

T. J. MAWSON

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# BELIEF IN GOD

*An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*

OXFORD

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of Religion*

T. J. MAWSON

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*To my parents*

*Without whom many would be less than they are and some  
would be nothing at all*

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TWO people have been more influential than any others in the development of my thought on these topics. The first is John Kenyon, my undergraduate tutor in Philosophy. The second is Richard Swinburne, my graduate supervisor. Later in life, I have had the privilege and pleasure of knowing each of them as colleagues and friends and neither has ever failed to improve my thinking in my conversations with them. The questions to which this book addresses itself were first put to me in a philosophically rigorous way by John; and he was the first to guide me to care about trying to answer them in a similar fashion. Anybody who is familiar with the work of Richard will recognize his influence on almost every page of this book: on starting points, we are often in complete agreement; on conclusions, less so. But in both their cases my debt is of course not for the conclusions that I reach but for the questions that I ask and the method by which I seek to answer them. If progress in Philosophy is marked not so much by an accumulation of answers as by the improvement of one's questions, then these two have helped me most in what progress I have been able to make.

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T.J.M.

*St Peter's College Oxford*  
*4 January 2005*

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## Introduction

I start with a—roughly speaking, psychological—claim that I venture is true of everyone reading this book. At some stage in your life, the physical world considered as a whole—the planet on which you live; the stars you see in the sky: the whole lot—has presented itself to your intellect as something close to a question. The physical universe has struck you as a phenomenon in need of an explanation. Some of you think that you've found the answer to that question. Perhaps question and answer came at once, in one psychologically durationless moment of realization as you now think of it. Some of you think that you've found that there is no need for an answer after all. You've decided that the feeling that the physical world as a whole is a question is illusory. And for the rest of you the physical world as a whole continues to strike you in your reflective moments as it did then, as a question to which an answer is required and yet sadly elusive.

To have the capacity to be puzzled by the fact that the physical world as a whole exists is a contingent feature of the human mind. And although common, it is not a universal feature. There are some who have never been puzzled in this way and who are thus completely unable to empathize with the speculations to which this puzzlement naturally gives rise. Such men and women cannot but find the philosophy of religion and a good deal of metaphysics pointless, a series of logic-chopping or vaporous attempts to smother non-existent problems in waffle and nonsense. But I venture that nobody reading this has never felt struck by the physical world as a whole in the way that I've just described. I venture that for a number of reasons, the most obvious and unexciting of which is that a selection effect has operated on those who find themselves reading books with subtitles like 'An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion'. The prevalence of this puzzlement throughout time and across cultures explains the persistence of the philosophy of religion and metaphysical thinking: this puzzlement is, as Schopenhauer once put it, 'the pendulum which keeps the clock of metaphysics in motion'.

Because this puzzlement is a puzzlement about the physical world as a whole, if we allow it to keep the clock of metaphysics in us in motion, we will be led to think that the answer to the question of the physical world must lie outside it. An explanation cannot reside within that which it explains. Physicalism I define as the view that this puzzlement concerning the physical world as a whole is ultimately misguided, that there is nothing outside the physical world that accounts for it. Religions I define as those systems of thought that view physicalism as false, that claim then that there is something outside the physical world that accounts for it: there is something beyond the world that natural science describes and that something explains why there is a world for us to describe and why there is an us to do the describing.<sup>1</sup>

Physicalism has never been popular. It might be right none the less, but it's certainly never been popular.<sup>2</sup> The religious view has always been more popular. As a writer from antiquity summed his discoveries as to the diversity of the world's cultures: one can find cities without kings; without walls; and without coinage, but a city without gods has never been found. The religious view accepts the validity of this puzzlement. It accepts that the physical world is indeed a question in need of an answer. Specifically, the adherents of each religion claim that their religion provides the answer to this question.

What sort of thing do the various religions of the world say this answer is? Here we come to a great divide among the world's religions between, on the one hand, those—roughly speaking, Western—religions that view the sort of thing that is the answer to the question of the physical world as a personal agent and, on the other hand, those—roughly speaking, Eastern—religions that view the answer as an impersonal force. In this book, I'm going to be focusing on the central claim of the Western religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, those religions that say that the answer to the question is a personal agent, namely God. The thought that the answer to the question of the physical world might be a personal agent is the pendulum that keeps the clock of Theology in motion, and it's that pendulum I'll be looking at.

