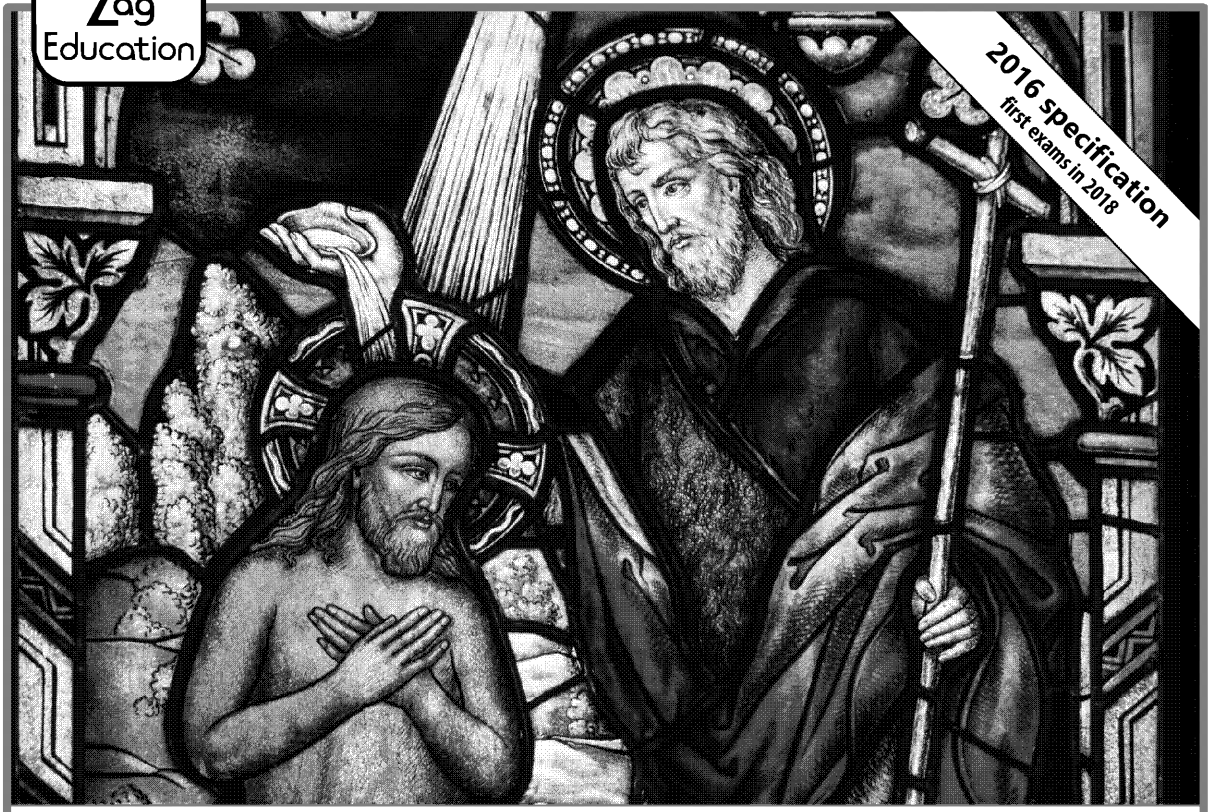
Zig Zag Education

**Religious Studies** A Level Year 2 | OCR | H573




# Course Companion

## for A Level Year 2 OCR Religious Studies Component 1: Philosophy of Religion

**zigzageducation.co.uk** POD 10218

# Contents

# Teacher's Introduction

This course companion is written for the A Level Year 2 OCR Philosophy of Religion specification and is designed to offer students a comprehensive introduction to the material within that academic course. The sections and topics, therefore, mirror OCR's specification headings, and every care has been taken to not only help students to understand the key concepts and ideas within the course, but also sharpen their critical thinking skills.

Alongside the main bulk of the writing there are also a number of other features to help students with their learning and revision. Self-guided and group activities are included throughout the resource to better engage students with the material, and I have also provided glossaries, textual references and information on key thinkers where appropriate.

I hope that you enjoy working through this resource and that it benefits both you and your students throughout the academic year.

**Note on Suggested Reading**

**Stretch and Challenge**

Any content in these boxes is not strictly required for the specification. However, it is appropriate, creditable information students could include in an exam context.

*February 2020*

# Key Terminology in Theolog
# Philosophical Developme

| | |
|---|---|
| **Omnipotence** | The attribute of being all-pow[illegible] or powerful withou |
| **Omniscience** | The attribute [illegible] knowing, or incapable of bein state [illegible] |
| **Free Will** | [illegible]ea that human beings have the power and ability actions, free of excessive coercion or constraint. |
| **Benevolence** | The attribute of being all-loving and incapable of evil. |
| **Eternal** | The state of never beginning or ending. |
| **Timeless** | The attribute of being outside of or external to time. |
| **Everlasting** | The attribute of having existed throughout all time and all future time. |
| **Just** | The attribute of being completely fair and right in all or |
| **Paradox** | A statement or thing that when presented seems to co contradictory aspects. |
| **Immutability** | The attribute of [illegible] changing or unable to change. |
| **Temporality** | [illegible]ute of being within time and so viewing objec [illegible]esent or future. |
| **Libertarianism** | The view that free will cannot be reconciled with deter beings with free will cannot be predetermined. |
| **Presentism** | The view that God does not experience events as occur a single, eternal present. |
| **Four-dimensionalism** | The view that time and space exist in four dimensions a separately to these four dimensions. |
| **Predestination** | The view that all events are predetermined at the begi human actions. |
| **Deism** | The view that God is not benevolent or personally inve human beings. |
| **Systematic Theology** | A theological discipline that focu[illegible] on developing a ra Christian faith, includin[illegible]e existence and nature of G |
| **Process Theology** | A theological [illegible]ne that focuses on explaining God God f[illegible] theologians, is radically contained wit [illegible] limited powers to influence the course of eve |

# Key Terminology in Religious Negative, Analogical or Sy

| | |
|---|---|
| **Religious Language** | The words, phrases and vocabulary human beings use t associated religious concepts. |
| **Apophatic Way** | The view that positive language or propositions provid about God and other religious concepts. |
| **Cataphatic Way** | The view that positive language or propositions provide about God and other religious concepts. |
| **Symbol** | A sign or representation that stands in for something el more abstract meanings. |
| **Objective** | Relates to propositions or statements that are not dep experiences or perspectives. |
| **Subjective** | Relates to propositions or statements that are depende or perspectives. |
| **Cognitive** | Relates to statements that can be evaluated as true or |
| **Non-cognitive** | Relates to statements that cannot be evaluated as true |
| **Univocal** | Language that can only be interpreted in one way. |
| **Equivocal** | Language that can be interpreted in multiple ways. |
| **Analogical** | [illegible] that draws a comparison between two things more of them. |
| **Anthropomorphism** | Where one attributes human characteristics to a non-h |
| **Existentialism** | A philosophical theory that examines questions about h what it means to be a free human being in the world. |
| **Transcendence** | The attribute of existing above or beyond the ordinary |
| **Analogy of Attribution** | The view that it is appropriate to draw analogies betwe objects due to shared potential properties. |
| **Analogy of Proportionality** | The view that it is appropriate to draw analogies betwe beings and greater beings who possess proportionately |

# Key Terminology in Religious
# Twentieth-century Perspe

| | |
|---|---|
| **Analytic** | Statements or propositions that are true by virtue of th terms involved. |
| **Synthetic** | Statements or propositions that are true by how their m external world. |
| **A Priori** | Knowledge arrived at through reason alone, independe |
| **A Posteriori** | Knowledge that depends at least partially on experienc |
| **Tautology** | A statement or proposition that is true under every pos meaning of its terms. |
| **Logical Positivism** | A philosophical movement which emphasised the prim put forward the verification principle as a test of meani |
| **Verification Principle** | The principle that a statement is only cognitively meani can be verified through empirical evidence. |
| **Cognitive** | Statements or propositions that can be evaluated as tr |
| **Non-cognitive** | Statements or propositions that cannot be evaluated as |
| **Form of Life** | The context or culture in which human beings perf language. |
| **Language Game** | A distinctive form of language that arises out of a specifi its own rules and criteria for meaningfulness. |
| **Hypothesis** | A proposed explanation for a phenomenon or event th become a theory. |
| **Qualification** | An extra piece of information that explains or limits a la |
| **Blik** | A perspective, world view or lens by which each perso evidence for their beliefs. |
| **Parable** | A story or tale that is designed to instruct listeners on a |
| **Eschatology** | A field of theology concerned with the afterlife and/or |
| **Falsificationism** | The philosophical view that the criterion for whether a whether it is possible to draw up conditions which wou |

# 4: Theological and Philosophical

## What you will learn in this section:

The philosophical discussion around the nature of God and his attributes, includin

- Omnipotence, the paradox of the stone and the possibility of divine self-limit
- Omniscience and its relationship to the eterr[illegible] od and human free wil
- Benevolence and justice, including t[illegible]ationship to discussions about div human free will.
- Eternity as timeles[illegible]s with an emphasis on the work of Boethius and Anse
- The na[illegible] h[illegible] free will and its reconcilability with the attributes of Go
- Swinbu[illegible]iews on eternity as meaning everlasting and the implications of omniscience and relationship to time.

**Starter Activity:**
Write down all the attributes you believe God to possess. Next, identify three wa conflict with each other and, without referring to the contents of this companio attempt to solve these conflicts.

| Key Thinker | |
|---|---|
| **Name** | Boethius |
| **Born** | 477 |
| **Died** | 524 |
| **Key text** | *The Consolation of Philosophy* (524) |
| **Why are they important?** | Boethius was a Roman philosophe[illegible]ixth century who w topics, from politics to reli[illegible]. His last work, *The Consolation* one of the most i[illegible]rt[illegible]influences on medieval and renaiss way for fi[illegible]r systematic thought on the nature of God's omn[illegible]ee will. |
| **Did you k[illegible]** | *The Consolation of Philosophy* was written while Boethius wa alleged crime of treason, for which he was executed only a ye |

| Key Thinker | |
|---|---|
| **Name** | Anselm of Canterbury |
| **Born** | 1033 |
| **Died** | 1109 |
| **Key text** | *De Concordia* (1107–1108) |
| **Why are they important?** | Anselm was one of the first major scholastic figures in Christi thought with philosophy and rationalist views to develop a sy defending the Christian faith. He is best known now for his or contributed greatly to ideas about God's omnipotence and or relationship to time. |
| **Did you know?** | Anselm regularly clashed with[illegible]s of England while he v He ended up being [illegible]vice and having to travel to Rome position and [illegible] |

| Key Thinker | |
|---|---|
| **Name** | Richard Swinburne |
| **Born** | 1934 |
| **Died** | – |
| **Key text** | *The Coherence of Theism* (1977) |
| **Why are they important?** | Richard Swinburne is one of the most prominent modern philosophers o particularly well known for his Christian apologetics. These focus on the r belief in God and outline many different modern versions of arguments f also detail how the God of classical theism can be conceived without con |
| **Did you know?** | Swinburne's systematic approach is deeply inf ed by Thomas Aquir admitting himself that his progressi on ple philosophical proble Christian beliefs is strongly i Aquinas' writings. |

## Introduction

When most people th ut the various ways God has been conceived throughout histor the different depictions presented by religions across the world. However, even in the Chris definition of God has never been static. Especially in the early Christian Church, debates rag to conceive of and describe the nature of God, with numerous councils being called to adju competing views. Nowadays, such arguments might seem trivial. Throughout many denomi discourse has been replaced with rigorous dogma. Yet, presently, for many theologians, de not mere intellectual disputes, but importantly inform the very way the world is thought of; bad, just or unjust. Moreover, the coherency of God has important implications for belief in idea of God is fundamentally paradoxical or contradictory, then why even believe his existe

Therefore, even for theologians who take the existence of God to be unquestionable, under God is vital. Many do not simply seek to identify the attributes that define God, but also to attributes relate to one another and how they interact with the world itself. The developme philosophical thought is often undertaken **systematically**; beginning from basic proposition detailing how they give rise to more complex interactions and r s. This detailed proce encompasses philosophical ideas about God, but also r s. Christian theologians a avoid philosophical conflicts when developing r ories about God, but also to reco with scripture and tradition. Thus, outli wh t a 'perfect' God may look like is an incredib encompassing a wide variety of and influences. This means that even among religio exists great disagree bo how to construe his primary attributes.

However, this disagreement has also led critics to argue that systematically detailing the na impossible and that there are fundamental contradictions within the idea of a perfect being throughout this section, there are numerous ways in which different attributes clash with n also the lives and beliefs of human beings. For many atheists, these clashes indicate that be unreasonable and illogical. Yet, for theists, the same is not always true. Some thinkers have subject to the limits of logic and, while resolving conflicts between different attributes is an intellectual task, the greatness and transcendence of God means that his being will naturall beings who are limited in intellect and power.

This is a very controversial proposition nonetheless. The basic principles of logic are general not only what is meaningful, but what is possible or impossible. If God is exempt from them to discuss his being? While human intellect is naturally limited, this does not mean human b some ability to discern what God must or must not be, even if we cannot fully understand that God effectively is beyond logic, one is giving up belief that logic itself has any mean God. This broader debate about God's r ons to logic is particularly exemplified in the study: omnipotence. While, among classical theists, God is thought to possess limitless pow have questioned whe ich attribute is internally contradictory or coherent.

## The Origins of Classical Theism

Although the concept of God is generally fixed now among most Christian denor
always so. Christian monotheism evolved out of a myriad of influences, and inte
varied greatly depending on geography, history and religion. Judaism had the gr
many ideas were adopted from Greek thought, such as the idea that God is imm
theologians claim that it is acceptable to abandon the immutability of God becau
his being conceived by Platonic thinkers such as Plato. Furthermore, there has b
views throughout Christian history that often present different ideas about God
While these views have generally been sidelined by Christian thinkers, they ofte
alternative philosophical positions unpalatable to Christian audiences. Therefore
nature of God is worth thinking about the history of Christianity itself, for, as
put in by Christian philosophers is reconciling the God of scripture with philosop

# Omnipotence

It initially seems a simple deduction. If God is the greatest possible being, he must
to do anything without restriction. If there is an action God cannot do, then it can
being greater than God who could perform that action. Therefore, God has limitle

But hold up for a second. What if God could perform an action that limits his own
God is no longer omnipotent, since there becomes an action that God cannot do.
power, then God is also no longer omnipotent. This puzzle has been expressed nu
known as *the paradox of omnipotence*. Moreover, it is a puzzle that has eluded ar
possible to simply argue God is not omnipotent, this proposition is one not popul
difficult to not only reconcile with scripture, but also with ideas about the ability
grant human beings salvation. For example, Matthew 19:26 states '... with God all
that God can perform actions beyond human comprehension. Therefore, what tur
problem has ramifications far beyond its initial premise.

**Discussion Activity**

In pairs or groups, discuss how you think God's omnipotence should be de
foresee with your definition, and how might they be solved?

### The Paradox of Omnipotence

It is possible to detail the puzzle above in a more relatable form. Simply, one can a
stone that he could not lift. If God cannot create the stone, he does not possess li
create the stone, he also no longer possesses limitless power. Now, such an exam
one just say that God could do such an action, but chooses not to, preserving his o
that the notion of lifting stones is inappropriate for an immaterial, transcendent b
meaningless? Both answers are possible, but miss the more subtle difficulties of th

One key issue is that God not only created the world, but created human beings. M
some degree that human beings have free will (although others such as Augusti
predestination). If human beings are truly free, then they must possess powers to
means God must be limited in power to manipulate or control human beings, result
human beings placing limits on God's omnipotence. Similarly, could God create so
a square circle? Such a question is not subject to the objections of the stone exam
considering the earlier debate about God's relationship to logic.

Therefore, while the paradox can be detailed in innumerable ways, not all are arb
deeper questions about how a being unlimited in power relates to the objects of l
lifting is an action that is appropriate for God, the idea of limitless power altogeth
contradiction for the being who possesses it. This indicates that either omnipoten
more problematically, God cannot possess omnipotence.

So how can the paradox be resolved? Well, there are a number of routes that thi
common is simply to redefine or clarify the meaning of omnipotence. If it does no
then the paradox may be avoided. Another common route is to reanalyse the phr
contending that contradictions only emerge due to the way the omnipotence is p
however, is to simply deny there is a paradox at all. This is the argument that Des
is the most controversial solution to the problem.

## Descartes and the Limitless God

What if God simply does have limitless power? If this is the case, then God simply
contradiction or not. Descartes' solution to the paradox of omnipotence is simply
definition of omnipotence itself. It simply is not an issue that God could create a s
God if he were absolutely omnipotent could create one and then lift that same sto
circle or a perpendicular square. There is nothing impossible for a being possessing p
humanity's place to try to make God conform to the perceived laws of logic. In fac
contradictions, if human beings were truly able to understand God's nature, they
conflicts between his attributes.

