

Within every major religion is a belief about a transcendent reality underlying the natural, physical world. From its beginnings, the philosophy of religion has been concerned with reflecting on, as far as possible, how religions might understand what it calls "Ultimate Reality". How the various religions conceptualize that reality differs, especially between Eastern and Western religions. In Western religion,¹ by which I am referring primarily to the three religions of Abrahamic descent, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Ultimate Reality is conceived of in terms of a personal God. God is not only personal, but the creator of all, and perfect in every respect. Many other properties are attributed to God as well, including omniscience, omnipotence, and immutability.

In Eastern religion – and here I am referring primarily to Buddhism, Taoism, and the Advaita Vedānta school of Hinduism – Ultimate Reality is understood quite differently. It is not a personal creator God, for example, but an absolute state of being. It cannot be described by a set of attributes (such as omniscience or omnipotence) for it is undifferentiated, Absolute Reality. Taoists refer to it as the *dao*; Hindus refer to it as Brahman; for Buddhists, the name varies – *sunyata* for example, or *nirvana*. These different conceptions of Ultimate Reality bring with them distinct understandings of other significant issues as well, such as salvation/liberation, life after death, and evil and suffering, among others.

In this chapter we will focus specifically on the two different conceptions of Ultimate Reality, beginning with Eastern religion.

ULTIMATE REALITY: THE ABSOLUTE AND THE VOID

Hindu Absolutism

Dating back more than five thousand years, Hinduism is one of the oldest religions of recorded history. Unlike most other religions, Hinduism embraces many distinct belief systems and worldviews. There are theistic, polytheistic, pantheistic, and even atheistic forms of Hinduism. Because of this diversity, it is impossible to accurately summarize Hindu thought on any particular matter. For our purposes, however, we will home in on one school of Hinduism that is frequently discussed in the philosophy of religion literature: Advaita Vedānta. This school of Hinduism includes the belief that Ultimate Reality, indeed all reality, is Brahman and Brahman alone. A key figure espousing Advaita Vedānta was the eighth century Indian philosopher Shankara. As he explains it, only Brahman is real, and Brahman is devoid of all distinctions. He describes it this way:²

Brahman is the reality – the one existence, absolutely independent of human thought or idea. Because of the ignorance of our human minds, the universe seems to be composed of diverse forms. It is Brahman alone.³

This is a form of Hindu Absolutism – the view that Ultimate Reality is the undifferentiated Absolute. It is also a form of *monism* in which there is only one reality; this reality – Brahman – includes no attributes, and all apparent distinctive characteristics within Brahman and between Brahman and the world are ultimately illusory. For the Advaitin, this is true of all distinctions, between all (apparent) things, even between one's self (*Atman*) and Brahman.

Just as, my dear, the bees prepare honey by collecting the essences of different trees and reducing them into one essence, and as these (juices) possess no discrimination (so that they might say) "I am the essence of this tree, I am the essence of that tree," even so, indeed, my dear, all these creatures though they reach Being do not know that they have reached the Being. Whatever they are in this world, tiger or lion or wolf or boar or worm or fly or gnat or mosquito, that they become. That which is the subtle essence, this whole world has for its self. That is the true. That is the self. That are thou...⁴

It is sometimes difficult for Western minds to conceive of the absence of all distinctions, especially between oneself and all other (apparent) things. Our experiences imply that we are unique individuals, separate identities from other people, things, and God.

A question which naturally arises is why are we not experiencing this undifferentiated unity with Brahman? Why do we believe that we are separate, unique, individual entities and that distinctions are real? The Advaitin answer is that we begin in an unenlightened state because of the deleterious effects of *maya*, which ultimately infect us because of *karma*. In Hindu mythology, *maya* (also

Shankara and Advaita Vedānta. Shankara (c. 788–820 CE) is the most renowned Indian philosopher to develop the doctrine of Advaita Vedānta Hinduism. He wrote a number of works, including commentaries on the Vedas (sacred Hindu texts). There are various schools of Vedānta, and the one he expounded and defended is the non-dualistic system in which reality is one (*advaita* means "non-dual" and Vedānta means "end of the Vedas"). On this view, Ultimate Reality (Brahman) is undifferentiated unity, and the multifaceted phenomenal world is an illusion (*maya*).

Maya) is depicted as a divine goddess, Mahamaya, who deludes us. Hindu Advaitin philosophers typically interpret *maya* as the great veiling of the true, Unitary Self.

