



GCE

Religious Studies

**RS3 PHIL:
Studies in Philosophy of Religion (A2)**

by Gordon Reid

Topic One: Is religious faith rational?

AIM

At the end of this topic you should be able to:

- Explain the key ideas of the Ontological Argument for the existence of God
- Evaluate the success of this argument
- Understand the problems arising from the concepts on which the argument depends
- Explain and evaluate arguments about the success or failure of the Ontological Argument
- Explain theories about the nature of faith
- Explain the relationship between faith, reason and revelation
- Explain propositional and non-propositional concepts of revelation
- Explain the contributions of key scholars to these debates

1. The Ontological Argument

(i) The special character of the Ontological Argument

Unlike the Cosmological and Teleological (Design) Arguments, the Ontological Argument or Proof is *a priori*, deductive and analytic. This means that it moves through logical steps to a conclusion which is self-evidently true or logically necessary. A successful argument of this kind will be based on premises which already identify the conclusion which is the only possible one that could be deduced from those premises. The premises must contain analytic truths which are true by definition – they do not need to be supported by external evidence. In this case, the Ontological Argument is based on premises about the nature of God which its proponents believe lead necessarily to the conclusion that God exists – in other words, the argument shows that it is impossible to conclude that God does not exist.

Proposed by Anselm in 1078, the Ontological Argument has continued to appeal to many important thinkers, including Descartes, Norman Malcolm and Alvin Plantinga, whilst Aquinas and Kant were fierce opponents, despite their different positions on the nature of God. In recent times, it has been challenged by Bertrand Russell and G E Moore, whilst even Richard Dawkins has attempted his own refutation of the method of argument employed by the proof.

In 1078 Anselm, then Archbishop of Canterbury, proposed in the *Proslogion* that the existence of God was true by logical necessity – it could not be reasonably doubted or demonstrably disproved. The process of his reasoning led him to the conclusion: '*Thanks be to thee good Lord, thanks be to thee, because I now understand by thy light what I formerly believed by thy gift*' and Anselm believed that he had insured his belief in God against all possible attack.

Effectively, Anselm attempted to prove the existence of God by way of ***reductio ad absurdum***. This method of reasoning aims to demonstrate the truth of something by revealing the absurdity of denying that truth – in Anselm’s case, that God does not exist. He aimed to show this to be absurd by means of an argument which demonstrates that the existence of God is logically necessary (i.e. he cannot *not* exist).



For reflection:

What is your initial reaction to this kind reasoning? Do you think it seems reasonable to prove that something is the case by definition and which cannot therefore be disputed? For instance, if we claim that ‘John is a bachelor’ does that mean he is indisputably both male and unmarried? Think of another example.

(ii) Proving God’s necessary existence

Anselm’s argument is based on three key sub-arguments:

1. That the definition of God as *that than which nothing greater can be conceived* has inevitably implications for his existence.
2. That the non-existence of God is logically impossible.
3. That the atheist is ‘a fool’ to believe that God does not exist.

Anselm based the argument on the intrinsic meaning of the word ‘God’. Significantly, Anselm maintained that God, by definition, means ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’ and that when both believers and non-believers speak of God, they intuitively understand this concept. God is ‘greater’ than all other beings but in the sense that he is supremely perfect and so ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’ *must* possess all perfections in order to be so defined and when we speak of God we speak of such a being.

Crucially, Anselm argues that if this being possesses all perfections, then it cannot not exist. This key assumption is based on the principle that existence is a perfection - something which can be possessed or lacked by a being or thing, and which contributes to our understanding of the nature of that thing or being. Existence is something which it *has* in the way that it may *have* or possess a particular colour or size, intelligence, moral awareness or unawareness. Furthermore, Anselm places existence in the same category as he would place goodness, love, wisdom or justice, for example – attributes most classical theists would readily ascribe to God - and by so doing he treats it as a *predicate* - a defining characteristic.

This step is important to the argument because it establishes that existence may be possessed or lacked, and that to possess existence is necessarily greater than to lack it. However, the matter doesn’t end here, since existence may be ***in re*** (in reality) or merely ***in intellectu*** (in the mind). That which exists in the mind may theoretically possess all other great-making qualities, but that which exists in reality is undeniably greater since it possesses in reality the great-making property of existence. Since God *is* that than which

nothing greater can be conceived, God must possess the perfection of existence both in reality and in the mind. If this was not the case, then something other than God which did exist in reality would be greater than God, and this is impossible since the definition of God excludes anything else from being greater than him. Anselm writes:

Now we believe that thou art a being than which none greater can be thought...clearly that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot exist in the understanding alone. For if it is actually in the understanding alone, it can be thought of as existing in reality and this is greater. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be thought is in the understanding alone, it can be thought of as existing also in reality, and this is greater... Without doubt, therefore, there exists, both in the understanding and in reality, something than which a greater cannot be thought.



Seminar Topic:

Anselm clarified his thinking by use of an analogy. When a painter considers his next work it is already in his mind and he has a clear idea of it and its existence *in intellectu*. However, it cannot be said to exist until it has painted - when it exists also *in re*. Such existence, Anselm maintains, is undeniably greater than existence *in intellectu*.

Discuss whether you think this is a strong analogy? Does it help you to understand the Ontological Argument? In your groups work out another analogy to explain the difference between existence *in re* and *in intellectu*. Do you agree that existence *in re* makes a thing or being greater? Do you understand what it means to speak of existence as a 'great making quality'?

Like all the arguments for the existence of God, the Ontological Argument can be set out in a series of premises and a conclusion, which make clear the reasoning of the argument. There are many ways of doing this; this is one useful version:

P1:	God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived.
P2:	That than which nothing greater can be conceived possesses all perfections.
P3:	Existence is a perfection.
P4:	It is more perfect to exist in reality than in the mind alone.
P5:	That than which nothing greater can be conceived must therefore exist in reality.
P6:	If it were possible for that than which nothing greater to be conceived not to exist, it would not be the greatest conceivable being.

P7: That than which nothing greater can be conceived must therefore necessarily exist.

Conclusion: God necessarily exists.

The conclusion specifically identifies God's necessary existence, which takes a special form for the Ontological Argument - **de dicto** necessary - by definition. The nub of Anselm's argument is that because the definition of God requires that he should exist, to deny his existence would be absurd and once this is fully understood, it is impossible to deny the existence of God, as Anselm observed:

For something can be thought of as existing which cannot be thought of as not existing, and this is greater than that which can be thought of as not existing... So, then, there truly is a being than which a greater cannot be thought - so truly that it cannot even be thought of as not existing... He therefore who understands that God thus exists cannot think of him as non-existent.



For reflection:

What arguments do you think are likely to be offered against the concept of necessary existence? Is it meaningful to speak of a being which must exist by definition? Could we apply that concept to anything we know in our regular experience? For example, we can say that a circle must be round, or a triangle must have three angles, but could we say they must exist?

(iii) The implications for atheism

Nevertheless, Anselm is aware that the existence of God can be, and is, denied by the atheist, who he identifies with the 'fool' of Psalm 53:1: *'the fool has said in his heart there is no God'*. He calls him a fool because he believes that the atheist is guilty of making a claim which cannot possibly be true because he has failed to understand the full implications of what it means to speak of God. Had the atheist grasped the real meaning of the term 'God' as 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived', it would be impossible for him to deny his existence, and, Anselm believed, since the atheist has a concept of God in his mind, it should be a matter of reason for him to recognise the impossibility of denying the existence of such a being:

Can it be that there is no such being since, 'The fool hath said in his heart "There is no God"'?... But when this same fool hears what I am saying - "A being than which none greater can be thought" - he understands what he hears... even if he does not understand that it exists... Even the fool, then, must be convinced that a being than which none greater can be thought exists at least in his understanding.



Seminar Topic:

In a group decide whether Anselm is right to argue that the atheist is obliged to recognise the existence of God. How might an atheist respond to this? Find out how God has been defined by different thinkers, including atheists, and discuss whether these are equally acceptable definitions. Would they lead Anselm to the same conclusion, that God necessarily exists?

(iv) Early challenges to Anselm's argument

Anselm's argument was refuted in his own life time by the monk Gaunilo, who offered a counter *reductio ad absurdum* to demonstrate that if the logic of the argument were applied to things other than God it led to absurd conclusions. Substituting the word 'God' with 'the greatest island' led to an argument which had the same apparent form as Anselm's, but the conclusion could not be true:

P1 I can conceive of an island than which no greater island can be thought.

P2 Such an island must possess all perfections.

P3 Existence is a perfection.

P4 Therefore the island exists.

Even if the first premise proposed 'the greatest *possible* island', the argument would still yield an invalid conclusion since, quite clearly, to merely conceive of an island in all of its perfections does not guarantee its existence or bring it into existence. Thus, Gaunilo's criticism strikes at the heart of the ontological proof which depends on accepting that (i) perfection necessarily entails existence and (ii) that which is perfect must necessarily exist. Gaunilo believed that Anselm was guilty of defining God into existence – by saying God is perfect by definition, he must exist – which involved making a transitional error – moving from the concept of a thing to the reality of a thing by definition alone.

Anselm was unbothered by Gaunilo's challenge, simply observing that the proof was intended only to apply to God, and not to contingent things, such as an island. God's necessary existence makes the matter of his existence a different issue altogether, since whilst any island can be changed, made better or worse, and its existence is dependent on other factors, the same cannot be said of God, who is, by definition and nature, intrinsically perfect. God's perfection is not determined by human judgments and cannot be modified. As far as Anselm was concerned, the proof held firm.

In the 13th century Aquinas observed that Anselm was guilty of making an assumption about the definition of God arising from reason alone. He believed that understanding the meaning of the term 'God' means only that God exists *in intellectu*, not *in re*. Rather, God's existence in reality must be demonstrated *a posteriori*, as Aquinas's Five Ways attempted to show. Once God's existence is proved *a posteriori*, only then are we in a position to speculate about his nature. God does not exist because he is perfect; rather, if God exists, he may then be shown to be perfect by reference to other factors.

Writing task:

- (i) Outline the key ideas of one form of the Ontological Argument.
- (ii) Evaluate the view that this argument fails to prove that God must exist.

(v) Descartes' Ontological Argument

The Ontological Argument was revived by René Descartes (1598–1650), who reformulated it specifically in terms of perfection and necessary existence. It appealed to him as a rationalist philosopher who sought to prove the existence of God by reason alone and as Descartes could rationally conceive of his own existence, he could also conceive of the existence of a perfect being. He implies here that the notion of a perfect being is innate, since we can conceive of a perfect being without being perfect ourselves.

P1	I exist.
P2	In my mind I have the concept of a perfect being.
P3	As an imperfect being, I could not have conjured up the concept of a perfect being.
P4	The concept of a perfect being must therefore have originated from the perfect being itself.
P5	A perfect being must exist in order to be perfect.
P6	Therefore a perfect being exists.



For reflection:

Do you find this argument persuasive? Is it true that imperfect beings cannot conceive of perfection unaided by perfection itself? Could this justifiably lead to the claim that we cannot conceive of anything we have not directly experienced?

Alternatively, Descartes' argument can be presented with God, the perfect being, as the subject, arguing that existence belonged analytically to God as three angles were analytically predicated of a triangle:

P1	The idea of God is the idea of a supremely perfect being.
P2	A supremely perfect being has all perfections.
P3	Existence is a perfection.
P4	A supremely perfect being has the perfection of existence.
P5	It is impossible to think of God as not existing.
P6	God exists.



For reflection:

Descartes also proposed that existence belonged to God as necessarily as a valley belonged to a mountain. Do you think this analogy works well? Is it more or less useful than his analogy of the triangle?

(vi) Existence is not a predicate

Immanuel Kant revived challenges to the Ontological Proof by making the observation that whatever our concept of an object may involve we must go outside it if we are to ascribe existence to it. In other words, existence is not one of the attributes which we give to a being or thing, since it is not something that being or thing *has*, rather the attributes belong to it in reality or not, only if it independently has real existence.

Fundamental to both Anselm's and Descartes' forms of the Ontological Argument is that existence is a predicate, an attribute, or a quality that can be possessed or lacked and their presence or absence is part of our understanding of it. However, Kant observed that existence is not associated with the definition of something, since it did not add to our understanding of that thing. We must establish the existence of something before we can say what it is like, not the other way around, and existence itself does not add to the nature of that thing or being. Thus, we cannot ascribe existence *a priori* to our definition of a perfect being, which is tantamount to saying 'An existing God exists'.

The twentieth-century philosopher G.E. Moore demonstrated further the principle that existence could not be used as a predicate because the word does not function as other predicates do. For example, the following two statements appear to have the same grammatical structure, but on closer examination, whilst the first statement is meaningful, the second is not

- Some tame tigers do not growl.
- Some tame tigers do not exist.

The first claim identifies those tame tigers which do not growl, which is a conceivable category of tame tigers, but the second claim identifies a category of non-existing tame tigers, which is not conceivable. The tame tigers either exist as an entire category of tigers or not – and indeed some may growl and some may not.

Bertrand Russell similarly proposed that 'existence' was not a predicate but rather a term used to indicate the instance of something in the spatial-temporal world. Therefore, 'Some tame tigers exist' does not tell us anything about their nature but it does indicate that there is an instance of such beings in the world. 'Cows are brown' and 'Cows are brown and exist' effectively tell us only one thing: 'Cows are brown'. To attribute existence to them clarifies that they are not imaginary tigers, but it does not add another characteristic.



For reflection:

How important is it to distinguish between claims about existence which *appear* to function in the same way because they are grammatically the same? For example, consider these two claims:

A. All cows have tails

B. All unicorns have horns

Grammatically, these claims are identical, and it is therefore reasonable to assume, according to Russell's reasoning, that both cows and unicorns occupy time and space. Can you resolve this problem?

