roaches to the faith/reason nexus
t, while it seems clear that com-
undermine a Christian's affirma-
ness, our theological perspective
. A second observation is closely
ctant to engage in philosophical
l distort their theological beliefs.
ever, by distinguishing between
ier formulations of the reason and
emerges. In all three, theological
itments can also have a profound
ions.

5

Is There a God?

One of my favorite Coen brothers' movies is O *Brother Where Art Thou?* (2000). The plot is loosely based on Homer's *Odyssey.* In the movie the three main characters break out of jail and are on the run from the law in the American South of the early twentieth century. In a forest they come across a large crowd of white-robed people getting baptized at a river, against the background of the beautiful song "Down to the River to Pray" (sung by Alison Krauss). One of the men, Delmar, rushes down and is baptized: "The preacher done washed me clean," he says, and his sins are forgiven. Delmar "got religion." But what is that, anyway? What is religion?

As with many other terms about big ideas, there is no agreed-upon definition of religion. What many folks today mean by religion is simply religious organizations—local religious houses and their national associations: temples, synagogues, spiritual centers, and churches of various types. What is more, the term "religion" in modern times identifies something different than was meant in previous centuries. For *Augustine* in the fourth century, for example, religion (*religio*) meant something close to what we call spirituality today.

So far we have not made much progress. Let's agree that what the modern word "religion" points to has long been a vital aspect of human cultures, as it still is today. For many in richer, more developed countries, religion is seen as something private, a choice some make

but others do just fine without. This is a quite modern development, and odd in the long history of human beings. What we are pointing to with the term "religion" is in fact a whole way of life and death, something that was a vital part of culture for individuals and nations throughout history. It is hard to say what all the great world religions have in common, however. Experts in religious studies will define it differently, if at all. And the problem with defining religion is that when we abstract these beliefs from a whole-body and communal way of life, we are in danger of misunderstanding them by isolating individual **propositions** from their larger spiritual experience and way of life. Religions are much more than the meaning of their respective concepts; they orient a whole life and culture toward something sacred or transcendent (not always gods or God). Let's take two examples.

Some Christians have objected to the very idea of a philosophical analysis of Christian beliefs. Philosophers as a group use tools and methods that do not appeal to spiritual practices, faith traditions, or deep trust in Christ, all of which are central to robust Christian life. *Pascal*, whom we discussed earlier, is one thinker who famously makes this point. He made the now-famous distinction between the "God of the philosophers" and the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." To take another example from a different world religion, the Tibetan Buddhist teaching that emptiness or nothingness (*shunyata*) is the true nature of what we experience as "real things" is only fully understood when we see and understand it as part of a larger Buddhist way of life and death. To isolate the philosophical concept as if it were a simple proposition to be accepted or rejected on its own is a common way to misunderstand what religion is really all about.

Philosophers of religion have not always understood that propositions treated in isolation can lead to misunderstandings about religious thought. This remains a potential problem, but less so in our time due to the helpfulness of religious studies. It is possible to investigate religious teachings philosophically and still maintain a deeper sense of their place within a way of life. In the Western tradition, certain traditional doctrines (like God not having a creator) have been debated for thousands of years both inside and outside the church. We will examine those here, especially those having to do with God.

Not all religions have gods or God at their center, but in our context, the religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have shaped the conversation for so long and to such a great degree that these tend to be what philosophers of religion discuss. In China this chapter would be quite different! With these global and multicultural facts to frame our discussion, let us investigate, then, some of the classical Western debates about God.

WHICH THEISM?

You don't have to study philosophy of religion long to realize that the word **theism** pops up pretty often. The term is simply shorthand for a system of belief that focuses on God or the gods. If you believe in gods or God, you are a theist, believe it or not! But theism comes in several types. Let's go over the batting list.

Polytheism is the belief in many gods. At the roots of European history there were cultures that worshiped many gods; think of Odin and Zeus, for example. The myths or sacred stories of these gods did not always show them in the best moral light; some were downright destructive. But they were clearly great and terrible, often associated with powerful forces in human life (like Mars, the god of war) or the natural world (like Thor, the god of thunder and lightning). This is characteristic of polytheism, the oldest form of religion in written human history. We find variations of it in China, Egypt, India, Mesoamerica, and Mesopotamia—wherever people first started to write things down.

The belief in just one God, **monotheism**, takes longer to develop. An early version of it is **henotheism**: a tribe or people recognizes only one god for themselves but accepts that other nations have their own gods. But over time, among the Hebrews, these other gods were seen to be nothing at all: useless, deaf and dumb. Only the God of Israel, YHWH, was the living God: "I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God" (Isa 44:6). This is monotheism plain and simple. Monotheism moved from the Middle East to Eurasia as a whole, and is currently the most dominant form of religion on earth. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and some schools of Hinduism are monotheistic. Monotheism sees the one God as creator of all

that existed, exists, or will exist. God is also the source of all that is really possible, including making and upholding the laws of nature that structure reality. But the God of monotheism does not need the world in order to exist.

