

# The Philosophy of Religion

Stephen Wright  
Trinity College, Oxford  
University College, Oxford  
stephen.wright@univ.ox.ac.uk

Hilary 2018

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## I Course Content

### I.1 Course Overview

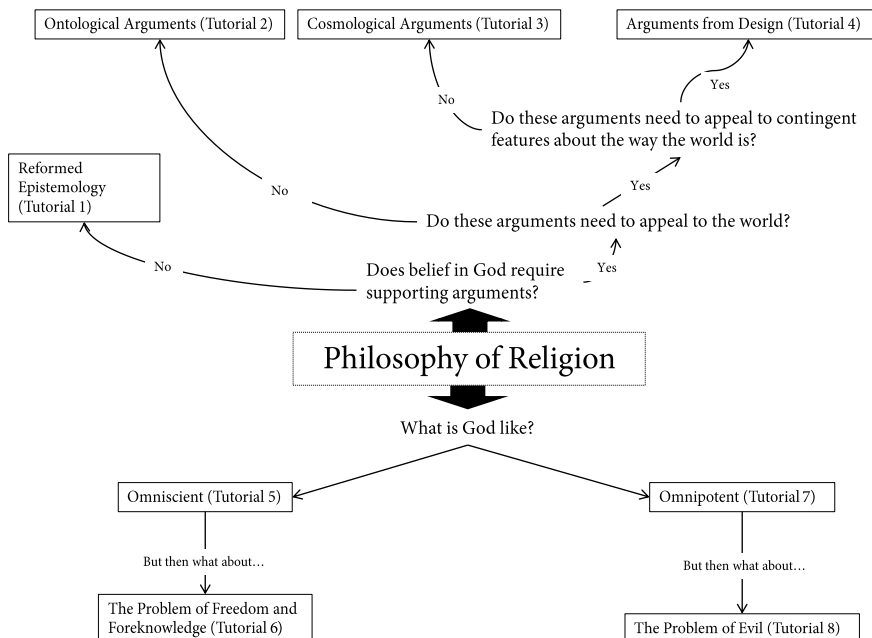
Week	Topic
1	Evidentialism and Reformed Epistemology
2	Ontological Arguments
3	Cosmological Arguments
4	Arguments from Design
5	Omniscience
6	Freedom and Foreknowledge
7	Omnipotence and Benevolence
8	The Problem of Evil

In the *Philosophy of Religion* course, we will look at the theories of various prominent authors that have been concerned with justification for belief in God and the nature of God. Most prominently, we will look at Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and more recent work by Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne and J.L. Mackie. Our approach, however, will be a thematic one. We will be thinking about some of the fundamental questions concerning the nature of God, the existence of God and the respectability or otherwise of belief in God. The course is divided into two parts. In the first part of the course, we will consider arguments for the existence of God. We will begin by considering whether or not such arguments are required for rational belief in God at all, looking at Alvin Plantinga’s *reformed epistemology*, which claims that they are not. With this in hand, we will come to consider *ontological arguments*, *cosmological arguments* and *arguments from design*, three prominent types of argument that purport to establish the existence of God.

During the second part of the course, we will turn our attention to the kinds of properties that God is supposed to have and consider the implications of God having these kinds of properties. We will begin by thinking about the idea that God is supposed to be all-knowing, or *omniscient*. Initially, we will consider what being omniscient amounts to, before considering whether there is a problem with God being omniscient because God's omniscience prevents human free action. Having considered omniscience and its relationship to human freedom, we will then go on to consider the idea that God is supposed to be all-powerful, or *omnipotent*. Having considered what omnipotence amounts to, we will consider whether or not the existence of evil in the world provides evidence against the idea that God is both omnipotent and morally impeccable.

An idea of how all of this fits together is given below:

## 1.2 Concept Map



## 2 Course Admin

### 2.1 Website

I'll post the materials for these tutorials on my website as we go along. They can be downloaded at:

[www.stephenwrightphilosophy.com](http://www.stephenwrightphilosophy.com) on the right-hand side of the page under the 'Philosophy of Religion' link.

