

# Subject specific vocabulary: Metaphysics of God

The following subject specific vocabulary provides definitions of key Metaphysics of God terms used in our A-level Philosophy (7172) specification.

Your students should be familiar with, and gain understanding from all these terms and arguments.

## Analogy

A comparison drawn between one thing (or set of things) and another thing (or set of things), whereby similarities are identified for the purposes of clarification or explanation (e.g. the comparison of human life with a narrative or journey: all can be broken into temporal phases – with a beginning, a middle, and an end – and are characterised by the goals of the agents involved etc).

## Analogy (Hume's argument from)

An argument (attributed by Hume to Cleanthes) for the existence of a designer of the universe (God). The argument begins with the observation that the universe consists of many machine-like systems or artefacts with 'means fitted to ends'. Appealing to the rules of analogy, Cleanthes argues that like effects have like causes, and as we know that machines are created by intelligent design (human), we can infer that the universe is likewise created by intelligent design, albeit the intelligence is far greater (divine) given the grandeur of the universe.

## Aquinas' 1st Way

A deductive cosmological argument which argues from the existence of change (traditionally translated as 'motion') in the world to the existence of a first (and sustaining) cause of change: an unchanged changer (or 'unmoved mover').

For Aquinas, change is the actualisation of some potential (e.g. cold water has the potential to be hot) which can only be brought about by something that is already actual in a causally relevant sense (e.g. the water is heated by the flame which is actually hot). It is therefore 'impossible that in the same respect and in the same way' something should be both the changer and the changed: i.e. things cannot change themselves, but are changed by others who actualise their potential.

This series of changers caused by other changers cannot go on to infinity, because without a first changer there would be no subsequent changers. So, there must be a first cause of change which is not itself changed, and this is presented by Aquinas as one way of understanding God.

## Aquinas' 2nd Way

A deductive cosmological argument from the existence of an order of 'efficient causes' in the world (of causes and their effects) to the existence of a first efficient (and sustaining) cause of these (ordered) 'efficient' causes.

Nothing can be the efficient cause of itself because it would have to be prior to itself, which is impossible. An infinite series of efficient causes is also impossible, as without a first efficient cause there would be no intermediate causes and no ultimate (or present) causes. Therefore, there must be a first efficient cause, and this first efficient cause is presented by Aquinas as one way of understanding God.

## Aquinas' 3rd Way

A deductive cosmological argument from the existence of 'possible' (or contingent) beings in the world to the existence of a 'necessary' being which accounts for the existence of possible (or contingent) beings.

The generation of possible beings is either explained by other possible beings or by necessary beings. If every being was merely possible then at one time there would have been nothing in existence, and as nothing can come from nothing, there would be nothing in existence now. But there is something in existence now. So, there must be at least one necessary being.

The necessity of a being is either caused by another necessary being or it belongs to the nature of that being. There cannot be an infinite series of necessary beings deriving their necessity from each other, as without a first necessary being there would no other necessary beings. So, there must be some being whose necessity is not derived from any other being, and which causes necessity in other beings. This necessary being is presented by Aquinas as one way of understanding God.

## Atemporal causation

A hierarchical (or 'vertical') form of causation concerned with the sustained existence of an order of beings regardless of the temporal status of those beings. Atemporal causation is said to be at work by some philosophers (e.g. Aquinas) whether the order had a beginning in time or whether it consists of an infinite series with no beginning in time.

## Blik (Hare)

An attitude towards the world (e.g. a religious viewpoint) which is neither held nor withdrawn on the basis of empirical evidence. For Hare, bliks generate meaningful language because they shape our interpretation of the world, determine what counts as evidence, and affect how we behave.

## Causal principle

The principle that for any event (such as something coming into existence), there is a cause of that event. It may also be applied more generally as the claim that for anything that exists or occurs there is an explanation (cause or sufficient reason) for its existence or occurrence.

