

# Introduction: Perfect Being Theism

Antony Eagle

[antonyeagle.org](http://antonyeagle.org)

God, Faith and Infinity » Lecture 1

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# Acknowledgement of Country

*Kurna miyurna, Kurna yarta, ngai tampinhi*

[Kurna people, Kurna country, I recognise]

I wish to acknowledge that these course materials were prepared on the traditional Country of the Kurna people of the Adelaide Plains. I recognise the past and on-going attachment of Kurna people to this country, and respect and value the significance of this relationship for Kurna cultural and spiritual beliefs, both traditional and present in the lives of Kurna people today.

# Overview of the Course

# Philosophical Issues in Religion

- › In a broad sense, **religion** is any kind of cultural practice that invokes **supernatural persons to explain the causal or moral order**, and sees those supernatural persons as **deserving reverence**.
  - › *Supernatural* here means: not explicable by the ordinary laws of nature.
- › So any cultural practices which invoke **spirits or gods**, to **explain natural events**, or as appropriate subjects of **veneration**, will count as religious:
  - › Belief in a divine creator, and related practices around worship in a church/mosque/synagogue, will count;
  - › But so will Aboriginal cultural beliefs: e.g., involving Dreamtime beings who both create and continue to be embodied in landscape features, who/which demand reverent responses from people living today (Napaljarri and Cataldi 1994).
- › What doesn't count?
  - › Thoroughgoing **physicalism**;
  - › Non-physicalist yet naturalistic world-views – e.g., some forms of Buddhism;
  - › Supernaturalism without persons – e.g., accepting the existence of **magic**.

# Our Focus: Topics

- › To keep things manageable, in this course we don't cover religion generally, or cover various **polytheisms** such as those found in the ancient Greek or modern Hindu pantheons.
- › We focus rather on **monotheism in the Abrahamic tradition**: our central questions concern the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
- › The unity of these religions is grounded in two facts:
  1. That all three accept the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) as genuinely inspired by God; and
  2. These three religious traditions, at least in their theologies, broadly share a conception of that God as a **perfect being**.

# Our Focus: Methodology

- › **Methodologically**, we approach religion via **reason**, not revelation. That means our focus is on religious doctrines, evaluating them via reasoned argument.
- › On occasion I quote scripture for illustrative purposes; yet we do not approach our topics via the interpretation or uncritical acceptance of scripture.
- › This separation from the scriptural tradition can make this course look quite cold, or even austere, from the standpoint of members of the religious traditions on which we focus – the rich texture of religious **stories**, **experiences**, and **practices** are largely beyond our remit.
- › Yet there is also scriptural support for this sort of approach:

The Qur'ān does not require that people believe in its teaching blindly. Both believers and unbelievers are required to ponder, reflect and understand through the use of their reason. It warns against blind obedience to one's predecessors (II, 170; V, 105) and repeatedly addresses itself to the understanding of its audience (III, 65; XII, 2). Although the teachings of the Qur'ān are based upon divine authority, they often seek out rational persuasion to bring about faith. (Leaman 2002: 15)

# A Note on the Course and Our Approach

- › The philosophy of religion, for sociological reasons, is one of the whitest and malest parts of **analytic philosophy** (which already tends towards the white and male).
  - › This is evident in literature discussed; while the recent literature is much more diverse, the 'classic' texts in the field are not.
- › Our topical focus on the doctrines of perfect being theism doesn't help here, though it has a number of **advantages**.
  - › The central advantage I see for our approach is that it allows the course to link with classic and current debates in **metaphysics and epistemology**.
  - › A disadvantage is that these greater links with philosophy mean the course has lesser links with the **sociology or ethnography** of religion.
  - › This also means that, in common with almost all analytic philosophy of religion, we prescind from issues of race, sex, and class in the understanding of religious doctrine. Note however that **feminist philosophers of religion** have raised concerns about whether this apolitical facade is sustainable (Frankenberry 2018).

# The Structure of the Course

- › Given that demarcation of our topic, this course amounts to an overview of some of the central concerns of analytic philosophy of religion.
- › Specifically, we are guided by these four questions:
  1. What is God?
  2. Does God exist?
  3. What is God like?
  4. Ought we believe that God exists?

# In this lecture: What is God?

- › We start with a rough characterisation of God as a **perfect being**:

God is that being, perfect in all respects, who created the universe and all its inhabitants, who is all powerful, all knowing, and all good, and who is the main subject of commonly accepted scripture in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

- › I will say more about this conception below; but this is, at least, our **working hypothesis** for most of this course.
- › At the very end, in *Lecture 12*, we return to this topic, and ask: should we take this talk of God **literally**? Or is the scriptural God merely a **metaphor**?

