The Divine Attributes

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Exploring the Philosophy of Religion

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This is a series of individual volumes on classic and contemporary themes in the philosophy of religion. Each volume introduces, examines, and discusses the main problems and arguments related to each topic. Each book also considers some important positions of major philosophers, offers thoughtful critiques, articulates new positions, and indicates fruitful directions for further investigation.

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Series Editor's Preface

Philosophy of religion is experiencing a kind of renaissance. From the last quarter of the twentieth century onward, we have witnessed remarkably vigorous activity among philosophers interested in religion. We are likewise seeing college and university students seeking courses in philosophy of religion at an unprecedented rate. To reach this point, philosophy of religion had to weather the harsh and hostile intellectual climate that persisted through most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Absolute idealism depersonalized deity, naturalism supplanted a religious worldview, and positivism deprived theological claims of cognitive status. Yet, partly because of incisive critiques of these viewpoints and partly because of new, first-rate studies of religious concepts and beliefs, this field of inquiry has once again come to the fore.

The Exploring the Philosophy of Religion series, then, comes into a very exciting arena. The books it contains treat some of the most important topics in the field. Since the renewal of interest in religion has occurred largely among Anglo-American philosophers committed to the best in the analytic tradition, these works will tend to reflect that approach. To be sure, some helpful general introductions and anthologies are available for those wanting a survey, and there are many good, cutting-edge monographs dealing with technical issues in this burgeoning area. However, the books in this series are designed to occupy that relatively vacant middle ground in the literature between elementary texts and pioneer works. They discuss their stated topics in a way that acquaints the reader with all the relevant ideas and options while pointing out which ones seem most reasonable. Each volume, therefore, constitutes a focused, intensive introduction to the issue and serves as a model of how one might actually go about developing an informed position.

Philosophy of religion is dynamic and growing. The issues it addresses are of primary significance for understanding the divine, ourselves, and our place in the universe. With this sense of magnitude, the present series has been conceived to offer something to all who want to think deeply about the issues: serious undergraduates, graduate students, divinity and theology students, professional philosophers, and even to thoughtful, educated lay persons.

Michael L. Peterson

Acknowledgments

Authors' Note

The Divine Attributes can be used as a text in undergraduate and graduate courses in the philosophy of religion. We have included a glossary that explains the meanings of philosophical terms that may be unfamiliar to students who are taking their first course in the philosophy of religion or to the general reader. Terms included in the glossary appear in **bold face** the first time they occur within the text or within the notes.

It is Infinity, which, joined to our Ideas of Existence, Power, Knowledge, &c. makes that complex Idea, whereby we represent to our selves the best we can, the Supreme Being.

<div align="right">

John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*
II. xxiii. ¶ 35 (1690)

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Introduction to Rational Theology

In this book we will analyze the idea of God (understood as a maximally great being). This exercise belongs to a philosophical discipline known as rational theology. In developing our analysis, we will go through the following stages: (i) describing the nature of rational theology, (ii) differentiating the idea of a maximally great being from other historical ideas of the divine (and identifying the core great-making qualities of a maximally great being), (iii) defending the coherence of maximal greatness and the mutual coherence of the divine attributes it includes, and (iv) elucidating those divine attributes. At the end of this book, we will provide an overview of the prospects for justified belief in the existence of a maximally great being from the perspective of rational theology.

Theology is the study of God, the gods, or the divine: it seeks to answer questions about the nature and existence of God, the gods, or the divine. *Rational theology* is a theology that accepts the canons of rationality. These canons consist of the laws of logic (both those of **deductive** and non-deductive inference), together with other principles regulating the use of sources of evidence such as introspection (or inner awareness), perception (or outer awareness), and memory. Thus, rational theology cannot accept an account of the divine which logically **entails** a contradiction, or which flies in the face of probability. For instance, according to the logical **Law of Non-Contradiction**, nothing can both be and not be at the same time. This law implies that it is absolutely **impossible** both for God always to exist and for God never to exist. Similarly, it is absolutely impossible that there exists a spherical cube. Therefore, if there is an account of the divine that logically entails that it is within the power of God to bring it about that he both always exists and never exists, or to

bring it about that there exists a spherical cube, then that account of the divine is unacceptable to rational theology. Furthermore, the canons of rationality imply that we cannot rationally attribute to God a source of evidence or knowledge that is incoherent or appears to be inconsistent or impossible.

