



# Revision Summaries for A Level Year 2 OCR

## Component 1: Philosophy of Religion

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# Teacher's Introduction

The revision summaries in this series are designed to support your students as they study the A Level OCR Religious Studies specification, and have been designed to cover the major themes and concepts of each topic point accordingly. This revision summary supports the A Level Year 2 Component 1: Philosophy of Religion part of the specification.

All students, whether they are academically strong, average or weak, can benefit from a concise and clearly explained set of notes to revise from, both as they work through the OCR course and when preparing for their end-of-course exams. It is recommended, therefore, that students be given each relevant summary after learning a topic so that they can clearly understand the summaries and refer back to them when needed. However the summaries can also function well as a pack given to students in the run-up to their exams.

Each topic follows a set structure detailed below:

- ✓ **Glossary:** A clear list of important terminology students need to know when studying the topic.
- ✓ **Overview:** A look at the major themes of the topic, with a brief introduction to the major points of discussion and disagreement.
- ✓ **Key Points:** The main body of the summaries for each topic, they are a clear and concise set of notes that help students support their own knowledge and understanding of the topic.
- ✓ **Key Figures:** An important overview of any major philosophical or theological figures students are required to know.
- ✓ **Key Texts:** A set of notes around any important theological or biblical texts students may require background information about and understanding of.
- ✓ **Student Checklist:** A helpful guide to what students need to know by the end of the revision summary and a way to check their understanding and progress through a particular topic.
  - ! **Note:** The checklist is presented in question format and these questions would be ideal to set for homework or revision so that students can build the skills they need in order to progress to longer exam-style questions.
- ✓ **Exam-style Question:** A practice essay question with helpful assessment objectives, complete with levelled mark schemes and indicative content at the end of the resource. These are useful for students approaching their end-of-year exams or wishing to improve their essay technique on a particular topic.

*NB Depending on the figures studied and the required reading, not all topics will have a Key Figures or Key Texts section.*

This structure clearly ensures students have not only a grasp of the key themes of each topic, but also a way to understand their place within the specification as a whole. Students who may have missed lessons or not made detailed notes may benefit greatly from these revision summaries, especially in helping their recollection of key topics closer to their end-of-course exams.

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# Theological and Philosophical Dev

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<b>Benevolence</b>	The attribute of being all-loving and incapable of evil.
<b>Deism</b>	The view that God is not benevolent and personally invested
<b>Eternal</b>	The state of never having begun to be or ceasing to be.
<b>Everlasting</b>	The attribute of having existed throughout all time and con
<b>Four-dime</b>	The view that time and space exist in four dimensions and C separately from these four dimensions.
<b>Free Will</b>	The idea that human beings have the power and ability to d free of excessive coercion or constraint.
<b>Immutability</b>	The attribute of being unchanging or unable to change.
<b>Just</b>	The attribute of being completely fair and right in all one's a
<b>Libertarianism</b>	The view that free will cannot be reconciled with determinis free will cannot be predetermined.
<b>Omnipotence</b>	The attribute of being all-powerful, or powerful without lim
<b>Omniscience</b>	The attribute of being all-knowing, or incapable of being ign affairs.
<b>Paradox</b>	A statement or thing that when presented seems to contrav aspects.
<b>Predestination</b>	The view that all events are predetermined at the beginning actions.
<b>Presentism</b>	The view that we does not experience events as occurring in the eternal present.
<b>Process Th</b>	A theological discipline that focuses on explaining God not a for process theologians, is radically contained within the we powers to influence the course of events in time.
<b>Systematic Theology</b>	A theological discipline that focuses on developing a rationa Christian faith, including the existence and nature of God.
<b>Temporality</b>	The attribute of being within time and so viewing objects as future.
<b>Timeless</b>	The attribute of being outside of or external to time.

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# The Nature and Attributes of God

## Overview

As long as the existence of God or gods has been posited, questions have been at the forefront of philosophical thinking. Debating the nature of God for many centuries, but affects their very perception of the world itself; whether it is good or bad. Furthermore, whether a rational and coherent view of God can be developed, free from contradiction. The nature of God, while metaphysical, has a profound thought to greatly affect arguments for his existence. The nature of God might at first glance seem overly abstract, it has far-reaching ramifications for many. It can be argued that such questions reveal great truths about how human beings think about knowledge, power and free will.

## Key Points



### The Attributes of God

- The Christian concept of God has never been static; while early church leaders debated around the idea of a single, omnipotent, benevolent God, how this idea is interpreted through the history of Christianity.
  - Christian monotheism was first and foremost influenced by Judaic thought and ideas from Greek philosophy (e.g. Platonism), such as God being immutable.
  - Different beliefs about the idea of God have not just emerged from clashes of ideas, but from key philosophical questions about the coherency of certain divine attributes.
  - While most theologians accept the existence of God as a starting point, many have systematically developed a concept of God that is not contradictory, and fits with other attributes.
- Critics of theism often argue this project is impossible, as the idea of a 'perfect being' with this is due to posited attributes being inherently contradictory, or being incoherent when possessing other divine attributes.
  - If an idea is contradictory in this way, it is potentially not logically possible. In response, theists argue that God is not subject to the limits of logic, and it is not necessary for the divine attributes of God to be logically coherent.
  - Yet, the theist response arguably makes the task of identifying and understanding God simply a being who by his very nature appears to be contradictory. Furthermore, the basic principles of logic govern what can be a true or false statement; can God be exempt from them?
  - Either way, regardless of the issues observed, there is a broader debate about whether the conflicts concerning the attributes of God affect the possibility of God existing. In the eyes of some theists, to develop a coherent idea of God, especially if the idea is incapable of grasping the existence and essence of such a being.

### The Paradox of Omnipotence

- The paradox of omnipotence springs from a central idea about the nature of power: if God is without limits, can they act to restrict their own power?
  - If they can restrict their own power, then they are no longer omnipotent, and cannot be omnipotent in the first place. This also applies to the things God creates; if God's will is unable to be influenced by God's power.
  - A key example of this is the paradox of the stone, which simply asks whether God can create a stone so heavy for him to lift. If he cannot create the stone, he is not all-powerful; if he can create the stone, then he ceases to be all-powerful.
  - This underlies a tension with omnipotence; if it is defined as being unlimited in power, then it is a contradiction for any being that possesses it. This indicates that omnipotence is logically impossible for any being to have.
  - Furthermore, while this may simply call for a reinterpretation of omnipotence, it challenges the image of a God who is unlimited in power, so much so that he created the universe (Genesis 1:1-5; John 1:1-3; Acts 17:24-28; Romans 1:20; 19:26).
  - Many theologians argue that omnipotence is an essential attribute. If God has created the universe, and he could not guarantee the salvation of humanity, then he is not all-powerful.

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## Can the Paradox be Resolved?

- There have been many responses to the paradox of omnipotence. Some argue it is framed incorrectly, and that stated correctly the paradox is dissolved. Others, on the other hand, argue that the paradox is a misinterpretation of omnipotence, while some partially drop the attribute, identifying a different attribute such as 'almighty'.
  - Descartes, for example, held firm, saying that there is no paradox, since God can perform any action, even if it results in a logical contradiction. Truly accepting God as omnipotent means not attempting to make his power conform to the laws of logic.
  - If this is the case, then if one is truly able to perceive God's nature, it will be realised there are no conflicts between his attributes. There is a deeper issue here: do our ideas of omnipotence rest on human beliefs about power, with the idea that they do not necessarily hold true for divine beings.
  - However, it can be argued that logical contradictions are not tests of power, but rather identifying states of affairs that are not possible simply by virtue of the meanings of the terms involved. God making a square triangle is, therefore, meaningless altogether. If a square triangle were possible, then it is not a triangle, it becomes meaningless.
  - Furthermore, Descartes' interpretation makes other conflicts more pressing. If the logically impossible, why can he not create a world where human beings cannot perform good deeds? Such a wide interpretation of omnipotence potentially makes it difficult to develop.
- Aquinas takes a different position from Descartes, arguing that omnipotence does not mean the capability to do anything logically impossible. God, therefore, simply possesses the power to do anything that could possibly have, meaning God can do whatever is possible, but cannot do what is a contradiction.
  - This interpretation potentially solves the paradox of omnipotence, since it limits God to create a stone too heavy for him to lift, or perform an evil act, since these are contradictions.
  - However, there are deeper questions concerning the stone example. For humans, if an object is too heavy for them to lift, and such a question arises, it is a question to whether God can act so as to restrict his own omnipotence.
  - This question is arguably not one of logical possibility, but of the nature of God. It can be made between whether God is *accidentally* omnipotent, and so can choose to will, or *essentially* omnipotent, where omnipotence is part of God's nature.
  - Such questions are particularly pertinent when it comes to God creating beings. If God possesses the power to coerce and control free beings, are they truly free? If they are not, then God seems to not be omnipotent, and to be restrained by the nature of his creation.
- Various responses have sprung up from these interrelated issues, particularly concerning whether God to limit his own power, or whether it is appropriate to describe limits on God's power.
  - William Lane Craig argues that omnipotence means that God can perform anything that is consistent with his nature. God, therefore, is essentially omnipotent and can't perform actions that would contradict this omnipotence, or clash with other aspects of his nature, such as his being eternal.
  - Richard Swinburne argues the paradox of omnipotence holds true only if God is 'omnitemporal', essential omnipotence. It is logically incoherent to imagine God restricting the past to remove his omnipotence, but there is no contradiction in imagining God restricting the power of an *omnitemporal* being.
  - Peter Vardy agrees with this sentiment, arguing that God himself has to limit his power to create free beings. However, God is still omnipotent, since this self-limitation is not a restriction on his power, but of external coercion.
  - However, if this self-limitation is possible, then is God really omnipotent, or is his power limited?

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- Following on from this question, Hartshorne argues that the idea of limitless power is contradictory, but it is not a real perfection that a divine being would possess, as it would mean meaningful resistance to such a power.
  - Instead Hartshorne argues omnipotence means God possesses unsurpassable power: nothing can resist God's power, and God can even self-limit his own power, but not in a way that would make him not the most powerful being.
  - Peter Geach follows a similar line of thinking, but argues that instead of omnipotence being to be as almighty, as it doesn't carry connotations of possessing limitless power.
  - However, in these cases it can be questioned whether the paradox has actually been avoided with clever semantics. (b) If God possesses unsurpassable power, then it would give rise to another being who possesses more power.
  - Alternatively, it could be asked whether God possesses the power to limit his own power in a way that is not unsurpassable. Some thinkers, such as Swinburne, argue it is perfectly possible for God to limit his power, yet under Hartshorne and Geach's accounts this would be contradictory.
- Altogether there are potentially issues in all accounts of the nature of omnipotence. Some are solved, others emerge, and key disagreements remain about whether God is being omnipotent accidentally, or essentially omnipotent.
  - In Wittgenstein's early work the *Tractatus* he questions whether in the case of something such as God, language is capable of properly representing concepts. This is because if God is omnipotent; there simply isn't a good frame of reference or experience of God's omnipotence; divine being may possess and its ramifications.
  - Deeper questions also exist as to whether God should be subject to logical constraints. Philosophers, such as Craig, argue that logic is simply part of God's nature, and that the case that the laws of logic used to judge things in the universe may not exist fundamentally outside of universal constraints.