A second question, then, is how do we overcome this illusion? The Advaitin answer is that we need to advance to an enlightened state in order to overcome the veil of cosmic ignorance. We do this by moving beyond the rational mind, and we do it most effectively through various paths or Yogas.⁵ By engaging in the right physical and mental practices we can escape the illusory power of *maya* and finally experience *moksha* – the enlightened realization that reality is one, multiplicity is illusion, and only the undifferentiated Absolute is real. While *moksha* is the goal, it is recognized in Advaita Vedānta that true enlightenment may not be achieved in this life. It may, indeed, take many reincarnations before the power of *maya*, and the negative influences of karma, are expunged (more will be said about karma in Chapter 10).

While Absolutism is a very ancient tradition within Hinduism, it has modern adherents as well, and one of its most prominent expounders in recent times was Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950). Sri Ramana, as he is sometimes called, maintained that escaping the veiling power of *maya* is best accomplished by searching deeply within ourselves, a method of self-inquiry he referred to as “I-thought.” By constantly focusing on the questions Who am I? and Where does this “I” come from? – keeping an inner attention on the “I” and excluding all other thoughts – one can eventually attain the Self-realization that the individual self is nothing other than *Atman* (Self), and that *Atman* is Brahman.⁶

While it is estimated that three-fourths of Hindu intellectuals affirm an Absolutist view of Ultimate Reality, it has never been widely popular among the general population of Hindus.⁷ Nevertheless, it has been very influential in the history of Hindu thought.

Buddhist metaphysics

Buddhism emerged from within the Hindu tradition in India in roughly the fifth century BCE, and with respect to Ultimate Reality it is arguably most closely aligned with the Advaita Vedānta school of Hindu thought. However, Ultimate Reality in Buddhism, at least in one major school called Madhyamika (the school of the “Middle Way”) as developed by Nagarjuna, is neither the Absolute of Hinduism nor the personal God of the theistic religions. Rather, it is *sunyata*, which is translated as “Emptiness” or “The Void.”

At first glance it may seem that emptiness and Ultimate Reality are contradictory notions. How can something real be empty? But Buddhists of this school understand “being real” as “being independent of other things.” Buddhist scholar Masao Abe clarifies:

The Buddhists believe that to be called “substantial or real” a thing must be able to exist on its own. However, if we look at the universe, we find that everything in it exists only in relation to something else. A son is a son only in relation to his father; and a father similarly in relation to his son. Fatherhood does not exist on its own but only in relation to something else. The Buddhists use the word *svabhāva* to denote existence on its own, that is, nondependent existence, which alone, according to them, qualifies as true or genuine existence. But if everything in the world depends on something else for being what it is, then nothing in the universe can be said to possess *svabhāva* or genuine existence; hence it is empty.⁸

On the Buddhist metaphysic, there is no “thing” which has independent existence. Fundamental reality is in fact emptiness. There is neither *Atman* nor Brahman, there is no self but *Anatman*, or no-self (more about this in Chapter 10). All things – whether galaxies, mountains, trees, animals, or people (including you and me) – are in fact abstractions of events or processes, events or processes which are dependent on other events or processes. Even though things appear to be static or stable, this is due to abstracting from the various experiences one has and then positing a substantial self or static entity. But again, these are processes; in reality, all is in flux. One Buddhist text puts it this way:

Whether Buddhas arise, O priests, or whether Buddhas do not arise, it remains a fact and the fixed and necessary constitution of being that all its constituents are transitory. This fact a Buddha discovers and masters, and when he has discovered and mastered it, he announces, teaches, publishes, proclaims, discloses, minutely explains, and makes clear that all the constituents of being are transitory.⁹

Nagarjuna (c. 150–250 CE) was an Indian Buddhist philosopher and perhaps the most influential Buddhist thinker besides Siddhartha Gautama – the Buddha (c. 563–483 BCE). He is primarily known for developing a view called *sunyata*, or emptiness, which unifies two other central Buddhist doctrines: no-self and interdependent arising. His writings formed the basis of the Madhyamika (Middle Way) school of Buddhism. He wrote many works, including *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* (*Mulamadhyamakakarika*), the *Seventy Verses on Emptiness* (*Sunyatasaptati*), and the *Sixty Verses on Reasoning* (*Yuktisastika*).

