THE IDEA OF GOD  
(UNIT 1 TOPIC 4)

This topic covers three areas:

* The question of what we mean by 'God' and whether our concept of God is *coherent* i.e. whether it makes sense and is free from internal contradictions.
* An argument for the existence of God and whether it is successful.
* The question of where our idea of God comes from: is it innate within us or is it something that human communities typically develop as some kind of 'useful fiction'?

The divine attributes

The following attributes have traditionally been ascribed to God:

* **Omnipotence.** This means that God is all-powerful: there is nothing that he is not able to do, should he wish to.
* **Omniscience.** This means that God knows everything there is to know.
* **Supreme goodness.** God's intentions are always morally perfect and beyond criticism.
* **Transcendence and immanence.** 'Transcendent' means existing independently or outside of the physical world, while 'immanent' means existing or working within the physical realm. In Christianity, God is often said to be both transcendent and immanent, in the sense that he exists outside of and independently of the physical world, but he reveals himself to us through that world.
* **Temporally unbounded existence.** God's existence has no beginning and no end. He is sometimes described as 'everlasting', meaning that he has existed for all time and will continue to exist for all time. More commonly, God is conceived of as 'eternal', meaning that he exists *outside* of time altogether in an 'immutable' (changeless) state. For God, past present and future “are by Him comprehended in His stable and eternal presence” (Augustine).
* **Omnipresence.** God is present everywhere in all places at all times.

Is the concept of God coherent?

It has often been suggested that no being could possibly have all the attributes listed above because they are self-contradictory or contradict one another. Here are some of the alleged contradictions together with possible responses that might be offered by theists.

The claim that omnipotence is self-contradictory.

An objection to attributing omnipotence to God is that if God were all-powerful, he would be able to do anything (by definition) and that would include any act in which he overcame his own power—for example, creating a stone so heavy that he could not lift it. However the proposition that God makes a stone so heavy that he cannot lift it actually contradicts God's own omnipotence.
Response:

One might react to this by saying that God is indeed so powerful that he can defy the laws of logic. However, a more plausible response is that ‘being unable to do what is logically impossible’ is not a genuine limitation on God’s power, since any sentence that purports to say that some logically impossible act has been performed is literally nonsensical. In such a sentence, no act has really been described. It is not really true to say that an omnipotent being can make a stone that he cannot lift, not because such a being can do this, but because the description of the alleged act makes no sense.

The claim that if God is eternal, then he cannot be omniscient.

As we saw above, to say that God is eternal means that he is independent of time and therefore not susceptible to change. However, unless God knows what time it is now, then God cannot know which of the following propositions is true: ‘Christ will be crucified’ or ‘Christ has been crucified’. Therefore, God is omniscient if and only if he knows the time now. But if God knows the time now, then what God knows is susceptible to change. Therefore, if he knows everything he cannot be eternal.

Response:

A possible response involves looking more carefully at the nature of time. In the early years of the twentieth century, the British philosopher J.M.E. McTaggart distinguished between the A-series and the B-series. In the B-series, events are merely earlier or later than other events. In the A-series, they are also distinguished as past, present and future. Notice that the temporal facts that the above argument claims to be beyond God's knowledge are A-series facts, not B-series facts. This suggests a possible response to the argument: we could try to make the case that there are no independently real A-series facts, that the B-series is sufficient for an understanding of time. Then we could say that the things that God is alleged not to know are not independently real facts anyway. Since his being immutable and outside time does not prevent his knowing B-series facts (for example, that the Battle of Hastings comes before the signing of Magna Carta), there is no genuine limitation on God's temporal knowledge.

So how would we make the case that there are no independently real A-series facts? We could do this by arguing that A-series claims merely position events in relation to the speaker's own utterance. To say that an event is 'present' is to claim that it is 'simultaneous to this utterance', where 'this utterance' refers to the very utterance in which the claim is made. To claim that it is past is to claim that it 'occurs before this utterance' and to claim that it is future is to claim that it is 'after this utterance'. (A similar approach could be used to analyse the role of tense markers present in many languages such as English e.g. the 'ed' in 'We picked it up'.) If this is right, these statements are not really about a separate A-series; they are about the B-series, but in a particular sort of way, a way that involves positioning events in relation to the speaker's current thoughts and utterances. On this view, there are no separate facts about what is past, present and future and so the fact that God does not know such facts does not entail that he lacks omniscience—he does not know them for the simple reason that they do not exist. Having said that, it must be conceded that rejection of the A-series is a controversial move in the metaphysics of time. Some philosophers believe it is essential to our understanding of time, in particular that without it, we cannot make sense of the idea of temporal flow. (Incidentally, McTaggart himself agreed that the A-series was essential to time, but thought that the idea of the A-series was self-contradictory and therefore time was unreal.)
The claim that if God is omnipresent he cannot be transcendent.

