

issues of moral and ethical concern and examines them, not only in relation to ethical theory, but by identifying the more general moral problems that arise. Some issues of applied ethics are enormous and affect almost everyone. For example, if a government makes a decision to go to war, everyone is affected in some way, even if they are not engaged in direct conflict. Hence the morality of warfare is a universal concern, and it will not simply be a matter of using an ethical theory to see if it is right to go to war, but will involve examining a range of moral issues, the sanctity of life, whether it is ever right to kill, the justifications for going to war and conduct in war, and how to deal with the environmental and economic effects of war.

In the modern world the range of issues that require us to apply ethics is ever increasing. But ethicists have always been interested in applied ethical matters. The Greek philosophers were concerned with how to live and die in a moral way, the medievalists with abortion and war. Hume wrote an essay on the morality of suicide (advocating it as the right of a free human agent), and Kant was concerned with exploring how to establish universal peace. The utilitarians perhaps most of all were concerned with the real ethics of society and not just theory.

#### Taking it further...

There are many films that you can study from the perspective of the ethical dilemmas they raise. Four you could try are *Gattaca*, *12th Step*, *The Bridges of Madison County* and *Brokeback Mountain*.

In the modern world several branches of applied ethics have acquired independent academic status: bioethics, business ethics and the moral status of animals are of particular interest in the 21st century, while issues of sexual ethics, which never went away, have been given a new lease of life. It is very easy to find material about applied ethical issues because these issues are being debated every day in the news, on television and through other forms of media. They are also often the themes of novels and films, which provide tremendous stimulus for discussion.

For the religious believer, the question of how morality should be linked with religious faith is vital, and many approaches to ethics have aimed to clarify this debate. Many issues of applied ethics are fuelled by controversy between religious believers and secularists (those who do not analyse matters from a religious perspective) and, in some cases at least, if the religious dimension was not present an ethical code would be easier to establish.

In the following sections we shall examine this important issue, as well as analysing the key features of **utilitarianism** and **situation ethics**, two ethical theories that particularly reflect the time in which they emerged. In the next chapter we will explore two perennial areas of applied ethics, **sexual ethics** and the **ethics of war and peace**.

## CHAPTER 1

# Philosophical arguments about the existence of God

## 1.1 God and philosophy

### Key Ideas

- The nature of the God of classical theism as omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good
- The need to prove the existence of God
- Types of philosophical reasoning and their attendant problems

### The God of classical theism

The three main Western religious traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all hold to the central belief that God is one, hence they are **monotheistic** faiths. However God may reveal himself, he is indivisible; the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is not a violation of this central belief. The doctrine of the Trinity is the belief that God makes himself known in three distinct persons, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and yet remains wholly one. He is not three gods, but God manifests himself in creation, salvation and revelation in the three persons of the one Godhead.

For all the monotheistic faiths, God is the supreme reality or, as the 11th century theologian Anselm described him, 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived'. Such a being must, of necessity, possess all the perfections that there are to possess and cannot be exceeded in perfection by any other being, or this would be a contradiction of his supreme perfection.

The perfection of God has led to problems of how to express that perfection, and some philosophers have fallen back on the *via negativa*, speaking of God entirely in terms of what he is not, for example that he is not evil. However, this is not entirely satisfactory because it leaves us with no meaningful content to God, and believers clearly want to say something rather than nothing about him. This has led to many things being said about God in an attempt to capture his completeness and perfection, all of which are encapsulated in his personal nature. Richard Swinburne explains it as: 'By a person I mean an individual with basic powers (to act intentionally), purposes and beliefs' (*Is There a God?*, Oxford University Press, 1996). The primary attributes of the God of classical theism are his **omnipotence**,

### Taking it further...

Anselm's ontological argument demonstrates that the existence of God is a necessary prerequisite of his being 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived'. This argument is covered at A2.



### Taking it further...

There are many attributes that can be applied to God, some of which are constituent parts of these primary attributes, others which are distinct. They include his omnipresence (present everywhere), bodilessness and eternal nature.

**omniscience and perfect goodness.** These attributes are essential to his role in creating and sustaining the world and serving as the ground to all human moral values.

### Omnipotence

To be omnipotent means to be able to do everything. However, it is reasonable to ask whether this means, in the case of God, literally everything or only those things (hardly a limited number) that are logically possible. If God can do literally everything, then he must be able to, for example, make a stone too heavy for him to lift, build a wall too high for him to climb over, make a square circle, create a thing that exists and does not exist at the same time, make  $2 + 2 = 5$  and change the past. Descartes maintained that God could do all these things and more, but centuries previously Aquinas had listed 20 things that God could not do. Certainly it would make little sense to say that God can do the logically impossible because these things themselves do not describe anything that makes sense. Aquinas defined as 'absolutely impossible' any thing where the 'predicate is altogether incompatible with the subject'. In the *Summa Theologica* (Resources for Christian Living, 1981) he wrote: 'Whatever implies contradiction does not come within the scope of divine omnipotence, because it cannot have the aspect of possibility. Hence it is more appropriate to say that such things cannot be done, than that God cannot do them.' Hence, to be omnipotent involves being able to do all things that are possible. For example, it is not considered a limit to God's powers that he cannot draw a square circle because it cannot be done.

