



Sistine
Chapel

The Concept of God

Some General Points



William Blake, *The
Ancient of Days*

Topics

- God of the Abraham vs the God of the Philosophers
 - Natural Theology, Fundamental Theology
- God's nature
- God's relation to the world
- Some Standard Concepts of God
- Kinds of Question about the concept of God

God of the Abraham vs the God of the Philosophers



Blaise Pascal, French mathematician and philosopher 1623-1662

- Pascal on his conversion experience:
 - "From about half-past ten in the evening until about half-past twelve. Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob. Not of the philosophers and intellectuals. The God of Jesus Christ."
- What is the God of the philosophers?

God of the Abraham vs the God of the Philosophers

- Aquinas' definition of God:
 - "in the first place, the first unchangeable (causing) changer"
 - God's essence is to exist: God is "ipsum esse subsistens"- very being itself subsisting
 - The divine attributes: God is
 - Immutable, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, all good, a free intelligent person, eternal, impassible, metaphysically simple and unstructured, maximally perfect, pure actuality ...
 - Divine aseity
- Loving, holy & worthy of worship, How do these fit into this picture?
- Aquinas himself came to see his philosophical understanding of God as "so much chaff" compared to what he experienced in prayer in his later years



St. Thomas Aquinas, philosopher, theologian, expositor of Scripture and doctor of the church, 1224-1275

God of the Abraham vs the God of the Philosophers

- Traditional Western concept of God is influenced by the philosophers:
 - ■ ~~God is immutable, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, all good, a free intelligent person, eternal, impassible, metaphysically simple and unstructured, maximally perfect, pure actuality, enjoys the divine aseity- complete independence of anything else (which itself depends on God)~~
 - God is the ultimate metaphysical principle of all being
- In this, Western religion represents a specific response to the religious and intellectual situation that had emerged in the Greco-Roman world:
 - Three strands of culture were separating
 - Traditional mytho-poetic public religion of Greeks and Romans- their stories, legends and myths of the Gods
 - Intellectual, explanatory, objective enquiry into the world: science & philosophy demythologising the understanding of nature and of the deepest bases of reality (ultimate reality as the divine things)
 - Personal, emotionally satisfying religion of mysticism (mystery cults)
 - In Christianity, these strands are unified with the concept of the divine being yoked to the demythologisation of intellectual enquiry:
 - Philosophy/ theology controls the interpretation of traditional stories- the mythos of the religious life
 - And doctrine, conceptually controlled in terms of philosophical and scientific concepts, disciplines personal devotional life in terms of public worship, authorised prayer, liturgy etc

God of the Abraham vs the God of the Philosophers

Yoking central religious concept of God to philosophy gives rise to two notions:

■ Fundamental or Dogmatic theology:

- Very philosophical compared to, eg, scripture interpretation
- But takes for granted basics of faith's doctrine
 - Eg assumes that God exists, is eternal, is not the world etc and moves from there

■ Natural Theology

- Is an area of philosophy *per se*: it is straightforwardly philosophy of God, if any gods exist
- "natural" because
 - not assuming any revelation or unquestionable central doctrines
 - And its aims to develop a concept of God and claims about God that are ascertainable and defensible only in rational terms, without any appeal to revelation, authority, or the like
- Whether philosophy should include natural theology is itself a controversial issue
 - Philosophical study of religion: ? Philosophy of Religion? Or ?natural theology?
- Whether natural theology has any place in the Monotheistic religions is also controverted in the theological debates of these religions
 - Traditional Catholic vs Protestant (esp Reformed) positions

God's Nature

- Two aspects to consider wrt God's Nature:
 - What attributes does God have in herself- in abstraction from her relation to the world?
 - What relations does God have to the rest of what exists?
- Divine Nature: what God is in herself
 - Divine attributes:
 - Number of gods: Polytheism, Hentheism, Monotheism, Animism
 - Monotheism:
 - Divine Uniqueness
 - As a personal being:
 - Omniscience, omnipotence, all goodness (wholly just, merciful, loving, ...), free effective agent and creator of all things, providential for creation,
 - As metaphysical first principle and ground of being:
 - Pure actuality, first uncaused cause of all things, unmoved first movent, immutable, impassible, eternal, metaphysically simple, necessary existence- God's essence is to be

God's relations to the world

□ Questions:

- Why is there something rather than nothing?
- Is God's reality exhausted by the reality of the world?
- Or is there more to God's reality than the world?
- Is God involved in events in this world? How, if so?
- What explains natural events? Other natural events? Does God have any role in explaining natural events?
- Does nature have any dependence on anything beyond itself? What sort? On what?
- Does God intervene in natural causation?
- ...

Some Standard Positions

Pantheism:

- God is nature; nothing exists apart from nature; God is nature seen as creative
 - God= natura naturans (Spinoza); World= God's body (Jantzens)

Deism:

- God and nature are radically distinct and separate; God creates the world but is then uninvolved in it; events in the world explain other events in the world; God as Great Architect- no miracles or other special divine interventions, no God-human relations of a particular kind
 - Newton, Samuel Clarke, ...

Classical Theism:

- Nature is in or dependent on God- God is present in nature but also distinct from it and her reality not exhausted by nature; God is ultimate explanation of the world and its events, but worldly realities have their own "autonomy" or "relative independence"; God is creator and sustainer of world; but God is unchangeable; dependence between God and nature is "one-way": nature depends on God but God depends on nature in no way; God enjoy unqualified 'divine aseity'

Some Standard Positions

	Is God involved in the world?	Does God transcend the world?	Does nature enjoy any autonomy in relation to God?	Is God a person?
Pantheism	Yes	No	No	Mostly, no; but in some versions, yes
Deism	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Theism	Yes	Yes	Yes and no	yes

Some Standard Positions

□ Versions of Theism

■ Panentheism:

- A view emanating from KU Leuven: aims to be a median position between Pantheism and Deism, and between Platonic “exemplarist” theology and Aristotelian theology, and between Classical Theism and Process theism

■ Process Theism:

- Reality has both concrete and abstract aspects and “substantive” and “processual” aspects: God is “changeable” and the world can make a difference to God’s nature- the divine perfections depend on nature for their specification- in this, the divine nature “grows”

□ Modernism

□ Naturalism

Kinds of Question about the Concept of God

- ❑ Is each divine attribute definable coherently without self-inconsistency?
- ❑ Are the divine attributes coherent: can pairs or triples of the attributes be had by one entity? Are the divine attributes compossible? E.g.
 - ❑ Is eternity consistent with being a person?
 - ❑ Is perfect justice consistent with mercy?
 - ❑ Is immutability consistent with being all-knowing?
 - ❑ Is divine simplicity consistent with having many perfections?
- ❑ Are the relations God has to the world consistent with her divine attributes?

Kinds of Question about the Concept of God

□ Atheology vs Natural Theology

■ Arguments against God's existence:

- Eg. if some pair of attributes is not compossible, any being conceived to have that pair can't exist

■ Natural Theology:

- What is the best way to conceive of God?

- Eg. if some pair of attributes are not compossible, we should reconceive what God is in order to make the concept of God coherent and intelligible
- Or ... perhaps we should redefine the attributes in question to get a more justifiable conception of God

- NB: in this part of Natural Theology we are not showing that God exists but removing atheological arguments against God's existence, that is, refining and defending the concept of God so as to show that God could exist (not that she does)