David Hume had also considered the argument that a failure relied on the principle that necessary existence was a coherent concept. He argued that existence could only ever be contingent (dependent and limited) and since all statements about existence could be denied without contradiction, anything which could be said to exist could also be said not to exist. Thus, Hume did not agree that any form of existence could be analytically true but was simply a matter of fact.

Most of these criticisms are essentially based on the claim that it is not possible to move from the *de dicto* necessity of a claim (that it is true by definition) to *de re* necessity (that a thing or being exists in the real world). Even the possibility of a thing existing of necessity is challenged by Hume, and so the foundations of the Ontological Argument could be seen to be fundamentally flawed, if we agree with his reasoning.

(vii) Continued support for the argument

Despite these challenges, the argument has also been supported by leading thinkers, including Leibniz, who argued that since it is impossible to think of God as lacking any perfection he must exist, since to possess all perfections but not to exist would be meaningless. Norman Malcolm also proposed a form of the argument in support of necessary existence, working on the presumption that if God *could* exist, he *must* exist, since he cannot *not* exist. Malcolm argues that God is a special case, unlike contingent beings, for whom existence is merely possible. The argument can be framed thus:

P1 God is that than which nothing greater can be thought.

P2 Necessary existence is a perfection.

P3 If God possesses all perfections, he must possess necessary existence.

P4 A necessary being cannot *not* exist.

P5 If God *could* exist, then he would exist necessarily.

P6 It is contradictory to say that a necessary being does not exist.

P7 God must exist.

Alvin Plantinga suggested that since we are able to imagine any number of

alternative worlds in which things may be quite different - for example, a world in which Arsenal football club were in League Two and Accrington Stanley in the Premier League - there must be any number of possible worlds in which things could be different, including our own. However, if God's existence is necessary, he must exist in them all and have all the characteristics of God in them all – in other words there can be no conceivable world in which God cannot exist, but as a being of maximal greatness and excellence, he must exist in all worlds.



Seminar Topic:

In a group assess the strengths and weaknesses of these modern contributions to the Ontological Argument. Do they show that the argument has perennial value?

(viii) The anti-realist value of the argument

It is possible that the Ontological Argument is successful if we accept that its premises are made as not objectively, but subjectively true statements, which are coherent with other statements made within a particular form of life – in this case the language game of speaking about God. Proponents of the Ontological Argument are already committed to certain claims, most especially that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived, and all that this entails and so the argument is meaningful to them. However, 'God necessarily exists' is a claim that may be rejected by realists as meaningless, unverifiable and unfalsifiable, because it does not correspond to the state of affairs which it describes. On the other hand, the anti-realist approach does not demand absolute truth, but rather that something be true within its peculiar context. On this basis, despite the criticisms outlined by its opponents, the Ontological Argument could therefore be considered to succeed if it is understood as an expression of what the believer already holds to be true, rather than a proof of God's objectively real existence, which cannot be reasonably denied.

The success of the Ontological Argument also depends on how successfully it works as a deductive proof without the evidence and experience of the universe on which to draw. It may be successful if the first premise is universally accepted. However, whilst 'God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived' may be true for *some* believers, it is not necessarily the case for all. If believers can understand God in other terms or describe him in other ways, or if there are good reasons for rejecting Anselm's definition, then the argument fails. Only if true premises lead to valid conclusions can the Ontological Argument be said to have succeeded in proving that God's existence is a matter of logical necessity.

Writing Task

- (a) Examine the implications of claiming that God exists by definition.
- (b) To what extent can this claim be reasonably challenged?

2. The nature of faith

John Hick argues that faith is analogous to a road walked by the believer in the confidence, but not the certain knowledge, that it will lead to the destination they believe to be the fulfilment of their faith. The destination will only be eschatologically verified – in other words, proved to be true at the end of the journey – but faith determines the way in which the believer will tackle that journey. Faith of this kind is easily open to criticism, as Richard Dawkins argues, '*Faith is the great cop out; the excuse to stop thinking*'. Faith appears to eschew the need for evidence, testing and re-appraising of hypotheses, and faith claims may be thought to be seriously undermined by their lack of substantiation. We need, therefore, to be very clear about what we think faith *is* and in what ways it differs from reason. The first point to bear in mind is that there can be no single definition of faith. However, we need a starting point, and let us consider, therefore, that faith is distinct from that which we call knowledge. When we know something, we suggest that there is no question of it being false, but faith can be mistaken. Nevertheless, those who have religious faith do not live in a permanent state of doubt about that in which they have faith although they are aware that belief in the existence is in some important way different to my knowledge of China, even though I may not have visited it, since faith, unlike knowledge, can be mistaken. But nevertheless, religious believers hold their belief in the existence of God and his attributes to be a serious matter, and they have reasons for believing what they hold to be true. The possibility of religious experience alone could move the believer beyond faith to something more concrete, as Peter Donovan observes: '*Why all this talk of arguing from religious experience? If you really experience God you don't have to argue, you **know** he's real, and that's all there is to it.*'

Nevertheless, believers are not exempt from being required to justify their beliefs, and philosophers have approached this in different ways. Descartes argued that reason can provide a firm foundation for faith; Anselm maintained that the Ontological Proof would enable him to know the existence of God through the use of reason even if his faith failed him, whilst Kierkegaard maintained that reason contradicts religious faith, whilst Aquinas claimed that it supplements it.

(i) Types of faith

Propositional faith is the belief that there is an objective reality to which we ascribe the term God, and about whom we can make claims which are objectively true.

Propositional faith has certain similarities to our knowledge of things in the world. A belief that there is a God who is omnipotent and who created the world, for example, might in some ways be similar to our belief that there is a president of the United States, in so far as most of us have not met him and yet believe in his existence from media reports, or have not visited China, and yet believe that it is where the atlas suggests it is. We believe it to be objectively true, despite not having first hand experience of it. However, propositional faith may not make much difference to a person's life and many nominally religious people might feel perfectly comfortable with this kind of

faith. It is not the same as believing that it is possible to have a personal relationship with that same God, which makes a difference to the way believers look at the world and live their lives.

This involves **non-propositional faith**, which describes a trust in God which may be held even when evidence or experience would seem to point against it. This kind of faith must be based in some personal knowledge of God, and not simply in the acceptance of facts about him. This kind of faith is probably that which is most meaningful to believers, since faith is not just a matter of holding certain beliefs to be true, but of participating in a relationship with the object of faith. That means taking a risk of love, trust, and hope, and not the critical rational stance of the scientist who demands evidence and corroboration. It is characterised by subjective knowledge. Religious faith of any kind involves speculation about matters which lie beyond what the scientific method can tell us, and the believer therefore has to be able to show that their faith is not just wishful thinking.



For reflection

Which kind of faith do you think describes the faith of any religious believer whom you know and why? Which kind of faith do you think is more significant? What are the risks involved in these different kinds of faith?

Basil Mitchell uses the **parable of the partisan and the stranger** to illustrate the nature of non-propositional faith.

In a time of war, a partisan meets a stranger who claims to be the leader of the resistance. The stranger urges the partisan to have faith in him whatever the circumstances, even if he sees the stranger acting in ways which appear to contradict this claim. The partisan is committed to his belief in the stranger's integrity, even when his friends think he is a fool to believe in him. When the stranger appears to be withholding help, or even acting contrary to the partisan's interests, he still believes that the stranger is on his side, and has overwhelming reasons for maintaining his faith. His original encounter with the stranger gave him sufficient confidence to hold on to his faith in him, even when the evidence weighed against it.

This kind of faith does not allow anything to count *decisively* against its claims, and this is an important observation, since the partisan does not deny that *sometimes* the stranger acts in a way which is contrary to the claims that the stranger made about being 'on his side'. However, the relationship that he established with the stranger at their first meeting was so significant that he is able to believe in the stranger's integrity, despite his ambiguous behaviour.



Seminar Topic

Discuss your feelings about this parable, which is obviously an analogy for the believer's relationship with God. Do you find the partisan's faith admirable or absurd?

Kierkegaard's **Postponement Argument** also maintains that religious faith depends on a commitment that requires religious believers not to abandon their faith, even when it is being seriously challenged because they have taken a leap of faith that enables them to hold fast to their faith, even when rational arguments to support it fail, or when experience poses serious challenges to it. They are forced to postpone (wait for) the evidence for their faith to be confirmed as truth, but they cannot waste time in this life doing so. Kierkegaard's argument may also be understood as a suspension of judgment. Since in this world and this life the existence of God cannot be decisively proved, we are forced to live as if God does not exist if we are to wait until such proof can be adequately demonstrated. However, this means that we would never be able to make a decision about the personal implications of God's existence, which could have disastrous eschatological consequences. Hence, the believer has to take a step of faith, even when evidence is sparse. This is a type of **fideism**, the view that religious beliefs cannot be evaluated by reason, but the believer has to take an element of risk and accept the paradoxical nature of faith.

Kierkegaard, writing under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus, wrote that whilst objective knowledge:

'rambles comfortably on by way of the long road of approximation without being impelled by the urge of passion, subjective knowledge counts every delay a deadly peril, and the decision so infinitely important and so instantly pressing that it is as if the opportunity had already passed.'

Kierkegaard also proposed the **Passion Argument** to illustrate that reason is not an appropriate foundation for faith. He argues that religious faith is not about having certain knowledge, but about having an intense passion, and the more risk and sacrifice involved, the greater that passionate faith is. If there were a stronger probability of God's existence, the strength of that faith would inevitably weaken, and it would be less valuable. Certainty is therefore not desirable for a life of true faith.



For reflection and research:

James Sire observes:

Many American children are caused to believe in Santa Claus. But they would not be justified in clinging to this belief after they discovered their parents filling their stockings late Christmas Eve. They would in such a case have a reason for believing that Santa Claus is only a myth.

Do you think the same observation may be made about belief in God? Would having a passionate belief in Santa Claus be a desirable thing? If not, why is belief in God different? In what ways may some religious leaders be guilty of encouraging this kind of faith? Research the Jonestown tragedy on the Internet. Was this result of passionate faith or delusion?

However, Dave Hunt (*In Defence of the Faith*, 1996), in contrast with Kierkegaard argues that faith does require a firm foundation of evidence and reasoning because it concerns matters of eschatological importance: '*One may be willing to allow some uncertainty in earthly matters, but only a fool would be comfortable with even the smallest degree of doubt in things which affect him eternally*, he observes. In the case of God, Hunt argues, if seeing were believing, no one would believe in his existence, since '*He dwells in the light which no man can approach, who no man has seen, nor can see...*' (1 Timothy 6:16). Faith makes contact with that which is beyond sight, as the writer to the Hebrews makes clear: '*Faith is...the evidence of things not seen*' (Hebrews 11:1). Hunt argues that '*Faith must stand on the basis of evidence which is independent of physical sight and scientific verification, but which is irrefutable*'. What this involves therefore is trust, which is only possible through personal knowledge of God, not human religious leaders or allegedly authoritative texts, doctrines or claims, so again this is a non-propositional understanding of faith, based on relationship not facts.

Hunt linked reason, evidence and faith in a vital relationship: '*Reason and evidence may legitimately point the direction for faith to go - and must do so. Indeed, faith must not violate evidence and reason or it would be irrational. Faith takes a step beyond reason, but only in the direction which reason and evidence have pointed*'. He rejects the 'leap of faith' view as encouraging an irrational response to nothing more than feelings, intuition and unsubstantiated personal preference. Hunt claims, '*Eventually, that belief will prove a delusion and the bubble of euphoria will burst, leaving the person worse off than before*'.

(ii) Bliks

If we did insist on believing in the existence of Santa Claus long after our childhood had passed, allowing nothing to count against it, and finding in every piece of contrary evidence something that would somehow support our continuing belief, we would have what R. M. Hare termed a **blik**. A blik is a way of looking at the world which is neither verifiable nor falsifiable, but which is not meaningless because it influences the way we interpret the world and

the way in which we live. Hare used the parable of the lunatic and the dons to illustrate his theory:

A certain lunatic is convinced that all the dons want to murder him. His friends introduce him to all the mildest and most respectable dons that they can find, and after each of them has retired, they say 'You see, he doesn't really want to murder you; he spoke to you in a most cordial manner; surely you are convinced now?' But the lunatic replies, 'Yes, but that was only his diabolical cunning; he's really plotting against me the whole time, like the rest of them; I know it, I can tell you.' However many kindly dons are produced, the reaction is still the same.

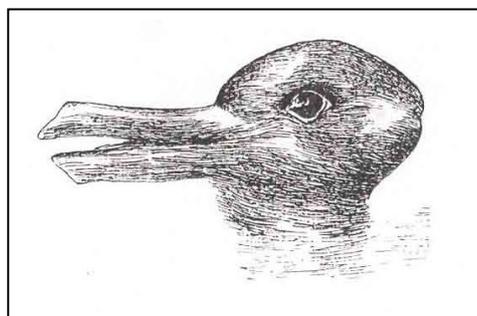
Nothing will count against the lunatic's belief, and in the same way, Hare argues, nothing will count against that of the religious believer. If asked why he believes, he will simply say, 'Because I do', and since that is the very nature of a blik, that's all he can say. Hare suggests that we all have bliks; James Sire describes it thus:

Suddenly someone asks us why we are doing it and we are at a loss. 'I do believe' we say to ourselves. I believe lots of things. From the simple matter of believing that my computer will work when I turn it on, to the much more questionable belief that my broker is honest or that my fiancée loves me in ways she loves no one else, everything I do is predicated on belief. Sometimes I question my beliefs - especially the complex ones, the ones involving people, life goals, politics and religion. But I always have them. Belief is automatic.