Descartes' position here is sometimes called **voluntarism** and is pretty much endo
as the consequences of holding that God can do literally anything are thought to b
God can make 3 x 4 = 11, then it is possible altogether that 3 x 4 = 11 and the enti
have to be rewritten. Similarly if God could create a square triangle, then the very
longer correct. Such examples indicate that logical contradictions aren't simply te
overcome, but constrictions upon what is possible for any being. By allowing the l
transgressed, one is also denying them any meaning or importance. There becom
absurdities that result in a wholly chaotic and random picture of God and the wor
laws of logic doesn't chime very well with religious tradition. God could create fre
perform good actions, for example, or free human beings wholly directed by God'
freedom also becomes meaningless.

Therefore, most thinkers reject Descartes' solution. However, it does hint at a pot
coherent response to the paradox. What if limitless power simply meant the abilit
action? This is the line of thinking endorsed by Aquinas and has been influential a
since its proposal.

## Aquinas and the Logical God

So God can do anything as long as it's logically possible. What does this mean? We
one, God could not create a square triangle since triangles by definition have thre
fact, anything that is logically necessary cannot be subverted by God's power. Goo
benevolent cannot perform an evil act, nor create free beings who are controlled
constrained wholly by external forces. In fact, on the surface, Aquinas' solution se
solve many of the key problems with Descartes' voluntarist response.

Well, 'many' is the key word here. Cast your minds back to the original formulatio
paradox of the stone. Is creating a stone too heavy for a being to lift a logically im
action? Not at all. Humans regularly create things that are heavy for them to manipula
highlights how power is not simply a fixed quantity. There are not simply two classe
and those not. Instead there is a whole variety of beings with different amounts of
environmental contexts. This may seem an obvious point, but it also leads to a m
between **essential** and **contingent (or accidental)** omnipotence. The former refer
necessarily and cannot lose, while the latter refers to omnipotence possessed
or place, but which is not permanent.

Why is this distinction important? Well, God could be omnipotent, but only contin
heavy to lift might be possible at one time, but result in God ceasing to be omnipo
of affairs is perfectly logically possible, so the question is not whether an omnipot

too heavy to lift, but whether an *essentially omnipotent* being could do so. Classic
not be happy with classing God as contingently omnipotent, since this would imp
necessary part of God's nature, and God ceasing to be omnipotent would contrad
although Aquinas' solution is initially appealing, it only solves some aspects of the
classes of logically possible actions which violate God's omnipotence.

## George Mavrodes and Omnipotence

Mavrodes draws on Aquinas to p[illegible] his solution to the problem on omnipote
paradox itself is misconst[illegible] when restated correctly it ceases to be a philosop
important a[illegible] solution is the notion that the inability to do the impossi
power. Th[illegible], if God is omnipotent, he can do everything that is possible, a
something impossible.

Turning to the paradox of the stone, the problem is typically focused on God not
his creation. But what Mavrodes argues is that a stone too heavy for God to lift
first place, since it is an action beyond the powers of an omnipotent being! Mav
contend that it is the existence of God as an omnipotent being that makes such
and, once the issue is framed in this way, the paradox dissolves.

### Does Omnipotence Really Mean Unlimited Power?

Through analysing Descartes' and Aquinas' solutions and their respective issues, a
your mind. Why is omnipotence defined as unlimited power? Who decided that's
Well, such thoughts, while anathema to traditional conceptions of God, are what
the paradox of omnipotence. For, while power is an importan[illegible] way of understand
it may simply be that positing it as an unlimited attrib[illegible] simply incoherent. If t
omnipotence may simply be better construed as having a different meaning. Mor
Geisler and William Craig have argue[illegible] that God with unlimited power is not cen
Scriptural support for this p[illegible] is not strong and there is plenty of interpretative
for an alternative co[illegible] of God's power.

For example, Craig argues that omnipotence means God can perform any possible a
This means that God is essentially omnipotent, but cannot perform actions which u
omnipotence or clash with other aspects of his nature, such as benevolence or omn
that God could not create a stone too heavy for him to lift. Such an action is not co
immaterial, omnipotent, transcendent being, so cannot be performed by God even
can be questioned whether Craig is really answering the paradox here. On the one h
inerrant action as inconsistent with the nature of God so long as one assumes certai
possess. On the other hand, it fails to answer key questions about whether God cou
his control. Such an action is hardly inconsistent with his nature (considering it is th
thought) yet it would intuitively seem to result in limits upon God's omnipotence, w
upheld. Therefore, on deeper reflection, Craig's response does not seem to offer a t
paradox of omnipotence. In fact, a better answer may lie in simply identifying the w
power. These forms of replies will be examined in the n[illegible] section.

### What Limits are There upon God's Pr[illegible]

While there are merits to th[illegible] analysed so far, it appears that there still ar
understandin[illegible] on t[illegible]e, particularly in regards to the creation of free beings
of limits to [illegible] power in light of human free will has been an important decision b

One influential approach to this difficulty has been outlined by Richard Swinburne
under question in the paradox is not God's omnipotence, but his necessary, omni
put, the paradox is only an issue if it is required that God not just be omnipotent,
and places. God can still be omnipotent if presently he is capable of performing a

future state of affairs where he is no longer omnipotent. This definition is appeali
that it is logically impossible to change the past. Otherwise a previously powerful
in order to restore their omnipotence. In the case of the paradox of the stone, it is
God could create a stone he could not lift and cease to be omnipotent. However,
God has no reason to perform such an action and so does not cease to be omnipo
that the capability to perform an action is not necessarily tied up with motivation.
own power, but there is little reason to believe he ever w

Swinburne's answer provides a clear solu of the main aspects of the p
cannot do what is logically impos ot perform an action such as creatin
God can create a stone t lift, but simply possesses no motivation to. Th
but there ar issues. First, Swinburne's solution can be argued to sim
than solve i e question of whether God truly can self-limit is reduced down
rather than the limits of power. For example, if God was not bounded by time, wo
self-limit? Second, and perhaps most importantly, is God still omnipotent present
beings beyond his control? One option here might be to say that human beings ar
power if he wishes. Yet this seems a bit counterintuitive to the notion of real free
example, for a king to make any human being his slave at a moment's notice, it w
yet-to-be-called slave possesses real freedom.

Peter Vardy here enters with a potential response to this problem. He agrees with
limit his own omnipotence and, in fact, in order to create free human beings, this
necessary. If God were able to perform any act, logically possible or not, then in th
principles, laws and freedoms that guide human lives would be meaningless. God,
power at the moment of creation, in order that human beings can continue to live
However, what Vardy argues is that God's omnipotence is not lessened by this rel
was not coerced into it. Rather it was God's own will t is power to what is
of creation. Therefore, because the restriction o on potence were born out of
all-powerful. God cannot perform logi y possible actions not because of his la
of his chosen self-limitation of tain powers.

Once again s an intuitive appeal to this solution, but if God has self-limited
meaningfull lled omnipotent? The paradox of the stone arguably is not inte
how God came to be limited in power, but shows that the idea of omnipotence in
incoherent. By rendering God contingently omnipotent at best, both Vardy and Sw
the paradox but instead have admitted that God is not all-powerful as previously
Swinburne's and Vardy's solutions both rely on the idea of ascribing reasons or m
This is a little bit contentious, for it draws in specific theological ideas into philoso
could be asked why God create the world without self-limitation, or why God spec
human freedom. The answers Swinburne and Vardy give solve the paradox, but p
speculation than we might want to admit. Unless there are reasonable and appare
his power, then it might well seem that self-limitation is just a way for God to get

Perhaps more importantly, however, we can ask whether a self-limited God really
definition, a self-limited God cannot perform some actio sing the possibility
who could. This issue, alongside the wider proble the paradox of omnipotenc
jettison the idea of omnipotence altogeth using on different ways to describ

## What Else, if Not Omnipotence?

Going even further back in our discussion, it was noted in the introduction that the debate around the attributes of God is focused on outlining what it means to be a 'perfect' being. But what if omnipotence is not a perfection? This proposal is put forward by Charles Hartshorne, who argues not only that limitless power is a self-contradictory concept, but that it is also not a real perfection that a divine being would possess. If God w[as] powerful without limits, he would effectively be a despot, since [no]thing could ever offer meaningful resistance to such power. Human beings could never possess real freedom and never have a bal[anced] or fair relationship with God. Therefore, instead, Hartshorne a[rgues] that omnipotence should be interpreted as meaning G[od] possesses unsurpassable power. No matter what context, God is always the most powerful being, even if he cannot perform any task.

This encompasses the idea of self-limitation in a potentially more balanced way. G and beings can resist God's power at times; it simply is just that no being could ev Hartshorne is not, however, the only thinker to present this proposal. Peter Geach omnipotence is the wrong term to describe God's power, instead favouring 'almig connotations of limitless power. Such ideas do have philosophical appeal; they ex logically impossible, but equally do not require outlining potentially speculative a God's self-limitation.

Equally, though, it is unclear whether they truly answer the stone paradox. Is God power, or contingently unsurpassable? If the former, it could be asked whether G omnipotent. If God cannot self-limit until surpassable in power, then God could b Yet if God could self-limit in such a fashion then he would no longer be unsurpass are deeper questions about whether, under Hartshorne's [or] Geach's proposals, omnipotent beings. If omnipotence is simply being [un]surpassable in power, multi powerful is a possible outcome. What initially seems to be a clever way to avoid t exercise in semantics with the ordinary issues with omnipotence still unresolved.

## Seeking An[swers] Where There are None

There are strengths and weaknesses to all the solutions analysed so far, but the e omnipotence itself seems to be an incredibly difficult attribute to coherently defi contradiction is solved, more emerge, and the danger is that God's omnipotence i meaningful describe the extent of his power. Moreover, as has been noted, while power is an attractive proposition in solving the omnipotence paradox, it also doe God of classical theism, who is typically taken to be essentially omnipotent.

One general response here might be to note that whatever the limits are to God's a concept that is beyond human capabilities to grasp. For example, in Wittgenstei questions whether in the case of transcendental subjects such as God, human lan the concepts or attributes ascribed to them. More simply, whatever the dimensio of a scale or form far beyond that encountered in the natural world, so it may be describe them based on contingent, observable notions of power. This might see understanding the limits of human language and comprehension can also potenti of philosophical discussion about omnipotence.

This is particularly true [regarding] the paradox of the stone. While most modern God cannot [do] what is logically impossible, it is not clear what exactly is logically poss essentially omnipotent, then it is true that it is not logically possible for him to cr lift, but it is also not clear whether it is logically possible for a being to be essentia The laws of logic are as much based upon the nature of things as they are upon th such as Craig put forward arguments that logic is simply a part of God's nature, su being some concrete and transparent definition of God's nature in the first place. not even agreed about what omnipotence means in the context of a perfect bein

Altogether, it is not difficult to see that the debate around omnipotence risks bec
logically possible defines the limits of God's power, but God's power may also def
possible. Whether this circularity is a shortcoming in human language and compre
appreciate the deeper philosophical nuances of omnipotence, is not clear. Noneth
take to omnipotence it is important to acknowledge the difficulties in not only out
being might look like, but also in grounding this notion in everyday ideas about log
principle is true when it comes to analysing the next attrib[illegible] we shall look at; om

**Activity:**
Throughout this section on [illegible]potence, numerous different definitions have b
For each of the thinkers above, write a short paragraph detailing how you would
omnipote[illegible]ho do you think are the strongest?
1. Thoma[illegible]nas
2. Peter Vardy
3. Peter Geach

## Omniscience

Omniscience is typically defined as being 'all-knowing'. However, like omnipotenc
does justice to the myriad of ways this definition can be extrapolated. For exampl
ability to know anything that it is possible to know? Or the complete knowledge o
of their place in time and space? Or does it just mean the inability to be wrong ab

Such questions are important because knowledge itself is not a straightforward co
epistemological discussions generally focus on **propositional knowledge**, a type o
propositions and descriptions. However, there are also thought to be other kinds
**knowledge by acquaintance**; the knowledge of some[illegible]through direct awaren
things? Is it in the form of specific propositions about the world, or would an omn
different, more direct and fundamental way? All these questions are difficult to an
way that omniscience is described itself, but also its relationship to God's other at

One comm[illegible]e with omniscience, which will be a key focus of this section, is i
will. If God is all-knowing, then it can be contended that God has knowledge of all
the universe, whether they be past, present or future, relative to human beings. If
God must know the outcome of every action or situation at any possible time. Thi
by human beings, and their results, are already known to God. For many, this fore
with free will. How can an action be free if its outcome is already known? To know
intuitively seems to require that the outcome is predetermined. If there was any p
outcome, then one could hardly be said to possess knowledge of the future.

Therefore, prima facie, if God is omniscient then human beings cannot have auton
cannot possess free will. For some religious thinkers, this conclusion is strangely a
theologians such as Augustine and Calvin have been happy to accept a doctrine of
that God, upon creating the world, predetermined the outcome of all events, hum
theologians often also uphold strict doctrines of **electi**[illegible]aining that some indiv
while others are condemned. Yet, for most mo[illegible]n C[illegible]tians, such a conclusion i
God be just or benevolent if some people are condemned due to actions complete
Moreover, accepting predesti[illegible]on only solves the conflict between omniscience
asserting the truth of **h[illegible]eterminism**, where all events are predetermined by t
plenty of e[illegible] from scientific enquiry in favour of determinism, it is unclear w
necessitated [illegible]or causes. If you recall your study of Hume and the causal princ
principle itself is difficult to accept as a priori truth, and similar issues arise when
between determinism and free will.

Most Christian thinkers, therefore, prefer to take a **libertarian** view of free will. Th
be fundamentally incompatible with determinism, and puts forward that human b

their actions beyond the influence of prior causes and constraints. For many theis
only meaningful view of human agency that can be reconciled with scriptural evid
have genuine moral responsibility, such that they can be rewarded or punished fo
need to be able to freely choose those actions. Yet a libertarian view of free will s
omniscience, as we have previously explored. So how can the two be reconciled?

## Compatibilism

Through this section, we focus pri[illegible] libertarianism as a model of free will
important to consider **co[illegible]** or **soft determinism**. This states that free v
determinism [illegible] concepts are properly understood there is simply no con
served as [illegible] a thorn in the theologians' side. Most contend that it is an unt
give an age[illegible]al power over their actions. However, it is important to note tha
the conflict between omniscience and free will is potentially dissolved. It becom
God who knows the deterministic outcome of things alongside free human bein

A scan throughout the history of the philosophy of religion will find no end to the
question. However, solutions have usually focused on clarifying the way God 'kno
God's omniscience or the existence of human free will. This is a tricky path to take
certain of how God knows anything? Well, a clue, at least for many thinkers, lies i
space itself. More precisely, if God is a transcendent and eternal being, his relatio
different from that of a contingent, temporal being. What may seem to be an eve
may very well appear differently to God. It is this difference in perspective that po
understanding how God knows things, for it may be that God's knowledge of all th
things occurring within a particular past or future. Simply put, if God's knowledge
does not interfere with human free will.

This line of thinking might seem odd at fi[illegible]ce. How can knowledge of future
events happening? An answer to this question was influentially proposed by Boeth
understanding of God's [illegible]ally dissolves the conflict between omniscience and
that we sha[illegible] to [illegible] the next section.

### Discussion Activity:

In Alan Moore's famous graphic novel *Watchmen,* the scientist Jonathan Osterma
experiment but is somewhat miraculously reformed as Dr Manhattan, an otherwo
develops a range of abilities, including vastly increased knowledge and the ability
scales. As a result, he begins to lose his ability to relate to humanity and becomes
realisation that the universe is deterministic. One of the implications of the charac
understand the insignificance of humanity in the grander schemes of the cosmos

In pairs or groups, discuss this idea and the bearing it has on conceiving God. Wo
likely to be benevolent? Or could he be both all-knowing and all-good?

## Boethius and Omnibenevolence

We've noted how the conflict betwee[illegible]nce and free will is not just
contained to those two attribu[illegible]. It e[illegible]ompasses a number of deeper
questions about the be[illegible]e and justice of God, especially if his
omniscienc[illegible]cts [illegible]ether human beings can be judged as morally
responsible [illegible]ir actions. For Boethius, it is these questions about the
benevolence of God that are most important to resolve. In his famous work *The C*
Boethius outlines a series of concerns with the omniscience of God. Most importa
human beings could be fair if God already knew the outcomes of their actions. If h
meaningful choices than the ones predetermined by God's knowledge, then judgi
manifestly unfair. There would also be no point in praying or communicating with

good. Perhaps most problematically, if human beings' evil acts are predetermined God created the world itself, it seems that God himself is responsible for evil! Res will conflict for Boethius is, therefore, really resolving conflicts between the omni of God. If there is no solution, key Christian doctrines about salvation, judgement be abandoned, or have to be changed to fit a **deistic** or capricious God.