The claim that God is present everywhere seems to conflict with the claim that God is transcendent, as part of what is meant by saying that God is transcendent is that he is outside space and time.

Response:

The conflict only arises if we suppose that 'transcendent' implies 'wholly outside space and time'. There is no conflict if transcendence is taken to imply an existence that is not completely confined to space and time. The story of 'Flatland' might serve as an analogy here. 'Flatlanders' inhabit a two-dimensional world and have never come across spacial depth. Imagine a cylinder-shaped object bursting through their flat world. The flatlanders would be aware only of a two-dimensional cross-section of the cylinder with no suspicion that the object extends beyond this. Thus it might be suggested that God is to be found everywhere is our world, but also extends beyond it in ways that we cannot conceive. (It should be remembered that this is only an analogy, as the extra dimension in which God is thought to exist is not literally a spacial one.)

The Ontological argument

The Ontological Argument for God's existence attempts to demonstrate a priori that if God's existence is conceivable, then God must exist. In other words, it involves looking at the concept of God and deducing that God's nature being what it is, God must exist. 'God exists' is thus seen as a necessary truth, which cannot be denied without self-contradiction. But what exactly is the argument? It has been stated in several different ways, of which the first is due to St. Anselm, an eleventh-century cleric who became Archbishop of Canterbury. A later version was stated by the seventeenth-century French philosopher, René Descartes. As Descartes' version is simpler, we will look at it first.

Descartes' version of the argument

1. By definition, God is a supremely perfect being.

2. Necessarily, a supremely perfect being has every perfection.

3. Existence is a perfection and so, by (1) and (2), God must of necessity exist.

There are a number of attractions to this argument:

- If it works, it establishes the existence of God beyond any possibility of rational doubt, unlike, say, the Argument from Design, which attempts to infer the existence of God from the apparent presence of design in nature and which might therefore be thought only to show at best that God's existence is a probable hypothesis.

- It also appears to reveal something important about the nature of God as a necessarily existing entity (unlike the ordinary entities encountered in the empirical world).
Its definition of God is clear and simple and probably acceptable to the majority of theists.

Criticisms of the argument in Descartes' version

Unfortunately, the argument often strikes people as a bit of a conjuring trick. Kant had what appears to be a pretty strong criticism of it when he suggested that existence is not a predicate, that is, it is not a genuine property or attribute. Rather it is the condition for something to have attributes in the first place. If existence is not a predicate, then it cannot be considered a perfection and so Descartes' argument fails.

Another line of attack accepts that existence is a kind of predicate but charges Anselm with failing to distinguish between what might be called 'intensional' and 'extensional' truth. Intensional truth concerns the way things are conceived to be, whereas extensional truth is concerned with reality. From the fact that something is defined as \( F \) it follows that it is \( F \), but only when speaking intensionally, not extensionally. If I talk about 'The round square', then what I am referring to must be both round and square, but only intensionally speaking and not in such a way as to entail that there are any round squares in reality. A definition only generates extensional truth when combined with an extensional assumption of existence, that is to say: if \( a \) is \( F \) by definition, then it is extensionally (and not merely intensionally) true that \( a \) is \( F \) provided that it is extensionally true that \( a \) exists. (For example, that The Golden Mountain is a mountain is an extensional truth provided that, extensionally speaking, the Golden Mountain exists.) This principle applies even if \( F \) represents the property of existence itself. It follows that Descartes' argument does not show the existence of God as an extensional truth, which is what he actually needs. His definition shows only that it is an extensional truth provided that (extensionally) God exists. To be completed properly, the argument would therefore have to appeal to the very point that he is trying to prove, which would make it circular and thus wholly ineffective.