## 2.2 A Note on the Reading List

For each class I've identified two different types of reading. Readings marked as required are exactly that – they're readings you just have to do. Some of these are hard, but don't worry, we can discuss anything that you don't understand in tutorials. After this, there are some further readings. These you will want to look at in your own time, possibly after the tutorial (or maybe before) and they will help develop your thinking on these subjects further. For the purposes of the tutorial essay, however, I'd like you to focus particularly carefully on the readings that I've identified as required for the class. This is *not* to say that all of the readings for each week will be relevant to every essay for that week. You'll have to use (and develop) your judgement for working out what is and isn't useful in each case. But it is to say that you should read those required readings particularly carefully because I'll be expecting you to know about them in advance of the tutorial.

Lastly, don't be shy about asking me if you find any of the readings hard to get hold of. If you can't find any of the readings, I'll either email you a PDF of it or else replace it on the reading list with something that can be found or sent.

## 2.3 Essays and Assessment

This course is assessed by a three-hour unseen examination, which you will take along with your other Finals examinations. There are, however, weekly essays that must be written before each tutorial. If your other course requirements enable you to claim an exemption from writing essays in any particular week, then you must let me know about this in the week before you come to write the essay (so if you're claiming an exemption from an essay in 7th week, then you must let me know this by the end of the tutorial in 6th week.)

Exemptions aside, you are required to write and submit an essay of around 2,000 words each week. This needs to be written and emailed to me (address above) at least 24 hours in advance of the tutorial. I'll read them and comment on them and get them back to you before the tutorial starts. During the tutorial, I won't get you to read out your essay, but you should have it with you, because the material that you've developed will be relevant to the questions that we'll be thinking about and you're warmly encouraged to use the content of your essays in discussion.

## 2.4 Tutorials

In tutorials, we'll be talking about four things:

- (1) The readings that you've been looking at.
- (2) The essay that you've written.
- (3) Anything that you're particularly keen to discuss.
- (4) A set of questions on the subject that I've prepared.

Different tutorials might give different weight to each of (1)-(4) and that's absolutely fine. In some tutorials we might discuss your essay less, or you might have fewer questions occurring to you in other tutorials. If nothing obvious emerges, then we'll work through a set of pre-prepared questions that I'll have put together on the topic of the tutorial. I'll give you a copy of these at the end of the tutorial and at the end of the course, I'll make a copy of the course outline with all of the questions available. But I won't tell you what the questions will be in advance. The reason is that you will ultimately be assessed by an unseen examination and this will test your understanding and your ability to think on your feet. One of the best ways to prepare for this is to confront questions that you haven't previously seen and think your way through them, with some support, advice and guidance. That's what having an unseen question sheet in tutorials simulates. After the tutorials, you can use the questions to structure your own revision, if you wish. The questions won't be a comprehensive list of everything that might come up and they won't all be essay questions. Some will simply test your understanding. But working your way through them would be a good way to start your revision when the time comes.

## 2.5 Doing Philosophy

During your time doing philosophical work, you'll want to read things that aren't on the reading lists. And it's really important that what you read is good quality. It's very easy to waste a lot of time and energy in philosophy reading stuff that just isn't helpful. If you read stuff from poor sources, you're liable to wind up confused or misinformed. You want to be reading things that are written by people who have, at the very least, more philosophical experience than you. In the case of several sources, though, there's no filtering or checking to make sure that this is the case. Obviously, the reading lists provided by the faculty are a great place to look. But even they don't contain *everything*. With that in mind, here are some guidelines for you to get you started. As always, do get in touch and ask me if you find yourself in any doubt at all.

Some good places to start your reading are:

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy at <http://plato.stanford.edu> is an excellent resource. It gives you an overview of some of the topics that we'll be working on and also comes with a useful bibliography, all of which is of an appropriate quality for you to be using.

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/> is another excellent online philosophy encyclopedia. Like the Stanford Encyclopedia, its entries are reviewed before they are published and also have useful suggestions for further reading.

Philpapers at <http://www.philpapers.org> is an online collection of philosophy articles that can be searched by category. There are some excellent articles on here and the site is a useful way of finding things to read. This site requires some caution, though. Unlike the above two, anyone can add their papers, regardless of whether or not they have actually been published in journals, or are ever going to be! As a rule of thumb, if you can't see publication details for a paper on this site, then proceed with caution. This notwithstanding, it is an excellent and important source.

