Analytic Philosophy of Religion: its History since 1955

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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.
Introduction

For anyone with even a slight acquaintance with the field, there can be no doubt that the philosophy of religion has been one of the most active and volatile branches of the discipline of philosophy in the latter half of the twentieth century. In this book, we will be reviewing the history of the philosophy of religion since 1955, concentrating on the problems, doctrines and figures making up the tradition of analytic philosophy of religion dominant during that period in Britain and the United States. Although my primary concern will be with the history of this tradition in the philosophy of religion, I will also be defending two historical claims about the general development and progress of the philosophical research and discussion composing this tradition. First, I will be charting the obvious trend from a nearly universal consensus in favour of atheism among the central figures in analytic philosophy of religion in the 1950’s to the dominance of theistic philosophers of religion by the turn of the 21st century. Secondly, I shall be arguing that there has been a paradigm shift in the way that discussion of the philosophy of religion has been undertaken in the last fifty years from a largely deductivist perspective to a more inductivist one and then, ultimately, to a Post-Deductivist perspective. This change parallels a similar trend in the epistemology in the same period but seems to have developed largely independently of that trend, or at any rate does not rely directly upon it.

I shall begin by filling in some of the historical background, beginning with the late nineteenth century developments in the Catholic Church that led to the rise of the neo-Thomist movement and which, I will argue, initiated the modern deductivist paradigm and its model for conceiving and discussing the central issues in the philosophy of religion such as the existence of God and the problem of evil. I shall then turn to the origins of analytic philosophy and of the early analytic philosophers of religion who quite naturally adopted the deductivist paradigm and used it to make the formidable case for atheism that seemed all but unchallengeable in the 1950’s.

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1 For a history of Anglophone philosophy of religion prior to this period, see Sell (1974); for a comprehensive history of twentieth century philosophy of religion see Long (2000).
2 The parallel is evident in Plantinga (1993a).
However, I will then argue that, in response to Nelson Pike’s refutation of the deductive argument from evil in the 1960’s, the analytic atheists inadvertently initiated the new, inductivist paradigm that, over the next twenty years, transformed both the standards of argument and the very way in which problems in the philosophy of religion were conceived by philosophers. I will then chart the development of the revival of theism in the philosophy of religion, concentrating on the two main approaches to a contemporary philosophical defence of theism: the inductivist approach of Richard Swinburne and the Post-Deductivist approach of Alvin Plantinga.

This, as it turns out, is quite a story to tell and by no means will I be able to tell all of it. Since there is so much relevant material, I have opted for breadth rather than depth and conceive of the book as a kind of handbook that will provide sufficient acquaintance with the material for students and other non-specialists while serving as a guide and platform for further, more sophisticated research in the field or with regard to special topics that readers may feel inclined and competent to pursue. Although I will occasionally offer my own arguments or assessments of the current debate in the various topics I will be discussing, this is a work of scholarship rather than creative philosophy. My intention is to present the philosophical work of others rather than to contribute to the ongoing debate, something I hope to do on another occasion. I will be well pleased if the reader goes away with the (hopefully correct) impression that he or she knows the lay of land in this fascinating and increasingly sophisticated branch of philosophical inquiry. I shall be even more satisfied if the reader is then motivated to investigate the relevant problems and texts more fully. To begin with, however, I shall assume that the reader is approaching these questions for the very first time and proceed accordingly. Let us begin, then, with the preliminaries.

What is the Philosophy of Religion?

The philosophy of religion is the branch of philosophy that deals with the central, substantive claims of religion from the rational point of view, such as the existence and nature of God, the nature and function of religious language and the justification for religious belief. Because it is a branch of philosophical investigation, the philosophy of religion ideally begins from an external and neutral rational perspective on the substantive, metaphysical claims of religion and proposes to evaluate and assess those claims from that perspective. The philosopher of religion, regardless of his antecedent religious commitments (or lack of them) is bound by the philosopher’s general commitment to the objective and impartial examination of these substantive claims.
from the rational point of view. As such, the philosopher of religion is not permitted to privilege any sources of religious belief or religious authorities in such a way as to take their truth for granted or place them beyond the limits of rational investigation unless one is prepared to justify these exclusions on purely rational grounds. While such claims are appropriate and weighty in theological contexts, they are not appropriate in philosophy of religion. It avails nothing, from the rational point of view, that a particular claim is well-attested in the Scriptures or promulgated by institutionally recognized religious authorities. Only analyses and arguments that can be formulated and justified using our common human reason are appropriate in a philosophical discussion.

The analytic philosophy of religion, the tradition with which we will be most concerned in this book, sees the role of reason in the analysis and evaluation of the substantive claims of religion as having three essential aspects. First, there is conceptual analysis, in which philosophers attempt to provide an account of the substantive meaning of a particular term, one intended to provide a clear and perspicuous theoretical account of the referent of that term. This can be done formally, by offering an analysis of a term intended to constitute a theoretical definition of that term, or informally in terms of the ordinary usage of the term and the linguistic intuitions evoked by these reflections. Thus, one may attempt to analyze the term “God” in the hopes of arriving at a theoretical conception of God consisting in a set of essential properties uniquely belonging to the referent of that term, something that can pass muster as a definition of that term and thus state the necessary and sufficient conditions for anything to count as God. Alternatively, one may study and reflect on the way the term “God” is used by religious believers and its function in religious discourse, including ritual and prayer, in order to gain insight into the meaning of “God” and to grasp the “cash value” of that term within a certain mode of discourse. As we shall see, these different analyses of the concept of God, such as those offered by classical theists, by evangelical protestant thinkers, process panentheists and Wittgensteinians, result in different, competing and perhaps even to some extent incommensurable conceptions of God with important implications for what one claims about the existence and nature of God.