I would encourage you to think of my ignoring the traditions of the Eastern religions as methodological humility rather than methodological narrow-mindedness. If I am to make significant progress in the space allowed by a relatively short book, I must concentrate on an area that I can reasonably hope to traverse in the amount of time such a format allows. So for this reason, which I admit is not a philosophical reason, I'm going to focus exclusively on the main philosophical arguments pertaining to the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and to the main claim of these religions, that there is a God.<sup>3</sup>

So I shall be looking at this claim:

There is a God

and be asking the following questions of it: What does it mean? Are there any reasons for thinking it true? Are there any reasons for thinking it false? What is the relationship between having reasons for thinking it true and having faith in God? I shall be asking these questions of it because they are all different aspects of the main question that interests me, Should one believe in God?

Those then will be my questions. How shall I approach them?



He who has raised himself above the Alms-Basket, and not content to live lazily on scraps of begg'd Opinions, sets his own Thoughts on work, to find and follow Truth, will (whatever he lights on) not miss the Hunter's Satisfaction; every moment of his Pursuit, will reward his Pains with some Delights; and he will have Reason to think his time not ill spent, even when he cannot much boast of any great Acquisition.<sup>4</sup>

According to legend, when Alexander the Great first arrived in Asia, its rulers met with him and (hoping to avoid confrontation with his invincible armies) they offered him half their lands, palaces, treasures, etc., half of everything they owned. Alexander dismissed them instantly, telling them simply that he had not come to Asia with the intention of accepting from its leaders whatever it was they cared to offer him, but rather with the intention of leaving for them whatever it was he did not care to take. True philosophers are not beggars. They do not humbly accept whatever opinions are offered them by someone speaking to them from the front of a lecture theatre or from the pages of a book. They are conquerors. They take no pride in an opinion unless they themselves have won it by argumentation, and they deserve to be proud of what they win because the arguments that they use are ones they themselves have tested in the most intense fires that their minds and those of others could stoke. Of course they may be expected to take up weapons originally forged by others. But in testing them in dialectical battle they will fashion them to fit their own hands and purposes, adding their own experiences and intuitions to make a stronger alloy peculiar to them. It is in so conquering that philosophers' wars are always just and their victories righteous, for it is in so conquering beliefs that one can justify a claim to own them (genuinely own, as in have a right to them, that is) rather than merely happen to possess them. The best any philosophy book can hope to do is give a clear overview of the conceptual territory that needs to be conquered in this manner as it is seen from the point of view of its author, a point of view that will perforce be partial in the richest sense of the word. My only hope for this book then is that it will do this. As I travel across the territory, mapping it to the best of my ability, I shall be pursuing and chronicling my own campaign, travelling in a particular direction (i.e. towards a particular conclusion). But in doing so I shall do my best to indicate as I pass them the alternative positions that are or have been defended. In doing so, I hope to make it easier for you to assess the accuracy of my map; judge the wisdom of the particular course I have taken; and win the territory for yourself in the manner I have just described.

If no book can ever do philosophy, but rather only people can do philosophy, then in this sense no philosophy book can ever be more than an introduction to philosophy for the person reading it. But this book is intended to be an introduction to philosophy in the more usual sense too: it is written with the intention that every argument in it be understood by everyone who might read it, including those who start from a position of considering themselves to know no philosophy at all. Most philosophy books are not written with this intention. This one's being so means that, now and again, I'll take a moment or two to go over some terminological or other point in a way that those who consider themselves philosophers already will not find of benefit. My apologies to them for these delays. In fact, this tendency won't slow things down much. In this area of philosophy, unlike some others, one can make good progress without needing to master difficult technical ideas or symbolic structures. The ideas

employed in the philosophy of religion are—contrary to what I find many people unexposed to this area expect—commonplace ones; the arguments, commonsensical. All are within the grasp of the average adult who finds himself or herself with a will to grasp them. This is not to say that all are within the grasp of the average adult. Sadly, the average adult has no will to grasp these sorts of issues or arguments at all. This widespread indifference is not peculiarly focused (if one may in principle speak of focusing indifference) on the philosophy of religion; it spreads itself to all philosophy. As Russell observed, most people would rather die than think; and of course most do. But happily, due to the selection effect to which I alluded earlier, you are very unlikely to be ‘most people’. You will want to understand what I have to say and thus you will succeed in doing so.

