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WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY? WHAT IS RELIGION?

If you are reading this book, you are almost certainly taking a philosophy class. There is a good chance you are coming into it not having read much philosophy. So you may have several questions at the start. What is philosophy? What is religion? And how is philosophy even relevant to religion? We will address those questions in this chapter.

1.1 What Philosophy Is

The word "philosophy" comes from the Greek roots *philo* (love) and *sophia* (wisdom). So one basic definition of philosophy is that it is the pursuit of wisdom, where wisdom is understood as some sort of deep insight into or understanding of the truth. Another definition says that philosophy addresses the "big questions" about the meaning of life, the nature of the universe, and whether we know anything for sure. The answers to these big questions are often presupposed in other areas of thought such as mathematics, physics, politics, history, and psychology. These big questions fall under more specific fields and subfields of philosophy. There are enough of those subfields of philosophy to fill up an encyclopedia, but we can focus on just a few main branches.

Metaphysics concerns the nature of reality – for example, whether everything that exists is a physical thing or whether there are nonphysical things too (things such as souls, God, and numbers). Epistemology concerns belief, justification, rationality, and knowledge – for example, what it takes for a belief to count as knowledge rather than just opinion. Ethics concerns moral right and wrong, as well as value judgments generally – for example, what the scope and extent of human rights is. Logic concerns the standards for proper reasoning – for example,

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what it takes for one set of propositions to guarantee the truth of a further proposition. These specific categories, in turn, have subcategories themselves, and many big questions fall under more than one category. For example, some people think morality is real or objective, while others think morality is just a social or cultural construction. The dispute between these two sorts of people concerns not only ethics, but also metaphysics, epistemology, and the nature of language.

Despite this diversity of philosophical categories, however, philosophy (or, at least, the analytic approach to philosophy taken in this book) involves a commitment to providing logical arguments for one's views. It also involves conceptual analysis. In the next section we will get an initial sense of what logic, arguments, and conceptual analysis are by using examples that are relevant to some of the material covered later in this book.

1.2 Basic Tools of Philosophy: Logic and Analysis

As we have already seen, logic is the study of reasoning. You probably have a good sense already that many people reason very poorly. They form generalizations much too quickly. They base their opinions on irrelevant factors such as emotion and popularity. They try to reject views they do not like by criticizing the character of the people with whom they disagree rather than their ideas. Indeed, poor reasoning is so common that there are innumerable books, lectures, websites, and podcasts about it. But if some people reason poorly there must be such a thing as reasoning well. Logicians are the philosophers who specialize in the study of logic. They attempt to identify and develop these good forms of reasoning. They do so with the help of a toolkit of basic ideas. Let us familiarize ourselves with these basic tools.

1.2.1 Propositions and Their Qualities

A proposition is something that can be either true or false. A proposition claims to represent some fact about the world, and either it does (in which case it is true) or it does not (in which case it is false). Typically, propositions are expressed by declarative sentences. From the logician's perspective, the same proposition – for example, "I love you" – can be expressed by a variety of declarative sentences, including sentences in different languages. Consider the following declarative sentences.

God exists. (English)
Est Deus. (Latin)
Gött existiert. (German)
Dios existe. (Spanish)

These sentences all convey the same information and have the same content; they all express the same proposition.

1.2.1.1 The Relationships Between Propositions

Logicians identify several important ways in which propositions can stand in relationship to one another. One proposition entails another if the truth of the first guarantees the truth of the second. For example "Andrea is over six feet tall" entails "Andrea is over five feet tall." Furthermore, a set of propositions is consistent if it is possible for them all to be true and is inconsistent if it is not possible for them all to be true. "Andrea is over six feet tall" and "Andrea has red hair" are consistent, whereas "Andrea is over six feet tall" and "Andrea is under five feet tall" are inconsistent. While those examples are clear, it is not always clear whether one proposition entails another, or whether a set of propositions is consistent. Indeed, questions about entailment and consistency are some of the most fundamental and intensely debated of all religious questions. Consider these four propositions: (i) God can do anything; (ii) God knows everything; (iii) God is perfectly good; and (iv) there is pain, suffering, and horrendous evil in the world. Are they consistent? That is, is it possible that all four of those propositions are true? Many articles and books have been written on that very question. It is called the problem of evil. We will encounter it later.