For Boethius, this was an unacceptable result, so how did he propose to avoid suc we get into the details, it is worth outlining the different perspectives on a differe There have been numerous interpretations of this attribute throughout history, b understanding how God is eternal is to propose God to be **timeless**. In this i exists completely independent of time. The terms past, present and future simp perceives the world and events within it. The second way conversely proposes this interpretation of eternity, God exists within time, although infinitely. Therefo will continue to always exist in the present, with respect to the events in the past

It is not clear scripturally which one of these interpretations is correct, and differen of philosophy have adopted different perspectives. Boethius, nonetheless, adopts a eternity, arguing that his transcendence means God does perceive events as relative Since God exists independently of time, he instead grasps all events in an atempora God's perspective, all things occur simultaneously; there are no events that are defi past or the future, and, most importantly, God's knowledge is never temporally bou position is often called **presentism** and Boethius argues it holds the key to reconcili with human free will. As Boethius himself states:

*… eternity is the possession of endless life whole and perfect at a single moment… abides for ever in an eternal present, His knowledge, also transcending all movem dwells in the simplicity of its own changeless present, and embracing the whole in the past and of the future, contemplates all that fills them in its simple cognition as taking place.* (Book 5, Part VI)

How does this solve the issue with free will? Well, in short, because God's know events, never before events. Boethius draws an analogy between God's observati beings' observation of the present. If, for example, I watch my neighbour playing might say that I know that my neighbour is playing football across the street. Yet knowledge of this event means that my neighbour was necessarily bound to play knowledge dictates is that necessarily at this moment, my neighbour is playing fo neighbour to have been playing football in the past, nor that he continue playing argues that God's knowledge works in a similar manner. Since God is only ever ob there is no necessity placed upon the individuals involved in those events in respe Therefore, altogether, God's knowledge does not necessitate any future events; it awareness of things at the moment they occur.

It is worth unpacking this suggestion a little further. While Boethius' analogy is he distinguish between the forms of necessity we are talking about here. For what Bo difference between what he terms **simple** and **conditional necessity**. Simple nec of affairs that have to be the way that they are, due to the nature of the objects i matter of simple necessity that any human being will eventually die. Human bein and so by knowing the proposition 'Jacob will die in the future' it is guaran However, conditional necessity refers to states of affairs that occur due to the act particular time. They are necessary in the moment of their occurrence, but not be relevant law. The former example given of the neighbour playing football is an inst since it is by his actions that he is playing football, not because of his nature.

This distinction between simple and conditional necessity is vital for Boethius. God's depending on the situation, can be of either simple or conditional necessity. Yet, in knowledge does not incur any past or future necessity upon the beings involved. Fo

beings, God's knowledge only extends to the necessity of their actions in that prese
does not necessitate human beings performing any future actions. This means that
reconciled with human free will, since any action that is conditionally necessary is n
choices, not God's knowledge. At most, all God's knowledge holds is that if an even

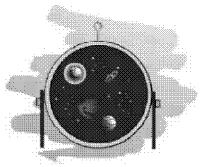
Boethius' reasoning can seem a little obtuse here. There are many events which a
demarcated as due to either simple or conditional necessity; human actions in pa
and environmental influences which might not be easily divided into such a dicho
about whether Boethius' solution is too abstract; but the worry is not about whether
moment necessitates events to occur, but whether God's complete knowledge of
freedom. Nevertheless, before we delve into some of the issues with presentist sc
omniscience and free will, it is worth looking at another influential proposal, given

**Discussion Activity:**
In pairs or small groups, discuss whether you think Boethius' appeal to a timeles
conflict between omniscience and free will. Is the distinction between simple an
Or does it fail to give a convincing account of the kind of knowledge God must h

## Anselm, Eternity and the Fourth Dimens

Boethius' argument is intuitively persuasive, but leaves a number of areas unexplained. What does it mean for God to be atemporal, and how does this timelessness relate to the dimensions of the world we observe around us? Anselm seeks to answer these questions as he expands on Boethius' approach to the eternality of God, putting forward a theory now known as **four-dimensiona**

Anselm's basic proposal is that there is a fourth dimension, time on top of the th
beings can observe and interact with. This fourth dimension constrains human be
flow of causes and effects is bound by time. Human beings, as temporal, can o
relative to the past, present or future at any given moment. Therefore, any event
inside this fourth dimension is perceived chronologically; there is no way of know
temporal context. There is no way of knowing an event outside of its physic
argues that God does not just transcend the physical world, but also time. His per
by temporal or physical context and God can observe any event at any time it is o



Importantly, Anselm does not view God as a being separated fr
perceive any event at any time because all dimensions are cont
transcendent of the dimensions of the world, he is yet immaner
single possible event. This combination is what enables God to
present. God's knowledge is, therefore, complete, but it is not t

Naturally there's a lot to unpack in Anselm's proposals. Still, they can primarily be
Boethius' *presentism*. The most important point for Anselm is that God exists at a
is not constrained by their physical or temporal dimensions. This means that God'
subject to physical or temporal restrictions. Whatever God knows has to be under
perspective, not a temporally bound human point of view. Significantly, God's rela
there is no divine foreknowledge of any event as such. Everything is perceived simu
grants the possibility of genuine libertarian free will for human beings, since God's
any necessity on future human actions. It only imposes *conditional necessity* in th
short, it is the existence of the events themselves as perceived by God that means
knowledge of those events occurring.

## Why Accept Anselm's View of God and Eternity?

Both Anselm and Boethius present an intuitive, if somewhat complex, solution to
conflict between omniscience and free will. The idea that God's knowledge functi
differently from that of human beings is not beyond the realms of possibility and i
supported by the unique characteristics God possesses. However, despite these
advantages, many thinkers disagree fundamentally with the idea of a timeless Go

In one sense, this is because it is unclear whether it truly solves the original issues
identified at the beginning of this section. William Tasker, for example, contends
that even if God only possesses atemporal knowledge of events, this does not me
genuine free will is possible. What matters is that human beings have genuine
alternative possibilities when decision-making, such that they could have chosen a
different course of action at a particular time or place. Yet if these genuine alterna
it would be possible to change God's beliefs. The fact that God's knowledge is ate
Unless human beings possess this power to *change* God, then God's knowledge st
human choices, whether it be an atemporal or temporal necessity. The critics' cor
is not the way that God knows something that matters, but his very infallibility tha

Despite this argument having some force, most thinkers have focused instead on
coherent notion. One strand of argument has been to question whether Anselm's
represent what omniscience entails. If God truly does know everything, shouldn't
knowing the outcome of past and future events? Boethius' ideas about conditiona
conflict between omniscience and free will by simply limiting God's knowledge to
Human actions are free not because God exists in the atemporal present, but beca
events is dependent on human beings performing them. If God truly were omnisc
context of an action would not matter; God would simply know the outcome.

Difficulties also emerge when thinking about the implications of a timeless God's
Kenny argues that numerous inconsistencies emerge if one takes God to observe
especially when considering propositions about events. If Anselm and Boethius ar
the birth and death of Henry VIII occur at the same time, along with every other e
while such a proposal seems initially strange, this absurdity can be taken even fur
things in an atemporal present, then the beginning and end of the universe also si
birth and death of Henry VIII. Therefore, what initially seems to be a plausible vie
much less intuitive than suspected. Even if such a form of existence is metaphysic
to speculate), how does this picture of God cohere with the personal, interventior
while it is possible to contend here that Kenny is simply conflating a human and di
world, his argument does have some force when one considers how God has beer
the Christian faith and its accompanying scripture.

Within almost every major narrative in the Bible, God is not portrayed as being tra
sense. In fact, God at every juncture appears to be temporal. He intervenes on be
becomes incarnate in the person of Jesus. Moreover, God seems to be aware of h
causally impact human beings. God in the Bible is not a mere observer, but an inte
followers, who pray and receive knowledge from him in turn. The question, there
God is metaphysically possible, but whether, considering God's role in the lives of
correct to view God as timeless. Presenting attributes on God may run the risk of maki
philosophical problem, removed from the events and beings in the universe itself.
questions about whether temporality is necessary to possess knowledge of all thi
reconciling the atemporal perspective on God with the fundamental beliefs of the

In many ways, the timeless picture of God naturally seems to better fit a **deistic** p
the dynamic interventionist God of the Christian faith. Classical theism has often s
infallible, but also **immutable**; unable to change. Yet, for many critics, an immutab
being a loving God. Richard Swinburne in particular questions whether immutabili
perfections. He argues that love is a voluntary act; it is dynamic and requires chan

suffering of others. Yet the God that Anselm and Boethius portray would be incap
Swinburne claiming conversely he would be a 'very lifeless thing'. Similar difficult
how a timeless God could be just or fair, especially if not engaged with the strugg
attempting to choose the good. Perhaps more fatally, it can be asked how such a
lives of human beings could be reconciled with key Christian teachings such as atc
critics, the ramifications of God being a timeless, immutable being are greater tha
are fundamentally irreconcilable with a meaningful religious belief.

Yet, if these criticisms are right, aren't we back to square one? If God is within tim
possess knowledge of past and future events, meaning free will is threatened onc
this problem, we can turn to Swinburne's proposals about the limitations upon an

## Kretzmann and Stump on Eternity

Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump in a recent paper expand and clarify a
areas of Boethius' and Anselm's accounts of a timeless God. In particular they no
what it means for two events to be simultaneous, especially when talking about
temporal and atemporal beings. They, therefore, propose two methods for unde
first is T-simultaneity (temporal simultaneity), which covers how events happen
beings. The second is E-simultaneity (eternal simultaneity), which covers how ev
for an eternal being.

What Kretzmann and Stump ultimately propose is that God is ET-simultaneous wit
describes how God is both eternal in existence, but also present at every tempora
event which the entirety of God and his existence are not simultaneous with; or, a

*From the standpoint of eternity, every time is present, co-occurrent with the whole*

Let's unravel this a bit more. Say we have an event B, my 26th birthday; myself D
an eternal being. D and God cannot share T-simultaneity at B, for no eternal bei
in time. Nor can D and God share E-simultaneity, for D is not eternal. If they
would also share this simultaneity at every other possible moment in time. How
thought that both D and God exist ET-simultaneously. God exists eternally and is
time; any specific time that is picked out for a temporal being such as D is share
and vice versa. For Kretzmann and Stump, this form of simultaneity highlights ho
with omniscience, for, at any moment in time, all events are being experienced s
human beings. There is no divine foreknowledge at play that constrains the free

## Swinburne and the Everlasting God

Earlier in this section, we noted the difference between two different interpretations of eternity. Swinburne, in contrast to Boethius and Anselm, rejects the idea of a timeless God and instead claims he should be viewed as everlasting. God's eternity, therefore, does not involve him being independent of time. Instead, God exists infinitely contexts as human beings, although God has always existed a
level. It simply means that God currently exists in the prese
solve the original conflict between omniscience and free will

In short, Swinburne directly states it is not logically possible f
about the future. Although God is omniscient, he self-limits his own knowledge up
beings. The existence of libertarian free will for Swinburne requires that human b
possibilities to their choices, which cannot be known by any being, regardless of t

Nonetheless, Swinburne also states that ultimately God is fully omniscient; this se
and God can restore his knowledge of the future at any point by taking away free

Swinburne's perspective also reverses a number of other aspects of the timeless v
immutable and unchanging. Instead, as explored, God can freely change and limit
ensure the existence of free will. Being within time, he is also personally invested
intervene to help human beings where appropriate. Mor[illegible], he can engage in v
with human beings, empathising with their suffer[illegible]ng and existing in solidarity with
not a static being, removed from the wor[illegible]rge, and there are fewer difficulti
benevolence with his eternity and [illegible]nce.

### Evaluating t[illegible]er[illegible]t, or an Everlasting God

Swinburne a[illegible] that viewing God as everlasting has a number of advantages ov
interpretation is much more easily reconcilable with Christian scripture and tradit
questions about how a God outside of time intervenes within the lives of tempora
in the present and through self-limitation of his omniscience, unaware of the futu
Therefore, when God acts to influence the actions of human beings, his motivatio
are the ones with the power to change the future, not realise a preordained set o
Swinburne's interpretation supports a more intuitive understanding of libertarian
outline a complex metaphysics of necessity, rather human actions are simply free
to be free.

Yet it also possible to question whether God is truly omniscient in this picture. W
answer to the conflict, it is also maybe a tacit admission that the conflict is unsolv
cannot logically know the future; rather God is just not omniscient. As such, Swinb
departure from classical theism. For if God does not know th[illegible] future, then how w
beings could eventually be saved, or whether his int[illegible]ve[illegible]ons in the world would
careful balancing act between arguing for a [illegible]-li[illegible]ation on God's knowledge an
which contribute to perfection.

Moreover, it [illegible]be [illegible]ed that Swinburne overstates the difficulties with God's t
God is not j[illegible]nscendent, but also immanent. It is part of his perfection that G
wholly inves[illegible]in the lives of human beings. Just because human beings require t
engaging in loving relationships does not mean the same is true for a divine being
imperfection to require this capacity to change. On reflection, it is not clear whet
although intuitive, is truly necessary to reconcile the different conflicting attribute

**Discussion Activity:**
In groups or pairs, discuss whether you believe a timeless or everlasting interpreta
provides the most coherent response to the conflict between omniscience and fre
the strongest argument for your decision?

## Justice, Benevolence and Free Will

Turning back to the beginning of this section, you [illegible]ght remember that one of th
Boethius was reconciling not just omniscien[illegible]etence and free will, but also the
Yet, so far solutions have focused [illegible]the relationship between God's eternali
God were not benevolent [illegible]uld there be an issue to solve?

Such a sugg[illegible]strays far from the fundamental beliefs of many religious peopl
concerned w[illegible]a God that is not invested in the lives of human beings, or does nc
the history of humanity? But if ideas about benevolence and justice are subtracte
omniscience, then the issue is considerably less pressing. It may be that a **deistic** p
appropriate, where God is omniscient and timeless but not benevolent. Under thi
actions of human beings from an eternal present without philosophical difficulties

perspective can be reconciled with his temporal actions in scripture. Such a persp
answer to the problem of evil, another issue arising out of God's benevolence. No
popular view of God, but many agnostic thinkers throughout history, such as Davi
have indicated in their work that this is the most likely way that God might exist. N
to outline, if only to contrast with a classical theist perspective.

Alternatively, a solution to these issues may lie in restricti[ng] God's knowledge fur
self-limited God provides the answer to reconcilin[g] c[on]flicting attributes, why
argue that God is not omnipotent or omni[scient] at all? This is the view of **process**
does not possess complete powe[r] or [k]nowledge over all things. Instead God only
All matter can resist God [in] [a] way and, as such, God does not have complete
can only pa[rtially] sh[ape] [it] the way that a limited, benevolent being seeks. This i
most religio[us] thinkers but it is important to note that a solution to the conflicts b
in restricting their scope or power. Whether or not this is a feasible proposition, h
wish to reconcile God with scriptural evidence. If the latter factor is not an issue, t
be reinterpreted radically in light of the conflicts and contradictions examined in t

Nevertheless, it also has to be considered that God's being and nature is far beyo
may mean that conflicts only appear due to the limitations of our imaginations. It
allows him to know and do things that seem philosophically impossible from our p
seem to be an easy get out clause for the classical theist, it is at least a good call fo
philosophical picture of God has changed radically throughout the last two millen
renewed thought brings a conceptual breakthrough in understanding how the att

**Quick Quiz**

1. What is the paradox of omnipotence?
2. What is the difference between essential [and] co[n]tingent (accidental) omnipo
3. What is the difference betw[een] [ti]m[e]less and an everlasting interpretation
4. What is deism?
5. What i[s] [m]ultidimensionalism?
6. What is the difference between simple and conditioned necessity?
7. What is immutability?
8. What is self-limitation?

# 5: Religious Language: Neg
# Analogical or Symbol

## What you will learn in this section:

The philosophical discussion around the nature and use of religious language, incl

- The apophatic way (via negativa) and its usefulness in theological discussion
- The cataphatic way (via positiva), with reference to Aquinas' views on analog
- Symbolic religious language, with reference to the philosophical thought of P

**Starter Ac**

Read the Prologue to the Gospel of John. What kind of language do you think is does it potentially impact the interpretation of its theological message?

| Key Thinker | |
|---|---|
| **Name** | Aquinas |
| **Born** | 1225 |
| **Died** | 1274 |
| **Key text** | *Summa Theologiae* (1485) |
| **Why are they important?** | There are few figures who have had more influence on the Cat priest St Thomas Aquinas, and there are few institutions which the shape of world history than the Catholic Church. As such, A for a long time, the moral and intellectual landscape for large p |
| **Did you know?** | It is believed that Aquinas' relatives disapproving of his decis friar, once forcibly imprisoned him in the family castle in an a Legend has it that his brothers even resorted to hiring a prost Thomas away from a life of religious chastity. Not one to be d the latter, Aquinas is said to have driven her from his bedroom |

| Key Thinker | |
|---|---|
| **Name** | Paul Tillich |
| **Born** | 1886 |
| **Died** | 1965 |
| **Key text** | *Dynamics of Faith* (1957) |
| **Why are they important?** | Tillich is perhaps one of the most influential figures in twentiet just for his intellectual output, but also for his public-facing ser Christian theology with existential philosophy proved importan radical proposals about the nature of God, but also in adapting academic shifts of the first half of the twentieth century. |
| **Did you know?** | Tillich in the early 1930s was a supporter of the Fellowship of S contended that Christian ethics was incompatible with the fun |

## Introduction – The Nature of Religious Language

In our everyday lives, we typically tailor the language we use to different situati just describing different kinds of objects. The same is true for religion and its asso you are religious yourself, the language used in scripture, prayer and worship refle talking about God, but the individual ways a particular theist may perceive their re since the dawn of philosophy of religion, debate has raged about how to construe vocabulary used when talking about God and other religious ideas.