## Causal principle (Hume's objection to)

Hume's objection to the causal principle features in his criticism of cosmological arguments, especially those which argue from temporal beginnings. The causal principle - that for any event there is a cause of that event - does not fall into either of the two domains of knowledge demarcated by 'Hume's fork': the claim that 'everything that begins to exist has a cause' is not a relation of ideas (its denial is not a contradiction and does not entail a contradiction), and experience could never serve to establish it as a universal truth, so it is not a matter of fact.

## Cognitivism (about religious language)

An approach to analysing religious language which holds that such language is meaningful where it includes claims (propositions or assertions) that describe the world or mind independent reality (e.g. 'God exists', 'God is good'). These claims are truth-apt: expressing cognitive states, such as beliefs, that can be true or false.

## Contingency (argument from)

Any cosmological argument which argues from the existence of contingent (or possible) beings to the existence of a necessary being (God) which accounts for (or explains) their existence.

## Contingent (existence)

Beings (or states of affairs) are contingent if they are possible but not necessary: they could be otherwise and may not have existed at all. These beings therefore depend (or would depend) on something other than themselves for their existence.

## Contingent (proposition)

A proposition is contingent when it could be true or false depending on how the world is at any one time and place. This may be presented in modal terms: a proposition is contingently true (e.g. 'it is raining outside') if and only if it is true in this world but false in a possible world.

## Cosmological arguments

A family of arguments for the existence of God which argue from the existence of the world (cosmos/natural order) or certain general features of the world (e.g. temporal beginnings, motion/change, contingency) to a first cause (reason or explanation).

## Dilemma

A dilemma arises in philosophy when logic seems to demand that we commit to one of two possible conclusions, neither of which is desirable for one or more reasons. These alternatives are sometimes called the 'two horns' of the dilemma. (Here is a formal characterisation of a dilemma, where  $q$  and  $r$  are equally undesirable: If  $p$ , then  $q$  / If not  $p$ , then  $r$  / so either  $p$  or  $r$ .)

## Empiricist/logical positivist challenge (to religious language)

Logical positivism was an empiricist movement in twentieth-century philosophy concerned with the meaningfulness of language. The criteria of meaningful language proposed by logical positivists, and other empiricist philosophers, presents a challenge to the meaningfulness of all metaphysical and therefore much religious language. One famous formulation of such a challenge is Ayer's 'verification principle'.

## Eschatological

Concerned with the 'last things' (the end of the age, the end of the world, or the end of a life). In theistic religion, eschatology is especially concerned with the post-mortem destiny of human beings and how they stand in relation to the judgement of God.

## Eschatological verification (Hick)

A thesis to counter the sceptical claims of empiricists/logical positivists about the meaningfulness of religious language. Hick argued that religious claims (e.g. 'God exists') could still be verified (proved to be true) postmortem, even if this is not possible within the lifetime of those making those assertions. This argument is designed to meet the challenge posed by Ayer's 'verification principle', showing that religious claims can be empirically verified eschatologically, and thereby fulfil one of Ayer's criteria for meaningful language.

## Eternal (God)

God is timeless (transcending the temporal order), existing without beginning or end.

## Euthyphro dilemma

This dilemma originated in Plato's *Euthyphro* dialogue where it concerns the relationship between piety (or holiness) and what is loved by the gods. In a monotheistic context, it concerns the relationship between God and moral goodness.

This dilemma may be posed as a question: Does God will (or command) that which is morally good because it is good, or is it morally good because God wills (or commands) it? Neither possibility seems desirable for the (classical) theist: the first horn of the dilemma locates the essence of moral goodness outside the will of God, while also challenging God's omnipotence; the second horn threatens to make moral goodness arbitrary.

## Everlasting (God)

God exists, without beginning or end, within and throughout all of time.

## Evil

Any harm or suffering inflicted on or experienced by human and non-human animals (for some philosophers this is understood as *privatio boni*: the absence of goodness).

## Existence is not a predicate (Kant/issues for ontological arguments)

An objection to ontological arguments (such as Descartes) where 'existence' is treated as if it were a real predicate of God: one of many descriptive perfections (e.g. omnipotence) which adds something significant to our idea of God and is crucial to establishing God's existence. For Kant, the existence of any being is always a separate matter to our conception of it, and is something to be established empirically. It contributes nothing to our idea of the being (e.g. our idea of 100 silver coins would not be expanded in any way by their actual existence).