1.2.1.2 Modal Propositions

Most propositions are about the way things were, are, or will be. For example, "Germany won the Men's World Cup in 2014" is a true proposition about the way things were. But some propositions are about the way things could be, could not be, or must be. Logicians call these modal propositions. Consider the proposition "Germany could not have lost the Men's World Cup in 2014." It is quite different from the first proposition, and it seems to be false. (Germany only beat Argentina 1–0, and they did so in extra time.) Logicians define three modes a proposition can take: necessity, impossibility, and contingency. A necessary proposition has to be true; it is not possible that it be false. For example, "All triangles have three sides" is necessary (or necessarily true or a necessity). An impossible proposition has to be false; it is not possible that it be true. For example, "All squares have eleven sides" is impossible (or necessarily false or an impossibility). A contingent proposition is neither necessary nor impossible. A contingently true proposition might have been false, and a contingently false proposition might have been true. So, "Germany won the Men's World Cup in 2014" is contingently true and "Argentina won the Men's World Cup in 2014" is contingently false.

Many important religious questions concern the modal status of propositions. Consider this proposition about God and creation: "At the beginning of time, God created the universe." Many theists (people who believe that God exists) believe that this proposition is true. But does being a theist require that you think that this proposition is *necessarily* true? Perhaps not.

Some theists say it is not necessarily true. They say that God was free not to create the universe at all. God might have done no creating, in which case reality would have consisted of God but nothing else. Other theists say it is necessarily true. Given God's very nature as a good, loving being, God had to create a world with beings other than God – beings that are capable of loving and being loved by God. God would not be perfectly good if God did not create such a world and such beings.

Some theists say it is possible that God is responsible for the existence of the universe, but that the universe never came into existence at any particular point in time. Some say this because they think that it is possible that the universe is eternal and so is God: they are coeternal. Some say this because they think that time itself depends on the existence of the universe, so that it makes no sense to talk about times prior to or outside of the universe. Despite denying that the universe came into existence at a particular point in time, these theists also say that, if it were not for God, the universe would not exist. So, for them, "At the beginning of time, God created the universe" is not necessarily true, even though they do think that the universe is completely dependent on God.

Atheists (people who believe that God does not exist) of course think that "At the beginning of time, God created the universe" is false. They think that, somehow, the universe exists uncreated – either because it exists of its own nature or because it exists for no reason at all. But even some theists think it is possible that the universe exists for no reason at all. That is, they admit that it is possible that the universe exists without existing *for* any reason or *because of* any prior cause. They think that "At the beginning of time, God created the universe" is true, not because it is necessarily true, but merely because it is the best overall explanation of what science tells us about the universe.

We will return to many of these questions about God and creation later in this book. For now, just remember that questions about modality – questions concerning whether a proposition is necessary, is impossible, or is neither – are some of the most important questions in philosophy and in religion.

1.2.1.3 A Priori and A Posteriori Propositions

Another important distinction among propositions concerns the ways we are capable of coming to know them. What philosophers call *a priori* knowledge of a subject (treat *a priori* as all one word) is knowledge capable of being had

about that subject independently of any experience with that subject. For example, you can know *a priori* that if you roll two six-sided dice, the probability of getting a seven is one in six. (Here is the proof. There are six ways the first die can come out and six ways the second die can come out. That means there are thirty-six possible combinations for the sum of the two dice. Of those thirty-six possibilities, six of them add up to the number seven: 1 + 6, 2 + 5, 3 + 4, 4 + 3, 5 + 2, and 6 + 1.) So, in order to know that the probability of getting a seven is one in six, you do not need to spend hours and hours rolling dice. No experience of playing board games or casino games is necessary. You can work out the answer in your head or on a sheet of paper. In other words, you can know *a priori* that the probability of getting a seven is one in six.