The key issue at the centre of this debate is how ordinary language, crafted aroun
of the natural world, can possibly capture the nature and essence of a being fund
comprehension. For how can any description of God be meaningful or productive
reflect the actuality of his being? For example, take the phrase 'God created the u
intuitively graspable, but the very idea of creation is rooted in human ideas about
concepts. Does the moment at which God formed the world, potentially ex nihilo,
by which we might create a chair or a table? If we answer 'no' then we risk reduc
down to a mere assembly of material parts, **anthropomorphising** God in the proc
phrase doesn't capture how God formed his world, then is it expressing anything
What can possibly be learnt from such a statement?

Thus, many philosophers have argued that it is important to philosophically analyse how re
employed and appropriately. There are two aspects to this concern. The first is outlini
accurately describe the being and nature of God. On the one hand, it intuitively se
descriptions of God, for fear of trivialising philosophical analysis about his being a
is also arguably important to avoid wholly metaphorical descriptions of God, wher
mere placeholders for the properties or actions under question. Either result wou
discussion about God at all and lead to a lack of progress in capturing not only the
relationship with human beings.

The second aspect is also important to consider. While it is vital to consider how r
accurately, any analysis of it also has to encompass how religious language is used
spiritually inclined people employ religious language not only to talk about God, b
Beyond mere descriptions of God, religious language has another purpose; it is int
being and nature that can be shared and understood by those who believe in him
difficult to pin down. Sometimes religious language is used to present proposition
as true or false. The phrase 'God created the universe' might be a clear example o
want to claim that such a statement is a matter of interpretation, for a fundamen
reckoning that God is the creator of the universe.

However, in many cases religious language does not express clear propositions lik
Sometimes it expresses ideas that are closer to metaphor, symbol or even art. For
watches human beings from the heavens' is not one that could easily be interpret
observing human beings it probably does not involve any standard interpretation
likely to carry meaning for many religious individuals. It reflects the way God is pe
human beings and looks out for them in times of need. The same might be true fo
'God is always with us'. So how should these non-literal statements be interpreted
might argue they are essentially meaningless, but they still play an important part
so it is necessary to think about what purpose they play. This is especially importa
different ways religious language is employed in different contexts. In the case of
language is thought to hold power. The words uttered by individuals are not thou
bring about real spiritual change among the people involved.

Therefore, unpacking the intricacies of use and purpose of religious language is a
theists are rarely agreed on the best way that religious language should be interpr
well be that capturing the variety of uses requires a multi-faceted approach, emplo
processes commonly found in religious discussion. However, before we delve into
worth outlining an important philosophical distinction that illuminates the concer
is between what are termed **cognitive** and **non-cognitive statements**.

## Cognitive and Non-cognitive Propositi

The last subsection detailed two different ways in which religious statements can
ways weren't made explicitly known!). On the one hand, they can be viewed as co
statements which are **truth-evaluable**; they can be effectively evaluated as true o
statements are often referred to as **realist** language. They seek to declare facts ab
facts later turn out to be wrong! An example of a cognitive statement might be 'al
stripes'. Even if one later finds a blue or yellow zebra, the statement has a definite

On the other hand, religious statements can be viewed as non-cognitive propositi
which cannot be evaluated as true or false, i.e. they are not truth-evaluable, and t
examples of **expressive** language. Non-cognitive propositions do not seek to desc
instead they can be viewed as subjective expressions of a person's viewpoint. As s
of meanings depending on the context and situation in which they are uttered, as
assumptions or ideas of the individual uttering them. There are many different ex
statements, including myths, symbols and metaphors. Many disciplines, such as a
perceived to employ non-cognitive statements.

So, is religious language cognitive or non-cognitive? This is a difficult question to a
throughout this section. Many religious thinkers have naturally preferred to view
cognitive. Throughout scripture, specific propositions are made not just about the
within creation, and most theists believe these propositions are true and objective
perspectives. However, it can't be denied that many religious statements are clos
For example, while the utterance 'the bread and wine in communion is the body a
interpreted literally (such as in the Catholic faith), many Christians would view suc
symbolic. This is not to argue that this utterance has no connection to reality, but
lies in the perspectives of those speaking and hearing it.

However, before we delve deeper into the cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions
explore two key routes used when developing cognitive propositions about God. Th
**way** and the **cataphatic way**. Both are used within modern theological discourse an
advantages and disadvantages, depending both on how they are employed and wh

**Activity:**
It is important to know the difference between cognitive and non-cognitive state
philosophers, it is not always clear what kind of propositions fall into each camp
below, write down whether you think it is cognitive or non-cognitive.

1. Every dog has floppy ears.
2. Rainbows are full of beautiful colours.
3. Atoms are formed of protons, neutrons and electrons.
4. It is always wrong to commit murder.
5. God can never be wrong.

## The Apophatic Way / The Via Negativa

The apophatic way is a form of language used to talk about God which focuses on
it is also known as the **via negativa**. The underlying hypothesis behind the apopha
discussion about God is that by developing statements that describe what he
directly out[illegible] his nature and being. For example, if I were to state 'God
might convey to express the shape of God's benevolence without resorting to ina
comparisons to human ideas about what is good.

From this example, it is, therefore, possible to sport an initial advantage of the ap
negative language, it potentially avoids the pitfalls of using literal propositions wh
is not on how the terms employed relate to God, but how God himself differs fro

As such, using negative language may remove many of the constraints and restrictio about God, allowing thinkers to build up an idea of God not limited by the boundari

Another initial advantage is that it prevents the confusion often encountered when comparisons to describe God. For example, if 'God is the Father' were uttered, it is interpreted. Is God the Father of humankind, or each individual person? Yet if one v to human beings' the meaning might be more clear (even if the statement is disagr example, explored in the previous section, would be a less statement 'the power of G statement better expresses the limitless nature of omnipotence than simply stating at least in some contexts, the apophatic way might help prevent conceptual confusi

The apophatic way is often employed in numerous ways throughout religious his the most famous early advocates was Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (so named real name is unknown!). He was a Christian thinker from the fifth/sixth century CE that since God was beyond the realms of human reason, intellect and even imagin absurd to think the categories human beings used to describe the natural world c his nature or being. Instead, he argued it was necessary for human beings to move world of sensory experience and its corresponding language in order to fully comp By using negative language in theological discussion, Pseudo-Dionysisus proposed beings could free their minds and move to a higher understanding about God's tra and eternality, eventually even becoming unified with God himself.

This idea is less radical than it sounds. Within Christian tradition, prayer and medi attempting to move beyond the conceptual boundaries of the natural, and the ap be a key part of such rituals. Other religions have also adopted similar approaches regularly recommends using negative language when describing key concepts, suc complete enlightenment so fundamentally removed from earthly human attachm hold it can only ever be outlined or sketched using negative statements. A more c from Maimonides, a twlelfth-century Jewish philosopher. In the next subsection we sh usefulness of the apophatic way.

## Maimonides and the Ship

We've explored so far some of the potential initial advantages of the apophatic w consistently when describing a complex concept such as God? It can be questione has specific limits, or whether there is a coherent process for employing it when d concepts. These issues are addressed by Maimonides, who argued that consistent despite these concerns, can develop well-rounded and detailed discussion about

He draws the example of a ship to demonstrate this belief, contending that so lon significant degree that a ship exists, then one can continually ask negation-led que to knowledge of its properties. For instance, one might ask 'does a ship have whe stone?'. By noting that a ship does not possess these aspects, one eventually draw ship is. Now, Maimonides notes that such a process is naturally very long and com might simply use positive language, and this is likely to be appropriate considerin dimensions and properties of a ship. But the same is not true for God and so the c is that so long as the apophatic way can detail a conception of a ship with enough tim true of God.

However, we can probe this analogy further. Is discussion of God really comparab could we even truly ascribe the right concept of a ship just through negative lang probed in the next subsection.

## The Apophatic Way and Orthodox Christianity

Apophatic theology has typically been viewed as less important than cataphatic churches. However, the same is not true for the Eastern Orthodox Church, wher theology was taught as a superior method for understanding God. John of Dama that positive theology only reveals the things around God, not God himself, and throughout many Orthodox writings. Therefore, when considering the nature an way, it is important to look beyond many of the conventional Western theologia apophatic theology lying just beyond their writings.

### Is the Apophatic Way Useful in Theological Discussion?

We've noted a number of initial advantages to the apophatic way and detailed ho generate meaningful discussion about God. However, it is still not entirely clear th alone can lead to accurate descriptions and statements about God. In fact, if we t ship analogy, we can observe a number of weaknesses with the apophatic way.

First, it can be pointed out that the properties of a ship are potentially easier to el attributes of God. For example, a ship is material and must be built out of elemen beings. As such, there are points of reference human beings can employ to help g language when describing a ship. However, the same is not true for God, who is th immaterial. If we take a common example, such as 'God contains no evil', we can detail. For while this statement helps us understand that God does not possess a information about what God's nature actually is. God possessing no evil does not benevolent. It may even simply mean that whatever God is, evil is not a suitable th the unique properties of God may make negative language a non-starter when it

However, there is a deeper issue here. In the previous examples, it can be noted tha statements are employed, they still rely on a positive understanding of the terms in contains no evil', understanding this proposition still relies on the hearer knowing w that utilising positive language is, to an extent, unavoidable for anyone employing th independent knowledge ideas developed from observation and experience of the na then it is not clear to what extent the apophatic way can divorce itself from the use one asks the meaning of a particular negative statement, it can be argued that it is a positive descriptions. If one simply responds to a question about a negative statem statement, it is difficult to imagine how the questioner could grasp the true meanin

These difficulties are noted by the philosopher Brian Davies, who takes this issue f apophatic way alone is a dead end for theological discourse. His central criticism eliminating various characteristics or attributes belonging to something through th comprehensible or discernible concept is produced. This is because it is impossibl the apophatic way whether two or more parties are sharing the same ideas about relate their internal concepts to reference points in the actual world. He, therefor Maimonides' analogy of the ship. While Maimonides holds that individuals could through the use of negative questions and statements, Davies argues the exact op discuss what a ship is not for days on end, but still not know whether their own co other's, since no positive point of reference is provided that could eliminate these agreement, it is due to positive differences subtly being inserted into the debate.

Antony Flew develops this further here. He argues that if one were to effectively des apophatic way, this idea would equate to nothingness. A process of continually de possesses any known characteristic or attribute would eventually result in the neg produce a concept devoid of any meaningful content. For Flew, this is especially tr positive relation at all between a person's abstract idea of God and objects in the there are no material things that could fix a conception of God, so the negation of God possesses would eventually leave God possessing nothing meaningful at all.

These criticisms are harsh but potentially fair. At the heart of them is the contenti
understanding of beings and their attributes is based upon observation and comp
So if one is trying to describe an object while continuously negating its connectio
characteristics, it is difficult to determine whether the end concept is meaningful
the apophatic way does produce meaningful ideas is potentially due to underlying
as reference points.

This is not to suggest the apophatic way is not altogether useful. It simply may be
without considering its relationships to the other form of cognitive religious langu
**cataphatic way**. If this is the case, the appropriateness of negative language migh
use. In cases where positive language fails to do justice to a particular idea, the ap
route to open up discourse and enabling participants to grasp a difficult abstra
However, it is clear that if the criticisms studied are correct, then positive assertio
role in theological discourse. It is these assertations we will study in the next secti

**Discussion Activity:**
In pairs or groups, discuss the concept of nirvana in Buddhist thought. Is this an
only be described using the apophatic way? Or is there the possibility of using po
such a concept?

## The Cataphatic Way (The Via Positiva

In contrast to the apophatic way, the cataphatic way (or via positiva) employs positi
when describing God, detailing what he is rather than what he is not. On the surfac
approach to religious language. However, in comparison to negative propositions, p
much wider variety of forms. Moreover, there is much greater flexibility when it co
and the dynamic nature of language itself means that the cataphatic way is faced w
from the start. All languages are rich in **connotation**. Words can have a variety of dif
their use and terms can often be used metaphorically, adding layers of meaning that a
glance. Thus, the first roadblock the cataphatic way faces is how to avoid ambiguity
statements about God. When terms are used appropriately and justifiably the same
apophatic way before, surface, especially if those terms possess connotative meanin

It is, therefore, necessary to draw a few preliminary distinctions. The first is betwe
language. The former refers to statements that possess only one unambiguous m
statement might be 'all swans are white'. There is simply no way of construing tha
declaring the entirety of a specific species of bird to be a certain colour. Equivocal
which do have more than one interpretation. An example of an equivocal stateme
whether one literally takes this to mean love is in the air or as a metaphorical stat
place is not clear.

Why is this distinction important? Well, using univocal and equivocal statements
set of difficult issues. If univocal language is used, then there is a risk of anthropo
inevitably drawing a direct comparison between human attributes and divine attri
'God loves humanity' is very different from saying 'Angie loves Sally'. While both s
using univocal language here equates God's love with human love, even though th
If using equivocal language, however, then statements about God may become va
Saying 'God is in the air' might mean something entirely different to two different
truth-evaluable claim about the nature or being of God. There is, therefore, an inh
univocal or equivocal language to describe God; both seem to be inadequate.

So what is the solution here? Well, one possibility is using **analogical language**. Th
Aquinas as a meditating form of langauge between univocal and equivocal statem
God and acknowledging the limitations of this description at the same time. It is th
analyse in the next subsection.

# Aquinas and the Nature of Analogical Lan

An analogy is a comparison between two things that aims to explain the properti or behaviour of one (or both) of the things. Typically we draw analogies as a form of inductive argument, but analogical language can serve a wider purpose when attempting to describe objects. For example, in the case of describing God, using analogical language would involve drawing comparisons be[illegible]een aspects of God' nature and behaviour to similar aspects in human b[illegible]ings. By developing these comparisons, one can potentially not only p[illegible]de positive reference for unders acknowledge the differences betw[illegible]d and human beings at the same time. F analogical language is tha[illegible] a balance between univocal and equivocal lan comparison b[illegible]ee[illegible]ings like univocal language, but it also does not have a interpretati[illegible]e equivocal language.

For example, in the last subsection, we took the univocal statement of 'God loves humanity' as an instance of how direct comparisons might fail. However, if analys this statement analogically we might be able to reformulate it to be more appropriate and accurate. We could say 'God's love for humanity is similar to a mother's love for her child'; this statement not only draws a comparison between two different contexts of love, but aims to capture the way that God's love is unconditional. Equally, the analogy here acknowledges that God's love is not exac the same as other forms of love, only similar. Such examples are also not far-fetched. Throughout the Bible, parental relationships are drawn on to describe th God and Jesus, but between God and humanity as a whole. Therefore, analogical l way forward for the cataphatic way; it allows human beings to develop meaningfu calling upon misleading comparisons with human ideas and concepts.

One important proponent of analogical language w[illegible]as Thomas Aquinas. He argued t fails to do justice to the greatness and ne[illegible]ce of God while equivocal language e substantial ideas about his beings. However, analogical language allows for referenc providing a route to ack[illegible]dging the limitations of these ideas in light of God's pe about the 'p[illegible]on found in things' to justify this positive view of analogical the way con[illegible]nd ideas scale upwards and downwards depending on the objec although he possesses attributes such as omnipotence or benevolence to incompre lesser versions of this attributes are to some degree found on Earth, such as human

We can delve into this idea a bit further and analyse two key forms of analogy tha such a gradation in things, then analogies can be applied in two separate ways. On **attribution**. This simply notes that for any object created by a being, it is possible being from the qualities of the created object. For example, a skilled baker might on the bread they make or, to take an example from Year 1, a watchmaker might principles or qualities they hold to be important. Therefore, in a similar fashion, it certain *qualities* or characteristics to God based on the qualities found in the natu

The second way one can apply analogy is through **analog[illegible]proportionality**. Aqu when analysing the qualities of lesser beings to ex[illegible]ol[illegible] conclusions about hig proportionately more of those same quali[illegible]or example, we might note that ob of a mouse allows for inferences ab[illegible]t[illegible]speed and dexterity of a larger rat. In s possible to draw analogi[illegible]p[illegible]portionality, especially when the qualities of two altogether A[illegible]s a[illegible]hat it is justifiable to develop scalable inferences abou based on th[illegible]cteristics of human beings. For example, God's goodness can a thinking about human goodness on a universal scale.

Perhaps most importantly, paying attention to attribution and proportionality wher ensure the complexity and difficulty of understanding God are not overlooked. It re between God and human beings is adequately spelt out and analogies adjusted dep

attribute in question and the way it might scale between higher and lesser beings. J
importance of proportionality, notably gives the example of a faithful dog. He point
faithful does not just require identifying a connection between the faithfulness of a
recognising that the nature of each kind of faithfulness is proportionate to the bein
requirements for being faithful are simply much less considering its more limited m
dogs as faithful requires being aware of these limitations and adjusting one's judge

A more formal presentation of proportionality is given by Ian Ramsey. He does no
but instead holds that positive language is appropriate so long as one views the ba
**models**. Models for Ramsey are the concepts that human beings use as reference
Examples might be 'just', 'omnipotent' or 'almighty', and Ramsey argues such term
describe or encapsulate characteristics of God, but provide a basic grounding for dis
agree upon. Importantly, on top of these models, Ramsey outlines what he calls q
allow human beings to describe proportionally, and place limitations on, the mod
religious proposition. Qualifiers can be anything from basic terms such as 'quite' o
that acknowledge differences between the way models are discussed. For Ramsey
models and qualifiers together provides a structure for accurate and meaningful d
having to provide statements that strictly cohere to an analogical form. Aquinas' o
but made more palatable for everyday philosophical discourse.

