

The God of the Philosophers

Most people's faith in God is neither formed nor sustained by rational argument, though they may find rational arguments interesting and sometimes useful. Ask people why they believe in God, and beyond the obvious answer that they have been brought up to do so, the answer is more probably going to lie in some form of religious experience than in argument. This explains why most people's concept of God is closer to the God of Abraham than the God of the philosophers.

Given the difficulties with using religious experiences, religious authority or miracles to defend belief in God, let alone beliefs about God's nature, it is not surprising that, for all its problems, the philosophy of religion has remained important in establishing what people believe and why. Nevertheless, framing God in philosophical terminology and interpreting any encounters with the God of Abraham 'through reason alone' has its own issues.

Key to the philosophical concept of God is that God is perfect, which is usually defined in terms of omnipotence and omnibenevolence. Omnipotence is usually held to entail omniscience. Yet, what can these terms really mean?

- Can an omnipotent God create a rock that is too heavy for him to lift? How about a square circle? How about an imperfect world?
- Can an omniscient God see into the future? Could God have known that human freedom would result in Auschwitz? To what extent can individuals be free, if God knows what they are going to do?
- Can an omnibenevolent God have created a world where everybody is condemned to grow old, get sick and die, where

creatures must kill each other for food and always struggle to survive and reproduce?

Describing God's attributes creates a tension between theology and philosophy. Determining philosophically satisfactory meanings is likely to create theological problems, and vice versa.

It is clear that the problem of meaning in religious language is particularly acute when one conceives of God as outside time and space, given that language tends to imply a spatio-temporal framework. Aquinas claimed that there is meaning in some descriptive terms when applied to God, but it must be severely restricted. Having sought to establish that God exists through his five *a posteriori* arguments, Aquinas switches from an *a posteriori* approach to an *a priori* one to determine the attributes which the first unmoved mover, the first efficient cause, the absolutely necessary and supremely perfect being must possess.

Aquinas argued that any description of God's qualities must be understood *analogically*, through the filter of reason. As a function of his five ways, God cannot be a material being or *thing*; every material being is capable of change and motion and is contingent. God cannot be within time or space, because that would entail God depending on this framework and changing in some sense. Being outside time and space, God must be wholly lacking in potential and be pure actuality, fully whatever it is to be God. God must be *wholly simple* and immutable, without any division between God's qualities (i.e. God's power is the same as God's goodness and it is only in our limited understanding that these seem to be separate qualities).

For Aquinas, the terms 'omnipotent' and 'omnibenevolent' have very specific analogical meaning. He wrote:

Whatever in any way whatsoever can be, comes within the range of God's power and He can make it be. In God's case, and only in His case, the possible said relatively to an active power and the possible without qualification are the same. God's power is grounded in (is identical with) His infinite being which is the sum

of all perfection. Thus, what is said to be possible with respect to His power is anything whatsoever that can be.¹

For Aquinas, God's power is limited to what is *actually possible*, that which is not internally contradictory and which does not contradict God's perfect nature. God cannot do X and not X at the same time, God cannot create a square circle, neither can God do something which contradicts God's perfect nature because both these involve contradictions. God cannot create a rock too heavy for God to lift, because creating something too heavy for God to lift contradicts God's omnipotence.

Aquinas rejects the application to God of any perfections that can only belong to finite creatures. Only 'pure perfections', which are not tied to any particular mode of being, can be applied to God. For example, for Aquinas, since God is the cause of goodness or love in creatures, it is right to call God good or loving, and yet it is still wrong to think that there is any substantial overlap between what it means to call a person good or loving and what it means to call God good or loving. Aquinas makes the lack of contact clear by saying that God's goodness resembles human goodness – but to a lesser extent than the effects of the sun, such as a tree, resembles the sun.²

Aquinas does not think we can know God's essence or much about God at all, but we can use words truly of God without knowing their meaning when applied to God. Aquinas maintains that we can know *that* God is but not *what* God is. God's essence is unknowable except to God (incidentally this was one reason for his rejecting the ontological argument – only God knows God's own essence and, therefore, only God could deduce God's existence from knowledge of God's essence) – which is why language applied to God has so little meaning.

It is worth considering that Aquinas' whole approach to God *might* be flawed. This is a large claim and may be wrong – certainly Gerard W.

1 *Summa Theologica* I, q. 25.

2 *Summa Theologica* Ia, 13, 2.

Hughes S. J. rejects it.³ However, considering the possibility will be helpful in understanding the broader implications of Aquinas' thinking. One particular problem area has to do with Aquinas' concept of timeless choice.

