

The divine attributes

INTRODUCTION

At the heart of philosophy of religion is the idea of God. There are many ideas of God around the world, and different religions have different views on the nature of God. However, almost all agree that God is ‘maximally great’ – that nothing could be greater than God. This is the conception of God we will start with. But our scope will become more narrow, and the properties of God we will discuss are those which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have thought central. But, even more selectively, we will only look at how the debate over God’s attributes has been understood and developed in the Western Christian tradition.

We are starting with the thought that nothing could be greater than God. Another way this thought has been expressed is that God is perfect. Augustine says that to think of God is to ‘attempt to conceive something than which nothing more excellent or sublime exists’. Some philosophers claim that God is the most perfect being that *could* (not just does) exist.

A note on referring to God: I have adopted the traditional personal pronoun ‘he’ in referring to God. There are two reasons for this: first, the conception of God that is discussed in the syllabus is personal, so the impersonal ‘it’ sounds awkward. Second, English unfortunately has only two personal pronouns, ‘he’ and ‘she’, both gendered. If God exists, I don’t believe that God is gendered in either way. My use of ‘he’ is purely to avoid the awkwardness of alternating ‘he’ and ‘she’ and of using ‘s/he’.

GOD AS PERSONAL

Before turning to the properties of God listed in the syllabus, we may ask why these properties have been thought to belong to God. Part of the answer is that many religions and philosophers have thought that God is personal. Properties that essentially characterize a person include intellect and will. The intellect is characterized by rationality and knowledge, the will by morality, freedom and the ability to act.

(Some philosophers argue that to lack either intellect or will is to lack perfections – things without either intellect or will are not as great as things with intellect and will. Certainly we prize these abilities very highly. So to be perfect, God must have both intellect and will, i.e. be personal.)

Intellect and will are properties of mind. If God is a person, he is so in virtue of being a mind. Being perfect, if God is a mind, then he is an ideal mind. He will have perfect intellect and perfect will. Perfect intellect involves perfect wisdom, perfect rationality and perfect knowledge (omniscience). Perfect will involves perfect goodness and perfect power (omnipotence).

However, if God were a person, he would be very unusual. As the most perfect possible being, God cannot become more perfect; nor can God become less perfect, as then he would not be the most perfect being possible, and so not God. So unlike other persons,

God cannot change. Persons also usually have bodies. But the most perfect being can't have a body, at least literally. Anything made of matter changes over time, but God can't change. And anything made of matter must have parts. God cannot have parts, because whatever has parts depends on them for its existence. So God can't be material. For these reasons, philosophers have said God is *personal* rather than a *person*, that is, God has attributes essentially associated with being a person, but God is not a person, because he does not change and does not have a body.

OMNIPOTENCE

As perfect, God will have perfect power, or the most power possible. Power is the ability to do things. The most obvious definition of omnipotence is 'the power to do anything'. But does 'anything' include the logically impossible? For instance, could God make $2 + 2 = 5$? Could God create a married bachelor? Some pious philosophers have wanted to say yes – logic is no limit on God's power. However, there is simply no way we can meaningfully say this.

What is logically impossible is not anything at all. Any description of a logically impossible state of affairs or power is not a meaningful description, because it contains a contradiction. The *limits* of the logically possible are not *limitations*. So almost all philosophers have restricted omnipotence to 'the power to do anything that is logically possible'. Even if God can't do the logically impossible, there is still nothing that God can't do.

OMNISCIENCE

Perfect knowledge is usually taken to mean 'omniscience'. The most obvious definition of omniscience is 'knowing everything', but we need to remember that God is the most perfect *possible* being, and perhaps it is impossible to know *everything*. For example, if human beings have free will, then perhaps it is not possible to know what they will do in the future. So being omniscient, God knows all the truths that it is possible to know. What we think it is possible for God to know will depend on other attributes of God, e.g. whether we think God exists outside time (so there is no 'future' for God).

Omniscience is not just a matter of *what* God knows, but also of *how* God knows. Aquinas argues that God knows everything that he knows 'directly' and 'immediately', rather than through inference or through understanding a system of representation (such as language or thinking in terms of propositions). Other philosophers disagree, and argue that if we say that God doesn't know all true propositions, then there is something that God doesn't know; so God does have propositional knowledge as well as direct and immediate knowledge.

PERFECT GOODNESS

There are two ways of understanding perfect goodness. If goodness just is perfection, then saying God is perfectly good is just to say that God is perfectly perfect – or the most perfect possible being. There is more than one way to be perfect (including, as we've seen perfect power and perfect knowledge), and God is perfect in all ways. This is a metaphysical sense of 'goodness'. The other sense of 'goodness' is the moral sense. In this sense, 'God is perfectly good' means that God's will is always in accordance with moral values.

Plato and Augustine connect the two understandings of perfect goodness. What is perfect includes what is morally good; evil is a type of 'lack', a 'falling short' of goodness. If evil is a 'lack' or 'failure', what is morally good is more perfect than what is not.

TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE

The idea of transcendence marks the way God is very different from creation. First, God is 'outside' or 'goes beyond' the universe. Since God is self-sufficient and the creator of the universe, clearly God is not reducible to the universe. Second, God is not spatial as the universe is, and many philosophers argue that God also transcends time in the sense that God is timeless, rather than existing in time (see below). Third, while God is personal, he has intellect and will in quite a different way from persons.

However, emphasising God's transcendence can make it seem that God is very remote from us, no part of our lives. The claim that God is immanent marks the close connection between God's existence and the existence of everything else. For example, it is said that God is omnipresent, i.e. that he exists everywhere – in everything that exists, God is 'there'. In being everywhere, God knows everything from the 'inside'. Some thinkers also argue that God is immanent in time and so in human history, giving a sense that we work alongside God in producing what is morally good.

Immanence without transcendence, the view that God is wholly immanent, would lead to 'pantheism' – that God and the universe are the same thing. It would also lead to a denial of God being personal – since the universe isn't. So transcendence is necessary for the traditional conception of God; immanence is necessary to prevent that God being impossibly remote from us.

EXISTENCE WITHOUT BEGINNING OR END

Being perfect, God is self-sufficient, dependent on nothing else for existence. If there was something that brought God into existence, God would be dependent on that thing to exist. If there were something that could end God's existence, then God is equally dependent on that thing (not exercising its power) to continue to exist. If God is the ultimate reality and depends on nothing else, then nothing can bring God into existence or end God's existence. And so (if God exists) God's existence has no beginning or end.

There are two ways in which this can be expressed, related to transcendence and immanence. If we think that God exists in time, then we say that God's existence is *everlasting* – God exists throughout all time. If we think that God exists outside time, then we say that God's existence is eternal – God is timeless. In this case, God has no beginning or end because the ideas of beginning and end only make sense in time – something can only start or stop existing in time. God is not in time, so God cannot start or stop existing.