Having said that, maybe you hate math but love playing games with two dice – games like Monopoly, Chutes and Ladders, and Three Man. After careful observation and lots of experience, you notice a pattern: the number seven rolls out about a sixth of the time. This shows that something that is knowable *a priori* might come to be known through experience. In this case, if you learned from experience that seven rolls out about a sixth of the time, you did it the hard way. You learned it from experience (and maybe wasted a lot of your valuable time and money), but you could have learned it just by doing some basic math.

For some propositions, however, there is no way to know them to be true except through observation and experience. Propositions that are knowable only this way are called *a posteriori* propositions. (Again, treat *a posteriori* all as one word.) So, for example, "Smoking causes lung cancer" is something humans came to know by applying the scientific method. You can know (i) what smoking is, (ii) what lung cancer is, and (iii) what it is for one thing to cause another thing, but you cannot know that smoking causes lung cancer just by reflecting on (i), (ii), and (iii). Humans had to employ the scientific method to come to know that smoking causes lung cancer. Likewise, "Bourbon Street in New Orleans smells awful in the morning" is something you can know only by experience (either by your own experience or by other people sharing their experiences with you). Neither proposition is one that you can know to be true just by thinking about it. Neither proposition is knowable *a priori*. Both are knowable only *a posteriori*.

We now have a basic sense of what propositions are. We have also seen that there are different kinds of propositions and different relationships in which propositions can stand to one another. Now, what do philosophers do with propositions?

1.2.2 Arguments

For philosophers, propositions are the building blocks of arguments. In philosophy, "argue" and "argument" are good words. To argue is not to shout or get angry, but to give reasons in support of a claim. In logic, an argument is

a set of propositions. One of them, the conclusion, is the proposition being argued for. The rest, the propositions given in support of the conclusion, are the premises. Philosophers care deeply about arguments because arguments provide the basis for evaluating what other people believe. Arguments make it transparent to everyone what the reasons are that people have for what they believe. The provision of arguments is thus a powerful force for dialogue, discussion, understanding, and (hopefully) tolerance. As you will come to see while reading this book, the people on all sides of religious debates have surprisingly powerful arguments for their positions. A position you may think is ridiculous can suddenly start to make a lot more sense once you hear the arguments for it.

1.2.2.1 The Standard Presentation of Arguments

In ordinary life, arguments are presented in a wide array of forms. Sometimes the conclusion is stated at the beginning for effect. Sometimes the premises or the conclusion are presented using a rhetorical question. And sometimes, it is just not clear what the conclusion of the argument is supposed to be. Philosophers try to impose a degree of order on this confusion. As a matter of standard practice, they restate or paraphrase the argument so that it consists of only declarative sentences, with each sentence given a number and with the conclusion put at the end. In this book we will frequently present basic philosophical positions as arguments. When we do, we will follow this procedure. Doing so makes it easier to examine the reasons available for a position, see the weak spots, and possibly come up with a better argument.

1.2.2.2 Inductive Versus Deductive Arguments

Logicians divide arguments into two broad types. An inductive argument is one in which the premises are not put forth as guaranteeing that the conclusion is true, but only as providing grounds for thinking that the conclusion is probably true. In contrast, a deductive argument is one in which the premises are put forth as guaranteeing that the conclusion is true. The person making a deductive argument is saying this: "If you believe each of my premises, you absolutely must believe my conclusion. There is no wiggle room, no way out for you. All you can say is that one of my premises is false. There is no possible way all of my premises are true and yet my conclusion is false."

To illustrate the distinction, and to get a sense in general of what arguments are like, consider these two arguments for the conclusion that some Creator made the universe.