## Omniscience and Free Will

- Omniscience is commonly interpreted as 'all-knowing'. However, beyond this, there are a number of deeper proposals as to what this attribute means.
  - For example, omniscience could mean the capacity to know anything that is true, regardless of their location in the universe, or it could mean the capacity to know any piece of propositional knowledge.
  - In fact, omniscience arguably extends not only to descriptive knowledge, but also to prescriptive knowledge; an omniscient being would know what the right kind of action in any situation would be.
  - There are also deeper questions about what it is to 'know' something. Does it mean knowing in propositional form commonly used in everyday life, or would an omniscient being know in a different, more fundamental way?
  - These questions might seem abstract, but they inform the way omniscience is understood and potentially avoid key conflicts between other attributes and states of affairs.
- One common issue is the potential conflict between omniscience and free will. If God is omniscient, for example, then it is plausible that he must know the outcome of every event which will occur in the future. However, if this is the case, then the outcome of any human action is already predetermined.
  - If God is omniscient, prima facie, human beings cannot have power or agency, as they cannot possess free will.
  - This issue is most pressing if one takes a *libertarian* view of free will. This view is fundamentally incompatible with determinism, and puts forward that human beings have the power to act beyond the influence or constraints of prior events and circumstances.
  - The problem is that most theists (at least Christians) take a libertarian view of free will. It is necessary in order for concepts such as moral responsibility, and religious events such as judgement or salvation to be fair.
  - While some theologians in the past have endorsed predestination (e.g. Calvinism), others argue human actions aren't predetermined, and, if this is the case, there is a conflict between omniscience and the existence of human free will.

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- Solutions to the conflict between omniscience and free will usually focus on predestination, where God 'knows' things, rather than denying God's complete knowledge, or human beings' free will.
  - One common approach has been to reconcile this conflict with wider questions about the nature of God's attributes, particularly those that differentiate between a divine and human nature.
  - It is often thought that God's eternality, transcendence and relationship to time offer a potential resolution to the omniscience / free will conflict, as it may be possible for God to know things without this knowledge necessitating a certain past or future.

## Boethius, Benevolence and Judgement

- Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy* writes extensively about the omniscience of God, which is primarily concerned with how God could know all things that were going to happen in the lives of human beings.
  - If human beings possess no other choice, then judgement seems manifestly to require God to be benevolent.
  - Therefore, for Boethius, resolving the omniscience / free will conflict was not just a matter of the ramifications of the conflict extended beyond metaphysical questions about the nature of God.
  - It also affected key elements of Christian doctrine, and its central proposition was that God, in the lives of human beings, ready to offer salvation to those who were good.
- Boethius' solution was to claim that God's timelessness and transcendence meant that God's knowledge did not impact the freedom of human choices.
  - The key aspect of his proposal was that since God is not contained within time, God does not possess knowledge or beliefs at any particular time.
  - God instead grasps all events in an atemporal present; all things occur simultaneously from God's perspective.
  - This means that God's knowledge is never directed towards a past or a future, but is always of the present; therefore, not a knowledge that guarantees a particular event has to occur, but a knowledge that only observes events at the time they are happening.
  - Boethius argues that this 'presentism' means that God's knowledge does not necessitate human free will. He draws an analogy between God's observation of the world and a human being's observation of the present; just because it is possible to observe an event occurring does not mean that an event necessarily occurred.
  - Therefore, God's observation of the present doesn't necessitate any future events, and God's atemporal awareness of all things at the moment they occur, and does not necessitate any future events to follow another.
- Boethius justified this view by distinguishing between 'simple' and 'conditional' necessity.
  - Simple necessity refers to basic states of affairs or events that have to be true by the nature of the things involved. For example, it is necessary that human beings die because they are mortal.
  - Conditional necessity, however, refers to states of affairs or events that are necessary only if a being is at a particular time. They are necessary at a particular moment or law. An example of conditional necessity might be a student writing their homework because they are a student.
  - This distinction is important for Boethius, as conditional necessity does not prevent anything from happening because it is necessary that a student is writing their homework at the present time does not mean that the student is necessarily going to write their homework because of the student's choice at a particular time.
  - Boethius claims that God's knowledge is always that of conditional necessity, and events occur without God's knowledge necessitating them to occur. Instead it suggests events in the world occur by their own choices, not by their natures, meaning it is possible to have free will despite God's knowledge of events.
  - In short, conditional necessity does not prevent anything from happening, and it does not prevent anything to happen or not happen. It is akin to stating 'if an event occurs, then it must be true that it is necessary that it occurs'.

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## Anselm and the Four-dimensionalist Approach

- Anselm expanded on Boethius' approach to God's eternity, putting forward a commonly referred to as 'four-dimensionalism'. This builds upon the ideas about necessity and conditional necessity proposed by his predecessor, while placing them in a systematic and structured analysis of God and his relationship to time.
  - Anselm argues that there is a fourth dimension of time on top of the three dimensional world, and human beings are constrained by being within time as the physical world. This means human beings are temporal; they exist to the past, present and future at any given moment.
  - This temporality also limits how human beings can perceive their actions and All events are viewed chronologically, and in relation to how the past (and the future) are perceived.
  - However, Anselm argues that God does not just transcend the physical world, as all dimensions are contained within God, who through his immensity is an eternal present.
  - This eternal present means God does not view events relatively to the past or future, but occur simultaneously both in time and space and so there is no divine foreknowledge of all things.
  - For Anselm, this allows genuine libertarian free will for human beings, for God does not impose prior constraints on human choice. It only imposes 'consequent' necessity on the events themselves that means they are necessary, not God's knowledge of them.

## Is God Timeless?

- Boethius and Anselm present a solution to the conflict between omniscience and a particular interpretation of God's eternity as involving timelessness. Yet this view is not without philosophical issues.
  - First, it is not clear that the original conflict is adequately resolved. For example, that just because divine foreknowledge does not involve causal constraints does not mean that there is still genuine free will.
  - If God's knowledge is eternally fixed, then it cannot be altered by human beings, irrespective of temporality. If human beings do not have genuine alternatives, then as choosing a course of action outside of God's knowledge would require that he does not know the truth, true omniscience.
  - The problem is, in some way within Anselm's account, it appears that God has been made passive. But this makes God a passive creature, susceptible to being affected by creatures.
  - Generally, classical theism would not be satisfied with the idea that human beings can change the timeless knowledge God possesses, and so it seems that conditionalism cannot guarantee genuine free will.
- Another issue is that if God is timeless, it is difficult to reconcile this facet with the Bible.
  - In the Bible, God regularly intervenes in the lives of human beings at specific points in time. Acts, such as the Incarnation, can be understood both temporally and aeternally. God is fundamentally aware of how his actions and knowledge causally impact human beings.
  - Some philosophers, such as Anthony Kenny, go further and argue that the Bible is fundamentally incoherent, as it leads to absurdities such as God experiencing time. For example, God might experience the founding and the fall of Jerusalem at the same time. Though these events require temporality to be fully understood.
- There are further issues with a timeless God and other attributes such as benevolence.
  - Classical theism maintains that a timeless God is immutable, and it makes it difficult to see how a timeless God can change or be affected by events within the temporal, physical world.
  - Yet, many theologians and others point out that such a God would surely be incapable of having any personal relationships with human beings. Love, as dynamic, and being affected by the suffering and plight of others. Love, as dynamic, and so an immutable divine being would not be able to hold the personal relationship exemplified by the Christian God.
  - The timeless God, therefore, risks slipping into deism, and in turn this poses a problem for justice. For if God cannot be fundamentally invested in human lives, or if God is not personally affected by human suffering, then such a God be reconciled with key Christian teachings such as atonement.

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## Swinburne and the Everlasting God

- Swinburne, in response to these issues, puts forward another interpretation of eternity of God. Instead of God being timeless, he claims that God is everlasting.
  - This means that God is fundamentally within time instead of outside it. God existed in every past moment of time, and currently exists in the present. However, while God will, as part of being eternal, exist in every future moment of time, he does not have foreknowledge of future events that concern the actions of beings with free will.
  - However, it can be asked, if omniscience is defined as being all-knowing, is there a limit of God's knowledge of the world? Swinburne argues that God, in actuality, truly omniscient, but this limit is self-imposed due to his creation of beings with free will.
  - This does not arise, as Swinburne contends, because if beings with libertarian free will are possible for God to know the outcomes of their actions, regardless of whether they exercise their free will.
  - God nonetheless is still omniscient and omnipotent since he possesses the power to limit his knowledge from beings and so end the limits of his knowledge about the future.
  - The key aspect to this theory is that God is no longer immutable; he can change in order to be appropriate to ensure the existence of beings with free will.
- Swinburne envisions a number of other potential advantages to this view:
  - Since God is not immutable, there is no issue with how God could engage with human beings, and so there is no difficulty reconciling God's eternity and his existence within time.
  - Similarly, an everlasting God is also more easily reconciled with the God of time, experiencing human beings' actions as they are undertaken, rather than having knowledge of them.
  - Lastly, it arguably supports a more intuitive understanding of free will. Rather than metaphysically distinguish between different forms of necessity, human beings are free because God guarantees them to be free, rather than their being free due to some external knowledge.
- However, there are a number of issues with accepting an everlasting God.
  - The first, and perhaps the most serious, issue is that God is not truly omniscient under the theory proposed by Swinburne. In particular, if God can self-limit his omniscience to ensure that he is accidentally omniscient and is not essentially all-knowing. Many theists would find this problematic, especially since it is quite a departure from classical theism.
  - Some can even claim that Swinburne has simply defended a God of his choice, rather than a God who is truly all-knowing. Similar to omnipotence, it can be argued that making God subject to the laws of logic deals with why being all-knowing is problematic.
  - It also can be questioned whether there are issues with immutability. Many theists would find this problematic, while still personally invested in the lives of human beings. However, then a timeless God may well still be meaningfully benevolent.

## Is God Benevolent or Just?

- Much of the debate around omniscience and free will arose from Boethius' concerns about the benevolence or justice of God, especially when he is supposed to judge human actions.
  - The two attributes are usually intertwined: a benevolent God cannot be unjust, and a just God cannot be evil.
  - Yet it may be the case that a conflict arises out of God's benevolence. If God is truly all-knowing, then human actions are predetermined, and this has been the position of a number of theists (e.g. Calvinism and Lutheranism).
  - Alternatively, it might be just that deism should be upheld and concerns about free will should be dropped. Such a response might favour a presentist approach which states that God could be personally involved in the lives of human beings.
  - Furthermore, as studied in Year 1, benevolence gives rise to the problem of theodicy, and potentially even omniscience, of God.
  - Lastly there are issues with the benevolence of God and divine immutability. If God is truly all-knowing, then a timeless God may well still be meaningfully benevolent.

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- The benevolence of God, however, may provoke different responses. As Swinburne argues, a God who self-limits his own power and knowledge does not face the same problems as classical theism.
  - Some theologians have gone further. Process theology presents a view of God that is more dynamic, where God is in a constant state of becoming, rather than that of persuasion and a view of matter as an entity that can have the power to resist God.
  - The idea of a suffering or powerless God is not without its criticisms, however. Some argue that a God who is too weak to resolve the conflicts between attributes both projects human attributes onto God, presuming God has to conform to the philosophical quibbles of fallible humans.
  - It may be the case that God's being weak in ways beyond human comprehension. From a theistic perspective there is no clash between divine omnipotence, in particular, may make the idea of a suffering God philosophically impossible.
  - However, ideas of divine powerlessness or self-limitation may be less radical than they seem. The philosophical picture of God has changed through the last two millennia and the tension between divine powerlessness and an unlimited all-knowing God are fundamentally irreconcilable with an unlimited all-knowing God.

## Key Figures

### Boethius

Boethius (or Saint Anicius Manlius Severinus Boëthius to use his full name) was a Roman philosopher and theologian in the sixth century. He is best known for his work *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a dialogue between a philosopher and a prisoner, which addresses many existential, metaphysical and religious issues, but most famously, the conflict between divine foreknowledge and human free will. However, although he was Christian, nearly all his work approaches the perspective of natural philosophy, as Boethius contended that reason should be used to address metaphysical issues about God would remain the same regardless of tradition or culture. His complementary approach to religious questions proved highly influential, and Boethius is considered one of the main bridges between the Classical Greek tradition and Christian theology.

### Anselm

Anselm of Canterbury was an Italian medieval philosopher and theologian who wrote extensively about the nature and existence of God. He is widely regarded as one of the fathers of the Scholastic tradition, which looked to Aristotle for a systematic approach to theological questions. Anselm's philosophical approach was highly systematic. In his writing focused on key questions about God's relationship with the world. Due to various interpretations of his position, many researchers claim that Anselm's approach to the conflict between God's omniscience and free will, divine simplicity and conditional necessity. His work here, despite being written nearly a thousand years ago, is still influential and is still debated extensively by philosophers of religion today.