Google Scholar at <http://scholar.google.co.uk/> is a relatively recent research tool and

one that's extremely useful. The best thing that you can use Google Scholar for is finding papers that are relevant to what you've been reading. If you run a search for a paper that you've just read, Google Scholar will help throw up any papers that have cited the paper you searched for. This is extremely useful for helping you figure out where to go next. As with PhilPapers, however, there's no quality filter, so if you are in any doubt about what you've found (as with any of the above resources) feel free to ask me first. Lastly, note that this *is* an acceptable use of Google's resources, where searching for philosophers or themes and then reading what you find absolutely is *not*. Likewise, stay off looking for things on Wikipedia.

## 2.6 Preliminary Reading

If you haven't previously taken any kind of introductory epistemology or metaphysics course before, then I would recommend either of the following books to give you an overview of the kind of epistemology and metaphysics that we'll encounter on this course:

Peter van Inwagen (2009) *Metaphysics* (3rd Edition) Boulder: Westview Press.

Michael Williams (2001) *Problems of Knowledge: A Critical Introduction to Epistemology* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

If, on the other hand, you have studied epistemology and metaphysics before, then I would recommend either of the following introductions to the philosophy of religion:

Brian Davies (2004) *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Linda Zagzebski (2007) *The Philosophy of Religion: An Historical Introduction* London: Blackwell Publishing.

Both the Davies and Zagzebski books discuss many of the issues that we'll be thinking about during this course.

### 3 Tutorial 1 – Evidentialism and Reformed Epistemology

We will begin our investigation into the philosophy of religion by considering the question of whether or not belief in God needs to be supported by the kind of evidence provided by independent argumentation. According to reformed epistemologists, belief in God can be properly basic, the idea being that it does not stand in need of independent justification (though belief in God might be justified only if there is no counterevidence). This view has an affinity with *foundationalism* in contemporary epistemology. By contrast, those taken with evidentialism hold that belief in God being justified depends on the provision of some suitable argument to the conclusion that God exists.

#### 3.1 Required Readings

- Alvin Plantinga (2000). 'Religious Belief as Properly Basic' in Davies, Brian (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 42-94.
- Richard Swinburne (2005). *Faith and Reason (2nd Edition)* Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 3.

#### 3.2 Additional Readings

- W.K. Clifford (2000). 'The Ethics of Belief' in Brian Davies (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 31-35.
- J.L. Mackie (1982). *The Miracle of Theism* Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 11.
- Norman Kretzmann (2000). 'Evidence and Religious Belief' in Davies, Brian (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 95-107.
- Peter van Inwagen (1996). 'It Is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, for Anyone, to Believe Anything Upon Insufficient Evidence' in Jeff Jordan & Daniel Howard-Snyder (eds.), *Faith, Freedom and Rationality* Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 137-154.
- Michael Rea and Louis Pojman (2011). *Philosophy of Religion* Long Grove IL: Waveland Press, Chapter 9.
- Tim Mawson (2005). *Belief in God* Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 6.

*Question: Is it possible for someone to be right, rational, justified or warranted in holding a religious belief without independent evidence?*

## 4 Tutorial 2 – Ontological Arguments

God is supposed to have certain properties. Furthermore, he is supposed to have these properties *essentially*. According to most, he is supposed to be a perfect being or a being greater than anything else that can be conceived. Ontological arguments seek to show that having these properties implies existence. So we get a reason for thinking that God exists from considering God's essential nature. In this tutorial, we'll have a look at a couple of different ontological arguments. We'll think about both the traditional ontological arguments, put forward by St. Anselm and subsequently by Descartes in the *Meditations* and we'll then go on to consider Alvin Plantinga's modal ontological argument.

### 4.1 Required Readings

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- Alvin Plantinga (1974). *God, Freedom, and Evil* Michigan: Harper & Row, Part IIc.
- J.L. Mackie (1982). *The Miracle of Theism* Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 3.

### 4.2 Additional Readings

- Michael Tooley (1981). Plantinga's Defence of the Ontological Argument. *Mind* 90 (359):422-427.
- Peter van Inwagen (2009). *Metaphysics* Boulder: Westview Press, Chapter 6.
- Rene Descartes (1641). *Meditations on First Philosophy* Cambridge: Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, Meditation 5.
- Pierre Gassendi, Johannes Caterus & Rene Descartes (2000). Descartes Replies to Critics, in Davies, Brian (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology* Oxford: Oxford University Press 330-337.
- Peter Millican (2004). The One Fatal Flaw in Anselm's Argument' *Mind* 113 (451):437-476.