Speaking of the world, we should move on now to **pantheism**. Have you ever heard anyone say that they are "spiritual but not religious"? They may go on to identify a spiritual dimension to all—that is, a spirit of life that moves through living things, perhaps. Such a person may be what we call a pantheist, probably without them knowing it! Pantheism holds that a spiritual, sacred dimension of the world exists, but it is not usually thought of as a personal god. What we may call God in our religion is at bottom nothing more than a spiritual force, they normally maintain. Think of the Force in *Star Wars*. A pantheist does not believe that "everything is god," as the name might suggest. More likely they would say that everything is sacred—yes, even mosquitoes. After all, they have a part to play in the circle of life, right? Pantheism is a known player in today's world religions but is usually rejected as a label by those who hold to it.

But what if a person rejects all kinds of gods and sacred reality, or is just not sure? These are nontheists. The main two types of nontheist views in our culture are **agnosticism** and **atheism**. An agnostic is simply unsure whether there is a god or sacred reality or not. They are not just being negative; they simply don't know. There is a positive side to this viewpoint. The agnostic will claim that no one else can know for sure, either, including you and me. There is just no rational, logical way to be sure one way or the other about the existence of God. An atheist, on the other hand, is a firm believer in God *not* existing. Atheism is the view that there are no gods, no God, and no sacred, transcendent reality. Usually atheists hold that the material world is all that exists.

It might seem that every developed life philosophy should fit somewhere on our theism/nontheism spectrum, from polytheism to atheism. So scholars thought for a long time! Starting a few centuries ago, however, some philosophers developed a viewpoint that combines elements of monotheism and pantheism. In this view, **panentheism**, the spiritual energy of the universe becomes a single, personal God.

This God is distinct, but never separate, from the world. Likewise, the world is never separate from God. For a panentheist, not only does all reality depend upon God to exist (like monotheism) but God also depends upon the world to exist. God is also moving and changing alongside the world; this God grows and is never fully perfect. Panentheism is a viewpoint normally espoused by philosophers and other intellectuals. Those who hold to this type of theism may or may not practice a specific faith tradition.

So now have we covered all the bases? After all, we looked at polytheism, monotheism, pantheism, panentheism, agnosticism, and atheism. How many bases does this ballpark have, anyway? There is one problem left, as usual. Our overview of theisms leaves out the details. Lots of fascinating nuances about the particulars involved in the many great world religions and life philosophies simply cannot be included. Not all monotheists are the same, nor even all atheists, for that matter. As we noted earlier, too, a genuine religion is much more whole bodied and lived out than these abstract categories. But this list can be useful, as long as it is understood to be introductory and limited. Like knowing a friend *only* through texting, there is so much missing.

IS THERE A GOD? HOW DO YOU KNOW?

Having listed the different types of theism, let's focus on monotheism. This is the standard or classical view of God in Western and Middle Eastern culture. Is it possible to prove that the God of standard monotheism exists? One time the famous philosopher and well-known atheist *Bertrand Russell* (1872–1970) was at a reception in his honor when someone came up and said she had a question. "What if you were to die, Mr. Russell, and come before God? What would you say?" Russell is reported to have replied, "Evidence, God. I needed more evidence!"

Is there any evidence for God? Typically, all that exists is supposed to be the evidence for God's existence. Creation as a whole bears the marks of the Author, so to speak. So the God in question needs to be a creator of everything that is not God. What is more, this God will need to be the author of the laws of nature and sustain

all creation moment by moment, upholding the laws, principles, and fundamental energies that are behind and within all created things. This God will need to be very powerful or almighty. And this God will need to use that power and wisdom throughout all reality and so be present in some way everywhere. Finally, if all that ever exists has a beginning, however long ago, then this God will need to be eternal so as to bring about the initial singularity that existed before space-time itself. You get the idea. We are talking, in these arguments for God's existence, about standard monotheism. But this is not just any kind of one-god-ism. Rather, this God is the source of all that is and all that is possible, unlimited by space, time, or anything other than the divine nature. While sometimes a mere god like Zeus or Odin might fit the argument, only this unbounded, unlimited living Being will fit them all. When we just say "God" in this part of our chapter, we will mean this Holy One.

So does there exist any evidence that God is real? To start us off, let's turn to the most famous Western philosopher to advance arguments like this: *Thomas Aquinas*. Aquinas was born in a small Italian town called Aquino (Aquinas means "from Aquino"). He lived in a fascinating time in Europe when feudal culture, commerce, and society were on the rise up from the Dark Ages. Feudal kingdoms were still behind the great Arab empires, the most advanced cultures in central and western Eurasia. The learning of the Arabs was challenging the older, more settled patterns of thought inherited from the classical and Christian past among the Latin-speaking scholars of Europe. New universities like Paris and Oxford had been founded, with new faculties of academic theology.