### Richard Swinburne

Swinburne is a contemporary philosopher and theologian, best known for his arguments for the existence of God. However, he has written on nearly all major issues in the philosophy of religion, including the problem of evil, the attributes of God and the most coherent approach to reconciling them with the world. Swinburne's works are highly systematic and he attempts to show that belief in God is rational. This extends to his work on the attributes of God, where, although he develops his own version of traditional Christian teachings, such as immutability, his work often functions as an alternative to traditional Christian teachings.

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## Key Texts

### ***The Consolation of Philosophy* (Boethius)**

*The Consolation* is Boethius' best-known work and is often described as one of the Classical Greek theology and Medieval Christian theology. It was written over the course of Boethius's imprisonment. Boethius was in prison awaiting his trial for treason against Theodoric the Great (for whom he was pronounced guilty and executed). This setting informs many of the book's themes, particularly on the problem of evil and the existential difficulties of human life. However, despite the book being written as a discussion between Boethius and a character called Lady Philosophy, his work on the conflict between divine providence and free will paved the way for

### ***De Concordia* (Anselm)**

*De Concordia* is one of Anselm's lesser works which focuses on the conflict between divine foreknowledge and free will. Written between 1107 and 1108 CE, it is presented as a single dialogue, and accounts for the conflict. It isn't the first work by Anselm to focus on omniscience, which is tackled in earlier works, but it does present a more mature vision of Anselm's four-dimensionalism and how God's knowledge is eternal present.

### ***The Coherence of Theism* (Swinburne)**

*The Coherence of Theism* is an early work by Swinburne, first published in 1977. It focuses on the coherence of theism altogether, which covers many of the issues within the philosophy of religion. Swinburne argues that the existence of God is a rational and coherent proposition. *The Coherence* primarily takes the form of a dialogue between Swinburne and an unnamed atheist. Swinburne attempts to show that although there are important objections to theism, the picture of God presented by classical theism is coherent and so long as the terms involved are interpreted correctly in the analogical sense they

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## Student Checklist

What Do I Know?	No Idea 😞	Some Idea 😊	Good Idea 😄	
What are the attributes of God in traditional (or classic) monotheism?				
Why is it thought to be important that God is omniscient?				
What is the paradox of omnipotence?				
How might redefinitions of omnipotence solve the paradox of omnipotence?				
Why are there discussions around whether God can self-limit his own omnipotence?				
Why have some thinkers argued that other terms than omnipotence better describe the power God possesses?				
Why is there a conflict between omniscience and free will?				
How does Boethius attempt to resolve this conflict?				
What is Anselm's four-dimensionalist approach to God's eternity and omniscience?				
What issues are there with a 'timeless' God?				
Why does Swinburne argue instead for God as 'everlasting'?				
How might God self-limiting his omniscience solve conflicts with human free will?				
How does God's benevolent and just nature conflict with his other attributes?				
What philosophical problems are there to a classical theism?				
Is the God of traditional (or classic) monotheism coherent?				

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## Practice Exam-style Question

1. "There is no adequate solution to the conflict between the omniscience of God and free will." Discuss.

### HINTS

In your answer you should:

- show a consistent knowledge and understanding of the conflict between omniscience and free will, including:
  - the significance of God's eternity in the debate around the conflict
  - the debate around whether a timeless or everlasting interpretation of God's eternity is more convincing in resolving the conflict
  - the proposal that God could potentially self-limit his own omniscience
- Analyse and evaluate different approaches to the questions surrounding free will, and whether any modern theological approaches are successful.

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# Religious Language: Negative, Analogic

G<sub>2</sub>

L<sub>1</sub>

O<sub>1</sub>

<b>Analogical</b>	Language that draws a comparison between two things to
<b>Analogy of Attribution</b>	The view that it is appropriate to draw analogies between c
<b>Analogy of Proportionality</b>	The view that it is appropriate to draw analogies between t
<b>Anthropomorphism</b>	Where one attributes human characteristics to a non-human
<b>Apophatic Way</b>	The view that negative language or propositions provide a
<b>Cataphatic Way</b>	The view that positive language or propositions provide a m
<b>Cognitive</b>	Refers to statements that can be evaluated as true or false.
<b>Equivocal</b>	Language that can be interpreted in multiple ways.
<b>Existentialism</b>	A philosophical theory that examines questions about huma
<b>Non-cognitive</b>	Relates to statements that cannot be evaluated as true or f
<b>Objective</b>	Relates to propositions or statements that are not depende
<b>Religious Language</b>	The words, phrases and vocabulary that human beings use to tal
<b>Subjective</b>	Relates to propositions or statements that are dependent o
<b>Symbol</b>	A sign or representation that stands in for something else a
<b>Transcendence</b>	The attribute of existing above or beyond the ordinary phys
<b>Univocal</b>	Language that can only be interpreted in one way.
<b>Analogical</b>	Language that draws a comparison between two things to

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# Religious Language: Negative, Analogic

## Overview

Religious statements and propositions are put forward every day, and we are wholly aware of the structure and form of the sentences they are uttering. Yet such other ordinary statements, as they point to a metaphysical reality or being that cannot be described in typical words, phrases or sentences. Throughout history, this difficulty of talking about God from a religious and secular perspective, yet it is still unclear what limitations there are and whether ordinary language can appropriately be used to describe the existence of God. However, such questions have rarely been resolved decisively, with the issue of religious language usually being one of how religious language can be most productive, with much of the focus on positive language can successfully capture a being who transcends the physical realm.

## Key Points

### The Nature and Purpose of Religious Language

- Religious language is concerned with the words, phrases and vocabulary humans use to describe God and all other associated religious concepts.
  - While this may appear initially to be straightforward, there are a number of issues surrounding discussing and debating the existence and nature of God.
  - These issues are often motivated by philosophers attempting to outline or describe what is meaningful or productive language. If ordinary statements and propositions can be used in constructing statements or propositions that effectively describe the world, then it is an impossible task.
  - Therefore, there is great attention paid to the way language about God is used. It is often interpreted literally, even if God is thought to be beyond comprehension. It is often used metaphorically, even if such language struggles to connect to an independent reality.
  - God's transcendence, among his other attributes, means that it is difficult to describe him. The language used to describe him is used accurately, which in turn raises questions about what is meaningful at all.
- Another difficulty is that not all are agreed on what the purpose of religious language is.
  - Some see religious language as presenting propositions that can clearly be evaluated as true or false. For example, if someone claims that 'God created the universe', then it would be genuinely holds such a statement to be true and reflective of an event that has occurred.
  - However, at other times religious language is used differently. If a person says 'God is love', such a statement could reflect a literal belief that an element of God is love, or it could be interpreted to mean that God is an important psychological presence in a person's life.
  - Importantly also, religious language does not just involve passive description. It is often used in different practices and contexts in individuals' lives. In rituals such as prayer, the language used is thought to bring about changes in human beings, or even to be a form of worship.
  - These differences in use mean that even theists themselves are not agreed on what religious language should be defined or employed. Capturing the variety of uses makes it difficult to give a description or theory.

### Cognitive and Non-cognitive Propositions

- One basic distinction in the use of language is between cognitive and non-cognitive statements. These terms are used descriptively, but at other times they are used within arguments to justify the language they employ.
  - Cognitive statements are those which can effectively be evaluated as true or false. They can be interpreted as facts which directly state something about the world.
  - One example of a cognitive statement is 'all swans are white'; this statement can be evaluated as true or false according to whether non-white swans exist (hint: they do).
  - Non-cognitive statements, however, cannot be evaluated as true or false. They are not concerned with representing directly knowable facts, and are used to denote non-literal truths.

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- The meaning of non-cognitive statements is, therefore, subjective; it is as much about our beliefs or pre-existing assumptions as it is on the meaning of the terms employed.
- Examples of non-cognitive statements may include symbols, metaphors, religious language, etc.
- Cognitive and non-cognitive language is also sometimes termed realist and non-realist language, in ways in which it seeks to evaluate or represent ideas about the world, although this can also be misleading. Those who argue for non-cognitive language being impractical claim that language has no direct connection to reality, just that its meaning does not make it as true or false with respect to the observable world.

## The Apophatic Way (Via Negativa)

- The apophatic way, or the via negativa, is a form of language used to talk about God. It holds that it is impossible to meaningfully talk about him by describing what he is like, but only by using negation, or negative language.
  - Support for the apophatic way typically originates due to the difficulties in using ordinary language to describe God. Since God is transcendent and superior to human experience, it is unclear whether ideas derived from this experience can meaningfully apply to divine beings.
  - However, in describing what God is unlike, it is possible to remove such restrictions, and build up an idea of God that is not limited by the boundaries of human experience.
  - Moreover, it prevents confusion through using particular terms to describe God. Saying that 'God is the Father' can be interpreted in a variety of ways, all of which may fail to accurately capture the nature of a transcendent being.
  - For example, to say 'the power of God has no limits' potentially captures more than positive descriptions, as it does not seek to develop ideas of God's power through comparisons.
  - The apophatic way has been employed in religious thinking far beyond Christianity. For example is the concept of nirvana in Buddhism. As a state of enlightenment removed from human attachments to the world, it is only ever described in terms of the transcendence of what one has attained it.
- One of the most famous advocates for the apophatic way was Pseudo-Dionysius, a Christian thinker from the fifth and sixth centuries CE.
  - He argued that God was beyond the realms of human reason, intellect and language, and that the categories human beings use to describe the world of sense experience are unsuitable to describe God.
  - It is only through negative language that human beings can begin to move beyond their experience and begin to comprehend God as a transcendent being.
  - By using negative language regularly, Pseudo-Dionysius claims that humans can progress towards a higher level of rational understanding about God and so make themselves unified with God.
- However, it can be questioned more deeply how such a process is possible. Do negative language enable human beings to correspondingly develop an accurate positive understanding of God?
  - Maimonides, a twelfth-century Jewish scholar, believed so and used the example of a ship to illustrate this. He claimed that so long as one has a degree of certainty that a ship exists, one can ask questions that eliminate properties that do not belong to a ship. For example, 'Can a ship travel on land?' or 'Can a ship have wheels?', and affirming the negative of these questions can help to comprehend the kind of thing a ship is.
  - Maimonides claims that the same is true of God. By defining what God is not, one can develop a deeper comprehension of what God truly is. For example, by saying 'God is not evil' it is possible to comprehend the kind of benevolent being God might be, without being limited by existing ideas about goodness.

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## Issues with the Apophatic Way

- While there are a number of intuitive advantages to using the apophatic way, it alone can provide clear and accurate methods for comprehending the nature of God.
  - One common criticism is that there are some attributes of or elements to be described through negative language. Taking a previous example, 'God contains no evil' this statement does lead to an understanding of benevolence. In fact, the statement is short of capturing the wholly good essence of God for many believers.
  - Perhaps more importantly, it can be contended that even using negative language to provide a positive understanding of the terms in play requires stating 'God contains no evil' which requires a pre-existing understanding of evil.
  - Unless this pre-existing understanding is developed independently of experience, then any statement will still be drawing on positive ideas and using them to illustrate their idea of God.
  - It is, therefore, not clear to what extent the apophatic way can divorce its statements, especially if clarification or comprehension is needed for the statements.
- A deeper issue is proposed by Brian Davies. He argues that if one only uses negative language then one can never properly arrive at a meaningful concept of God altogether.
  - His central contention is that negatively eliminating various characteristics of God, whether two or more people are sharing the same ideas about something, does not provide a reference point or common ground between their thoughts.
  - Therefore, it may be possible that after eliminating all things that God is not, one is left with fundamentally different ideas about what God is. If this is the case, it becomes clear that the apophatic way alone could lead to meaningless religious discussion.
  - Some critics take this point further. Antony Flew argues that if one were to use only the apophatic way, it would equate to describing nothingness.
  - He contends this is because in the case of God especially, if there is no positive concept of God and things in the world, then there is nothing to distinguish what God is from our understanding of being is based on observation and comprehension of the world. Using negative language to describe God is equivalent to describing nothingness.
- It may be argued that the apophatic way is not the best, or a wholly accurate way, and that other methods of language are needed for religious discussion.
  - It can be noted that much of the language used in scriptural or doctrinal discussion is made up of positive assertions about his nature and identity. It may be difficult to make a forceful commitment to the apophatic way.
  - Similarly, it may be that even if the apophatic way is valid, there is an important role (or via positiva) in religious discussion. Aspects of God, such as his benevolence, can be compared to human experience, especially when combined with negative language.

