

The concept and nature of 'God'¹

In this handout, we will ask how the concept of God has been understood. There are many concepts 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 we develop it more narrowly, and the properties of God we will discuss are those which Judaism, Christianity and Islam - the three great monotheistic traditions - have thought central. Even more narrowly, we will look only at how the debate over God's attributes has been understood and developed in the Western Christian tradition.

PERFECTION AND REALITY

We start with the thought that nothing could be greater than God. Another way this thought has been expressed is that God is perfect. In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine says that to think of God is to 'attempt to conceive something than which nothing more excellent or sublime exists'. But just thinking of what does exist, and thinking of God as the most excellent of these things, may be too limited. Some philosophers claim that God is the most perfect being that *could* exist. If God exists, then not only does nothing that is greater than God exist, but it is impossible for anything greater than God to exist.

The idea of perfection has often been linked to the idea of reality in two ways. First, what is perfect has been thought to be more real than what is not. Imperfections involve something failing to exist in a better way. Second, perfection has also been thought to involve complete self-sufficiency - i.e. not to be dependent on anything, and not to lack anything. Again, this connects with being the ultimate reality: that which is not the ultimate reality will depend on that which is, and so not be perfect. So God, as the most perfect being, is traditionally thought of as the ultimate reality - the ground or basis for everything that exists.

OMNISCIENCE

Perfect knowledge is usually taken to mean 'omniscience'. The most obvious definition of omniscience is 'knowing everything' (Latin *omni-*, 'all'; *scient*, 'knowing'). 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 let us say for now that omniscience means 'knowing everything that it is possible to know'.

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for A Level: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 28-32

Omniscience is not just a matter of *what* God knows, but also of *how* God knows. In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas argues that God knows everything that he knows 'directly', rather than through inference or through understanding a system of representation (such as language or thinking in terms of propositions). To perfectly know something, Aquinas thought, the form of knowledge must match the nature of the object, e.g. we know visible things best through sight. Furthermore, to know each thing as the particular thing it is, rather than just to have general knowledge, is better. Knowing each tree as the tree it is is more perfect than knowing general facts about trees. So direct knowledge of particulars is superior to knowledge that is mediated by concepts. This is a bit like our knowing objects through sense experience, or better, knowing what you are doing when you are doing it, since everything that exists, thinks Aquinas, exists as a result of God's activity.

Other philosophers disagree about whether God's knowledge must always take the form Aquinas claimed. They argue that if God doesn't know all true propositions, then there is something that God doesn't know; so God has conceptual and propositional knowledge as well as direct knowledge.

OMNIPOTENCE

Power is the ability to do things. As perfect, God will have perfect power, or the most power possible. The most obvious definition of omnipotence is 'the power to do anything' (Latin *omni-*, 'all'; *potent*, 'powerful'). But once again, we should consider that God is the most perfect possible being, and therefore God's power may be the power to do anything possible and no more. Should we think that the power to do anything includes, for instance, the logically impossible; or is this not a possible power? 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.

Aquinas argues that the correct understanding of God's omnipotence is that God can do anything possible. What is impossible is a contradiction in terms - the words that you use to describe the impossible literally contradict each other. So any description of a logically impossible state of affairs or power is not a meaningful description, because it contains a contradiction. What is logically impossible is not anything at all.

Thus, the *limits* of the logically possible are not *limitations* on God's power. Even if God can't do the logically impossible, there is still nothing that God can't do.

SUPREME GOODNESS (OMNIBENEVOLENCE)

There are two ways of understanding perfect, or supreme, 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, more usual, 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' or absence of goodness. Evil doesn't have a positive aspect - it isn't a genuine 'force' or an aspect of reality that stands against goodness. What is evil simply fails to be what is good. If evil is a 'lack' or 'failure', what is morally good is more real than what is not. And so what is morally perfect and what is metaphysically perfect are the same thing.

GOD AND TIME

Being perfect, God is self-sufficient, dependent on nothing else for existence. If something 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 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. If God exists in time, then having no beginning or end, God exists throughout all time. God is a temporal being that is *everlasting*. If God exists outside time, then God is an atemporal being, timeless. In this case, God's existence is *eternal*. 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.

This idea of God's 'eternal' existence says very little - just that God is atemporal - and even this is negative (God does *not* exist in time). Furthermore, while we can say this, it is very hard to understand what we could mean. What is it for a being, such as God, to exist 'outside time'? We explore this question at length in the handout 'God and eternity'.