

## On God as a person<sup>1</sup>

Within the monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, God is usually thought of as omniscient, omnipotent and supremely good (omnibenevolent). But why are these thought to be the properties that characterise God?

One part of the answer is the thought that nothing can be greater than God. Hence, whatever characteristics God has will be perfect. Thus if God has knowledge, God will have perfect knowledge. (For more on the connection between God's attributes and perfection, see the handout 'The concept and nature of God'.) But why think that God has knowledge or power or... in the first place?

### **GOD AS PERSONAL**

Part of the answer is that many religions have thought that God is 'personal'. Properties that essentially characterise a person include intellect and will. The intellect is characterised by rationality and knowledge, the will by morality, freedom and the ability to act (power). (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 a perfect 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, it seems that God cannot change. Persons also have bodies. But the most perfect being can't have a body, at least literally.

- P1. Anything made of matter changes over time.
- P2. Anything made of matter has parts.
- P3. Whatever has parts depends on them for its existence.
- C1. If God were made of matter, God would change and depend on his parts.

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<sup>1</sup> This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2014) *Philosophy for AS* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, p. 161

- P4. Being perfect, God can't change and God doesn't depend on anything for his existence.
- C2. Therefore, God can't be made of matter.

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.

## **TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE**

Another respect in which God differs from persons is the relation he has to the rest of creation.

The idea of *transcendence* marks the way that God is very different from creation. First, God is 'outside' or 'goes beyond' the universe. Since God is self-sufficient and also traditionally said to be the creator of the universe, clearly God is distinct from and independent of the universe. Second, God is not spatial or physical as the universe is, and many philosophers argue that God is eternal, transcending time. 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. 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 everlasting, 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 - God as wholly immanent - would lead to 'pantheism', the view 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.