INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

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TOPIC 9
PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

❑ Questions about the nature of God have been part of philosophy since its inception (as with philosophy of science, this is *applied philosophy*). Even if you aren't religious, these questions can nonetheless be interesting, since they raise philosophical concerns that are timeless.

❑ Moreover, God and religion have often been thought (historically, anyway) to be a central component of the good life of human flourishing, which makes the topic particularly philosophically important.

❑ We will be exploring three topics: what is God like?; is *belief* that God exists reasonable?; and is *faith* in God reasonable?

THE NATURE OF GOD

❑ Note that this question is philosophically interesting even if you think that God doesn't exist.

❑ For the purposes of this course, by 'God' we will have in mind the *theistic* conception (as features in, for example, Christianity, Judaism and Islam).

❑ This is a conception of God as distinct from the natural world that He created (in contrast to *pantheism*).

❑ Although theism is strictly speaking compatible with *polytheism* (many Gods), we will focus on *monotheism* (one God).

THE NATURE OF GOD

❑ According to classical theism, God has the following nine properties:

(i) He is *personal* (one can have a relationship with Him);

(ii) He is *incorporeal (/transcendent)* (He doesn't have a body);

(iii) He is *omnipresent (/immanent)* (He is everywhere, or at least never absent);

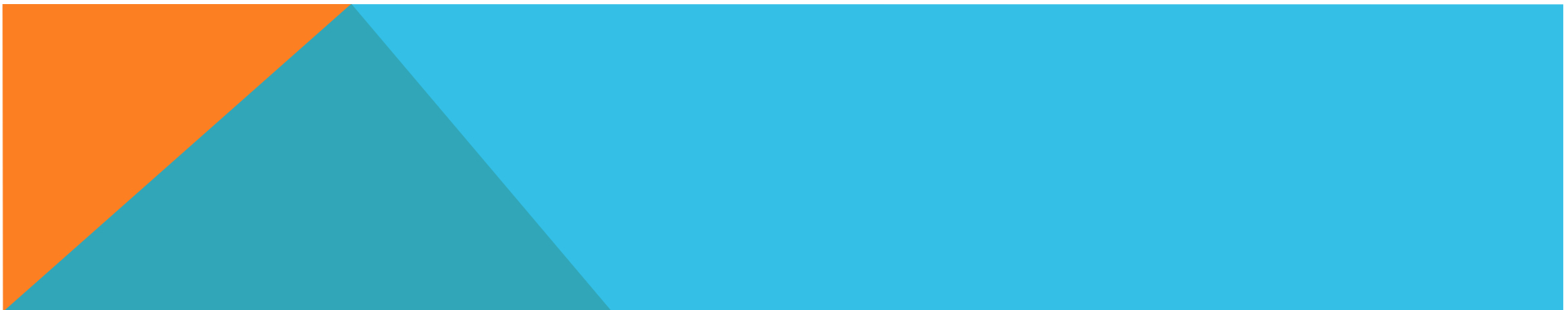(iv) He is *omnipotent* (He is all-powerful);

(v) He is *omniscient* (He is all-knowing);

(vi) He is *eternal* (either that He is everlasting, or else that He is outside of time);

(vii) He is *perfectly free* (there are no limitations on His freedom);

(viii) He is *perfectly good* (there are no limitations on His goodness);

(ix) He is *necessary* (there is nothing contingent about His existence).

OMNIPOTENCE

❑ We said that God was all-powerful (omnipotent), but can there be limits on his power?

❑ For example, can God do the impossible, such as create something which is both a circle and a square? One might argue that God's inability to do the impossible is not a limitation on the extent of his power, since power is only a power to do what is possible.

❑ Related to this question, a puzzle from the middle ages asks whether God can create a stone so heavy that he cannot lift it. Either way, it seems that his powers are limited (either there is something that he cannot create, or something that he cannot lift).

