Chapter One
THE CONCEPT OF GOD

'The fault lies not with God, but with the soul that makes the choice.'

(Plato, *The Republic*)

Before we consider the various arguments for and against the existence of God, we need to have some appreciation of the historical, philosophical and theological understanding of the term 'God'. This is important, as the understanding of God will have obvious implications in terms of defending his existence. What is also significant in terms of the philosophy of religion is the massive impact Greek philosophy has had on Christian belief.

1. THE GOD OF THE GREEKS
1.1 Plato

Plato is one of the founding fathers of Western philosophy and he has had a massive impact on religious and philosophical thought. He lived from around 427-347 BC, spending most of his life in Athens. Plato founded the Academy in Athens and this institution has often been described as the first European university. Here people studied works in philosophy, politics, mathematics, theology, and the sciences for nearly a thousand years.

The importance of Plato's philosophy for religious belief cannot be underestimated. As we shall see, some of the greatest Christian thinkers were familiar with the teachings of Plato, and his works were also translated into Arabic where they were a powerful force in Islamic philosophy.

However, there is another important philosopher that we should mention who was alive before Plato. At around twenty years of age, Plato met a remarkable man: Socrates. As Socrates himself wrote nothing down, what we know of his teachings is mainly through Plato's works.

The main (though by no means *only*) concern for Socrates was morality. Whereas Socrates believed in absolute standards, there were a group of itinerant teachers who thought the opposite: the **Sophists**. The greatest Sophist of all, Protagoras, famously declared that "Man is the measure of all things". By that he meant that it was mankind that established what is right or wrong, not the gods or the existence of a morality independent of man. In

other words there is no such thing as an absolute morality, rather it is relative to the individual, the period or the society. This, of course, has important implications for our knowledge of things. If morality is relative, then it is impossible to say that one thing is 'good' and another is 'bad'. For example, the practice of slavery was seen as quite acceptable for the ancient Greeks (it wasn't even perceived as a moral issue) whereas, in our society, it is considered an immoral practice. We would like to believe that our morality is more 'enlightened' in this respect, but to suggest such a thing implies that there is a 'good' morality and a 'bad' morality; that to return to the practice of slavery would be regressive. However, if there is no such thing as an absolute moral standard, then you cannot either 'regress' or 'progress'; it is just a relative matter.

Socrates considered this implication, that there can be no moral standards, as simply unacceptable. There *must be* standards, there *must be* such a thing as a moral Truth. This was effectively Socrates' mission in life: to 'interrogate' the man in the street, to get them to question their beliefs and subject them to philosophic scrutiny in order to determine what ultimately is right and wrong.

During Socrates' latter years his beloved city of Athens was in decline. Its arch-enemy, the militaristic state Sparta, defeated it in 405 BC. This proved to be a massive blow to its confidence and the belief in itself as the mightiest and most sophisticated city-state in Greece. It led the people of Athens to question what had gone wrong and to look for a scapegoat. Led, no doubt, by the politicians who sought power by following the prejudices and passions of the masses, the blame was directed towards Socrates. Athens, seeking security and identity, returned to its old traditions and saw in Socrates the man who most publicly questioned the beliefs in the gods and the old ways, as well as corrupting the youth with his disruptive ideas. As a result Socrates was arrested and was compelled to drink the poison hemlock as his method of execution.

When Socrates was executed Plato was only 29 years old. Plato was a student, indeed, a disciple, of Socrates, and the belief that there are such things as eternal truths was something that Plato took much further than the topic of morality. He believed that *all knowledge* is eternal.

The analogy of the cave

One reason why Plato has remained so popular after so many years is that he was aware of his audience. He wrote mostly in

the form of a dialogue, with Socrates as the main character, and so the reader feels that he is experiencing an unfolding drama. Plato appreciated the importance of explaining often-difficult concepts in a way that could be more readily understood. To achieve this, Plato would make use of **analogy**. An analogy is a way of comparing one thing with another to help bring out their similarity. For example, comparing the structure of an atom to the solar system helps you get a better (though inaccurate) image of how an atom is made up. Perhaps Plato's best-known example of this form is the Analogy of the Cave.