Wittgenstein understood faith as a process of 'seeing as', or 'experiencing as'. Just as we might see a pattern on a page and perceive it or experience it as something quite different to the next person so too we perceive the world differently. Because the world is religiously ambiguous, it can equally be perceived as having religious significance or not - the religious believer interprets the data of the world religiously, the non-believer does so non-religiously; and the ambiguity will only be resolved eschatologically. Neither atheist nor theist will be able to convince each other that their interpretation of the evidence is more reasonable, since they will interpret the 'evidence' quite differently.



Seminar task



This is Wittgenstein's famous 'duck-rabbit' illusion. What do you see when you look at the image? Is it both a duck and a rabbit, only one or the other, or can't you tell? In what ways may this illustration help to understand how religious believers look at the world.

(iii) Anti-realism and non-foundationalism

A **realist** approach to faith works on the assumption that '*a statement is true because it corresponds to the state of affairs that it attempts to describe*' (Peter Vardy's definition). However, anti-realism does not attempt to make statements cohere with an objective reality, but claims that '*Truth depends on what is agreed within the community which depends on the rules of the language game, not on dispassionate enquiry*' (Vardy). In this sense, religious claims belong to their own language game, and to submit them to scientific testing would represent a misunderstanding of how those claims are used and of their context. All language games are self-contained and claims made within them require no justification; hence, when atheists say 'God does not exist' they are not contradicting the theists who say 'God exists', but instead they saying that they do not share the 'form of life' to which the other subscribes. It is not, however, a question of who is right and who is wrong.

If religious faith is a blik, and hence cannot be verified or falsified, it is not dependent upon philosophical justification. This is the principle of **non-foundationalism**, which opposes **foundationalism** - the view that religious beliefs *must be* justified by reference to other beliefs. For the non-foundationality religious beliefs are **properly basic beliefs**; those which, in Alvin Plantinga's terms, '*don't get their warrant by way of warrant transfer from other beliefs*'.

Plantinga rejected foundationalism on the grounds that if all beliefs need to be justified by reference to other beliefs, then many statements (not just religious ones) would be rendered false since there is nothing that can give them their 'warrant' and it could not even meet its own demands - that is, foundationalism itself cannot be justified by reference to other beliefs. Religious belief is therefore a basic belief which itself provides the foundation for other beliefs, but which does not itself need to be proven or demonstrable.



For reflection:

Do you think that religious believers *do* attempt to justify their beliefs? If so, is this because they haven't realised that they are properly basic beliefs, or because non-believers require them to justify them

(iv) The gamble of faith

If reason, therefore, cannot confirm to us the existence of God, what counts as good evidence for religious belief? Is it the kind of experience to which we turn to support scientific beliefs? When it is said that religious belief is non-rational, very often it means that it is non-scientific, since scientific claims are open to revision if experience tells against them, however good the evidence for them may have appeared in the first place. Religious beliefs are less open to change which makes them vulnerable to criticism.

William James understood faith as ‘the *will to believe*’. Whilst scientific methodology requires objectivity and neutrality, we do not apply this to every aspect of our lives and James argued that this is particularly true of religious beliefs which are both *forced* (unavoidable whether we believe or don’t believe) and *momentous* (they make a significant difference to our lives).

Blaise Pascal, the French mathematician and philosopher maintained that atheism was an irrational stance, since rationality should determine that we choose to believe. Pascal observed that there were two possible choices and four possible outcomes:

Choice/outcomes	If correct	If wrong
Believe that God exists	Eternal bliss – all gain	Extinction – no gain; no loss
Do not believe that God exists	Extinction – no gain; no loss	Eternal punishment – all loss

Pascal argued that if presented with these alternatives, the rational person must choose to believe and although that choice may involve some sacrifices - obedience to moral rules, for example - that was a small price worth paying when the potential rewards were so great. To risk the terrible possibility of eternal punishment by gambling on God’s non-existence was simply folly. Hence, theism is the safe bet, the only option that the rational person should take.



Seminar task:

In your group identify three strengths and three weaknesses of Pascal’s Wager and use them to answer the question ‘To what extent is Pascal’s Wager persuasive?’ (NB – this is not an exam type question).

Writing task:

- (a) Explain **two** ways of understanding the relationship between faith and reason.
- (b) Assess which of these two ways is the more convincing.

Topic 2: Is Religious Language Meaningful?

AIM

At the end of this topic you should be able to:

- Understand the nature of the problems surrounding religious language
- Understand the concept of meaningful and meaningless
- Explain the nature of cognitive and non-cognitive language
- Examine and evaluate the Verification Principle
- Examine and evaluate the Falsification Principle
- Understand the concept of Via Negativa
- Explain concepts of univocal and equivocal language
- Examine issues concerning analogy, symbol and myth
- Understand the meaning of the Language Game Theory
- Evaluate the arguments for and against the use and validity of religious language

The Nature of Religious Language

Religious language is concerned with the way we speak about God, faith and religious belief. It includes:

- Description of the nature and aspects of God, such as 'omnipotence'
- Descriptions of religious belief, such as the 'Last Judgment'
- Religious technical terms, such as 'sin', 'blessing' and 'grace'
- Ordinary words that have a special religious meaning such as 'good' and 'love'

The main problem with religious language is that it is difficult to use human, earthly words to describe a transcendent God who is above and beyond all human experience. Human words are inadequate and this creates misunderstandings and confusion. It has led some to suggest that any attempt to speak meaningfully about God is impossible.

Cognitive and Non-Cognitive language

However, there are certain religious concepts and ideas that can be accurately described in human terms – this is when cognitive (realist) language is used, that is:

- Factual statements that can be proved to be either true or false, for example by empirical research such as '*The Pope is a Catholic*'
- Statements that contain meaningful factual content (at least for believers) such as '*God loves me*'

In 'Theology and Falsification', Anthony Flew described cognitive language as consisting of:

'...crypto-commands, expressions of wishes, disguised ejaculations, concealed ethics, or anything else but assertions.'

There are other religious terms which, although not factually true, can also be understood in other ways – for example as symbols, myths or moral commands. This is called non-cognitive (anti-realist) language and it deals with statements that express a religious truth for believers – for example 'Jesus is the Son of God' is a truth for Christians.



For reflection:

Think of other examples of cognitive and non-cognitive religious language?

Can religious language ever be meaningful?

Nevertheless, religious language rarely contains statements of fact that can be empirically checked or verified. Is it, then, of any value? There are two main principles that can be used to determine the value of a statement.

The Verification Principle

In the 1920s a group of philosophers known as the Vienna Circle, became an influential part of the movement known as Logical Positivism and, from this, came the Verification Principle. Influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein's *picture theory of language*, this group suggested that a statement is meaningful if it can be defined, or pictured, in the real world. They argued that, for language to be meaningful, it has to follow certain principles of science and mathematics in order to be verifiable by empirical testing, logic or experience. To be meaningful, a statement must fulfil one or more of the following criteria:

- **Analytic statements** - true by definition (e.g. 'a circle is round'). These are *a priori* statements that are true because they contain their own verification.
- **Mathematical statements**
- **Synthetic statements** - true or false by empirical testing. These are *a posteriori* statements, for instance, 'birds fly'. In addition, theoretical statements such as 'there is life on other planets' may also be included as meaningful since they may be verified or falsified at some time in the future.



For reflection

Are statements such as 'love your neighbour' or 'money is the root of all evil' meaningful under these criteria?

On this basis, the Vienna Circle concluded that religious statements were meaningless, since they did not satisfy any of these criteria.

A.J. Ayer, in 'Language, Truth and Logic' observed that since the existence of God could not be rationally demonstrated, it was not even probable. Since the term 'god' is a metaphysical term referring to a transcendent being then the existence of God could not be proved logically or rationally. He argued that any statement about God was therefore meaningless. He wrote:

'The notion of a being whose essential attributes are non-empirical is not an intelligible notion at all'

Ayer went on to suggest that religious descriptions of the soul, life after death and heaven were also meaningless because they could not be verified. In the same way, he dismissed the claims of those who said they had undergone a religious experience because such testimonies could not be empirically verified:

'The fact that people have religious experiences is interesting from the psychological point of view, but it does not in any way imply that there is such a thing as religious knowledge'.

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Criticisms of the Verification Principle

However, the Verification Principle has problems itself, because many of the statements it categorizes as meaningless clearly do have meaning. For example:

- Statements that express opinions or emotions, such as *'I love you'* cannot be empirically verified but nevertheless do have meaning.
- Ethical and moral statements such as *'Do not commit murder'* are not empirically verifiable, but certainly have meaning.
- Laws of science cannot be always be completely verified - for example, when we say that *'gravity always makes thing fall to the ground'*, we do not know if this will always be true, yet this statement is still meaningful
- Historical statements such as *'The Battle of Hastings took place in 1066'* are meaningful though there is no one alive who could claim to have experienced the event.
- Finally, the Verification Principle cannot itself be verified, for there is no empirical experience that can prove it to be true

To answer these criticisms, Ayer suggested a 'strong' and 'weak' form of the Verification Principle:

- Strong verification occurs when there is no doubt that a statement is true, such as *'The grass is green'*.
- Weak verification occurs where there is not absolute certainty, but where there is a strong likelihood of truth because of the evidence, such as *'William the Conqueror won the Battle of Hastings'*.

'A proposition is verifiable in the strong sense if, and only if, its truth could be conclusively established...but it is verifiable in the weak sense if it is possible for experience to render it probable.' - Ayer



Seminar Topic:

How did A J Ayer distinguish between strong and weak verification?

Was he right?

Is the Verification Principle convincing?

However, recent scholars have begun to argue differently. Keith Ward in 'Holding Fast to God' observed that God's existence *could* be verified in principle since:

'If I were God I would be able to check the truth of my own existence.'

John Hick in 'Faith and Knowledge' said that many religious language claims, such as '*Jesus was born in Bethlehem*' are historical and could be seen as meaningful because they are verifiable in principle. He illustrated this in his 'Parable of the Celestial City'. Here, two people are walking along a road. One believes that it leads to the Celestial City; the other believes that it is a road to nowhere. They have many problems to deal with as they travel. One sees these problems as being sent by God to prepare them for life in the Celestial City; the other sees them as random chance. Only when they reach the end of the road will they know the truth. Hick called this 'eschatological verification'. Although the destination was unknown, the journey and their beliefs as to where it is heading, were meaningful for the travellers.

The Falsification Principle

The doubts about the Verification Principle led to a new test – the Falsification Principle, which asks what would prove a religious language statement to be false. Hick in 'Faith and Knowledge' observed:

'In order to say something which may possibly be true, we must say something which may possibly be false.'

Anthony Flew took the scientific view that, to check the truth of something means to check the falseness of it as well:

'What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or the existence of, God?'

Flew claimed that religious believers were often guilty of not allowing evidence against the existence or love of God and instead hid behind vague answers such as '*God's love is incomprehensible*' when they cannot explain why God seems to allow terrible things to happen. Flew claimed that such believers were allowing their definition of God to:

'...die the death of a thousand qualifications'

Flew used John Wisdom's famous '*Parable of the Gardener*' to highlight how believers continue to refuse to accept anything that counts against the existence of God. In this story, two men are in a garden. The first sees some plants growing among the weeds and believes the garden has a design about it, and he suggests that there must be an invisible gardener. The second man argues that there is no gardener, because a gardener would have removed the weeds. The men examine the garden and find some things that suggest that there is a gardener and others that there is not. In the end, the first insists that there is an invisible, intangible garden. The second asks what the difference is between an invisible gardener, and no gardener.

Flew claimed that religious language was meaningless because believers did not allow for any of their beliefs about God to be proved false:

'Now it often seems to people who are not religious as if there was no conceivable event...the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people to be a sufficient reason for conceding... "God does not really love us then.'

Flew argued that if nothing is allowed to count against a claim such as '*God loves us as a father loves his children*' then the claim means nothing, since anything is apparently consistent with the claim, even the death of thousands of children in an earthquake. He argued that this reluctance by believers to see their views challenged sounded the end of any meaningful use of religious language.



Seminar Topic

Is the Falsification Principle a convincing one?
Is Flew right about religious believers?

Criticisms of the Falsification Principle

However, not all scholars agree with Flew. R M Hare claimed that when believers use religious language, they are using it in a unique way, which he called '*bliks*:'

'Ways of regarding the world which are in principle neither verifiable nor falsifiable - but modes of cognition to which the terms 'veridical' or 'illusory' properly apply'.

Hare used the example of a student who was convinced that a lunatic teacher was plotting to kill him. He would not accept any evidence that he was shown to the contrary and he would not accept evidence that would falsify his belief. In other words, his determination to see the world in a particular way was a '*blik*' – his belief was meaningful to him, even if it was not empirically true.

For Hare, religious believers use religious language to express concepts that are important to them and which make a significant difference to their personal lives that can be empirically observed – for example, statements such as ‘*Jesus is my Saviour*’ and therefore, these statements do have meaning.

Basil Mitchell in the *Parable of the Partisan and the Stranger* highlighted the fact that, although many religious believers do accept that their beliefs can be challenged; nevertheless, they will continue to believe them even if the evidence is overwhelmingly against them. In the parable, a partisan meets a stranger whom he believes is the secret leader of the resistance movement. At times, the stranger seems to be working against the movement, but the partisan is told that it is all part of the stranger’s plan. The partisan continues to believe the stranger because he has faith in him even though his friends strongly disagree. The partisan continues to hold fast to his belief even when the evidence is unclear.

Mitchell called these beliefs ‘*significant articles of faith*’, which the believer knows are open to challenge, but, because of his/her faith, will never allow the evidence to falsify their belief.

