Toronto Philosophy of Religion Working Group
Online Conference 2027

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Please note: All times are listed in EST.

Thursday, January 7th

	Zoom Room 1: [Click here to enter] Hosted by Daniel Rubio	**Zoom Room 2:** [Click here to enter] Hosted by Klaas Kraay
9:00-10:00	**Coherence and Rituals in Expert's Beliefs** Z (Zainab) Sabra (Erasmus University Rotterdam) Philosophers of religion have debated the coherence of religious belief and the internal consistency of theism (Plantinga 1974; Swinburne 2016; Speaks 2018), through conceptual analysis of doctrine considered in the abstract. This paper reorients religious coherence around ritual as intentional action. Its central thesis is that ritual coherence is plural and locally achieved: it consists not in conformity to a single doctrinal standard, but in how practitioners' reasons for acting integrate with the stipulated forms of ritual action. Philosophy of action provides resources for this shift. Anscombe's (1957) account of intentional action and Davidson's (1963) treatment of reasons as causes direct attention to how agents understand their actions and the reasons that make them intelligible. Ritual makes this problem acute because ritualization separates an act's stipulated form from practitioners' reasons for performing it (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994). We therefore ask how religious experts integrate ritual into a coherent worldview. Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1931) provide the methodological basis. His rejection of the assumption that ritual encodes mistaken causal beliefs suggests that ritual should be understood within the shared form of life in which it has meaning, rather than evaluated against an external justificatory criterion. We operationalize his injunction to "look and see" through semi-structured interviews with religious experts. Interviewees interpret religious texts and are probed concerning the reasons, and implications of the ritual practices. We analyze these interviews descriptively, adapting a knowledge-analysis framework developed by diSessa, Sherin, and Levin (2015) to map relations within practitioners' reasoning. The analysis shows how ritual coherence is constructed through divergent configurations of reasons, practices, and cultural environments, even within a single tradition. The paper thus extends philosophy of religion beyond doctrine-centered coherence by offering an action-theoretic account of how coherence is constructed and inhabited in religious practices.	**Explaining the Repair of Creation** Dar Triffon-Reshef (Notre Dame) By 'the repair of creation' I mean the kind of transformation which presumably fallen creation must undergo in order to meet its divine purpose. The common view, I exemplify, holds that a repair of creation is called for merely as cure for fallenness, and is explained by this. In this paper I propose a shift of perspective, according to which the need for a repair is explained independently by God's purpose. More broadly, I encourage the thought that the repair of creation should take center-stage in our theorizing about the divine purpose on the one hand, and about creaturely fallenness on the other. In the first part of the paper I raise a puzzle about the repair (how come the perfect God created something ultimately in need of a repair?) and discuss two possible lines of response: that (for some reason consistent with God's perfections) God cannot prevent fallenness, upon the occurrence of which attaining God's purpose then requires a repair as a cure (this is the common view). Or, that God to begin with wills a repair, because this somehow contributes to God's purpose. I examine the tradeoff between the two responses, and argue for the preferability of the latter in resolving the puzzle. In the second part of the paper I ask why might God will to repair, or how this may contribute to God's purpose. I consider and evaluate three possibilities: (1) repairing is the purpose; (2) attained through a repair, the purpose becomes more valuable or better enjoyed; and (3) a repair is constitutive of the purpose, contributing something to the nature of the result. Namely without a repair, the same result is unattainable. While all three possibilities are amicable to my general aims, I deem the third most promising.