# Part I: Does God Exist?

- › Our focus in this part of the course is on a metaphysical question: **does our world contain among its inhabitants any divine being?**
- › The possible answers are 'yes' and 'no', but the routes to them interest us.
- › **For God:**
  - › *Lecture 2*: arguments that God exists because it is in God's essential nature; or because any cosmos has structural features that require a God.
  - › *Lecture 3*: some specific physical evidence – design or fine-tuning - favours the hypothesis that God exists;
  - › *Lecture 5*: Without God, there would be no moral truth – there is, so God exists.
- › **Against God:**
  - › *Lecture 4*: Horrendous evil exists, so God does not.
  - › *Throughout*: We don't need God to explain the cosmos, or design, or morality – Occam's razor ('accept the simpler hypothesis') thus indicates God does not exist.

## Part II: What is God Like?

- › God is a **perfect being in all respects**.
- › We'll rely on this notion, and an informal understanding of God's perfection, in a number of places – notably in the argument from evil (which relies on God's goodness and power).
- › In this part of the course, however, we try to dig deeper into what it means to be perfect – and here we must confront head on various questions about **infinity**, since to be perfect in these ways often involves having a nature that is unbounded or infinite in extent or scope.
  - › *Lecture 6*: What does it mean to be perfect in ability: to be all-powerful or **omnipotent**?
  - › *Lecture 7*: What does it mean to be perfect in knowledge: to be **omniscient**?
- › We address the questions of whether anything could be omnipotent or omniscient (and thus whether God could be) primarily through some tricky puzzles or **paradoxes** about these 'omni-qualities'.

## Part III: Ought we Believe that God Exists?

- › We turn to religious belief, where questions about the nature and rationality of belief in God turn out to be constrained by, and also have interesting consequence for, general **epistemology** (theory of knowledge).
- › In one sense, if the pro-God arguments from Part I work, we might be convinced that God exists by following a rational argument where it leads. But what if we aren't convinced by those arguments?
  - › *Lecture 8*: Pascal's wager: do we have prudential reason to believe in God?
  - › *Lecture 9*: The ethics of belief: can it right to believe even without conclusive evidence?
  - › *Lecture 10*: Faith: what is faith, and can it be rational?
  - › *Lecture 11*: Religious disagreement: what should we say in the face of pervasive differences in religious doctrine and practice?

# A note on terminology

- › Historically, God has been referred to with **male pronouns** ('He', 'His') and masculine role terms ('Heavenly Father', 'Lord').
- › This terminology may be unfortunate; it appears to derive from the combination of a conception of God as all wise and all powerful, together with historically **gendered assumptions** about what kind of person is wise and powerful.
- › On the other hand, what may be philosophically the most plausible choice of pronoun – **singular 'They'** – is deprecated by many people, and not consistent with usage in most of the texts we are reading. ('It' is worse, since many will regard that as inconsistent with divine personhood.)
- › I thus record here my **reservations** about 'He' as a pronoun for God, but that I will probably go along with the literature in using it.

# God as a Perfect Being

# The Classical Tradition

- › The idea that God is perfect has a long history (Webb 2010: 228).
- › It is one aspect of the **classical** tradition – though not part of the Greeks' popular conception of their own pantheon, which is replete with highly flawed gods. It is rather a philosophical conception of what divinity **should** be, if it is to play certain roles in the theories of ultimate reality that Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics variously adopted:

surely God and the things of God are in every way perfect ... we cannot suppose him to be deficient either in virtue or beauty ... being, as is supposed, the fairest and best that is conceivable, every God remains absolutely and for ever in his own form. (Plato, *Republic*, Book II)

- › These arguments were adapted by early Christians for their own purposes:

as early Christian thinkers looked for philosophical resources to help them develop their concept of God, they had to hand in Greco-Roman philosophy an approach to philosophical theology with no essential ties to pagan religion. (Leftow 2011: 106)

# A Recipe for Knowledge of God

This conception of divinity [as the greatest possible being] does not provide us with much in the way of specifics. But it does provide us with a rule or a recipe for developing a more specific conception of God. Perfect-being theology is thus the attempt to unpack the concept of God by way of this recipe. (Murray and Rea 2008: 8)

- › The classical tradition tried to **stipulate** purely *a priori* that God is a perfect being, and to derive the features of God from that perfection.
  - › Or maybe the stipulation is that ‘God’ is to abbreviate ‘the perfect person who created the universe’.
- › So-called ‘pure’ perfect being theology (Speaks 2018: 73), or **perfect being theism** (PBT), starts from this stipulation, and aims to derive substantive claims about God.
- › PBT needn’t have any connection to a particular **religious tradition**.
  - › Pure PBT can be pursued without mentioning ‘God’ – e.g., as a study into questions of the existence and nature of a **perfect creator**.