Why do I have this optimism about the ability of the average adult who is willing to grapple with these issues to grasp them successfully? Why do I think that the human faculty of reason as it finds itself at work within the minds of normal people is up to the task of discovering the truth here and our faculty of language up to the task of expressing it? Shouldn’t we humbly think that if there is a God, then he exists beyond the possibility of human thought and expression, that here our reach will always exceed our grasp?

Of course human reason is fallible. The best ideas and arguments any finite mind can come up with may be expected to fail to reflect perfectly the nature of an infinite God if there is such a being. But what should we conclude from this truism? Is it that we should not even *try* to use our reason to discern the truth about these matters and our language to express it? Or is it rather that we should proceed with caution, being careful, for example, to define what we mean by any important term before we use it; being careful, for example, to make each stage in our argument as clear as possible; being careful, for example, to proceed with our investigation as dispassionately as possible and, where our passions must needs enter in, being careful to consider how they might be misleading us? This book is written in the belief that it is the latter course of action that must commend itself to any enquiring mind.<sup>5</sup> I do not defend that belief here, except indirectly: if my arguments work, then this is a vindication of my ‘working hypothesis’ that, if we tread with care, we may reasonably believe ourselves to be using words in a meaningful way to talk about whether or not there is a God and using our reason to arrive at knowledge of the answer to this question (or at least knowledge of how we should go about answering it).

Not everyone believes in this working hypothesis. And not everyone is temperamentally able to suspend their disbelief in it for the relatively short period of time that it would take to explore imaginatively where it might take them, the exploration that this book undertakes. If you think that you don’t share this optimism in the power of human reason to address these issues, I can say nothing that will better convince you to suspend your disbelief for the next dozen or so

chapters than that which I might be able to persuade you to say to yourself by asking you to imagine this situation.

You are wandering alone in a vast and unfamiliar labyrinth. It is pitch black: you have no light to guide you, none at all, *except* that provided by the flickering and weak flame of the small candle that you carry. You are guarding this flame jealously as you tread your cautious and faltering steps. A man suddenly appears out of the gloom ahead of you. This man tells you that which you already know only too well, that your candle is a small one and its flame dim. Then he suggests that, in order to find your way more easily, you should put it out entirely. What would you say to him?



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PART I  
THE CONCEPT OF GOD

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# 1

## Personhood, Transcendence, Immanence

You may have heard the radio play; seen the TV series; and/or read the book *The Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy*. In one incident in that story, a computer that has been working away—for thousands of years if I remember correctly—on finding the answer to ‘the great question of life, the universe and everything’ dramatically reports that it has found the answer but worryingly warns those who are speaking to it that they won’t like it. Undaunted, they press on and ask the computer to reveal what is the answer to the great question of life, the universe and everything. The computer tells them—‘42’. It adds, ‘I told you you wouldn’t like it.’

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share the view that the answer to the great question of life, the universe and everything is God. God’s not as amusing an answer as 42, but—and in part because—it’s one that we can’t help but think is *prima facie* more likely to be true. Jews, Christians, and Muslims differ over much else (as even a cursory examination of any newspaper will reveal), but these—often violent—differences should not obscure from us the even more remarkable fact that every Jew, Christian, and Muslim agrees on what each of them would say is overwhelmingly the most important fact to which the human mind can ever direct itself, that there is a God.

It will be handy to have a generic term for Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and, as the name of the conception of God that they share is usually referred to in the literature as the ‘theistic’ conception (from the Greek word for ‘God’), so I’m going to call Jews, Christians, and Muslims simply ‘theists’. So, my first question will be this: What does a theist mean when he or she says, ‘There is a God’? This isn’t, it will be observed, the question of whether or not what they say is true. Or at least, it’s not directly that question. (If it doesn’t mean anything to say that there’s a God, then that entails it can’t be true to say that there’s a God.) It’s the prior question of whether or not there’s any common and coherent concept of God that theists have in mind when they use the term. Do they mean anything at all by saying it? At least initially, it appears that they do, that there is a common and coherent concept of God that they have in mind.