## The Cataphatic Way (Via Positiva)

- The cataphatic way, or the via positiva, employs positive language to state what God is.
  - However, positive language takes many forms. All languages are rich in words and terms are often used metaphorically or non-literally, to add layers of meaning that do not necessarily provide.
  - This ambiguity in meaning raises a number of primary issues when using positive language. One is questioning how positive statements should be constructed about God.
  - This issue hinges on what are appropriate terms. A key distinction is between unambiguous statements and statements that have only one unambiguous reference. Statements that potentially have more than one interpretation are problematic.
  - If equivocal language is employed, then one risks anthropomorphising God and making a comparison between God and human-derived ideas. For example, saying 'God loves' is different from saying 'Terry loves Sally'.
  - However, if one employs equivocal language then positive descriptions of God are open to interpretation. It becomes much more difficult to concretely state what God is, and there is a risk of complete subjectivity.

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- There is, therefore, an inherent tension to using positive language to describe God. Literal, unequivocal comparisons risk being inaccurate, while on the other hand being meaningless or overly subjective.

## Aquinas and Analogical Language

- An analogy is a comparison between two things that aims to explain the properties or behaviour of one (or both) of the things. Analogical language, therefore, involves the general use of analogies which talk about an idea or concept in terms of something else.
  - In the case of describing God, analogical language involves drawing comparisons between aspects of God's nature and behaviour and human nature and behaviour in order to illuminate the former.
  - The key advantage of analogical language is that it strikes a balance between using unequivocal language; it does not draw a direct comparison between two things, but does not also have an unavoidably high number of interpretations.
  - For example, if one were to say 'God's love for humanity is similar to the love of a mother for her child' is not claiming that God and humanity are mother and child, but that there is something of God's love which is not open to interpretation.
  - This means that analogical language can also help develop a meaningful understanding of religious ideas. God as the Father and Jesus as the Son can be understood from ideas found in the world without imposing a literal comparison between human fathers and sons.
- One key proponent of analogical language in religious discussion was Thomas Aquinas. He argued that language runs the risk of failing to do justice to God's greatness while equivocating in order to communicate the extent and magnificence of this greatness.
  - Analogical language, on the other hand, is best suited as it allows for reference to concepts derived from human experience, while also acknowledging the limitations of such concepts.
  - Aquinas talked about the 'gradation to being in all things' to justify this. He argued that certain attributes to such greatness that are beyond human comprehension can be described meaningfully through the lesser versions found on Earth.
  - Furthermore, he noted two forms of analogy that enabled meaningful analogical language.
  - One is analogy of attribution, which notes that for anything that is created, something can be said about the being from the created object. In the same way that we believe in good qualities on bread, God might do the same upon creating the world.
  - Another is analogy of proportionality, which notes that it is possible when comparing lower beings, to draw conclusions about higher beings who possess proportional qualities. God's goodness can, therefore, at least be partially understood, but magnitudes are not found in human beings.
- Analogies of attribution and proportionality ensure that the complexity and difficulty of God are not overlooked.
  - John Hick gives the example of a faithful dog to help illuminate the importance of analogical language.
  - He points out that describing a dog as faithful requires not just that there is a similarity between the faithfulness of a dog and a person, but also that the nature of the dog is proportionate to the being in question.
  - The requirements for a dog to be faithful are not as severe considering its limitations compared to those of a human. However, it does not mean that dogs can be as faithful as humans as long as one is aware of the creature's limitations.
  - Ian Ramsey expanded on these ideas, developing an account of what he termed 'models'.
  - Models are the ideas that human beings use as references to describe God. They do not necessarily represent God, but provide a basic grounding for understanding and agreeing upon.
  - On top of these models are 'qualifiers', which allow human beings to describe God in relation to the models. He equates his being with the models used. Qualifiers can be basic terms such as 'faithful' or 'good'.
  - Using models and qualifiers together provides a structure and method of discussion about God without necessarily having to provide strict analogies.

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## Issues with the Cataphatic Way

- Positive language is widely used when describing God, and many perceive its use as justified so long as one is aware of its limitations. However, there are a number of potential issues.
  - One is to do with the terms used themselves. While it is possible to be aware that an analogical statement has limitations when describing God, it can be no less the case that these limitations themselves have to be described in literal language for people to understand.
  - William Blackstone makes this point, arguing that analogous language is less meaningful than initially perceived by religious thinkers, since any terms, straightforward or not, require explaining via univocal language.
  - In the case of the dog example, explaining why a dog's faithfulness is different from human faithfulness inevitably requires use of literal or univocal statements about dogs' capacities, nature and behaviour.
  - However, if these differences aren't explained, the analogy becomes less useful, since any number of interpretations can be made about the similarities between the two.
- Another issue is that analogical language assumes a base similarity between God and the world; if it would be completely invalid to draw an analogy in the first place.
  - For religious individuals, such a similarity is justified, since God is thought of as the creator of the universe and, for Christians, humankind is made in the image of God.
  - However, if one takes an impartial stance, there is no a priori reason to suppose that God is like human beings, or experience the world in any similar way, especially if one is talking about the omnipotence of God, there is no independent way to determine how about power can be effectively compared to God's power.
  - Vincent Brümmer develops this issue, noting that God's inaccessibility makes it unclear whether human language is fit to describe God at all. Furthermore, if one constantly to remedy this, then one is simply developing a wholly negative conception of God, saying that 'God is like x but not like x'.
  - However, others such as Frederick Ferré, claim this issue is not decisive for philosophy. It always remains a philosophical question about whether there are unbridgeable differences between God and the world. What is important is the formal requirement in order to develop a systematic and meaningful way of talking about God.

## Religious Language as Symbol

- Symbolic language takes a much different form to straightforwardly positive or negative language. It primarily describes God and the world through the use of representations; images and metaphors point towards greater meaning.
  - Symbols, therefore, can be distinguished from signs. The latter literally stand for something, while symbols evoke a greater meaningful response from those engaging with them, through participation.
  - Paul Tillich develops this distinction. He contends that a sign typically is a pointer to something else, whereas a symbol is a more complex, richer representation that has a deeper meaning when used.
  - In this context, one common symbol is a national flag; it not only represents a country, but inhabitants it often carries an emotional significance, giving rise to feelings of pride and emphasising the country's core values.
  - Symbolic language is therefore, typically taken to be non-cognitive rather than cognitive, not providing factual information about the world, but rather providing a way for the faithful to express their faith and to participate in it.

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## Tillich and the Importance of Symbols

- Tillich's concern with religious language is placed within his overall synthesis of Christian theology. The main issue at the heart of his work is the meaning of how we can understand a vast and incomprehensible universe.
  - He contends that in nearly all academic disciplines this issue is raised, from science to the arts, and it is inescapable as soon as human beings start to investigate the world.
  - However, he also puts forward that theology is the only discipline that is able to address existential issues. Through what he terms 'method of correlation', it is possible to correlate Christian revelation to the deeper nihilistic questions encountered in other disciplines.
  - Furthermore, Tillich contends that these insights are symbolic in nature. The symbols of God both lead to a more morphic, contradictory interpretations and fail to provide a complete picture of life.
  - Symbols, on the other hand, allow human beings to develop greater insight into the different levels of reality they might not be naturally privy to and pointing to concepts, ideas and phenomena.
  - This is because symbols encourage wider participation in their use and carry meanings and emotions which might be inaccessible through ordinary language.
- Tillich's emphasis on the importance of symbols reflects his distaste for traditional conventional linguistic methods of describing or understanding God presupposed by a hierarchy of other beings.
  - Thinking about God in this way leads to specific attributes such as omnipotence, which God being bound by logical inconsistencies and contradictions.
  - Tillich contends that, instead, a more fruitful approach is to view God as transcending existence, not an actual being himself. This is important, as if one is treating God as a being represented symbolically, since ordinary language is fundamentally unsuitable to describe anything beyond conventional ontological description.
  - Symbols are, therefore, necessary in all aspects of religious life when talking about God. They enable beings to not only understand God, but to see how he gives purpose and meaning to life and eases the existential worries of individuals.
  - However, symbols are not simply created. They require human participation and development within a cultural context within which they are formed as the actual meaning of being is being their meaning.
  - Symbols, therefore, emerge from continuous reflection upon ideas about God and change with the arrival of new events, worries and phenomena through time.
- Tillich's ideas initially seem radical, but symbolism is rife throughout Christianity and is pervasive in all spheres of human life. It raises the question of whether religious statements are sets of cognitive statements, and not instead as non-cognitive symbols whose meanings are involved in shaping and participating them.
  - Taking the symbol of the cross, many Christians would be inclined to agree that it represents meanings, feelings and ideas that cannot be captured by ordinary language. It represents sacrifice, but the notion that God is on the side of human beings and ready to die for them.
  - However, statements such as 'God created the world' may also be highly symbolic. Christians will readily acknowledge that creation was not a single or basic process beyond human comprehension.
  - Furthermore, symbolic language captures the highly participatory nature of religion. Theists do not draw upon religious language in order to give basic descriptions of the world, but use it within dynamic contexts, whether they be rituals or prayers.

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## Issues with Symbolic Language

- While symbols are important within religious discourse, it is less clear whether a comprehensive account of not only how religious propositions are used, but also what they mean, can be given.
  - One key issue that many critics raise is that for many theists, religious statements are truth-evaluable claims about the world, even if there are potentially different ways of understanding them.
  - In the case of 'God created the world', while a symbolic interpretation is possible, it is not clear how this can be reconciled with the statement about God being the cause of the universe, whether it be through scriptural sources such as Genesis, or through scientific events such as the Big Bang.
  - Moreover, in both religious and secular discourse, claims are debated not just on their truth or falsity, but on their nature, but whether they reflect the genuine truth about God and the world.
  - Symbols might change over time because of the evolving participation of individuals in a community, leading to a new understanding of God which renders an old interpretation of a symbol obsolete.
  - This reflects a deeper problem for symbolic language. It is not clear how symbols can represent the theological body of knowledge that many theists ascribe to.
- Hick builds upon this issue, noting that Tillich regularly shies away from asserting the heart of symbols, claiming primarily that they represent the ideas of a community rather than fixed theological claims and statements.
  - Yet Hick argues this means that the only value symbols possess is subjective. It is difficult to tell whether individuals are gaining deeper meaning from participating in a community or just responding to a misleading emotional response.
  - Hick, therefore, contends that it is necessary to assert that symbols can only be true in a relative sense. Otherwise they cannot be said to correspond to deeper meanings or beliefs.
  - Yet if this is the case, then symbols cease to be as meaningful and become mere placeholders. They stand in for sets of theological statements or claims which can be represented by other religious language.
  - There is, therefore, a tension at the heart of Tillich's theory. It seems as if symbols are needed to 'ground' symbols in factual content, but if this is the case then the symbol becomes less comprehensive and less integral in capturing religious discourse.
- There are also issues with whether symbols are reliable or stable enough to convey meaning if there is no factual grounding.
  - Symbols can easily become trivialised and their meaning lost or perverted. For example, the swastika. While it is a symbol of spirituality in many religions, it was abandoned and used as a symbol of 'Aryan' pride or identity.
  - Similarly, there is an issue of whether the meaning of symbols can be conveyed to a wider community. If it is only possible to convey spiritual ideas by symbols, but they are not understood within their relevant communities, then it seems to make meaning impossible.
  - A final issue is that symbols can easily become outdated and fail to accommodate new understandings of God and the world. For example, Greek myths might be viewed as highly relevant, but the fact that such myths are highly likely in the eyes of most to be untrue.
  - Symbolic language is capable of change through participation of a culture, but it is also capable of remaining static and becoming irrelevant. Yet because the meaning of symbols is so important, it is unclear how to distinguish outdated symbols from current, dynamic ones.