Secondly, analytic philosophers of religion engage in the clarification of claims, putatively substantive propositions about God, such as the claims that God exists, that God is love, that God is omnipotent and omniscient and so on. Here philosophers proceed largely by an examination of the intuitions evoked by questions or objections intended to test the implications of a claim. So, suppose we consider that claim that
God is omnipotent. Since “omnipotent” means “all-powerful”, one might suppose that to say God is omnipotent is equivalent to saying that God can do just anything at all. But it doesn’t take much reflection to suggest that such an interpretation of “God is omnipotent” is puzzling, to say the least. For example, can God make square circles? Can God change the past, bringing it about that something that happened yesterday should never have occurred at all? Nor is this merely a matter of what is intrinsically possible, for there appear to be some things that God, conceived of as a perfect being, is incapable of doing or bringing about that are well within the power of ordinary human beings such as ourselves. For example, I can sin or destroy myself, but it hardly seems correct to say that God could do these things, since God is usually thought to be both morally perfect and necessarily existent. Although some atheistic philosophers of religion have attempted to use such considerations to prove that the concept of God is somehow incoherent, the great majority of contemporary philosophers of religion regard puzzles such as these as challenges to clarify the concept of God rather than abandon it.

At the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, there was a widespread conviction among philosophers in the English-speaking world that analysis of the sort sketched above would prove sufficient by itself to resolve (or, it was hoped, to dissolve) all distinctively philosophical questions in such a way as to eliminate the need for any form of substantive philosophical theorizing. This view is no longer in the ascendant. Contemporary philosophers are still offering competing analyses that amount to different substantive theoretical accounts of the putative realities those analyses are intended to describe or capture. Further, since philosophical theories are not directly and straightforwardly testable by observation or experiment in the way that scientific theories are, philosophers attempt to build a case for their views by offering rational arguments for those views, objections to the views and arguments of others and responses to the objections presented against their own views. As such, rational argument is very much the life-blood of philosophical discourse and this leads to the third major task of the philosopher of religion; the evaluation of reasons and arguments for and against specific philosophical positions. Thus, theistic philosophers will generally use one or more of the traditional philosophical arguments – the ontological, cosmological or teleological arguments – to justify belief in God. Other philosophers will offer objections to those arguments and exponents of these arguments will endeavour to reply to those objections.

In what follows, we will see many examples of each of the foregoing, with a decided preference for the latter. The tremendous growth of discussion in the philoso-
phy of religion, especially with the rise of analytic philosophy of religion beginning in the 1950’s, has led to an equally impressive increase in the number of competing views within the discipline. In accordance with my stated plan, I will attempt to acquaint the reader with most of the main positions that have been held and defended in this burgeoning field in the last fifty or so years. Those who are content with a broad overview will, I hope, be satisfied and those wishing a more sophisticated treatment of these figures and issues given a solid foundation to pursue further studies.

Faith and Reason

The philosophical virtues of rationality, objectivity, impartiality and intellectual charity are easier to attain in some branches of philosophical inquiry than in others. Few who investigate the intricacies of advanced logic, the philosophy of mathematics or the philosophy of language are likely to have strong pre-philosophical commitments prior to the examination of the questions and theories that arise in these areas of inquiry. This is not so where the philosophy of religion is concerned. Religion, unlike mathematics or linguistics, is a matter of common human concern and in many areas – including metaphysics, cosmology, ethics and even politics – living religion competes with philosophy for the role of *biou kubernetes* or “helmsman of life.” For this reason, one rarely comes to the philosophy of religion without strong opinions either for or against religious belief, usually derived from one’s prevailing culture and early childhood training. This, in turn, hampers our ability to engage the issues, theories and arguments in the true spirit of philosophical inquiry, which requires that we put aside our feelings and opinions and restrict ourselves only to what can be discussed and defended from the perspective of neutral reason. For both religious and irreligious people alike, it is very easy to beg the question by assuming that certain favoured views are obvious (“science disproves religion”)\(^1\) or beyond philosophical questioning (“the Bible is the word of God”). Indeed, many come to the philosophy of religion with their minds already made up, looking either merely for confirmation of the views that they antecedently hold or material that might be useful for apologetic purposes; in neither case do they approach the issues in a properly philosophical spirit, one specified by the ideal of philosophical inquiry.

At the same time, the issues canvassed in the philosophy of religion are hardly

\(^1\) For examples of this sort of thing, see the selections from Dawkins and Dennett in Martin and Bernard (2003) pages 430–31 and the essay by John Worrall in Peterson and Van Arragon (2004) pages 59–72.
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