There is a traditional set of properties that all theists are agreed God has and that all atheists, that is to say those who believe that there is no such being, are

agreed that he would have had were he to have existed. Where atheists think that it's logically possible that God exists (that is they think that the claim that he does exist is not in itself inconsistent, in the way that the claim that a married bachelor exists would be inconsistent), they agree with theists that these properties are 'co-possible', that is to say that there's no conceptual incoherence in claiming that an entity with all these properties exists. Where atheists think that it's not even logically possible that God exists, they think that, *pace* theists, these traditional properties of God form a mutually incompatible set, they're not co-possible. So what are these properties?

By believing that there is a God, theists believe that there is a being who is personal; incorporeal/transcendent; omnipresent/immanent; omnipotent; omniscient; eternal; perfectly free; perfectly good; and necessary. Furthermore, they believe that this being has created the world (by which I now mean to include anything else other than God that exists in addition to the physical universe we encounter in our everyday lives—for example, souls, angels, other universes, if there are any); they believe that he is the creator of moral and other sorts of value for us; they believe that he has revealed himself to us; and they believe that he offers us the hope of everlasting life.<sup>1</sup>

Not only do all theists agree that God has these properties, they also agree as to their status: the first nine of these properties are held by theists to be essential properties of God; the last four of these properties are held to be accidental properties of God.

There are at least a couple of uses of the terms 'essential' and 'accidental' in the literature. In this context we may helpfully say that a thing's essential properties are the properties that of necessity that thing could not fail to have yet still exist; a thing's accidental properties by contrast are those properties that it could in principle fail to have yet still exist. For those who have not come across it before, the distinction between essential and accidental properties so understood will be easier to see if I give an example. So, let me take as my example of a thing the particular book that you hold in your hands at the moment. (I'm assuming you're holding it; if not, pick it up.) And let me pick out two properties that this book has, one of them plausibly essential on this understanding and the other accidental. This book has pages—that's an essential property of it—and at the moment it is being held by you, its reader—that's an accidental property of it. If you removed from the book the property it currently enjoys of having pages—for example, by tearing them all out and eating them—then the book would cease to exist. What would exist instead would be a tattered book cover and a case of indigestion; and a tattered book cover and a case of indigestion do not—of necessity—constitute a book. That shows then that having pages is an essential property of this book—it's a property that of necessity the book could not fail to have yet still exist. By contrast, if you removed from the book the property it currently enjoys of being held by you—for example, by putting it down on a table—then the book would not of necessity cease to exist. So being held by you

is not an essential property of the book; it's an accidental property. Being held by you is a property that the book could in principle fail to have yet still continue to exist.<sup>2</sup>

So—according to theism—God has the first nine properties on my list essentially. They're properties that of necessity he could not fail to have yet still exist. The last four properties of God on my list by contrast are seen by theists as accidental properties; they're properties that God could have failed to have yet still have existed. God, in virtue of his perfect freedom (a property I'll come to in due course), could have chosen not to create a world, in which case there would have been no us for him to create moral and other values for; there would have been no us to whom he could reveal himself; and there would have been no us to whom he could offer everlasting life.

In a moment, I'm going to start going through these properties in the order in which I've just given them, talking about the conceptual difficulties and philosophical issues that they raise. By doing so, I'll show—as I've already started to show—why it's no accident that all theists would agree that the first nine of the properties I give in my list are essential and that the last four are accidental; and I'll also show how the divisions within the first nine of these properties and within the last four of these properties are artificial. I should stress a consequence of this before I go on: my dividing the essential properties of God into nine, rather than dividing them into some other number, is at least somewhat arbitrary. As we shall see, at least some of the properties that I initially describe as distinct are conceptually entailed by others. Indeed, I shall later argue for what is sometimes called the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity, that is the theory that all the nine essential properties on my list are best seen as differing aspects of a single and simple property that constitutes the divine essence.<sup>3</sup> So, while I've divided the divine nature into nine essential properties at this stage for the purposes of making my explication easier, some might sensibly divide it into a different number or indeed not divide it at all. The same goes for my dividing the four accidental properties that all theists are agreed God has into four rather than some other number or not dividing it at all. Later, I'll consider and endorse (more contentious) arguments to the effect that that also is arbitrary: given that God's created a universe with people in it, then he must (of necessity) create value for them; reveal himself to them; and offer them everlasting life. The division between essential and accidental properties however, *that* is—without contention—not arbitrary. We'll further explore why in due course.