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## Key Figures

### Thomas Aquinas

St Thomas Aquinas is one of the most important theologians to have ever lived and his work has influenced much of modern Catholic teaching. His work has a wide variety of influences, but he was particularly influenced by Aristotle's ideas within a Christian context. This in particular led to a strong emphasis on the idea that the attributes of God could be discovered and identified in the observable world. While he is best known for his arguments for the existence of God, his work within the philosophy of religion proved highly influential, with many modern theologians, such as Ramsey or Swinburne, building on his writings in laying the groundwork for legitimate religious discourse about the nature of God.

### Paul Tillich

Tillich was a 20th-century philosopher and theologian who is best known for his synthesis of Christian teaching, using this synthesis to address pervasive questions about the nature of existence. His theology as such was radical in many respects, eschewing the traditional view of God and the world, and embracing terminology from existentialist philosophy. As such, his view of God as Being-itself and faith as 'ultimate concern', the total surrender of oneself in faith, were often considered to be unorthodox, especially by more conservative Christians. However, to grasp his overall theology without extensive reading, he has made a vital contribution to the philosophy of religion.

## Key Texts

### *Summa Theologica* (Aquinas)

*Summa Theologica* is Aquinas's best-known work, and was intended as a guide for the study of theology (Aquinas never finished it). It is a large text, and Aquinas intended it to include all of the topics of theology, with each topic being part of a cycle which starts with God and ends with the Church. While the best-known part of the *Summa Theologica* is the five arguments for the existence of God, a key part is Aquinas's development of the importance of analogical language, especially where the nature of God cannot be understood from observation and reasoning on the basis of the natural world. His language have proved very influential, and many modern theologians have built on Aquinas's ideas.

### *Dynamics of Faith* (Tillich)

First published in 1957, *Dynamics of Faith* is one of Tillich's most widely read works. It is an exploration of faith (which Tillich defines as being 'ultimate concern'), looking at what faith means in the context of everyday existential dilemmas. An important aspect of his work is that the only meaningful way to talk about faith is through symbolic language. Words are used to point to the ultimate reality more than they are designations of a specific being, and there are a variety of symbols employed to show faith as a state of ultimate concern, including myths and parables. *Dynamics of Faith* is one of Tillich's most accessible works and a good encapsulation of his methodologies and philosophy of religion.

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## Student Checklist

What Do I Know?	No Idea ☹	Some Idea ☺	Good Idea ☺	
Why are there difficulties in describing the nature and purpose of religious language?				
What are cognitive and non-cognitive statements?				
What is the apophatic way?				
How can the apophatic way be useful when attempting to describe or understand God?				
What issues are there with the apophatic way?				
What is the cataphatic way?				
Why does Aquinas believe that analogical language is appropriate when talking about God?				
What are analogies of attribution and proportionality?				
Why might religious language make a number of inward assumptions about the relationship between God and the world?				
How is religious language often symbolic?				
Why does Tillich believe that religious language is extensively symbolic?				
Why might symbols provide a comprehensive way of understanding religious language?				
What issues are there with symbolic approaches to religious language?				
Are symbols too subjective to provide a comprehensive account of religious language?				
Should a cognitive approach or a non-cognitive approach be favoured towards religious language?				

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## Practice Exam-style Question

2. 'Religious language should be understood as predominantly symbolic'

### HINTS

In your answer you should:

- show a consistent knowledge and understanding of religious language, including:
  - the major theological approaches, including the apophatic way, the symbolism
  - Tillich's position that religious language is predominantly symbolic
- Analyse how these concepts can potentially illuminate the everyday use of religious language
- Analyse and evaluate different approaches to the questions surrounding arguments for symbolism, and whether symbolic approaches can provide understanding of religious language.

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# Religious Language: Twentieth-century

G<sub>2</sub>

L<sub>1</sub>

O<sub>1</sub>

<b>A Posteriori</b>	Knowledge that depends at least partially on experience.
<b>A Priori</b>	Knowledge arrived at through reason alone, independently of experience.
<b>Analytic</b>	Statements or propositions that are true by virtue of the meaning of the terms.
<b>Blik</b>	A personal, subjective view or lens by which each person views the world and their beliefs.
<b>Cognitive</b>	Statements or propositions that can be evaluated as true or false.
<b>Eschatology</b>	A field of theology concerned with the afterlife and/or the end of the world.
<b>Falsificationism</b>	The philosophical view that the criterion for whether a statement is true is whether it is possible to draw up conditions which would falsify it.
<b>Fideism</b>	The view that faith and reason are completely independent and that religious beliefs can be justified through faith alone.
<b>Form of Life</b>	The context or culture under which human beings perform their actions.
<b>Hypothesis</b>	A proposed explanation for a phenomenon or event that requires further investigation to become a theory.
<b>Language Game</b>	A primitive form of language that arises out of a specific form of life, with its own rules and criteria for meaningfulness.
<b>Logical Positivism</b>	A philosophical movement which emphasised the primacy of science and forward the verification principle as a test of meaningfulness.
<b>Non-cognitive</b>	Statements or propositions that cannot be evaluated as true or false.
<b>Parable</b>	A story or tale told to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson, designed to instruct listeners on a specific point.
<b>Qualification</b>	An adjective or information that explains or limits a larger statement.
<b>Synthetic</b>	Statements or propositions that are true by how their meaning relates to the world.
<b>Tautology</b>	A statement or proposition that is true under every possible interpretation of its terms.
<b>Verification Principle</b>	The principle that a statement is only cognitively meaningful if it can be verified through empirical evidence.

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# Twentieth-century Perspectives and Comparisons

## Overview

For most of human history, discussion about the nature of religious language was from a theological perspective. This meant that talking about God was considered an intention taken to be that God does exist and the only issue was to find out the most appropriate way to talk about God. However, across the last few hundred years, an increasing number of people adopted a secular perspective. This meant the assumption that God existed was increasingly questioned, and, along with this, religious language altogether. In the twentieth century, the debate around the nature of religious language became philosophical and linguistic, focusing on meaning, and critics began to ask whether religious language made any truth-evaluable claims about the world, or were simply expressions of faith or opinion. This kicked off broader discussion about whether religious language should be considered cognitive or non-cognitive and whether these statements could be approached from a scientific perspective.

## Key Points

### Religious and Secular Approaches to Religious Language

- Religious language is often viewed differently from secular perspectives, especially in the twentieth century. Philosophers have contended that despite efforts to clarify the form and structure of religious language, it remains non-sensical or meaningless.
  - Auguste Comte, the founder of positivism, claimed that religion would eventually be replaced by science, which offered more concrete and verifiable answers to unexplained phenomena than the abstract nature of religious explanation.
  - Whereas religious explanations typically had many different styles, where science was interpreted differently, scientific explanation was perceived as more rigorous and objective.
  - Part of this was that religious language was often connotative; the terms used in religious language had their literal use, whereas scientific explanation generally strived to be denotative and unambiguous statements.
  - This demarcation led philosophers to question whether it was possible to make truth-evaluable statements that were verifiable, such that all could agree whether they were or those that weren't.
  - Furthermore, this demarcation seemed to matter greatly when it came to the nature of the world. If a statement could not be verified to be true or false, what was its value? It could be questioned whether statements that weren't truth-evaluable had any value at all.

### Cognitive and Non-cognitive Approaches

- Scientific enterprise naturally values cognitive statements. In empirical study, a theory is only accepted as truth-evaluable for it to be established. This does not mean any theory is necessarily true; rather, specific propositions relating to that theory can be established as true or false.
  - Similarly, for religious language, the analogical approach from Aquinas proposed that religious statements about God. To state 'God is omnipotent', from Aquinas's perspective, is true or false by reference to sense experience and rational thinking.
  - However, on the other end, symbolic language is non-cognitive. The aim of symbolic language is not to state whether a religious proposition is true or false, but to understand its meaning for the person participating in it.
  - A number of deeper questions arise from this division. Do cognitive or non-cognitive approaches provide a more fitting and meaningful interpretation of religious language? Can religious language be meaningful altogether if it is non-cognitive?
  - Furthermore, how should religious texts be understood if a non-cognitive perspective is adopted? Is there a way of keeping the truth claims of scripture meaningful, or are they simply expressions of faith that do not possess a religious perspective?

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## Logical Positivism

- The logical positivists were a group of philosophers in the early twentieth century understanding the criteria for a sentence to be 'cognitively meaningful'; that is, a false way to states of affairs in the external world.
  - They were influenced in particular by Hume's fork, which divided between 'ideas'. The former were synthetic, contingent and a posteriori and the latter were analytic and a priori.
  - For any proposition, Hume claimed that if it fits into neither camp, it should be considered an 'illusion'. In other words, the proposition did not make a verifiable claim and should not be trusted to represent the way the world actually is.
  - The logical positivists took this distinction as a guide and looked also to see if they could label a proposition as analytic or synthetic. This led to what is known as the verification principle.

## Ayer and the Verification Principle

- The verification principle holds that for any proposition or statement to be meaningful, it must be verifiable either through empirical evidence or through it being an analytic truth.
  - Therefore, unless a statement was able to be confirmed or verified through some form of sense experience (and so be synthetic, a posteriori), or be tautologically true due to the meanings of the terms involved (analytic, a priori), then the logical positivists held it to be meaningless.
  - This meant that a wide variety of fields failed the test laid down by the verification principle. In particular, ethics which made normative propositions and metaphysics, which made propositions about things beyond sense experience, were demarcated as being meaningless.
  - Importantly, religious propositions failed the test also, as they generally referred to a metaphysical entity who is beyond the realms of sense experience.
  - For example, if one were to claim that 'God created the world', one could not verify this through experience, nor is this an a priori truth.
  - This challenges both cognitive and non-cognitive theories of religious language. If cognitive experience is paramount in understanding God (natural theology), but if God cannot be verified through experience, then there is no proper empirical evidence that could verify his existence, or his actions.
  - For non-cognitive views, such as symbolism, it effectively states that all talk of God is for poetic discussion about the existence or nature of things.
  - Such a view is succinctly put forward by early Wittgenstein, who claimed that 'whereof one must be silent'; implying that for topics whose truth cannot be verified, they are meaningless since any associated issues could never be resolved.
- A J Ayer continued the work of the logical positivists and in *Language, Truth and Logic* he gave a criticism of religious language, claiming that since it is predicated upon discussing the existence of God, it is fundamentally unverifiable and so meaningless.
  - However, Ayer also deviated from other logical positivists. He argued that the 'strong' verification principle, which claimed that a statement is only meaningful if it is verifiable through empirical evidence, was too strict, as it claimed that a statement must be verifiable through empirical evidence.
  - This prevented the verification of important statements such as historical claims, which cannot be directly observed every swan at once.
  - Instead he asserted what he termed the 'weak' verification principle, which claimed that a statement only had to be verifiable in principle through empirical evidence. Therefore, if a statement, when taken literally, is something through which sense experience, it passes the test, and one can assert that it is probably true, but not conclusive.
  - For the weak version of the verification principle still held that metaphysical statements were meaningless, as it would still in theory never be possible to empirically verify statements such as God, or the statements of other fields such as ethics or aesthetics.

