

Introduction

How we think about ourselves can determine how we think about God, and how we think about God can affect our self-understanding. Virtually all the major world religions insist upon the cardinal importance for all of us to know ourselves. Ernst Cassirer went so far as to characterize the duty to “know thyself” in Judaism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity as a categorical or absolute imperative.¹ The vital importance of knowing oneself is an especially central theme in Christian spiritual texts, poetry, theology, and philosophy. Christian mystics, such as Meister Eckhart, have held that self-knowledge is crucial to spiritual development; it is in some sense prior to knowledge of God. Well before him, Augustine interwove self-exploration and strenuous philosophical reflection on the mind of God in the *Confessions*. For Augustine, the pursuit of self-knowledge and the knowledge of God occur together naturally and virtually simultaneously. In his classic work *On the Trinity*, Augustine even proposed that our internal, mental life of memory, intellect, and will could be recognized as a mirror, vestige or distant reflection of the inner, three-part life of God. Our interior life is an echo of God’s.

Today many philosophers would endorse something like Augustine’s and Eckhart’s insistence upon the link between our view of God and our view of the self, but conclude that deep philosophical reflection on what it is to be a person, to act intentionally and to have conscious experience, undermines any

¹ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), chapter 1.

substantive view of God and, indeed, of religion as a whole. A wide range of these philosophers have argued for a radically materialist notion of persons, one which tends to throw our everyday notion of lived experience overboard or at least to inch it toward the railing. In western tradition God is typically conceived of as an immaterial, spiritual being. God is a nonphysical, powerful, intentional agent present throughout the cosmos without being identical with it or with some material object in it. God is not, in Ernst Haeckel's colorful phrase, "a gaseous vertebrate."² As a spiritual reality God does not have mass, weight, volume, electrical charge, atomic number, and so on. God is no mere assemblage of physical parts, or some kind of formal, abstract set with all and only material members, but the creative power responsible for the cosmos' origin and continued existence. If a materialist view of the cosmos, according to which *all* of reality is fundamentally physical, is correct, then the traditional understanding of God is incorrect. Even those materialist philosophers who have not dismissed the mental (and who are criticized by more radical partisans as timid or pre-scientific) have placed the traditional understanding of the self and God in jeopardy, because of their exclusively physical conception of reality. As far as *traditional* Christianity is concerned, it appears that T. L. S. Sprigge is right: while it "is not true that to be an atheist is to be a materialist ... in effect to be a materialist is to be an atheist."³ The same is true for traditional forms of Islam and Judaism.

Just as the scientific community has dispensed with demonic activity or supramechanical vitalistic forces called entelechies in their theories about the cosmos, some philosophers and natural scientists now wish to dispense with the mental world of intentions, motives, and awareness (a world that is often referred to as "folk psychology") in their explanatory theories of human

² Haeckel cited by Emil Brunner in *Christianity and Civilization* (London: Nisbet, 1948), p. 15.

³ T. L. S. Sprigge, *Theories of Existence* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1985), p. 35. Sprigge is referring here to a comprehensive materialism, according to which all of reality is material. We shall see later that some theists are materialist in their view of humans and other animals, but immaterialists in their view of God.

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behavior. They seek either to identify the mental with the physical or to eliminate the mental altogether. Paul Churchland lays out the implication of his eliminative materialism with marked clarity:

Our common-sense psychological framework is a false and radically misleading conception of the causes of human behavior and the nature of cognitive activity... Folk psychology is not just an incomplete representation of our inner natures; it is an outright misrepresentation of our internal states and activities.⁴

In place of our ordinary, “folk” understanding of ourselves as centers of consciousness and agency, philosophers like Churchland want to substitute a more scientifically refined picture. Richard Rorty gives a specific example of this desired physicalist substitution, wherein talk of pain, for example, is supplanted by talk of nerve fibers.

The absurdity of saying “Nobody has ever felt a pain” is no greater than that of saying “Nobody has ever seen a demon,” if we have a suitable answer to the question “What *was* I reporting when I said I felt a pain?” To this question, the science of the future may reply “You were reporting the occurrence of a certain brain process, and it would make life simpler for us if you would, in the future, say ‘My C-fibres are firing,’ instead of saying ‘I’m in pain.’”⁵

Rorty believes that the case for such a substitution will unfold with the same force as displayed in a scientific treatment of demons. The scientist answers the witch doctor’s question “What was I reporting when I reported a demon?” by saying “You were reporting the content of your hallucination, and it would make life simpler if, in the future, you would describe your experiences in those terms.”⁶ Paul and Patricia Churchland, Willard Quine, Stephen Stich, and others have endorsed related proposals calling into question the propriety of appealing to beliefs, desires, and sensations as mental states in the explanation of events.

