

# Introduction: Divine Attributes

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## 1 On the Importance of Reflecting on God's Attributes

An earthworm feels the pleasant warmth of the African sun when a herd of elephants passes by. All of a sudden, it feels vibrations in the ground, a shadow falls upon it, and the temperature decreases notably. One of the elephants stopped close to the earthworm. Does the worm have any clear conception of what is going on? Can it perceive the elephant and create a mental representation of it, given its sensory apparatus and brain performance? Most probably not. As far as we know, the earthworm's sensory apparatus is not capable of perceiving an elephant, and its brain is unable to produce a mental image of it.

There are a fair number of theologians and philosophers who claim that our situation is analogous to the one described above when it comes to acquiring reliable knowledge about God. We are like earthworms—incapable of producing any adequate sensory perception or mental representation of God. All that we can do is cautiously

approach the mystery of God by being aware that all our images, reflections, and teachings about it are ultimately inadequate attempts to grasp a reality far beyond our cognitive grasp.<sup>1</sup>

According to such a view, any philosophical and theological reflection about the divine nature and the divine attributes amounts to mere academic quibble or, even worse, pseudo-discussions.

There is no doubt that the motivation for holding such a view is noble and also points to something religiously important. “You shall not make for yourself a carved image of God,” says the first of the Ten Commandments. This commandment reminds us that any attempt to grasp God in a determinate and precise way is hubris that will inevitably end in idolatry. This reminder, however, does not mean that any attempt to systematically reflect on the nature of God is religiously misleading. On the contrary, a closer look shows that, among the different roads leading to a reflection about the nature of God, there are at least two that are intrinsically motivated by religious life itself.

The first road is scriptural evidence. Various passages in the Bible ascribe properties to God that are taken to be part of the divine nature. Gen. 17:1 and Ps. 91:1, for instance, describe God as almighty; Ps. 139 says that God has unlimited knowledge; and Ps. 51:1 declares that God's love and faithfulness will never cease. If these passages are not taken as purely metaphorical expressions but are read with a literal kernel, then one natural question to ask is in what sense we shall attribute these properties to God.

The second road is the religious praxis of worship. Reflection upon what kind of being is worthy of worship

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<sup>1</sup> We use the metaphor of the elephant and worm because it was proposed by a theologian at a recent workshop on the atemporality/temporality of God.

leads to a reflection upon the divine attributes. It appears obvious to claim that a being that is surpassed in its positive attributes is not worthy of worship, for then there would exist another more excellent being that deserves more to be worshipped. In other words, it seems to be religiously unsatisfying if a being possesses many great-making and admirable attributes that, however, can still be thought to be ascribable in a qualitatively and quantitatively increased manner to another being.

The third road is philosophical theology. Some philosophers and theologians have provided arguments for the existence of God. With these arguments comes the requirement to clarify which features God possesses. Take, for instance, Thomas Aquinas. After providing arguments for the existence of God, he goes on to argue for God's infinity, moral perfection, omnipresence, omniscience, immutability, eternity, omnipotence, beatitude, etc. at the very beginning of the *Summa Theologica*. Traditional handbooks of dogmatics kept this order with some modifications up to the present day. It has been part of the general curriculum of theology to reflect on the divine attributes.

These brief considerations indicate that a thorough reflection about divine attributes appears to be well motivated from the perspective of religions praxis as well as systematic reasoning about it.

Taking up the metaphor of the worm and elephant, however, one could object that we are simply not able to form any positive conceptions of the divine attributes. Philosophers and theologians may have such a claim in mind when they say that all we can do is to state that God is a "being beyond being" or a "being that transcends being and non-being." Instead of complicating matters further with such hard-to-grasp or even paradoxical expressions, it appears clearer to straightforwardly say that God is beyond any cognitive grasp of ours and, as a consequence, we can form no positive conceptions of the divine attributes, full stop. This account, however, would amount to the view that a strong and powerful tradition of systematic reasoning about the divine is inherently flawed and therefore should be abandoned.

Other philosophers and theologians suggest a weaker thesis when they say that we can give a non-paradoxical and positive characterization of the divine attributes but only in non-literal terms. As understandable as the danger of a too-anthropomorphic conception of God may be as a consequence of literal ascriptions, one can justifiably ask to what end such a view leads. What exactly does it mean to say that God is all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful, etc. when our common understanding of goodness, knowledge, and power should be applied to God only in a non-literal sense? Our understanding depends on our interactions with entities to which these terms can be ascribed literally. Thus, the suggestion to expand the use of these concepts to an entity who does not share these

features with us at all—and therefore any literal ascription results in inadequacy—is hard to swallow. There is hardly a way of providing content to the claim that God is all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful unless we suppose that God has these attributes in a relevantly similar way to other beings with which we are familiar.