An Inductive Argument for the Existence of a Creator

(1) Computers are complex things, with all of their parts finely adjusted so that they can engage in computation.
(2) Computers do not just appear naturally, but rather are created by intelligent beings who have a plan in mind.
(3) Airplanes are complex things, with all of their parts finely adjusted so that they can fly.
(4) Airplanes do not just appear naturally, but rather are created by intelligent beings who have a plan in mind.
(5) Philosophy textbooks are complex things, with all of their parts finely adjusted so that they can impart wisdom.
(6) Philosophy textbooks do not just appear naturally, but rather are created by intelligent beings who have a plan in mind.
(7) The universe is an incredibly complex thing, with all of its parts finely adjusted so that it can produce life.
So, (8) Probably, the universe was created by an intelligent being who had a plan in mind.

Notice two things about this argument. First, each premise is a simple declarative sentence, and so is the conclusion. Furthermore, each sentence is given a number. Presenting arguments this way lays out each element of the argument piece by piece, making it easier to pinpoint exactly what is being talked about when the argument is examined closely. Second, notice the structure of the argument. The first six premises provide three instances of one property (complexity geared toward a purpose) going together with a second property (having been created by an intelligent being). The last premise says that the universe has the first property. The conclusion says that the universe probably has the second property. The key word here is "probably." Obviously, just because two things go together most of the time does not guarantee that they go together all of the time. So even if all of the premises are true, it does not guarantee that the conclusion is true, and the person making the argument surely does not mean the argument that way. Because of that, the argument is classified as "inductive."

Now compare that argument to the next one.

A Deductive Argument for the Existence of a Creator

(1) If the universe had a beginning in time, then the universe was created by some powerful being outside of the universe.
(2) The universe had a beginning in time.
So, (3) The universe was created by some powerful being outside of the universe.

Here, the argument has a simple form: if A, then B; A; therefore, B. (Logicians give a name to this argument structure: *modus ponens*.) The person putting forward this argument is saying that there is just no way for both premises to be true yet the conclusion false. The premises are claimed to guarantee that the conclusion is true. That is why this argument is classified as "deductive."

1.2.2.3 Valid and Invalid Arguments; Sound and Unsound Arguments

A deductive argument was just defined as one in which the premises are intended to guarantee the truth of the conclusion. But arguments do not always do what they were intended to do. Sometimes a person advances an argument that they think guarantees the truth of their conclusion, but in fact their argument fails to provide that guarantee. For example, imagine your friend tells you this: "Everyone who is going to be at Alayna's party tonight is a friend of Brittany. But everyone who is a friend of Brittany is a friend of Catie. Therefore, at least one friend of Catie is not going to be at Alayna's party tonight." Maybe your friend is right that at least one friend of Catie is not going to be at Alayna's party, but the premises do not guarantee that conclusion. Perhaps Alayna, Brittany, and Catie all have the exact same friends, including one another. So your friend has made a deductive argument that failed to do what a deductive argument is meant to do. It failed to guarantee that the conclusion is true if the premises are all true.

The term "valid" is a word of appraisal that is applied to deductive arguments. In saying that an argument is valid, we are not saying that its conclusion is, in fact, true. What we are saying is that, *if* the premises are true, the conclusion *must* be true. The argument about Alayna, Brittany, and Catie aspired to be valid, but it failed. It is an invalid deductive argument. Knowing that an argument is valid does not mean that the premises are true, nor does it mean that the conclusion is true. Maybe the argument is valid, but one of the premises is false. In that case, the conclusion could be true or it could be false. An old slogan in computer science was GIGO ("garbage in, garbage out"). The slogan meant that a program could be written perfectly, but the output could be bad if the data input was bad. The same applies to valid arguments. The reasoning in an argument may be perfect, but the excellence of the reasoning will not matter if one of the premises is false.

However, an argument may be invalid, but the conclusion might be true (by coincidence). In logic, a sound argument is a valid argument with all true premises. So, if an argument is sound, the conclusion must be true. If an argument is unsound, that means it either has at least one false premise or is invalid. For example, a deductive argument for the existence of a creator is valid, but (as we will see later on in this book), both of its premises are highly debatable. While it is clearly valid, it is not clearly sound.