⁴ Paul Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984), p. 43.

⁵ Richard Rorty, “Mind–Body Identity, Privacy, and Categories,” *Review of Metaphysics* 19:1 (1965), 30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 31, 32.

Many objections to recognizing some immaterial feature of ourselves apply with equal force to recognizing some immaterial aspect of the cosmos or, as it were, behind the cosmos conserving it in existence. Philosophers have objected to an incorporeal concept of God on grounds such as: intentional agency is not truly explanatory of events; if there were a nonphysical agent it would be too dissimilar from physical things for there to be any causal relation between them; the very idea of a nonphysical thing is conceptually absurd. These are some of the many objections philosophers have wielded against classical theism, the same objections which are wielded with as great a force against the belief that we ourselves either are nonphysical, spiritual beings or contain a nonphysical part called a soul. John Macquarrie underscores the theological importance of our philosophy of human nature. "If we have abandoned dualism when we are thinking of finite beings, does it make sense to retain it on the cosmic level in thinking of God and the world? It has no more plausibility there."⁷

Richard Rorty explicitly links together his judgment about God and persons or minds. According to Rorty, both "God" and "mind" must go from any clear-headed theory of the cosmos. He writes that the immaterial, classical understanding of God is faulty principally because it is an extension of a faulty understanding of ourselves. To view ourselves as in some measure nonphysical is to uphold a "blurry," ill-formed self-image.⁸ And in a similar fashion, Kai Nielsen, Adel Daher, Antony Flew, Paul Edwards, and others to be discussed below (despite their intramural differences) criticize classical theistic notions of God because the foundational ideas of self and mind which inform the classical model, are no longer viable.⁹ Classical

⁷ John Macquarrie, Foreword to *God's World, God's Body* by Grace Jantzen (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), pp. ix, x.

⁸ Rorty, "Mind as Ineffable," in *Mind in Nature*, Nobel Conference xvii, ed. by Richard Q. Elvee (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 85, 87.

⁹ Kai Nielsen, *Scepticism* (London: Macmillan, 1973), as well as his more recent "God, Disembodied Existence and Incoherence," *Sophia* 26:3 (October 1987) and *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), especially pp. 36–37; Adel Daher, "Does Religion Have its Own Logic?," *International Logic Review* 12:1–2 (December 1981); Paul Edwards, "Some Notes on Anthropomorphic

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theism was based upon a useful, but false self-understanding. Get rid of blurry, folk psychology, so they argue, and we will soon be rid of blurry, folk religion.

In the great monotheistic religious traditions, God is not, of course, depicted with precisely the same attributes as created persons; God is not a super *homo sapiens*. And at important junctures in the development of these religions, theists have gone to great lengths to insist that God differs from us in that God is eternal, while we are temporal; God is not made up of parts, we are; God has no sense organs, we do; God creates galaxies from nothing, we only shape things that already exist; God is without origin and incorruptible, we are neither. In the central conviction that God exists necessarily, while we exist contingently it might appear that the God of classical theism resembles abstract propositions like “ $7 + 5 = 12$ ” which are necessarily true far more than God resembles us. But God is also believed to know about the world, to be an all-good agent, to reshape things which already exist, to love the cosmos. Theists will diverge on how to understand these features as ascribed to God, but it is evident that these ascriptions make up central items in the folk-psychology framework that is under attack in much contemporary philosophy. Theists refine terms like “intelligence,” “agency,” and “emotions” as applied to God, but surely the theistic enterprise requires that we have some conceptual handle on our own intelligence, agency, and emotions before religious refining can take place. And if the

Theology,” in *Religion, Experience and Truth*, ed. Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1961) and “Difficulties in the Idea of God,” in *The Idea of God*, ed. E. Madden *et al.* (Springfield, Ill.: C. C. Thomas, 1968), p. 48. See also Anthony Flew’s contribution to *Does God Exist?* by Flew and T. Miethé (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), and J. C. A. Gaskin’s *The Quest for Eternity* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1984). Paul Churchland entitles one reason for accepting dualism “the argument from religion” (*Matter and Consciousness*, p. 13), an argument he hastily dismisses (pp. 14, 15). The crucial role of the philosophy of mind for the philosophy of God has been widely noted historically. See, for example, Thomas Reid, *Lectures on Natural Theology*, ed. by E. H. Duncan (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), p. 2. Descartes endorsed a similar view. See *Descartes: Philosophical Letters*, trans. A. Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 252. Worries about the intelligibility of conceiving God as nonphysical have a long history. Witness Sextus Empiricus’ discussion of the topic in *Against the Physicists* (third century AD) and, still earlier, Cicero’s *The Nature of the Gods* (first century BC).

eliminative materialism of the Churchlands, Rorty, and Stich holds sway, it is difficult to see how such theistic refining can even get started.