These thoughts propose that the metaphor of the worm and elephant is misleading and intellectually problematic when it comes to describe the cognitive situation of human beings regarding God. Claiming that we can speak about God only in paradoxical, metaphorical, and non-literal ways because God is a mystery utterly beyond our comprehension disqualifies any talk about God from being part of serious rational discourse.

Of course, it might turn out at the end of the day that a meaningful interpretation of some, many, or all divine attributes cannot be provided, and metaphorical speech is all what we are left with. A closer analysis might reveal that some, many, or all attributes involve inconsistencies, are mutually exclusive, or lack any determinate content. This may be so. However, it should be the end point, not the starting point, of a long road travelled. Since we are still in the midst of this intellectual journey, more reflections about divine attributes are apt and appropriate—particularly in times when irrational and arbitrary conceptions of the divine seem to be on the rise and many harms and sufferings are caused in the name of God.

## 2 God's Attributes as a Philosophical Problem

Analytic philosophy of religion has witnessed a significant increase in interest in the ontological presuppositions of the various theological doctrines. One might speculate about the motives of this development within a philosophical tradition that was critical or even hostile towards religious reasoning at its beginning (Wolterstorff 2009). As a matter of fact, it can be said that substantive and creative theorizing about God's nature and attributes has taken place within the analytic tradition from the late 1970s onward (see, for instance, the contributions of Swinburne 1977; Davis 1983; Freddoso 1983; Wierenga 1989; Gale 1993; Hughes 1995; Hoffman and Rosenkranz 2002).

Investigation of divine attributes has focused on several themes. We briefly mention four. First, attempts were made to reach a clear definition of divine attributes without falling prey to logical incoherence. Several questions about divine omnipotence are well known: Is God able to do absolutely everything, or are there limits to divine power? Can God actualize contradictory states of affairs? Can God perform acts contrary to divine nature, for instance, deciding that it is no longer necessary for Him to be eternal or morally perfect? Concerning omniscience, analogous

problems have been discussed: Does God's omniscience also encompass the knowledge of what it is like for a concrete individual to feel a subjective experience, such as joy, regret, or anger (Zagzebski 2013)?

Second, there is a debate about the composability of these attributes. Take Leibniz's famous claim that God ought to create the best of all possible worlds out of His moral perfection. Does this claim entail that God must of necessity create this world, which appears to stain His omnipotence? Another example: If God knows what time is now, then this seems to make God a subject of time and change, contrary to a long and prominent theological tradition according to which a perfect being ought to be immutable. On the other hand, denying that God knows what time is now seems to harm His omniscience.

Third, someone may focus on the relationship between divine attributes and some other fundamental principles of the theistic tradition, such as human freedom. If human beings are free in a robust, libertarian sense, then it is hard to see how God is able to foreknow free human decisions. If this is the case, can one still claim that God is omniscient and everything dependent on His power?

A fourth topic of interest concerns the relationship between divine attributes and observable features of our world, such as the quantity and quality of evil we experience. Why does a perfectly good, omniscient, and omnipotent God permit all the evils in the world? At the least, with Leibniz's classical treatise of this problem, the topic of theodicy is at the very top of the list of themes discussed in theology, philosophy of religion, and criticisms of religion.

Finally, it is important to notice that the topic of divine attributes is not only central to contemporary philosophy of religion but also deeply intertwined with general questions of logic and metaphysics. The divine attributes are deeply intertwined with concepts such as modality, consistency, coherence, causation or freedom. A careful analysis of these concepts is a presupposition for grasping aspects of the divine nature. However, they are also of utmost importance for understanding the existence of mundane entities and their relations to each other. Therefore, the philosophical analysis of divine attributes proves interesting not only for scholars in theology and philosophy of religion, but in principle for any philosopher with an interest in our fundamental concepts and intuitions about being, knowledge, modality, causality or freedom.

### 3 The Papers of This Issue

The papers of this special issue can be divided into three main groups.

The first group, consisting of only one paper, faces the problem of the knowledge of the essence of God and of His

attributes. In his contribution, "Divine incomprehensibility. Can we know the unknowable God?" Stephen Davis discusses the relationship between God as essence and God as revealed and whether the God as revealed in the Scriptures is a reliable representation of God's essence. Davis critically analyzes the reasons one could advance for ruling out the possibility of human knowledge of God and some possible reactions and solutions to the problem of the knowledge of God's essence. His conclusion is that via Revelation we can know certain things about God in essence. We do not know much, and we do not fully understand all that we can know. Nevertheless Revelation does accurately reveal divine essence.

A second group of papers deals with the concept of God itself and with divine attributes in general. Daniel Howard-Snyder's aim in his essay "Who or What is God, according to John Hick?" is to analyze the problem of the concept of God. He starts from Hick's well-known account, which provides a systematic framework to carve a notion of God shared by all the most important religions. However, Howard-Snyder argues that this concept is probably impossible given its metaphysical features; on the other hand, even if it were consistent, this notion is unworthy of interest.