So, God's omnipotence must include all those things that are logically and physically possible and that do not contradict his nature. Such a God can intervene in the world and act against what are commonly called 'laws of nature' and he does so on the grounds that he is the supreme creator on whom all things depend. Classical theists believe that God's creation of humanity and the universe was for a purpose, although he remains transcendent and exists above and beyond the limits of human experience. 'The God of the Bible stands above the world as its sovereign Lord, its Creator and its Saviour; but he appears in the world to set men tasks to do, speaking to men in demand, in promise, in healing and fulfilment' (John A. Hutchenson, *A Handbook of Christian Theology*, Fontana, 1960).

Throughout the Bible, God's action in the world is consistently illustrated by accounts of miraculous events in which God suspends the laws of nature to accomplish his purpose and guide the course of history. The biblical writers had no concept of natural law that determined how the universe operates, and so when God intervenes in the course of events it is never portrayed as a violation of natural laws. This certainly avoids the problem of why God would break his own rules when performing a miracle, because there are no rules to break or laws to violate.

'Belief in miracles exists where nature is regarded only as an object of arbitrariness... which nature uses only as an instrument of its own will and pleasure. Water divides or rolls itself together like a firm mass... the sun now stands still, now goes backward. And all these contradictions of nature happen for the welfare of Israel, purely at the command of Jehovah, who troubles himself about nothing but Israel' (Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, Prometheus Books, 1989).

## Omniscience

In the same way, if God is omniscient (all knowing), we need to establish the extent of God's all knowingness. Richard Swinburne suggests that God's omniscience means that whatever is true, God knows it: 'If it snowed on 1 January 10 million BC on the site of present-day New York, God knows that it snowed there and then... All God's beliefs are true, and God believes everything that is true' (*Is There a God?*, Oxford University Press, 1996). However, God is not required to know what it is logically impossible to know, or to know all fictions and false propositions, as some thinkers have suggested. Similarly, does God's omniscience mean that he must know what someone will freely do in the future? Because God is omnipotent, he has chosen to create free beings, which must impose a limit on his omniscience because it would be logically impossible for God to know in advance what free beings were going to do.

The Bible appears to support this view, for example, when God decides to destroy humanity in the Great Flood. In Genesis 6:6 the writers say: 'The Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said: "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created... for I am sorry that I have made them".' If God had known in advance that his creatures would behave so immorally that he would be obliged to destroy them, then surely he would not have created them in the first place?

This view depends, of course, on accepting that human agents do have at least some element of freewill in the sense that there are no external causes that determine how they will choose to act. It certainly seems that we have a sufficient degree of freedom and even the world itself is not fully determined. One explanation for the problem of natural evil may be that God gave to creation as well as to mankind the ability to make at least some choices for themselves.

Two major problems are raised by God's omniscience. The first is the classic problem of evil. If God knows of all past, present and future events of evil and suffering and has failed, and will continue to fail, to intervene to prevent their occurrence and, further, to prevent the occurrence of the consequences of those events, he faces some hard moral questioning. This further questions God's omnipotence because if he could have made a world in which evil and suffering did not occur, then it is reasonable to ask why he did not so, and, if he could not have made such a world, his sovereignty and power are compromised. Although the biblical writers seem to be comfortable with the view that God is, without contradiction, responsible for both good and evil, for example the great Flood, the sufferings of Job and the death of the first born, modern thinkers are less satisfied with this.

The second major problem is that of salvation. If God has chosen some people to be saved and others to suffer eternal damnation, then what difference does it make how we behave, what choices we make and what influence others attempt to have on us? How can we justify the moral goodness of those who do not believe in God, because what eschatological value can it have to them? If salvation is by faith and not works, does faith even have any meaning if God has determined that an individual should have faith?

### Taking it further...

Freewill need not be limited to human beings, but also may apply to the natural order. Natural evil, events in the natural order that cause pain and suffering to humans, may be the consequence of the natural order exercising its divinely given freewill.



A 19th century print depicting God as a juggler, amusing himself with the worlds he has created

Anton Thorn argues why should anyone accept belief in an omniscient God when 'this notion cannot be integrated with the facts of reality'? (<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Sparta/1019/Omniscience.htm>). Firstly, for an omniscient being, knowledge cannot be the result of the long processes that humans have to face to gain new knowledge. God's omniscience is therefore unearned knowledge and it is never the product of any mental effort. Thorn argues that such knowledge is at odds with every other concept of knowledge that we have and, hence, incomprehensible. Secondly, what purpose would exhaustive knowledge serve? If God is immortal, everlasting and eternal, what need does he have of such knowledge? The notion of a God who knows all things, however private, serves, Thorn claims, to benefit those who would seek domination over others through forcing them into certain behaviour patterns. He claims there is no real need for God to be omniscient.