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## Issues with the Verification Principle

- For the strong verification principle, there are a large number of potential issues to do with whether the principle itself is appropriate, and others concern what it excludes statements or propositions that would be considered intuitively meaningful.
  - One basic criticism is that the verification principle itself is unverifiable, and does not pass its own grounds for meaningfulness. However, this criticism can be misplaced, as the verification principle is not itself a law or metaphysical proposition. Instead it is a basic principle demanding that what is and is not meaningful for cognitive statements.
  - More concretely, some theorists challenge whether or not the verification principle is a real test of meaning. Brümmer argues that the verification principle is not a test of meaning for scientific propositions when they are in fact proclaimed to be true.
  - This is important, as supporters of the verification principle assume that what drives cognitive statements. However, Brümmer contends this assumption is based upon the logical positivists' own subjective outlook, not a global objective one.
  - Brümmer's criticism gives rise to the possibility that verification is not equivalent to truth. Cognitive statements may possess meaning even if they aren't directly true.
  - Swinburne in support of this idea gives the example of toys coming alive after sleeping. While it would never be possible to observe this behaviour, it does not make propositions about it, meaningless.
  - What it suggests is that the meaning of a proposition is not determined by its conditions, but instead how the proposition is understood in the context of the interpreter's perspective. It may be that the verification principle isn't too simplistic as a general principle of meaningfulness.
- The verification principle also faces issues when it comes to verifying propositions in practice. While it was noted that the strong verification principle had issues with facts, which cannot be directly verified, there are other problems still.
  - Scientific theories often posit many different kinds of unobservables, whether phenomena such as black holes. However, all of these are at best only indirectly complicated measurements and often aren't observable at all. This means unobservables cannot be verified by empirical evidence.
  - The problems were accommodated by logical positivists to some degree. For example, it was thought of as metaphorical discussion of direct observations or data. This makes metaphysical statements about the existence or nature of unobservables easily be understood with strong forms of verificationism.
  - Furthermore, it is difficult to form propositions about laws of nature under the strong verification principle as they can never be properly verified through sense experience (as there are no direct observations they can be tested). The same is true when discussing probabilities.
  - While logical positivists may simply argue that laws of nature are simply empirical regularities, in scientific practice they are often metaphysical restrictions or simply well-documented rules. This suggests that the verification principle is not a reliable test of meaning.
- There are also specific issues with Ayer's 'weak' version of the verification principle, which, although allowing for a greater set of propositions to be meaningful, also encompasses propositions Ayer may regard intuitively as meaningless.
  - Hick proposes that under weak verification, religious statements may be meaningful 'eschatologically' as since it is theoretically possible that in the afterlife we can empirically confirm many religious beliefs through sense experience and an afterlife spiritual dimension.
  - While Ayer might contend that such eschatological verification is misleading as one cannot verify the existence of an afterlife now, it raises the prospect that the weak verification principle is too vague, as any number of propositions could be true in circumstances unknown to human beings now.
  - This is especially pertinent as some religious philosophers contend that although they aren't strictly empirical claims about the world, they do draw upon sense experience.

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- Following Aquinas, Dorothy Emmet contends that religious claims use analogical language both in faith and specific sense observations about the natural world. Such claims are not true but they do draw upon verifiable elements and may be in theory able to be supported by empirical evidence.
- So not only do logical positivists misunderstand the nature of religious propositions, but themselves might accommodate a wide variety of meaningful statements: some which are empirically verified and others which are closer to metaphysical claims based on faith.
- This raises the prospect that verificationism, even in its weak form, may be able to deal with analogical religious language, and Aquinas's view could remain important in contemporary philosophy of religion.

## Wittgenstein and Language Games

- Ludwig Wittgenstein did not present a singular position on the role and nature of language. His early work, particularly the *Tractatus*, was highly influential in logical positivism. However, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein radically changed his view.
  - He came to believe that the meaningfulness of propositions could not be determined by verifying criteria or specific truth conditions. Instead, any rules or boundaries for the use of propositions were much more fuzzy, and contained within the context of their use.
  - Wittgenstein in particular noted that language was not a static enterprise. It changes over time as both the context of its use and the people using it evolve.
  - This hints that statements cannot objectively be said to be meaningful or not. The radically proposed is that whether a statement has meaning or not can only be determined by its 'Lebensform' or 'form of life' from which it arose.
  - A form of life is that context or culture of a person, or people, uttering a proposition. In the case of religious statements, this might refer to larger or smaller groups, such as a single parish or Bible study group.
- Out of these different forms of life emerge different forms of language that are specific to that form of life. Wittgenstein used the term 'language games' to describe the rules, principles and context of language within a particular form of life.
  - Each person might play many language games depending on what kind of work they do, the people they spend their time with.
  - From the inside of these language games, individuals may utter statements specific to that game and corresponding form of life. On the outside of the game, these statements appear meaningless, but that is due to them not implicitly or explicitly understanding the principles behind the uttering of those statements.
  - Wittgenstein uses the example of builders employing terms such as 'slab', 'pillar', etc., calling them out in a particular way or order that functions as a primitive language. Although these words are part of a larger overall language, they can be considered as a separate language within this larger set.
  - Language games are connected to each other by family resemblance. The meaning of a term is determined by the relationship between all the terms and statements employed by people in different games. This relationship is in myriad different ways by overlapping similarities that change and evolve over time.
- In the case of religious statements, their meaning can only be understood fully in the context of the form of life they were uttered or from which they arose. A religious statement such as 'God exists' may possess layers of meaning which an atheist or non-religious person would not understand.
  - Wittgenstein claimed that in any language there are statements that are not subject to independent criteria and cannot justify their use beyond convention. For example, the statement 'staplers are not staplers' has no reference to any specific criteria, it is only true because of a cultural convention that has determined some things to be staplers and others not.
  - This extends to religious language. Religious beliefs have no way of being objectively proven, they are simply formed from the way human beings observe the world and each other.
  - Religious language as such is not intended to be universally evaluated as true or false, but to communicate beliefs and ideas between people within the relevant game of life.

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- This does not mean that religious language is arbitrary, however, as any statement made must have to follow the rules of the game. This means statements can be incorrect but not broken rules or have been deemed to be used incorrectly.
- The logical positivists in developing the verification principle, therefore, applied a particular language game onto one which has different rules and criteria (the religious language game).
- As such, while religious statements might fail the verification principle, they are not meaningless to pass, only possessing meaning within the form of life in which the correct rules are used.

## Language Games and Non-cognitive Propositions

- Wittgenstein's ideas about language games provoked great debate among philosophers. It seemed to provide a theory of why religious language possessed meaning separate from logical positivists.
  - To this there is disagreement over whether Wittgenstein himself viewed religious language in this way. There is evidence that while he viewed meaning as inexorably tied to language games, he did not see this as invalidating criticism of any particular field of language.
  - The similarities between different language games may mean that common criticisms of different language games, such that criticisms from one can apply to another, are not valid. Rules or criteria of truth and meaningfulness.
  - However, a clear distinction can also be drawn between Wittgenstein and Aquinas. Both regard God to be inherently unknowable, but Aquinas' connection between God and the created world means that analogical language can be used to talk about religious beliefs.
  - On the other hand, Wittgenstein would argue that such analogical language is not a religious language game which emphasises the validity of natural theology. The possibility of deriving the nature or existence of God from sense experience is not possible.
  - For Aquinas, therefore, the limitations of religious language are due to the nature of the transcendent, perfect being, while, for Wittgenstein, its limitations are due to the nature of the religious language game, with its own set of rules and criteria.
- Other philosophers of religion have built upon Wittgenstein's language games to develop adapted ideas within the contemporary religious language debate.
  - Don Cupitt argued that all statements about the existence of God should be seen as non-cognitive, an idea often termed 'theological non-realism'. He argues that religious statements are not attempting to claim God as an objectively existing being, but are a form of expression for a religious community about faith and the world they live in.
  - D Z Phillips argues similarly. He puts forward that religious language in response to criticism has falsely adopted a language game more suitable for science. Instead religious language and the statements or propositions made inside it should only be understood and judged within the relevant game.
  - Religious language, therefore, does not need external justification for it to be meaningful. It is perfectly valid and legitimate so long as it is judged by the standards of coherency within its own game. It does not need to be subject to other language games or disciplines.
  - These views express a strongly context-specific understanding of meaning. Religious language is defended against more critical secular views, but there are a number of issues in the discourse overall.

## Issues with Language Games

- Language games are a useful way of categorising how human beings employ language in everyday lives. However, it provides a comprehensive way of understanding how something is just from the terms involved, but how those terms are used and structured in a particular context.
  - However, it is unclear to what extent language games can be applied to religious language and to what extent they exonerate religious language from secular criticisms.
  - One issue, as noted in the last section, is whether language games should be used to understand cognitive understanding of religious language; it is unclear whether Wittgenstein's view may be that shared criteria between different language games allows for a common understanding.

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- However, if Wittgenstein is correct about language games, then ideas such as the verification principle are misleading, as they are applying rules and criteria from one game onto another, creating difficulties or justifiability of doing so.
  - Moreover, the logical positivists may be mistaking in the first place the kind of language game being made in their statements or propositions, as they are adhering to different criteria for the truth of their utterance.
- However, it is not entirely clear whether viewing religious language from this perspective exempts it from external criticism.
- One issue is that the logical positivists can still claim that religious statements are meaningful if they accepted that their own criteria are more useful and coherent in describing the world.
  - This is particularly true for statements such as 'God exists'; the critic of religious language might say that this statement only has meaning within a religious language game, but it lacks any basis or grounding, compared to a statement such as 'zebras exist', which is grounded in the world and is universally understood as meaningful.
  - Relying on language games to justify the meaningfulness of religious language is problematic as no critical input from other language games could affect a theist's belief in God.
  - There is, therefore, an extra question over the kind of language games that religious language is part of when communicating with others. There may be some extra merit to accepting that religious language is meaningful, regardless of a person's form of life or activities.
  - A similar issue is whether language games are circular. If the source of meaning for a statement is the language game they are contained in, but language games are determined by how they are used and constructed by individuals, then it seems to raise an issue of how any language game can be justified.
  - This circularity suggests that language games are perhaps a too abstract idea to rely on. In order to understand the way individuals use language, more precise analysis is needed.
- There are also questions about reconciling a non-cognitive view of religious language with the claims made by scripture.
- The Bible, for example, often seems to make distinct and cognitive-evaluative claims about the world. Jesus's miracles, resurrection and events that are claimed to have happened are presented as God's actions in the world.
  - Most Christian teachings seem to reflect these claims. Calling Jesus 'God' is not just an expression, but a recognition that Jesus is divine.
  - There is, therefore, potentially an uphill struggle for the non-cognitive view of religious language to show how these claims should be understood, if not as cognitive.
  - One way, as studied previously, is through Tillich's argument that religious language is symbolic. If the case then the rules and criteria around the use of symbols may reflect the way religious individuals use language.
  - However, more broadly the Bible might be viewed as an invitation to a particular way of life. It develops a picture of the world in order to convey spiritual meaning on a particular way of life. Events within might not have to be assessed as true or false, but might still be meaningful within a particular religious context.
  - Hick, for example, argues that the teachings of the Bible should be interpreted as symbolic. If talking about Jesus's Incarnation, then it is best to demythologise such claims. The Incarnation potentially reflects God's love and intervention through creation, rather than a singular case of God's intervention.
  - Therefore, non-cognitive non-realist views on scripture are possible and plausible. If scripture has many different interpretations, it can be argued that a non-cognitive view of religious language is the way scripture is ordinarily used and interpreted.

### Flew and Hare's Criticism

- The issues with the verification principle, among other factors, led many philosophers to question whether it was possible to provide strict criteria for the meaningfulness of any statement. This led to the conclusion that religious language was automatically cleared as a result of the verification principle.