❑ One way to resolve these issues is to say that omnipotence means something like 'as powerful as one can be'.
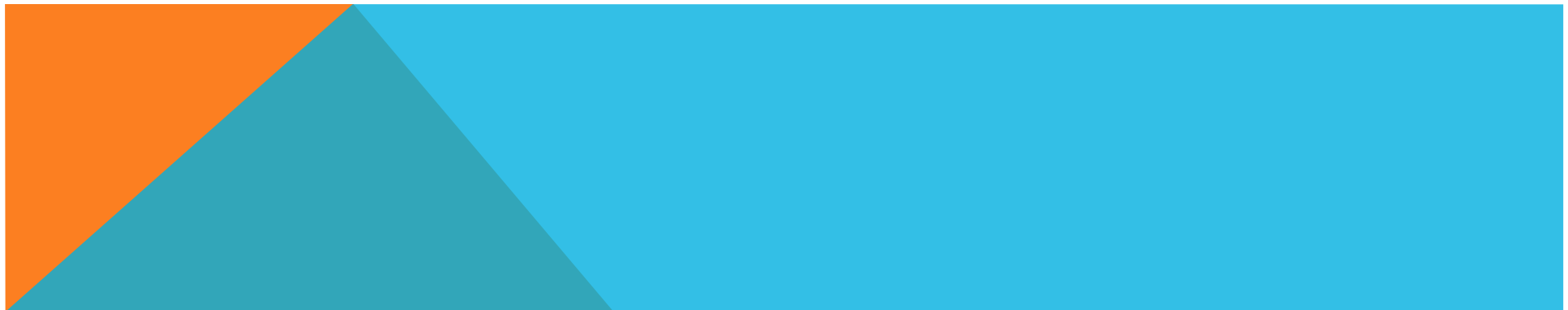
DIVINE SIMPLICITY

❑ Notice how closely related these attributes of God are.

❑ That God is all-knowing and all-powerful obviously has a bearing on the claim that He is perfectly free (since a deficit in either of the former would undermine His freedom). And so on.

❑ This observation has led some to argue for the *Doctrine of Divine Simplicity*.

❑ This is the thesis that God really has a single property, that of being the most perfect person possible, where the nine attributes listed above are essentially just attributes of this single property.
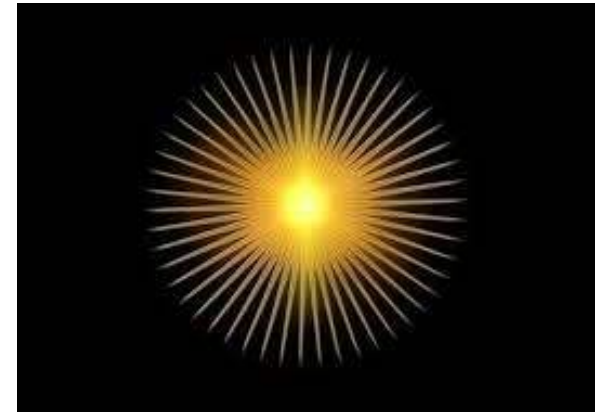
THE RATIONALITY OF BELIEF THAT GOD EXISTS

❏ Classically, this question was asked by considering the question whether there are any good *proofs* of God's existence. The thought was that there must be a way of establishing, by reason alone (and hence in a manner that all reasonable people can accept), that God exists.

❏ More recently, the focus in philosophy of religion in this regard has been less on offering proofs, and more on putting forward arguments why belief in God's existence is no less reasonable than lots of our other beliefs (such as our perceptual or scientific beliefs).

THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

❏ Here, very roughly, is the *ontological argument* for God's existence, as first proposed by St. Anselm (1033-1109). The general idea behind the argument is to show that it follows from the very idea of God that He must exist.

❏ (Ontology, by the way, is the branch of metaphysics concerned with being or existence).

❏ God is by definition perfect. An existent being is more perfect than a non-existent being. So, God must exist.