## Fallacy of composition

An error which arises from 'parts to whole' reasoning, whereby we falsely attribute something that is true of all members of a set to the set itself (e.g. 'Hydrogen (H) is not wet. Oxygen (O) is not wet. Therefore, water (H<sub>2</sub>O) is not wet').

## Fallacy of composition (Russell/issues for cosmological arguments)

One objection to cosmological arguments is that they commit the fallacy of composition, or 'parts to whole reasoning'. Russell suggests that these arguments make the faulty inference from the fact that each member of some set of beings (i.e. those in the universe) has a cause (or explanation) for their existence, to the conclusion that the set of beings itself (i.e. the universe) must have a cause (or explanation) for its existence (God). Russell specifically targeted a Leibnizian argument from contingency – which is said to assume that because each contingent being has an explanation then the sum of contingent beings must have an explanation – but the objection can be applied to other versions of the cosmological argument.

## Falsification

An epistemological procedure which tests claims or theories by trying to falsify them (rather than to prove them) and defining the conditions under which the claims or theories would be falsified.

## Falsification (Flew/religious language)

Flew proposes that we can test the meaningfulness of religious claims (e.g. 'God is all loving') by identifying the conditions under which those claims would be falsified (and therefore withdrawn) by those who make them. If no such conditions can be specified, those claims are unfalsifiable and therefore meaningless.

## Free human beings

Human beings who possess some level of autonomy (freedom) in their actions, and especially in their moral decision making. (This freedom may be of a libertarian or compatibilist nature.)

## Free will defence (Plantinga)

A response to the problem of evil which argues that there is no logical contradiction between accepting that evil/suffering exists and believing in an omnibenevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient God. If God wills there to be creatures with morally significant freedom (and this is a good thing), God cannot (without contradiction) guarantee that creatures will not bring evil into the world.

## God's attributes

The characteristic features which philosophers have attributed to God (either through philosophical reasoning alone, or by abstracting from the sacred texts of monotheistic religions). God is typically said to be omniscient, omnipotent, supremely good (omnibenevolent), and eternal or everlasting (among other defining qualities/capacities).

## Impossibility of a necessary being (Hume/Russell)

A claim which objects to any argument for the existence of God as a necessary being (e.g. in ontological and some cosmological arguments). On this view necessity is a (logical) property of propositions rather than things, and a proposition is only necessary if its denial is inconceivable (i.e. it entails a contradiction). There is no contradiction in the claim 'God does not exist' (nor is there a contradiction in the denial of any other existence claim) so God cannot be a necessary being.

## Infinite series

An infinite series is a series without limits (e.g. natural numbers can form an infinite series, whereby positive and negative numbers are unbounded in both directions).

## Infinite series (issues for cosmological arguments)

The possibility of an infinite series (of beings/events/causes) is sometimes raised as an objection to cosmological arguments which argue for the necessity of a first cause for some (temporal or atemporal) series in the world: if it is possible that infinite series exists, it is not necessary that there be a first cause to account for the existence of any such series.

## Kalām argument

A cosmological argument (with roots in Islamic philosophy) which argues from the temporal beginning of the universe to the necessity of a first cause of the beginning of the universe, which is itself uncaused (God).

## Moral evil

Any harm or suffering (inflicted on human or non-human animals) caused intentionally by the actions of free moral agents (e.g. murder).

## Natural evil

Any harm or suffering (experienced by humans or other animals) which is not caused by the actions of free moral agents, but by natural events or processes (e.g. earthquakes).

## Necessary being

A being whose existence is not a matter of contingent fact, whereby things might have turned out otherwise, but whose form of existence is necessary: this being could not fail to exist (this kind of existence is typically ascribed to God and features in ontological and some cosmological arguments).