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- Antony Flew proposed that there was a major difference between religion and science; the latter naturally provided conditions under which they could be tested, while the former provided no such conditions.
- He adapted this idea from Karl Popper, who originally proposed falsification as a way to distinguish science from pseudoscience. However, Popper did not envision falsification as a way to distinguish what was good scientific practice.
- Flew, on the other hand, argued that what made propositions meaningful was the conditions under which they could be proven false.
- In contrast to the verification principle, there are no rules on how propositions are tested or what kind of evidence is required to verify them. Instead what matters is that propositions are tested according to the conditions that would show them to be true.
- An important feature of propositions, therefore, is that predictions can be made. For example, if it is said 'Whenever there are cumulus clouds, it rains', one can predict rain when there are cumulus clouds.
- If cumulus clouds appear but there isn't rain, in order for this proposition to be meaningful, it is necessary to reject this statement or adjust it so that it fits the evidence.
- Flew argues that despite religious statements or propositions giving the appearance of falsifiability, any time evidence is given that contradicts such statements, religious individuals only offer 'qualifications' of these statements instead of rejecting them. In order to demonstrate this idea, he outlines 'the parable of the invisible gardener', a tale which pits a believer and a sceptic against each other. The former believes that a particular patch of land is tended by a gardener, while the latter argues it is not.
- They both stay and observe the garden but observe no gardener. The believer insists that the gardener, therefore, must be invisible and tending the garden in secret, against all evidence to the contrary, while the sceptic argues that the lack of evidence indicates there simply is no gardener.
- Flew argues that in the parable, the believer is equivalent to the theist. They refuse to accept the evidence that contradicts their beliefs and instead they add stories to justify their original theory regardless of whether it is best to reject it.
- Therefore, since the sceptic can disprove the theist's beliefs, they cease to represent the real world. Religious language in this way, as Flew contends, is full of 'qualifications'.
- A good contemporary example of this idea is the problem of evil. Despite the widespread, purposeless and gratuitous suffering, theists continue to hold on to the idea of an omnipotent, often through providing explanations, from free will to soul-retribution.
- Flew would argue that these explanations fall short and are often arbitrary. If a theist view, would have just accepted that the evidence does not support an omniscient and so the idea should be rejected.

## The Falsification Symposium – Hare

- Flew opened up his ideas to other philosophers of religion, especially those who attended a symposium, published in 1971, titled 'Theology and Falsification', which contained responses from R M Hare and Basil Mitchell.
- Hare did not directly challenge Flew's parable. Instead he offered a counterexample: a student who is convinced all university dons are out to get him, no matter how much evidence is presented to him to the contrary.
- The key takeaway from this parable Hare argues, is that there is not a direct relationship between beliefs and evidence. It is all filtered through a person's world view. Hare terms this 'blik'.
- Each person's blik is a form of lens, which structures how they perceive the world and evidence for or against their beliefs. In the case of the student, even though the dons' niceness is simply a ploy by the dons to harm them.
- There is, therefore, no objective way to test the student's beliefs. Evidence for or against them, and vice versa.
- Hare contends that Flew's argument is one kind of blik going against another. Different person's bliks will interpret the world in different ways and so they will arrive at different conclusions.

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conclusions. This means the conditions for a religious statement to be true are different from those of an atheistic statement.

- Religious language and arguments, therefore, simply reflect the operation of the conditions for truth-claims and explanations of the world that can only be judged from within the conditions. They are evaluated by a person viewing the world from an entirely different blik.
- Hare offers a broadly non-cognitive approach to answering Flew, drawing upon the idea of blinks. Religious statements and their corresponding evidence are at least partially derived from a person's perspective on the world.
  - Hare does not argue that this makes evaluating claims impossible. Blinks can be different depending on the kind of claims people make about the world and how they view individual people.
  - Take, for example, the problem of evil, the advantages of Hare's ideas. Atheists might perceive evil and suffering as a direct challenge to an omnipotent God. Theists might see the moral and spiritual growth arising from evil, or the growth of love. In either case, what is evidence for each side's argument depends on the blik. The world.
  - However, Hare's arguments do have shortcomings. As Flew notes, Hare's blinks are the way most religious people perceive the statements they make. Instead of a particular blik, many theists would contend they are making a genuine assertion.
  - Furthermore, Hare's argument seems to suggest that religious people are not rational, since there is no way to easily judge whether someone possesses a blik.
  - Hare's position, therefore, potentially collapses into fideism, where religious claims are apart from faith. This is somewhat of a radical proposal, since many theists claim that the language used to describe him is rational and coherent.

### The Falsification Symposium – Mitchell

- Basil Mitchell offers a much different argument to answer Flew. Rather than deny the truth of religious assertions, he argues that evidence can be brought against religious assertions, but if the evidence presented is not enough for a fair-minded person to reject these assertions.
  - He gives a counter-argument to Flew, concerning a resistance fighter who is captured. The resistance fighter tells the stranger that the stranger is a spy, and the stranger is of a different race, such that the fighter trusts the stranger from then on.
  - The stranger, even after this encounter when evidence is presented to the fighter that he is colluding with the enemy, he continues to maintain his faith that the stranger is not a spy.
  - Mitchell argues that the fighter represents the theist, for the theist does not reject God, and accepts that there is evidence against this belief. However, part of maintaining this belief is the face of conflicting evidence, and moreover the evidence is throughout the world.
  - Therefore, when a theist claims that 'God is good', they accept that there is evidence that contradicts this statement, but that there are initial and continuing reasons to believe due to one's faith.
  - Mitchell altogether proposes that religious statements come from reason, and if falsified then these statements should be rejected. However, faith means that religious statements are not rejected simply at the first bit of conflicting evidence.
  - Flew's parable for Mitchell misrepresents the theist's position since it presumes that the theist rejects the evidence. On the contrary, the believer accepts the conflicting evidence, but holds to their faith.
- Mitchell's response has several advantages. In everyday life, propositions are often dropped or held to be true simply because there is some conflicting evidence, yet also held to be reasonable.
  - Draw upon the example of the problem of evil, it can be highlighted that the theist does not reject God in the first place. Even if people still hold faith in a benevolent God, most theists would argue that theodicies are necessary.
  - Mitchell, therefore, presents a more cognitive response than Flew. Religious claims are used within them are truth-evaluable, but the conditions for their meaning are not falsifiable.

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- However, there are still issues with Mitchell's portrayal. As Flew highlights from believing a stranger. God in Christian thought is an omnipotent creator exempt God from conflicting evidence or contradictions in the same way or intentions of a human being.
- Furthermore, one can directly observe the behaviour of the stranger, whereas the unknown and unobservable. Belief in the stranger might easily be understood. God's actions could be numerous or few, and so impossible to judge.
- Mitchell also does not clarify where the middle ground is between extreme uncommitted believer. The limits of faith are pertinent to a debate where already being irrational in the first place.
- It could be that theists have already surpassed reasonable faith. Unless one can show that theists are not, it could be that Mitchell is simply offering another 'qualification' to the original theory. However, setting such conditions is arguably an impossible task, since faith is belief in God regardless of conflicting evidence.
- It can, therefore, be debated whether reasonable faith is possible, or whether since reason arguably requires proportioning one's belief to the evidence, one's belief against a lack of evidence supporting it.

### The Issues with Falsification

- While Hare and Mitchell give two potentially persuasive responses to Flew, it can be questioned whether falsification is a legitimate test of meaning altogether.
  - One potential issue is that there are many instances where scientific theories are upheld, despite evidence against them. In fact this was an issue for Popper, who originally proposed falsification as a method of demarcating science from pseudoscience.
  - A key example was the theory of evolution. It is impossible to draw up the conditions under which evolution would be rejected because any fossils or animals would be ingratiated into a new hypothesis of evolution, as a form of 'qualification' to the original theory.
  - Such examples suggest that the lines are a bit more blurred between science and religion. Flew's parable lets us see this is particularly true when it comes to more abstract concepts.
  - These concepts often include beliefs about probability. There are no conditions for a coin being 50/50, since there could be any amount of variation between heads and tails.
  - There are also difficulties when it comes to scientific assertions about direct observation. For example, atoms or black holes. The statement 'black holes exist' would be, in principle, impossible to verify. In their nature, black holes can only be studied by their effects upon objects.
  - Yet for many religious individuals the same is true of God. He might not be directly observable, but believers claim there is evidence in nature and experience for his existence.
- The issues with falsification as a test of meaning don't mean that it is not potentially useful. It indicates that even within cognitive theories of meaning, it might not be completely objective.
  - It may be that more precise or detailed criteria about what makes a statement meaningful are needed in order to judge its meaningfulness.
  - However, it also has to be considered whether Ayer or Flew have their own subjective belief such that the criteria of meaning they propose are not objective.

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## Key Figures

### A J Ayer

Ayer was a twentieth-century British philosopher, best known for his support for logical positivism. His book *Language, Truth and Logic* arguably helped bring the verification principle to wider attention. He reached the radical conclusion that many different forms of language were meaningless. This was influenced by his strongly atheistic beliefs, especially later in life, and he remained critical of religion throughout his academic career. However, he did also eventually accept that logical empiricism was a flawed philosophical theory, stating that its most serious defect was that 'nearly all of its important theses are unprovable'.

### Ludwig Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein is one of the most famous philosophers of the twentieth century. He published only one book during his lifetime (the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in 1921), but his thought is divided into an early and a late period. The early period was largely concerned with the relationship between propositions and the world, with the view that providing the logical dimension solved many major philosophical problems. However, Wittgenstein in his later period started analysing human behaviour and language within the contexts it was used, and the pragmatic dimensions of how human beings employ terms and concepts. This proved highly influential, and many regard his posthumously published collection of manuscripts as one of the most important philosophical texts of the twentieth century.

## Key Texts

### 'God Talk is Evidently Nonsense' (Ayer)

'God Talk' is an essay taken from Ayer's larger work *Language, Truth and Logic*, first published in 1936. It expands upon his argument that religious language is essentially meaningless, since the existence of God cannot be demonstratively proved or disproved. Ayer also goes deeper, arguing that neither of these approaches can provide evidence for God as a metaphysical proposition. 'God Talk' is, therefore, a highly sceptical and destructive as it attempts to claim it to be. Ayer is arguably in many ways just continuing the tradition set down by Hume, arguing that meaningful talk or discussion of things has to be possible to be meaningful.

### *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein)

*Philosophical Investigations* was first published in 1953, after Wittgenstein's death. It covers a wide range of topics, but is best known for its discussions about the nature and use of language. It is a departure from his early thought and put forward that language has to be understood within the context of his conceptions of forms of life and language games. *Philosophical Investigations* proved highly influential, leading to both a decline in movements such as logical positivism, and the rise of what is known as 'ordinary language philosophy' in the subsequent years. Even now, many regard Wittgenstein as one of the most influential philosophers in an ever-expanding number of fields, and debate rages on the best way to interpret the book's loose style, which presents arguments in the form of dialogues rather than formal proofs.

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## Student Checklist

What Do I Know?	No Idea ☹	Some Idea ☹	Good Idea ☺
What is the verification principle?			
Why do the logical positivists propose the verification principle as a test of meaning?			
How does the verification principle pose a problem for religious language?			
What issues are there with the verification principle?			
Why might a non-cognitive approach to religious language solve the issues presented by the verification principle?			
What is a form of life?			
How do language games arise out of different forms of life?			
How do language games present a non-cognitive approach to religious language?			
How can language games be compared to Aquinas's analogical approach?			
What is the falsification principle?			
Why does Flew propose the falsification principle as a test of meaningfulness?			
Why does Flew argue that religious language is not meaningful?			
What replies do Richard Swinburne and John Hick offer to Flew in the falsification symposium?			
What issues are there with Flew's falsificationism?			