Richard Swinburne in ‘The Coherence of Theism’ went further, claiming that many such statements have real meaning even though they cannot be empirically proved or falsified:

‘There are plenty of examples of statements which some people judge to be factual which are not apparently confirmable or disconfirmable through observation. For example: Some of the toys which to all appearances stay in the toy cupboard while people are asleep and no one is watching actually get up and dance in the middle of the night and then go back to the cupboard, leaving no traces of their activity.’

Finally, R. B. Braithwaite argued that religious language is about the way in which people behave towards one another and that religious language can be meaningful because it expresses an intention to follow a certain code of conduct.



Seminar Topic:

Assess the strengths and weaknesses of these scholarly views.

Which scholars’ views are, in your opinion, closest to being right?

Why?

The Via Negativa

The *Via Negativa* is the view that the truth about God can be discovered by speaking negatively about him - the way to find out what God is like is first to discover what he is not like. By ruling out what he is not, then we will discover what he is. This is the principle of negation.

Aquinas argued that the Via Negativa emphasised the unknowability of God. He suggested that to talk positively about something requires a subject and that God, who is above all things, and existentially different from them, cannot be a subject. Therefore it is much more meaningful to talk negatively, rather than positively, about his qualities.

Certainly, this view avoids many of the problems of using human language to describe the qualities of God – it is easier to say what he is not. Peter Cole in 'Philosophy of Religion' wrote:

'...by denying all descriptions of God you get insight and experience of God rather than unbelief and scepticism.'

Criticisms of the Via Negativa

- It does not allow God to be described in factual terms
- The *Via Negativa* cannot distinguish theism from atheism, since to say that God can only be spoken of in negatives means denying the existence of God altogether.
- Believers always want to speak positively about God, not negatively



For Reflection

Is the Via Negativa a useful tool for understanding religious language?

Concepts of Religious Language

In religious language, certain words are not always to be taken literally and the meaning of words and phrases can often depend on an understanding of the way religious language is actually used. There are several possibilities:

(i) Univocal Language

Univocal language occurs when words are used in their everyday sense. In religious language this means, for example, using 'God's love' and 'Sarah's love' to mean the same thing. This way of using language makes it possible to understand God as we know the nature of God's love because we understand human love. However, univocal language does not always work because if we refer to God and humans in the same way, then we are unable to differentiate between them. Aquinas wrote in the 'Summa Theologica':

'But no name belongs to God in the same sense that it belongs to creatures; for instance, wisdom in creatures is a quality, but not in God.' equivocally.

(ii) Equivocal Language

Equivocal language is when the same word is used in a totally different way. Whilst we may use everyday words to describe God, because the nature of God is so different from the nature of humanity, then when we refer to God as being 'loving' or 'just' we are using these words in a different way. God's love is not of the same nature and quality as human love. Using equivocal language, therefore, is useful in highlighting how God's qualities are similar, yet distinct, from human ones – though often this makes it difficult, if not impossible, to understand God. Aquinas observed:

'Neither, on the other hand, are names applied to God and creatures in a purely equivocal sense, as some have said. Because if that were so, it follows that from creatures nothing could be known or demonstrated about God at all.'



For reflection:

What is the difference between equivocal and univocal language?
Give examples

(iii) Analogical language (Analogy)

Analogical language uses human terms such as 'good' and 'love' and applies them in a similar, but not identical way to God. Thus, God's love is similar to human love but infinitely superior. In this way, analogy enables people to speak meaningfully about a transcendent God, by using human terms to describe, in a proportionate way, the qualities of God. In 'A Dictionary of Christian Theology', Burrell wrote:

'Analogies are proportional similarities which also acknowledge dissimilar features.'

Aquinas claimed that although God is not a being like other beings, nevertheless, we can reason about him by using words in a non-literal way that show there is a relationship between words used in one sense as opposed to another. Aquinas called this the '*gradation to be found in things.*' He said that all the goodness and love in humanity came first from God and, therefore, God and humanity are '*analogously related*' to him. All the positive qualities of humanity belong to God in greater and more perfect ways and we understand God through our experience of these human qualities:

'Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble and the like.... 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.'

There are two types of analogy:

- *Analogy of Proportionality* - all good qualities belong infinitely to God and, in proportion, to humans – for instance, an insect has life, a human has life, God has life; there is a proportionate relationship. We still cannot fully understand God, but at least we can begin to understand his nature.
- *Analogy of Attribution* - God is the cause of all good things in humans and therefore God's attributes are a higher level of our own. John Hick spoke of an 'upwards' analogy – speaking of a dog being faithful to its master and then going upwards to a human being faithful to God and a 'downwards' analogy where human love is a pale downwards reflection of God's love.

In 'Philosophy and the Christian Faith', Colin Brown noted:

'Divine truth has to be refracted and expressed in terms of human words and finite images.'



Seminar Topic

Give examples of analogies of proportion and attribution.
Is analogy an effective argument?

Ian Ramsey went further, offering a '*models and qualifiers*' approach to analogy:

- A model is an analogy that helps us to express something about God, such as '*God is love*'. The model is the word 'love'. We know what love means in human terms and when we apply it to God, it gives us a model to understand the love of God.
- A qualifier is a word that adapts or improves the model to increase our understanding of God. It does this by putting God's attributes on a greater level, for instance by adding the qualifier that '*God is infinite love*'. In this way, we can think of God's love in a deeper and more meaningful way.

Writing Task;

- a. Explain the view that religious language can only be understood in the context of religious belief.
- b. 'All religious language claims are meaningless'. Evaluate this claim.

(iv) Symbolic Language

A symbol is something that identifies the concept that it is referring to and participates in the meaning of that concept. Erika Dinkler-von Schubert in 'A Handbook of Christian Theology' defined a symbol as:

'A pattern or object which points to an invisible metaphysical reality and participates in it.'

Symbols can be words, pictures, objects and actions. A national flag, for example, is a symbol of national identity; a wedding ring is a symbol of love or the exchange of rings at a wedding, symbolizing eternal love. In most religious traditions symbols are very important – for instance, the cross in Christianity identifies the religion and also participates in the Christian concept of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, leading salvation and eternal life. Symbolic statements might include Jesus' famous sayings: *'I am the bread of life'* and *'I am the good shepherd.'*



For reflection

What is the difference between a symbol and a sign?

Symbols go beyond factual information and should not be interpreted literally because they go beyond our normal factual understanding. The most common kinds of symbolic language found in religion are myths and metaphors. Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams:

'Like all other serious human discourse, religious language requires a symbolic foundation.'

In 'Systematic Theology' Paul Tillich supported symbolic language in religion, claiming that it was a positive way of expressing the nature of God in terms of what he called:

'...the ground of our being', or '.....that which concerns us ultimately.'

In 'Dynamics of Faith' he said that:

'Symbolic language alone is able to express the ultimate because it transcends the capacity of any finite reality to express it directly.'

In 'Holding Fast to God,' Keith Ward said that symbol was crucial to religious language is rooted in people's awareness of the human dimensions of their experience:

'God' is that mysterious depth which is mediated in certain symbols and events in our lives.'

One of the most important types of symbolic language is myth. A myth is a story which uses symbols and imagery to express a truth when it is not known for certain what actually happened. Some parts of the Bible, such as the story of creation and Noah's Ark, are regarded by many scholars as myths – not factually true accounts of events, but myths written by the Biblical writers to explain what they did not know for certain. Millar Burrows in 'An Outline of Biblical Theology' observed:

'Myth is a symbolic, approximate expression of truth which the human mind cannot perceive sharply and completely, but can only glimpse vaguely, and therefore cannot adequately or accurately express.'



Seminar/ Research Topic

What other biblical events would you regard as myths – why?

Should Christians believe that the Bible is all literally true?

How can we know which parts of the Bible are fact and which are myth? Does it matter?

For religious language, the purpose of myths is to convey concepts which are beyond our understanding or which cannot be explained in everyday terms – for example, how did God create the world? Equally, in the scriptures themselves, there are mythical words used to describe Judgement Day itself:

'For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangels' call and with the sound of the trumpet of God...and we, both alive and dead, will rise to meet the Lord in the air'

- 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

Criticism of Symbolism and Myth

The main problem with the use of symbol and myth in religious language is that they are open to different interpretations. It is difficult to know exactly what they mean and so:

- The original meaning may be lost
- Symbolic objects may become the focus of worship, for example, relics of the saints
- Symbols and myths become outdated

Tillich observed:

'It is necessary to rediscover the questions to which the Christian symbols are the answers in a way which is understandable to our time'

Rudolph Bultmann argued that, in order to find out the truth of God, religious language should be demythologized and the myths contained in the scriptures should be removed. In this way, he believed, the real truth of the scriptures would be revealed and this would help the faith of religious believers. He believed that it was impossible for humanity in modern times to believe such

outdated stories and that the scriptures would be more effective and useful without them:

'It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries and at the same time, to believe in the New Testament world of demons and spirits.'

More recently, Richard Dawkins said in 'The God Delusion':

'...much of the Bible is ... just plain weird, as you would expect of a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted and 'improved' by hundreds of anonymous authors...'



For research

To what extent do analogy and/or symbol solve the problems of religious language?

Language Games

In 'Philosophical Investigations' Ludwig Wittgenstein suggested a new theory concerned with the meaningfulness of religious language. He argued that language statements of any kind were not intended to be true or false for everyone, but only for those who were within what he called '*form of life*' – for instance, a medical statement would be true or false for a doctor but not, necessarily, for a chef.

He believed that all language was a game and that in every 'form of life' (for instance, science, mathematics, sport and religion) words are used within the context of the subject area – the 'game'. All 'forms of life' have their own language and have their own rules concerning meaning. The language in the game is non-cognitive, that is, it is not about making universally true statements, but to communicate meaning to other people in the same game.

Thus, religious language is about making meaningful statements to religious believers. These statements do not have to be meaningful to anyone else outside the game. The player of one language game cannot criticize the player of another, or enter into a game without first learning the rules and conventions of the language of that form of life. Each game has its own '*criteria of coherence*' which can only be understood by playing the right game by the right rules. Wittgenstein summed this up as:

'Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use.'

For instance, an expression such as '*Jesus saves*' in religion has a totally different meaning from the same words used, for example, in football when we talk about how the '*goalkeeper saves*.' The word '*saves*' is being used in two different language games. Wittgenstein noted:

'I think differently, in a different way. I say different things to myself. I have a different picture.'

Those who don't play the religious language game will hear religious language and misunderstand it. Wittgenstein called this a '*category mistake*'. For instance, if a believer spoke of their 'soul' and a scientist then tried to find it as a physical object, then this would be a clash of language games and this would be '*...a blunder that's too big.*'

Peter Vardy in 'The Puzzle of God' observed:

'God exists' is true not because the word 'God' refers to an everlasting being or a timeless substance, but rather because the phrase 'God exists' has a use and a purpose within the form of life of the believing community.

This view was supported by D.Z. Phillips in his works 'Religious Beliefs and Language Games' and 'The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God', where he suggested that religious language means what it says to religious believers, even though it may seem meaningless to everyone else. He argued that religious believers think of God as a real and conscious being who knows, loves and hears them. As a result, it makes perfect sense for a believer to address God as 'Father' and speak to him in prayer and worship. Therefore, expressions such as 'Save me, O God' (Psalm 69:1) and 'Our Father, who art in Heaven...' (Matthew 6:9) are perfectly understandable. For Phillips therefore, religious language must be understood in the context of religious belief. He notes:

'...by looking at the application of religious concepts we find what it means to speak of an objectively real God who is at a distance from human beings.'



Seminar Topic

How does the creation story fit in with language games?
Does this clash with science or not?

Advantages of Language Game Theory

- Highlights the non-cognitive nature of religious language
- Language games provide boundaries for the correct use of language
- Believers can learn the rules of religious language
- Religious language games defend religion against criticisms from other 'forms of life' since truth is understood as relative and statements are to be judged against their context and not whether they are objectively true or false

Weaknesses of Language Game Theory

- Religious language games do not allow for believers' claims to be empirically tested
- Religious language alienates those outside the game
- The rules of the games cannot be changed to allow outsiders in



For reflection

In what ways can myths be seen as being part of a religious language game?

Conclusion

As far as religious language is concerned, there is no single theory that satisfies everyone. Although religious language does not give us absolute and empirically-provable truths, nevertheless, it gives us revealing insights into the nature of human belief in God. Peter Vardy wrote:

'In finding the value of religious language, the individual finds God.'

Writing Task

(a) To what extent have the problems of using religious language been resolved by philosophers?

(b) 'Arguments about the meaningfulness of religious language are unconvincing.' Examine and evaluate this claim.

Topic Three: Is religious faith compatible with scientific evidence?

AIM

At the end of this topic you should be able to:

- Explain the range of philosophical definitions and concepts of miracle;
- Evaluate the adequacy of these definitions
- Understand the problems arising from the concepts of 'laws of nature' and 'an interventionist God'
- Explain challenges to belief in miracles, with particular reference to Hume and assess to what extent arguments against the occurrence of miracles are convincing
- Explain arguments in defence of the reality of the miraculous and assess to what extent belief in miracles is reasonable, and even essential for a religious believer
- Explain the relationship between contemporary religious and scientific views of the origin of the universe and human life
- Explain concepts of creation and evolution and theories of Intelligent Design, Big Bang and continuous creation
- Evaluate how far attempts to reconcile religious and scientific views of the origin of the world and of the origin of human life are successful

1. The concept of miracle

Miracles are a type of religious experience and have great power to convert people and to confirm religious belief, and there are thousands of testimonies given throughout the ages of people who claimed to have experienced miracles. It is important therefore, that we know what we are talking about when we use the term before we can begin to discuss whether accounts of miracles should be considered reliable.