From the perspective of rational theology, if the concept of God is logically incoherent, then he cannot exist. Consequently, a rational defense of the existence of God requires a coherent conception of God. A conception of God is coherent if and only if the divine attributes are intelligible taken both individually and in combination. Finally, the existence of God should be not only formally consistent, but consistent with the **necessary** truths of **metaphysics**, **epistemology**, and **ethics**, at least to the extent that these can be ascertained.

As the reader will have noticed, we use masculine pronouns to refer to God. We do this for stylistic reasons; this should not be taken to suggest that God has gender. Indeed, assuming that God is nonphysical, and that a nonphysical being could not be biologically gendered, it is impossible that God is biologically gendered.

The relevant canons of rationality, cited earlier, require us to seek truth and to seek to avoid falsehood. They are the canons of *epistemic* rationality or justification. **Epistemic justification** is the sort of justification that is necessary for knowledge. More specifically, a belief can count as knowledge only if that belief is both true and epistemically justified. Rational principles of other kinds require one to seek other valuable goals, such as maximizing one's own happiness, or maximizing happiness for oneself and others. It follows that one should distinguish epistemic rationality, which is fundamentally and essentially truth-seeking and falsehood-avoiding, from nonepistemic rationality, which is not. It is **possible** that we will be happy if and only if we believe in God, and we could have such a prudential or practical reason for believing in God even if we are not *epistemically* justified in believing in him. But rational theology, in our sense of the term, has no place for a belief which is not epistemically justified, for instance, unreasoning faith, a "**will to believe**," or a belief whose only justification is prudential or pragmatic.[1]

Rational theology is committed to the following two general principles of epistemic rationality. First, if a **proposition**, p, does not have **intrinsic credibility** for a person, S, then p is acceptable for S only if S has adequate evidence for p.[2] In other words, one ought to accept a proposition only if one is epistemically justified in believing that proposition. Second, the *degree of confidence* a person, S, has in the truth of a proposi-

tion, p, should be in proportion to the evidence S has for p, or in proportion to p's intrinsic credibility for S. That is to say, the degree of confidence one has in a proposition ought to be in proportion to one's epistemic justification for believing that proposition.

A theology is rational *to the degree* that it conforms to the canons of rationality. *Ideally*, a rational theology *completely* conforms to those canons. On the other hand, the failure of a theology, T, to conform completely to these canons is consistent with T's being *highly* rational.

This book is a study in rational theology. Thus, we assume that any defensible theology must meet the demands of reason. More specifically, our main purpose is to give a rational account of the *nature of God*, that is, of the God of the three major Western religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.[3] The conception of God that these religious traditions have come to accept is the conception that Anselm (1053–1105) expresses: the being than which none greater is possible, that is, a perfect being.[4] This notion of maximal greatness or perfection will serve as a regulating definition on the basis of which we will attempt to derive and analyze the fundamental divine attributes, such as divine power, knowledge, and goodness. From this notion we will also try to decide whether God is to be understood as being eternal, as within or outside of time, as **existing necessarily** or **contingently**, and as a physical or a spiritual being. We believe that the systematic construction of a coherent conception of God based upon the foregoing rational principles is instructive, and of theological and philosophical interest.

The notion of *rational religion* parallels that of rational theology. Rational religion is a belief in God, the gods, or the divine based upon reason. Accordingly, rational religion accepts the possibility of revising its beliefs in response to rational criticism. (Rational religion may base the belief that God exists upon *experience*, even upon an apparent experience of *God*, but only on the assumption that the belief that God exists is revisable in response to rational criticism.) In contrast, *revealed religion* is a belief in God, the gods, or the divine based upon the absolutely authoritative revelatory experiences of one or more historical individuals. Such revelations may be codified in what is accepted as an infallible sacred text, for example, the Bible. Unlike rational religion, revealed religion rejects the possibility of revising its beliefs in response to rational criticism. For example, an advocate of rational religion who believes that God exists would be willing to abandon that belief in response to rational criticism, whereas an advocate of revealed religion who shares this belief would *not* be willing to do so. This is consistent with the fact that some advocates

of revealed religion are willing to revise their beliefs about the correct *interpretation* of their sacred texts in response to rational criticism. On the other hand, some advocates of revealed religion are strict fundamentalists who maintain that there is a unique *literal* reading of their sacred texts that is not open to further interpretation.

