



Theism and Atheism

Opposing Arguments in Philosophy

EDITORS IN CHIEF

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This chapter discusses how theism and atheism are best defined, primarily as a function of what “God” or “god” means. It sets out the range of meanings that “god” and “God” can have in different argumentative contexts, suggesting that proofs for God’s existence need not immediately conclude to the existence of a being with personal or omni-attributes. It also explores the notions of analogy and apophaticism, given that these themes condition the way many theists understand the affirmation that God exists. The chapter thereby offers principles that should govern the proper use of words in theism versus atheism debates.

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Robert Nola, *Emeritus Professor, The University of Auckland*

This chapter discusses atheism, theism, and agnosticism and the nature of some of the definitions of these doctrines. Rather than address arguments for or against god (or God), the chapter also considers definitions that can clarify what these doctrines mean. It also discusses concepts of god as spelled out in various kinds of definition.

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Robert Audi, *Professor, University of Notre Dame*

This chapter presents many of the main issues that must be understood to arrive at an appropriate method for appraising the rationality of theistic worldviews. It outlines several conceptions of theism; it explores the kinds of evidences possible for it and compares those with the kinds appropriate to confirming scientific theories; and it specifies a range of positive attitudes, such as faith and hope, that theists may have regarding the existence of God. The chapter considers both the kind and degree of rationality of theistic attitudes and the need for rationality in actions based on those attitudes. Both theistic attitudes and certain actions based on them are shown to be important, and their rationality is also shown to be both a highly complex matter and a status that is not ruled out on methodological grounds.

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Graham Wood, *Lecturer, University of Tasmania*

Suppose that you are given two worldviews, one championed by a theist and one championed by an atheist. What method or methods should be used in attempts to assess the comparative merits of these worldviews? What kinds of considerations should feed into these methods? This chapter begins with a discussion of themes central to answering these two questions, including specifying two worldviews to allow for meaningful comparison. Then a series of topics is addressed for the benefit of a person, identified as the “undecided person,” who does not yet endorse either worldview, in order to establish if there are reasons to prefer the atheistic worldview presented here.

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Peter Millican, *Gilbert Ryle Fellow and Professor of Philosophy, Hertford College*

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Paul K. Moser, *Professor of Philosophy, Loyola University Chicago*

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Ali Hasan, *Associate Professor, University of Iowa*
Richard Carrier, *Educator (PhD), The Secular Academy*

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John R. Shook, *Lecturer in Philosophy, Bowie State University*

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Robert Fastiggi, *Professor of Systematic Theology, Sacred Heart Major Seminary*

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Evan Fales, *Emeritus, University of Iowa*

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Ira M. Schnall, *Lecturer (retired), Bar-Ilan University*

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Arif Ahmed, *University Reader in Philosophy, University of Cambridge*

Richard Carrier, *Educator (PhD), The Secular Academy*

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 Robert J. Spitzer, S.J., *President, Magis Center of Reason and Faith*
 James Sinclair, *Senior Physicist, United States Navy*
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 Neil A. Manson, *Professor of Philosophy, University of Mississippi*
 Sahotra Sarkar, *Professor, University of Texas at Austin*
 Cory Juhl, *Professor, University of Texas at Austin*
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 Brendan Sweetman, *Professor, Rockhurst University*
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Michael Ruse, *Lucyle T. Werkmeister Professor and Director of HPS Program, Florida State University*

Susana Nuccetelli, *Professor, St. Cloud State University*

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Theism, the belief that the God of Abrahamic religions objectively exists, faces a challenge from evolutionary accounts of belief in supernatural agencies. It does put the burden of argument on theists, who must argue persuasively for either the epistemic justification of their fundamental belief or for the inaccuracy of the evolutionary hypothesis.

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Brendan Sweetman, *Professor, Rockhurst University*

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Kenneth Williford, *Associate Professor and Chair, University of Texas at Arlington*

Konrad Talmont-Kaminski, *The Head of the Society and Cognition Unit, University of Bialystok*

Diane Proudfoot, *Professor, University of Canterbury*

Mariam Thalos, *Professor of Philosophy, University of Tennessee*

This chapter observes the way theists have supposed that metaphysical considerations about human beings have supported theism over atheism. The chapter further discusses questions about consciousness and intentionality, reason, personal identity, and freedom. It is argued that the incompleteness of current neuroscientific accounts of these phenomena does not lend any significant support to a theistic account of them.

