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**Part I**

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**The Nature of God**

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# 1     **Attributes of God: independence, goodness, and power**

In the preface, we explained and defended our decision to focus our attention in this book primarily on the Western monotheistic religious traditions. Those traditions claim, in some rough sense, to share a common concept of God; and one of the most important enterprises in theistic philosophy of religion has been the task of analyzing that concept and exploring some of its more puzzling and problematic aspects. In this and the following two chapters we too shall take up this task, paying special attention to those attributes of God that have traditionally been regarded as most important and of the greatest philosophical interest.

Before turning to our discussion of the attributes of God, it will be helpful first to say a few words both about what we mean when we talk about “the” concept of God and about how we might go about unpacking that concept.

## **The concept of God**

Theologians in the Western tradition have characterized “the concept of God” in a variety of different ways. For some, the concept of God is just the concept of the ultimate reality, or the source and ground of all else; for others it is the concept of a maximally perfect being. Still others would say that to be God is to be the one and only being worthy of worship, so that analyzing the concept of God would involve coming to a full understanding of worship-worthiness. Alternatively, one might think that the concept of God is just the concept of whatever being happens to be revealed in one’s favored sacred text as the supreme ruler of all. And so on. Which concept, then, are we concerned with?

Before answering this question, a few preliminary clarifications are in order. First, note that there are two different ways of using the word “God.” It can be used as a proper name or as a title. To illustrate the distinction,

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consider the difference between the name “Ronald Reagan” and the title “The President of the United States.” The term “Ronald Reagan” names a specific individual and being Ronald Reagan is just a matter of being identical to that specific individual. You can’t be elected to the position of being Ronald Reagan; nobody other than the man who was in fact Ronald Reagan could have been or could come to be Ronald Reagan; and if all you knew about the man was that he was named Ronald Reagan, you wouldn’t be able to draw any conclusions about what he was like or about what offices he held. Referring to Ronald Reagan by his name leaves open all questions about what Reagan was actually like. Of course, the term “the President of the United States” also can be (and often is) used to pick out a specific individual. But it is not always used this way. For example, it would be perfectly true to say that the President of the United States is the commander-in-chief of the United States military even at a time when the office of president was vacant – i.e. even at a time when there was no such person as the President of the United States. By contrast with what is expressed by the term “Ronald Reagan,” being president is a matter of fulfilling a certain office, not of being identical to some specific individual. You can be elected to the position of president; people other than the current president have been and will be president; and if all you knew about someone was that he or she was President of the United States, you would be able to infer quite a lot about that person – for example, that the person is over thirty-five years old, that he or she is a United States citizen, that he or she is commander-in-chief of the US military, and so on. Referring to a person by his or her title tells you (sometimes, anyway) quite a lot about the person.

Likewise, when “God” is used as a name, it is being used simply to refer to a specific individual, leaving open questions about what that individual is like. Being God is just a matter of being that individual; and to find out what God is like, we have to acquire information about that specific individual. On the other hand, if and when “God” is used as a title, we can learn quite a lot about what God is or would be like simply by unpacking our concept of the role associated with the term “God.”

Thus, corresponding to this difference in ways of using the term “God,” there is a distinction to be made between two ways in which the monotheistic traditions have fleshed out or developed their concept of God. We can, following a long tradition, call these the *a posteriori* and the *a priori* ways. The *a posteriori* approach begins with data that people believe put them in

direct contact with the individual referred to by the name “God” – data coming from revealed texts, religious experiences, mediums or prophets, and the like – and then builds the concept of God out of those data (just as you might develop your concept of Ronald Reagan out of data gathered from a written biography, videotapes of speeches and interviews, and so on). When people speak of the God of the Bible, or the God who speaks to them in mystical experience, or the God of Abraham or Mohammed, they are referring to some particular individual with whom they are in direct or indirect contact through these different media. They are also using the term “God” and its relatives (like “the God of so-and-so”) as proper names.

The second or *a priori* way begins with some basic characteristic, property, or feature that people take to belong to anyone or anything that might count as God. Those taking this approach are likely to say things like: “For something to count as God, that thing must be the creator of all that is” or “For something to count as God, it must be worthy of worship” or “For something to be God it must be the ground of morality,” and so on. Those who treat the concept of God this way start with the idea that for something to “count as” God, it must play a certain role or satisfy some description. Then they ask what a being must be like in order to play that role.

There is some reason to think that these various starting points will not all converge on the same entity. A Pure Land Buddhist and a charismatic Protestant might both claim to have had repeated religious experiences of God. But the concepts of Amida Buddha and Jesus are vastly different and seem not to pick out the same thing. Furthermore, someone who thinks of God primarily as the greatest possible being might well arrive at a concept of God very different from what would be arrived at by someone taking as her guiding notion the idea that God is the entity that acts as the ground of morality.

