idea that all things are made of fundamental particles which, although exceedingly numerous, are drawn from a small, finite set of *types* of particle. If we are sceptical, it is likely to be because we think the idea too simple. But for Swinburne it is not simple at all, quite the reverse.
giant consciousness are simultaneously preoccupied with the doings and emotions and prayers of every single human being—and whatever intelligent aliens there might be on other planets in this and 100 billion other galaxies. He even, according to Swinburne, has to decide continuously not to intervene miraculously to save us when we get cancer. That would never do, for, ‘If God answered most prayers for a relative to recover from cancer, then cancer would no longer be a problem for humans to solve.’ And then what would we find to do with our time? Not all theologians go as far as Swinburne. Nevertheless, the remarkable suggestion that the God Hypothesis is simple can be found in other modern theological writings. Keith Ward, then Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, was very clear on the matter in his 1996 book God, Chance and Necessity:

As a matter of fact, the theist would claim that God is a very elegant, economical and fruitful explanation for the existence of the universe. It is economical because it attributes the existence and nature of absolutely everything in the universe to just one being, an ultimate cause which assigns a reason for the existence of everything, including itself. It is elegant because from one key idea—the idea of the most perfect possible being—the whole nature of God and the existence of the universe can be intelligibly explicated.

Like Swinburne, Ward mistakes what it means to explain something, and he also seems not to understand what it means to say of something that it is simple. I am not clear whether Ward really thinks God is simple, or whether the above passage represented a temporary ‘for the sake of argument’ exercise. Sir John Polkinghorne, in Science and Christian Belief, quotes Ward’s earlier criticism of the thought of Thomas Aquinas: ‘Its basic error is in supposing that God is logically simple—simple not just in the sense that his being is indivisible, but in the much stronger sense that what is true of any part of God is true of the whole. It is quite coherent, however, to suppose that God, while indivisible, is internally complex.’ Ward gets it right here. Indeed, the biologist Julian Huxley, in 1912, defined complexity in terms of ‘heterogeneity of parts,’ by which he meant a particular kind of functional indivisibility.

Elsewhere, Ward gives evidence of the difficulty the theological mind has in grasping where the complexity of life comes from. He quotes another theologian-scientist, the biochemist Arthur Peacocke (the third member of my trio of British religious scientists), as postulating the existence in living matter of a ‘propensity for increased complexity.’ Ward characterizes this as ‘some inherent weighting of evolutionary change which favours complexity.’ He goes on to suggest that such a bias ‘might be some weighting of the mutational process, to ensure that more complex mutations occurred.’ Ward is sceptical of this, as well he should be. The evolutionary drive towards complexity comes, in those lineages where it comes at all, not from any inherent propensity for increased complexity, and not from biased mutation. It comes from natural selection: the process which, as far as we know, is the only process ultimately capable of generating complexity out of simplicity. The theory of natural selection is genuinely simple. So is the origin from which it starts. That which it explains, on the other hand, is complex almost beyond telling: more complex than anything we can imagine, save a God capable of designing it.

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CHECKLIST

To help you review, here is a checklist of the key philosophers and terms and concepts of this chapter. The brief descriptive sentences summarize the philosophers’ leading ideas. Keep in mind that some of these summary statements are oversimplifications of complex positions.

**Philosophers**

- **St. Anselm** was the author of the ontological argument. 398
- **St. Thomas Aquinas** was the author of the Five Ways of proving God’s existence. 400
- **Mary Daly** was a contemporary feminist analyst/critic of traditional conceptions of God. 425
- **René Descartes** offered three proofs of God, including a streamlined version of the ontological argument. 407
- **Gaunilo**, a Benedictine monk, was a contemporary of Anselm and a critic of the ontological argument. 399
• **David Hume**, a religious skeptic, provided classic criticisms of the teleological and cosmological arguments. 413

• **William James** held that it is rationally justifiable to yield to your hope that a God exists. 421

• **Julian of Norwich**, an English anchoress and mystic, argued that we are in God and God is in us. We learn about God by learning about ourselves. 404

• **Immanuel Kant** criticized the ontological, cosmological, and teleological proofs of God and thought that God’s existence cannot be proved, yet he believed that God’s existence must be assumed by the rational, moral individual. 416

• **Søren Kierkegaard** held that God is beyond reason’s grasp, that truth is subjective, and that salvation can be attained only through a leap of faith to Christianity. 419

• **Gottfried Wilhelm, Baron von Leibniz**, proposed one of the most effective versions of the cosmological argument. 410

