# Introduction to Metaphysics

## Reading Questions

### Metaphysics

#### The Philosophy of Religion
- Arguments for God’s Existence
- Arguments against God’s Existence
- In Case of a Tie

#### Summary

## Reading Questions

1. What is Metaphysics?
2. What is the Philosophy of Religion?
3. Briefly, what is the Ontological Argument? Is it more appealing to rationalists or empiricists? Why?
4. Briefly, what is the Teleological Argument? Is it more appealing to rationalists or empiricists? Why?
5. Briefly, what is the Cosmological Argument? Is it more appealing to rationalists or empiricists? Why?
6. Briefly, what does the Problem of Evil claim?
7. Briefly, what does Pascal’s Wager claim?

## Metaphysics

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that considers the ultimate nature of reality. Of course, since philosophy concerns itself with questions that can’t be answered by scientific investigation, many questions about the nature of reality, like “Are their black holes?” and “What is the chemical composition of water?”, aren’t really metaphysical. Other questions about reality however – questions like “Does God exist?” and “Do we have free will?” – are probably destined to elude empirical resolution and so are genuinely philosophical. It’s this sort of question that metaphysics addresses.

## The Philosophy of Religion

In our study of metaphysics, we’ll be focusing on the Philosophy of Religion and asking the question “Does God exist?” And, for our purposes, we’ll understand God to an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good being.

### Stop and Think:

What do you think? Does God exist or not? More importantly, why do you think what you think?
Many people believe that God exists – or that God doesn’t exist - because they were raised that way, but from a philosophical point of view, this isn’t enough. Philosophy wants us to have good reasons for our beliefs, it wants our beliefs to be justified, and although (as we’ve learned from our study of epistemology) it’s hard to say exactly what it is for a belief to be justified, beliefs that are held solely on the basis of tradition probably don’t count. After all, tradition can tell us, and people have been raised to believe, all sorts of things that don’t seem to pass philosophical muster – things like the claim that eccentric women might be witches who should be burned at that stake.

So if “being raised that way” doesn’t count as a good reason to believe in God, what does? Well, as we’ve seen, virtually all philosophers seem to agree that a belief is justified if it’s supported by a good argument, so if we can find a good argument to the effect that God exists then we’ll be justified in believing in God, and if we can find an good argument to the effect that God doesn’t exist then we’ll be justified in disbelieving in God.

Arguments for God’s Existence

There are three big arguments for the existence of God: the Ontological Argument, the Teleological Argument, and the Cosmological Argument.

The Ontological Argument tries to prove that God exists from the idea of God alone. Descartes, in his Meditations, advanced an Ontological Argument. Because this argument appeals only to ones ideas and not to facts in the world that one needs to establish empirically, the Ontological Argument is a favorite of rationalists like Descartes. Unfortunately, most philosophers find Ontological Arguments to be unconvincing. (Most nonphilosophers find Ontological Arguments to be silly.)

The Teleological Argument cites the remarkable order exhibited by the universe, and especially by living things, as evidence for the existence of God. Because this argument appeals to the evidence of our senses (e.g. we can see that flowers turn toward the sun, that leaves are precisely designed to facilitate photosynthesis and so on) empiricists tend to prefer the Teleological Argument to the ontological this argument. Unfortunately, the theory of evolution appears to undermine many of the simpler versions of the Teleological Argument because it provides an alternate explanation for the appearance of design. (Evolution might not undermine every version of the Teleological Argument, because one could maintain that the conditions for the operation of evolution are so precise that the existence of God is the best explanation for why evolution can proceed at all.)

Unlike the Teleological Argument, which attempts to prove that God exists from the existence of particularly nifty and well-ordered things, the Cosmological Argument attempts to prove that God exists from the fact that anything exists at all. It builds upon our intuition that something must have started everything, that the universe couldn’t have just popped into existence out of nothing and for no reason. Insofar as the Cosmological Argument takes evidence from experience (specifically, the fact that
nothing simply springs into existence without a cause) it’s an argument that might appeal to an empiricist, although its empirical content is in many ways “thinner” than the empirical content of the Teleological Argument.

An interesting distinction between the Ontological Argument on the one hand, and the Teleological and Cosmological Arguments on the other hand, is that Ontological Argument said to be a priori whereas the Teleological and Cosmological arguments are said to be a posteriori.

A proposition (essentially, the idea conveyed by a sentence) is knowable a priori if it can be known to be true or false without experience of specific facts in the actual world. Of course, we’ll probably need experience in order to learn the language in which the proposition is expressed, but once we understand the notions involved in an a priori proposition - once we understand what the words mean in the sentence - we can determine the truth or falsity of the proposition by reflection alone. “All bachelors are unmarried,” “There are no round squares,” “Every triangle has three sides,” and “2 + 2 = 4,” are knowable a priori. Not surprisingly, rationalists like a priori knowledge.

A proposition is knowable a posteriori if it can be known only through experience of facts in the world. Even if we understand the notions involved in the proposition, we can determine the truth or falsity of an a posteriori proposition only by investigating these facts. “The earth revolves around the sun,” “Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492,” and “This table weighs 52 lbs,” are knowable a posteriori. Not surprisingly, empiricists like a posteriori knowledge.

The Ontological Argument casts “God exists” as knowable a priori, because it claims that we can figure out that God exists simply by reflecting upon the concept of God. The Teleological and Cosmological Arguments cast “God exists” as knowable a posteriori because both of them maintain that we need to know certain facts about the world in order to know that God exists.

The Cosmological Argument is, I think, one of the most interesting and best arguments for the existence of God. Of course, in the end, it might not be a good argument, but it is, without question, a fascinating piece of reasoning, so this is where we’ll seek justification for theism.

Stop and Think:
Do you prefer the ontological argument, teleological argument, or cosmological argument? Why? How might someone object to that argument?

Arguments against God’s Existence

But of course theists aren’t the only ones who are challenged by philosophy to give a defense of their beliefs. What about the atheists? Do we have any reason to think that God does not exist? The Problem of Evil, which claims that the presence of evil and
suffering in the world is incompatible with the existence of God, is by far the most commonly invoked argument against religious belief, so we'll be taking a hard look at it.

Stop and Think:
You've probably already heard or read someone expressing the problem of evil. What do you think of this argument for atheism?

In Case of a Tie

And what should we do if we find the arguments for and against God to be equally satisfactory or unsatisfactory? In his famous Wager, Pascal argues that we should believe in God even in the absence of evidence for God's existence because it's in our own best interests to do so. This is such an interesting position that it more than deserves our attention.

Stop and Think:
Why might it be in our own best interests to believe in God?
Summary

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that considers the ultimate nature of reality.

Philosophy of Religion is the branch of Metaphysics that addresses the question “Does God exist?” where God is understood to be an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good being.

There are three big arguments for the existences of God:
1) The Ontological Argument tries to prove that God exists from the idea of God alone. It’s an a priori argument and favored by rationalists.
2) The Teleological Argument tries to prove that God exists by citing the remarkable order exhibited by the universe, and especially by living things. It’s an a posteriori argument and favored by empiricists.
3) Cosmological Argument attempts to prove that God exists from the fact that the universe couldn’t have just popped into existence out of nothing and for no reason. It’s an a posteriori argument and favored by empiricists.

There is one powerful and important argument against the existence of God.
1) The Problem of Evil claims that the presence of evil and suffering in the world is incompatible with the existence of God.

Pascal’s Wager argues that we should believe in God even in the absence of evidence for God’s existence because it’s in our own best interests to do so.