You might object to this argument that in the case of existence, there is no such thing as intensional truth, because the whole point of talking about existence is to convey the idea of something's actually being real and that is extensional truth. But this is a misconception. Consider geometrical objects such as polygons. Some polygons exist; others don't—a polygon with both nine and ten sides is an example of a polygon that does not exist. But 'exists' here clearly does not mean extensional existence, for neither object has that kind of existence (their lines have zero thickness and no lines in reality have zero thickness). It must be attributing existence in the intensional sense. Similarly, in the Sherlock Holmes novels, some characters exist and others do not—Holmes' wife is an example of a character who doesn't exist. Again, 'exists' cannot mean here extensional existence. So we can distinguish between extensional existence in concrete reality and purely intensional existence. Descartes’ argument, if it establishes anything, establishes only that God has intensional existence.

Anselm's version of the argument

Anselm defines God as 'The being than which none greater can be thought' or as we might say 'The greatest imaginable being'. He then argues as follows:

1. The phrase ‘greatest imaginable being’ is understandable and so this being exists in the mind.
2. Suppose, along with the atheist, that the greatest imaginable being exists only in the mind and not in reality.
3. Then there would be a being greater than the greatest imaginable being, namely, a greatest imaginable being that exists not only in the mind, but also in reality.

4. But this is a contradiction, and so the original supposition that led to it (step 2 above) must be false—i.e., it must be false that the greatest imaginable being exists only in the mind but not in reality.

5. Therefore, the greatest imaginable being—God—exists in reality.

**Criticisms of the argument in Anselm's version**

Gaunilo (a contemporary of Anselm) produced what seems to be a rather devastating criticism of this style of argument—that it could be used to 'prove' the existence of all kinds of bizarre things whose reality no-one would take seriously. You could use it, for example, to prove that there is a 'greatest imaginable island'. For if the greatest imaginable island existed only in the mind, there would be an island greater than the greatest imaginable island, namely a greatest imaginable island that existed not only in the mind, but also in reality! (Descartes' version of the argument is of course vulnerable to a similar objection—in that case one could think in terms of the 'supremely perfect island'.) On the other hand, one might attempt to answer this attempted refutation by arguing that the idea of the 'greatest imaginable island' is in fact incoherent, since however good we imagine it to be, we could always add something else to make it even better. In contrast, God's perfections, such as omniscience, omnipotence, supreme goodness and (if the Ontological Argument is right) existence, do not admit of any possible improvement, nor are there any more good properties that we could add to them. So the notion of the greatest imaginable being is not similarly incoherent.

But there is a more fundamental objection to Anselm's argument and it relates to the distinction we drew earlier between intensional and extensional truth. To simplify matters, let us refer to the greatest imaginable being, whose existence the atheist denies, as $G_1$ and to the being introduced in step 3, the greatest imaginable being that exists not only in the mind but also in reality, as $G_2$. Now suppose we ask what is actually meant by saying that there is this being $G_2$? Is this to be taken in the intensional or the extensional sense? If we were to take it in the extensional sense, that would be begging the question against the atheist; we are not entitled to assume at this stage that $G_2$ exists in the extensional sense—the fact that he is defined as existing in reality doesn't guarantee that he has extensional existence, as is clear from our discussion above of the implications of the intensional/extensional distinction for Descartes' argument. So if the argument is to have any hope of working, we must take it that $G_2$ is being asserted to exist intensionally. But then there is a different problem, for it can't then be argued that $G_2$ is greater than $G_1$. This is because $G_1$ also cannot be assumed at this stage to exist in anything more than the intensional sense—again, to suppose otherwise would be to beg the question against the atheist. And if $G_2$ can't be shown to be greater than $G_1$, then the alleged contradiction cannot be proven and the argument collapses.

**The origins of 'God'**

Where does our idea of God come from? Descartes thought that it originated from God himself; he believed it was impossible to account in any other way for the fact that we have this idea, which gave him an additional argument for the existence of God, besides his ontological argument that we discussed earlier. An alternative view is that the idea of God is a 'construct' designed to serve certain needs that we have as human beings.
'God' as an innate idea

An innate idea is one that human beings can conceive independently of experience—they need not have come across anything like it in their sensory interaction with the world. Descartes thought that our idea of God is innate in this sense. I might think that I can explain why I have the idea of an infinite being by having received it from another finite being (my mother or father, say), but how did this other finite being acquire the idea? If we introduce a third finite being to explain this and then a fourth and so on, it is clear that we are just endlessly pushing the problem further back, producing what is called an ‘infinite regress’. At some point, Descartes argues, we need to invoke an actual infinite being to explain the existence of these ideas. This actually infinite being is like the original of which the ideas are copies. Therefore, Descartes concludes, God must exist as the source of the idea that we have of him.