Although defining what is meant by the term 'miracle' may seem obvious to some, it is a rather more subtle concept than it first appears. The traditional, classic definition of 'miracle' is usually 'a violation of a natural law', a definition which seems to have been uppermost in David Hume's mind, when, in **An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding** (1748) he defined a miracle as '*A transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity or the interposition of some invisible agent*' and claimed that '*Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happens in the common course of nature*'. Two key ideas appear to be contained within this definition: a breach, violation, or transgression of nature, and the **intervention** of an external agency – 'the Deity', which is, of course, God. J L Mackie implies much the same in his definition: "*A miracle occurs when the world is not left to itself, when something distinct from the natural order as a whole intrudes into it*' (**The Miracle of Theism**, 1982). Essentially, again, a miracle is defined as an event which would not occur within our regular experience of how the world works, but is the result of something outside the world acting upon it. For Aquinas

too, miracles are “*Those things ... which are done by divine power apart from the order generally followed in things.*”



For reflection:

What is your initial reaction to the idea of miracles? Do you think it is possible that miracles may occur or are you inclined to reject that possibility? Do you think your views may be open to change, and why?

Interestingly, even Hume acknowledges that to speak of a miracle usually, if not always, means to speak of God’s intervention in the regular order of things, and the notion of an interventionalist God is an important concept for the religious believer. Furthermore, the concept of laws of nature is not without its difficulties, which we shall examine in due course.

- **What are laws of nature?**

The idea that we experience the world as working in a regular manner is an essential theme within the natural sciences. We perceive patterns within nature which we can explain and which make the world intelligible. In the world view of the medieval and Renaissance periods, which was self-evidently more religious than our modern world view, this regularity, or ordering, of the universe, was inextricably linked with the belief that a rational God had created an ordered world. In fact, to speak of creation was to speak of an order and coherence which reflected the very nature of God and which could be discerned by the human mind. Isaac Newton argued that the regularity of the world derived from its divine creation, and the phrase ‘law of nature’ began to be used in the 18th century to describe a world ordered by a divine creator and lawgiver. A law of nature was effectively a description of features of the world that were *intended* to act in that way and at the time it had real religious implications.

Today, the term has been secularized and for scientists it has lost its religious significance but it is still used readily enough to describe those principles which are thought to be universal, fixed, unchanging and beyond human intervention. Whilst David Hume suggested that the human mind imposes order and regularity on the world, Paul Davies is clear that this is not the view of modern science: ‘*The existence of regularities in nature is an objective mathematical fact...we are uncovering real regularities and linkages out of nature, not writing them into nature*’ (**The Mind of God: Science and the search for ultimate meaning**, 1992).

For the religious believer, this ordering is linked with divine creation, not only that God brings the world into being, but that he also sustains it. This leads inevitably to questions about the nature of God’s involvement in the world and the possibility of miracles as events in which God, in response to human need and according to his will, directly intervenes in the regular ordering of the world and allows the natural laws of the world to operate differently.



Seminar Topic:

Do you agree that laws of nature are to be discovered by humans, rather than imposed by the human mind? In pairs identify three 'laws of nature' and discuss whether you think there is evidence that they have real objective existence in the world. Feedback the outcome of your discussion to the rest of the class.

▪ Is this enough for a miracle?

There is more to the notion of a miracle than the violation of, or exception to, a law of nature, however. To be accurately defined as a miracle, an event must have religious significance. In fact, Richard Swinburne argues that this is the primary characteristic of a miracle, since an event may have religious significance and be unexpected or unusual, but it need not violate a law of nature. In other words, it may be improbable, but not impossible. Even if God did intervene in the natural order it would not be sufficient to call it a miracle if there were no religious significance. As Swinburne observes: *'If a god intervened in the natural order to make a feather land here rather than there for no deep ultimate purpose... (it) would not naturally be described as (a) miracle'* (**Miracles, 1989**).

Furthermore, Swinburne argues that an event may be described a miracle if it is not strictly speaking outside natural law, but happens in a time scale or in circumstances which render it unusual. He identifies: *'Resurrection from the dead in full health of a man whose heart has not been beating for twenty-four hours... water turning into wine without the assistance of chemical apparatus or catalysts...'* (**Miracles, 1989**) as events which in the regular course of events may not be unusual, after all people do make unexpected recoveries from even the most serious conditions, and water is used as the basis for wine making. However, the time scale and circumstances distinguish them from these naturally explicable events and may be deemed miraculous.



For research

What miracles from the New Testament fit the events described here by Swinburne? Identify other miracles from the Old and New Testaments and discuss what is the key element which makes them miraculous.

Thomas Aquinas identified three categories of miracles:

1. Events done by God, which nature could never do, e.g. stopping the sun (Joshua 10:13). Such an event would be described as a classic violation of a law of nature miracle.
2. Events done by God, which nature could do, but not in that order e.g. exorcisms or other healings (Mark 1:31). These events would not be impossible, but certainly highly unexpected or improbable.

3. Events done by God, which nature can do, but God does by bypassing natural laws, such as healing by the forgiveness of sin (Mark 2:5). In these cases, it is possible that the healing may have taken place if nature was left to its own devices, but God intervenes and acts directly and speedily in the situation.

Interestingly, these three different categories of miracle allow for an increasingly weak understanding of the term. The final category of events are those which are interpreted or discerned as being due to God's action and this may be a matter of faith rather than evidence. We could go further than Aquinas' third category and add more, each moving further away from the classic strong violation miracle, including, perhaps the wonder felt at a beautiful sunset, or a coincidence of fortuitous events. These are events which some might feel quite comfortable describing as miraculous, but they are not satisfactory definitions and ultimately include too much. If an event can be explained entirely satisfactorily in terms of natural patterns and behavior, it cannot justifiably be called a miracle.



For reflection

Do you think the philosophical understanding of a miracle is too limited? Do you think it should be extended to include fortunate coincidences, or humanly unexpected events, such as, for example, a League Two football club winning the FA Cup? Why/why not? If the manager of Accrington Stanley FC were a Christian and prayed that the club would win the FA cup and they did, would that make it more likely to have been a miracle?

What do you understand by the phrase 'The miracle of childbirth?' Is this a contradictory phrase? Are people philosophically ignorant when they use phrases like this or can it be justified?

2. Challenges to belief in miracles

(i) Laws of nature

The classic definition of a strong miracle is, as we have seen, dependent on the view that God intervenes in an otherwise regular natural order. However, it may be that laws of nature may not exist, or at least we do not know them all or how they operate. John Hick suggests that natural laws may, in fact, be no more than "...*generalisations formulated retrospectively to cover what has, in fact, happened*" in which case if we experienced an apparent anomaly of a law of nature rather than immediately calling it a miracle, we should consider broadening our understanding of the relevant law to incorporate this new information. The 'breaking' of the natural law may just be something that we did not understand or expect but can be incorporated into our knowledge of the natural order. Furthermore, scientists argue that within nature, a certain amount of unexpected or random actions may occur. Mel Thompson argues that: "*The idea of a miraculous event introduces a sense of arbitrariness and*

unpredictability into an understanding of the world (**Philosophy of Religion, 1996**) implying that we can allow for irregularities within the natural order without necessarily inferring God's intervention.

Indeed, it is possible that given the incomplete nature of our understanding of natural laws, all events, however inexplicable they may appear, can eventually be incorporated into our understanding of the way the natural world works, as we have already come to understand events which were once deemed 'unnatural' acts of God, such as volcanoes or earthquakes. This argument, taken to its logical conclusion, would, in due course, render it unnecessary to designate any event as a miracle as scientific methods would have made it possible to explain every observable event and belief in God may become entirely unnecessary.



Seminar Topic

In pairs, think of two things which are physically impossible now, but which may be possible in the future, in the way, perhaps, that space travel or even basic computer technology were impossible 100 years ago. In what ways might our understanding of laws of nature change in the light of the things you have identified? Do you agree that if we can explain every event in terms of laws of nature that belief in God is rendered unnecessary?



For reflection

Richard Swinburne suggests that the resurrection of Jesus can reasonably be called a miracle because it is unlikely to happen again under similar circumstances. Do you agree? Explain why/why not.

(ii) God's action in the world

The understanding of miracles as evidence of God intervening in the natural order also raises problems since we need to consider what this says about the nature of God and how he acts. A theistic view of God is of an interventionalist God, who has not created the world and withdrawn, but who continues to sustain it and who is capable of intervening in it. Aquinas further identified God's intervention in the world through secondary causes. Those secondary causes are the agencies within the world which God works through, despite their fallibility. God responds to human choices and actions so that ultimately, human history represents the way in which his will is made known. Alistair McGrath describes it thus: *'God, so to speak, delegates divine action to secondary causes within the natural order. For example, God might move a human will from within...Here an action which is God's will is carried out indirectly by God – yet, according to Aquinas, we can still speak of this action being 'caused' by God in some meaningful way'* (**Science and Religion - A New Introduction, 2010**) Austin Farrar described this as 'double

agency' – the agency of the secondary cause (an agent or objects in the world) and the primary cause, which is God.

It should be clear, however, that although this understanding of God's working in the world might allow for God's involvement in the Big Bang or evolution (more of this later), it does not allow for violations of natural laws of which God must be the primary cause. The God of classical theism, however, is not a God who acts arbitrarily and any intervention must demonstrate more than his power, but also his love and commitment to his creation, which takes us back to the notion that miracles must point beyond themselves to reveal something of religious significance.

God's relationship with the world is closely linked with whether it is reasonable to think of him performing miracles. Nelson Pike argues that because the God of classical theism is outside time, God cannot act in the world, and this problem can only be resolved by accepting that whilst God may be timeless, he can still bring about events which are within time, or even, that God exists within time but is unaffected by it. Whichever way we may look at this, miracles may also be said to compromise human free will, since God's action, however, beneficial, removes the responsibility for humans to make choices for themselves.



Seminar Topic:

Richard Swinburne observes: *If there is a God, one might well expect him to make his presence known to man, not merely through the overall pattern of the universe in which he placed them, but by dealing more intimately and personally with them.* (**The Existence of God**, 1979)

In pairs discuss the view that belief in miracles is an essential part of what it means to believe in God. Make notes on arguments for and against this view and aim to reach a clear conclusion one way or the other supported by reasoning and argument. Present your case to the rest of the class and be ready to defend it against criticism. Don't fall back on the view that it doesn't matter what anyone thinks, it's up to the believer to decide – try to reach a conclusion which you think is *true*.

(iii) The purpose of miracles

Because miracles may appear to be arbitrary or selective, they raise serious criticisms regarding their purpose. For example, in St. Clare's Basilica in Naples, the people regularly gather to see the apparent miracle of St Gennaro's blood liquefying before their eyes. Peter Vardy in **The Puzzle of God** (1999) questions the specific nature of some miracles on moral grounds: *"A God who intervenes at Lourdes to cure an old man of cancer but does not act to save starving millions in Ethiopia – such a God needs, at least, to face some hard moral questioning"* whilst Maurice Wiles writes: *"It seems strange that no miraculous intervention prevented Auschwitz or Hiroshima. The purposes apparently forwarded for some of the miracles acclaimed in the Christian tradition seem trivial by comparison"* (**God's Action in the World** 1986). The problem Wiles highlights is that miracles which benefit individuals

appear to have no greater purpose, but both Keith Ward and Richard Swinburne defend God's right to act occasionally in ways which do not have far reaching consequences. If God intervened more often and in more far reaching ways, then his relationship with the world would be fundamentally changed, and humans would have little reason to work themselves to find cures and to share in the task of stewarding God's creation.

Jesus made clear that the purpose of his miracles was to point beyond themselves to his relationship with God: *Just believe it – that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. Or else believe it because of the mighty miracles you have seen me do*" (John 14:11). However, even Jesus could not cure everyone in need during his ministry and many must have been left disappointed. He cryptically anticipated the criticism this might generate in his synagogue sermon:

²³Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum' " ²⁴"I tell you the truth," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. ²⁶Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. ²⁷And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian" - Luke 4:23-27



For reflection

Do you think that only an immoral or unloving God would heal an individual of cancer, but ignore the fate of those trapped in the Twin Towers or on the sinking Titanic? What would be the implications of God intervening in events such as these? Would they be positive or negative or is it impossible to reach a balanced judgment?

- **Fortuitous coincidences, symbols and myths**

R F. Holland famously suggested that a miracle is nothing more than an extraordinary coincidence that is seen in a religious way (an example of 'seeing as') - "*A coincidence can be taken religiously as a sign and called a miracle*". If a mother has prayed for her son's safety in the path of an oncoming train, and the child is apparently saved from harm, it is likely that she will have good reason to believe that God has acted miraculously in the world, in her son's moment of crisis. However the event is subsequently explained to her she will continue to interpret it in this way since this is how she has perceived it. This is an anti-realist understanding of miracle which allows the individual or group to interpret an event as miraculous even if conflicting evidence reasonably allows an alternative explanation. The improbability of the event highlights the sense that it can only have come about through divine agency, despite the fact that improbable events occur on a regular basis and for which no divine explanation is given – winning the lottery, for example.

Realists argue that miracles are objectively real events and that, if there is a God, he would indeed make them happen, to increase the faith of his people. Anti-realists, however, suggest that miracles are symbolic events that help believers to understand the nature of God and are only properly understood by the religious believer.

Along similar lines, D F Strauss's book, **The Life of Jesus Critically Examined** (1835) adopted the term 'myth' to cover all the miraculous elements in the gospels. He shifted the focus from the 'story of a **miraculous occurrence**' to '**the story** of a miraculous occurrence'. Controversially for his time, he argued that the miracle stories were not proofs of Jesus' messiahship, but potentially problematic narratives which could not be empirically verified. Over a century later, Rudolph Bultmann wrote that: *It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless, and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and demons* (**Kerygma and Myth** 1953). He claimed that the modern reader must demythologise the biblical text to find the meaning that its writers intended to convey. Removing the miraculous elements of the story would, Bultmann argued, make it possible to re-experience the gospel in a more relevant way.