Philosophers in the Christian tradition earlier in the twentieth century appreciatively grasped the link between the concept of God and persons. William Temple, A. E. Taylor, and F. R. Tennant would not have been surprised that the materialist turn in our understanding of persons would lead to a turning away from classical theism. The goal of balancing theories of persons and God is not ignored by some contemporary philosophical theists. Thus, Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, and Keith Ward (among others) have each drawn upon philosophically developed theories of persons in spelling out and defending theism. Each has sought to articulate and defend a conception of persons in sharp contrast to materialistic reductionism.

But because of widespread philosophical dissatisfaction with any type of dualistic treatment of persons, not all Christian theologians have embraced a distinction between persons (mind or soul) and material bodies, God and the world. The intellectual temperament toward dualism is negative indeed, and captured in Daniel Dennett's comment that "dualism is not a serious view to contend with, but rather a cliff over which to push one's opponents."¹⁰ As a result, some Christian theologians articulate postdualist notions of the person and the God-world relation. While theistic philosophers like Peter Van Inwagen, Bruce Reichenbach, and (at one time) Stephen T. Davis have defended materialist notions of human persons alongside a traditional immaterialist picture of God, this combination is far from the consensus position. The attempt to localize and contain materialism has not commanded the field. Grace Jantzen rejects both the dualist distinction between the mind and body and the classical distinction between the cosmos and an incorporeal God. Instead, she proposes that we conceive of God and creation along material lines, affirming the single reality of God

¹⁰ Daniel Dennett, "Current Issues in the Philosophy of Mind," in *Recent Work in Philosophy*, ed. Kenneth Lucey and T. R. Machan (Totowa: Rowen and Allenheld, 1983), p. 157.

and the world. Adrian Thatcher applauds nondualist trends in anthropology and theology: “The blurring of the distinction between spirit and matter also blurs the distinction between God and the world and ... theology is better for it.”¹¹ He holds that a nondualist view of persons is actually better placed to articulate central Christian notions of creation, incarnation, and resurrection. Patrick Sherry and Nicholas Lash both see the rejection of dualism as a prerequisite to developing an adequate understanding of God. Lash comments that “For the consistent dualist, God is either an idea or a ghost,” and Sherry castigates dualist-motivated theology for its imagining God to be “more like a Super-Frankenstein than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”¹² The theologian Fergus Kerr is equally hostile to dualism. In *Theology After Wittgenstein* he campaigns for a thorough abandonment of traditional dualism, a theory he thinks has had a nearly catastrophic effect on religious belief. “In all traditions, Christian theologians are to be found who work with a concept of the self that needs to go to the cleaners ... Therapy is required to free us from the inclination to compare ourselves, unfavorably of course, with bodiless beings, whether angels or machines.”¹³

The disenchantment with dualism has contributed to a revival of the Aristotelian understanding of the person. This anthropology, especially as refined in the thirteenth century by Thomas Aquinas, has historically often appeared as an attractive alternative to outright mind–body dualism. The demise of dualism at the hands of current philosophical critics is heralded by some theologians as a vindication of Aquinas’ saner Aristotelianism, which sees the soul as the form of the body, over against Augustine’s more radical dualism in which the soul has

¹¹ Adrian Thatcher, “Christian Theism and the Concept of a Person,” in *Persons and Personality*, ed. A. Peacocke and G. Gillett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 183, 184. See also Jantzen, *God’s World, God’s Body*. Work by Jantzen, David Paulsen, and Ishtiyaque Haji which attempts to retain theism while rejecting an incorporealist idea of God recalls the radical theism of Thomas Hobbes (seventeenth century).

¹² Lash, “Materialism,” *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. A. Richardson and J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1983), p. 353; Sherry, *Spirit, Saints and Immortality* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 13. Sherry seems to be using “Frankenstein” as the name of the monster rather than its creator (a very common confusion).

¹³ Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 187.

a body as its container. Far more extreme theologically is the move by Gary Legenhausen, who uses the case against dualism to argue that God is best thought of in altogether impersonal terms. "Persons persuaded by the arguments of the physicalists that mind is dependent upon body might be tempted by atheism. Such persons might reason that since mind is dependent on body, God, who is mind without a body, cannot exist. But given the impersonalist view of God, it is possible to draw a different conclusion, namely that God exists but does not have a mind."¹⁴