# A Scriptural Approach

- › As Leftow points out, however, early Christian thinkers had also a rich **scriptural tradition** to draw on, which expresses in various ways and places the **perfection and unsurpassability of God**:

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:48)

I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. (Job 42:2)

Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit. (Psalms 147:5)

As for God, his way is perfect: The Lord's word is flawless.... (Psalms 18:30)

- › Leftow concludes: 'The claim that God is in all respects perfect does little more than sum up such texts' (Leftow 2011: 108).

# Scriptural Perfect Being Theism

- › This leads Leftow to what he calls **Scriptural Perfect Being Theology**, or S-PBT. (Speaks (2018), ch. 4 calls this ‘impure’ PBT.)
- › The idea is that through the acceptance of scriptural authority, we can access **revealed truth** about the attributes of God:

We begin from the claim, warranted by Scripture, that God is perfect in all respects. Suppose now that Scripture says that God is G, where G is or falls under one of these respects. Add that God can be F, and would be a greater G ... were He F than were He not F... Then *prima facie*, God would not be perfect or maximal in the respect mentioned unless He were F. So we infer that, *prima facie*, God is F. (Leftow 2011: 108)

- › Here we start from a **richer** conception of God – he is not merely a perfect being, but we have a thick conception of some of what his perfection involves – e.g., omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, etc.
  - › This is a distinctively religious enterprise. The perfect creator is now embedded in a rich textual tradition that may justify our interest in such a God.

# The Rational Accessibility of God

- › The strategy here can be generalised to all versions of PBT: use the notion of God's perfection to **derive** or **justify** further features of God.
- › The **pure** approach makes no further assumptions than perfection – it is claimed that just by **rationally reflecting** on that **concept**, we can see what sort of function God must perform.
- › Even without scripture, claims about God may be uncovered by **armchair** investigation – one reason philosophers have liked this approach:

One crucial question [for theology] is ... how much we can know about God by the use of reason alone, without reliance on revelation or the assumptions of individual religious traditions. ... In order to get started on the project of deriving by reason alone the attributes of God, we need a starting point—some assumption about God which, independently of revelation and tradition, we can see to be true. And the claims that God is the greatest actual, or greatest possible, or greatest conceivable, being might seem to provide just the wanted starting point. (Speaks 2018: 8)

# The Accessibility of God and Salvation

- › But note that PBT also seems to make God more **accessible**.
- › If reason alone can bring us to understand God, then you don't need to be **lucky** to end up having faith (i.e., have an experience of revelation, meet the right missionary, live in the right time period).
  - › It would surely be **unfair** if God made belief in Him a necessary condition of salvation, without making that belief in principle available to every created person.
- › And, as Speaks points out, it is a **neutral** conception that anyone – no matter their prior belief – can use as a route to God:

The claim that God is the greatest possible being does not in itself say anything very specific about God—and this fact is part of what makes it an attractive starting point. ... It is not hard to imagine people with radically different views of God finding common ground in the claim that God is the greatest possible being. (Speaks 2018: 8–9)

# The 'program ... of axiomatization and confirmation'

- › Leftow sees in Augustine and Anselm two distinct pure projects that are nevertheless closely related to S-PBT:

One is a quest to axiomatize. Scripture presents a messy variety of claims about God. It would be elegant if one could show that they were all consequences of some one fundamental claim (given appropriate auxiliary premises); if the axiom were independently plausible, further, those claims would thus also emerge as independently plausible. A claim about God's perfection can seem well-suited to be that fundamental axiom. It could also confirm Scripture's claims about God in a second way to show that they can also be warranted a priori. For it would support the authority of Scripture even in areas PBT cannot reach to show that where PBT can reach, Scripture presents the same truths independent reason would reach on its own. (Leftow 2011: 113)

# Carrying out this program

- › For example, scripture is **incomplete** – it certainly doesn't tell us everything about God and creation, though the assumption is that God created the rest of us just as much as he created the peoples who are primarily discussed in the Torah, Bible, or Qur'ān.
- › Taking the scriptural truth that God is perfect as **fundamental**, we can develop a **simple and systematic worldview** of the rest of creation as being continuous with that part described in the Bible.
  - › That axiom, for example, licenses us to treat scripture as having 'open texture' (Leftow 2011: 110), as being newly applicable to all circumstances rather than being strictly only about what it literally discusses.
- › A S-PBT is **self-endorsing**, in that other scriptural claims are of a piece with those derived from the fundamental axiom.
  - › This isn't exactly **confirmation**, but it is certainly better than being **self-undermining**.