Seminar Topic:

In pairs discuss whether you find the anti-realist view of miracles persuasive. Do you think there are good reasons ever to believe that objectively real miraculous events may have taken place or could take place? Is it easier for you to believe that Jesus performed miracles or that miracles may occur today?



For Research

Find out more about the work of D F Strauss and Rudolph Bultmann and make sure you can explain their understanding of miracles.

Use the Internet to research about modern day miracles, such as miracles reported at Lourdes and at massive miracle crusades around the world. Is the evidence in support of these miracles persuasive?

3. David Hume's challenges

In his classic work, **An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding (1748)**, David Hume argued that it will always be impossible to prove that a miracle has happened. He took the view that all questions of truth had to be answered by the evidence of experience. Any testimony to a miracle had to be tested against the claims of regular experience to the extent that: *"No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle unless it is such that the falsehood would be more miraculous"*.

Hume argued that miracles were logically and physically impossible since a miracle, by definition, was a violation of a law of nature, and since laws of nature were fixed, they could not be violated and hence, a miracle could not occur. Hume was not interested in the possible significance or purpose of miracles, dismissing any testimony to them on uncompromising empirical grounds:

- Lack of reliable testimony: *"There is not to be found in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good sense, education and learning, as to secure as against all delusion"*.
- The natural bias of religious believers: *"The passion of surprise and wonder, arising from miracles...gives a tendency towards belief of those events... a religionist may be an enthusiast and imagines he sees what has no reality"*.
- The intellectually questionable origin of accounts of miracles: *"It forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations that they are observed chiefly to abound amongst ignorant and barbarous nations"*.
- Conflicting claims: *"In matters of religion, whatever is different is contrary...every miracle, therefore, pretended to have been wrought in any of these religions...destroys the credit of those miracles"*.



For Research

Find out some more about David Hume's philosophy. He makes many criticisms about religious beliefs. In what ways do you think the intellectual background of his time influenced his thinking?

Problems with Hume's View

The major criticism of Hume's four points is that they are really far too generalised to be regarded as convincing evidence.

- Hume does not say what would constitute a sufficient number, or what 'unquestioned good sense, education and learning' actually means. By suggesting that there could never be a sufficient number of reliable

witnesses, Hume eliminates any number you could even think of! Furthermore, he implies that we should never trust the testimony given to any previously impossible event. If this were the case, then no one of 'good sense, education and learning' should have believed the first moon landing. Of course, some people still like to suggest that it shouldn't be believed, but they are generally considered to be wrong and that it is more reasonable to believe that it did occur. Could this not also be the case for miracles?

- Do only religious people see miracles? Moreover, are religious people intrinsically unreliable anyway? Maybe religious people see miracles because they are best equipped to do so? If you wanted to do a survey on bat numbers along a stretch of river you would be guided by a bat expert who would explain how to use a bat detector and what the sounds from it indicated, even though they would not usually be heard by the human ear. If you said you didn't trust him because he was a bat expert and of course he'd say you were hearing bats even if you weren't, that would simply not be reasonable. Why are sceptics so reluctant to put their trust in religious believers in the same way?
- Hume says that miracles are chiefly observed in 'ignorant and barbarous' nations – yet even in Hume's time the countries that reported the most miracles were France and Italy. Hume believed that accounts of miracles were legacies of pre-Enlightenment thinking, but France and Spain were leaders in the intellectual Enlightenment. In modern times, many miracles are reported all around the world, and although many are in the developing world, many others are reported in the US where technology and scientific advancement are beyond question. How could Hume explain this today?
- Finally, why does Hume assume that God (if he exists) could not work miracles for all people of all faiths? Miracles in different religions could only cancel each other out if they were actually contradictory and in many cases, miracles are shared between more than one religious tradition. For example, Christians don't reject accounts of the parting of the Red Sea because it is also accepted by Judaism. Furthermore, even if the resurrection of Jesus and the revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad may support different truth claims, they are not philosophically contradictory, and if we accept the principle of miracles as at all reasonable, there is no reason why they could not have both occurred.



For reflection

Is belief in miracles dependent on belief in God, or could a miracle have the power to persuade an atheist or agnostic to believe? Think clearly about the reasons for your answer.

Writing Task

- (a) Explain two different ways of understanding the term 'miracle'.
- (b) 'There are more reasons to reject belief in the occurrence of miracles than to accept them'. Assess this claim with special reference to David Hume's criticisms of miracles.

4. Contemporary religious and scientific views of the origins of human life and the universe.

The relationship between religious and scientific views of the world is commonly held to be one of conflict. This is a simplistic and easy model to adopt, for it sets the two disciplines apart from each other in a potentially much more controversial way than the truth of the matter. The conflict model is understandable, for up until the 16th century, religious and scientific world views were based on shared assumptions about God's role in creation, but the development of modern science in the 16th century led to new ways of understanding God's role in the universe, and to a debate which continues today.

The medieval world view placed God at the centre of the universe and everything could be explained by reference to his will. Aquinas adopted Aristotle's ideas of a Prime Mover, which he identified with God as the First Cause and Mover, but this classical view was soon to be challenged by Copernicus and Brahe over a period of around 150 years, whose work pointed to the fact that the Earth and other planets revolved around the Sun, forcing a rethinking of the relative importance of the Earth in the solar system. In 1632 Galileo published his ground breaking work which proved that the planets moved naturally and not through the agency of a First Mover which led him to believe that the Bible should not be read literally but metaphorically. This does not mean that he rejected them as valueless, but rather he encouraged a rethinking of how they were intended to be interpreted.

Isaac Newton, whose findings led to the discovery of laws of gravity and motion, nevertheless understood the regularity and predictability of these laws as the result of God's creative work. Their very predictability encouraged the idea of a clockwork or mechanical universe, with God as the clock maker. Newton's view was deistic – this means that it reflects the idea of God as a creator, who can then leave the universe to get on with itself, but his discoveries, and his development of a telescope which made it possible to make hypotheses based on evidence and observation, led some believers to abandon their faith. The universe was a machine that could run itself, human life was not unique, the Earth was not at the centre of the universe and God was not the ultimate controller. Everything would, eventually, be fully explicable in scientific terms, famously expressed by the astronomer Pierre Laplace, who responded to Napoleon's question about the role of God in his

theories, claiming '*I have no need of that hypothesis*'.

Interestingly, although the contemporary British physicist Stephen Hawking initially claimed that Laplace was wrong, writing in **A Brief History of Time** (1988) that the laws of the universe had been 'left to God', in September 2010, he made headlines with the new claim that "*Because there is a law such as gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing*". *Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist. It is not necessary to invoke God to light the blue touch paper and set the universe going*" (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-11161493>).



For reflection

What are your initial feelings about the relationship between scientific and religious world views? Do you think they must be incompatible or might they be able to complement each other?

Today, there are a wide range of religious and scientific views about the origin of the universe and human life, and whilst some are obviously contradictory and inconsistent, others show how the dialogue between science and religion has developed in a spirit of friendship over the centuries.

(i) Evolution

The work of Charles Darwin as ship's naturalist on *The Beagle*, which set sail in 1831, led to his publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. During his travels, Darwin was struck by four features of the natural world which he felt demanded an explanation:

1. Living things seemed to be adapted to their specific needs.
2. Some species had died out altogether.
3. Life forms were unevenly distributed throughout the world, and some were only found on individual islands.
4. Many animals have rudimentary structures which have no obvious function, such as wings on flightless birds. Why would God design these redundant features?

Prior to Darwin's work, Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830) had paved the way for an understanding of natural forces having been at work over much greater expanses of time than had previously been thought and fossil evidence suggested that species were not fixed. Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829) proposed an early evolutionary theory along the lines that organisms adapted to meet their needs according to their environment – for example, giraffes evolved longer necks. Humans were at the top of an evolutionary ladder as the most complex evolved life form.

Darwin took this further, and proposed that natural selection was the best mechanism to explain how evolution took place, modeled on the artificial selection he had observed in pigeon breeding and other domestic breeding. Breeders could select desirable characteristics in individual animals and selectively breed them into future generations and Darwin argued that this offered a model for what happened in nature. Because of competition for food, the young of any species compete for survival and those young which survive to produce the next generation tend to be characterised by favourable natural variations that are passed on to their descendents (natural selection). Each generation may improve adaptively over the succeeding generations, and this gradual and continual process is the source of evolution of the species. Darwin argued that all species were descended from a common ancestor – for example, all dogs from a common wolf-like ancestor, just as in the artificial breeding of pigeons the fancy varieties can all be traced back to the rock dove.



For Research

Find out more about Darwin's work, his theories and how he developed them and the difficulties he and others found with the theory of evolution by natural selection. Think about the way in which his theory was thought by some Christians to challenge belief in God's creation of the world. Was this Darwin's intention? Use the Internet and other resources to answer this question.

(ii) Evolution and religious views about creation

The religious implications of Darwin's theory were immediately apparent to traditional Christian thinkers. Because Darwin argued that humans were part of the evolutionary process their status as a special creation of God was threatened and no biological distinction could be drawn between human beings and other animals. William Paley's version of the design argument, proposed in 1802, had been seen as the model for understanding a mechanized, teleological (purposeful) world which was wholly compatible with the notion of a divine creator. However, T H Huxley, commented in 1864 in *The Natural History Review* that 'teleology, as commonly understood, had received its deathblow at Mr. Darwin's hands'. Darwin himself was aware that there were many difficulties with his theory, but he confidently maintained that it was still the best explanation available.

The religious implications were clear nonetheless. Whilst traditional Christian thought regarded humanity as set apart from the rest of nature, in the image of God and the pinnacle of God's creation, Darwin's theory suggested that human nature had also emerged over a long period of time in the same way as other animals. As Richard Dawkins so robustly argues in *The Blind Watchmaker* (1987), Darwin's theory provided a far more persuasive account of the complexity of nature than Paley had in 1802. Although Dawkins acknowledges that Paley's argument was 'informed by the best scholarship of

his day', he also comments that it is 'gloriously and utterly wrong', since the 'only watchmaker in nature is the blind forces of physics.' Paley's ideas were rendered obsolete by Darwin.

Darwin's discoveries were seen by some to deal a decisive blow to one of the most important arguments for the existence of God though there were many Christian thinkers at the time and in the years that followed, who approached the argument in terms of seeing evolution as the means by which God directed an extended process of creation, rather than a singular event.



For reflection

Do you think that Darwin's theory leaves no room for God as creator? Outline a short argument for and against this view, making sure you have reached a conclusion which grows out of your interpretation of the argument.

(iii) Evolution and Creationism

Christians who had traditionally opted for a literal reading of Genesis were particularly affected by Darwin's theory. Although they were not adopted by all Christians by any means, popular Protestantism in the UK and US in the first half of the 19th century assumed that the common sense reading of Genesis was to be taken as describing six 24 hour days of divine activity which climaxed in humanity emerging gloriously in the image of God as an act of special creation. Even though Darwin himself struggled with the fact that the status of humanity was apparently diminished by his theory, most Darwinists today would agree that there is no privileged place for humanity in an evolutionary system.

Young Earth Creationism still represents today the popular literalist reading of Genesis. It adopts the specific belief that creation took place over six days, some 6,000-10,000 years ago, and was accomplished through non-natural divine events – essentially through the miraculous intervention of God, working outside natural processes. YEC was made both popular and respectable by the publication of *The Genesis Flood* (1961) by engineer Henry Morris and biblical scholar John Whitcomb. The book's particular influence was its proposal of a 'flood geology' claiming that fossil-bearing strata had been deposited during Noah's Flood, not millions of years previously. He wrote: '*The last refuge of the case for evolution immediately vanishes away, and the record of the rocks becomes a tremendous witness... to the holiness and justice and power of the living God of creation*'. The impact of *The Genesis Flood* was considerable and it laid the foundations for the establishment of the Creation Research Association, and the emergence of Creation Science which moved to transform creationism from an eccentric discipline within biblical studies to the status of science.

YEC is expounded with great vigor amongst evangelical Protestants in the US where huge financial investment has been made in the promotion of YEC and the rejection of evolution. Influential and apparently well informed ministers present YEC as an orthodox and necessary belief and even in the UK in

2009, a study carried out by *Theos*, a public theology think tank, revealed that 11% of those polled believed YEC to be 'definitely true'.



For Research

Find out more about Young Earth Creationism (YEC) in the UK and US today. Start with this website -

<http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/mainnav/darwin/articles.aspx>.

Ironically, **Old Earth Creationism** has a longer history than YEC. Even Augustine had rejected the literal reading of Genesis leading to belief in a young earth: *'Even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heaven and the other elements of the world... Now it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian... talking nonsense on these topics.'* For many conservative Protestants today it is the majority view, and proposed that the days of creation were not 24 hours but unspecified periods of time and that a large gap occurred between the events recorded in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, representing a long period of time between the primordial creation of the universe and the emergence of life on earth. Inevitably, this reading of Genesis allows for an evolutionary perspective on the narrative.

More accommodating still, is the notion of theistic guided evolution as proposed, among others, by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who described in his book, *The Phenomenon of Man*, the evolution of life forms which became increasingly complex. Humans are evolving still to higher levels of achievement and consciousness, and at some future time – the Omega Point- everything will be integrated into Jesus Christ, making evolution part of God's plan for the destiny of humankind.