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS AND THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH

The Four Noble Truths

- 1 The existence of suffering (*dukkha*) – life is suffering.
- 2 The arising of suffering (*samudaya*) – the cause of suffering is attachment and selfish desire.
- 3 The cessation of suffering (*nirodha*) – the path out of suffering is the cessation of attachment and selfish desire.
- 4 The way of cessation (*marga*) – the path for achieving the cessation of attachment and selfish desire is the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Noble Eightfold Path

- 1 Right views – understanding Buddhist doctrines such as *Anatman*, interdependent arising, and the Four Noble Truths.
- 2 Right resolve – resolving to renounce the world and to act with charity toward all.
- 3 Right speech – speaking the truth with kindness and respect.
- 4 Right conduct – acting according to moral principles.
- 5 Right livelihood – living in a way that does no harm to anyone or anything.
- 6 Right effort – attempting to live a noble life and to avoid an ignoble life.
- 7 Right mindfulness – attending to wholesome thoughts; compassion.
- 8 Right meditation – focused concentration on the Eightfold Path and the unity of all life.

Thus all that exists does so only in relation to other things. Furthermore, all things originate out of a self-sustaining causal nexus in which each link arises from another. This is the Buddhist doctrine of interdependent arising (*pratitya-samutpada*), and it is an important element of Buddhist metaphysics. Everything is dependent on and connected to other things. Nothing in the nexus is independent; everything arises from something else.

Buddhists also hold to the idea of karma, the notion that actions – past, present, and future – have effects on the actor. This is one of the causes in the nexus of interdependent arising. Because of ignorance (*avidya*), we continue to experience the effects of karma, which keeps us within the cycle of cause and effect, death and reincarnation. The way to escape the illusory world of permanence is explained by Nagarjuna as recognizing *sunyata*, by becoming aware of Emptiness, or the Void, by seeing that there are no finite or infinite substances – no individual or permanent

selves or beings – and ultimately breaking through the illusion of the phenomenal world, escaping the cycle of rebirth and experiencing *nirvana*, the final extinction of ego and personal desire.

Just as with the Advaita Vedānta claim that “*Atman* (Self) is Brahman and Brahman is undifferentiated Ultimate Reality” is not readily apparent and even contrary to typical human experience, so too with the Buddhist doctrines of *sunyata* and *Anatman*. Thus, a question which naturally arises is why are we not experiencing emptiness, no-self, and the interconnectedness of all things? Why do we tend to believe that we are substantial selves and that we are separate from ultimate reality? The Madhyamika Buddhist answer is that we need to be enlightened in order to rightly apprehend these fundamental truths. The path to enlightenment, or *nirvana* (which is an indescribable state of ultimate bliss; the extinction of the self), is the discovery, understanding, and practice of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.

ULTIMATE REALITY: A PERSONAL GOD

While Eastern thinkers, such as those above, maintain that Ultimate Reality is the undifferentiated, impersonal Absolute and deny the existence of a substantial divine being, philosophical reflection about the nature of a *personal God* – what is sometimes dubbed “philosophical theology” – has been part and parcel of the Western philosophical enterprise since its inception more than two millennia ago. Many of the early Greek philosophers, for example, reflected on and wrote about the divine. In later centuries, thinkers from the Western religions utilized the work of these “pagan” philosophers in their attempt to comprehend and articulate the nature and attributes of God from within their own religious traditions.

But what is meant by the term “God” from the perspective of Western religion? For the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), God is a personal, perfect being who created the world and who has certain divine properties, or attributes, which set God apart from all other beings. This is called “theism,” and it is the view of God traditionally held not only by adherents of the three great monotheistic

Ramanuja (c. 1017–1137) was the chief proponent of a qualified non-dualist form of Vedānta Hinduism called *Vishishtadvaita* which includes a view of Brahman more akin to monotheism than to pantheism. He was also one of the main Hindu philosophers to systematically interpret the Vedas, or Hindu scriptures, from a theistic perspective, and he argued for the soteriological (salvific) importance of *bhakti*, or devotion to God.

religions, but also by those within a longstanding Hindu tradition who, unlike the Advaita Vedāntins, affirm certain attributes of Ultimate Reality. One such depiction of God, or Brahman, as he is called, from within this tradition was offered by the Hindu philosopher Ramanuja (c. 1017–1137 – yes, it seems he lived quite a long life!):

By the word “Brahman” is denoted the Supreme Person, who is by inherent nature free from all imperfections and possesses hosts of auspicious qualities which are countless and of matchless excellence. In all contexts the term “Brahman” is applied to whatever possesses the quality of greatness, but its primary and most significant meaning is that Being whose greatness is of matchless excellence, both in His essential nature and in His other qualities. It is only the Lord of all who is such a Being. Therefore the word “Brahman” is primarily used only to signify Him...¹⁰

Similarly Anselm (1033–1109), a Christian philosopher, theologian, and monk, described God this way:

God is whatever it is better to be than not to be; and he, as the only self-existent being, creates all things from nothing.