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## Practice Exam-style Question

3. Assess whether the verification principle successfully challenges the language.

### HINTS

In your answer you should:

- show a consistent knowledge and understanding of logical positivism and including:
  - how the verification principle challenges the meaningfulness of religious language
  - the issues with the verification principle and whether it is an adequate test of meaning, and whether religious language can be meaningful
  - different cognitive and non-cognitive approaches to religious language
  - the ramifications for logical positivism
- Analyse and evaluate different approaches to the issues surrounding logical positivism, and whether the verification principle is an adequate test of meaning, and whether religious language can be meaningful

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## Mark Schemes

### Levels of Response (A Level)

Level	Levels of Response (AO1)
<b>6</b> <b>(14–16 marks)</b>	The student's answer will display excellent knowledge and understanding, address the question, and will contain a strong and nuanced focus on the question, and will contain a ranging amount of applicable content applied with flair. It will show a detailed understanding of the relevant issues with comprehensive breadth and depth. There will be a precise use of technical language and significant and substantial references to appropriate scholars, academic opinions or sources of wisdom.
<b>5</b> <b>(11–13 marks)</b>	The student's answer will display very good knowledge and understanding, address the question, and will contain a great amount of applicable content applied appropriately. It will show a detailed understanding of the relevant issues with depth or breadth. There will be a precise use of technical language and substantial references to appropriate scholars, academic opinions or sources of wisdom.
<b>4</b> <b>(8–10 marks)</b>	The student's answer will display good knowledge and understanding, address the question, and will contain a good amount of applicable content applied appropriately. It will show on the whole a solid understanding of the relevant issues with moderate depth or breadth. There will be a mostly precise use of technical language and a number of references to appropriate scholars, academic opinions or sources of wisdom.
<b>3</b> <b>(5–7 marks)</b>	The student's answer will display adequate knowledge and understanding, address the question, contain a fair amount of applicable content and show a basic understanding of the relevant issues, though without depth or breadth. There will be a mostly precise use of technical language and an adequate number of references to appropriate scholars, academic opinions or sources of wisdom.
<b>2</b> <b>(3–4 marks)</b>	The student's answer will display a rudimentary knowledge and understanding, address the question, contain some applicable content and show a limited understanding of the relevant issues. There will be some technical language and a few references to appropriate scholars, academic opinions or sources of wisdom.
<b>1</b> <b>(1–2 marks)</b>	The student's answer will display a poor knowledge and understanding, misunderstand or disregard the question, contain little applicable content and show a limited understanding of the relevant issues. There will be minimal technical language and few references to appropriate scholars, academic opinions or sources of wisdom.

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Level	Levels of Response (AO2)
<b>6 (21–24 marks)</b>	The student's answer will give an excellent analysis and evaluation. It will contain a highly insightful, persuasive and coherent argument, with clear, well-developed justification and evidence for the views presented, and will thoroughly address the question. There will be a faultless and extensive use of technical language and a substantial number of precise references to appropriate scholars, academic opinions or sources of wisdom which enhance the answer.
<b>5 (17–20 marks)</b>	The student's answer will give a very good analysis and evaluation. It will contain a predominantly persuasive and coherent argument, with well-developed justification and evidence for the views presented, and will fully and skilfully address the question. There will be a good use of technical language and substantial references to appropriate scholars, academic opinions or sources of wisdom which enhance the answer.
<b>4 (13–16 marks)</b>	The student's answer will give a good analysis and evaluation. It will contain successful efforts to give a coherent argument, with some well-developed justification and evidence for the views presented, and will pertinently address the question. There will be a mainly precise use of technical language and a good number of references to appropriate scholars, academic opinions or sources of wisdom which enhance the answer.
<b>3 (9–12 marks)</b>	The student's answer will give an adequate analysis and evaluation. It will contain successful efforts to give a coherent argument, though it will lack full justification and evidence for the views presented, and will generally address the question. There will be a technical language and an adequate number of partly effective references to appropriate scholars, academic opinions or sources of wisdom.
<b>2 (5–8 marks)</b>	The student's answer will give a rudimentary analysis and evaluation. It will contain occasionally successful efforts to give a coherent argument, but with limited justification and evidence for the views presented, and will only partly address the question. There will be a limited use of technical language and a few ineffective references to appropriate scholars, academic opinions or sources of wisdom.
<b>1 (1–4 marks)</b>	The student's answer will give a poor analysis and evaluation. It will contain a fragmented argument, lack justification and evidence for the views presented, and will not address the question. There will be minimal technical language and no references to appropriate scholars, academic opinions or sources of wisdom.

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## Indicative Content

1. 'There is no adequate solution to the conflict between the omniscience of God and free will'. Discuss.

**(A01) Students may describe and explain the ideas below:**

- The omniscience of God potentially conflicts with human free will; if God already has foreknowledge of future events, then those events must necessarily occur.
- This necessity implies that the outcome of human choices or decisions is already determined. If human beings were free, then God could not know the outcome of their choices.
- This conflict is not necessarily an issue, as God is supposed to be a benevolent and just being. If human beings do not possess free will, it would be unfair or unjust to judge them on their actions.
- Some theologians have accepted that all things are predetermined, but most will reject the notion that humans have free will.
- There have been two major approaches. One focuses on the timelessness of God.
- This timeless approach contends that because God is outside of time, God does not experience time as being in the past, present or future. Instead, everything appears to God in the present.
- Boethius develops this view by appealing to the difference between simple and conditional necessity. He claims that God's knowledge only requires the latter, which in short means 'if an event happens, it must necessarily happen'.
- Anselm also develops this view by appealing to a four-dimensionalist view of time. Transcendent God is outside of, or separate from, the fourth dimension of time.
- The second view argues that God is everlasting, not timeless. God, therefore, does not experience time as future events.
- Swinburne argues that God self-limits his own omnipotence and omniscience when he creates free human beings. However, he remains omnipotent and omniscient since he can reverse this freedom at any time.

**(A02) Students may analyse and evaluate the question through the arguments below:**

**There is no adequate solution to the conflict between omniscience and free will:**

- The distinction between simple and conditional necessity is not enough to guarantee free will. If human beings are to be free, their actions would have to change God's knowledge, which contradicts omniscience.
- A timeless God raises numerous other difficulties, including whether God can be outside of time and how God could act within time. Furthermore, it can be questioned whether an eternal present is logically possible.
- It is unclear whether an omniscient and omnipotent God could self-limit his own power. If he cannot, the case then he is not essentially omniscient.
- Talk of an everlasting God cannot be reconciled with the God of traditional theism, who possesses complete and unlimited knowledge of everything.

**There is an adequate solution to the conflict between omniscience and free will:**

- A timeless God is coherent and the distinction between simple and conditional necessity is sufficient. How God's knowledge of all things is not foreknowledge of future events, especially if God is outside of a four-dimensional world.
- The conflict between omniscience and free will is only an issue if God is also benevolent. It may be that a deistic conception of God is most appropriate, where God does not interfere with the actions of human beings.
- It may be simply that God is not omniscient; he may self-limit his own knowledge to preserve the order of his world so that beings may make free choices. This is acceptable so long as God does not reverse this freedom at any given point.
- God may naturally be limited in power such that all beings have the free power to resist the persuasion of God. Omniscience only conflicts with free will if one insists that omniscience means God knows every possible thing, not everything consistent with his nature.

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## 2. 'Religious language should be understood as predominantly symbolic'

**(AO1) Students may describe and explain the ideas below:**

- The nature of religious language is widely debated. Broadly, approaches can be divided into cognitive and non-cognitive forms.
- Cognitive approaches contend that religious language makes truth-evaluable claims. One of the problems of a cognitive approach is the cataphatic way, which points forward that positive language is appropriate when describing God.
- Aquinas takes this cognitive approach, contending that while many forms of language (both univocal and equivocal) are unsuitable for talking about God, it is legitimate to use analogical language.
- Other scholars and philosophers claim that a non-cognitive approach to religious language is more suitable and comprehensive.
- Tillich, for example, claims that religious language is extensively symbolic, and this nature means that its claims are not directly truth-evaluable.
- Instead, symbols are employed by theists when talking about God, in order to encourage conscious reflection about his nature and point towards deeper meanings.
- Symbols also capture the highly participatory nature of religious language; believers do not simply make claims about the world, but use symbols as a form of faith and expression.
- On the other hand, for Tillich, using cognitive language in describing God is a fundamentally misguided approach; it treats God as if he were a separate distinct being and leads to the contradictions and inconsistencies that plague theology.
- This means claims such as 'God created the world' are not intended to be direct truth claims about the world, but symbolic statements that point towards God as the ultimate being.

**(AO2) Students may analyse and evaluate the question through the arguments below:**

**Religious language is predominantly symbolic:**

- Symbols are pervasive and extensive in scripture and tradition, whether it be from a Christian or Islamic perspective, such as the cross to the imagery used in the Bible to describe Jesus.
- God is not a simple object in the world, able to be described using ordinary language. Instead, God is the source of all being and can only be understood using symbolic language, free from the constraints of empirical and scientific terms.
- Symbolic language explains how human beings not only talk about God, but participate in the divine through language and employ it as a method of expression and a demonstration of faith.
- Many of the issues and inconsistencies in traditional theism occur because positive language is often employed inaccurately. The remit of theology is to give answers to existential questions, not to make direct truth claims about the nature of the world.
- Symbolic language notes the importance of a person's subjective ideas and experiences when talking about God.

**Religious language is not predominantly symbolic:**

- It is not clear that all religious language is symbolic and non-cognitive in nature. Many claims about the world are often made on a cognitive basis, with symbols used to augment and clarify our understanding of these cognitive claims.
- Aquinas's development of analogical language answers the issues with describing God using ordinary language. It is only improper if one is not being truthful in one's descriptions or making incorrect analyses of attribution and proportionality.
- While participation is important, many theists do not view their statements as merely symbolic of faith. Most do view them as making claims about the actual structure and nature of the world.
- Symbolic language is too subjective to be a comprehensive foundation for religious language. If it is not grounded in factual content then they cannot be claimed to correspond to reality. Yet if they are grounded in factual content, then this reasserts the importance of cognitive claims.
- Symbols are too easily misunderstood, misappropriated or mishandled to be an adequate basis for religious discourse.

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3. Assess whether the verification principle successfully challenges the language.

**(AO1) Students may describe and explain the ideas below:**

- The verification principle was put forward by the logical positivists as a test of meaning for a given statement or proposition.
- It held that in order for a statement to be meaningful, it has to either be analytic or verifiable by empirical evidence. If it is neither of these, then it is meaningless.
- Ayer put forward a weak version of the principle, saying that instead of needing to be verifiable by empirical evidence, statements only had to be verifiable in theory.
- The verification principle challenges the meaningfulness of religious language, as the existence of God; a metaphysical idea which cannot be proved or disproved through empirical evidence.
- This suggests that a cognitive view of language is important; unless a statement can be evaluated as true or false then it is not a meaningful representation of the world.
- In response, some theists have argued that the verification principle misunderstands the nature of religious language, which is in fact non-cognitive, and does not make direct truth claims about the world.
- Others have argued that the verification principle itself is misguided. By its own criteria, it is not meaningful, and excludes many important meaningful statements, such as historical claims and theories about unobservables.
- One example is Swinburne's toy room; even if such a proposition cannot be empirically confirmed or disproved, it does not mean it does not possess meaning. It relates to human experience and understanding of the world by the terms and ideas involved.

**(AO2) Students may analyse and evaluate the question through the arguments below:**

**The verification principle is an issue for religious language:**

- Whether a statement can be cognitively evaluated is an important insight into its meaningfulness, and this is generally agreed by those using both scientific and religious language. This means there is a strong foundation for the verification principle.
- Religious claims often demand evidence in the natural world for support; if this is not possible, then they should be accepted as faith or verification for religious claims. It is not enough to say that religious ideas are not testable.
- The verification principle is not a radical measure, but simply a way of proportioning the meaningfulness of a statement according to the evidence available. God is simply a metaphysical proposition that cannot be meaningfully confirmed or disconfirmed.
- The weak versions of the verification principle meet the challenges of critics; historical claims and statements about unobservables can be accommodated so long as they can be verified in theory.

**The verification principle is not an issue for religious language:**

- The verification principle misunderstands the nature of religious language. It does not make direct claims about the world but is an expression of faith.
- The meaning of a statement is not derived from whether it can be verified but from our understanding of the statement within the context it was uttered. The rules and conventions of the language game govern the meaningfulness of statements and terms.
- The verification principle excludes many intuitively meaningful statements, such as historical claims and theories about unobservables or laws of nature, which are key to the practice of science.
- If a weak form of the verification principle is adopted, then many religious claims can be accommodated, such as the theory in the afterlife through eschatological verification.

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