Logic can be a difficult subject. If philosophy is your degree program, you will probably be required to take at least one course on logic. Since not everyone using this book will be a philosophy student, the arguments you see here will be simplified in this important respect. Unless explicitly labeled otherwise, all of the arguments that get displayed and given a name in this book will be

deductive arguments that are valid. This way, you will be free to focus your attention on the premises of the arguments. You will have to decide whether the argument is or is not sound. But, unless you are told otherwise, you will not have to worry about whether the conclusion might be false even if the premises are all true.

1.2.3 Conceptual Analysis

In the course of thinking about arguments and the premises that occur in them, we often have to think quite carefully about the concepts being used. Consider this argument concerning abortion. "Every person has a right to life. A human fetus is a person. So, a human fetus has a right to life." The key concept in this argument is "person." There is considerable controversy over this concept. What does it take to be a person? Is being a person just the same as being a member of the species *Homo sapiens*? Not everyone agrees with that. For example, proponents of the rights of animals often claim that elephants, dolphins, and some primates have enough mental and emotional capacity to count as people. Meanwhile, artificial intelligence is advancing so rapidly that it is no longer just science fiction to wonder whether a computer might ever count as a person. But, if being a person does depend on one's mental abilities, just what abilities are necessary? Some say humans who have lost the ability to remember, to speak, and to direct their own lives (e.g. patients in long-term comas or with advanced Alzheimer's disease) no longer count as people. Others say personhood does not depend on the possession of these faculties.

As the personhood example shows, whether we judge a statement to be true or false and whether we judge an argument to be sound or unsound can depend on our beliefs about the concepts involved. To probe these beliefs, philosophers engage in conceptual analysis – the exploration and clarification of the most basic components of thought. Here are some of the most important tools philosophers use when engaging in conceptual analysis.

1.2.3.1 Identifying Necessary and Sufficient Conditions

A necessary condition is a requirement. It is a condition a thing must satisfy in order to qualify as being of a certain kind. A sufficient condition is a guarantor. It is a condition that is enough for a thing to qualify as being of a certain kind. For example, it is a necessary condition for being a University of Mississippi student that you submit an application to the University of Mississippi. Not everyone who submits an application is a University of Mississsippi student, but you cannot be a University of Mississsippi student without having submitted an

application. It is a sufficient condition for being a University of Mississsippi student that you are a member of the University of Mississsippi Ethics Bowl team. If you are a member of the University of Mississsippi Ethics Bowl team, that fact guarantees that you are a University of Mississsippi student.

Statements of the form "if … then …" are called conditional statements. "If it is snowing, then it is below freezing" is a conditional statement. A conditional statement consists of an antecedent ("it is snowing") and a consequent ("it is below freezing"). For conditional statements, the consequent specifies a necessary condition for the antecedent. In this example, if it is not below freezing, it is not snowing. Below-freezing temperature is a necessary condition (a requirement) for it to be snowing. Likewise, if it is snowing, you are guaranteed that it is below freezing. Snowing is a sufficient condition for it being freezing. So the antecedent of a conditional specifies a sufficient condition for the consequent.

As part of conceptual analysis, philosophers will spend considerable effort trying to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for a given concept. For example, we will soon look at the question of whether anyone is ever truly free if God exists. Supposedly, God is omniscient (all-knowing) and infallible (never wrong). But that seems to mean that God has foreknowledge of (knows ahead of time) every single thing everyone has ever done, is doing, or ever will do. And since God is never wrong, that means no one ever has done, ever does, or ever will do anything other than what God foresaw happening. So there seems to be a logical inconsistency between saying "God is omniscient" and "Humans have free will."