What art thou, then, Lord God, than whom nothing greater can be conceived? But what art thou, except that which, as the highest of all beings, alone exists through itself, and creates all other things from nothing? For, whatever is not this is less than a thing which can be conceived of. But this cannot be conceived of thee. What good, therefore, does the supreme Good lack, through which every good is? Therefore, thou art just, truthful, blessed, and whatever it is better to be than not to be. For it is better to be just than not just; better to be blessed than not blessed.¹¹

We find parallel depictions in the other theistic traditions as well.

Philosophical reflection about God has moved in new directions in recent times, and a central discussion these days has to do with the coherence of theism. Some philosophers argue that the traditional concept of God is plausible; that the divine attributes, as historically held, can be reasonably articulated and affirmed. Others argue that theism is internally inconsistent in a way that God turns out to be a logically impossible being. Others argue that the traditional concept of God must be significantly modified in order for it to be logically coherent. Still other philosophers argue that overall the concept of God is coherent, but some of the classic attributes are in need of modification. In recent discussions on the coherence of theism, two concerns have been central: the logical coherence of each of the divine attributes considered individually, and the logical compatibility of the divine attributes taken together. Below we will focus our attention on the first of these concerns.

The traditional theistic concept of God includes a cluster of properties attributed to God, including the following five:

Five attributes of the traditional concept of God

Necessity – the property of existing necessarily.

Omnipotence – the property of being perfect in power.

Omniscience – the property of being perfect in knowledge.

Eternity – the property of having neither beginning nor end.

Immutability – the property of being intrinsically changeless.

Necessity

In Western philosophical theology, God is conceived of as a *necessarily existent being*. To exist as a necessary being has meant that the being's existence does not depend on anything, or anyone; it is self-existent (the Latin term is “*a se*”, by itself). A *necessary being* can be contrasted with a *contingent being*. A contingent being is a being that might not exist; if such a being does exist, it could well not have done so. In addition, a contingent being's existence is dependent on something else; it is not self-existent. From a Western perspective, when we examine the world we find that it is filled with contingent beings. Whether we look at the very small (the particle world of quarks and gluons, for example), or the very large (planets, stars, and galaxies), or things in between (such as plants, pandas, and people), everything we find is contingent.

There are different ways of understanding God's existence as being necessary. For example, some philosophers argue for God's *factual* necessity. On this view, since God does exist, he could not have come into existence and he can never cease to exist. But there is another way of understanding God's existence being necessary, namely that God's existence is *logically* necessary. If a proposition is logically necessary, then it is impossible for it to be false, and it is true in every possible world (see ‘Possible worlds’ box, p.55). If God's existence is logically necessary, then it is true in every possible world that God exists, and it is logically impossible for God not to exist. Just as it is logically impossible for five plus five to equal twelve, so too it would be logically impossible for God not to exist.

But is God's existence logically necessary? Some philosophers have thought so, but many have also disagreed. Immanuel Kant, for example, has gone so far as to claim that there are no logically necessary propositions which include *existence*.¹² But a number of responses have been offered to Kant's objection (and to other related objections), and in the past few decades the belief that God's existence is logically necessary has become respectable once again. (While we must leave this topic for now, we will return to it in Chapter 6 when examining the ontological argument.)

Omnipotence

Another property typically attributed to God is omnipotence – from the Latin *omnis* (all), and *potens* (powerful)) which is the property of being perfect in power. But what does it mean to be perfect in power? Philosophers throughout the ages have struggled with this question. Even the great Christian theologian/philosopher Thomas Aquinas labored with this one: “[even though] all confess that God is omnipotent ... it seems difficult to explain in what His omnipotence precisely consists.”¹³

A common understanding of omnipotence is that he can do anything whatsoever. God can create a world; God can answer prayer; God can do miracles; and so forth. But can God really do *anything*? What about creating square circles or married bachelors? What about existing and not existing simultaneously? What about sinning – can God sin? A few philosophers have thought that absolutely nothing can limit God’s power. Philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650), for example, maintained that God is not limited by anything, including the laws of logic or mathematics. For Descartes, God could make it true that some object *P* both exists and does not exist at the same time, or that two plus two equals five.