Effectively, Aquinas argues:

- P1 It can be established that there is an X such that this X sustains the universe.
- P2 This X everyone calls God.
- P3 God is wholly simple and therefore timeless, spaceless, bodiless, etc.
- P4 God can be truthfully talked about even though the content of language about God is very limited indeed.
- P5 God can do everything that is actually possible. What is actually possible is defined by saying that everything that does not involve a contradiction can be done by God.⁴
- IC God [can] therefore do anything provided there is no contradiction involved (the brackets round 'can' are important as, when applied to God, this cannot imply potential for God to do other than what God does),
- P6 A contradiction can occur either:

- i because the action contradicts some feature of God (for instance 'can die' would contradict God's eternal nature outside time and space);
- ii because the action is internally contradictory (for instance acting and not acting simultaneously, doing 'p and not p at the same time').

³ *The Nature of God*, London: Routledge, 1995.

⁴ The problems start with the use of 'can'. One cannot use 'can' in this sentence, rather one should say that 'X does everything, absolutely'. Aquinas maintains that God has no potential (incidentally this is one reason why definitions of omniscience in terms of God's powers [cf Anthony Kenny] cannot be applied to the timeless and spaceless God). God is pure actuality and therefore one cannot talk of unactualized powers or abilities of God.

Because of this, an omnipotent God could not swim because swimming seems to require a body and to involve time. Nevertheless, Aquinas argues that an omnipotent God could act, despite being timeless, spaceless and bodiless, because 'God acts' should be understood as 'acts timelessly'. God cannot act other than as God does act (since this would imply potential) but God acts, in a single act, in whatever timeless manner is necessary to bring about temporal effects.

The distinction between 'timelessly swims', which Aquinas sees to involve a contradiction, and 'timelessly acts' is not clear, although because 'timelessly acts' is held not to involve time, this may be considered not to be contradictory, whereas 'timelessly swims' is contradictory since 'swims' necessarily involves time.

However, if God's timeless action is held to imply God choosing to act, then this can be argued to necessarily involve a contradiction when God is defined as wholly simple. Choice seems to involve potential just as swimming involves a physical presence in time and space.

This could be rejected by saying that 'chooses' means 'timelessly chooses' in an unknowable way which does not involve potential. This would not appear to be internally contradictory – but could one not then say that 'timelessly swims' does not involve a contradiction either? The one may be no more plausible than the other. There are limits to what words can be allowed to be true when applied to a timeless God. If 'choice' involves choosing one alternative rather than another (for instance to create or not to create), then this would mean that God would have to have potential, and this is not possible if God is timeless.

If God cannot choose in any real sense then God has to act as God acts – God is compelled to act by the very nature of God. In this case, the universe becomes necessary and not contingent and the reason for separating the universe from God and not seeing the universe itself as the necessary *brute fact*, which underpins its own existence, dissolves.

In order to maintain that God can choose in any meaningful fashion and, therefore, that God can respond to prayer (since a response involves potentiality), then God needs to be in time. If God is in time, then God can have potential – God can respond to prayer by acting after the request is made. The universe can then be created as a free

choice by God and is contingent and not necessary. However, placing God in time can be held to limit the idea of God and many Christian philosophers would say that would not be religiously adequate.

The Particular Problem of Omniscience

Traditional Christianity, Islam and Judaism hold that God is omniscient – God knows everything including the past, the present and the future. If God is wholly simple and timeless, then God sees the whole of time in one ‘now’. There is no past, present and future to God. God timelessly sees the whole of time including the creation of the universe, the dinosaurs, your birth, life and death and the end of the universe. Augustine likens this to a person on a mountain looking down on the road of time below. To the person on the road some people are behind them and some are ahead of them but the person on the mountain sees them all simultaneously. Similarly your grandparents are in the past and your grandchildren are in the future but God timelessly sees the whole of time in one, eternal, ‘now’. This gives God complete knowledge.

Boethius (480–525) expressed this as follows:

God sees all, seated in the skies:
Earth's bulk cannot his gaze withstand,
Nor clouds of night a hindrance be.
What is, what has been, what will be
A single glance of mind discerns,
Since He alone all things can see,
The title of 'true sun' he earns.⁵

All knowledge is timelessly present to God. Since there is no time in God, all knowledge is present at once. Boethius wrote:

⁵ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book 5, trans. P. G. Walsh, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 103.

God ponders all things as if they were enacted in the present. Hence your judgement will be more correct should you seek to envisage the foresight by which God discerns all things not as a sort of foreknowledge of the future, but as knowledge of the unceasing present moment.⁶

It is an attractive idea but it conceals a grave problem, and this revolves around human freedom.

