

Philosophy Insights
General Editor: Mark Addis

Contemporary Philosophy of Religion

Steven Duncan

*'If God is omniscient,
... He cannot
plead ignorance'*

PUBLICATION DATA

© Steven Duncan, 2007

The Author has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this Work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Published by *Humanities-Ebooks.co.uk*
Tirril Hall, Tirril, Penrith CA10 2JE

READING THIS EBOOK

- * Please adjust the magnification to 82% and progress by using the page forward / back buttons (to enlarge text further, select full screen: CTRL+L).
- * To navigate through the contents use the hyperlinked 'Bookmarks' at the left of the screen.
- * To search, click the search symbol and select 'show all results'.
- * Hyperlinks, if any, are enabled for PC users only.
- * For the convenience of Mac users, any internal hyperlinks are also bookmarked, along with chapters and appendices.
- * To return from visiting an internal hyperlink or appendix please use the green 'previous view' button to return to your starting point (click once for each page you have visited to return from an extended hyperlink).

LICENCE AND PERMISSIONS

This book is licensed for a particular computer or computers. The original purchaser may license the same work for a second computer by applying to support@humanities-ebooks.co.uk with proof of purchase.

Permissions: it is permissible to print one (watermarked) copy of the book for your own use, but not to copy and paste text.

ISBN 978-1-84760-053-0

Contemporary Philosophy of Religion

Steven Duncan

Contents

About the Author

What is the Philosophy of Religion?

Three Competing Paradigms in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion

Deductivism

Neo-Thomism

Analytic Philosophy

Analytic Atheism and the Meaningfulness of Religious Language

Atheistic Deductivism

Inductivism

Mitchell's Inductivist Proposal

Swinburne's Bayesian Theism

Swinburne on the Prior Probability of Theism

Swinburne's Positive Case for Theism

Swinburne's Theodicy

Inference to the Best Explanation and the Future of Inductivism

Post-Deductivism

Deductivism and the Ethics of Belief

The Post-Deductivists on Evil

The Parity Argument Strategy

Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology

Plantinga and Wolterstorff: Christian Philosophy

Recent Work on the Traditional Arguments for God's Existence

The Ontological Argument

The Cosmological Argument

The Teleological Argument

Bibliography

About the Author

Steven M. Duncan (1954–) earned his Ph.D. at the University of Washington in 1987 and has taught at various colleges and universities for the last thirty years. He is currently on the adjunct philosophy staff at Bellevue College.

Chapter One

What is the Philosophy of Religion?

Philosophy as traditionally understood may be defined as the branch of intellectual inquiry that deals with the most general and fundamental questions about the nature of reality and human life insofar as those problems lie beyond the competence of the special sciences to raise or resolve. Defined in this way, many people do not want there be such a thing as philosophy, or at any rate want as little of it as possible.¹ However, despite the concerted efforts of many movements in twentieth century philosophy, from logical positivism to post-modernism, this traditional conception of philosophy has proven remarkably resilient and philosophers continue to discuss the “big questions” with ever less embarrassment as the mid-twentieth century slips farther below the horizon of living memory. Among the questions that have exercised philosophers of the last sixty years, that of the existence of God has been one of the most hotly contested. It is the debate over that question that will be subject of this book.

Philosophy of Religion is the branch of philosophy that deals with that question, as well as related questions concerning the nature of God, the meaning of religious language and the immortality of the soul, among others, insofar as these questions are amenable to discussion from the point of view of neutral, impartial rational inquiry. Unlike other “second-order” philosophical pursuits, however, the philosophy of religion does not take religion as such, i.e. actual religious belief and practice, as its subject-matter. Instead, philosophy of religion is concentrated primarily on the metaphysical truth-claims implied or presupposed by religious belief and practice properly so-called and attempts to bring these to the surface, analyze their central concepts, clarify their implications and attempt to

¹ For example, Quine is supposed to have said that “philosophy of science is philosophy enough;” this, or something like it, expresses the opinion of many contemporary philosophers.

evaluate their truth or falsity from the rational point of view. Since most religions make some attempt to do this from within the perspective of belief in the form of dogmatic theology, it is religion as theologically articulated, rather than as lived belief and practice, that is primarily of interest to philosophers of religion, regardless of whether or not they are sympathetic to religion.

The religious tradition of the West, which for our purposes here includes the Middle East and Persia, is known as *monotheism*, which is centrally characterized by the thesis, shared by Christians, Jews and Muslims, that there exists one supreme being, the personal and providential creator of the universe who reveals Himself through the prophets and whose mighty deeds are recorded in canonical scriptures such as the Bible or the Holy Qu'ran. Although these religions diverge with regard to which prophets and scriptures they accept and differ with regard to their distinctive religious teachings, all of them trace themselves to the fundamental revelation of God to Abraham and claim to worship the same God. Furthermore, as theologically articulated, they largely agree in their overall metaphysical conception of God. It is this conception of God, known as *theism*, which is the primary object of analysis in the philosophy of religion and which is thought to express the fundamental metaphysical truth-claims common to all the Western monotheistic faiths.