Relative to a particular conception of God, the gods, or the divine, *theism* asserts the existence of God, the gods, or the divine; *atheism* denies their existence; and *agnosticism* neither asserts nor denies their existence. Relative to the Anselmian conception of God, theism asserts that such a supreme being exists. Traditional forms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have a shared commitment to theism in the sense just specified.

However, the philosophical task of *defining* or **analyzing** the nature of God is, we believe, prior to the task of deciding whether or not God exists. After all, before one can tell whether or not something exists, one has to know *what it is* one is inquiring about in this way. As we indicated earlier, our main purpose in this book is to carry out this definitional or analytical task. Although this book is not primarily about the *existence* of God, we nevertheless will have a few things to say in our concluding remarks about how rational theology addresses the question of the existence of God. In what follows, we give a brief summary of each chapter of the book.

Chapter 1: *The Idea of God*. In section 1.1, we distinguish different understandings of the divine, such as polytheism versus monotheism, a personal versus an impersonal god, pantheism versus a divine being separate from the universe, and so forth. In section 2.2, we focus on the regulating idea of the divine as the greatest or most perfect possible being. This idea has been at the core of traditional Western theism at least since the Middle Ages. We discuss how this regulating idea entails various salient divine attributes that together comprise the nature of God, attributes such as omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, incorporeality, and necessary existence. Nevertheless, we reject the idea that maximal greatness entails certain attributes that have been ascribed to God, such as omnipresence and timelessness. In later chapters, it is argued that attributes of this kind cannot meet the test of coherence.

Chapter 2: *Substantiality*. In section 2.1, we discuss the notion of categories of being, including substance, and show why God is properly understood as a substantial being. In particular, we show why God must be understood as a *person*, rather than as an impersonal being. In section 2.2, we show how substance is to be understood in terms of a kind of independence (which God as a substantial being would enjoy). Lastly, in section

2.3, Spinoza's nontraditional theory of God as an independent substance is assessed.

Chapter 3: *Incorporeality*. In section 3.1, we define the notion of a soul or spiritual substance. We also show how the nature of God, in particular divine spirituality, precludes God's being literally omnipresent, but allows for some metaphorical sense in which God would be omnipresent. Section 3.2 defends the intelligibility of souls against various philosophical attacks. Section 3.3 defends the intelligibility of **body–soul interaction** against philosophical objections. It is also argued that God's being omnipotent entails that God is a soul, rather than a body. In section 3.4, we argue that God's being a soul entails that he is **simple**, that is, without parts. In addition, we distinguish this sort of simplicity from other, more radical and arguably incoherent forms of simplicity.

Chapter 4: *Necessary Existence*. Section 4.1 discusses the **necessity** or **contingency** of propositions, of properties, and of the existence of beings. In section 4.2, we explain the concepts of a **necessary being** and a **contingent being**. We also defend the coherence of the idea of a substantial necessary being against Humean objections. Section 4.3 provides an account of divine necessary existence, divine **necessary properties**, and divine **contingent properties**. In addition, we defend the standard, possible-worlds analysis of **modalities** such as necessity and contingency. In section 4.4, we distinguish the notions of a necessary being and a self-existent being and argue that the latter notion is problematic.

Chapter 5: *Eternality*. Section 5.1 discusses the debate over the nature of divine eternality and the motivation for the claim that God is timeless. In section 5.2, we argue that this motivation is misguided and that divine eternality is fully intelligible only if it is temporal eternality. Section 5.3 explains the distinction between immutability, or strict unchangeability, and incorruptibility, or the impossibility of diminishment or decay. We maintain that God should be understood to be incorruptible but not immutable.