If God knows exactly what you will do and how the whole history of the world will unfold, how can you or other humans be free? To know means to know a true state of affairs – it is not a prediction, it is absolute knowledge. It follows that whatever God knows must necessarily happen. There are two distinct possibilities here:

1 God's knowledge can be held to cause events to happen. The causal arrow flows from God to the world. In Islam everything is said to happen by the will of Allah. This affirms God's complete knowledge but it creates a massive problem for human freedom. If God's knowledge is causal, then human freedom is an illusion. We may think we are free, but actually we are wholly determined by God.

2 The alternative is to say that it is human free decisions that cause God's knowledge. In this case, the causal arrow flows from human beings to God. But if this is the case, then God depends for God's knowledge on human free decisions, and Augustine and Aquinas and other philosophers agree that this cannot happen if God is wholly simple, timeless and spaceless. God cannot come to know things, God has no potentiality. Even if God is held to timelessly know everything, then God still depends on human beings for God's knowledge, and this cannot be for Aquinas as it would make God's knowledge depend on human actions, so all God's attributes could not be identical in God.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

This is a major problem. If human freedom is compromised, not only does moral praise and blame disappear, as everyone is totally determined, but any suggested solution to the problem of evil is also undermined, as human beings are no longer free – they are programmed robots. They may think they are free, but this is an illusion.

Many solutions have been attempted to this problem, including the idea put forward by Luis De Molina S. J. (1535–1600) that God has *middle knowledge* – knowledge of all possibilities. God knows every possibility, so whatever a human being chooses will be known by God. However, this does not solve the problem. I can say that I know that you will have 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 up to 50 children. Whichever number of children you have, I can say that I knew that. But if I do not actually know which of the number of children will be actualized, I cannot claim to know. I may claim to know the result of the FA Cup Final – either Team A or Team B will win or they will draw. However, unless I can know which of the possibilities are actualized, I cannot be held to have known the result.

Boethius addressed this problem, writing:

There seems to be a considerable contradiction and inconsistency between God's foreknowledge of all things and the existence of any free will. If God foresees all things and cannot in any way be mistaken, then what Providence has foreseen will happen must inevitably come to pass.⁷

He wrestled with the alternatives at great length but finally is forced to effectively retreat behind mystery. He wrote: 'So the future events which God foreknows will all undoubtedly come to pass, but some of them will proceed by free choice.'⁸

There is no clear way that this position can be held – if God knows the future then freedom is eliminated and to hold that the two are incompatible requires a retreat behind mystery. This raises the

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

problem of when it is right to play the 'mystery card' and when there is a real contradiction that cannot be overcome.

Gerard Hughes S. J. is one of the most senior Catholic theologians, and he argues that God cannot respond to prayer since, as God is unchangeable, a response would require God to have potential and be able to change. There is a single act of God which has multitudes of effects throughout history so in God's single timeless act every effect brought about by God is included. For God to be able to respond to prayer, God would have to know what people would request in prayer logically prior to those who pray existing and even praying, and if humans are to be genuinely free (as Hughes affirms), then God could not respond to these prayers in the sole, single, creative act which the timeless God performs. This may be philosophically persuasive, but it is a very long way from the understanding of prayer held by most Christians.

The simple way of resolving the tension between omniscience and freedom is to place God in time. Some Protestant theologians take this view, and it gives rise to what has been called *Openness Theology*,⁹ whereby God is held to know everything that it is logically possible to know – not including the future – and to change and develop through interaction with creation. This approach has the benefit of enabling language to be relatively literal and God to be 'personal' – which is important for those who base their faith on individuals reading the Bible. Nevertheless, 'openness theology' is absolutely rejected by Roman Catholics, who maintain that God is wholly simple, not limited and anthropomorphic, and that faith is propositional, supported by philosophical argument.¹⁰

⁹ Richard Rice, *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will*, Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishers Association, 1980.

¹⁰ It follows that discussions of this issue tend to take place within the context of philosophical theology rather than the philosophy of religion.

GOD MATTERS

Summary

How we understand God's nature will depend, to a large extent, on where our belief comes from. For Protestants, whose faith originates in the Bible, God is the 'God of Abraham' and by implication eternal-in-time, with limited power and knowledge and anthropomorphic qualities. This places strain on the relationship between faith and reason. For Catholics, whose faith is propositional, God's simplicity means God is outside time and space and truly unlimited – but this places strain on language, meaning and the point of philosophy itself.