Into this heady mix of new ideas arose the young new Dominican brother whose genius would soon become obvious to all. Aquinas is generally accepted as the greatest medieval theologian, despite being called the Dumb Ox in school. He wrote a tremendous number of important works in philosophy, biblical interpretation, worship, and theology. By all accounts, his greatest work is the *Summa Theologiae*, a massive summary of theology for students that he never was able to finish. In this and other works, Aquinas reinterpreted Christian theology and philosophy for his day and culture. He accepted the

authoritative teachings of the past, often providing brilliant and learned summaries of diverse traditional views. His creativity came in showing how the new scientific and philosophical learning of his day could be put into the service of Christian doctrine. The school of thought he founded, Thomism, still continues as a major voice in Christian scholarship today.

Many people have long studied his "five ways," a famous survey of rational grounds for belief in the existence of God. These also have the virtue of being short, like five PowerPoint slides: a useful summary rather than a detailed exposition. Aquinas believed that philosophy could discover some truths about God even apart from Christian faith and **special revelation**. (*Aristotle* and *Plato* had given him fine examples of this.) To understand the five ways of Aquinas in his own language, we would need to understand the culture of his time, especially the science or **natural philosophy** of his day. For our age, the five ways are in need of updating, so we will do this a little bit here. His five ways all involve something we observe in the universe as a whole. They start with widely accepted facts about the universe as understood in his context.

(1) The first argument, often called the argument from motion, or the argument to an Unmoved Mover, is derived from the fact that things change and move. "Motion" here, however, does not mean travel but any kind of change, even an internal one. An ultimate or "first" cause of motion (change) is always needed, even in an infinite series. For even in an infinitely long series, where does the motion come from when we consider it as a whole? Imagine an infinite train of boxcars moving along an infinite track. Each one pulls the next one, but we want to know who or what moves the whole train, for these boxcars have no motors. The train has no beginning, so there is no engine causing the movement. It has no ending, so the caboose is not the source. Something must be moving all of it. Where does the energy to move an infinite number of boxcars come from? We can see from this example that the motion or power to change in an infinitely long series of events does not explain itself. We need some source outside the series to cause change or motion to happen within it. The idea of an energy transfer from one boxcar to the next only passes the buck.

When we are speaking of the motion and energy of entire universes, the obvious candidate is an omnipotent and eternal God.

(2) The second argument, often called the one to an Uncaused Cause, focuses on the cause for things to exist at all. Everything we know has a beginning. No thing that comes into being can cause *itself* to exist, for nothing comes from nothing. Again, even if there are an infinite series of finite, internal, and local causes, where does the power-to-be for the whole series come from? There must be an unlimited Being, one who is never brought into existence and so needs no creator, who is the ultimate cause of all things. God is once again the natural candidate for an Uncaused Cause.

(3) The third way of providing evidence that God exists starts with another common truth: nothing in the universe had to exist. Everything we see in the world could possibly have never existed, and all of it will eventually pass away. In other words, the totality of all things in spaces and times is contingent: it is perfectly possible to conceive of them as not existing. What is more, it is also physically possible that the whole thing, including the big bang, the laws of nature, and all that follows from them, might never have existed. Once again, an infinite series of contingent things does not do the job. What is needed is a noncontingent thing, a necessary being. That being is God, who exists of God's very nature, Being itself and the fount of all existence. God cannot have a creator and be eternal. So far these arguments have a similar flow and pattern. We call all three of them **cosmological arguments** because they are about the cosmos as a whole.

(4) The fourth way, named the argument from degrees, or "gradation," is different. It is based on some facts about the cosmos rather than all of it. Here we focus on good qualities. While humans are never perfect, they do demonstrate *degrees* of perfect qualities. Some people are noble, good, or honest, while others are decidedly not. And those who are more or less good demonstrate those qualities in different ways. So where do these standards come from? Aquinas rejects the idea that we humans invent these standards, since they apply whether or not we believe them. He believes that each good quality can be passed on only by someone who is better. We learn what it means in practice to be truthful by learning this from truthful people, for

example. This would imply that somewhere in the past there was a perfect being, who exemplified all the best qualities. One obvious candidate again is God. This argument is perhaps the most difficult one to restate in modern terms. It made more sense back then.

For the science and philosophy of Aquinas' time, what was true of moral qualities was true of every quality in everything. For there to be degrees of hotness, there must be somewhere a perfect heat. For there to be degrees of strength, there must be somewhere a complete and perfect strength. If that sounds like Plato, you are right! But the point is that God is the obvious source of all created perfections. Many of Aquinas' examples are about moral qualities, and those translate somewhat better into our age. Where do they come from? What grounds our standards of goodness, of right and wrong? God is not only a morally perfect being but is also the creator of everything. God's own good nature provides a perfect standard for things whose goodness echoes his own perfection in created ways. The idea that moral goodness is grounded in God's perfect goodness makes sense to us, even if we disagree. As an argument about moral truths, this argument from degrees is reasonable, even if today we would reject its application to everything.