Rejection of theism as an outworn world view resting upon a mistaken view of persons has also marked a more skeptical theological movement. Perhaps the most radical departure from classical theism in recent years is undertaken by theologians who seek to preserve religious language and some practices (religious ethics, prayerful meditation, liturgy) while either bracketing or rejecting outright the notion that God exists. Thus, D. Z. Phillips and others construe Christian beliefs as expressing a form of life which may be embraced without believing that God exists. Gordon Kaufman has also developed a conception of religious imagination and ethics that is cut off from the claim that there is a God.¹⁵ In some respects this revisionist stand resembles one branch of materialism which insists upon the practical indispensability of conceiving human behavior in terms of beliefs and desires, even though beliefs and desires are not recognized by them as actually existing states.¹⁶ Some theological revisionists treat the physicalist movement as no more dangerous to religious life than the Copernican revolution or Darwinism. When Copernicus displaced the view that the earth is the center of the cosmos and Darwin advanced his evolutionary theory, many thought Christian belief was doomed. If Christian belief can incorporate a Copernican view

¹⁴ Gary Legenhausen, "Is God a Person?," *Religious Studies* 22 (1986), 322.

¹⁵ At times, Kaufman's view of God seems close to Dennett's view of beliefs.

¹⁶ Wilfrid Sellars' paper "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man" is among the most important in twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy to press for a distinction between the practical and theoretical which allows for such a demarcation, *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963).

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of the cosmos and the theory of evolution in biology, then why, it is argued, can't it incorporate a physicalist view of the person and the rest of reality?

So, in the wake of current attempts to reform our understanding of intelligence and agency, philosophers and theologians have tended either to revitalize and defend the classical theistic model or reject it outright or subject it to radical reinterpretation. Before I outline the place of this book in the ensuing debate, consider further two central areas of contemporary work in the philosophy of religion that bring to the fore the critical need for taking theories of the person seriously. The first involves the treatment of arguments for God's existence and the second involves the revival of Anselmian philosophical theology.

All the classical arguments employed to justify belief in God have been systematically attacked on the grounds that the concept of a nonphysical personal God is incoherent. Jonathan Barnes' principal objection to the ontological argument is that it is "becoming increasingly clear that persons are essentially corporeal."¹⁷ For similar reasons Thomas McPherson rejects the argument from design – an argument that the purposive character of the world is evidence of a purposive Creator. "The Argument from Design stands or falls by the analogy between human purposing agents ... and a presumed divine purposing agent ... The Argument from Design, as an argument by analogy, cannot even get off the ground unless it is possible to give sense to the notion of a human purposing mind."¹⁸ McPherson deems that the problems afflicting our belief in human purposiveness challenge belief in Divine purposiveness. Anthony Kenny's analysis of the design argument exhibits with great clarity the interwoven character of theism and the philosophy of mind. He concedes that *if* the notion of an incorporeal purposive agent is intelligible, the argument from design is successful in providing some evidence for God's existence. But as Kenny thinks it is far from clear that such

¹⁷ Jonathan Barnes, *The Ontological Argument* (London: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 84, 85.

¹⁸ Thomas McPherson, *The Argument from Design* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972).

incorporeal life is intelligible, he concludes that the argument has little force.¹⁹ T. R. Miles rejects arguments in support of theism based upon religious experience largely because he finds the notion of a nonmaterial causal agent conceptually unacceptable.²⁰

The most recent development in philosophical theology may be termed the Anselmian Revival, after St. Anselm of the twelfth century. Modern-day Anselmians take as their principal concern the philosophical defense of God as supremely excellent. God is said to be unsurpassably great, maximally perfect, or, in Anselm's language, a being greater than which cannot be conceived. As this is played out in the work of many Christian philosophers, we begin to see in the literature an increasingly clear, carefully articulated conception of God and perfection.

I am convinced that this is a fruitful, important move in philosophical theology, and it will be taken seriously in this book. But it needs to be appreciated that this revival rests upon assumptions about persons, minds, and matter, foundational assumptions that are under vigorous attack. We may discover a formal analysis of perfect or maximal knowledge, and perhaps, as I argue in Chapter 5, we may formulate a consistent Anselmian conception of God as possessing supreme cognitive excellence. But suppose that some contemporary physicalists are correct that knowledge is identifiable with certain neural, brain states such that for a subject to know anything she or he must have a certain neurophysiological structure. What, then, becomes of the supposition that there is an all-knowing, perfect Creator? Are we to imagine that a perfect, all-knowing God must have some massive, perfect material brain? Doubts about the conceivability of nonphysical states and activities feed doubts about the classical notion of God and erode the work of Anselmians.

Clearly, then, the debate over the philosophical case for theism must include or rely upon an investigation into our conceptions of ourselves, consciousness, possible forms of personal life, agency, purpose, value, and the material world.

¹⁹ Anthony Kenny, *Religion and Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 84.

²⁰ T. R. Miles, *Religious Experience* (London: Macmillan, 1972).