10:15-11:45	**Keynote Address #1** **Title: TBA** **Zoom Room 1:** [Click here to enter] Richard Swinburne (Oxford)	
1:00-2:00	**When Should Moral Failure Undermine (Religious) Deference?** Noam Oren (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Princeton University) When I was growing up, I attended a rabbi's weekly class for children. Years later, he was convicted that he had sexually abused several of his students. The community's response was equally striking: people stopped quoting him, distanced themselves from him, and many even threw away his books. I understood the need to prevent him from harming others. But why throw away his books? If his ideas were meaningful and accurate, how could his moral failures undermine them? Such cases may seem to support moral encroachment: moral considerations appear to affect an epistemic manner such as to whom we ought to defer to. Yet I argue that moral encroachment is not the right explanation. Instead, I examine four alternative explanations, assessing the strengths and limitations of each. First, wrongdoing may provide epistemic evidence that someone was never as much of an expert as we thought he was. Second, wrongdoing may undermine trustworthiness without undermining expertise. Third, we may have practical, moral or political reasons to withdraw deference such as condemning wrongdoing or deterring future abuse may justify sacrificing epistemic benefits. Fourth, moral failure may undermine normative authority. Religious leaders are sometimes followed not merely because they know more, but because their position gives them standing to direct others. Serious wrongdoing may undermine that standing. Drawing on contemporary work on expertise, ethics, epistemology, and decision theory, alongside Jewish and Christian sources, I argue that no single explanation captures every case. Different forms of moral failure undermine deference through different mechanisms. Religion serves here as a particularly interesting and illuminating case study for a broader philosophical question with political implications: when should the moral failures of experts affect whether we continue to defer to them?	**Asymmetric Vulnerability, Obligation, and the Divine Nature** Mahala Rethlake (Chicago) In *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Cornell, 1999), Adams claims that for God to "value human personhood" and "love individual persons," God must be "good to each" person such that God "guarantee[s]" that their life is "a great good" to them on the whole (31). In this paper, I argue that—Adams's own view notwithstanding—one can find in *Horrendous Evils* the seeds of the ideas that (1) God has at least one moral obligation to humans (i.e., to ensure that their lives are a great good), which (2) arises from a divine–human power gap, where humans are "in a state of impaired freedom" and "radically vulnerable" to evils due to conditions set up by "a fully competent and independent agent" (36-39). Laying aside the question of whether God has this obligation necessarily or voluntarily, I contend that it is significant if God has an obligation to humanity at all and aim to show that, despite enormous resistance to this idea, it is both plausible and unthreatening to the divine nature. Beginning from the assumption that God is a person, I argue that, intuitively and usually, power differences between persons generate obligations for the more powerful person (e.g., parent–child, doctor–patient, teacher–student). I conceptualize such obligation as arising from an asymmetric vulnerability that is even more present in the divine–human case. Drawing on contemporary work, I contend that, if real, this obligation is binding and so morally constraining. Contrary to others, and drawing on perfect being theology and scripture, I posit love as a great-making trait and show how obligation need not impinge upon (and can even amplify) divine greatness. I defend my argument against recent critiques of divine obligation and contribute to broader discussions of the divine nature as coherent and simple.
2:15-3:15	**There Is No Problem of Nomological Harmony** Tarik Tijanovic (College of the Desert) Cutter and Saad (2024) argue that the striking match between our universe's laws and the contents they govern is best explained by a third factor—such as a designer or an axiarchic meta-law—rather than left as an unexplained coincidence. They call this datum nomological harmony. This paper argues that the problem of nomological harmony does not survive scrutiny. I raise a dilemma: either contents depend on laws for their nature and identity, or they do not. If they do, the problem cannot get off the ground, since content is unindividuated prior to laws and there is no possible mismatch to be explained. If contents do not depend on laws, the proponent must posit quiddities—categorical natures independent of causal-nomic role—which generates a further dilemma concerning their modal status. If quiddities necessitate their causal-nomic roles, the residual puzzle about their harmonic arrangement collapses the problem of nomological harmony into a version of the fine-tuning argument. If quiddities are contingent, permuting which quiddity occupies which role makes no observable or causal difference, so quiddities drop out as explanatorily idle and the same collapse into the fine-tuning argument results. Either way, nomological harmony fails as an independent source of evidence for theism or axiarchism, though this failure does not thereby favor naturalism.	**When Horror Counts against God: Emotional Experience and Epistemic Defeat** Gabriel Reis de Oliveira (Instituto Federal do Rio Grande do Sul) Philosophers of religion commonly distinguish the evidential problem of evil from an emotional or religious problem that calls primarily for pastoral rather than philosophical attention. This paper argues that the distinction obscures an important epistemic role for affective experience. On a defeasible epistemology of emotion, some emotional episodes can present evaluative properties and provide prima facie reasons for corresponding judgments. When a subject adequately understands a concrete horror and affectively experiences its deliberate non-prevention by an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly loving agent as morally impermissible, that experience can constitute defeasible evidence against providential perfect-being theism. The argument is not that emotional intensity proves atheism, nor that emotion introduces a new logical form of argument from evil. Rather, appropriately grounded emotional experience expands the evidential basis of familiar arguments. A participant-centred formulation, developed through Marilyn McCord Adams's account of horrendous evils, sharpens the challenge by asking whether a particular person's suffering can be integrated into a good life for that person. I then consider skeptical theism. Claims about our limited access to divine reasons may undercut particular affective assessments, but the mere possibility of unknown reasons does not automatically eliminate their prima facie epistemic force. Emotional responses to evil can therefore be rationally assessable evidence rather than merely psychological obstacles to faith.