Most philosophers have not agreed with Descartes on this point and have qualified the claim “God can do anything whatsoever” with a nuanced one such as “God can do anything that is logically possible” or “God possesses every power which it is logically possible to possess.”¹⁴ Something is logically possible if it does not violate the basic laws of logic, such as the law of noncontradiction (which is that a proposition and its opposite cannot both be true). One representative of this view is Richard Swinburne, and he expresses the point this way:

A logically impossible action is not an action. It is what is described by a form of words which purport to describe an action, but do not describe anything which

The Western religions each seem to affirm God’s omnipotence:

Hebrew Bible: “Ah, the Lord! Behold, Thou has made the heavens and the earth by Thy great power and by Thine outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for Thee!” (Jeremiah 32:17)

New Testament: “For nothing will be impossible with God.” (Luke 1:37)

Qur’an: “Say: ‘O God, Master of the Kingdom, Thou givest the Kingdom to whom Thou wilt, and seizest the Kingdom from whom Thou wilt, Thou exaltest whom Thou wilt, and Thou abasest whom Thou wilt; in Thy hand is the good; Thou art powerful over everything.’” (Sura 3:26)

it is coherent to suppose could be done. It is no objection to *A*’s omnipotence that he cannot make a square circle. This is because “making a square circle” does not describe anything which it is coherent to suppose could be done.¹⁵

While defenders of Descartes’ view might be unconvinced by rational argumentation against the claim that God is not limited by logic, they certainly could not *argue* the point on rational or logical grounds. To do so would be self-contradictory and thus incoherent. Furthermore, if God could perform logically contradictory actions, this would seem to have troubling moral consequences. For example, God could break his promises or lie. Most theists are reticent to affirm that God can perform such immoral actions.

Given the belief that God cannot perform certain actions (neither immoral ones nor logically impossible ones, for example), many theists have held to the traditional, Anselmian view of omnipotence as meaning *perfect* power rather than *absolute* power. On this view, mere power itself is not praiseworthy, but perfect or excellent power is. Since it is no perfect power to be able to break promises, or lie, or violate contradictions, even though these actions cannot be performed by God, God is nonetheless omnipotent.

Omniscience

Historically, it has been held by most theologians that God is omniscient – from the Latin *omnis* (all), and *sciens* (knowledge). The meaning of omniscience has been widely debated, but one prominent historical view is that God is completely perfect in knowledge. On this historical view, being omniscient means knowing all things that are proper objects of knowledge, and since only true propositions are proper objects of knowledge (only true propositions can be known), God knows all true propositions. Thus, God’s knowledge includes every event, whether past, present, or future.

But there have been challenges to this traditional understanding of omniscience. In recent times, one challenge has arisen from an analysis of the concepts of divine

Possible Worlds: in modern modal logic, a *possible world* is a special class of possible situations or states of affairs. Logically necessary propositions, such as “five plus five equals ten,” exist in all logically possible worlds. A world is *impossible* if situations or states of affairs which describe it are logically impossible. For example, there is no possible world in which five plus five equals twelve.

Open Theism: the view that God is omniscient but lacks knowledge of certain future events (such as future free human actions) as they do not yet exist and are not predetermined so they cannot possibly be known – even by an omniscient being.

foreknowledge and human free will. If we have free will in a certain sense (what's called "libertarian" free will), then there are *future contingent events* – future events which do not have to happen. Some philosophers who believe that there are future contingent events argue that since they do not yet exist, and since they do have to happen, they cannot be known – even by an omniscient being. Open Theists, for example, argue that God does not know future contingencies. Nevertheless, they maintain, God is still omniscient, for he knows everything that can be known; he knows all past and present events and all future events which are determinately based on past and present ones or can be inferred from them.¹⁶

Other philosophers argue that God can have knowledge of future contingent events. The means by which God could acquire such knowledge remains largely unanswered, but one approach has been to hypothesize two different models of divine cognition: a perceptualist model and a conceptualist model. On the perceptualist model, a sense perception analogy is used to describe God's knowledge in which God "sees" or "perceives" the past, or present, or future. On this account, if God is in time (another debatable issue, as we will see below), he could not know the future since there is no existent future for God to see or perceive. On the conceptualist model, however, God does not acquire knowledge in this perception-like manner. Rather, God's knowledge is self-contained, analogous to the notion of innate ideas in human minds. God simply knows all things – past, present, and future – innately.¹⁷

Eternity

Theists are virtually unanimous in affirming that God exists eternally – that God has neither beginning nor end. But the unanimity ends when attempting to define "eternal." What does it mean to be eternal? And what is God's relationship to time and the temporal universe? We can delineate several prominent positions:¹⁸

- 1 **Timeless:** on one position, God exists outside of time; God has neither temporal extension nor temporal location – no before, during, or after. This position was held by most of the great classical Christian thinkers such as Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, and Aquinas, and it has contemporary adherents as well.¹⁹ There are a number of reasons why many of the great theistic thinkers have held to this view

Eternity ... is the complete, simultaneous and perfect possession of everlasting life.

Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.6

of timelessness, not the least of which is that it seems to solve the problem of God's foreknowledge and human (or agent) free will. Since God is atemporal, he does not in fact *foreknow* events; he simply knows all events timelessly, including the actions of free agents.

Another reason offered for affirming timelessness is this. If God is a most perfect being, as the theistic traditions affirm, then it seems evident that God would have the most perfect mode of existence. Intuitively, it also seems that a perfect mode of existence would be timeless rather than temporal. A temporal being, for example, would be moving along with the passage of time and so would not be able to experience all of life at once the way a timeless being would. On the temporal view, there are episodes of God's life which are gone, lost forever – only retrievable by God's memory. Such a transitory, temporal life is not compatible with the life of God, argue defenders of the timelessness doctrine, for even a very great memory is something much less than a present reality.²⁰

Another argument in support of timelessness is based on relativity theory. According to the theory, time and space are conjoined; one does not exist without the other. Now most theists believe that God is non-spatial. If this is the case, then to be consistent with relativity theory one would need to believe that God is non-temporal (or atemporal) as well.

A number of attacks have been leveled against timelessness in recent decades. One objection is that timelessness would restrict God's knowledge to timeless truths only, such as "two plus two equals four." Suppose, for example, that it is 7:00 p.m. and I just now finished eating dinner. God could not know that I "just now" finished eating dinner, for there is no "just now" for a timeless being. All "nows" are eternally present to such a being. On this view, it seems, God could never even know what time it is!

Another objection to the timelessness view is that it appears to contradict the scriptural teachings of the monotheistic religions. The narratives of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Qur'an all point to God's having a history in which God acts, and these actions include temporal reference. God *did* create the world (Genesis 1:19; Acts 4:24; Sura 35:1); God *is* sustaining the world (Psalm 65:9–13; Colossians 1:17; Sura 29:60); God *will* judge the world (Isaiah 2:4; II Corinthians 5:10; Sura 22:17); and so on. If God is *acting in time* as the traditions teach, the objection goes, then God must be *in time*.²¹

- 2 **Everlasting:** this is the view that God has neither beginning nor end, yet God is temporally extended; God exists forever in time.²² There are a variety of reasons put forth for God's being everlasting besides those raised above to objections of timelessness. One argument runs this way: according to the narrative of the scriptures, God is actively involved in the world. Being actively involved in the world has meant that God has a history with the world – a history of performing a succession of events, including speaking to and interacting with others in the world. But in order to have a history of this sort means that God stands in certain temporal relations to the world. So, God must be temporal.²³ It is also argued that this view is philosophically simpler, clearer and devoid of the glaring difficulties raised against timelessness. Many of the objections to timelessness such as those mentioned above can, in fact, be used as arguments for the everlasting view.

Objections to the everlasting view include those reasons noted above for affirming timelessness: solving the problem of God's foreknowledge and human freedom, and timelessness being the most perfect mode of existence.

- 3 **Eternal and temporal:** this is the view that God did exist without temporal duration, but at the creation of the universe God was drawn into temporal relations.²⁴ There are a growing number of philosophers who affirm some form of this view, and Christian philosopher William Lane Craig has published more on the topic than anyone. He maintains that the scriptural support for God's relation to time is indecisive – supporting both the timelessness and the temporal views. He also believes that there are good theological and philosophical reasons for affirming both timelessness and divine temporality. So, rather than holding to one at the exclusion of the other, he argues for a third way – a both/and position. God is timeless without the created world, but God becomes temporal with the creation.²⁵

There are a number of objections to this view including, of course, each of the objections noted above to the first two views. One objection particular to this view is that it is incoherent.²⁶ God cannot be fully timeless, the objection goes, for God was *capable of changing* even in the alleged timeless state. Indeed God did change, at least relationally, at the moment of creation. Since time and change are necessarily intertwined, there cannot be one without the other. Thus since God did change, God cannot be (could not have been) fully timeless.