Thus, through developing analogical forms of religious language, it can be seen th
pitfalls of the cataphatic way can be avoided. However, just because analogical la
not necessarily mean the analogies drawn between God and human beings are ap
possible to question whether the cataphatic way is able to meaningfully determin
or non-accurate without some prior assumptions about the relationship between
first place. It is these limitations we shall explore in the next subsection.

**Discussion Activity:**
In groups or pairs, discuss Hick's example of the faithful dog. Is this an appropria
about God, or is it a mistake to think that proportionality can help develop mean
statements about human nature and being?

## The Limits of Analogy

Positive language is used more than readily around the world when describing Go
to find many thinkers who do not believe its use is justified, especially when its lim
However, this does not mean that the cataphatic way does not possess its own se
ubiquity of positive language may obscure deeper problems with its use in everyd

One primary issue is to do with the actual terms regularly used to describe God. W
is possible to make analogical statements about God that convey the limitations o
positive language, the same is not always true of the terms themselves. For exam
the case of the statement 'God's love for humanity is similar to a mother's love fo
child', it is still necessary to explain to any receiver what 'love' or 'humanity' mean
the context of the statement. Yet explaining these terms requires literal univocal
language that may skew the perception of the analogy. This point is made by Will
that analogical language is much less meaningful and useful than ordinarily thoug
used in analogical statements still have to be defined or outlined using univocal st

If we imagine Hick's example of the faithful dog once more, it is possible to note t
comparison between human beings and dogs to explain the analogy. Inevitably, to
would also have to make univocal statements about the dog's specific mental cap
in order for the analogy to make sense. If these differences aren't explained, then
less precise and accordingly more equivocal, since a huge number of varying inter
the similarities between human beings and dogs. Thus, while analogies are useful,
this usefulness stems from the form of the analogies themselves, or a pre-existing

underlying ideas and concepts. In the case of God, this issue might prove even mo
the terms used to describe God are not often agreed upon. For instance, in the ca
often straightforward agreement on how to define power, let alone the attribute
term, this may place severe restrictions upon the viability of the cataphatic way.

There is a deeper problem to be found in the form of analogies themselves. Analo
assumes a base similarity between the objects in question – in this case God and hu
similarities then it would be completely invalid to employ an analogy in the first plac
analogical language may come from attributes and proportionality, but even thes
human beings sharing some qualities with their relationship as creator, and obje
impartial stance, there is no particular reason to suppose that God must share any si
relate to human descriptive concepts in any meaningful way whatsoever! Typical re
similarities, such as humans being made in the image of God, are not likely to con

Now, questioning the basis of the cataphatic way in this fashion may be a step to
of possibility that God and human beings share qualities. However, it is important
assumption behind analogical language. Vincent Brümmer in particular builds upo
inaccessibility of a transcendent, immaterial God means that any analogy potentia
describing God at all since it is not known whether the terms being employed pro
Furthermore, employing proportionality in the analogy doesn't remedy this proble
limitations upon the positive statements employed in analogous language, then th
collapses into the apophatic way, since every positive statement becomes simply
disguise, stating only 'God is like x, but not like x'.

Other thinkers, such as Frederick Ferré, have questioned whether Brümmer's obje
It can be noted that regardless of the statement in question, there are always pro
extent to which there may be underlying material or metaphysical connections be
fact, if you recall the discussion of deism in the last section, it may be that few con
attempts to describe God come up short if the cataphatic way is not employed
describing God, they are building upon a pre-existing body of belief and evidence
Therefore, whether God is dissimilar to human beings is not the most importan
vital is ensuring the manner way positive language is used is developed in a system
that theological discussion of God is not misleading or misinformed.

## Religious Language as Symbol

So far we've been largely focused on the form of cognitive religious language. But
aren't concerned with making definite, truth-evaluable statements about God? W
straightforward matching of concepts and ideas, but a much more complex proce
investigation? In this section we will look at a more radical theory of religious lang

Symbolic language takes a much different form from the straightforwardly positiv
have been analysing so far. It primarily describes God and the world through the u
or words that stand in for things and point towards greater meaning. This might s
key is that symbols are flexible in use and purpose. They are not bound to represe
world but can be invested with meaning by the people employing them. The aim
therefore, not to provide the most accurate or truth-evaluable representation of t
person using, witnessing or hearing it can engage further in the ideas it represents.

Taking a step back, it is important to distinguish symbols from signs. The latte
for another idea, concept or object. An example of a sign might be that for radioa
Regardless of how one seeks to interpret signs, they are employed to represent th
and those objects only. However, symbols are designed to evoke more; they are d
meanings and messages, and can have a myriad of interpretations based on who i
Paul Tillich, a key philosopher for this section, develops this distinction, contendin

just a simplified representation of something else, a symbol is a more complex, ri
something that highlights a deeper meaning when used.

Symbols are everywhere. A common example might be flags; while at heart they s
particular country, for many individuals they point to deeper meanings and ideas.
emotional significance. Many people are attached to flags and take offence when
they can stand for the values, achievements and merits of their country. Some mi
attached meaning to objects, but symbols are developed through participation, n
standard. In the case of Christianity, important symbols, such as the cross, can be
the crucifixion, but for most Christians they highlight the sacrifice of Jesus, the im
hope for the future.

The fact that the meaning of symbols is so subjective means that symbolic langua
cognitive, rather than cognitive. It does not aim to convey factual information abo
convey the beliefs and ideas of individuals who participate in it. That means that s
meaning through their use and those who are new to the symbols may bring a ne
they represent. However, we can discuss symbols in greater depth. How are they
religious ideas? For answers to these questions we can turn to Paul Tillich, who pr
heart of religious discourse.

## Tillich and the Role of Symbols

Before we delve into Tillich's interpretation of religious language, it is first necessary to outline his overall philosophical approach to religion itself. Tillich throughout his life looked to synthesise Christian theology with an existentialist perspective. **Existentialism** is a hard tradition to pin down; its scope and ideas are very wide, but as a form of philosophical enquiry it generally seeks to investigate the fundamental questions that define human existence. These include asking the person, their experiences and the ways they interact with the world. Often existe systematic or analytical than traditional approaches; in seeking to answer questio nature of human existence, authors have typically sought to outline the fundamen lives of human beings, which often elude straightforward description.

Tillich takes a similar approach when investigating aspects of Christian thoug of his work is understanding the meaning of human life among what appears to b universe. Such an issue is typical among existential philosophers. Albert Camus, fo the purpose of human life in the face of what he called the **absurd**; the confronta meaning in the world and the ultimate indifference of the world itself. Tillich, how issues are not restricted to this philosophical tradition. He contends that from art sciences, human beings grapple with understanding the meaning of human existe inescapable as soon as people begin investigating the world around them.

However, where Tillich differs from most existentialist philosophers is his embrace answer to these questions. In fact, he contends that theology is one discipline capa to existentialist issues. He develops what he calls **methods of correlation**; ways of n Christian revelation, whether it be from scripture, religious experience or tradition, problems. Overall, the aim of Tillich's philosophical project is not to grant some nov philosophy, but to show that its key issues are not irresolvable. Through theological meet existentialist dilemmas head on and to give solace to those individuals st

Tillich argues that the faith that his insight is best expressed through **symbolic lang** beings to do this, to gain insight into the world, opening up different levels of rea privy to and moving towards deeper meanings within concepts, ideas and pheno naturally address the existential questions we have explored so far, which resist a They can reach out to the fundamental elements of human experience and addre concerns. This is important for Tillich as human experience is deep and to a certai person's view of life is their own and their perspective on meaning and life is bou Tillich also contends that symbols are not simply randomly matched or developed

beliefs. Beneath the variety of individual experience there is a **collective unconsci** awareness that binds human experience of the world. It is from here that Tillich b they are only adopted by human beings when they match or reflect some aspect

## Symbolism all the Way Through

But why eschew straightforward cognitive statements altogether? Don't they hel and outline important aspects of religious thought? Thes[illegible] the obvious questi come to mind when first addressing Tillich's thou[illegible]. How can a statement such a created the world' be viewed as anythin[illegible] basic theological fact? Well, Tillich that positing such questions som[illegible]wn t[illegible]oses the point. As we have noted throu section, plenty of issues [illegible]g[illegible]when it comes to making literal statements abou Tillich argue[illegible]vi[illegible]g religious language as a series of cognitive facts about th what ultima[illegible]ds to the grander philosophical confusion about God and his b Tillich contends that, inevitably, literal statements about God lead to anthropomo contradictory interpretations and fail to answer the key existential questions abo religion intends to address.

Take the problem of evil, for instance. Through Year 1 we explored numerous the address the logical and existential problems of evil and noting their relative philos weaknesses. However, at the end, it can be argued that the question of why evil e answered than at the start. In fact, the discussion became a whole lot more comp complexity of the problem itself, Tillich would argue that the confusion arises bec with no straightforward literal answer. What the problem of evil reflects is human world that seems to have no care for their livelihood or well-being. Similarly, we c nature of God in the first section of this paper for another example. The debates a omniscience are tied up with difficult and intractable problems about what is logi and discerning the nature of God's power or knowled[illegible]t[illegible]est a thankless task

Tillich, however, goes further than si[illegible]o[illegible]y[illegible]g the efficacy of traditional religi that the portrayal of God in cl[illegible]al t[illegible]sm is the root of all the conceptual and li being. In attempting [illegible]ly describe God as if he were just another object, cla be a distinc[illegible]a[illegible]e top of a hierarchy of other beings. This inevitably ontolo so leads to t[illegible]gical problems and contradictions analysed throughout the histo instead that a more fruitful approach to God is to view him as the source or **groun** being himself. Yet if this is true, then literal or analogical language is unsuitable fo beyond the categories and concepts we employ in everyday life. Instead, symboli allows human beings to point to deeper meanings present behind these categorie better appreciation of how God grounds all things, and enables individuals to und ease their existential worries.

### Tillich and the Subject–Object Dichotomy

There is an important epistemological element to Tillich's criticisms of traditiona ways the idea of describing God as just another being is a[illegible]tural element of ou contending that traditional theism falls into talki[illegible]g[illegible]o[illegible]God using the typical s pervades most languages throughout th[illegible]ld. God is made into an object fro of him, but it is not readily ques[illegible]e[illegible]ether the subject–object distinction re God in the first place.

This idea h[illegible]portant ramifications for religious language also. If the subject–o misrepresents God, then it becomes hard to see how cognitive forms of religiou these generally rely on such a dichotomy to describe God. Tillich's arguments he for symbolic language.

## The Symbolism throughout Christianity

Tillich's ideas might initially seem quite radical, but they are supported by the sym
Christianity. A survey over Christianity's history reveals not only the routine creati
symbols, but the participation within them by Christians around the world. Furthe
the active involvement of people and their cultures has shaped these symbols and
theology. This involvement might not just reflect theological ideas, but also the ex
issues that a particular group of people has faced. For example, the Chi Rho symbo
Christians under Constantine, but as history unfolded and Christianity was adopte
people, the symbol no longer reflected those visions and became a more basic sym

The same is true of the central symbol of the cross. Many Christians would hold
meanings, as a set of ideas that cannot be captured by ordinary language. It can
sacrifice, but the notion that God is on the side of human beings and ready to help
countries where Christianity has been persecuted, it has often taken on political d
individuals in times of social struggle.

But what of more basic statements, such as 'God created the world'? How are the
to apply Tillich's thought to these examples if one approaches these statements w
Christians will readily acknowledge creation was not a single act, but a deeper tra
human comprehension. This is especially true if we accept Tillich's proposal for G
Even what the 'world' is can be symbolically interpreted. While it could refer to si
us, for others it might mean their own unique perspective on the world, or their r
meanings of even basic statements are fixed and their utterance can be deeply sy
language is used in a participatory manner this is even more apparent. Most theis
language to describe the world, but use it in dynamic contexts such as worship an
discourse. Religious language is, therefore, continuously transformed; it is perhaps not
the world, but the symbols and ideas that guide faith us.

**Discussion Activity:**
In pairs or small groups discuss the extent to which Christian scripture is symbol
detailing a set of cognitive claims about the nature of God and the world, or is th
subjective interpretation?

## The Limits of Symbols

While symbols are undoubtedly prevalent and play a vital role in religious discourse
language provides a comprehensive account of how religious statements are develo
questioned whether symbolic language gives such statements their whole meaning,
are meaningful not because of the way they communicate ideas but in how they co

This perhaps is the easiest issue to raise. Critics have noted that, for many theists, re
take a cognitive form. They make direct claims about the world, even if their meani
If we take our previous example of 'God created the world', while a symbolic interp
understanding of this statement is it holding that God is the cause and creator of all
process for sure requires more discussion, but the statement itself is potentially
Moreover, in theological discussion, individuals are not simply trading symbolic gest
particular arguments with the aim of identifying what is true and what is false. The
dogma has evolved throughout history cannot just be traced to the development of
the progression of philosophical reasoning about the nature of God and his being. S
change due to different amounts of participation but instead because of the changi
their meaning. New facts about the world or God may simply make old interpretatio

Symbolic approaches, therefore, face a deeper problem in accounting not only for
religious language but also in how new ideas and concepts drive changes in symbo
notes an important problem at this juncture. He contends that symbolic language
proponents such as Tillich shy away from asserting any specific factual content be

of symbols is simply generated by their participation, they can radically change o
of individuals and so fail to represent meaningful, fixed theological claims and pro
that if the only meaning symbols possess is subjective, this results in it being impo
individual is receiving the deeper meaning a symbol is supposed to represent. A p
participating in a deeper understanding of the world through symbols but instead
emotional response to their use.

This seems like a relatively easy issue to solve, ho[illegible]n't we just point to sor
represent? If this is the case, however, th[illegible] cease to function as symbols
they simply stand in for more cor[illegible]logical statements. Furthermore, it ca
content should be outlin[illegible] through symbolic language then the process risks b
content risk[illegible]m[illegible]ny subjective once more. Yet if the factual content is o
statements [illegible]re generally positive language), then there is the tacit admissio
can be symbolic. Either way, there is a tension at the heart of Tillich's proposals. It
religious language are needed to **ground** symbols in factual content. Yet, if this is
language itself ceases to be comprehensive in capturing the meaning of religious

A further problem emerges out of this lack of symbol grounding in Tillich's though
underlying factual content then it can be questioned whether symbols are stable
religious truths, which for many are thought to be universal. Symbols can easily b
their meaning lost or transformed due to lack of use or misuse. A famous example
swastika. While it is a symbol of spirituality in many religions, it was also adopted
representation of 'Aryan' pride or identity. Although the swastika is still used in its
individuals in the Western world its meaning is now inseparable from that imbue

A similar problem is determining how the meaning of symbols can be conveyed to
community or culture. If symbols are the only vehicle f[illegible]n[illegible]eying spiritual ideas
only be understood through participation, the[illegible] it see[illegible]to make meaningful relig
could the theist debate and seek com[illegible]d with the atheist unless there w
claims they could mutually dis[illegible]an[illegible]gree upon? The danger is that a reliance
religious discussion an[illegible]ipation wholly insular and unable to accommodate
example, G[illegible]yt[illegible]can be viewed as highly symbolic but this symbolism doesn
myths are h[illegible]nlikely to represent real truths. In fact, many would argue that
viewed as myths now because religious discourse has been able to accommodate
the world. Therefore, attention needs to be paid as to how symbolic language can
irrelevant. For critics, such a process would be inevitable were there not cognitive
religious discussion, but for proponents of symbolic language, the very history of
symbols may prove otherwise.

## How Should We Describe God?

Throughout this section we have looked at a myriad of ways religious language ha
hand, there are cognitive approaches from theologians such as Aquinas, whereas
more modern, non-cognitive, symbolic approach from Tillich. In the case of cogni
on how statements can be constructed which don't misch[illegible]terise or mislead pe
relationship to the world. This difficulty will be pa[illegible]la[illegible]exposed in the next se
secular approaches to religious language[illegible]nningful, verifiable statements can
subjects, then why attempt to de[illegible]n at all?

Similarly, alt[illegible]h r[illegible]gnitivism embraces a certain degree of subjectivity, it fa
religious lar[illegible]comes down to competing interpretations, what grounds it in
language altogether to a certain degree is non-cognitive – as we shall see when di
next section – but many religious people genuinely believe that they are making f
discussing God. Ultimately, while we are looking for the right way to describe God
A lot of theological debate isn't always rigorous, and the presence of artistic and s
religious thought makes it difficult to judge the 'right way' to craft statements ab

This isn't necessarily a crossroads. It simply highlights how complex language is. Th
both cognitive and non-cognitive statements, contending that religious language i
other, but to a mixture of the two. Some aspects of God might be able to be outlin
statements, while other aspects might require symbolic interpretations. If we take
for example, there may be no controversy in simply stating 'God is all-loving'. But
attempting to outline the ramifications and implications of this nature may requir
statements. It may require the use of metaphor and symb[illegible] highlight meanings

There are also reasons to doubt whether [illegible]mination is possible. We shall an
when we look at the thorny issue of [illegible]ation and falsification, and whether th
opportunity for the theis[illegible]

**Quick Quiz**

1. What is anthropomorphism?
2. What is an analogy?
3. What is the apophatic way?
4. What is the cataphatic way?
5. What is a symbol?
6. What is the difference between analogy of attribution and analogy of propor
7. What are models and qualifiers?
8. Who was a key proponent of symbolic language?