(5) The fifth way is based on the design and structure we find in all creation. We call this a **teleological argument**. Everything has some fundamental structure that makes it endure over time and have the properties it does. Chaos, randomness, and accident do occur in nature to be sure, but design and order are foundational. Have you ever noticed how things move in a "natural" way? By nature a predator will hunt and a ruminant will chew. By nature the Earth orbits the sun and is warmed by it. By nature the atoms in a molecule bind together. Even in a world of change, there is stability, order, and action with a purpose. Order, design, and purpose do not just make themselves. Even if one machine can make another, even if one system of nature can create another, these depend upon their own design and structure—and where did that come from? Thinking this through leads us to a need for an ultimate cause of order and design in all things. There must be an intelligence that is uncreated and thus not designed by another, but whose work shapes everything else. Even an

infinite series of natural systems, one after the other, can provide us with no answer as to where the design in the whole series comes from. So there must be some ultimate, final cause of order in all creation.

The very idea of God is of an **absolute being** that never comes *into* existence but always exists, forever. As an absolute and personal being, the God of standard monotheism is also perfectly wise—indeed, knowing all things possible (**omniscient**). So God is a good answer to our question about who is the ultimate cause of all things. It's hard to see what other candidate we might have, and Aquinas quickly moved once again to "This all people call God."

Aquinas concludes that the things we observe around us give us reasonable grounds for rational belief in God. We have public evidence to support the idea of a perfect, personal, and necessary being, the source of all possibilities, perfections, change, and order in the world. Even taken together, the arguments do not amount to proof—that is, to rational demonstration that this conclusion and no other fits all the facts. His arguments made good sense in the context of his day, but can they be updated for our science-minded time? For Christian thought, the ultimate structure and order of the universe created by God is what makes modern science possible in the first place.

The kinds of arguments we have been looking at are sometimes called **natural theology**. Natural theology begins with evidence from "nature" in the sense of the cosmos as a whole. These are facts we could in principle agree upon no matter what our religion or life philosophy. It then moves on to think and speak about God in what logically follows from these facts. And this is what theology means after all: studying and speaking about God. Natural theology seeks to do that apart from any particular religious revelation. And while there are plenty more skeptics in our time than in the thirteenth century, modern philosophy has not abandoned natural theology. Moderns have updated this style of argument and given standard names to the great variety of them. Like Aquinas, we will provide here a short overview of these arguments. Our goal is not to prove to every learned person that God exists but to briefly sketch much longer and more detailed arguments. What might a modern Aquinas put in his slide presentation?

MODERN ARGUMENTS FOR THEISM

There are a whole host of arguments for the existence of God. The five ways of Aquinas is just one possible list. To help keep track, the modern tradition follows *Immanuel Kant*'s list of four types. Kant borrowed some terms from Aquinas, and added his own. His list is: cosmological arguments, teleological arguments, arguments from morality, and **ontological arguments**. The first three start with facts about the world we live in, truths about creation. Just to be different, the last one does not appeal to empirical truths but to the very idea of God. Let's put that one off until last, as it can be mind-blowing!

Cosmological arguments all appeal to the very fact that there is a world at all. One cosmological argument today, similar to Aquinas' third way, is the argument from contingency. Contingency is simply the idea that something could have not existed: it is possible that it not be. You and I, and the book you are reading, are all contingent things. The opposite of a contingent being is a necessary being. God is not contingent, but what does it mean to say God is a "necessary" being? For standard monotheism, God is necessary in the sense of being absolute: immortal, eternal, uncreated, self-existent, and the cause of all else that has existence. All things we study in the sciences are contingent, even all the universes there may be. After all, a universe is just the sum of all the contingent things in it. But the sum of all contingent things cannot answer the question about why there is something rather than nothing. God, as the only absolute being, can.

Another version of the cosmological argument was proposed and debated by significant Muslim philosophers in the age of the great Arab empires. It is called the **Kalam cosmological argument**, from an Arabic word for "science of discourse," or logic. In this view, the universe cannot have existed for an infinite amount of past time. Modern physics has caught up with this medieval philosophy. So this first premise is:

(1) The cosmos as a whole (multiverse or universe) began to exist.
(2) Anything that begins to exist has a cause outside of itself.
(3) The whole of the cosmos has a cause outside of itself.

You can see that this is a specific way of saying the cosmos as a whole is contingent. And since God does not begin to exist, this excludes God. Finally, the ultimate cause of the cosmos would need to be one that does not begin to exist. God as personal, absolute being never comes into existence but exists eternally, being the ultimate cause of everything. God is the external cause needed here, and perhaps even the only reasonable one.