This analogy is from Plato's work the *Republic*. As usual in Plato's dialogues, Socrates is the main character. It is Socrates who asks his fellow conversers to imagine a cave. Deep down at the bottom of this cave are a group of prisoners who are firmly shackled so that they cannot move or turn their heads. They can face in one direction only – the wall of the cave. These prisoners have been in this condition since they were very young children and so the wall of the cave is the only life they have known. Behind the prisoners there is a fire, and between this fire and the prisoners there are many people walking by carrying artificial objects such as wooden figures of men and animals. A screen hides these people walking by, so that only the objects they are carrying appear above the screen. The fire casts a shadow of these objects onto the wall that the prisoners can see. The prisoners are not aware of what is happening behind them and so, for them, the whole of their reality consists of the shadows cast upon the wall of the cave. Even the voices of the people walking behind them they interpret as coming from the shadows.

However, Socrates then tells of one of the prisoners who is freed from his chains and is forced to turn around, look and walk toward the fire and the people. The released prisoner naturally finds all this confusing and painful; the light of the fire is dazzling, the people like some strange creatures from another planet. The prisoner wants only to return to the safe and secure world that he has known, but he is then dragged further upwards towards the entrance of the cave. Exposed to the outside world, the prisoner is unable to adjust to the daylight. Only over time does he gradually grow used to it, first by perceiving the lights of the night sky, then the shadows of objects cast by the sun, and finally the objects themselves in broad daylight. In time, the released prisoner is even able to gaze at the sun itself. By being able to perceive the sun, the prisoner realises it is the source of all

things; it is the cause of the changing of the seasons and the giving of life.

Forced to experience the world outside, the prisoner undergoes a gradual awakening; an awareness that there is a more beautiful and real world that is so very different from the dark and superficial world that he has known all his life and was previously so keen to return to. The prisoner also realises that all the things he previously felt were so important no longer matter and are all illusions. What, asks Socrates, would happen if the prisoner then returns to the world of the cave and tells the prisoners what he has seen? Would they welcome him and want to see this world for themselves? On the contrary, the other prisoners would think he had gone mad, for he would not be able to make out the shadows anymore and would come across as a bumbling fool. If the released prisoner attempted to release them by force they would threaten him and even kill him if they had to.

The theory of the Forms

The curious tale of the cave works on many levels. What is it meant to teach us? On one level, the audience of the time would have recognised the released prisoner as Socrates himself: the man who dared to question the conventions of his time; the man who claimed that there was a greater, better, truer world beyond the trivia of everyday life; the man who ultimately had to pay with his life for forcing others to question those things they held so dear. On another level, the released prisoner is every philosopher; anyone who searches for truth and sees it as their mission in life to teach this truth to others, regardless of the dangers.

At another level, however, the analogy of the cave is Plato's way of explaining the **Theory of the Forms**. What are these 'Forms'? The French poet and writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry recounts in his book *The Little Prince* how, as a child, he lived in a house where there was supposed to be some buried treasure. The treasure, of course, was never found but it was the *possibility* that it might exist that gave the house a magical quality. As Saint-Exupéry says, "What is essential is invisible to the eye." This is what Plato also meant by the Forms; they are the 'essential' things that are invisible to the eye or our other senses.

In the *Republic,* Plato points out that the analogy is a picture of the human condition. People are trapped within the illusory world of the senses like the prisoners at the bottom of the cave. However, Plato believed that it is possible to escape from this illusion and to perceive the truth that exists within our very souls. For

example, we can see many beautiful things: a beautiful sunset, a beautiful person, a beautiful flower. But what is *beauty itself*? How do we know that so many different kinds of objects share the attribute of 'beauty'? For Plato, we know what beauty is because there exists a 'form' of beauty; beauty itself. In fact, *everything* has a form; a table, a tree, a horse.