*Question: 'If non-existence disqualifies something from being the greatest conceivable thing, then the material universe is the greatest conceivable thing, because it is the greatest thing that exists. So in proving the existence of the greatest conceivable thing the ontological argument does not prove the existence of God.' Is this a respectable response to the ontological proof?*



## 5 Tutorial 3 – Cosmological Arguments

The structure of cosmological arguments involves seeking to infer the existence of God from the mere fact that there is something rather than nothing. There are various ways of going about this, which we will consider in this tutorial. Firstly, there are strategies that seek to show that since every event has a cause, the universe coming into existence must itself have a cause and that this cause must be God. Secondly, there are cosmological arguments that appeal to the idea of the *Principle of Sufficient Reason*. Lastly, there are arguments that appeal to the idea of *fine-tuning* to infer the existence of God from the fact that there is a universe.

### 5.1 Required Readings

- Peter van Inwagen (2009). *Metaphysics* Boulder: Westview Press, Chapter 7.
- William Lane Craig (1984). Professor Mackie and the Kalam Cosmological Argument. *Religious Studies* 20 (3):367-375.

### 5.2 Additional Readings

- Richard Taylor (1992). *Metaphysics* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Chapter 11.
- William Rowe (1970). Two Criticisms of the Cosmological Argument. *The Monist* 54 (3):441-459.
- J.L. Mackie (1982). *The Miracle of Theism* Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 5.
- Richard Swinburne (2004). *The Existence of God* (2nd Edition) Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 7.
- Graham Oppy (1991). Craig, Mackie, and the Kalam Cosmological Argument. *Religious Studies* 27 (2):189-197.

*Question: Does any version of the cosmological argument provide a good argument for the existence of God?*

## 6 Tutorial 4 – Arguments from Design

Arguments from design claim that an argument for the existence of God comes from the observation that the world exhibits certain features. Specifically, the world appears to have been designed. In this tutorial we will examine various different types of design argument. We will focus our attention on two separate points. Firstly, we will consider whether or not the world really exhibits the kinds of features that advocates of design arguments seek to appeal to. Secondly, we will consider whether or not these features of the world (if they exist) support the kind of argument for God's existence that defenders of design arguments claim that they do.

### 6.1 Required Readings

- Richard Swinburne (2004). *The Existence of God* (2nd Edition) Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 8.
- J.L. Mackie (1982). *The Miracle of Theism* Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 8.

### 6.2 Additional Readings

- Peter van Inwagen (2009). *Metaphysics* (3rd Edition) Philadelphia: Westview Press, Chapter 9.
- William Paley (2000). An Especially Famous Design Argument, in Davies, Brian (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology* Oxford: Oxford University Press 253-259.
- David Hume (1779). *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* Indiana: Hackett, Parts II and V.
- Richard Swinburne (1972). The Argument From Design - a Defence. *Religious Studies* 8 (3):193-205.
- P.T. Geach (1973). An Irrelevance of Omnipotence. *Philosophy* 48 (186):327-333.

*Question: Is there any reason to think that the physical world exhibits the appearance of having been designed?*

## 7 Tutorial 5 – Omniscience

Omniscience is supposed to be one of God's properties. In this tutorial, we'll think about what this amounts to. This tutorial will be organised around the question of what an omniscient God could fail to know. We will consider the examples of *de se* and *de praesenti* beliefs, which seem to be not only things that God cannot know, but things that ordinary human beings like us *can* know. In doing so, we will think about the difference between *de dicto*, *de re* and *de se* knowledge.

### 7.1 Required Readings

- Norman Kretzmann (1966). Omniscience and Immutability. *Journal of Philosophy* 63 (14):409-420.
- Patrick Grim (1985). Against Omniscience: The Case From Essential Indexicals. *Noûs* 19 (2):151-180.

### 7.2 Additional Readings

- Hector-Neri Castañeda (1967). Omniscience and Indexical Reference. *Journal of Philosophy* 64 (7):203-210.
- Joshua Hoffman and Gary S. Rosenkrantz (2002). *The Divine Attributes* Malden: Blackwell, Chapter 6.
- Thomas Aquinas (2000). Why Ascribe Knowledge to God? in Davies, Brian (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology* Oxford: Oxford University Press 446-455.
- Edward Wierenga (1989). *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into the Divine Attributes* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, Chapter 2.
- Richard Swinburne (1977). *The Coherence of Theism* Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 10.