## **Some Difficulties**

# Scriptural Inconsistency

- › One problem with this approach is that scripture doesn't seem to be **consistent** in how God is conceived. For every verse praising God's perfect benevolence, we have scriptural evidence of God's moral failures:

Consider God's moral character, as revealed in the Bible. He routinely punishes people for the sins of others. He punishes all mothers by condemning them to painful childbirth, for Eve's sin. He punishes all human beings by condemning them to labor, for Adam's sin ([Gen. 3:16](#)). He regrets His creation, and... commits genocide and ecocide by flooding the earth ([Gen. 6:7](#)).... He kills all the firstborn sons, even of slave girls who had no part in oppressing the Israelites ([Ex. 11:5](#)). He punishes the children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great great-grandchildren of those who worship any other god ([Ex. 20:3](#)). He sends two bears out of the woods to tear forty-two children to pieces, because they called the prophet Elisha a bald head ([2 Kings 2:23](#)).... This is but a sample of the evils celebrated in the Bible. (Anderson 2007: 218-19)

# Discounting the Inconsistencies; Retreat

- › If we say these passages Anderson cites are **inaccurate** about God, then we are faced with a difficulty: if these passages are flawed, then why should we think **other** passages are **reliable** in what they say about God?
- › We don't have a coherent program of 'axiomatization and confirmation', since we would have to say that Biblical inconsistency gives us some scriptural claims that are disconfirmed by the fundamental axiom about God.
- › The alternative is to take those passages to be **coherent** with the rest of scripture:
  1. We can **reinterpret** the passages so that they don't actually say anything morally problematic (open texture again?).
  2. Or we can say that those passages are in fact describing **morally correct action** – despite how it may appear.
- › We will look at this second option in considerably more depth in *lecture 4* when we examine the **problem of evil**. So let's wait until then to finally evaluate this line of objection.

# Triviality (Speaks 2018: §2.3.1)

- › Another sort of objection is that PBT is **trivial**. It cannot give us knowledge of God that goes beyond what we were already assuming.
- › Let's return to Leftow's (2011: 108) inference pattern from **earlier**, which was an attempt to show how we can learn novel properties of God.
  - (1) Necessarily, God is a perfect instance of some kind G (knower, actor, person, moral exemplar, etc.)
  - (2) God could be F. (E.g., God could know what I will eat for lunch next Tuesday)
  - (3) If God were not F and could be F, God would not be a perfect instance of G. (I.e., He would be an even better knower if he knew it, than if he could know it but didn't.)
  - (4) God is F. (So God does know that future fact)

# Necessary Properties

Advocates of perfect being theology often argue, plausibly, that for any property which it is intrinsically good to have, it is better to have that property necessarily rather than merely contingently....

[So] we already know ... that God is necessarily F or necessarily not F. And, given this, the claim that God is possibly F is trivially equivalent to the conclusion - that God is F - for which we wished to argue. This means that, to [apply Leftow's argument], we already need to know something which is trivially equivalent to the claim that that property is a property of God. Hence [(3)] can never yield the result that a given property is among the divine attributes without being given as input something trivially equivalent to just that. Let's call this *the problem of triviality*. (Speaks 2018: 31-32)

- › If Speaks is right, PBT just **rearranges** our existing knowledge – it cannot give us new insight into God, contrary to Leftow.

# God Without PBT?

- › Note that we can have a concept of God as perfect **without then going on to follow the recipe** given by PBT.
- › That alternative would be to take as **basic** the various claims made about God (that He is the creator, the source of moral value, all good, all knowing, etc.), as attempted characterisations of God.
  - › Another approach that is broadly in line with PBT doesn't aim to derive God's properties from his perfection, but instead from a concept of God as a being who coherently **maximises** all those various divine qualities (Nagasawa 2017).
- › Then we wouldn't be attempting to **unify** God's properties as all flowing from one single overarching property of perfection – we would have several conceptually separate 'aspects' of perfection, each of which is regarded as a **partial description** of God.

# Characterising God

- › For example, Murray and Rea (2008: 7) argue:

theistic traditions almost all agree on the following basic claims about God:

- (C<sub>1</sub>) Nothing made God, and God is the source or ground of everything other than God.
- (C<sub>2</sub>) God rules all that is not God.
- (C<sub>3</sub>) God is the most perfect being.

- › Alongside these will be claims like *God is almighty*, *God knows everything*, *God is perfectly good*, etc.
- › We can then debate whether any thing (or things) satisfies this ‘God role’.
- › What we won’t have – something PBT does promise by contrast – is any initial guarantee that these different conceptions **converge** – that there is a single thing which satisfies all of them.
- › This may or may not pose a problem – as we’ll see over the next few lectures.

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