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Michael J. Harris, *Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge*

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Jason Thibodeau, *Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Cypress College*

Thaddeus Metz, *Professor, University of Johannesburg*

Bruce Russell, *Professor, Wayne State University*

David Neil, *Lecturer in Philosophy, University of Wollongong*

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Siobhan Nash-Marshall, *Mary T. Clark Chair of Christian Philosophy, Manhattanville College*

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Bruce Russell, *Professor, Wayne State University*

Daniel Linford, *Graduate Student, Purdue University*

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Guy Consolmagno, *Director of the Vatican Observatory, President of the Vatican Observatory Foundation*

This chapter discusses the relation between religion and science, providing an overview of contemporary science and the very nature of scientific knowledge. Predominant methods of science are detailed as well as its proper subject matter and goals, which are essential for addressing questions about whether scientific knowledge seems to support or to conflict with the sacred texts of theism.

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Richard Carrier, *Educator (PhD), The Secular Academy*

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Keith Augustine, *Executive Director and Editor-in-Chief, Internet Infidels*

Taner Edis, *Professor, Truman State University*

A proper assessment of the bearing of scientific inquiry on theistic religion requires recognition that conflict, mutual consistency, independence, or conciliation are possible, but depends on the methods accepted and the claims made in each domain at particular times and places—which can, and have, varied. This chapter, therefore, focuses on questions relating to whether the best methods, findings, and theories in contemporary scientific disciplines support, cohere with, or conflict with commitments made by theistic theologies.

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Margaret I. Hughes, *Tutor, Thomas Aquinas College*

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and then offers a critique of this approach. It concludes that faith is necessary in order to come to a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of religion because, unlike an approach based in scientism, faith allows for an openness to finding what is true in any religion.

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Konrad Talmont-Kaminski, *Head of the Society and Cognition Unit, University of Bialystok*

Evan Fales, *Emeritus, University of Iowa*

Todd Tremlin, *Lecturer, Central Michigan University*

Gregory Dawes, *Professor, University of Otago*

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Joshua Golding, *Professor of Philosophy, Bellarmine University*

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Richard Feldman, *Professor of Philosophy, University of Rochester*

Malcolm Murray, *Professor, University of Prince Edward Island*

Charles Pigden, *Associate Professor, University of Otago*

Evan Fales, *Emeritus, University of Iowa*

The aim of this chapter is to decide whether, in the absence of adequate evidence of the (probable) truth or falsity of theism, we may be justified in making a religious commitment on prudential or pragmatic grounds.

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Joseph W. Koterski, S.J., *Associate Professor of Philosophy, Fordham University*

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Graham Oppy, *Professor of Philosophy, Monash University*

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Logic: Theism

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This chapter considers the plausibility of theism by giving attention to the logic of argumentation offered for the existence of God. It also discusses the various attributes of God, including omnipotence, omniscience, and impassibility.

THE RATIONAL FOUNDATIONS OF FAITH

Is it possible to prove that God exists? This chapter considers the relation of logic and theism by examining the reasoning used in two types of philosophical argumentation: *a priori* arguments (those based on premises that are prior to and independent of experience) and *a posteriori* arguments (those based on a premise known by experience). The chapter shows that different systems of logic are sometimes operative, for some make use of a first-order predicate calculus while others employ a higher-order calculus and modal logic.

THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The logic behind the ontological argument for God is purely *a priori*. It uses the *idea* of the perfect being when it defines God as a being than which none greater could be conceived and then works to show that we must grant that such a being exists, for if it lacked existence, then we would not have been discussing what we claimed to be discussing, namely, that than which nothing greater can be conceived. A classic version of this argument comes from Saint Anselm, who says in his *Proslogion* (1926, chapter II):

AND so, Lord, do you, who do give understanding to faith, give me, so far as you knowest it to be profitable, to understand that you are as we believe; and that you are that which we believe. And indeed, we believe that you are a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. ... Therefore, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, exists in the understanding alone, the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible. Hence, there is doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality.

In chapter 3, Anselm concludes:

For, it is possible to conceive of a being that cannot be conceived not to exist; and this is greater than one that can be conceived not to exist. Hence, if that than which nothing greater can be conceived, can be conceived not to exist, it is not that than which nothing greater can be conceived. But this is an irreconcilable contradiction. There is, then, so truly a being than which nothing greater can be conceived to exist, that it cannot even be conceived not to exist; and this being you are, O Lord, our God.

The argument is based on the very *definition* of God as utterly perfect. To avoid the fallacy of assuming what he intends to prove, Anselm uses a definition of God that even someone who denies