When we look at this problem more carefully, however, we will see significant differences in how philosophers analyze the concepts of omniscience and of free will. For example, some philosophers claim it is not a necessary condition for being omniscient that God knows future events. They agree that God knows everything that happens *as it happens*, and that God remembers everything that has ever happened, but God does not know anything *before it happens*. Other philosophers claim it is not a necessary condition for having free will that we be able to do something other than what God foresees that we do. They say our being free is consistent with God's foreseeing what we do. So whether or not divine foreknowledge and human freedom are compatible will depend on how the concepts of foreknowledge and freedom are analyzed.

1.2.3.2 Generating Counterexamples

If someone claims that A is a necessary condition for B, or that A is a sufficient condition for B, a philosopher will oftentimes push back by offering a counterexample – a particular case that undermines or disproves the claim. For example, suppose someone says a necessary condition for something's being

a religion is that it promotes belief in a single supreme being. If promoting belief in a single supreme being is a necessary condition for something being a religion, you will never be able to find something that counts as a religion but that does not promote belief in a single supreme being. There are counterexamples to that claim. For example, in most forms of Buddhism, there is little discussion of God. Belief in God is certainly not promoted, and in some key texts powerful arguments against the existence of God are advanced. For Buddhists, belief in God is not necessary for achieving the central goal: enlightenment and release from suffering. Yet Buddhism is pretty clearly a religion. So the case of Buddhism is a counterexample to the claim that religions, by definition, promote belief in a single supreme being. (As we will see later in the book, the case of Buddhism provides counterexamples to a number of claims made about the nature of religion.)

The ability to generate counterexamples is an important aspect of conceptual analysis. When you read general claims in this book – for example, "Every event has a prior cause" – you ought to be thinking to yourself, "Is this generalization true or are there counterexamples to it?"

1.2.3.3 Creating Thought Experiments

The topics discussed in philosophy are often abstract and sometimes otherworldly. For example, metaphysicians who seek to understand the nature of time might consider the possibility of time travel. But there are no real-life cases of time travel. In situations such as this, philosophers will often construct thought experiments – imagined scenarios that bring out the thoughts and presuppositions underlying our judgments. Sometimes these scenarios are drawn from books, as in the case of Hermione's Time-Turner from the Harry Potter series. Sometimes they are drawn from movies such as *Avengers: Endgame*, *Looper*, or *Hot Tub Time Machine*. Sometimes they are drawn from television, as with Stewie's time machine from *Family Guy*. Other times, philosophers just make up their own scenarios. Either way, the point is to get us to put our concepts to the test – to see whether the concept we have identified really does work the way we expect it to work. In the case of time travel, for example, a common thought experiment is to imagine what would happen if you went back in time and found yourself in a position to interfere in such a way that you were never born. It seems that, somehow or other, something must happen to prevent you from doing this, because if you were to succeed, you would not exist and so you would not have been able to go back in time. As a result of thinking through these sorts of cases, some philosophers claim that the very notion of time travel makes no sense.

Thought experiments play an important role in the philosophy of religion. For example, in trying to understand concepts surrounding life after death – heaven,

hell, reincarnation, and so on – philosophers will ask their readers to think about what they would say, do, or judge if they were in a certain hypothetical situation that no one we know of has actually experienced. You may be asked to think more deeply about movies such as *Heaven Can Wait* or *Down to Earth*. Suppose (as happens in these movies) that your last memories were of being terrified as a huge truck was coming right at you at full speed, and of everything going dark. Then suppose right now that you are experiencing walking on clouds, being told you have died and are in heaven, and so on. Would you automatically conclude that you were in the afterlife? Or might you think that there was some other explanation? Thinking through cases such as this is an important tool in the philosophy of religion, especially since many of the properties (e.g. omnipotence) and scenarios (e.g. life after death) that we discuss are ones that we have never experienced.

1.3 What Religion Is

Now that we have gained a basic understanding of what philosophy is and of what tools we will use when we "do philosophy," let us turn to the subject of our philosophical attention: religion. What is religion? Can we define it? As you might expect, this will be quite a challenge. There is almost certainly no short, clean definition of "religion." Some concepts are narrow enough and precise enough that we can articulate the necessary and sufficient conditions for their application – for example, the concept of "triangle." Religion is not one of those concepts.