• **Friedrich Nietzsche** believed that the masses are ruled by a slave morality inculcated by religion, science, and philosophy. His statement “God is dead” meant that there is no rational order, not that people do not believe in God. 420

• **Alvin Plantinga** holds that theists may accept the belief in God as a “basic belief,” one that is rational to hold without supporting evidence and that is a foundation for the entire system of the theists’ beliefs. 431

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REVIEW

1. Explain in your own words Anselm’s two ontological proofs of God.

2. What is a *reductio* proof? Give an example other than the one mentioned in the text.

3. Summarize Gaunilo’s objection to Anselm’s argument. What is Anselm’s response to that objection?

4. State, in your own words, Aquinas’s first, second, and third ways. Which of these arguments seems to you the soundest, and why?

5. In your own words, state Julian of Norwich’s arguments for knowing that God exists, for knowing what God’s nature is, and for knowing what God wants of us.

6. Critically evaluate Leibniz’s solution to the problem of evil.

7. In your own words, summarize Hume’s criticisms of the teleological argument. Are these criticisms sound? Why or why not?

8. Explain Hume’s reasoning for remaining skeptical of reports of miracles. Is this reasoning sound?

9. Hume maintained that, if you explain the cause of each event in a series by reference to earlier events in the series, there is no sense in then trying to find a single cause for the entire series of events. Is this right? What does it have to do with the question of God’s existence?

10. Does the world/universe—or something in it—give evidence of divine design? Explain.

11. Does the theory of evolution undermine the design argument?

12. Explain James’s argument for God. Is it a version of Pascal’s wager? Is it sound? Why?

13. Is James correct in saying that you cannot really suspend judgment about God’s existence?

14. Is the question of God’s existence live and momentous, as James says?

15. Which is “better,” to doubt everything that is less than certain or highly probable, or to believe falsehoods?

16. “It is impossible for normal people to believe that free will does not exist. Therefore, it does exist.” Evaluate this remark.
17. “Most people believe in God; therefore, God must exist.” Evaluate this claim.

18. Is the fact that the world is intelligible evidence of divine design?

19. “He died because God called on him.” “The sprinkler stopped working due to fate.” Are these claims equally meaningless? Explain. Is the claim “God exists” verifiable or falsifiable? Are any (other) claims made about God verifiable?

20. Assuming there is scientific evidence that the universe had an absolute beginning, does that evidence also prove the existence of God? Explain.

21. “The features of the world add to the probability that God exists but do not automatically make it probable that God exists.” Explain this remark.

22. Can you logically believe both that God knows everything and that there is free will? Explain the difficulty.

23. How valid as proof of God’s existence are purported eyewitness reports of miracles?

24. “Even assuming that the existence of God explains why there is a world, what explains why there is a God?” Does this question contain a valid criticism of the cosmological proof of God?

25. Would universal acceptance of atheism be morally disastrous for society?

26. In what sense is it legitimate rationally to think of God as male?

**SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS**

Anselm, *Basic Writings*, S. N. Deane, trans. (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1974). This work contains Anselm’s basic writings, though what we have already given you in this text may well be sufficient for most purposes.

Aquinas, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 2 vols., A. C. Pegis, ed. (New York: Random House, 1945). You have read the Five Ways, but you might also wish to consult the sections of *Summa Theologica* that deal with the nature and attributes of God and also part 1, questions 48 and 49, and the first part of part 2, question 79, for the classical Christian discussion of evil.


W. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, Frederick H. Burkhardt, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979). James is among the most pleasurable of philosophers to read.


I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, N. K. Smith, trans. (New York: St. Martin’s, 1965). Check the index under “God.” The most important material is in the chapter “The Ideal of Pure Reason.”


W. Paley, *Natural Theology: Selections*, Frederick Ferré, ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963). There is more to Paley than his famous stone and watch analogy, as the reader of this book will discover.

Alvin Plantinga, “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 3 (July 1984), pp. 253–271. Plantinga sets forth the idea that a belief in God may be a “basic belief.”


B. Russell and F. C. Copleston, “The Existence of God: A Debate between Bertrand Russell and Father F. C. Copleston.” This lively debate touches on several lines of proof of God, and Copleston’s version of Leibniz’s cosmological argument is pretty effectively worded. The debate has been anthologized in many places. See, e.g., E. L. Miller, *Philosophical and Religious Issues: Classical and Contemporary Statements* (Encino, Calif.: Dickenson, 1971).