(iv) Intelligent Design

The Intelligent Design (ID) movement has gained considerable influence in the US in recent years, and is based on the principle that the universe is 'irreducibly complex' which means that its origin can only be explained in terms of intelligent design. The debate was fuelled also in the UK when the Emmanuel Schools Foundation, sponsored by Christian car dealer Sir Peter Vardy were criticised for featuring creationist theories alongside evolutionary theory in lessons in its state schools. The issue is that including creationist or intelligent design theories in science specifications is seen by some to elevate them to the status of a scientific theory, a position refuted by many scientists.

Proponents of Intelligent Design claim "*that intelligent causes are necessary to explain the complex, information-rich structures of biology and that these causes are empirically detectable*" (William A. Dembski, *Intelligent Design* (Downer's Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1999)). The theory rests on three key principles.

1. Irreducible complexities

Irreducible complexity means that all the parts of a system must be simultaneously in place for the system to work and could not have arisen through a process of gradual change such as evolution. This approach was championed by Michael Behe who uses the illustration of a mouse trap. All of the parts of a mousetrap must be present for it to work and if any part is missing, it will fail to do so. Thus, the mousetrap could not have arisen piecemeal, but must have been designed by an intelligent mind. Behe has identified several examples of biochemical systems that he feels reflect this same principle of irreducible complexity.

2. Specified complexities

This is a similar approach favoured by William Dembski who argues that design is implied whenever complexity and specification arise. He suggests that we infer intelligent design in events that are highly improbable and that also correspond to some independently given pattern. Some structures can be explained in terms of natural laws that do not necessarily point to design but other structures show obvious design because they present irreducible complexities that perform a specified task.

3. Evidence not theory

Supporters of Intelligent Design argue that this issue is based on the question of evidence, not simply theory and they claim that ID as a scientific theory is a more adequate explanation of the biological evidence than that provided by the theory of evolution. It is important to recognise that Intelligent Design is not to be confused with creationism. It does not rely on the Bible and it does not speculate on the source of design. Nonetheless, it could be seen as pointing towards theism as the best way to interpret the evidence.

▪ **Origins of ID**

Discovery Institute was founded in 1990 by Bruce Chapman, George Gilder and Stephen C. Meyer as a non-profit making educational foundation and think tank based on the Christian teaching of C.S.Lewis. In 1991 Phillip Johnson, an American professor of Law, published the book *"Darwin on Trial"*, and five years later established the Centre for Science and Culture (CSC) at the Discovery Institute. Johnson proposed ID as a rival scientific theory to "chance evolution" a theory further supported by the writings of Michael Behe (*Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution*, 1996) and William Dembski (*The Design Inference*, 1998). Their aim was to encourage American school boards to allow students access to scientific evidence for and against Darwin's theory as it features in peer-reviewed scientific publications. Their challenge is not evolution as such, but 'chance' evolution, the naturalistic philosophy that there is no supernatural meaning or agency behind it. They do not generally reject the time scale on which evolutionists base their theory and make no public statements of support for the Bible's authority in matters of creation and origins.

▪ Challenges to Intelligent Design

1 *Intelligent Design is not science*

On the BBC2 Horizon programme “*The War on Science* (26 Jan 2006) Richard Attenborough claimed: “*It is so fundamentally against every scientific principle you can think of, that to put it in the same bracket is to seriously confuse thinking*”, and in the famous 2005 case of *Kitzmiller et al v. Dover Area School District* the court rejected all claims to ID being a scientific theory, insisting that it was ‘*nothing more than creationism in disguise*’.

2. *Sudden leaps*

Even if evidence of direct, step by step evolution is absent, it doesn’t rule out sudden leaps which are more likely than a designer-god. Raising the possibility of God in any case simply raises more questions than it answers.

3. *Findings of molecular genetics*

Recent findings regarding DNA suggest that it supports descent from a common organism in line with evolutionary theory.

In responses to these challenges, it may be argued:

1 *Intelligent Design is a science:*

The claim that Intelligent Design is not science ultimately depends on the view that any reference to the supernatural as opposed to natural distinguishes between non-science and science. However, Intelligent Design infers that real design exists in nature and is empirically detectable by the methods of science without arguing for a supernatural cause. Michael Behe states “*Thus while I argue for design, the question of the identity of the designer is left open...*” (*The Modern Intelligent Design Hypothesis*, *Philosophia Christi*, Series 2, Volume 3, Number 1, 2001).

2 *Sudden leaps*

Supporters of Intelligent Design challenge the claim that the possibility that a natural explanation might exist is not enough to undermine the inference of design. Furthermore, they refute claims that a design as an explanation would require a series of supporting explanations. ‘*Believing that the design hypothesis is the best explanation...doesn’t depend upon our ability to explain the designer.* (William Lane Craig, ‘*Why I Believe in God*’, in Norman L. Geisler and Paul K. Hoffman (eds), *Why I Am A Christian* (Baker, 2001)

3 *Molecular genetics*

It is argued that molecular histories conflict with those based on fossils and different molecular histories even contradict each other, with different molecules producing different evolutionary trees.

Writing Task:

(a) Explain **two** different religious understandings of the origin of the universe and human life.

(b) 'Religious views of the origin of the universe and human life have long been superseded by scientific understandings'. Assess this claim with reference to Evolution.

(v) The Big Bang

The view that the universe had a beginning is widely accepted by scientists and although this is consistent with the Christian idea that the universe had a starting point, it exists as an explanation which can be interpreted entirely from the perspective of independent laws of physics. The notion was proposed in 1948 by Gamow, Alpher and Herman who interpreted the background radiation caused by photons moving randomly in space, without a discernible source, at a temperature of 2.7K, as evidence that the space and time began less than even a second after a gigantic explosion. The universe is still expanding from the point of the explosion and the residual radiation from it can still be traced. Interestingly, when in 1964, Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson were working on experimental microwave antenna in New Jersey; they picked up a background hissing noise which they initially thought was caused by pigeons roosting on the antennae. However, it continued even after the pigeons were removed, and they came to understand that it was the afterglow of the primal explosion, rather like static on television.

The Big Bang was the cause of all known laws of chemistry and physics, but it was not for over a billion years that stars and galaxies began to form, many of which died before our own sun and planets were formed, leading some scientists to claim that the dead stars provided the materials necessary for carbon based life to form.

The key question for our purposes, of course, is whether this Big Bang can be accounted for without the need for a divine agency to cause it to happen. Scientists have been unable to account for the conditions before the Big Bang or what may have caused it to occur, which, for the theist, leaves room to postulate God as the cause of that explosion. This quest for a first cause goes back to Aquinas's Cosmological Argument, long before thinkers had any notion of the Big Bang, but scientists such as Richard Dawkins, who argues that 'If science doesn't explain it, we should do better science' will not be satisfied with accepting a theistic explanation of the Big Bang. For the Big Bang scientist, work continues to find a complete explanation which does not require divine intervention.

The precise conditions necessary for life which ultimately came about due to the Big Bang have led to the emergence of the modern Anthropic Principle, sometimes called a fine-tuning argument. The so-called Goldilocks Effect – that the universe is ‘just right’ for life – draws attention to the accidents or coincidences of physical and astronomical events which make life possible, leading Freeman Dyson to observe: *‘If we look out into the universe and identify the many accidents of physics and astronomy that have worked together for our benefit, it almost seems as if the universe must in some sense have known that we were coming’* (Disturbing the Universe 1979). This may not prove the existence of God, but it serves as a useful part of a cumulative case for the theist.



Seminar Topic

Look up more about the Anthropic Principle on the Internet or in your text books. It is often proposed today as part of a Design Argument for the existence of God. As a group see if you can reach a consensus on the best way of understanding the fine-tuning of the universe – God’s provision for humankind he created to inhabit the earth, or a coincidence of events which made possible the evolution of human life.

(vi) Continuous Creation

Similar to theist evolution is the doctrine of continuous creation. Advocates of this view start with the assumption that God created the universe out of nothing including its physical laws, but that he continues to act creatively and providentially by acting everywhere, in with and through natural processes to bring about physical and biological complexity. Arthur Peacocke has been a strong advocate of this position, proposing that chance events, such as genetic variations, do not count against God’s creative purposes. Rather, God is the ground of both chance and physical laws and he continues to create physical, chemical and biological complexity. As a result, the world has continuity, but is also open-ended with the possibility of change. Again, Augustine seems to have been ahead of his time, observing: *‘Let us therefore believe that God works constantly, so that all created things would perish, if his working were withdrawn.’*

However, the doctrine of continuous creation is not fully agreed. Some Christians claim that nothing happens in the world without God willing it, whilst others claim that God is transcendent over creation which responds to God’s will. Interestingly, the notion of continuous creation is more conceptual than creationist ideas, and can be linked at a quantum level with the notion that the world is genuinely open at a subatomic level and God can act with natural causes to bring about natural processes without overriding natural causality. The view has also been linked with process and feminist theologies.

One of the most well know advocates of continuous creation is John Polkinghorne, who argues that God acts to sustain the physical world and although no experiment can prove this, it is a matter of faith supported by the insights given by science. He argues that the patterns which can be observed in the flexible and open universe cannot be best explained by random chance, or even a single act of creation.



Seminar Topic

Now you have an overall picture of the issues raised by the relationship between science and religion, discuss in small groups whether you think there is conflict between the two or whether they are in fact friends, both seeking to discover truth. Make sure you have plenty of arguments and evidence to support your conclusions.

Topic 4: Are we 'free beings'?

AIM

At the end of this topic you should:

- Understand the nature of free will
- Understand the concept of determinism
- Be able to explain the nature of hard and soft determinism
- Be able to examine and evaluate the arguments for and against free will
- Be able to evaluate the Christian doctrine of predestination
- Understand the limits on human freedom
- Be able to explain concepts of grace, sin and atonement
- Be able to examine issues concerning salvation and the Elect
- Understand the views of scholars
- Be able to evaluate the arguments for and against the existence of human free will

What are the limits on human freedom?

'If God exists, all depends on him and we can do nothing against his will. If he does not exist, everything depends on us – Camus: The Myth of Sisyphus

Are human beings free to choose how they will act or are human actions already determined by past events? If we live in a world where everything is determined already, then there can be no place for moral responsibility. If we are not free to decide what we will do, then we cannot be blamed for our actions. So are we free, or not?

'Your destiny shall not be allotted to you, but you shall choose it for yourselves – Plato: Republic.

There are obvious limitations to human freedom:

- physical – we can only do what is physically possible
- psychological – we can only act according to our nature
- biological and sexual – we are limited by our bodies
- social and cultural – we are limited by our circumstances



For reflection

What does 'free' really mean?

Determinism

Determinism is the view that human beings are not truly free but that their actions, to a greater or lesser extent, are determined by past causes, events and circumstances and that everything requires a sufficient reason to occur as it does. This is also a basic assumption of modern science, which relies on determinism for its premise that actions can be predicted by past events. For the scientist, happenings can be explained in terms of the laws of nature, which operate by cause and effect. By understanding these causes and events, scientists know what should happen next – the outcome is determined by what has already gone on before.

In the same way, determinism implies that human actions are also the result of cause and effect and, therefore, are not totally free. It is the view that all events are pre-determined by other events, and that freedom of choice is merely an illusion. Humans are, in a real sense, slaves to past causes and have no real control over their actions. Instead, how a person acts is determined by character, previous experience, present circumstances, possibly, by God.



For Reflection

Does free will act in a scientifically predictable way?

Determinism does not take away all human freedom, but only refers to those areas of a person's character and background that are relevant in the circumstances. These circumstances, which lead to a chain of cause and effect, are called the '*origination*'.

For the determinist, therefore, the way a person acts is not due to freedom, but is the result of:

- Nature - they were 'made that way'
- Nurture – the way they were brought up
- Genetic and inherited characteristics
- Personal circumstances
- Family background

Hard Determinism

At one end of the spectrum is hard determinism. This is the view that all human actions are governed by previous events. The universe is composed of nothing other than ordinary physical processes that are in principle completely determined by the nature of matter itself. This requires the following presumptions to be true:

- a complex network of past events
- religious, psychological, political and cultural influences
- a world to run on strictly predictable natural laws
- the non-intervention of God through miracles or answered prayers, since these would change a pre-determined future
- People are not to be held morally responsible for their actions

Criticism of hard determinism

The hard determinist claim that freedom is an illusion is a difficult position to maintain because when we think of either practical freedom (freedom to do what we like) or metaphysical freedom (being responsible for one's choices); we can criticize the determinist's argument with the claim that we *feel* free. Furthermore, if we take hard determinism to its logical extreme, we are forced to acknowledge that even holding a deterministic view is itself determined.



Seminar work:

What might constitute psychological and political influences on a person's actions?

What does it mean to say that freedom is an illusion?

How might a hard determinist answer the criticism that we 'feel free'?

Soft Determinism

Less extreme is soft determinism, which is the view that there is some determinism in human action but that people remain morally responsible for what they choose to do. On this view, the world is composed of mental processes as well as physical processes. It assumes that:

- Some actions may be partially determined by genetics and upbringing
- Humans have a limited freedom of choice
- People are morally responsible for their actions
- God can intervene in the world through miracles and prayers

'We who lived in the concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given circumstances, to choose one's own way.' – Frankl: *Man's Search for Meaning*

Criticism of Soft Determinism

When soft determinists claim that there is a difference between free and not-free actions, they often fail to consider the factors that will influence a person's 'free' choice – for example, if someone is on a diet they may choose to eat salad or chocolate, but the diet will influence their choice – they could choose either, but, being on a diet, their choice is determined for them.



Seminar work;

What does it mean to be morally responsible?

If we are free, then should God perform miracles?

Is any decision we make ever completely free?