❏ There's clearly something problematic about this argument, but opinions vary about just what is wrong with it.
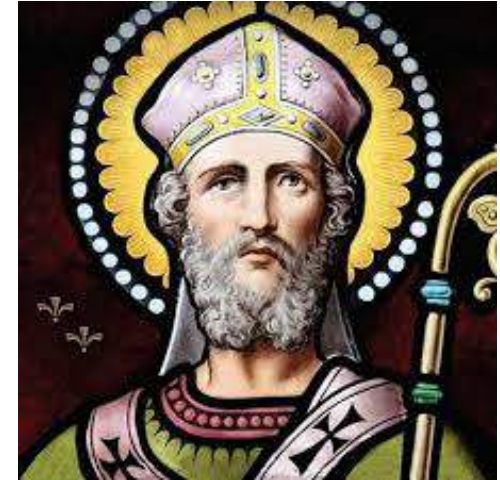

St. Anselm
(1033-1109)

THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

❑ One problem with the argument concerns the first premise: that God is by definition perfect.

❑ Suppose we substituted instead '*If* God exists, then He is perfect'.

❑ No-one would object to *that* claim, but of course from this premise we aren't going to be able to derive our conclusion that God must exist (since the conclusion would be conditional on Him existing in the first place)
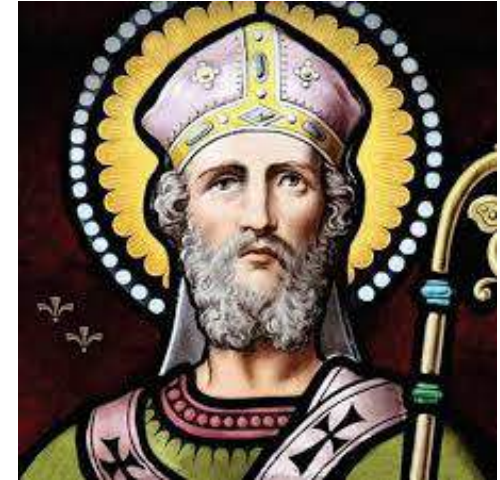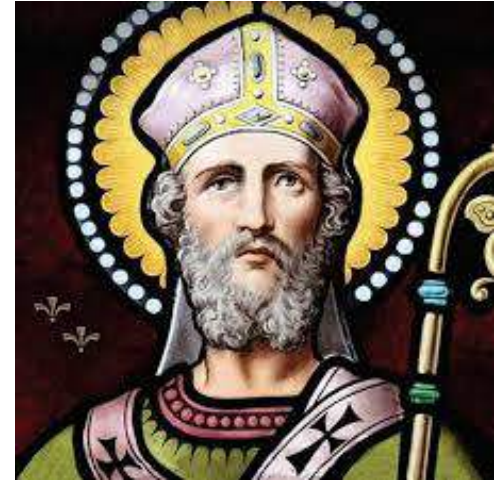
St. Anselm
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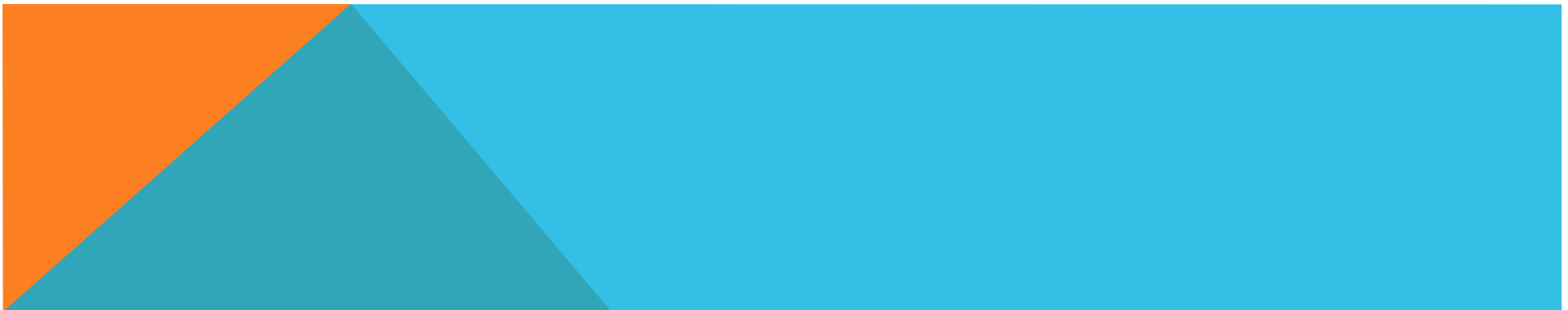
THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