Now the Kalam argument looks pretty solid in terms of modern physics. How could anyone rationally deny it? But in learned culture today, especially in America, there is a vocal group of atheists that oppose belief in God. This "new atheism" is typically a version of **scientific materialism**. Materialism is a life philosophy in which all that exists is matter-energy and things made up of it. For the **new atheists**, sciences are typically thought of as opposed to religious belief. Yet modern scientists and philosophers putting forth arguments for the existence of God also appeal to current sciences and accept their importance in shaping our world view. We might call these modern heirs of Aquinas **scientific monotheists**. Just as Aquinas appealed to and embraced the Aristotelian sciences of his day, modern scientific monotheists who follow the tradition of natural theology argue that God exists using contemporary sciences as a starting point for their philosophy. What is under discussion here is not scientific learning in and of itself, but the *correct philosophical interpretation* of it.

So a new atheist could argue as follows: The second step in the Kalam argument assumes that there is time before the cosmos as a whole. Nothing begins to exist without time. But relativity theory teaches us that time is *part* of the cosmos as a whole. We call it space-time. All of space-time begins with the big bang or "initial singularity." There is not time before that. So step two of the argument is true only for things within space-time, not for the cosmos as a whole. Steve's truck and Alan's bike began to exist, like everything in the universe. But on this counterargument the cosmos as a whole did not.

Sketching the rejoinder to this objection would take us into a fascinating but complex debate about time, physics, causation, and God. We don't have the time or space to follow the discussion here. Suffice it to say that none of the arguments for the existence of God have ever been without critics. Let's move on to the always-popular argument from design: the teleological argument.

The argument that appeals to the design of the cosmos, or the teleological argument, is very old, going back at least to Plato. Modern cosmology has strengthened this argument by postulating laws of nature and also by pointing out the fine-tuned character of the universe. The universe we live in contains a large number of very specific physical properties. All of these need to have extremely precise values in order for life as we know it to exist. If the big bang had expanded at a different rate, or if the force of gravity or the charge of an electron were a tiny bit different, no life would exist. These are just three of hundreds of examples that could be listed. The fine-tuning evidence includes not only carbon-based life forms but any stable chemical basis for living organisms. The conclusion seems to be that the universe as a whole is set up in such a way that somewhere life is bound to happen. But it seems more likely that an intelligent designer purposefully arranged the conditions necessary for the origin and sustenance of life than that all the necessary factors just happened to converge as they did against extremely improbable odds. In other words, according to scientific materialism, life is very, very unlikely. By contrast, according to scientific monotheism, life is much more likely. Given what we know about the universe, the fine-tuning argument is a good example of a teleological argument for the existence of God. Its conclusion is that the existence of God is, on the evidence, more likely than atheism.

Naturally, scientific materialists have a response. A popular one appeals to the hypothesis of a multiverse. In this hypothesis our universe is one space-time domain among many others. Usually these many space-time domains are called parallel universes. There is either a vast or an infinite number of them in the multiverse, depending upon which version one finds most likely. To be sure, the multiverse hypothesis is speculative and controversial among specialists, but the hypothesis is based on well-established theories. Assuming a very large (but not infinite) number of parallel universes, a universe with the same fine-tuning as ours becomes much more probable. Somewhere in the vast ocean of parallel universes there will be one

just like ours. While the jury is still out on the multiverse hypothesis, some version or other does seem likely to be true. Like all speculative theories in physics, time will tell.

In Aquinas' short overview of the five ways, we saw versions of the cosmological and teleological arguments. These are recognizable as part of the same family as the two modern ones we have just covered. But the fourth way of Aquinas, the one about degrees of perfection, seems very old fashioned. There is also a modern version of this degrees argument; however, it is not based on science but on ethics. This is the **moral argument for the existence of God**.

Have you ever noticed that people disagree about what is right and wrong? Of course you have; it is obvious. Disagreements abound about racism, war, the death penalty, end-of-life issues, and a host of others. But if we think about it, there are some moral principles about which we can find a broad agreement. For example, being honest is pretty much always seen as a good thing; being a liar, not so much. Notice how we are not talking about a particular circumstance here. Complex situations can create moral dilemmas in which the right thing to do is not clear. These are not the places where agreement is easy and obvious, even when the principles are agreed upon. That there is disagreement about morality is easily explained. Everyone has their own story and their own perspectives. Cultures differ about right and wrong in many ways.

Yet some agreement about broad moral principles does exist, even if we disagree about the details of what it means in a particular case. Think of the call for human rights, or about mercy and compassion, which are widely accepted as better than vindictiveness, for example. Child abuse, sex trafficking, slavery—these are rightly condemned by most thoughtful people today. Agreement about basic principles like justice, mercy, human dignity, and helping those in need demands some kind of explanation. The mind seeks to know why these things are morally good and where they come from.