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Friday, January 8th

	Zoom Room 1: [Click here to enter] Hosted by Daniel Rubio	**Zoom Room 2:** [Click here to enter] Hosted by Klaas Kraay
10:00-11:00	**Grounding Necessarily Necessary Truths in God's Contingent Acts** Taylor-Grey Miller (Brigham Young University) Derek Haderlie (Brigham Young University) Slater Simek(Bakersfield College) On one important theistic modal paradigm, necessary truths depend on contingent acts of God's creation. Call this theistic voluntarism. We can distinguish two versions of theistic voluntarism, one stronger and one weaker: (Ambitious Theistic Voluntarism) All necessary truths depend on God's free action. (Modest Theistic Voluntarism) Some necessary truths depend on God's free action. Theistic voluntarism is motivated by perfect being theism. The thought is that if God is the greatest conceivable being, then God would be greater for grounding the necessary truths. This motivation for theistic voluntarism notwithstanding, as Davidson (2024) says, "few others in the history of theological thought" have endorsed theistic voluntarism. This is on account of its supposed inability to secure iteration principles widely held to be constitutive of metaphysical necessity. The argument goes like this. It is a constraint on any adequate account of metaphysical necessity that whatever is metaphysically necessary be necessarily necessary. Both ambitious and modest theistic voluntarists take God's acts of creation to be free, and so contingent. But if God's creative acts are contingent, then any necessities dependent on those acts must be contingently necessary. We argue that if we understand the notion of dependence as it features in the articulation of theistic voluntarism in terms of metaphysical ground, a straightforward defense of modest theistic voluntarism can be offered. We show how to construct cases where a contingent act of divine creation can ground a necessarily necessary truth which only relies on standard assumptions about metaphysical necessity and the logic of ground. We then go on to show how our defense of modest voluntarism can be extended to a defense of ambitious voluntarism. We conclude that theistic voluntarism deserves a new hearing in the philosophical literature.	**All About the Omega: On Bishop & Perszyk's Euteleology** Konstantina (Dina) Efaplomata (Innsbruck) Due to the view that the philosophical and theological shortcomings of classical theism lead to issues such as the problem of evil and the problem of divine hiddenness, many philosophers and theologians have been participating in the "alternative models of God" discourse by developing competing theistic ontologies. This paper examines Bishop and Perszyk's contribution to this discourse, namely euteleological theism; this model is presented as a less philosophically loaded alternative to classical theism that aims to provide (amongst other advantages) a better framework to deal with the problem of evil. The first section seeks to establish the core elements of the euteleological project by outlining all features of the model as they're presented in various papers, and in Bishop and Perszyk's recent book dedicated to its development and defense. The next section is concerned with a broader assessment of the appropriateness of Bishop and Perszyk's approach, starting with the status of euteleology as a workable alternative to Christian religious praxis. The focus then shifts to whether euteleological theism is "making it to the threshold" of what counts as theism, given the historical consensus on what constitutes theistic metaphysics proper, and to whether Bishop and Perszyk's methodology conforms to the norms and presuppositions that this mode of discourse entails. Finally, the internal consistency of euteleological theism comes into question; it is argued that there's substantial tension emerging from the combination of mutually inconsistent elements into the euteleological framework, as the strained form of teleological causation required for euteleology to work, and the lack of clarity regarding the temporal ontology of the "creative instant" show that Bishop and Perszyk's model is potentially more philosophically cumbersome than they intend.