The theological consensus among monotheists goes deeper than this, however; the mainstream conception of the theistic God, shared by the major figures of all three traditions, is nowadays referred to as Classical Theism or Perfect Being theology.¹ According to this view, God is characterized as the “being a greater than which cannot be conceived”, i.e. as the most perfect being in principle, unsurpassable even by Himself. Reflecting to some extent an element of Platonic inheritance, God is thought of as a being so fully and completely realized in every respect as to be immutable, impassable and utterly self-sufficient in such a way as to require nothing outside of Himself in order to exist. At the same time, God is a personal being, possessing intellect and will and thus capable of rational agency. One way in which God has exercised this rational agency is in the creation of the observable universe from nothing pre-existent, whether this is conceived of as eternally existing matter or the very substance of God

¹ See especially the works of Thomas V. Morris, in particular his *Anselmian Explorations* (1988) and *The Concept of God* (1989).

Himself. Rather, God created the world *ex nihilo* simply through willing that it should exist; further, given that the observable universe is created from nothing, it requires not only to be created but to be *conserved* by God at every moment at which it exists. Thus, despite being wholly independent of and transcendent to the observable universe He has created, God is immanent in presence and power to every point in space and time. In the context of the divine perfection, we must therefore attribute omnipotence, omniscience and perfect goodness to God, which attributes are reflecting in and testified to by what He has made.

In addition, most Classical Theists include necessary existence as among the divine attributes, maintaining that God, being independent and self-sufficient, contains within Himself the cause, reason or explanation for His existence. In the context of the divine perfection, Classical Theists deny that God is subject either to coming-to-be or passing-away. Being incapable of ever having come into existence or of ever going out of existence, God thus possesses infinity and eternity. However, Classical Theists are divided over whether this eternity should be understood as existence for an infinite period of time in both directions or as constituted by a unique, non-temporal mode of existence outside of time. In addition, some modern exponents of necessary existence as one of the central divine attributes maintain that it ought to be understood as *logically necessary* existence and thus as entailing that God's non-existence, properly understood, is logically impossible or self-contradictory. The classical ontological argument for God's existence, to found in Anselm, Descartes and moderns such as Norman Malcolm and Alvin Plantinga, is an expression of this tendency, though not all theistic philosophers, not even all Classical Theists, endorse this idea.¹

Much work has been done to clarify and defend the Classical Theist conception of God, as well as to evaluate it, especially in comparison to other, alternative conceptions of God on offer in contemporary philosophy of religion. We cannot go into all this here; however, we will focus on the central question of the philosophy of religion, namely, the question of God's existence, from the philosophical point of view. For our purposes here, we may further divide this topic into two more specific issues. First, there is the question of whether or not there are any rationally compelling (or at least intellectually respectable) arguments, evidence or grounds for believing that God exists. Theistic philosophers of reli-

1 For a collection of classic sources, see Plantinga (1965).

gion generally defend an affirmative answer to this question, whereas atheistic philosophers of religion critique those defences and conclude that there is no good reason for believing that God exists. Secondly, there is the problem of evil, which examines the main piece of evidence for positive atheism, i.e. the affirmative judgment that there is no God. Since the mid-twentieth century, the problem of evil has been one of the most written on philosophical topics in the English-speaking world. No account of contemporary philosophy of religion can fail to deal with this issue at least in broad outline.

Three Competing Paradigms in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion

I will survey contemporary philosophy of religion in accordance with the historical thesis I advanced in my earlier, more comprehensive treatment of this material called *Analytic Philosophy of Religion: Its History since 1955*.¹ According to that treatment, contemporary philosophy of religion is best characterized as reflecting the interaction between three overlapping but successive paradigms in the philosophy of religion called Deductivism, Inductivism and post-Deductivism respectively. While each of these approaches to the questions of God's existence and problem of evil has adherents today, each also enjoyed a period in which it was the prime focus of attention within the discipline. Deductivism, which was initiated by the neo-Thomists and which drew the fire of the analytic atheists, was dominant in the crucial decade of the 1950's in which contemporary philosophy of religion emerged, emphasized the construction and evaluation of deductive proofs of God's existence, and gave rise to the deductive Argument from Evil intended to prove God's non-existence. In response to theistic critiques of the Argument from Evil, the discussion of God's existence slowly shifted from the evaluation of deductive proofs for God's existence to the question of whether or not God's existence was reasonable to believe on the basis of our total evidence; this initiated the Inductivist paradigm that culminated in Richard Swinburne's Bayesian argument for the existence of God. Although what I call the post-Deductivist paradigm emerged about the same time as Inductivism, it did not enjoy its heyday until the 1990's, when Alvin Plantinga proposed his "Reformed Epistemology" as the core of a new kind of "Christian philosophy."

1 Published by Humanities-Ebooks (2007).