## Non-cognitivism (religious language)

An approach to analysing religious language which holds that this language does not describe the world or mind-independent reality, but it is no less meaningful for this. Religious language (e.g. 'God exists', 'God is good') is not truth-apt: it does not express cognitive states (such as beliefs) that can be true or false. Religious language expresses non-cognitive states (e.g. attitudes towards or evaluations of the world), and it is in this sense that it can be said to be meaningful.

## Omnipotent (God)

God is all powerful. This attribute may be defined in terms of God having the power to do anything or the power to do anything that is (logically) possible.

## Omniscient (God)

God is all knowing. This attribute may be defined in terms of God knowing all true propositions or knowing all that it is (logically) possible to know.

## Ontological

An area of metaphysics concerned with being or existence (e.g. what exists and the forms of existence).

## Ontological argument

A family of a priori and deductive arguments for the existence of God, which reason from the idea/conception of God to the conclusion that God must (necessarily) exist.

### Ontological argument (Anselm)

An a priori and deductive argument, which reasons from the idea/conception of God as a 'being greater than which nothing can be conceived' to the conclusion that God must (necessarily) exist. For Anselm, if such a being (God) existed only as an idea in the mind – and he insists that the idea does exist in the mind – then there would be something 'greater than a being than which nothing greater can be conceived' (i.e. a real God), which is absurd. So, in so far as we can conceive of God, God necessarily exists.

### Ontological argument (Descartes)

An a priori and deductive argument for the existence of God which reasons from the idea/conception of God as a 'supremely perfect being' to the conclusion that God necessarily exists. For Descartes, a 'supremely perfect being' contains all perfections, and existence is a perfection, so God must exist. In so far as Descartes has this idea of God, and he insists that he does, he cannot conceive of God not existing.

### Ontological argument (Malcolm)

An a priori and deductive argument for the existence of God which reasons from the idea/conception of God as 'an unlimited being' to the conclusion that God exists necessarily. (It is often characterised as a 'modal argument' because the argument for God's necessary existence depends on the possibility of God's existence.)

For Malcolm (who was reinterpreting Anselm's argument) 'an unlimited being' could not exist contingently, since contingency implies a limitation. Therefore, if an unlimited being exists it would do so necessarily: such a being would never come into existence nor go out of existence. So, the existence of an unlimited being is either necessary or impossible. A being is impossible only if there is an internal contradiction in the idea of such a being. For Malcolm, there is no contradiction in the idea of an unlimited being, and so such a being (God) exists necessarily.

## Paradox

A paradox arises when what seems like a logically unacceptable conclusion (e.g. because it produces a contradictory state of affairs) is derived from premises that seem to be true. Paradoxes may be resolved by showing that at least one of the premises is not actually true, that there has been an error in reasoning, or by showing that the conclusion is true and therefore needs to be accepted despite the logical difficulties.

## Paradox of the stone

An argument against the coherence of the divine attribute of omnipotence. The paradox may be framed as a question: Can God create a stone so heavy that God cannot lift it? It seems self-evident that an omnipotent being – unlimited in power – would be able to complete this task. But that would leave one thing that God cannot do (move the stone), placing a limit on God, and a limited being cannot be omnipotent. But if we deny that God can perform this task – because an omnipotent being can do anything – that would also leave one thing that God cannot do (create the stone), placing a limit on God, and a limited being cannot be omnipotent.

## Perfect island objection (Gaunilo)

A reductio ad absurdum form of objection to Anselm's ontological argument. Gaunilo purports to use the same logic as Anselm, but takes as his first premise the idea of a 'perfect island' (rather than an idea of God), then deduces from this that a perfect island must (necessarily) exist: working with Anselm's logic that something is greater if it exists in reality and not just in the mind. The conclusion that such an island must exist, simply because Gaunilo can conceive of it, seems absurd, and insofar as the conclusion that God must exist is based on the same reasoning, this conclusion is also absurd.

## Predicate

A descriptive term which attributes some property or attribute to the subject of a sentence.

## Principle of sufficient reason (Leibniz)

The principle that for any factual states of affairs (e.g. any events, beings, truths) there is a sufficient reason (or explanation) why that state of affairs holds rather than some other. It forms the basis for Leibniz's cosmological argument.