Immutability

The traditional doctrine of divine immutability is that God has the property of being intrinsically changeless; it is logically impossible for God to change in his intrinsic qualities. One argument for the view is based on God's being absolutely perfect. Whatever is absolutely perfect cannot change, for to change is to become better or

Process Theology: also known as neoclassical theology, process theology is a school of thought based on the philosophical work of Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) and further developed by Charles Hartshorne, John B. Cobb, and others. A central tenet of process thought is that reality, including God, is not made up of static substances but rather dynamic processes. Process thought has influenced both Christian and Jewish theologians and philosophers.

worse. Since God is an absolutely perfect being, it is not possible for God to change. Thus God is immutable.

God is not extrinsically changeless. For example, after the act of creation, God had a relation to the creation which God lacked prior to the creation. But the real issue is whether God has *intrinsic* changes – changes the very nature of God. Some recent Christian and Jewish thinkers argue that intrinsic changes lie at the very core of God's being. For these thinkers, God is not a substance, as traditionally held, but is involved within the spatiotemporal world as an active participant – a *process* which is at work in and beyond the world. This is *panentheism*. Process philosophers, as they are called, also maintain that many of the historic attributes, which they believe are derived from ancient pagan Greek philosophy rather than scripture, cannot be rendered plausible because of intractable philosophical objections. One of these attributes is immutability. Process thinker Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000; pronounced “Harts-horne”) makes the following point:

The traditional objection ... to divine change was that if a being were already perfect, meaning that nothing better was possible, then change for the better must be impossible for the being. The unnoticed assumption here has been (for two thousand and more years) that it makes sense to think of a value so great or marvelous that it could in no sense whatever be excelled or surpassed. How do we know that this even makes sense? In my view it does not and is either a contradiction or mere nonsense.²⁷

Hartshorne and other process philosophers argue that God is not a static being, but divine becoming. While the abstract qualities of God, such as goodness and wisdom, are stable, God is changeable and evolves as the world does. God grows in experiencing new joys, in acquiring new knowledge of real events, and in experiencing the values created over time by free agents in the world.

There are a number of other divine attributes which could be explored as well, including simplicity, incorporeality, omnipresence, divine action, and impassibility.²⁸ But the five described above provide at least a sketch of some of the discussions in philosophical theology involving the nature and attributes of God.

SUMMARY

In this chapter we looked at religious metaphysics and saw two very different ways of understanding Ultimate Reality. On the one hand it can be understood as an absolute state of being. Within Hindu absolutism, for example, it is Brahman, the undifferentiated Absolute. Within Buddhist metaphysics, fundamental reality is *sunyata*, or the Void – a self-sustaining causal nexus of non-substantial and impermanent processes in which everything is interdependent.

On the other hand Ultimate Reality can be understood as a personal God, such as the God of the theistic, Abrahamic faiths. There are a number of attributes which have traditionally been attributed to the God of theism, and we noted five of them: necessity, omnipotence, omniscience, eternity, and immutability. There are debates about whether the divine attributes are logically consistent and coherent. If they are not, then the existence of God as traditionally understood is impossible. Of course one can still be a theist and agree that at least some of the attributes as traditionally defined are incoherent. As we saw, open theists and process philosophers do so to varying degrees and offer fresh descriptions in an attempt to avoid incoherencies. Others argue that the traditional attributes can be defended as they have been historically defined.

Whether the attributes of God are logically consistent and coherent is an important issue. But even if so, this does not mean that God exists. In the next several chapters we will explore some of the evidences for and against the existence of God as traditionally understood, primarily in the three major theistic religions.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW/DISCUSSION

1. How would you describe Hindu absolutism? What are some similarities and differences between it and the Buddhist view of fundamental reality as described in the text?
2. Compare and contrast *moksha* and *nirvana*. What are agreements and differences?
3. If we could eliminate selfish desires, do you believe we could put an end to suffering? Explain your answer.
4. What are some of the ways that Nagarjuna's view of *sunyata* differs from the theistic notion of God as fundamental reality? Are there similarities? If so, what are they?
5. If you are a part of a religious tradition which includes belief in God, does your conception of God differ from traditional theism as described in the text? Explain.
6. If God is a necessary being, what are some other things about God that follow from this? Explain.
7. A conundrum referred to as the *stone paradox* has been raised against God's being omnipotent. Briefly, it goes like this: "Can God make a stone so large he cannot lift it? Either way, he must not be omnipotent." How would you respond to this paradox?
8. Can one coherently believe both that human beings have free will and that God has inexhaustible knowledge of the future? Does the notion of a conceptualist model of acquiring knowledge help? Why or why not?
9. Which view of God's relation to time seems most reasonable to you: timelessness, everlasting or eternal and temporal? Why?
10. Which view of Ultimate Reality depicted in this chapter do you find most compelling? Which one *least*? Why? Or perhaps you are more drawn to a naturalistic/atheistic worldview. If so, why?

