1 Paper

The Philosophy of Religion is not a subject that is easily demarcated in respect of its scope and point. That said, the Philosophy of Religion is commonly understood to be the philosophical scrutiny of the claims of religious believers and those made on behalf of religious traditions. The focus of study is principally on the three monotheistic traditions of the West: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Those coming to the subject for the first time need to be aware that it demands competence in many of the central areas of philosophy: metaphysics, philosophical logic, epistemology, and ethics. In this respect, the subject provides a student with an opportunity to apply their general philosophical acumen to a body of important questions concerning theism. Among the questions raised are: the existence of God; the coherence of theism; the compatibility of divine omniscience and human freedom; the problem of evil; and immortality.

2 General Reading

Anthologies


Introductory Texts

You should also consult the following journals
Religious Studies.
Faith & Philosophy.
International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion.
Philosophia.

3 Topics

A. THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

Traditionally three ‘proofs’ for the existence of God have dominated philosophical discussion of this issue. These are the ontological proof, the cosmological proof, and the argument from design. A more recent addition to the list of theistic proofs are moral arguments for the existence of God.

i. The Ontological Proof

The ontological proof is an a priori argument which seeks to show the existence of God from our possession of a concept or idea of God or a perfect being. There are at least two different versions of this argument. The first is to be found in Anselm, Proslogion, 2 & 3 (this form of argument can in fact be
traced back at least as far as Diogenes of Babylon; see Sextus Empiricus, Adversus Mathematicus, Bk.9, ll.133-136; for a contemporary criticism of this form of argument see Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, 1a, 1, 2. The second form of the argument is to be found in Descartes, see Meditations, V (this form of the argument has antecedents in Bonaventure; see de Mysterio Trinitatis, I, ll.21-24); this is famously criticised in Kant, see The Critique of Pure Reason, A592/B620–A603/B631. In recent times, interest in the argument has been revived by Norman Malcolm and Alvin Plantinga. For related issues see entries on names, descriptions and existence in Logic and Metaphysics and object-dependent thought and externalism and self-knowledge in Philosophy of Mind.

Further Reading

ii. The Cosmological Argument
Most versions of the cosmological argument are a posteriori, but there are some versions which are a priori. One standard formulation of a group of cosmological arguments can be found in the Five Ways of Aquinas (see Summa Theologiae, 1a:2-5); another much discussed version of the argument is Leibniz’s appeal to the Principle of Sufficient Reason (see ‘The Principles of Nature and Grace’, sec. 7—to be found in Philosophical Essays, translated by Roger Ariew, and Daniel Garber, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1989).

Further Reading

iii. The Argument from Design
The argument from design is an a posteriori argument which attempts to establish the existence of a designer of the cosmos. It proceeds by first claiming that the universe is not ‘gratuitous’—i.e. that it exists for no purpose—but that it exhibits an order and regularity which provides evidence of its creation by a designer who endows it with purpose. The argument can be traced back to antiquity (see Cicero, On the Nature of the Gods, Bk. II) but in its modern formulation, which is now the principal focus of discussion, the best early example can be found in Newton (see General Scholium to the Principia, cf. Berkeley, Alciphron). In this form the argument has met most its elegant and forceful rebuttal in Hume’s Dialogues on Natural Religion.

Further Reading
Ch.2, secs. on Stoic Design Arguments.

**iv. Moral Arguments**

Moral arguments for the existence of God tend to reflect a dissatisfaction with one or all of the traditional proofs of the existence of God. The *locus classicus* of this variety of theistic arguments is to be found in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (The Transcendental Doctrine of Method, Ch. II, A797/B823 onwards), see also *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* (a recent translation can be found in the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, see the volume *Religion & Rational Theology*, edd. and trans. A. Wood & G. DiGiovanni).

Further Reading


**v. Rationality and Faith**

Within the history of philosophy there has been a resistance to the attempt to prove the existence of a god on rational grounds alone. This is represented by the fideistic tradition. Fideism has been associated with various forms of scepticism, or a suspicion of reason, or else from a desire not to underplay the role of faith or revelation in the explanation of a belief in God. For a discussion of the history of this dispute see T. Penelhum, *God and Scepticism: a Study in Skepticism and Fideism*, (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983), and R. H. Popkin, *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, (Rev. ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

Further Reading


**B. PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY**

Philosophical theology is concerned with the nature and coherence of the concept of God. Traditionally this subject is closely allied to metaphysics and philosophical logic. Its central topics include the Divine Attributes and Divine Action.

**i. Divine Attributes**

Are attributes traditionally ascribed to God, such as omniscience, omnipotence and benevolence, individually coherent and mutually consistent? What is involved in the idea of divine perfection? Can God do the impossible? What is God’s relation to time and change, and to moral goodness? Is God’s omniscience compatible with human free will? Is God impassible, or vulnerable from the effects of human action?

Anselm, *Monologion*.


Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI.


### ii. Divine Action

This group of topics concerns itself with the following set of questions: What sense can be made of divine action in the world, the idea of divine creation, and of God’s sustaining of the universe? Could this be the best of all possible worlds? What is a miracle? What would count as good evidence that a miracle had occurred? Can God answer prayer?


Hume, David. ‘Of Miracles’. In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Sec.IX.


### iii. The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil represents an enduring challenge to philosophical theology as it issues from the seeming incompatibility of two of God’s attributes, namely His perfect goodness and His omnipotence. The problem is generated by the idea that a perfectly good god ought not to allow the extent and degree of evil that exists in the actual world.


Aquinas, *On Evil and Commentary on the Book of Job*.

Leibniz, *Theodicy*. 

C. RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY

Religious epistemology is dominated by the question how, if at all, can belief in a god be justified? Within contemporary discussion there are five approaches to the question: a) natural theology—the attempt to find evidence for the existence of God in the world of nature; b) reformed epistemology—a position which argues that belief in God does not need to be justified evidentially; c) prudentialist arguments—justification arising from expected benefits accruing to belief in God, the two standard forms being Pascal’s ‘Wager’ and William James’s ‘Will to Believe’ argument; d) fideism—an attempt to justify theistic belief by appeal to faith rather than to reason; e) experientia arguments—arguments which assert the existence of a god on the basis of religious experience.

Essential Reading


i. Natural Theology


ii. Reformed Epistemology


iii. Prudentialist Arguments

Pascal, P. *Pensées*, 343.


——. ‘The Sentiment of Rationality’.


iv. *Fideism*


v. *Experientia Arguments*


D. RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

Are all attempts to make theological statements cognitively meaningless? Are the criteria of meaningfulness to be found within religion? Can God be spoken of literally and positively, or only negatively, or metaphorically?


E. THE SOUL AND IMMORTALITY

A principal concern within the three monotheistic traditions of the West has been continued existence of the soul after corporeal death. This is one area in which the Philosophy of Religion is heavily reliant on more general philosophical discussions in Metaphysics and Philosophy of Mind.

Essential Reading

Plato, *Phaedo, and Republic*, Bk.X.

Aristotle, *de Anima*, Bks.2 and 3.


Further Reading


See also the special edition of *Faith & Philosophy*, on the general topic of resurrection, 1996.
Mavrodes, G. 1982. ‘Life Everlasting and the Bodily Criterion of Identity’. In the same volume.

Other topics normally studied include the relation of religion to science; and beliefs specific to a particular religious tradition (for example in Christianity, the concept of incarnation, in Judaism, the concept of idolatory). For references to these other topics see the three anthologies listed under general reading.