For Plato, the Forms represent truth, or reality. They cannot be attained by the senses (touch, taste, smell, sight, or hearing), but through the exercise of the mind. However, these Forms are *independent* of the mind: they are eternal, unchanging and perfect. Our knowledge of the Forms is innate, contained within our very souls, and so when we perceive them we are recollecting our knowledge of the Forms, of truth.

Plato and religion

For Plato, therefore, there are two realms. There is the visible realm, that is the world of matter, of the senses, of change, the world in which everything is always becoming something else, the world where everything is imperfect and subject to decay. However, there is the other realm, the intelligible realm in which there is perfection, permanence and order. This is the unchanging, the timeless realm. It is reality. The implications of the existence of these two realms is that man is faced with a choice: To live a life 'in the shadows', living an animal existence and pursuing pleasures and prizes that are temporal and fleeting; or to exercise our powers of reason and achieve awareness of the eternally good and beautiful. The latter option is the most difficult, for it requires self-discipline, a denial of sensual pleasures and the temptations of the world. Plato saw the weaknesses of the body as an 'evil' that gets in the way of the pursuits of the mind. Bodily pleasures and desires hinder the progress of the eternal soul in its journey towards the realm of the Forms.

All of this will be familiar to many religious believers, especially within the Christian tradition. This is no coincidence. In many respects, the Bible of the Jews – the Hebrew Scriptures – is very different from what became the New Testament. Early Christianity developed its doctrines within the Roman Empire; a society that was culturally bound to Greek philosophy. St. Paul, the man who more than any other promoted and developed Christian thought, was born a Jew, educated a Greek, and raised as a Roman citizen. To make Christianity accessible and understandable to the Roman mind, it was necessary to incorporate Greek thought

within it. Socrates and Plato were considered 'Christians before Christ'; they paved the way for the coming of Christianity by providing it with philosophical and theoretical foundations that would be acceptable to the western mind.

In the analogy of the cave, the sun represents the Form of the Good. In the same way that the sun is the source of all things and gives light to them, the Form of the Good is over and above the other Forms, giving them light and allowing us to perceive them. Therefore, when you have awareness of the Form of the Good you have achieved true enlightenment. In Christianity, the Form of the Good becomes God: the source of all things.

1.2 Aristotle
The nature of being

Aristotle (384-322 BC) was a student of Plato's at the Academy. However, he later criticised Plato's Forms because he could not see how such things could exist, or what possible evidence there is for their existence. Plato, for example, argued that there is a Form for our morals, that is there is a Form for justice so that, when we can perceive the Forms, we will know what to do in moral situations. Aristotle, however, believed that morality is such a changeable thing that it is impossible for something like a Form, so unchangeable and universal, to be applied to everyday situations.

A crucial question for Aristotle was, 'what is being?' Aristotle was raising an important and interesting problem here. We can accept that the whole universe is made up of 'stuff' or 'matter'. But how does this matter, this raw material of the universe, become existing things? How does a pile of matter 'turn into' a planet, a sun, a tree, an animal? What gives things their being?

For Plato, 'being' resides in the realm of the Forms. Raw matter is turned into things through the artistry of the 'Demiurge', the divine creator. In Christianity, God is the grand artisan, the designer and builder. However, Aristotle believed that we should look to *this world* for the nature of things. For example, what makes a car what it is? It is not simply the material – the metal, the glass, the rubber, the plastic, and so on that makes it a car – if you were to buy a car and it was delivered to your door as a heap of unconnected materials you would not be too happy. Rather, what makes a car what it is – what gives it being – is its structure or its form. For Plato, there is a Form of a horse. For Aristotle, the form lies *within* the species of horse, not outside of it.

The four causes

If we are not prepared to accept that there is a grand designer of some kind that gives things their form, then we are led down the path of materialism. That is, all that exists is matter and nothing else. However, the problem here is how can matter become something? What is the *motivating force* behind, or within matter that causes it to form into a tree or an animal? For Aristotle there are four related causes for the existence of things. For example, there are four causes of a tree's existence:

The material cause. For a tree to be a tree it must have the raw material: the bark, the leaves and so on.