# 6: Religious Language: Twentieth-century Perspe

## What you will learn in this section:

The secular philosophical discussion around the nature and use of religious langua

- Logical positivism, the verification principle and the criticisms of religious lan
- Language games, forms of life and the meaningfulness of non-cognitive religi to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein.
- The impact and significance for religious language, with reference to the w in the Wittgenstein symposium.

**Starter Activity:**
Take a look at the statement below; how would you go about verifying that this
Write out a list of criteria ahead of studying this section and compare as you go

**All things are made up of atoms.**

| Key Thinker | |
|---|---|
| **Name** | A J Ayer |
| **Born** | 1910 |
| **Died** | 1989 |
| **Key text** | 'God Talk is Evidently Nonsense' (from *Language, Truth and L* |
| **Why are they important?** | A J Ayer was a British analytic philosopher and perhaps one of of logical positivism. His work on the verification principle not o nature and meaning of language but also enabled Ayer to deve about ethics and religion, contending the former could be redu emotional statements and the latter could be thought of as alt |
| **Did you kn** | Although Ayer was an ardent critic of religion, in the year bef unusual and strong near-death experience, which he describe denial to any form of an afterlife. |

| Key Thinker | |
|---|---|
| **Name** | Ludwig Wittgenstein |
| **Born** | 1889 |
| **Died** | 1951 |
| **Key text** | *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) |
| **Why are they important?** | Wittgenstein is one of the most important philosophers of the thought helped guided logical positivist philosophers and looke the relationship between language and the world. However, in his earlier work and instead started to analyse how language is approach now often called 'ordinary language philosophy'. His *Investigations* in particular has influenced a wide range of disci including the philosophy of science and mind. |
| **Did you k** | Wittgenstein is known for not always being easy to deal wi temperamental. In 1946, he got into a now famous argument Popper, where Wittgenstein is rumoured to have threatened engaged in discussion. |

## Introduction – Secular Approaches to Religious Language

Throughout the last section, the nature and form of religious language was discus
perspective. But how is such language viewed from a secular, perhaps more critic
how statements get their meaning is not one that has been limited to religious dis
lengthy debates throughout the history of philosophy within disciplines such as e
aesthetics. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a subtle shift in th
academics began to become more pronounced. The rise of science and industry d
had led many to question whether religious ideas still possessed the same legitim
Moreover, as an ever deeper picture of the cosmos began to unravel through adv
and less clear that human beings enjoyed a special place in the universe.

Auguste Comte, the founder of **positivism**, claimed that religion would eventually
offered more concrete and verifiable answers to unexplained phenomena. Simply
for religion to explain aspects of human lives when ever more complex scientific e
the reasons behind the existence of human life. Therefore, Comte proposed a pos
social phenomena and any offshoots should be studied using scientific methodolo
criteria for evaluating whether a particular statement or theory can be considered
statements simply didn't fit this bill. The language and terms involved were often
downright mysterious, and so verifiability was simply impossible compared to scie
to be denotative and to present literal, unambiguous statements.

Now, we might easily provide some initial criticisms of this idea based upon our st
might argue that religious language does provide straightforward cognitive state
contend that religious language is fundamentally non-cognitive. If the latter, it ma
verifiability in order to be meaningful; it simply answers existential questions scie
However, Comte's work led to later philosophers questioning whether it was poss
between statements that were cognitively meaningful and those that weren't. In t
seemed to matter greatly when it came to acquiring meaningful knowledge of the
distinguish between what were matters of fact and subjective opinion. For if a sta
be true or false, how could we develop a picture of the world that corresponds
fundamentally. Within such debates there are questions about the kind of theorie
meaningful and what their place is in overall scientific and philosophical discourse

Considering questions of meaning, therefore, is not just for the philosopher of reli
influential, if much criticised, tradition in the next section that builds on Comte's i

## Logical Positivism

It was noted in the last section that scientific enterprise naturally values cognitive
of the world, it is not generally acceptable for there to be difference of opinion ab
phenomenon; rather the aim is to reach mutual agreement through study of the p
key element of scientific theories is that they are truth-evaluable. This does not m
has to be true or false, just that specific statements arising out of it can be potenti

As explored previously, however, there is a deeper question about whether the sa
language. For Aquinas' analogical approach, religious statements hold a deep imp
taken to ensure that propositions about God are accurate and not misleading. For
when a statement such as 'God created the world' is made, it should be taken as t
subjective opinion. In short, Aquinas views faith and reason as complementary.
great degree there are methods and ways of showing such a statement to be true
accepted without evidence. If such a view is true, however, how can certain aspec
It is not possible, for example, to now observe the resurrection, but this event pla
theological debate. While religious language can be cognitive, it does not seem to
rigour as scientific enquiry.

However, we've also seen how religious language can be symbolic and non-cogni
there are no specific grounds for evaluating whether symbolic propositions are tr
to deeper meanings generated by the participation of people within a particular r
are no independent grounds for evaluating the truth or relevance of a symbol; sy
element to their use and interpretation. Yet, if religious language is non-cognitive,
that values strict verifiability? Are symbols at all meaningful if they don't point to
about the world itself? In order to answer such questions we potentially need to t
**positivists**, a group of philosophers who were concerned with these questions of

## The Verification Principle

What might you consider to be a basic test of truth? For most people it's whether
meaningful statement state of affairs in the world itself. Yet how do we determine
Well, we devise tests and procedures for **verifying** that statement; to see wheth
up with its claims.

This is the fundamental basis of logical positivism. Philosophers in this tradition too
which divided up statements into two forms. There were 'matters of fact', which we
posteriori and 'relations of ideas', which were necessary and knowable a priori. Any
true or false Hume argued could be placed in one of these two camps, and for any p
could sideline it as 'sophistry and illusion'. In short, if the proposition did not make a
either of the two methods dictated by Hume's fork, it could not be trusted to repre

The logical positivists at the beginning of the twentieth century looked to Hume's
into what is often called the **verification principle**. This was envisioned as a test fo
statement; if a particular proposition failed the requirements of the principle, it w
meaningless. While there were numerous variations of this principle put forward
discussing Ayer), most upheld the same proposition: that in order for any stateme
either verifiable though empirical evidence (a **synthetic**) or established as an **analyt**

Synthetic statements are those which can be confirmed or verified through some
posteriori). The logical positivists typically viewed most scientific claims, including
this umbrella. Analytic statements, however, are those which can be confirmed th
For the logical positivists, analytic statements weren't particularly substantial. Sin
reference to the world they were **tautologies** and so often trivial. Yet they do play
concepts and developing precise ideas about the relations between objects.

Initially, you might think the verification principle is very restrictive, and you woul
disciplines and statements failed the principle's tests, including metaphysics, ethic
make propositions about objects that lie beyond sense experience. Perhaps more
religious propositions were generally thought to fail the verification principle, as G
confirmed simply through use of the senses. As such, it calls into question both co
theories of religious language. For the former, the verification principle seems to i
statements are framed cognitively, they still do not pass the criteria needed to be
it also suggests that non-cognitive interpretations of religious language are also a
statements are simply subjective matters of opinion, they fail to state meaningful
itself compared to scientific theories and laws.

The highly restrictive nature of the verification principle was controversial among
time it was developed. Arising out of a very strong empiricist streak from its prop
a sceptical approach. For metaphysical propositions play an important part in
scientific endeavour. As we shall observe later, a number of unintuitive consequence
verification principle, and various forms of language are denied as being meaningf
otherwise. However, it also too easy to deny the foundations of the verification p
took cues from Ludwig Wittgenstein's early work, which attempted to define the
and reality. Particularly important was his 1922 work *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophi*

claimed 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'. What the princi
dismiss all human endeavours as pointless but simply outline effective discussion
extent, religious language may simply obscure rather than enlighten such discussi

**Discussion Activity:**
In pairs or small groups, discuss whether you think the verification principle is a
leave anything important out? Or, conversely, is it too permissive?

## A J Ayer and Religious Language

For the most part, many of the logical positivists were concerned with religion. The
goal was to introduce a scientific approach to questions of language and meaning,
even if such an approach seemed to outlaw a significant number of disciplines in
the process. However, one philosopher was more invested in using the verification
principle to mount implicit criticisms of a wide variety of philosophical fields.
A J Ayer, in his influential work *Language, Truth and Logic* (and subsequent works),
positivists and set out how discussion of metaphysical ideas should be viewed as me

Before we delve into this, it is worth talking about how Ayer deviated from the ori
proposals of logical positivism. Most notably, he argued that the original form of t
which he dubbed the **strong** version – was too strict. It claimed that all meaningfu
to be verifiable by sense experience, but this ended up excluding a large number o
that, although intuitively meaningful, were not able in practice to be verified in th
For example, historical statements such as 'the Battle of Hastings took place in 10
verified by sense experience now, but few would contend that such a statement c
meaningfully document an actual event that took place. Similar issues occurred w
the theory of evolution. One cannot verify that certain characteristics have evolved thr
though there is overwhelming evidence for the general theory itself. Even proposi
white' faced difficulties, since it would now be impossible to realistically observe ev

Therefore, Ayer wished to set a lower bar for verifiability and develop what he ter
**principle**. This formulated that in order to be meaningful, statements only had to
through sense experience. Therefore, any theory for which it is possible to gather
empirical evidence in support passes the test. Under the weak verification princip
can solve the issues in the previous paragraph. While one could not realistically ob
process is possible in theory. Similarly, with historical statements, one could poten
empirical data on the Battle of Hastings, even if such a process could not be perfo

However, for Ayer, this weak verification principle still outlawed metaphysical pro
these could never possibility be verified in theory since they referred to entities ou
experience. The same is true for fields such as ethics or aesthetics, and Ayer becau
the theory that all moral statements are simply expressions of emotional approva
religious language, since it is fundamentally concerned with describing God and hi
also does not pass Ayer's weak verification principle. God is simply a metaphysical
verified to be true or false. For Ayer this makes most religious claims nonsensical.
humanity' is one that could never be cognitively meaningful and should be viewed
expressions of personal feelings.

It is also important to note, nonetheless, that Ayer holds the same to be true for a
'God does not exist' is equally unverifiable, for it too is talking about metaphysical
empirical verification. Therefore, Ayer is not presenting an argument against God,
discussing ideas about God. If empirical evidence is the only criterion by which we
it simply makes no sense to talk about things outside of those criteria!
Nevertheless, although this thought holds an intuitive appeal, it doesn't necessari
next section we shall detail some issues with both the strong and weak versions o
judge whether or not the logical positivist programme is appropriate.

## Verification and Empiricism

Although logical positivism is less popular now than in the first half of the twenti
been lost entirely. There is still much debate about the nature of truth and mean
empiricist perspective that often lends a sceptical eye to many of the metaphysi
themselves. One particularly wide debate has been about whether **scientific rea**
This view holds that the unobservable entities posited by scientific enquiry shou
ontological existence. The alternative view, **scientific anti-realism**, holds the opp
unobservables should be viewed as useful patterns in instrumental data. This de
draws a lot on the discussions logical empiricists were having 75 years ago.

### Do Religious Statements Need Verifying?

We've already noted some of the key issues with the stro
particularly when it comes to excluding statements we mi
meaningful. However, its problems don't stop there. Man
whether verification is an appropriate test of meaning in t
verification principle fails to appreciate the wider ways th
developed across different disciplines.

One basic criticism, often put forward, is that the verificat
unverifiable. It simply does not pass its own criteria for wh
criticism is somewhat misplaced. The verification principle is not intended as a sta
but a way of demarcating what are and are not cognitively meaningful statements
grounds would be to falsely apply the verification principle to an area where it is n

A more forceful criticism, therefore, is simply to challenge whether or not the veri
test of meaning. If there are various statements that we would consider to be mea
criteria, there are grounds to suspect that it might be wrong or misleading. For ex
that the verification principle misinterprets religious statements as being scientific
fact proclamations of fact. Therefore, he contends religious statements were nev
verified, so applying the principle of verification to them is nonsensical. This is a kee
goes further. A key aspect to his criticism is that behind the verification principl
meaningful are cognitive statements. Yet the logical positivists don't give reasona
assumption. While Hume's fork can be viewed as useful for analysing how truths c
deeply question the philosophical basis for relying on it as a test of meaning altog
verification principle simply reflects the logical positivists' own subjective ideals, n
for judging the relationship between language and the world.

Brümmer's criticism gives rise to the possibility that verifiability is not equivalent to
statements may possess meaning even if they aren't directly truth-evaluable. One i
Swinburne, who asks the reader to imagine a situation where the toys come alive at
they are sleeping. Even though it would never be possible to observe or verify this s
such a scenario is not meaningful. The well-known *Toy Story* films are based on this
be strange to question whether these films state nothing meaningful about the wor
ultimately suggests is that the meaning of a proposition is not embedded in certain
instead how such a proposition is understood in the context of both the utterer's ar
someone who doesn't know what a toy is, Swinburne's example might mean nothin
understand what toys are and their place within human life, it might be rich in mea
positivists are not necessarily wrong in stating that the verification principle is import
truths, but it cannot be applicable to all areas of life as a general principle of mean

This issue is also apparent when it comes to assessing the scope and applicability of
already looked at how the strong version had issues with statements such as histori
further whether any version of the verification principle can accommodate stateme
meaningful. A key difficulty for the principle is encompassing scientific theories whi

criteria of sense experience or observation. For example, modern scientific practice
many different kinds of unobservable entities, from subatomic particles to black hol
sense experience in the typical sense; theories about their existence emerge from t
patterns from experimental data and often aren't observable in any meaningful sen
existence of things such as subatomic particles is fraught with difficulties and poten

To some degree these issues were accommodated by the logical positivists, who e
twentieth century were well aware of the nature of knowledge in science. However, th
unobservables as a form of metaphorical discussion about the patterns in observa
they were still against granting theoretical entities any real existence beyond what was s
Yet although this may be an acceptable strategy to talking about unobservables, it
scientists themselves interpret the existence and nature of unobservables. Many
statements about the existence of things such as atoms and electrons and don't r
metaphorical. Moreover, it would be strange to regard such metaphysical statem
there is a wealth of data to potentially support such assertions.

A similar problem emerges with the verification principle when talking about laws
Both rely on a philosophical move from large generalisations to a specific, inviolab
such laws is impossible; it would rely on measuring or testing every single possible
phenomena in order to show they are true or false. As such, there are practically
situations under which they could be tested and so fail conventional principles of
positivists would argue that talk of laws is metaphorical; in reality they are just we
many scientists would say this misconstrues the meaning of a law of nature; the v
falsely excludes them. What this suggests is that even in the scientific domain, the
reliable test of meaning.

All these concerns are most pressing with the strong verification principle. Howev
what about the weak version Ayer puts forward? In contrast to the strong version
permits many of the excluded statements discussed above without sacrificing the
core essence of the principle. Yet what is, conversely, the weak principle was too
permissive for Ayer's liking? The prospect is raised by John Hick, who proposes th
religious claims could pass Ayer's weak principle due to **eschatological verificatio**
Simply put, it is theoretically possible that religious claims could be empirically
confirmed in the afterlife, and since all Ayer's principle requires is that statements
are theoretically verifiable, religious claims do not fail to pass its criteria. Hick
expresses this idea in an allegory of a theist and atheist on a quest to a hypothesis
'Celestial City'. Both are walking down the same road, with the theist believing in
this case, each of their claims can only be verified by either reaching the city or no
claims are verified as being true, and if they do not the atheists are instead. In the
only be verified by the experiences of an afterlife, but this does not mean they are

While Ayer might contend in this situation that eschatological verification is misle
verification in this life, it highlights an important ambiguity in his weak principle. F
*theoretical* or *in principle* verification? Any number of statements could be constr
with the right perspective or instruments, and it is unclear as to such whether Ayer's
permissive or religious claims simply pass the test and are meaningful. Dorothy Em
religious claims are potentially verifiable in this sense, although not strictly scientific
analogical language, which is rooted not just in faith but in specific sense observat
God, therefore, is not able to be proved by sense experience, but this does not me
supported by empirical evidence. It may be that if human beings had greater pow
of God could be wholly verified by sense experience.

What Emmet's point highlights is that what counts as empirical evidence for the v
specified. Religious propositions might accommodate a wide variety of different f
in sense experience, some not. For many believers, the existence of God may be v
experience in principle, even if for agnostics such as Ayer, he is not. This raises the

verificationism, especially in its weak form, is a direct challenge to religious langu
other reasons to suspect that the verification principle might not be a good test o
subtle, criticism is put forward by Wittgenstein. Although he was a champion of p
early years, his later work came to present a view antithetical to that of the logica
champion a thoroughly non-cognitive view of religious language.