❑ The second premise of the argument—that an existent being is more perfect than a non-existent being—also seems to be problematic.

❑ As Kant famously pointed out, *existence is not a predicate*, where this means that it is not a further property that things have.

❑ Things either exist or they don't. But whether they exist is not part of the list of properties that makes it what it is. So something cannot be better in virtue of existing (in the way that it can be better in virtue of having certain properties).

St. Anselm
(1033-1109)

THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

❑ There are many different variants of the cosmological argument, but the most famous is the so-called Kalam Cosmological Argument (as originally advanced by medieval Islamic scholars).

❑ We begin with the question of why there is something rather than nothing at all.

❑ This suggests that the universe has a cause, at least in the sense that there is some explanation for its existence (i.e., perhaps 'causes', strictly speaking, only happen once the universe is in existence).

❑ We then conclude that the only thing that could have caused the existence of the universe is God. (Or, a bit weaker, that the best explanation of what caused the universe to exist is that God created it).

❑ (An alternative formulation, due to Aristotle (384-322 BC): there must be an unmoved mover, or first cause, of everything).
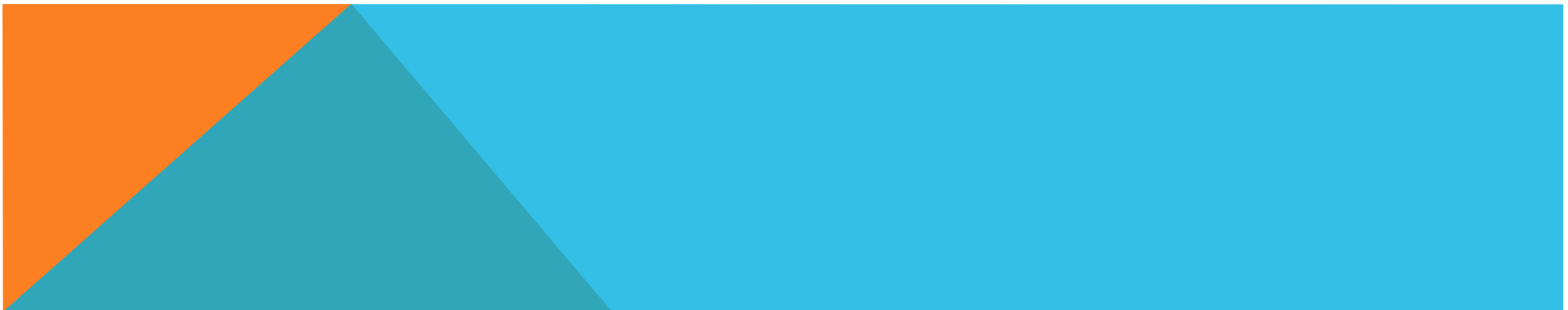
THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

❑ One thing we might question about this argument is the idea that there could be nothing rather than something.

❑ Is that obvious? It may be contingent that the universe is the particular way that it is, but perhaps it has always existed and couldn't have not existed.

Aristotle
(384-322 BC)

THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

❑ Another aspect of the argument that we might dispute is whether everything must have a cause, or, relatedly, whether there must be an explanation for every event.

❑ This latter thesis, by the way, is called the *Principle of Sufficient Reason*, and is attributed to the German philosopher Leibniz (1646-1716).

❑ If there are going to be any brute facts that defy explanation, then the existence of the universe looks like a prime candidate.