Indeed, just using the noun "religion" suggests that we are thinking in terms of concrete things – Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and so on. Thinking of religion in that way may lead us to focus on doctrines – sets of beliefs that, say, Christians have but Buddhists lack. But maybe thinking in terms of "religion" is the wrong way to start. Perhaps we should focus on the adjective "religious" and the adverb "religiously." What is it for something – a person, a thought, a way of life – to be religious? What is it for someone or some group to do something religiously? Framing the question this way moves our focus away from the doctrines people believe and toward the experiences people have and the practices in which they engage. And that could be a good thing, because religion is at least as much about what people do and feel as about what they say and believe.

Instead of seeking necessary and sufficient conditions for something being a religion, the philosopher of religion William Alston proposed we search for "religion-making characteristics" – characteristics that "help make something a religion." Here are the characteristics he came up with.

1 Belief in supernatural beings (gods).
2 A distinction between sacred and profane objects.
3 Ritual acts focused on sacred objects.
4 A moral code believed to be sanctioned by the gods.
5 Characteristically religious feelings (awe, sense of mystery, sense of guilt, adoration), which tend to be aroused in the presence of sacred objects and during the practice of ritual, and which are connected in idea with the gods.
6 Prayer and other forms of communication with gods.
7 A world view, or a general picture of the world as a whole and the place of the individual therein. This picture contains some specification of an overall purpose or point of the world and an indication of how the individual fits into it.
8 A more or less total organization of one's life based on the world view.
9 A social group bound together by the above.[1]

As you can see, that is quite a long list of religion-making characteristics, which makes it hard to say just what is and what is not a religion. Clearly something does not need to have all of these characteristics to count as a religion. On top of this flexibility, every item on the list is pretty abstract. It is not clear how they apply in concrete cases.

If you want to get a better sense of the concrete reality of religion – of what religion is, of what it is for something or someone to be religious, and of what it is for someone to act religiously – you really ought to take some religion courses at your college or university. Far too many people are familiar only with their own faith tradition, and some of them are familiar with it in only a narrow way. For example, someone who is a Lutheran may have only a vague idea about other Protestant denominations, almost no idea of Roman Catholicism, and no idea at all of Hinduism. Taking a world religions course may help correct this problem. Whether you adhere to some set of religious beliefs or to none, you can hardly understand history or current events if you do not have a basic sense of the major world religions. Only with a background in world religions will you be in a position to say whether a proposed definition of "religion" is adequate or not.

What is quite clear about religion in all of its forms is that religions raise philosophical questions for themselves. Indeed, philosophical problems are so prevalent in religions that, for almost every world religion, there is a separate academic study of the philosophical aspects of that religion. There are academic journals and Library of Congress classifications devoted to Hindu

[1] William P. Alston, "Religion," in Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), vol. 7, pp. 141–142.

philosophy, to Buddhist philosophy, to Jewish philosophy, to Christian philosophy, to Islamic philosophy, and so on. The sorts of philosophical questions arising within these religions span almost every branch of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and even logic. Considered from this perspective, the range of philosophical issues concerning religion is vast. The range is so great that it is impossible to cover all of the philosophical issues in just one textbook.

1.4 What Philosophy of Religion Is

Now that we have gotten a sense of what philosophy is and of what religion is, we can define philosophy of religion as the subfield of philosophy that addresses the big questions raised by or within religions and that makes use of the tools of philosophy (e.g. logic, conceptual analysis, thought experiments) to do so. The big questions are numerous, and the answers to them can vary dramatically from religion to religion. Does God exist? If so, what is God's relationship to us? Do we have free will? What is justice? Is there a purpose to the universe? Is there life after death? What is the meaning of an individual human life? What do we have to do to lead ethical lives? How should society be organized? This is only a sample of the philosophical questions that arise within religions.