The moral argument for the existence of God asserts that there are some moral truths that all people should believe and accept. These do not apply to some people some of the time, or to one culture and not another. It's not about how you or I feel or what our culture says is

right. If they are truths of morality, they should apply to everyone in a general way (specific applications will vary!). Justice (for example) has to apply to everyone or it is not justice. Equality before the law is universally important and good, not just some of the time and for some people. These kinds of human rights and general moral principles are not based merely on what individuals or societies believe. But if not based on human feelings and decisions, what are they based on? Morality cannot be based on physical things since they don't have moral properties. The planet Mars just *is*; it cannot be morally good or evil. Martians might be evil or benevolent, but not the planet itself. The moral argument for the existence of God concludes that God's own perfect goodness is the ultimate source of all morality. God provides the best, most reasonable answer to the question of where moral truth finds its grounds. God's goodness is thus the ultimate source of the good, even if some may not be aware of this fact

Scientific materialists have a fairly obvious reply to the moral argument for God's existence. They can agree that if God existed, then the Deity would provide a basis for general moral principles. But even if we accept that there are such general moral truths, are there no other ways to ground these principles without God? Perhaps we can ground them on human reason. Perhaps we are wrong to think that they need some grounding outside of themselves in order to be valid. The point is that God is not the only reasonable basis for believing in some general truths about ethical right and wrong. Of course another option is to reject general moral principles—that is, to accept some kind of moral **relativism**.

So far we have looked at arguments for the existence of God. These are named in our time the cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments. Each of them has a common structure, you may have noticed. They all appeal to something about the world as a whole to the conclusion that there is a God. The last argument in this review is quite different. It does not appeal to any facts about the world—empirical, moral, or otherwise. Hold on to your thinking caps because the ontological argument is based on the very idea of God.

Every argument begins with some premise—things that are assumed to be true. This argument, first formulated by *Anselm of*

Canterbury, assumes the God of standard monotheism. After all, Anselm wrote his book (*Proslogion*) for other monks, and it is a long meditation on God. His argument includes thinking about a verse from the Psalms: "The fool says in his heart there is no God" (Ps 14:1). Why is this person so foolish? In answer, Anselm gives a profound meditation on the nature of God and what follows from it.

Anselm defined God as a perfect being, "the being than which none greater can be conceived." We have already seen that God is not one being among others, not a "thing" in the everyday sense. Rather, God is being itself, the very power of life and existence, fully real to an unlimited degree. Anselm goes further and argues, in effect, that God is the greatest *possible* being. The ontological argument turns on the logic of this idea. Let's look at his version of the argument before turning to modern versions.

Anselm understands God to have many great-making properties. God is all wise and immortal. God is loving and merciful. God creates everything but can neither be created nor ever cease to exist. This is close to what we said earlier: because God is absolute being, God is a necessary being and not contingent. God has no creator and no designer. God is also present everywhere but without a body (another great-making property). So if God exists at all, then by definition God exists always, everywhere, and no matter what. And God has *every* great-making property, from power and majesty to love, goodness, and mercy. God does not just have these attributes, but has them perfectly.

Now imagine the most awesome food you possibly can. Hold it in your mind and imagine all of its yumminess. Is your mouth starting to water yet? Good. Now wouldn't it be even better if it existed in the real world, too, right now, in front of you? For something that's already great, being real instead of being just imaginary is even better! Existing in reality is a great-making property for anything that is good. Now think about who God is as understood by Anselm. Some would say this God is imaginary, just a possibility, but is not real. And yet there is a better and more perfect being than this God-in-our-imaginations. This would be the very same perfect being, the very same God, only *existing in reality*. So since God is the most perfect being, God must exist in reality. That's Anselm's argument in outline.

Even in his own lifetime there were other monk-theologians who objected to this argument. Writing "on behalf of the fool," *Gaunilo of Marmoutiers* found fault with Anselm's conclusion. Using the same kind of argument, one could prove that there is a perfect island, for example. And that is just absurd. A definition helps us to clarify in our minds what our concept of a thing is, but a definition cannot tell us whether that something actually exists. Much later Kant had a similar response: existence is simply not a predicate, not a property in the needed sense of the word. Anselm's response is that God and only God is a necessary being. So his argument is only good for such a being, one we have called absolute. Islands are contingent, so his argument does not work for them.

Modern philosophers who study this argument continue to find it fascinating, and different versions have been developed over the centuries. We will describe one such attempt, but not in detail. That would take us into the complexity of modal logic (the logic of possibility and necessity). This version turns on the idea of logically possible worlds. The notion of a possible world is a helpful conceptual tool, and because talk of possible worlds is useful in many areas of philosophy today, we will introduce this concept. But we will *only* introduce it; we won't get to be best friends.