*Question: What could an omniscient God fail to know?*

## 8 Tutorial 6 – Freedom and Foreknowledge

Following on from our discussion of omniscience, we will consider the implications of God's omniscience for the possibility of human freedom. According to one plausible-looking line of thought, since God already knows what we're going to do (and not just knows but *infallibly knows*) what we do isn't up to us in any interesting sense. The idea is that it's already decided at the point that we seem to make up our minds. In this tutorial, we will think about whether or not human freedom can be made compatible with God's infallible foreknowledge.

### 8.1 Required Readings

- Alvin Plantinga (1999). On Ockham's Way Out, in Stump, Eleanor and Murray, Michael J (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 13-27.
- Norman Kretzmann and Eleanore Stump (1981). Eternity. *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (8):429-458.

### 8.2 Additional Readings

- Linda Zagzebski (2002). Recent Work on Divine Foreknowledge and Free Will, in Kane, Robert (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* Oxford: Oxford University Press 45-64.
- William Hasker (1985). Foreknowledge and Necessity. *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (2):121-156.
- William Lane Craig (1998). On Hasker's Defense of Anti-Molinism. *Faith and Philosophy* 15 (2):236-240.
- Eleanor Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1991). Prophecy, Past Truth, and Eternity. *Philosophical Perspectives* 5:395-424.
- Nelson Pike (1965). Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action. *Philosophical Review* 74 (1):27-46.

*Question: 'For the future to be under my control, it must be that I can determine facts about the future. If I can determine facts about the future, then there must be facts about the future. If there are such facts, then God can know them. If God can know them, then He can infallibly know them. So God being able to infallibly know the future is not only compatible with the future being under my control, but it is a necessary condition of it.' Is this argument any good?*

## 9 Tutorial 7 – Omnipotence and Moral Perfection

The God of classical theism is supposed to be omnipotent. In this tutorial, we'll think about what being omnipotent amounts to. Even an omnipotent being, most theists say, can't perform logical impossible actions or create contradictory things. This just isn't part of what being omnipotent means. In the light of this observation, we'll think about the relationship between omnipotence and being perfectly moral. One might think that being perfectly moral involves creating the best of all possible worlds. But what if this is a logical impossibility?

### 9.1 Required Readings

- Edward Wierenga (1989). *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into the Divine Attributes* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, Chapter 1.
- Nelson Pike (1969). Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6:208-16.

### 9.2 Additional Readings

- Erik J. Wielenberg (2000). Omnipotence Again. *Faith and Philosophy* 17 (1):26-47.
- Richard LaCroix (1977). The Impossibility of Defining "Omnipotence". *Philosophical Studies* 32:181-90.
- Robert Adams (1972). Must God Create the Best? *Philosophical Review* 81:317-32.
- Laura Garcia (2009). Moral Perfection, in Flint, Thomas and Rea, Michael (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 10.
- William Rowe (2004). *Can God Be Free?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 6.

*Question: 'If God exists, He must be omnipotent and impeccable. If He is omnipotent, He is able to sin. If He is impeccable, He is not. Therefore there is no God'. Discuss.*

## 10 Tutorial 8 – The Problem of Evil

The existence of evil in the world seems difficult to explain if an omniscient, benevolent and omnipotent God exists. It seems as though an omniscient, benevolent and omnipotent God wouldn't allow the kind of evil that we see in the world to exist. In this tutorial we will think about how far the existence of evil yields an argument to the conclusion that God doesn't exist. We'll also think about various ways in which theists have sought to respond, including the scope and limits of the *free will defence*, which claims that the fact that humans have free will is a good thing and explains the existence of evil in some sense.

### 10.1 Required Readings

- David Lewis (1993). Evil for Freedom's Sake? *Philosophical Papers* 22 (3):149-172.
- Tim Mawson (2005). *Belief in God* Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 12.

### 10.2 Additional Readings

- Mark Piper (2007). Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Moral *Aporia*. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 62 (2):65-79.
- William Rowe (1979). The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (4):335-341.
- Richard Swinburne (2004). *The Existence of God* (2nd Edition) Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 11.
- Nelson Pike (1963). Hume on Evil. *Philosophical Review* 72:180-97.
- Alvin Plantinga (1974). *God, Freedom, and Evil* Michigan: Harper & Row, Part Ia.

*Question: Does the postulation of an afterlife help to solve the problem of evil?*