Chapter 6: *Omniscience*. In section 6.1, we show why omniscience is not to be understood as knowing every truth, but rather as knowing as much as any being could know. We also discuss what sort of knowledge an omniscient being would have, and what the limits of knowledge are for an omniscient being. Included in the latter is a discussion of the possibility of knowledge of future contingent and first-person propositions. Based on the discussions in section 6.1, we offer a definition of omniscience in section 6.2. Finally, in section 6.3, we survey the prominent arguments that figure in the debate over the compatibility of divine

foreknowledge and human **freedom**. We maintain that divine omniscience would *not* include foreknowledge of human choices and actions that are free in the **libertarian** sense.

Chapter 7: *Perfect Goodness, Perfect Virtue, and Moral Admirability*. Section 7.1 discusses the relation that God would bear to morality, and argues against the **divine command theory** of ethics. In section 7.2, we examine the relation between divine goodness and a **consequentialist theory** of right and wrong. The problem of evil, we maintain, usually assumes that some form of consequentialism is true. We will argue that certain puzzles arise about the nature of divine goodness given such a theory of ethics. In section 7.3, we examine divine moral perfection on a **deontological theory** of right and wrong, and its implications for the problem of evil. Finally, in section 7.4, we answer an alleged **paradox** according to which maximal greatness and moral admirability are incompatible.

Chapter 8: *Omnipotence*. In section 8.1, we show that the case of omnipotence is analogous to that of omniscience, in that the former is to be understood as *maximal* power, and not as the power to bring about *every* **state of affairs** (or even every *contingent* state of affairs). We also argue that there cannot be two coexisting omnipotent beings, and hence that God would be uniquely omnipotent. Section 8.2 discusses in detail what sort of power an omnipotent being would have, and what limitations there would be upon the power of such a being. Included in this section is a discussion of whether an omnipotent being can bring about impossible states of affairs, necessary states of affairs, past states of affairs, and free human actions. Based on the preceding sections, in section 8.3, we construct a formal analysis of omnipotence. Finally, in section 8.4, we argue that our analysis allows divine omnipotence and omnibenevolence to be reconciled. We also argue that our analysis of omnipotence implies that God would be a free agent in a robust sense.

In the postscript, *Concluding Remarks and Prolegomena to Future Rational Theology*, we provide an overview of the results reached in the first eight chapters, and argue that, properly understood, the concept of God is coherent. We emphasize that this result requires that we reject certain attributes that some traditional theologians have attributed to God. Nevertheless, the concept of God that emerges is, we argue, the one that is generated by the regulating idea of God as the greatest possible being. Finally, we indicate something of the philosophical context in which rational theology deals with the question of whether reason and experience can justify the belief that God exists.

NOTES

1   Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) famously held that unreasoning faith in God is required of us and that we ought not to engage in rational theology. This is an extreme form of fideism, the view that our lack of knowledge should encourage us to have faith in God. On the other hand, Blaise Pascal (1623–62) and William James (1842–1910) argued that belief in God can be rationally justified on prudential or pragmatic grounds. These arguments are consistent with forms of fideism less extreme than Kierkegaard's. Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) held a view that is incompatible with fideism. According to Aquinas, we can prove, and therefore we can know, that God exists; nevertheless, Aquinas maintains that there are many facts about God that we must accept on faith.

2   If a proposition, *p*, is self-evident for *S*, then *p* has intrinsic credibility for *S*. For example, the proposition that *if something is square, then it is square* may be self-evident for *S*. If a proposition, *p*, is self-evident for *S*, then *p* is acceptable for *S* even though *S* does not have evidence for *p*.

3   By the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, we mean the God that is *common* to all three religions. Hence, any claim about God that is specific to any one of these religions, e.g., the doctrine of the Trinity, is beyond the scope of our inquiry.

4   Anselm literally put it this way: God is "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived." He utilized this definition as a premise in his famous ontological argument for the existence of God. In the interests of clarity, we have replaced the partly psychological phrase 'can be conceived' with the wholly nonpsychological term 'possible', and have replaced the indefinite article 'a' with the definite article 'the'. There is no reason to think that Anselm would have found either of these clarifications objectionable. See *Proslogium*, chap. II, in *Saint Anselm, Basic Writings*, trans. Sidney N. Deane (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Co., 1962).

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