I have a confession to make. I enjoy reading really good science fiction, fantasy, and alternative history. The idea of a possible world is kind of like these stories. A possible world is a complete and full set of descriptions of every fact and every truth in *an entire alternative reality.* What is more, the actual world is also a possible world. The only limit on imagination is logical: no description—that is to say, no proposition that is true in this alternative world story—can logically conflict with any other. Possible-world talk is just a way to explore connections in our concepts, including what is logical necessity or what is possible. A possible world tells a full and complete story of an entire alternative reality. For the actual world, and only for our world, all the descriptions are true (and not just possibly true). It is logically possible that Steve could be a great ballet dancer—but trust me, this is not true in the actual world!

All right, now we are ready to move back to God. Our standard monotheistic idea of God (which we presuppose) tells us the Godhead

is not a contingent being. But what does that mean? It's crucial to the ontological argument, but how can we understand it today? One way would be this: God is a necessary being, the uncaused and eternal cause of all things, in whatever possible world God exists in. In this case, God is absolute being (in our terms) only in those possible worlds where She or He exists. But I can think of a *greater* God than that! Let's call this God*. An even greater view of God would understand that God* has maximal greatness. Let's define "maximal greatness" as being the absolute being *in all possible worlds*. And so since "God" is the greatest conceivable being, the true God must be the maximally great. By definition, the true and real God must be God*. Okay, here comes the hard part!

Maximal greatness is a possible property for God to have. It is not impossible for God* to be the true God. Now think of this: to say that God* *could possibly exist* is to say that a God* exists *in some possible world*. Let's call that world "the maximally great God world" or MG world. Now the MG world is a possible world. In that world, God* is maximally great. But if God* has maximal greatness in MG worlds, then God* has the property of being the cause of all that is real *in all possible worlds*. Finally, here is the punch line: our world is a possible world. The actual must be possible, right? So God* in MG-worlds must also exist in our world, because God* exists (by definition) in all possible worlds. God* exists in our world, and in all possible worlds.

Lots of theologians and philosophers have had problems with the ontological argument. It is interesting that Aquinas himself did not accept it. Just understanding the argument at all is a real achievement, to be honest. To sum things up, what lessons can we take away from this review? What have we learned from this long, modern list of arguments for the existence of God?

One thing we can learn is that the arguments are best understood as making a cumulative case. Even if any one argument might seem to give only a little evidence for scientific monotheism, when taken together they add up to more than any one by itself. Still, it would be hard to say that all the arguments, even taken together, provide demonstrative proof that there is a God. Clever skeptics can always

find a way out of the conclusion that God exists. They could simply deny one of the premises, for example, or question the logic of the argument as given. Which of these moves and countermoves is the most reasonable is hard to know in any objective way. What the arguments do prove is a convincing demonstration that belief in God is rational, even for those who don't believe there is such a God. That's not a bad thing to remember in the current culture wars over religious belief. We have had a good look at reasons for the existence of God. At this point, to be fair, we need to press to the most powerful argument against the existence of God: the problem of evil.

GOD AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Have you ever wondered why so many bad things happen? They seem to happen to good people, bad people, and everyone in between. One thing we know for sure is that all of us will suffer at some time or other. We all face one day the death of those we love, for example. Evil, injustice, and violence seem to fill the evening news. The pain and suffering of the oppressed and the innocent seem overwhelming all too often. The first question we might ask is, "What can I do to help?" But another question comes to believers quickly also: "Why doesn't God help more?" This problem for monotheism is old, and has a name: **the problem of evil**. It's as least as old as the book of Job, which is old indeed. It is simply the most intractable problem for any thoughtful believer in God.

The statement of the problem begins with who God is. We have laid out earlier the standard idea of God for monotheism: a personal divinity who is omnipotent (almighty), omniscient (all knowing), **omnipresent** (present everywhere), perfectly good. The next step in the argument is that a good person will stop unjustified or needless pain, violence, and suffering whenever they can. Here "unjustified" is an appeal to the obvious fact that some suffering is a good when it is a means to a greater good. Imagine having a huge toothache with swollen gums. Your friends rush you to the dentist. Assume you are, sadly, allergic to the anesthetics. "This is going to hurt—a lot," she says. The pain and suffering of getting your teeth fixed is *justified* by a greater good (in this case, your long-term well-being). This exception

allowed by the word "unjustified" in the argument means that *some* pain and suffering may be important and worth undergoing. The suffering of the terrible toothache may be evil, but the dentist is not! The best example of this I know of is childbirth, but you get the point.

The next step in the argument is about the world we live in. It simply states that unjustified pain, suffering, and violence happen. This statement of the problem is called the **logical problem of evil**, because it turns on the logic of the nature of God and of the world. In a way it's a kind of anti-ontological argument, concluding that God so conceived cannot exist in the real world. As stated, this appears to be a logically valid argument. If God is a good person, unjustified evil exists, and a good person stops unjustified evil from happening whenever she can, then something seems wrong with standard monotheism. After all, it would seem that an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent Being can do anything, including stopping people from doing evil. What follows from this conclusion is (a) God needs to change, (b) we need to deny one of the other premises (one of the steps in the argument), or (c) we need to question the logic of the argument. So perhaps (c) is right and the argument itself has problems.