❑ (And why think that this would be an explanation that we, with our limited cognitive capacities, can grasp anyway?)

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz
(1646-1716)

THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

❑ Interestingly, the Principle of Sufficient Reason is in any case widely rejected by scientists, particularly in quantum theory, which seems to describe events that have no explanation.

❑ Finally, even if this argument is successful, note that it's not obvious that it entails that there is a single creator. Why not several?

❑ (Or can we legitimately appeal to Occam's Razor here? This is the idea that, *ceteris paribus*, we should prefer explanations that entail the existence of fewer entities).

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz
(1646-1716)
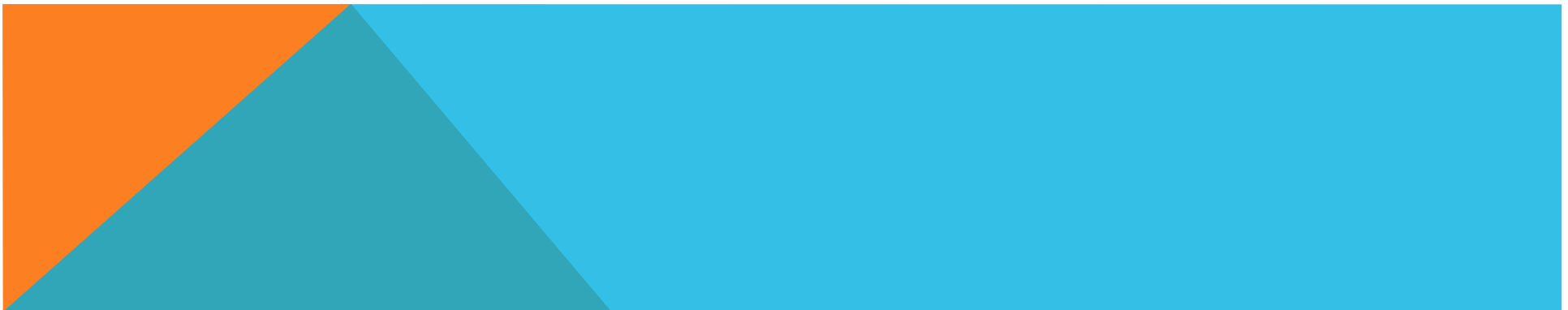
THE DESIGN ARGUMENT

❑ Historically, the impetus for the design argument was simply that the beauty and complexity of the natural world demanded that there be a designer, and of course that designer would be God.

❑ These days, proponents of this line of thought tend to express it in terms of *fine-tuning*. The idea is that the more we learn about the universe, the more we discover that certain very specific conditions need to be in place to ensure that a universe capable of sustaining life-forms like ours could have developed.

❑ Is this evidence of some divine hand fine-tuning the universe?

THE DESIGN ARGUMENT

❑ One potential difficulty for the fine-tuning argument is the *multiverse hypothesis*.

❑ This is the hypothesis that our universe is but one of an infinite number of universes.

❑ If that were so, then it's inevitable that some of these universes will have just the right conditions to support human life. It just so happens we are lucky to be in one of those universes.
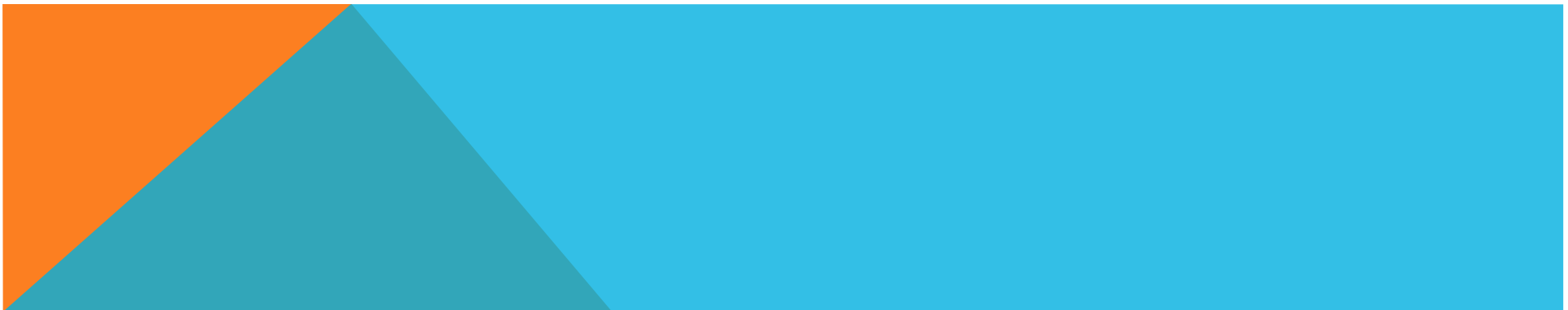
THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