This caveat about the potential for disagreement on the precise number of essential properties and the number of accidental properties of God having been made, it is, as I say, a remarkable fact that all Jews, Christians, and Muslims are agreed that God has these properties and that this is their status. Of course, one can find a few Jews, Christians, and Muslims who will deviate from this orthodoxy, but they are *very* few and they are very far between. Go to your local

synagogue, church, or mosque and try to find a Jew, Christian, or Muslim who understands what they are saying and sincerely denies that God has one of these properties. You will find that it is about as easy as finding a member of the Flat Earth Society at an astronomy convention. A consequence of this remarkable consensus on the divine properties is that the theistic concept of God cannot be an incoherent or vague concept unless the properties in terms of which theists define God are themselves incoherent (or incoherent when taken together [not co-possible]) or vague. It cannot be a term with little substantial content unless the properties that theists attribute to God themselves have little substantial content. I want to stress this consequence now in order to begin to meet a claim that is often made, that 'God' is a term with little, ambiguous, or only vague meaning attached to it. Of course there are deviant uses of the term 'God' in popular discourse, though they are usually indicated by a lack of capitalization—as when one speaks of the ignorance of the Greek god (NB no capital 'G') Zeus as to the identity of the person who will dethrone him. Nevertheless, in the theistic context, the term 'God' (capitalized) has a quite different and quite substantial set of properties associated with it. If the theistic understanding of the properties themselves is coherent and substantial, then the term 'God' thus has a very clear meaning; it isn't vague at all.

If we are going to understand what theists mean when they say that there is a God, we thus need to understand what these properties amount to and how they are related to one another; we need to find out whether the theist's understanding of these properties is coherent and substantial. My first task then will be to go through these properties in the order in which I've just given them and explain what theists mean by them. This is the task that will occupy me for the first five chapters. If a clear picture of God emerges as a result of this, we can then sensibly go on to investigate whether or not we have any reasons for or against thinking that there is anything like the picture we've thus painted. This is the task that will occupy me from Chapter Six onwards. From this description of my intentions, you can guess then the sub-conclusion I shall be arguing for on the issue of the coherence and substantiveness of the theistic conception of God: I shall be arguing that it is coherent and substantial. If it wasn't, there'd be no need for the second half of this book.

Without further ado then, let me start with the first divine property on my list: personhood.

#### PROPERTY ONE: PERSONHOOD

Theists pray to God; they ask him questions; they listen for answers; they ask him to do things; they suppose that by asking him to do things, they make it more likely that he will do the things they have asked him to do.

By way of illustration, let us consider an example of a purported conversation between God and the person whom Jews, Christians, and Muslims regard as the father of their faith, Abraham. As we join the story, Abraham is about to start arguing with God over God's plans to destroy the city of Sodom.

Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham approached him and said: 'Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and wicked alike. Far be it from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?'

The Lord said, 'If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I shall spare the whole place for their sake.'

Then Abraham spoke up again: 'Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?'

'If I find forty-five there,' he said, 'I will not destroy it.'

Once again he spoke to him, 'What if only forty are found there?'

He said, 'For the sake of forty, I shall not do it.'

Then he said, 'May the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak. What if only thirty can be found there?'<sup>4</sup>

The discussion goes on in this vein for some time, Abraham bargaining God down until in the end, while God does in fact end up destroying Sodom, he sends some angels to ensure that Lot and his family—the only righteous people who are actually to be found in that city—have the chance of escaping. Genesis 19: 29 thus reads, 'So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived.'

Now of course we cannot assume at the start of an investigation into the coherence of the concept of God that this story is true or thus non-problematically use it as 'evidence' of the coherence or properties of God, but we can use it as exemplary of the universal theistic practice of ascribing to God a certain property, the property of personhood. It may be that there is disagreement among theists about whether or not we should take this story literally and, even if we do, there are not many theists who would claim to have as intimate and conversational a relationship with God as it depicts, but all theists are agreed with the presumption of this and every other story that any of the religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam tell involving God's relations with humanity, that God is *not* simply an impersonal force, something which is either arbitrary or can be manipulated by certain actions that we can choose to perform. He is not a supernatural mechanism, something which is in certain non-belief-type states and that merely undergoes events or causes other things to undergo events. God is a personal agent, a someone not a something, a someone who has beliefs about certain things; who cares about certain things; whom one can thus reason



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