Theodicy or Defense?

In response to the problem of evil, some modern philosophers and theologians have tried to create a **theodicy**. A theodicy simply means a justification of the ways of God to rational minds (like ours, we hope). The massive destruction and evil of the twentieth century have undermined most attempts by philosophers and theologians to construct a theodicy. Few can believe anymore, with *G. W. Leibniz* (1646–1716), that this is "the best of all possible worlds." For the most part, theologians and believing philosophers today have left behind the work of theodicy and work instead toward a defense.

Theodicies typically seek to show the true reasons God would allow evil to happen: a tough task for mere creatures like us. A defense is different. It seeks not to justify the ways of God as such, but rather to give a response that makes sense to us to specific arguments stating the problem of evil. A defense points out problems in the arguments as stated, including the assumptions that go into it, and seeks to find

merely *possible* reasons why there is a God and there is also unjustified evil. These responses don't need to be true, but only need to possibly be true. A defense allows for rational belief in God while not seeking to provide anything as comprehensive as a theodicy would have to be. So let us look at a famous defense: the **free will defense**.

First Response: The Logical Problem

The primary defense that standard monotheism makes has to do with an assumption in the premises. There is an assumption in the logical problem of evil that for every evil event, God could have stopped it. However, it is at least possible that this is not true. And all that has to be shown, in terms of the logical problem, is that the conclusion does not *have* to follow from the premises as stated. All we have to show is that the assumption in question might be false, not that it *is* false. That's a lot easier to do! Remember, the elements of the free will defense do not have to be true, but only possibly true. And it is possible that God could not stop every evil event in cosmic history. This is because some created persons may have libertarian free will. As we explain in chapter 10 this kind of free will is the power to choose between options in a given set of circumstances. If there is a God, then these circumstances include what God did and does. So even God cannot give persons libertarian free will and at the same time make them always choose to do good rather than evil. On the other hand, a possible world with libertarian free agents wherein no evil is ever chosen is possible, *but that is up to the creatures, not to God.* Only the creatures' free actions (plus God's own, of course) can bring such a perfect world into being. So logically, the conclusion of the problem of evil does not *have* to follow from the premises. Even given the reality of evil, standard monotheism is not logically impossible: it is not incoherent. Note that this does not make it true, but it does undermine this particular argument from evil.

The Evidential Argument from Evil

Many philosophers who still hold to the cogency of the problem of evil agree that, in terms of what is possibly true, the free will defense

is a solid one. In recent decades, however, the move has been made to the **evidential problem of evil**. According to this alternative version of the problem, the existence of God is very, very unlikely given *the amount and extent of evil* in the history of the actual world (cosmic and human). This version of the argument turns on the logic of probability, and also on the assumption that somehow evil can add up over time or space. Two or more evil events, taken together, are somehow more evil than just one. Another important move to note is the distinction made between **moral evil** and **natural evil**. Moral evil depends upon the free actions of libertarian agents, while natural evil is not brought about by such free choices. The San Francisco earthquake of 1906 is an example of natural evil, while the forced incarceration and relocation of Japanese-American citizens into camps in 1942 is an example of moral evil. Even if the existence of God is logically possible, this version of the problem states, it is highly improbable given the amount of evil (moral and natural) in history.

Philosophers have responded in many ways to the evidential problem of evil. One response starts with the idea that natural events are neither good nor evil; we just experience them as evil when they cause suffering in sentient beings like us. But the complexities of the continuing debate are too many to survey quickly here. Defenses have been many and various, but no standard one has emerged yet. Needless to say, the problem of evil is the toughest problem for robust faith in a living God, especially when we are experiencing that evil.

ARE THE ARGUMENTS WORTH IT?

Throughout this chapter we have put forth arguments, criticisms, and counterarguments. What do you expect for an introduction to philosophy? But if no side "wins" or has a decisive victory, what difference does it make? We suggest two enduring lessons are here for discovery. First, despite what the new atheists might claim, belief in God is reasonable. It is not irrational or unscientific to continue to believe in God, or to come to believe. Sound reasons can be given for this belief based on evidence anyone can appreciate and respect, even if they don't agree with the conclusions. Second, we have deepened our understanding of who God is and what God does. In standard

monotheism, God is not just another contingent being or just one more god. God does not belong on the list of Santa Claus, leprechauns, or Zeus. To believe in this God does not make one a gullible fool or childish. This God is not against science and reason but instead makes them possible. Finally, we have learned a bit of what philosophy of religion is all about. These are real advances. What a true spiritual life is about is equally important, of course, alongside the philosophy of religion. Yet this way of life is something we have to discover for ourselves by living it and learning its wisdom. Such a journey might or might not lead to greater understanding, but in any case, it leads beyond the pages of our book.