The formal cause. Just having the raw materials is not enough for it to be a tree. It must also have a specific structure that is unique to it – that which causes it to be an oak tree rather than a cedar tree.

The efficient cause. This is what makes it become a tree in its particular environment; for example, the soil, the sun, the rain and so on. In other words, the tree is being 'pushed' by external causes in a certain direction.

The final cause. For Aristotle all things are aiming towards a specific end, a '***telos***' or 'purpose'. This is the final cause. In the case of the tree its final cause is to be an adult tree!

So, for Aristotle, all things are striving towards a final condition and all things are limited by this. For example, a tree cannot become an antelope, nor a fish become a bird. The important point is that the forms of things are contained *within* nature, they are not some supernatural, mystical, magical force. Everything has a form and matter is the potentiality of form. All things have both **potentiality** and **actuality.** For example, adult man is the actuality of which the child was the potentiality; the child is the actuality of which the embryo is the potentiality; the embryo the actuality of which the ovum was the potentiality and so on.

Aristotle sees nature as a battleground between chaotic, formless matter and the inner necessity, the shaping force that moulds material into specific figures and purpose, the realisation of its potentiality. When there are faults in nature then it is because matter has resisted the powers of the forming process. And so everything is guided in a certain direction – the egg towards a chicken, the acorn towards an oak – but this is not an external providence but a natural cause.

Up until this point Aristotle would be in line with much modern scientific thinking. However, Aristotle raises the question, what started it all? How did the inert, eternal matter start the process

of becoming in the first place? Although matter might have no beginning, it is inconceivable that motion also has no beginning and, for Aristotle, all things are in motion, moving from potentiality to actuality. Motion must have a source, a **Prime Mover**. This Prime Mover, or Unmoved Mover, is incorporeal, indivisible, spaceless, sexless, changeless, perfect, and eternal. He is not a creator God, but a mechanical force that moves all things. Again, this 'Mover' might not seem so far removed from modern physics if this 'God' is so abstract as to be a pure magnetic force. However, Aristotle says that God has *self-consciousness* . But what does this God do? Seemingly nothing, for it has no passions or desires, it is *pure actuality* and so has no potential to become anything else, or to act in any way. It has put the world into motion and now has no more role to play. Its only occupation is to contemplate the essence of things and as He Himself is the essence of things, then He contemplates Himself!

The Aristotelian God is far removed from the personal, acting God of the Jews or the loving, fatherly God of the Christians. However, Aristotle's views on motion, cause and purpose had a huge influence on Christian scholars, notably **St. Thomas Aquinas** (1225-1274). In the teleological argument (see Chapter Three), Aquinas adopted Aristotle's belief that motion must have a beginning, which he took to be God. Further, Aquinas also addressed the question of if all things have a potentiality, what then is man's full potential? This affected Aquinas' ethics and his belief that Man has the potential to reflect God's nature and goodness.

2. THE GOD OF CLASSICAL THEISM

Much philosophy of religion, as traditionally understood, rests within the European Christian tradition. It is therefore not surprising that it presents a particular view of God. What we mean when we talk about God is extremely important from the outset, as the arguments tend to rely upon a particular conception of God.

The religious believer is sometimes referred to as a **theist**. The term '**theism**' can mean a belief in a god or gods. However, in Christianity, theism usually refers to the 'classical' concept of God, as elaborated by St. Thomas Aquinas and most commonly understood by mainstream Christianity today. Briefly, God is perceived as single, omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), and omnibenevolent (all-good). This is also the orthodox view for Jews and Muslims.

2.1 God is single

There are no other gods, but God. This is a belief in a single (*monos*) God, and is referred to as **monotheism**. There are a number of other 'theisms':

Polytheism. A belief in the existence of many (*poly*) gods. This was a belief held by ancient Greeks, the Romans and Egyptians. It is also a belief held by a number of religions today, such as forms of Hinduism.

Pantheism. The belief that God is everything (*pan*). That is, God is not separate from the world but *is* the world. All things are God. Within most great religious traditions there are groups who believe this. A number of Christians today, known as **process theologians**, speak of **panentheism**, the belief that God is so much a part of the world that He is affected by it. When we suffer, God suffers (see Chapter Ten).