11:15-12:15	**Axiological Hiddenness: The Problem of Reasonable Resistance** Hunter Bissette (Oklahoma) The core datum of J. L. Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness is nonresistant nonbelief: a condition in which one's epistemic access to personal relationship with God is obstructed by one's failure to believe that God exists through no act of resistance to divine relationship. Schellenberg maintains that belief in God's existence is necessary for being in a position to enter personal relationship with God, while leaving open whether such belief is sufficient. I argue that belief in God is insufficient to ensure that one is in a position to rationally accept personal relationship with God: even one who rationally believes that God exists may, through no unreasonable failure of one's own, rationally believe oneself obligated to resist accepting such relationship. Call this condition reasonable relational resistance. Drawing on developments in the axiology of theism, I argue that reasonable relational resistance reveals a new argument from divine hiddenness: perfect divine love requires not merely that personal relationship with God be available, but that it be rationally acceptable to those capable of entering it. Whereas the traditional hiddenness argument derives the conclusion that God does not exist from the empirical actuality of nonresistant nonbelief, what I call the axiological hiddenness argument derives the same conclusion from the metaphysical possibility of reasonable relational resistance. Consequently, the axiological hiddenness argument can succeed even if we grant the absence of nonresistant nonbelief.	**Famine, Affluence, and the Problem of Evil** Amy Seymour (Rutgers) In "Famine, Affluence, and Morality", Peter Singer argues that "if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything else morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it" (1972, 235). While this principle seems plausible, many ethicists do not accept it—accepting it would mean either accepting that the affluent should donate far more than they do to relieve suffering or rejecting the claim that suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are very bad. But while Singer's principle is widely rejected, a parallel principle is commonly assumed in arguments from evil: If it is within the power of a wholly good being to prevent something very bad from happening, without sacrificing anything else morally significant, that being ought, morally, to prevent it. This principle is a combination of the views that a wholly good being prevents as much evil as it can and that there exists some evil that is possible to eliminate without thereby sacrificing anything nearly as morally significant. I argue that Singer's prevention principle and the Evil Elimination Principle stand or fall together, and detail the lessons learned from this parallel. Recent responses to both Singer's argument and the problem of evil focus on the "one off" nature of the cases which motivate these principles. The more someone keeps donating money, the less clear it is that the person is not sacrificing other goods by continued donation (see Timmerman 2015). Theists also make this response. Greater goods and free will defenses argue that God could not have kept the right goods and assured the prevention of evil. Rea (2008) argues that God could have other projects. To the extent that one finds Singer's principle wanting, one should find a key step in arguments from evil unmotivated.
1:00-2:00	**Why Didn't God Solve the Alignment Problem?** Josh Brecka (University of Toronto) According to free will theodicies, creaturely freedom is so valuable that it outweighs even some non-negligible amount of horrendous evil that free creatures may cause. God created humanity with free will despite our potential to misuse that freedom to do evil. Humanity may soon create a genuinely new kind of being: artificial general intelligence (AGI). It is commonly thought that humanity should ensure that potential future AGI is aligned. That is, intuitively it seems that if we create AGI, we should create it such that it would not act contrary to human values. In this paper, I argue that our intuitive judgement that AGI should be aligned is in tension with the motivation behind free will theodicies. Indeed, I argue that if preserving creaturely freedom is more valuable than preventing many horrendous evils, then our axiological assessment regarding alignment is mistaken. If the motivations behind free will theodicies are correct, we have reason to think that humanity should prioritize developing AGI with free will rather than AGI that is aligned. I argue that this undermines the motivations behind free will theodicies insofar as we think that it is permissible for humanity to create aligned AGI. Holding that it is possible to create AGI that is both free and aligned does not help. For then it seems that God could have similarly created humanity to be both free and 'aligned'. Thus, insofar as one values alignment over freedom in the case of AGI, one should be skeptical of free will theodicies. Analogously, insofar as one values freedom over 'alignment' in the case of God and evil, one should be skeptical of the value of creating aligned AGI.	**Opting for Hell: Reconceiving The Final Choice View in Light of Transformative Choices** Isabel Cortens (Saint Louis University) The FINAL CHOICE VIEW is the view that damnation is ultimately a choice on the sinner's part and not a retributive assignment. On this view, each person is presented the choice, either continuously or in a decisive moment, of whether to opt for everlasting union with God. The MILD HELL VIEW is the view that hell is not a condition of extraordinary conscious suffering or torment; rather, it is solely characterized as a state of separation from God. The FINAL CHOICE VIEW and the MILD HELL VIEW constitute a promising package for those who think that it's possible that some end up in hell. But the package faces a serious objection: it seems that choosing hell cannot be a truly free choice – either the choice is incoherent or it's made under conditions of ignorance that God could rectify. Either way, it seems the agent does not merit getting her way. In this paper, I defend the FINAL CHOICE VIEW (paired with the MILD HELL VIEW) against this objection, appealing to resources from the extant literature on transformative choices—choices that radically change who you are and what you know. My argument runs as follows. If hell is not extraordinarily bad, it is plausible that, for some, the heavenly option will be the uniquely transformative option: opting for heaven would result in both personal and epistemic transformation for the agent, whereas opting for hell wouldn't result in either. In these cases, it is possible that an agent chooses hell for the reason that it is the only option she can 'authentically' choose. Choosing hell for this reason is irrational, but it isn't incoherent; nor is it carried out under conditions of ignorance that God could rectify.
2:15-3:45	**Keynote Address #2.** **Zoom Room 1:** [Click here to enter]	Lara Buchak (Princeton) **Title: TBA**

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