## Problem of evil

A challenge to the existence (or nature) of God. The problem of evil identifies a tension (logical or evidential) between the existence of an omnibenevolent, omnipotent (and omniscient) God and the existence, quantity or quality of evil (or suffering) in world, whether moral or natural.

## Problem of evil (evidential)

A formulation of the problem of evil which claims that the evil (or suffering) in the world (especially its severity and distribution) constitutes strong evidence against the existence of an omnibenevolent, omnipotent (and omniscient) God. As an inductive argument, it argues that it is more probable than not that such a God does not exist given the evidence of evil in the world.

## Problem of evil (logical)

A formulation of the problem of evil of which claims that the existence of evil (or suffering) is logically incompatible with the existence of an omnibenevolent, omnipotent (and omniscient) God. As a deductive argument, it concludes that it is impossible that such a God exists given the truth of the premises about the nature of God and the existence of evil.

## Soul making (Hick)

A response to the problem of evil which argues that the existence of evil (or suffering) is necessary for the cultivation of virtue and a range of goods associated with human flourishing (hence 'soul making'), and so the existence of evil fails to show that an omnibenevolent, omnipotent (and omniscient) God does not exist.

## Spatial order

The 'regularities of co-presence': parts (seemingly) organised for a purpose. Regularities of this kind in the natural world (and analogies with the spatial order found in products of human design) form the basis for some teleological/design arguments (e.g. Hume's and Paley's).

## Spatial order (Paley's argument from)

A teleological/design argument for the existence of a designing intelligence (God) as the explanation for those 'parts organised for a purpose' that can be observed in nature. Paley's argument can be interpreted deductively (i.e. design just is the organisation of parts for a purpose, and design requires a designer) or inductively and analogically (e.g. design is the most probable explanation given the similarities between machines, such as watches, and biological systems, such as the human eye).

## Teleological/design argument

A family of a posteriori arguments for the existence of a designing intelligence (God) as the explanation for anything in the world which suggests purpose, order, or regularity. They may be deductive or inductive in their logical form.

## Temporal causation

An order of cause and effect within time, whereby causes are temporally prior to their effects. This order of causality forms the basis of the Kalām cosmological argument.

## Temporal order

The patterns in events and behaviours over time. Swinburne calls these events and behaviours 'regularities of succession'. They form the basis for his design argument for the existence of God.

## Temporal order (Swinburne's argument from)

An inductive teleological/design argument for the existence of a designing intelligence (God) as the explanation for temporal order (or 'regularities of succession'). Whereas spatial order (or 'regularities of copresence') can be explained by the natural sciences (e.g. evolution), Swinburne argues that temporal order – such as the regularities of succession described by the laws of physics – cannot. The only other known form of explanation available is personal (or purposive), of the kind found in human action. Therefore, by analogy, a personal (or purposive) explanation (a designing intelligence) is the most probable explanation for temporal order.

## Unique case (Hume/issues for design arguments)

An objection to design arguments which challenges the inference to design as the most likely/probable explanation for the existence of the universe (with its spatial and/or temporal order). This may be presented as an attack on the argument from analogy: because the universe is (apparently) a unique case, we are not able to make the necessary comparisons between the products of human design and the universe in the way we are about things within the universe which do allow us to claim evidence of design (e.g. comparisons between a small fishing boat and a cruise liner).

In terms of theoretical explanations, we do not have the necessary range of data to support a design hypothesis as the most probable. Hume took a regularity approach to causation: causal explanations are only justified on the basis of patterns repeatedly observed in nature. But because we have no experience of patterns in world making – since there is only one universe - we cannot theorise about causes in this case. For this reason, the objection can also be applied to (at least some) cosmological arguments.

## Verification principle (Ayer)

The principle that language is (cognitively) meaningful in so far as it makes claims (propositions or assertions) which are analytic or empirically verifiable: whether actually verifiable (in the 'strong version' of the verification principle) or possibly verifiable (in the 'weak version'). Ayer applies the principle to religious language (e.g. the claim 'God exists') and finds it to be neither analytic nor empirically verifiable, and therefore meaningless.