Libertarianism

At the other end of the spectrum, Libertarianism is the view that human beings can freely choose their actions. It assumes that:

- Humans are free to act and to take moral responsibility
- Moral actions are affected by upbringing and personal beliefs and values
- Humans have a moral conscience and a sense of moral responsibility

'By liberty, then, we can only mean a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinism of the will; that is, if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may' – Hume: An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding

Criticism of Libertarianism

Although libertarianists claim that people are free to make choices, their freedom is still limited by their nature. This is known as *liberty of spontaneity*. For instance, a person who is shy by nature would find it hard to make certain moral choices that would come more easily to a person whose character is less shy. A person is only truly able to choose freely when they are free from all constraints including those of background, beliefs, culture and other relationships. This is called the *liberty of indifference*.



Seminar Work

With reference to one moral dilemma suggest how it may be tackled by:

- a hard determinist
- a libertarianist
- a soft determinist

Fatalism

At the far extreme, fatalism is the view that that future events cannot be altered, and that all human actions and desires are pointless because they are themselves part of an unalterable pattern. Fatalism does not explain why this pattern of events exists; it just states that it does.



For reflection:

What aspects of human nature limit freedom of choice?

Is life pointless?

Compatibilists, Incompatibilists and Libertarians

- A compatibilist (soft determinism) believes that humans have some freedom, but that actions may be influenced by past events. In other words, that free will and determinism are compatible in some way.
- An incompatibilist (hard determinism) believes that human action is determined and that humans are not morally responsible. Determinism and free will are not compatible.
- A libertarianist does not believe that actions are determined by past events and humans are, therefore, morally responsible.

The consequences of determinism:

If everything is determined then there are important consequences:

- Humans have no moral responsibility for their actions
- Humans are unable to make free and rational decisions
- Free will and choice are just illusions



For reflection:

What do determinists mean by 'freedom'?

Do Libertarians take a person's character and personal situation seriously enough?

Criticisms

One of the main problems with determinism is what is meant by 'truth'.

- Determinists say that the factors that influence a person's actions are '**necessary truths**' – that is, they must be true, for example, '*all bachelors are men*'
- However, there is another kind of truth – a '**contingent truth**' which is one that may or may not be true depending on the circumstances, for example, '*all men are bachelors*'
- In other words, it may be true that a person's character and circumstances determine them to act in a particular way on one occasion, but it need not be the case on another occasion
- So, whilst it may be probable that a person's actions are determined by other factors, it is not certain that the actions are



Seminar work

What is the difference between necessary and contingent truths? Give examples of both.

What other kinds of truth are there?

Written work

Explain the distinctive features of hard and soft determinism.

'Belief in predestination is in compatible with belief in human free will and responsibility'. Assess the validity of this statement

Why is human free will important?

The issue of whether or not people are free to make decisions is important for two reasons:

1. All human effort depends to some extent on the idea that what individuals achieve is done by their own free decisions and choices. Scientific discoveries, great art, poetry, music and literature, would all lose their meaning if it could be shown that all such effort was simply the result of cause and effect.
2. Unless humans are *morally* free, then principles of justice, ethics, reward and punishment would become irrelevant, and along with them any concept of being good.

The relationship between human freedom and moral behaviour is crucial. If every action is determined – that is, that the totality of a person's experience, knowledge, genes, circumstances and relationships and the laws of nature play a part in decision-making – then we cannot blame a person for acting wrongly or praise a person for acting well.

'So long as...respect for rationality or autonomy is taken to be the foundational moral commitment, it is necessary either to deny that we have moral obligation to any of these sorts of creatures, or else,...to contrive a notion of rationality or autonomy that will somehow fit the situations of at least some of them'. – Jean Porter



For reflection:

Is this view right? Why/ why not?

Reinhold Niebuhr observed that, rather than human actions being determined, in fact, human beings actually seem to impose their desires and goals upon nature itself and have freedom to do this because they are able to understand the way in which single events belong to a general pattern. Humans can remember past events and use that memory to affect what happens in the future.

Equally, he claimed that there are many motives and causes which may exist in any given situation and that it would be impossible to make an accurate prediction of what a person will do. In other words, Niebuhr suggested that if every event, once having taken place, is interpreted as an inevitable and determined consequence of a series of events, then there is a temptation to be more deterministic in our view of human behaviour than may be appropriate. He refers to the '*endless variety and unpredictability of the historical drama*' as proof of the reality of human freedom.



For reflection:

Is it ever possible to predict what a person will do?

How free can humans be?

Even if humans are free, such freedom cannot be absolute and there are many practical limitations:

Constraints caused by the operation of the laws of the universe

The universe operates according to strict deterministic laws, which we refer to as chemistry, biology, physics, and so on. For every event there is an earlier sufficient cause and all events are predictable in principle. Therefore, given knowledge of the initial state of the universe, all future states of it would, in theory, be predictable. Human brains are physical, so they are subject to the same deterministic laws and so complete freedom of the will cannot exist.

Interestingly, Hume argued that humans are still free, despite these limitations because freedom means being free within the constraints of human nature. A person's actions are free if they were the result of a decision which is made in accordance with that person's beliefs and desires.



For reflection

Is free will really subject to the laws of the universe?

Constraints caused by our view of the nature of a person: Do 'I' really exist?

If human freedom depends on the nature of a person, then is there an identifiable 'I' that can be free in the first place? There are several differing viewpoints:

- Hard Determinism typically sees the self as an illusion caused by the brain's hardware. If there is no soul to give someone a personal identity, then all that is left is just a brain which is disposed to 'behave' in certain ways. For instance, neurophysiology can trace the functioning of the brain, and locate the parts of it that process wishes, intentions and desires. In this sense, falling in love is just a reaction of the brain. There is no 'I' to choose to fall in love – the brain does it automatically. If the self is an illusion, then, so is the view that it is free to make decisions.
- However, the model of consciousness developed by scientists Stuart Hameroff and Roger Penrose seem to suggest that the brain is more like a quantum computer with the human personality or soul as a kind of interface between the brain and the universe. Penrose and Hameroff speculated that quantum processes must occur in the brain in order to account for human ability in mathematics because advances in mathematics do not seem to come from standard chains of deterministic thought but from some higher process of intuition. It may be, therefore, that human beings are capable of going beyond the influences of determinism.
- Kant, argued that we simply cannot know if things are determined in advance or not and that, what we claim to be true, may just be a reflection of the way our minds interpret the world. He distinguished between:
 - Phenomena – the experience we have of things
 - Noumena – things as they actually are.

He said that, in the natural world, all things obey the laws of cause and effect and that, when we impose this on human action and experience, we see things as '*phenomenally determined*,' that is, interpreted by our minds according to the way we see things.



Seminar Work

Is there an identifiable 'I' that can be free in the first place?
Which of the views above are the most and least convincing? Why?

Constraints caused by God's nature: Does God's nature take away human freedom to act/choose?

'Either we are not free and God the all-powerful is responsible for evil. Or we are free and responsible.' – Camus: *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Religious believers have long argued that God, by his nature, is omniscient (all-knowing) and exists in time (temporal). This causes a serious theological dilemma:

- If God is omniscient, then he knows the future
- Therefore the future is already determined
- Therefore humans are not free to make choices

There is some evidence that Christianity broadly supports the principles of determinism and that believers accept that God already knows who will be welcomed into Heaven and be saved, and who will not. This is known as 'predestination'. St Paul said:

'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed in the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.' – Romans 8:28-30

Today, predestination is one of the 39 Articles of Faith in the Church of England:

'Predestination to life is the everlasting purpose of God'.

- Article 17: Book of Common Prayer

However, within the Christian Church there has, over the centuries, been considerable disagreement as to what this actually means. Here are a few of the scholarly arguments:

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE)

Augustine believed that human free led to Original Sin, that is, the disobedience of Adam and Eve which made sin a barrier between God and humanity. In *Confessions*, Augustine argued that Original Sin was the result of Adam and Eve's foolishness, pride and wilful disobedience to God. This was caused by Satan sowing 'seeds of doubt' into their minds.

This made humans sinful by nature – spoiled by sin. Humans have a spirit that is God-created, but flesh which is corrupt and sinful. People cannot freely choose to respond to God. Humans cannot achieve moral perfection alone because they are born sinners – only the grace (gift) of God can save them. God willingly offers the '*gift of perseverance*' to those who follow Christ and accept his sacrifice on the Cross as atonement for their sins. Personal salvation is a free gift from God.

However, in *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine explained that not everyone is able to accept God's gift of salvation – for it is only offered to a

certain few ('the Elect'). Augustine believed that God chooses who will be saved and who will not. Salvation is available to all who wish to choose it, but God knows who they will be. In this sense, God's omniscience does not deny human freedom. Augustine:

'Will any man presume to say that God did not foreknow those to whom he would grant belief? This is the predestination of saints, namely the foreknowledge and planning of God's kindnesses, by which they are most surely delivered.'



For reflection:

If God is all-loving, can predestination be justified?

Pelagius (354 – 420/40 CE)

Pelagius disagreed strongly with Augustine. Pelagius believed that Original Sin did not taint human nature and that people are, with the help of God, still free to choose good. In *Defence of the Freedom of the Will*, he said that Adam's sin 'set a bad example', but this was superseded by the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, who 'set a good example'.

For Pelagius, humans have full control and the free will to choose whether or not to obey God. Whilst humans may be sinful, they can nevertheless choose to do good and have full moral responsibility for their actions. Humans are, therefore, like criminals who need the atonement of Jesus Christ to save them – but they are not helpless victims who cannot choose for themselves. He called free will 'the highest human attribute'.

Unlike Augustine, Pelagius believed that humans could attain moral perfection through their own free choice. He opposed Augustine's view of predestination because he said it was unjust that human beings would go to Hell for doing what they could not avoid (sin) and that predestination took away human free will and moral responsibility.



For reflection:

If humans are sinners, how can they attain moral perfection?



Research Topic:

Compile the biblical evidence which supports and/ or opposes the views of Augustine and Pelagius.

Aquinas

God's omniscience is timeless, so God sees past, present and future timelessly, and his knowledge is '*acausal*.' In other words, God knows the results of a person's future actions but does not cause them to happen – so human beings remain free. This view may, however, cause problems for those who believe that God relates to humans personally.

John Calvin (1509 – 1564 CE)

Like Augustine, John Calvin believed in predestination. In 'Institutes of the Christian Religion' he argued that sin began with the fall of Adam and Eve and that, as a result, all humanity is sinful and people are '*driven to evil*.' The only help humanity can receive is through Jesus Christ. Calvin said that spiritual union between Christ and humanity was needed and this comes only through faith. For Calvin, faith would lead to a person asking for forgiveness of sins (remission) and to change their lives to follow Christ (repentance).

However, perfect holiness cannot be attained in one human lifetime and believers must spend all their earthly lives struggling against sin. However, because they have faith, then they will be saved and go to Heaven. This is called '*justification by faith alone*' and is a gift from God, given only to those whom God enables to have faith. Calvin:

'...the acceptance by which God regards us as righteous whom he has received into grace'.

In later years, followers of Calvin offered 'Five Points' of belief:

1. Total Depravity – humans are by nature sinful and are unable to choose God and be saved.
2. Unconditional Election – God chooses who will be saved (the Elect).
3. Limited Atonement – The death of Jesus saves the elect.
4. Irresistible Grace – God bestows his gift of salvation (grace) on those he chooses. They cannot refuse Him.
5. Perseverance of the Saints – God will ensure that the Elect will always remain strong in faith.

'The Holy Spirit graciously causes the elect sinner to co-operate, to believe, to repent, to come freely and willingly to Christ'.

For Calvin, human salvation was through God alone – God chooses those who will be saved and determines their lives accordingly:

'God adopts some to the hope of life and adjudges others to eternal death'.



For reflection

Is 'justification by faith alone' a fair doctrine?

Jacobus Arminius (1560 – 1609 CE)

Arminius took a different view from Calvin'. He believed that humans have at least a measure of free will. He said that the Holy Spirit would help all those who sought after God to find him. He called this 'preventing' grace – a gift of God to prevent damnation. In 'Writings' he described this as:

'...sufficient for belief, in spite of our sinful corruption and thus for salvation'

The followers of Arminius offered 'Five Articles of Remonstrance' concerning human free will and God:

1. All who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved.
2. Salvation is available to all.
3. To achieve salvation a person must repent and be 'born again'.
4. Grace is a gift from God which people are free to accept or reject.
5. Those who have faith in Christ can resist evil.

Arminius accepted the view that some people were already chosen by God (the Elect), but that others too, by their free choice, could choose faith and be saved by God's grace.

'The grace sufficient for salvation was conferred upon the Elect and on the Non-elect; that, if they will, they may believe or not believe, may be saved or not be saved'.



For reflection:

What is God's grace?

What does it mean to be 'born again'?

For Arminius, what is the difference between the Elect and the Non-Elect?



For reflection

If a person is predestined to go to Hell, then what are they actually being punished for?



Seminar topic

Does Calvin or Arminius produce the most convincing argument?
Why?

If God knows everything, is he responsible for human suffering and death?

Conclusion

Today, most people seem to accept that they are essentially free in their actions and choices even though this freedom has limitations. The consequence of this view is that humans are morally responsible for their choices and actions, despite their circumstances, personality, genetic make-up and so on.

Jean-Paul Sartre argued that the fact that freedom is the fundamental truth about being human, and the heart of human experience is the experience of being free. He claimed that we are always aware that at any time we could be making choices to be acting or thinking in different ways. Every conscious moment is therefore a moment of choice. Sartre, however, thought that this was a problem because, in human beings, '*existence precedes essence*'. This means that humans have no fixed nature that determines what they will do and they make choices without the guidance or security of God, religious doctrines or any objective reason to believe in.

He said humans are '*condemned to be free*' and make choices in '*anguish, abandonment and despair*'.



Seminar work

To what extent are we shaped more by our genes than our environment?

Can religious beliefs in predestination and free will be reconciled?