But with that definition of "philosophy of religion" in place, we now come to an important realization about this book. There is no way to cover in a single, average-sized book all of the questions and topics that legitimately fall under the heading "philosophy of religion." There are just too many religions in the world and just too many fundamental questions they raise. We are going to have to narrow down the topic considerably. So while the title of this book is *This Is Philosophy of Religion*, you should really think of it as a book about selected topics in the philosophy of religion. Here are some of the ways in which the focus has been narrowed.

The primary focus of this book is on issues that arise within the major monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All of these religions are instances of theism. They all promote belief in just one supreme being – a being that is perfect in every way. That being goes by different names (Yahweh, God, Allah), but in each of these religions that being is said to have the same basic properties: omniscience, omnipotence, moral perfection, necessary existence, eternal existence, and freedom. In this book, we will just use the term "God" for that being.

In Chapter 2, we will spend considerable effort trying to understand the properties of God more clearly. We will try to determine whether they all cohere – that is, whether it is logically consistent to maintain that God has all

of them. And we will try to see whether the existence of God is consistent with other things we know or believe – for example, that humans have free will. In Chapters 3 and 4, we will try to see whether there are any good arguments for thinking that God exists. In Chapter 5, we will look at two arguments for thinking that God does not exist. In Chapter 6, we will examine whether there is anything wrong with a person believing in God if that person has no good evidence for thinking God exists. In Chapter 7, we will look at a number of theories about why people believe God exists (or believe in any gods at all). Only in the postscript will we look at the philosophical issues arising within a nontheistic religion, Buddhism.

The scope of this book is thus wide in one sense (about half of the people in the world adhere to at least one of the major religions we will cover), but narrow in another sense. We will neglect a good number of religions – for example, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, alternative spiritualities/new religious movements, and traditional religions from various parts of the world. For coverage of those religions and the philosophical problems connected with them, you may want to take one or more courses on them – for example, Eastern religions or Eastern philosophy. This neglect should not be construed as a judgment that there is greater philosophical depth, sophistication, and profundity in the monotheistic religions than there is in other religions. It is just that we can cover only so much in one textbook.

Even with our restricted emphasis on the issues raised within theism, there are still many important questions that we will just not cover because of the limitations of space. Here are some of the important topics in the philosophy of religion that will not be addressed in this book.

Religious language: Can finite and imperfect beings like us ever successfully talk about and refer to God, a perfect and infinite being?

Death and the afterlife: Is life after death possible? If so, how? What forms might it take? And why should we care about what happens to us in the afterlife?

Divine hiddenness: If God exists, why is it not completely obvious to everyone that God exists? That is, why does God stay hidden from us?

Marxist, feminist, and race-theoretical criticisms of theism: Is the concept of God shared by the monotheistic religions itself best understood as a reflection of underlying social forces such as class domination, sexism, and racism? For example, is routinely referring to God as "he" a way for men to continue ruling society?

These are just a few of the many questions that could be covered in a book on the philosophy of religion. You may find that your teacher for this course wants to cover some or all of these topics. Do not think they are any less important just because they do not show up here. They are not being covered mostly for

the practical reason that if they were all covered, this book would be much too long, your teacher would probably not assign it, and it would be so expensive you probably would not buy it.

Now that we have gotten a clearer sense of the meaning of "philosophy of religion" and of the scope of this book, let us take a close look at our first topic: the concept of God.

Annotated Bibliography

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There are many introductory logic textbooks on the market. This is one the oldest, most comprehensive, and most polished.

Hales, Steven D. (2013). *This Is Philosophy: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell).

The first book in the *This Is Philosophy* series, it covers basic philosophical problems concerning ethics, freedom, personal identity, the mind, and knowledge, as well as God and religious belief. It is an excellent starting point for the beginner.

Rauhut, Nils Ch. (2011). *Ultimate Questions: Thinking about Philosophy*, 3rd edn (New York: Prentice Hall).

Another introductory philosophy book, this one begins with two helpful chapters. The first is on what philosophy is, while the second is on basic philosophical tools. Both chapters contain useful exercises.