As said before, one of the classic problems in philosophy of religion concerns the coherence of divine attributes. Many criticisms of theism try to show that the alleged attributes of God are indeed inconsistent. Therefore, Peter van Inwagen proposes that, in defending theism, a certain amount of tinkering is permissible with the concept of God. In his contribution, "Permissible tinkering with the concept of God," Jeff Speaks critically engages with van Inwagen's account that the most important fixed point in tinkering is the conception of God as the greatest possible being.

Michael Almeida, instead, discusses the way in which God possesses His attributes. His essay "A Posteriori Anselmianism" provides an account of Moderate Anselmianism, which maintains that the essential properties of God are not primarily necessary. The God of classical theism is personal as the talk about omnipotence, omniscience, divine will, divine love or moral perfection indicates. However, this tradition ascribes other features to God which are hard to accommodate with a personal conception such as God's immutability, simplicity or atemporality. This tension introduces the main concern of John Bishop's and Ken Perszyk's paper "The Divine Attributes and Non-personal Conceptions of God" which outlines a specific non-personal, monist, and "naturalist" conception of God.

There is, then, a third group of papers concerning specific divine attributes. Regarding *omnipotence*, in his contribution "The power to do the impossible," Brandon Carey argues that, in fact, God has the power to actualize

impossible states of affairs even though there is no possible world in which He does this. Carey shows that this is not paradoxical. As to *omnipresence*, in his essay “God is where God acts: reconceiving divine omnipresence,” James Arcadi offers an interpretation of what it means for an immaterial being as God to be at every location and maintains that we have to conceive of God’s presence at a location as an instance of divine action at that location.

God is often considered the unchanging *cause* of all changes and, classically, the need of existence of a cause of everything is advanced as a proof of the existence of God. This proof is based on the Aristotelian principle that nothing can come from nothing. In his contribution “Divine causation,” Graham Oppy discusses this principle and its epistemological credential. Oppy shows that the robustness of this principle is not higher than other principles concerning causality. In particular, it seems to be no more justified than the principle that a cause, by causing some change, changes itself. The latter principle is, of course, in tension with the idea of an unchanged cause. Oppy concludes that the Aristotelian principle that nothing comes from nothing is not a good reason for preferring theism over naturalism.

In her paper “Divine Freedom”, Frances Howard-Snyder considers two divine attributes in particular: *incompatibilist freedom* and *moral perfection*. She argues that incompatibilist freedom implies the capacity to do worse than the best action God can do. If so, then God is not essentially morally perfect.

Two papers deal with the attribute of *divine simplicity*. In his article “An argument from divine beauty against divine simplicity,” Matthew Baddorf argues against the possession of this attribute by God on the ground that, if God is beautiful and if beauty arises from structure, then God must be structured and, thus, complex. In his paper “Simplicity’s deficiency: Al-Ghazali’s defense of the divine attributes and contemporary Trinitarian metaphysics,” Nicholas Martin discusses Al-Ghazali’s defense of the thesis that God’s oneness of essence is not compromised by unity with extra-essential formal properties like God’s attributes. Martin notices the similarity of Al-Ghazali’s defense with Brower and Rea’s model of a Trinitarian God, according to which the three Persons of Trinity are like three diverse properties of the same substrate.

Three papers tackle the attribute of *divine omniscience*. Two of them are concerned, in particular, with the problem of divine foreknowledge of future human actions. In his contribution “Causation, time and God’s omniscience,” Richard Swinburne argues that God cannot know future

free human actions. If God is in time, then God’s past beliefs should depend on future human actions, but this is impossible because backward causation is metaphysically impossible. If God is timeless, then He cannot know temporal facts, including human action. Swinburne also shows that there is scriptural support for a weaker conception of God’s omniscience. In their contribution “A note on eternity,” Ciro De Florio and Aldo Frigerio question the relation between a timeless God and a tensed world. In particular, they show that the correctness of the thesis that a timeless God cannot know tensed facts depends on the metaphysics of time that is assumed. They argue that if the Fragmentalist metaphysics of time is accepted, then it is possible to argue that a timeless God can know tensed facts, including human free actions. The third paper about omniscience investigates a different problem. One usual argument against God’s omniscience is that God does not know facts known by creatures in a first person’s perspective. In his paper “Omnisubjectivity and incarnation,” Adam Green discusses Linda Zagzebski’s view that God is omnisubjective, i.e., He knows every conscious state of every creature from that creature’s first person perspective. Green offers an interpretation of omnisubjectivity in which God knows everything that happens in the mind of His creatures not because He can imagine their experience, but because He, in some way, can perceptually grasp everything that happens in His creation. Furthermore, Green speculates on what new kind of knowledge God acquires through incarnation, given that He already knew what it meant to be a human being.

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