❑ Here, in essence, is the problem of evil:

   (1) God is by definition all-powerful and all-good.

   (2) But an all-powerful and all-good being would not allow there to be evil.

   (3) There is evil.

   (C) So, there is no God.

❑ Since (1) is held to be a conceptual truth about God, most responses to this problem focus instead on (2) and/or (3).
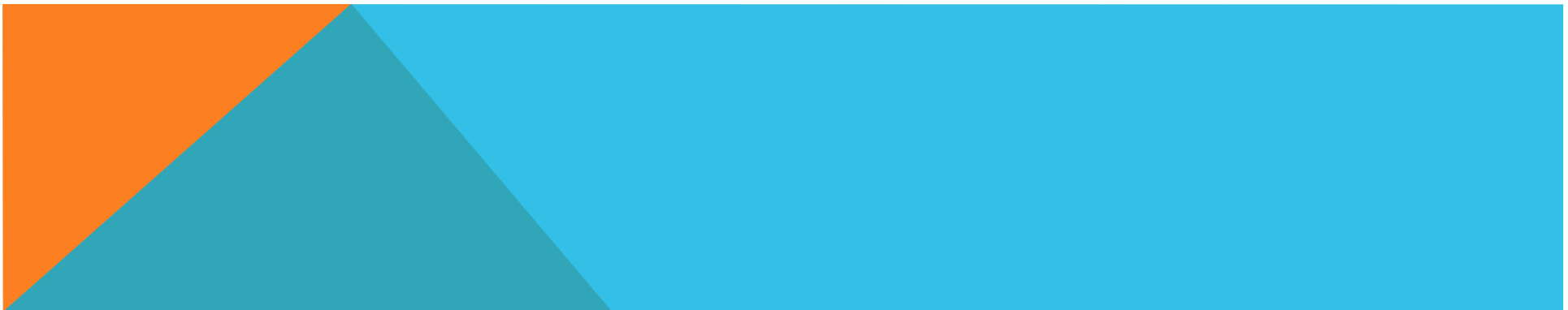
THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

❑ Is it obvious that God would not allow evil?

❑ For one thing, it may be important to God that human beings are given free will, but that will inevitably lead to evil deeds being committed by some.

❑ Moreover, it could be that certain valuable features of the world require there to be evil present. Perhaps, for example, great acts of charity are only possible if there is evil.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

❏ But what about entirely pointless evil—i.e., evil which doesn't serve any greater end and which God could prevent without limiting our free will (as when a natural disaster destroys a village)?

❏ But perhaps we only regard this evil as pointless because of our limited perspective, and if we saw things from God's perspective we would see that there was a point to it after all?

❏ This relates to a possible way of denying premise (3). After all, if our pain and suffering is serving a wider purpose (perhaps one that we cannot comprehend), then in what sense is it evil at all?

Tsunami Warning Sign

THE RATIONALITY OF FAITH

❑ Faith in God is more than just the belief that He exists. In addition, one must also believe in God (where believing in something or someone is not reducible to just believing that, for example, they exist).