## Wittgenstein and Language Games

Ludwig Wittgenstein is one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century yet, unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not present a singular or unified position on the nature of language throughout his life. His early work, especially the *Tractatus*, was deeply influential among the logical positivists and regularly discussed during debates about the viability of the verification principle. However, in his later life, Wittgenstein appeared to radica
*Tractatus* set clear boundaries on the remits and use of language, his posthumously
*Investigations* presents a much more complex set of ideas about how language gets

Perhaps most importantly, Wittgenstein came to believe that the meaningfulness
be assessed by how they conform to specific criteria of truth or falsity. What matt
corresponded to states of affairs in the world was how they were uttered and spo
However, considering the natural complexities and intricacies of language, this me
boundaries governing the meaning of propositions were bound to be fuzzier. Mor
intricacies would not be immediately visible to any impartial observer. Instead, un
statements would require paying attention to the context of their use and how th

Wittgenstein's approach here implies a deeper problem for groups such as the log
potentially means that there are no objective standards or criteria from which to j
statements. Instead, hard and fast rules would have to be abandoned in favour of
subjective environments from which statements and propositions arose. In fact, t
proposed. He held that assessing the meaning of a statement requires paying atte
(**Lebensform**) from which it arose.

Now the de of a form of life is difficult to pin down, for its application can
to the context or culture surrounding a person, or people, uttering a particular sta
case of religious statements, this might refer to larger groups, such as a denomina
a single parish or Bible study group. There are no straightforward rules for identif
might well emerge from multiple overlapping forms of life and might not be reduc
example, a religious person might draw on both their experiences as a Catholic, th
and even their individual worship patterns to develop statements about God, and
encapsulate a form of life that gives meaning to these statements.

Now by themselves forms of life don't explain very much. Sure, every person's use
their lives and activities, but what bearing does this have on assessing the meanin
forms of life emerge what can be considered to be primitive languages, or what W
**games**, which have their own rules, principles and ideas behind them. This is a tric
is easier to understand when one considers various more examples. Wittgenstei
'Water!'; this statement could be understood in numerous ways, from an exclama
response to a question. How its meaning is understood is not by any external crite
specific language game in which it is used. If in a restaurant, it might be readily un
waiter, but the possibilities are endless. It could even be a code word used by spie

We can extend this example a bit further, however, and look at how small language
terms and sentences. Wittgenstein himself asks the reader to imagine builders on a
employ numerous terms or statements such as 'slab', 'pillar' or 'beam', each of whi
and function in the context of their work. In fact, although each of these words is lik
individuals' vocabulary, within the context of the builders' worksite they can be con

form of language only meaningfully understood by those builders themselves. More limited to work environments. Imagine any hobby, task or job and you can probably statements which gain their meaning from their context of use within that pursuit. that these language games are what give statements their meaning altogether, not

## The Religious Language Game

We can delve deeper yet into Wittgenstein's thought. One important ramification o observer outside of them would not be able to fully understand the statements of t This is because they would not have knowledge of the rules and principles of the rel this isn't a call to scepticism. As stated before, there are a vast number of different f language games. Moreover, Wittgenstein argues there aren't sharp boundaries sep language games and into others in numerous points of overlap and similarity. This **family resemblance** and refers to the way things aren't always connected by essent they might have numerous points of connection when no one feature is present in language games, it may be that a person partially understands the meaning of a sta games, but fails to understand the full extent when not present in all the relevant g

For example, imagine a tennis player starting to play badminton. They might watch understand the rules of the game, but still be unsure as to the intricacies or tactics clubhouse afterwards, they might chat to a few regular badminton players who beg day. From the tennis player's knowledge of racket sports and their observations tha some of the meaning of the badminton players' statements, but it is unlikely they w meaning. If the tennis player started playing badminton regularly, however, they w of the game, the tactics and their associated language. Eventually they could talk to full appreciation and understanding of their language, having become part of the 'b

The exact same process could apply to religious statements. Most regular churchgoin understand a wider range of theological terms and be able to use them in discussion atheist visiting church or a Bible study group for the first time would probably find the the meaning of religious statements may be dependent on the language game in whi basic statements such as 'God created the world' might, therefore, have layers of mea those within the relevant religious language game. However, this does not mean that automatically find themselves lost when hearing a religious discussion. They might ha that would allow for a partial grasping of the subject matter. It does mean, nonethele language games may not perceive the deeper meanings of a religious discussion.

There is another important point to note about Wittgenstein's thought. He claime statements that are groundless. This means there are no independent criteria tha statements beyond the conventions of the language game they are contained in. the phrase 'this is a stapler' while holding out a stapler, you might well agree with saying. However, this is not because there are some independent standards that stapler. My statement would only be considered to be true because our particular determined some things to be staplers and others not. Other languages might hav they might even call a stapler and a hole punch the same thing! There are no defi language we use, and much of it is simply conventional.

Why is this important? Well, the same thought can be extended to religious langu simply statements which are groundless and cannot be externally justified. They a religious perspective on the world. Yet such statements aren't necessarily true or conventional. Wittgenstein's ideas here ultimately contend that much of our langua evaluated as true or false, nor are there meant to be specific criteria to determine language itself. Language as a whole is meant to communicate beliefs, thoughts a invested in the relevant game.

While this might make the meaning of language ultimately arbitrary, such a concl
Whether statements are meaningful or not can be assessed by their adherence to
language game they are contained in. Furthermore, since many statements are co
language games, there can be a myriad of perspectives on the meaningfulness of
forms of life. The fact that there are no universal conditions for meaning does not
meaningless, just that the rules which govern meaning aren't independent or obje
developing the verification principle, therefore, may simply be trying to impose th
game onto other language games. This might develop a particular insight into the
does not render their claims meaningless as the meanings of their statements
rules and principles.

We looked at this idea in the section on logical positivism with Brümmer's criticism
Wittgenstein's analysis of language it is much easier to see the force his objection
statements were potentially constructed to be meaningful within a religious langu
empiricist one. This means that imposing the rules and principles of a scientific lan
statements is bound to produce incoherent results. Therefore, while religious stat
verification principle, they simply were never constructed in order to pass it. Their
as Wittgenstein can only be fully understood from the religious language games in

**Discussion Activity:**
In pairs or small groups, discuss the different activities you are each involved in a
unique language game. These activities can include anything appropriate, includ
various aspects of pop culture!

## A Non-cognitive View of Religious Language

Wittgenstein's ideas have resulted in great debate among philosophers of religion
an intuitive explanation for not only why religious statements don't cohere with t
religious statements possess so many different characteristics. Under Wittgenstei
becomes possible to understand why sometimes religious language can be positive,
these aspects might be the overlapping of various religious language games.

However, many interpretations of Wittgenstein have taken him to support a non-c
language. This is understandable, to say the least. If all statements or propositions
rules and principles of their respective language game and these games are rooted
life and their conventions, then there are no independent criteria from which to e
Instead, they only get meaning from the subjective perspectives of those interpre
and potentially conflicting language games.

This is certainly the view of Don Cupitt. He contends that all statements about the
viewed as non-cognitive declarations. They hold meaning for those invested in a r
meant to be impartially assessed in any meaningful manner. Cupitt's view is often
**non-realism**. Under this interpretation of religious enterprise, theists are not atte
objectively existing being, but instead are expressing their faith in a higher power
Theists as such are well aware that there are no objective grounds to prove or dis
good reason to interpret religious talk as making evidential claims. To do so is to f
the statements theists make. But how does this exempt religious statements from
saw in the section on logical positivism, religious statements are criticised precisel
claims. We can turn to the thought of D Z Phillips here.

Phillips agrees with Cupitt that a non-cognitive interpretation of religious languag
argues that religious language has no need to answer the criticisms given by the lo
attempting to respond to such criticisms, theists have falsely adopted a language
than religion. Religious statements should not have to answer to such secular criti
importance of the statements arises from their respective religious language gam
external rules and principles. Phillips, therefore, argues that religious language ult
justification for it to be meaningful, so long as it is accordingly judged by the crite

own game. To try to apply the rules and principles of another language game is to statements incoherent or meaningless, because the forms of life which generated

Therefore, we can see that a non-cognitive interpretation of religious language can Wittgenstein's claims at face value. However, before we look at the issues with lang comparing Wittgenstein to a figure we analysed earlier in this companion; Thomas A the differences in approach between the two figures and the cognitive/non-cogniti

## Wittgenstein vs Aquinas

A clear distinction can be drawn between Wittgenstein and Aquinas when it come language. Nevertheless, it is worth exploring their similarities. Both appreciat it comes to describing God and both understand God to be fundamentally unknow appreciate religious language to be meaningful in a multifaceted way that depend and thought. Within Wittgenstein's thought there is also a place for analogical lan religious language is determined by its respective language game, this game will li forward by individuals such as Aquinas, so his rules and principles regarding the u not be invalidated.

Where there are differences is how this analogical language itself should be const there is a connection between God the creator and the created world, which mea appropriate means of talking about religious subjects due to both analogies of att However, Wittgenstein would stop short of talking about such a connection. Whil religious form of life, analogical language itself would have little bearing beyond t contained in. For the atheist critic, no such connection between God and the wor objective basis for analogical language cannot be assumed either. Rather, analogi within a specific religious language game which emphasises the validity of natural not all theologians have supported a natural theological perspective. Karl Barth, fo that natural theology held any significance whatsoever, and the use of analogical come second to the revelatory language of the Bible. This highlights how, for Witt games are present in religious thought; the rules and principles governing th may well differ even among religions.

Therefore, while Aquinas acknowledges the limitations of religious language, t examined in the context of its inability to fully capture a transcendent, perfect bei cognitive perspective of religious statements. Whether or not a religious statemer the extent to which it accurately describes the nature and being of God. For Wittg religious language arise due to its relationship to specific language games, which r principles. This makes sense from a non-cognitive perspective, for the meaningful not measured by the extent to which it accurately describes God, but by whether principles of its relevant language games.

### Wittgenstein and Non-cognitive Interpretations

There is a lot of debate about whether Wittgenstein himself viewed language ga non-cognitive view of religious language. Although there are potentially grounds manner, there is also evidence to suggest that Wittgenstein did not favour such did not see his philosophy as invalidating claims of any particular field. He was the meaning of statements arose from whether certain disciplines were justified the wide variety of overlapping language games may justify criticism of religious criteria, especially if normative traditions govern the rules and principles of the re Therefore, it is important not to attribute non-cognitive ideas to Wittgenstein, b have interpreted his works in that manner.

## Issues with Language Games

While Wittgenstein's ideas potentially offer a way for theists to avoid the criticism
logical positivists and others, there are a number of issues facing the adoption of l
games from a religious perspective, some more pressing than others.

One obvious issue is that it is uncertain altogether whether a non-cognitive positi
rescues philosophical language from the criticisms of A[illegible] logical positivists r
argue that even if statements get their meaning from language games, it is simply
that the scientific language game is preferable to the religious one. At the minimu
helps human beings describe and predict the world better, suggesting the rules ar
criteria that it employs to decide the use of language inside are more fitting or us
the ones employed by the religious language game. While, of course, in practice, it n
difficult to step outside people's use of language, since it is rooted in various forms of life,
being part of another language game may not exempt the religious individual fro
since criticism can be made of the overall language game itself, not just the state

This issue is particularly pressing also when one considers the ramifications of ad
based on language games. Essentially, a strong version of this view endorses the i
justification is needed for religious statements; they are justifiable entirely by the
religious language game. However, this risks collapsing into **fideism**, where the on
religious claims is faith. Many theists are opposed to such a collapse, as on the wh
contend that faith is reconcilable and can coexist with reason. However, if there is
religious claims, then it is difficult to see how reason plays a part in theological en
extra question about how the religious language game should communicate with
adopts an overly insular perspective, it may be detrimental to interpretations of re

One other problem that is often identified is the possibility of language games bei
meaning for propositions is the game they are contained in, but language games t
propositions are meaningful, then it seems difficult to avoid a circularity of descri
too pressing, so long as one can satisfactorily identified how meaning arises and is transfe
language games, but it does suggests that the idea of a 'religious language game' is
understanding a variety of ways religious statements are constructed, more precis
intricacies of language. However, these analyses may reveal that non-cognitive ju
statements is slimmer than wished for by proponents, especially if religious langu
with other critical language games.

A final issue concerns whether it is possible to reconcile a non-cognitive view of re
evidence. Throughout the Bible, many individuals, including Jesus himself, seem t
about God and the world. Moreover, Jesus' ministry is full of miracles and events
incontrovertible proof of God's presence. Yet, if proponents of non-cognitive view
such claims can only be assessed by the rules and criteria of religious games. Ther
critical analysis of scripture and its claims. However, many theologians do regularl
scriptural evidence and change their beliefs about God based on what they regard
view as potentially myth.

This is not necessarily a true problem for non-cognitive interpretations. Religious
forms, and it may be that the Bible is best construed as an overall invitation to a p
it does indicate that at the minimum a lot of religious thinkers do respond to critic
other criteria and more specifically these criticisms as an invitation to properly refle
example, are major programme of demythologisation when examining the Bible
symbolic and not literal. While this might initially seem like support for non-cogni
programme is also driven by the need to develop Christian proposals that cohere
science. Simply put, there is a tension between a non-cognitive justification of reli
Christian thinkers use modern science and philosophy to evaluate religious claims
are endorsed, there may not be a wealth of difference between the two approach
examining scripture, and there might still be room for cognitive criticism of religio

Throughout this section, we've looked at how a non-cognitive view of religious la
philosophical criticism. Religious individuals can, therefore, make claims without v
or false according to some independent set of criteria. Yet, what if the very ability
statement meaningful in the first place? This is the idea we will examine in the ne
falsification symposium.

## What is the Meaning of Falsification?

So far, the main issues presented against th[illegible] focused on the potential ne
statements. But what if verificatic[illegible] the primary way scientific statemen
This is not a new questio[illegible]portant one to consider. Throughout the sect
noted the vari[illegible]of [illegible] which it failed to accommodate meaningful scientific
much respo[illegible]for its decline in popularity as the various religious criticisms we
verification, [illegible]t is the real test for scientific meaningfulness? One influential pr
He contended that the right to demarcate between scientific and pseudoscientific
whether or not they presented criteria for falsification. Simply put, if a particular p
shown to be false, then it was scientific. If, however, there was no straightforwar
then it should be viewed as pseudoscientific.

Why did Popper propose this idea? Well, he took inspiration from a variety of sourc
he presented was Einstein's general theory of relativity. This took his previous theo
incorporated further ideas about the nature of gravitation. Yet, while it is well acce
published his theory in 1916, it was received with more confusion than acceptance.
difficult to test. However, one of the theory's main predictions was that light would
significantly strong gravitational field, such as the ones belonging to massive solar b
it was not until 1919, when Arthur Eddington mounted an expedition to the island o
first tested. Through photographing and analysing an eclip[illegible]ere, Eddington mana
being deflected by the gravity of the Sun and thus [illegible]Einstein's theory three ye
Since then, there have been many more [illegible]tions of the predictions of general
perhaps one of the most signific[illegible]scientific experiments ever performed.

Needless to [illegible]his [illegible]process impressed Popper. Even though Einstein's the
empirical ev[illegible], it still made important novel predictions that most importantl
falsification. Although Eddington's expedition turned out to confirm Einstein's the
wrong. For Popper, this showed that it doesn't really matter where theories come
propose clear criteria that show how they can be falsified. He argued that this the
the core empirical sciences, from physics to chemistry and biology. However, man
pseudoscientific in his eyes. For example, Popper thought psychoanalysis, as exem
failed to propose any meaningful ways to falsify its claims and so failed to be scien

The keen-eyed among you might have noticed that so far this debate is wholly abo
pseudoscientific. Where does religion come into it? Well, it's true that Popper wa
beyond science. However, there is a philosopher who took the core features of Po
criticise religious discussion. It is they who we will analyse in the next part.

### Antony Flew and Falsification

What if falsification wasn't just a test [illegible]cit[illegible], but a test of meaning altogether?
Antony Flew, who took Popp[illegible]ironments and used them to criticise religious cla
provide falsifying crit[illegible]not just a sign of pseudoscience, but a sign also that
proposed li[illegible]me[illegible]ingful value. However, Flew also had a very significant targ
these criteri[illegible]God of classical theism. He argues that despite religious statem
appearance of falsifiability, any time evidence is presented that contradicts these
or reconsider their beliefs. Instead they merely offer 'qualifications' to their origin
them from the contradictory evidence. Such qualifications inevitably become ad h
maintaining the truth of the original statement. Rather they just refashion it to fit
presented. This shows, Flew argues, that religious claims aren't truly falsifiable an

Flew, however, doesn't present his argument in a conventional philosophical form often known as the 'parable of the invisible gardener', a story designed to concret appeared in a 1950 article in the following form:

> *Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, 'Some gardener must tend this plot.' The other disag[rees]: 'There is no gardener.' So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. 'But perhaps he is an invisible gard[ener]' [they] set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H. G. Well's The Invisible Man [could] be both smelt and touched though he could not be [seen]. But [the] shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. [No] movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. 'But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible, to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to loo[k after] loves. At last the Skeptic despairs, 'But what remains of your original assertio[n]? An invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ[s] from an imaginary g[ar]dener at all?*

What Flew contends is that religious claims inevitably die 'the death of a thousand altering their original beliefs, they cease to meaningfully correspond to states of a potential example of this, which you studied in Year 1, is the problem of evil. Desp that evil not only exists, but is widespread and gratuitous, theists hold on to the b omnipotent. As such they offer various theodicies that, in Flew's eyes, would prob These include the possibility of fallen angels causing evil, human free will being a g being necessary for moral growth. Yet each of these explanations only further com simplest and best explanation is potentially that a [non-]potent and benevolent G fact that theists won't abandon belief in an [omni]potent and benevolent God, ever glaring, is testament to religious claims themselves being unfalsifiable.