### Perfect goodness (omnibenevolence)

God's perfect goodness arises from him being omnipotent and omniscient and does not contradict or conflict with those attributes. The goodness of God is not a remote quality or attribute, but is expressed through his direct activity in the lives of his people. This is done both through the standards God sets and through how he responds to them in their attempts to live up to those standards. God himself is more than a model of goodness, he is perfectly good, although God's goodness is not the same as human goodness. If this is so, then nothing can give rise to our describing any of God's actions as cruel, vindictive or vengeful. J. S. Mill argued that a good God should not act differently to a good person, so we cannot justify apparently evil acts of God on the grounds that he is divine and so can act in mysteriously different ways.

One of the central questions in religious philosophy concerns the relationship between God and goodness. Does God create moral standards that he issues as commands, or does he command that which he already knows as good? This is known as the *Euthyphro* Dilemma (for a fuller discussion of this see section 3.2). This dilemma is difficult to solve, because religious believers tend to use God's commands as a means of deciding what is good but are aware that sometimes their relationship with God might call them to do something that they know rationally would be considered wrong.

The goodness of God, therefore, cannot be measured by human standards of goodness but is to be experienced within a relationship that is based in faith, not reason. God's goodness does not depend on circumstances or on him acting in an entirely predictable manner. If it did, then the believer would only be able to love and worship God when he was experiencing God's goodness in a consistent, unchanging way. The experience of many biblical characters shows that not to be the case: Job, Ezekiel, David, Paul, Stephen and Jesus himself, to name but a few. Despite their experiences, these characters, and others like them, accepted that God's goodness is ultimately incomprehensible but utterly reliable.

For the Israelites, God's goodness was experienced through his covenant relationship with them, first revealed in the giving of the Law, including the Ten Commandments (the Decalogue) at Sinai (Exodus 20:1-21). Nevertheless, God's goodness is not inflexible. Although he is angry when his people violate his standards, and because he is just he must judge, he does not do so hard-heartedly. The book of Hosea balances the thought of God's divine

### Taking it further...

'Reason and morality normally go together but, just occasionally, it is possible for a love relationship with God to cause someone to do something which goes against society's accepted norms. It may call one of us to leave mother and father, brothers and sisters for a higher love... In the Christian life, lived as part of a love relationship with God, it is just possible that this relationship might call an individual to act against what appears to be rational, reasonable and understandable' (Peter Vardy, *And if it's True?*, Marshall Pickering, 1988).

wrath (which Israel's conduct deserved) against God's desire for them to repent and return to him. 'I will not execute my fierce wrath against them, I will not return to destroy Ephraim: for I am God and not man; the Holy one in your midst' (Hosea 9:11).

Philip Yancey uses the book of Hosea as an example of God's grace, his undeserved favour shown to sinful man. 'In a manner of speaking, grace solves a dilemma for God... On the one hand, God loves us; on the other hand, our behaviour repulses him. God yearns to see in people something of his own image reflected; at best he sees shattered fragments of that image. Still, God cannot – or will not – give up' (*What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Harper Collins, 1997).

The God who created the heavens and the earth, and who is perfectly good, is eager to forgive, and as "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways", declares the Lord' (Isaiah 55:9), he can do what he likes and go to whatever lengths he chooses to be reconciled with his people.

For the New Testament writers, the ultimate demonstration of God's goodness is, of course, in the sending of Jesus. God takes the initiative to overcome the natural inclination to sin that is in all men, and provides the means of redemption in the new covenant promises in Jeremiah 31:31f: the covenant that will be written on men's hearts, not on tablets of stone. John 3:16 expresses it perfectly: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that all who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life'. God's willingness to sacrifice his son is the model of goodness and the saving act to which man is called by the New Testament writers to make a life-changing response, freeing him forever from the impossible task of measuring up to the perfect, unchangeable God.

## God in Eastern religious tradition

Hinduism is commonly perceived as polytheistic; however, it is a monotheistic religion with one God (Brahman) assuming many forms and names. For example, Brahman as Nirguna has no attributes whereas as Saguna or Iswara he is manifested with attributes. The many different names for God can be found in hymns in the Rig Veda. For example: 'They call him Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni, and he is heavenly nobly-winged Garutman. To what is One, sages give many a title they call it Agni, Yama, Matarisvan' (Rig Veda Book 1, Hymn 164.46). Brahman is a mysterious being, occupying the highest place as the Creator, Ruler and Lord, without beginning or end, indestructible and indescribable.

Thus the various forms and names of God that symbolise Brahman reflect different visions according to the many sages and seers. Hinduism is not henotheistic, where people believe in one god but are not concerned if he is the only god, because Brahman is one even though he has many names. Henotheism demands that there should be a competing deity against Brahman but this is not the case. Furthermore, even the different Avatars (reincarnations) are not considered independent of Iswara. Neither is Hinduism pantheistic, because there is no direct identification of God with the universe. Rather, God and the universe, belonging to the Absolute or Reality, are considered as distinct from each other in Hindu religious philosophy.



Shiva, the Hindu God, performing the dance of creation