Descartes considers a possible objection to his own argument, which is that we could have obtained the idea of the infinite by negating our idea of the finite. Infinite goodness, for example, is goodness that is not limited. In reply to his own objection, he then claims that infinite qualities cannot be understood in this way, that our idea of the infinite is prior to our understanding of the finite, not the other way about: ‘...how could I possibly understand that I doubt, and that I desire, that is, that there is something lacking in me, and that I am not completely perfect, if there were no idea in me of a more perfect being, by comparison with which I could recognise my own shortcomings?’ But Descartes seems here to be confusing the idea of perfection as something that can come in degrees—one can be ‘more’ or ‘less’ perfect—with the idea of absolute perfection, which admits of no degrees because it represents perfection beyond the possibility of improvement. Certainly, to understand that I am lacking in something I need to understand that that there could be someone who was better than me in that respect. But it does not follow that I have to have a prior notion of a being that could not be bettered in any way at all. For all that Descartes has said, it seems that we could indeed have derived the idea of perfect goodness from that of imperfect goodness, rather than the other way around.

Though we may have doubts about the cogency of Descartes' argument for maintaining that our idea of God is innate, it remains possible perhaps that it is. It is not an obviously false claim. Though it may be true that not every member of every human community has the idea of an infinite being, this idea might nevertheless be present in everyone in some potential form, needing to be activated in some way and perhaps indeed the source of this 'potential idea' is God himself. But is there an alternative explanation for our having the idea of God? Perhaps this concept is a human construction, designed to meet certain needs. This possibility will be explored in the next section.

'God' as a human construct

One reason for thinking that God might be no more than a human construct is the anthropomorphism present in most conceptions of him. Although God is not normally conceived of as having a physical existence and is thus different from human beings in that respect, he is usually granted many of the psychological characteristics of humans, positive and negative (such as wisdom, kindness, jealousy and vengefulness). It might even be claimed that we have to conceptualise God in terms of human attributes, since his possession of at least some of them is a necessary condition of our being able to have any kind of relationship with him. Of course, this does not prove that God is no more than a construct of the human mind: we would at least need to explain why the idea of God (or of gods) could have come about by natural processes.
According to Marx, we construct religion in order to help us come to terms with the misery, distress and hardship of this life. (‘Religion is the opium of the people’.) The idea of an all-loving and all-powerful God who will guarantee us happiness in an after-life if only we will put our faith in him may well be effective solace for the oppressed—and a good tool for their capitalist bosses, who would rather that they took such comfort than challenge their oppression.

However, despite its ‘scientific’ pretensions, this Marxist notion seems to be nothing more than a plausible-looking guess as to why religion came into existence. A more genuinely scientific attempt to explain religion has recently been developed by Daniel Dennett. Dennett seeks a Darwinian explanation of religion in terms of its survival value in human societies. He invokes Richard Dawkins’ idea of a meme—a cultural idea or practice that is very successful in replicating itself within human populations (i.e., the cultural equivalent of a gene). According to Dennett, the origins of religion lie in human beings’ adoption of the ‘intentional stance’, that is, the attitude of mind in which we attribute beliefs and desires to others. But at some point in our evolution, it became ‘hyperactivated’, so that even inanimate objects were thought to have beliefs and desires, giving rise to early animistic versions of religion. A similar hyperactivation of the (biologically advantageous) tendency to trust one’s parents and to see them as ‘repositories’ of knowledge led to ancestor worship, Dennett suggests. Then the critical transition to belief in an invisible God was achieved when religious authorities found it advantageous to refer important questions from believers to a higher authority whose answers they alone could verify. Although Dennett offers some suggestions as to the kinds of future research programmes that might be adopted to provide more evidence for the truth of his theory, at present it remains a plausible speculation, albeit with a good scientific basis in Darwinism.