This presents a [specific] dilemma for the theist. Should they hold that religious cla their ideas [are] falsified? Or should they admit religious claims are unfalsifiable a This is the challenge that Flew presents at the end of his 1971 paper that begins w 'Falsification Symposium'. Within this set of papers, Flew expands upon his origina Falsification' and invites other philosophers to comment on and critique his ideas. Basil Mitchell, attempt to meet this challenge and present parables of their own.

**Activity:**
Read through Hare and Mitchell's parables ahead of this next section. Then think construct your own parable in response to Flew. What ideas would you be trying you outline this in a narrative? Write down your parable in one or two paragraph your classmates or peers!

## R M Hare and Bliks

Interestingly, Hare does not accept Flew's challenge. Instead, he offers a counter-parable with the aim of showing that Flew mischaracterises the nature of belief. T might be construed as a bold move, but it is important to note that Flew's parable itself be misleading. Do theists really still believe in God in the absence of evidenc right to state that God himself is invisible to theists? It is this last question in parti that Hare focuses on, with his parable of the student and the dons.

As its name suggests, this parable gives the example of a student who is convince all university dons are out to kill him. He is utterly steadfast in this belief, even t his friends and family actively show him evidence to the contrary. Even thoug might obse ns' good behaviour and deeds, he conversely interprets such be as underhan mpts to gain his trust to harm them later. The question Hare pr is, how should we interpret this student's perspective? Is he like the theist in Flew issue at play?

Hare's parable might seem odd at first, but Hare later presents his point more cle not a direct correspondence between a person's beliefs and the evidence in the w beliefs are filtered through a person's world view, which Hare terms a 'blik'. Hare a blik, and it functions as a kind of lens through which we perceive the world. Furt perception, each person's blik also determines what counts as evidence for and ag of the student, he holds a blik which interprets every don's behaviour to be malici his friends and family, which view the dons as friendly. Since the student's blik str way, no amount of contradicting evidence can get him to change his mind. All the ironically is evidence in favour of his views.

Why is this an effective response to Flew? Well, Hare argues that because each pe no objective way to discern what is and what is not evidence for a particular belie the sceptic, their perceptions of the world are not equal. The believer may view confirmatory evidence for God while the latter might view it as disconfirmatory. different world views have the conditions for their statements to be true or mea them simply have different bliks.

## Getting to Grips with Bliks

Hare's response appears simple but intuitive. Religious statements and argument a religious blik. For the theist, such statements might be confirmed by evidence th atheist. This presents a difficult situation, for how can it be possible at all to discer non-reasonable ones? Well, Hare doesn't completely argue that everything is subj possible to discern 'sane' from 'insane' bliks, depending on the kinds of claim peo how they fit in with wider beliefs. However, the key aspect of his proposal is that, about the world and the explanations that fit them can only be judged by referen always be evaluated by a person viewing the world from an entirely different blik.

Therefore, Hare offers a broadly non-cognitive approach to answering Flew, draw meaning of religious statements and their correspondence with evidence is at least parti elements of a person's perspective. We can take again take our example of the pr Although an atheist might look around the world and perceive gratuitous evil and a benevolent and omnipotent God, the theist might view the world entirely differ reacting heroically and selflessly in the face of adversity, people choosing good acti and committing to God in the most testing moments of human beings' lives. Th decide which of these perceptions is right, yet these perceptions also discern wha side of the problem of evil. Thus it may be wrong to claim that falsification is nece not clear what evidence disconfirms the theist's proposals in the first place! The t the theist and the atheist may differ wildly.

**Discussion Activity:**
What is your blik? In pairs or small groups, discuss how you think your perspecti
interpret evidence. Are there many differences and, if so, do these differences ir

Nevertheless, Hare's arguments also have their shortcomings. For one, Hare's ap
the way many theists view their religious claims. Flew notes that religious individu
their beliefs as the result of a religious blik. In fact, Ha[illegible] to subtly suggest t
equivalent of the insane student, a proposition [illegible]ould be unhappy with. It is
controversial to suggest that classical [illegible]s a whole would disagree with Hare
of religious belief and would [illegible] to view religious claims as genuine assertions,
with Flew's original [illegible]. This problem is also magnified by Hare's lack of det
distinguish [illegible]on insane bliks. Couldn't Flew simply charge the theist with hav
have meani[illegible]riteria for the interpretation of evidence?

There is the acute danger here that Hare's position simply collapses into **fideism**.
need no justification apart from faith, and, while it is undoubtable that faith plays
beliefs, many theists also believe that it is reconcilable with reason. The issue is Ha
to suggest that religious claims are justifiable regardless of the possibly reasonabl
them. If this is the case, then it seems difficult to rescue Hare from this charge of f
religious belief potentially becomes irrevocably subjective.

There is, therefore, potentially space for an alternative cognitive response to Flew
and details how religious belief is both falsifiable and reasonable. This is provided
the symposium; Basil Mitchell.

## Wittgenstein and Falsification

Throughout this companion, we ha[illegible] studied Wittgenstein's thought i
debate around logical positi[illegible] and the verification principle. However, it can a
If Wittgenstein is ri[illegible] falsifiability may be an important rule or principle w
game, bu[illegible]ith a religious one. This means that attempting to criticise relig
strictly uni[illegible]ble may be attempting to erroneously apply one game to anoth
highlighted also by Popper's original proposals, which restricted ideas about fals
the philosophy of science only. Flew, by contrast, is extending Popper's thought
may be unwarranted. Therefore, it is important to note that your studies of Witt
questions about falsification and may provide an alternative non-cognitive respo

### A Reasonable Form of Faith? Mitchell and the Stranger

Mitchell offers an argument against Flew much different from that of Hare's. Rath
making falsifiable assertions, he proposes that they do, and that, in religious discu
against *religious* assertions. However, Mitchell also retorts that, for the theist, the
religious assertions is not overwhelming enough for theists to reject their original
initial evidential grounds for religious belief and the role of f[illegible]h in maintaining th

Like Hare, Mitchell proposes a counter-par[illegible]ag[illegible]st Flew. He details a story co
who one day encounters a strang[illegible]midst of war. In the meeting, the strang
convinces them in a high[illegible]manner that they are on the fighter's side, su
has a deep tr[illegible]n t[illegible]ghty and words of the stranger. This means that even a
fighter's fri[illegible]d allies present evidence that the stranger is colluding with the
motives, the [illegible]ghter continues to maintain trust in the stranger.

Mitchell argues that the fighter here represents the theist, and the stranger, God.
have a set of initial strong reasons to believe in God, whether it be religious exper
can't be discounted when discussing the falsifiability of religious assertions. Howe

having a certain degree of faith in not only the existence of God, but also his bene
investment in the lives of human beings. An important aspect of this faith is that i
evidence. This does not mean that conflicting evidence does not sway the opinion
that faith itself overcomes the tolls of such evidence. Moreover, this kind of faith i
life, not just in religious belief. It is required to make sense of the world, to trust o

Therefore, when a theist makes religious assertions, they [illegible] identify criteria for th
evidence presented against God is simply not enough to [illegible] ray their faith. The key
here is the idea of **reasonable faith**. He claims that if one holds a truly absurd b
pointed against, then this belief should be rejected as false. However, if one holds
slightest bit of evidence [illegible] cannot say one ever really had faith in that beli
which religious [illegible] claims which emphasises both rationality and faith. Flew
theist, since [illegible] umes that the believer ignores the evidence. On the contrary, t
conflicting evidence, but holds their faith regardless.

## Evaluating Mitchell's Thought

Overall, Mitchell's ideas have merit and offer a convincing rebuttal to Flew. It cert
paints a misleading picture in his parable; his characterisation of the believer is as
that there is no evidence for God, in comparison to the ordinary claims of many th
individuals, on the contrary, would say they have strong evidence for their belief i
of evidence accepted by Flew. Furthermore, Mitchell's characterisation of reasona
in a number of ways. Human beings don't just drop their beliefs in the face of any
usually require sustained interrogation of these beliefs with multiple sources of ev
essential, since evidence is not impartial and requires weighing up, especially in pl
maintaining of one's beliefs despite conflicting evidence may well be reasonable i
in the long run. This is true even in scientific enquiry, as we will explore later.

Furthermore, Mitchell presents a cognitive interpretation of the falsification probl
to ordinary theists. Many believers would argue that they are making factual claim
contradictory evidence for [illegible] claims. If we take the problem of evil, for exampl
despite evil itself being evidence against God, there is equally evidence that our p
sometimes [illegible] ded. What might seem bad at first can turn out to be good. A cl
toothache. Although the pain of a cavity might seem like a natural evil, it leads on
tooth fixed to prevent further health problems in the future. Therefore, the asses
may be more complicated than Flew hints at in this parable.

However, there are still issues with Mitchell's proposals. Flew himself notes that b
from belief in a stranger, and so Mitchell's analogy might not hold up altogether.
but the omnipotent and omniscient creator of all things. As such it is not possible
conflicting evidence in the same way one might do with the motives or intentions
right, then God is present in all parts of creation and so is directly responsible for
minimum makes defending God a much more taxing and difficult proposal than d
and it is unclear whether faith in a being could be reasonable in a similar manner.

Another issue is that one can directly observe the behaviour of the stranger, wher
unknowable and unobservable. This aspect of Flew's parable was overlooked by M
role in evaluating falsifiable evidence [illegible] particular kind of evidence for God
believers, then it hardly plays [illegible] rucial role in evaluating religious assertions. I
falsifiability requires [illegible] testing, not just hypothetical observable evidence. If th
objectively [illegible] the claims of religious assertions, then they might still fail Flew's

A final problem is linked to this difficulty. Although Mitchell spells out the nature
reasonable faith, he does not draw any distinct lines between what is reasonable
faith. These limits are very pertinent when discussing the nature of and criteria fo
simply argue in response to Mitchell that believers are guilty of irrational faith, no

forward by Mitchell. Considering the unobservable or partial nature of the eviden issue becomes much more pressing. Unless there is impartial evidence for God's e easier to characterise the believer's position as irrational rather than reasonable. conditions for reasonable faith, then it may be that Mitchell's response is yet anot assertions rather than a true explanation or defence.

Yet, despite these issues, there is another glaring problem that emerges here. Iron most damning for Flew rather than Mitchell. For t[illegible]ghout history, many individ irrational faith only to be later verified as [illegible]. This raises the notion that falsifiab of whether an assertion is meani[illegible]. This problem we turn to in the next par

## Why Falsifi[illegible]

A more fund[illegible]tal issue with Flew's portrayal may not come from competing p falsification altogether. At the beginning of this section, a brief history of the impo Popper was outlined, and it was noted that it seemed to be a potential way to der science. Yet, for Flew, the issue of falsification becomes one of meaning, not just s assertions were not always opened up for falsification? Such a problem would hig argument against religious belief and perhaps demonstrate, in a similar way to the falsification cannot be accepted as a true test for the meaning of a particular state

There are concrete reasons to accept that this is a problem for Flew. Although Ein theory of general relativity was a landmark case study for Popper, there are many successful scientific theories which do not and did not follow the same formula. T theory of evolution, for example. What are the conditions that would falsify this w accepted theory? If we found conflicting fossil records then what would occur is a changing of the path of evolutionary history, not the abandonment of the theory evolution itself. In fact, the unfalsifiability of the theory of evolution was taken as point for Popper, and as such is also an issue for Flew. For the adjusting of evoluti match the theory can be taken as an [illegible]e or a 'qualification' rather than a rea similar examples to this, ev[illegible]modern cosmology and physics. For example, the theories about [illegible]at[illegible]ssum to break down, whether it is at the centre of black h interactions [illegible]ticles. Yet, most physicists do not abandon Einstein's theories b empirically s[illegible]ported in other cases.

What this indicates is that the lines between scientific and religious assertions are parable lets on. Most theories are rarely instantly dismissed in the face of falsifyin even present concrete criteria for their falsifiability! There are just many more fac the meaning and significance of a particular statement, especially when it comes t entities such as God. This does not mean that falsification is not valuable. The abil statement is rendered false is naturally very useful for assessing how one should i of other knowledge. However, it may be the case that falsification by itself is simp a test of meaning or scientific value.

## Should We Still Speak in Parables?

One final issue we can note is a more general criti[illegible]e falsification symposi presents a parable designed to outline th[illegible]es although these parables do m cases for the participants' views [illegible]ve their issues and all inevitably to son nature of religious belief [illegible]it is possible to question each participant's viev question rai[illegible]bo[illegible]ther it is possible to capture all the dimensions of religi narratives. [illegible]be that each author raises important aspects and issues with re narrow portr[illegible]al of these aspects through parables, they lose sight of other facto companion we have explored the intricacies and complexities of assessing religiou in the case of falsifiability an equally intricate and complex approach is needed to dimensions of religious discussion.

## Quick Quiz

1. What is falsificationism?
2. What is a parable?
3. What is a blik?
4. What is fideism?
5. What are the differences between Hare's and Mitchell's responses to Flew?
6. What is the verification principle?
7. What is a language game?
8. What is eschatological verification?

# Answers

## Activities

### 4 Activity:

Student should focus on clearly defining these philosophers' thoughts and defending t
Aquinas, students might look to Mavrodes, as featured in the sketch and challenge bo
can't do can be construed as the logically impossible. For Swinburne, they might focus on th
ideas concerning self-limitation. Lastly, for Geach, they might focus on the necessity ar
omnipotence and the coherency of a concept such as almightiness.

### 5 Activity:

1. Every [illegible] floppy ears. (cognitive)
2. Rainbo[illegible]full of beautiful colours. (non-cognitive)
3. Atoms are formed of protons, neutrons and electrons. (cognitive)
4. It is always wrong to commit murder. (cognitive or non-cognitive – there is a sep
moral claims are factual claims which students will explore in ethics. This statem
questioning and thinking about what are cognitive/non-cognitive claims.)
5. God can never be wrong. (cognitive or non-cognitive – students will learn about t
religious language throughout the rest of the companion; this statement is desig
thinking about what are cognitive/non-cognitive statements.)

### 6 Activity:

Students might offer a variety of responses here, but the aim is to get them thinking ar
in a more unusual form. There is certainly room to adapt one of the parables in the fal
new parables should clearly outline who represents the believer and who represents t
distinctions in a meaningful manner!). Students should also hopefully begin to apprec
an issue looked at in the very last paragraph of this companion.

## Quick Quizzes

### Theological and Philosophical Developments

1. The self-[illegible]radictions that emerge through the concept of a being unlimited in p
God ca[illegible] impossible or self-limit his own omnipotence.
2. Essentia[illegible]nipotence means that omnipotence is part of God's nature; God cann
Contingent omnipotence means that omnipotence is not an essential part of God'
lose his omnipotence.
3. A timeless interpretation views an eternal being as independent or outside of tim
views an eternal being as contained within time but existing infinitely.
4. Deism is the view that God is not benevolent and/or personally invested in the li
5. The view that there are four dimensions constraining human activity, the three d
a fourth dimension of time.
6. Simple necessity is that caused by the nature of beings, conditional necessity is th
powers of agents.
7. The idea that God is unchanging.
8. The belief that God can inhibit the expression of his own powers or knowledge.

### Religious Language: Negative, Analogical or Symbolic

1. The (often false) attribution of human characteristics to a non-human object.
2. A comparison between two or more things with the aim of explaining one or more of
3. The use of negative language to describe God.
4. The use of positive language to describe God.
5. A representation or [illegible]image that stands in for something and points toward
6. Analogy of attribution is where analogical language can be used to describe the q
their cr[illegible]. Analogy of proportionality is where analogical language can be us
qualities of a being based on their lesser forms found in other beings.
7. Models are the concepts and ideas used as references when describing God. Qual
statements used to show the limitations of models.
8. Paul Tillich

## Religious Language: Twentieth-century Perspectives

1. The view that in order for a statement to be meaningful, it must present criteria f
2. A story designed to impart a religious or philosophical message.
3. An unverifiable and unfalsifiable world view that governs what counts as eviden
4. The view that religious claims can be justified through faith alone.
5. Hare presents a non-cognitive rebuttal to Flew, Mitchell a cognitive one.
6. A test of meaning proposed by the logical positivists that holds that a statement i or verifiable through sense experience (synthetic).
7. A primitive form of language, complete with its own basic rules and principles th particular statement.
8. Hick's idea that religious state[illegible]d be verified in the afterlife under Ayer'