Henotheism. Also a belief in many gods, but one (*henos*) rules above all others. Early references to the Biblical God talk of Him competing with other Gods for supremacy.

Atheism. A disbelief in the existence of God or gods. This view can be an outright rejection of religious belief, or a position maintaining a large degree of scepticism. Atheism can also be found within religious belief, however. For example, many Buddhists consider themselves atheists.

*Agnosticism***.** This holds that we can never be certain one way or the other whether God exists or not. There have been a number of different forms of agnosticism throughout history and it is possible (though psychologically difficult) to be a religious agnostic in the sense that a person may have faith but does not see this as providing *knowledge* of God in any way.

2.2 God Is personal

For many people today, a belief in a personal God may be understood in terms of a 'force' or an 'absolute' of some kind. Within Classical Theism, however, God is frequently **anthropomorphised**: that is, He is spoken of in human, personal terms. God is not an 'it' but a 'He' (within the Classical definition, the term 'She' is not generally used), and the language used concerning God's actions and attributes are also couched in human terms: God loves, God is kind, God is wise, God sits upon His throne, God walks with Adam in the Garden of Eden, etc. Such use of human language raises problems, as it does seem to humanise God to too great a degree.

2.3 God Is All

The Greek word 'omni' means 'all' or 'everything'. For the Classical Theist, God is:

Omnipotent. From the Greek *potens* (able). God, being God, is able to do everything. God cannot be limited in any way, for then he would not be the greatest being. However, there are problems in that it is not clear what is meant by 'everything'. For example, can God make a square circle, or kill Himself, or create a being greater than Himself, or produce an immovable object and then move it? Classical Theism tends to adopt the view that God is able to do *possible* things which are *consistent* with nature. Further, omnipotence does not mean that God is some vicious tyrant, inflicting trial and tribulation upon whomever He wishes. God is identified with the Greek word ***agapé*** (love), for He is concerned only with the welfare of His creation. However, this seems to conflict with the fact that there is so much evil and suffering in the world (See Chapter Ten).

Omniscient. From the Greek word *sciens* (knowing). God is all-knowing. God does not only know all there is to know in the present, but also the past *and* the future. He can reveal this future to select people, such as prophets. In fact, to talk of God as even existing in time is regarded by many theologians as a mistake: for God there is no past, present and future. God is **timeless**. God does not exist within time, for time is also a creation of God and He cannot be governed or be a part of it. Also, God must be **spaceless** in that he does not exist within space, as this is also His creation. As God is not in any way affected by time or space, He also is not subject to change, he is **immutable** (changeless) and, of course, **immortal** (cannot die). Some philosophers and theologians have argued that an infallible God who knows all that is to occur in the future is incompatible with the belief that human beings can have free will. For example, if God already knows that I will write this book, then I have no choice but to write it. Some scholars have attempted to get around the problem of free will by arguing that God is **eternal**, or **everlasting**: that is, He lives forever but *within* time. In this sense, God does not know the future because it has not happened yet. However, this places a limit upon his omniscience and his omnipotence.

Omnipresent. God is not only present at *any* place, but also at *every* place at the same time. The theologian **St. Anselm**, (c. 1033-1109) wrote that "the Supreme Being exists in every place and at all times," then later said that God, "exists in no place and at no time." These do seem contradictory statements, but Anselm is

attempting to get round the difficulty of using everyday language such as 'place' and 'time' in terms of a timeless and spaceless God. God cannot be circumscribed by place or time so, in that sense, He cannot be *in it*. God is 'present' in the sense that all things are subject to God's power and knowledge.

Omnibenevolent. God is all-good. He is not an evil God, and nor is he the creator of evil (for a further elaboration of this and the problems with it, see Chapter Ten). Rather, God *is* goodness, for goodness is not something separate from God. God is, therefore, a moral God and represents moral perfection. Humankind, for its part, can share in this by aiming to also be good.

Further reading

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