FURTHER READING

- Bartley, C. J. (2002) *The Theology of Rāmānuja: Realism and Religion*. London: RoutledgeCurzon. (A study of Ramanuja's theology and its connection to traditional Brahminical orthodoxy.)
- Beilby, James K. and Paul R. Eddy, eds. (2001) *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. (An accessible work on divine foreknowledge including four different viewpoints by leading scholars.)
- Cobb, John B. and David Ray Griffin (1977) *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press. (An introduction to process theology by two leading process figures.)
- Deutsch, Eliot (1969) *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press. (A concise, clear exposition of Advaita Vedānta, especially as espoused by Shankara.)
- Fisher, John Martin, ed. (1989) *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. (A collection of important essays addressing divine foreknowledge and human freedom; fairly technical.)

- Hartshorne, Charles (1984) *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. (A process philosopher/theologian re-examines the concept of God and homes in on certain attributes such as omnipotence.)
- Hasker, William (1989) *God, Time, and Knowledge*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. (A clear, readable, and powerfully argued book addressing the issues of free will and divine foreknowledge.)
- Hoffman, Joshua and Gary S. Rosenkrantz (2002) *The Divine Attributes*. Oxford: Blackwell. (A rigorous, philosophical analysis of the God of the Abrahamic faiths.)
- Jayatilleke, K. N. (1975) *The Message of the Buddha*. Ed. Ninian Smart. New York: The Free Press. (An exposition of central Buddhist teachings from a Theravada perspective, including the view that *nirvana* is ultimate reality.)
- Leftow, Brian (1991) *Time and Eternity*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. (Provides a defense of the view that God exists timelessly.)
- Morris, Thomas V. (1991) *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. (A clear, accessible introduction to major issues in philosophical theology, including a chapter on the power of God.)
- Pinnock, Clark, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, eds. (1994) *The Openness of God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. (Five well-respected philosophers and theologians present their case for open theism.)
- Shankara ([eighth century] 1947) *Shankara's Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*. Trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood. Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press. (The classic Advaita text about the path to true understanding of Brahman, *Atman*, and non-duality.)
- Sharma, Arvind (1995) *The Philosophy of Religion and Advaita Vedanta: A Comparative Study in Religion and Reason*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press. (A helpful examination of Advaita Vedānta in light of Western assumptions.)
- Smart, Ninian (1964) *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy*. London: Allen and Unwin. (A comprehensive presentation of the fundamental tenets of various Indian philosophical systems.)
- Stiver, Dan R. (1996) *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol and Story*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. (An excellent and accessible resource on the topic of religious language.)
- Swinburne, Richard (1993) *The Coherence of Theism*. Rev. ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press. (Examines whether belief in God as traditionally understood in the Christian tradition is coherent.)
- Tribe, Anthony J. (2005) *Buddhist Thought*. London: Routledge. (A solid introduction to Buddhist thought from the Indian tradition; also includes a helpful bibliography.)
- Ward, Keith (1998) *Concepts of God*. Oxford: Oneworld. (Provides an introduction to five major religious traditions and examines the doctrine of God within them.)
- Wierenga, Edward (1989) *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. (Drawing upon philosophical logic, it examines six of the traditional attributes of God.)
- Williams, Paul (1989) *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*. London: Routledge. (An accessible overview of the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism in India but also includes discussions of Chinese and Tibetan developments.)

WEBSITES

<http://www.hinduism.co.za/>

An award winning website on the Hindu religion which includes a number of entries on Hindu metaphysics.

<http://www.buddhanet.net/>

A comprehensive website on Buddhism, including entries on Buddhist metaphysics.

<http://www.science.uva.nl/~seop/entries/omnipotence>

An entry from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on omnipotence by philosophers Joshua Hoffman and Gary Rosenkrantz.

<http://www.science.uva.nl/~seop/entries/eternity/>

An entry from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on eternity by philosopher of religion Paul Helm.

<http://www.science.uva.nl/~seop/entries/immutability>

An entry from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on immutability by philosopher of religion Brian Leftow.

<http://www.opentheism.info>

A variety of resources and information on Openness Theology. Includes articles by some of the leading Open Theists.