❑ Indeed, real faith has some very different properties to propositional belief. If I merely believe that such-and-such is the case, and you present me with credible counterevidence, then as a rational subject I should lose my belief (or at least be much less confident about its truth). But faith isn't like that. Someone with real faith will retain their commitment even despite being presented this new counterevidence.

❑ (Are there limits to this though? And what does this feature of faith tell us about the rationality of religious conviction? For example, should it raise the epistemic bar for faith?)

THE RATIONALITY OF FAITH

❑ Notice that one can't acquire faith on purely *prudential* grounds.

❑ Learning that faith in God is good for one's career, for example, might give one reason to act as if one has faith.

❑ But so long as the only reason why one is acting in this way is prudential, then it will never be an actual manifestation of faith.

❑ This relates to a famous argument given by Blaise Pascal (1623-1662).

Blaise Pascal
(1623-1662)

THE RATIONALITY OF FAITH

❑ Pascal argued that one is prudentially better off having faith in God than in not having faith in God.

❑ Consider the two options. If you have faith, and God exists, then the rewards are infinite; if he doesn't exist, then the costs are finite. If you don't have faith, and God exists, then the costs are infinite; if he doesn't exist, then the benefits are finite.

❑ If you add it up, it's clearly far better to have faith in God!

❑ But Pascal never seriously thought this argument was a route to faith. It rather just shows, if one has faith, then there are prudential benefits (but these won't be the basis of a genuine faith).

Blaise Pascal
(1623-1662)
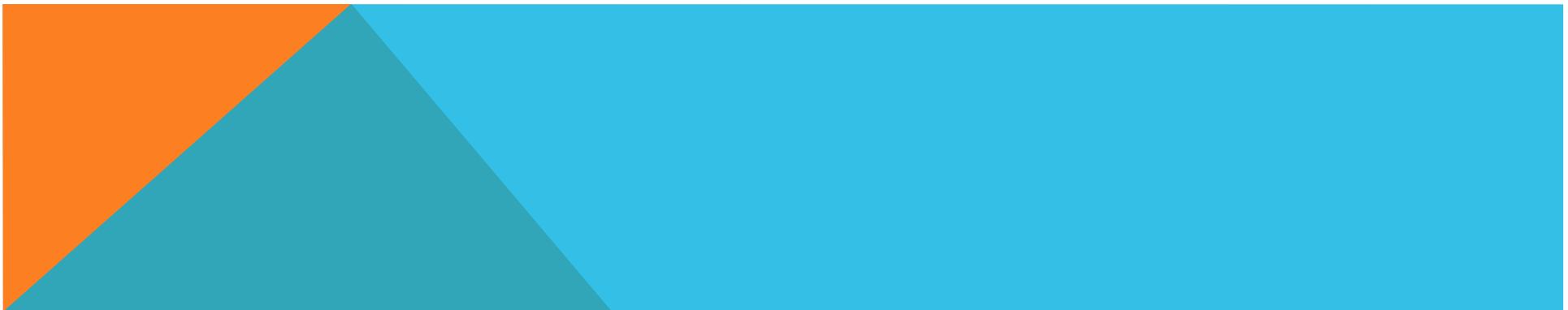
THE RATIONALITY OF FAITH

❑ Do we need to have a positive reason to have faith in God (such that, without such a positive reason, we should not have faith)?

❑ Is it never possible for a rational person to make a 'leap of faith'? (And aren't there quite a lot of things that we believe which we have no specific reasons to believe?)

❑ Besides, don't those with faith often have some positive reasons for their faith (e.g., religious experiences, or testimony from those they trust)?

THE RATIONALITY OF FAITH

❑ Still, one might counter that merely having some positive reasons in support of one's faith is not enough given that there are positive reasons against the existence of God (e.g., the problem of evil).

❑ Does one need to first have reason to discount those arguments against God's existence?

❑ (Can there be an 'epistemic division of labour' in this regard, whereby one leaves these debates to the religious experts, as one does with complex scientific debates?)