In the Western theistic tradition, the concept of God has arisen from a careful negotiation between these two methods. In many respects this dual approach makes perfectly good sense. It makes sense to think of the word “God” as a proper name since theists do think that there is some unique individual entity or person that they are acquainted with – through religious experience or revelation or the mediation of prophets, and so on. But it is also true that revelation or reason sometimes describes God as an entity that plays a certain role. So when the Hebrew Scriptures describe God as the creator, or when someone takes a “first cause” argument to show that the

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universe was brought into existence by something distinct from itself, we have reason to think that these two approaches are, or at least can be, converging on a description of the same thing.

The Western theistic traditions tighten the connection between these two approaches in that, whereas they acknowledge that the term “God” often functions both as a proper name and as a title, they also usually agree that (unlike the office of President) whatever person fills the “God-role” cannot fail to fill it. It is odd to use the term “President of the United States” as a name (though one can do so: just imagine naming your dog or your child “President of the United States”). The reason is that, in normal use, the term is associated with a role that is fulfilled at different times by different people. But if the term were associated with a role that could only be filled by the person who in fact fills it, it would be quite natural to use the term as a name. For example, suppose we tell you that Paul is the Galactic Emperor and that, furthermore (strangely), Paul necessarily holds that office. The word “Paul,” then, functions as a proper name; but the title “Galactic Emperor” might also function the same way. In other words, since Paul necessarily holds the office of Galactic Emperor – since nothing can possibly be Paul without being the Galactic Emperor, and vice versa – the term “Galactic Emperor” can function either as a name or as a title according to our preference. And the same is true, according to many theists, of the term “God.”

This is important because it helps to explain why we naturally vacillate between the *a priori* and *a posteriori* ways of fleshing out our concept of God (whereas we don’t vacillate between these approaches in fleshing out the concepts associated with terms like “Ronald Reagan” or “President of the United States”). Thus, if someone were to ask us to tell them about the Galactic Emperor, we might do so simply by talking about whatever information – from news reports, telescopic observations, media appearances, personal correspondence, or whatever – we have about Paul. In this way, we develop our concept of the Galactic Emperor via the *a posteriori* route. Alternatively, we might do so by talking about the role of Galactic Emperor – explaining what is involved in that role and what sorts of beings could or could not be qualified to hold it (ignoring for the moment the fact that Paul holds it of necessity). In doing this, we would provide something like an *a priori* analysis of the concept of Galactic Emperor. And, again, likewise in the case of God.

If we think about approaching the concept of God in these two ways, what concept of God emerges? We might first take note of the fact that theistic traditions almost all agree on the following basic claims about God;

- (C1) Nothing made God, and God is the source or ground of everything other than God.
- (C2) God rules all that is not God.
- (C3) God is the most perfect being.

These three points of agreement correspond to three distinct starting points for developing a richer, more detailed concept of divinity. We can label these three starting points: creation theology, providential theology, and perfect-being theology. According to creation theology God is not made or caused but is rather the cause or maker of everything else. Can we learn anything further about God by conceiving of God in this way? Yes. We can learn, first, that God is a being with causal power. If the created universe exhibits signs that its cause was a rational agent, we can learn that God is a being with intelligence or rationality. When we turn to consider various arguments for the existence of God in chapter 5 we will see that some theists claim that indeed much more can be known about the character of God by thinking of God as the creator.

Similarly, from providential theology, we can infer that God is supreme among all existing things because God rules over and superintends those things. If the universe exhibits continuing signs of divine providential activity, either because God must continue to sustain the world in existence or because we have reason to think that God has miraculously intervened in the world, then we might infer even more about the character of God from this sustaining activity or the nature of the purported miracles. Again, we will consider these potential sources of information in chapter 5 and in chapter 7 when we examine the topic of miracles.

### **Perfect-being theology**

The most important conceptual foundation for the monotheistic notion of God derives from the third starting point: perfect-being theology. Perfect-being theology plays an important role in all three of the major Western theistic traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Within philosophy, perfect-being theology traces its roots at least as far back as Plato, who

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identifies God with the supreme reality, which he labels “the Good,” and Aristotle, who characterizes God as “the best substance.” These traditions converged in powerful ways to inform the writing of some of the most important theologians in each tradition: Philo of Alexandria and Maimonides in Judaism, Al-Kindi and Avicenna in Islam, and Augustine, Anselm, and St. Thomas Aquinas in Christianity.

Although perfect-being theology has a very long history, it emerges as an explicit driving consideration first in the writings of the eleventh-century philosopher Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm explicitly characterized God as “that than which none greater can be conceived.” Contemporary perfect-being theologians understand Anselm to be affirming that God is the greatest possible being, that is, an individual displaying maximal perfection. This conception of divinity does not provide us with much in the way of specifics. But it does provide us with a rule or a recipe for developing a more specific conception of God. Perfect-being theology is thus the attempt to unpack the concept of God by way of this recipe.

To begin exploring the implications of perfect-being theology in more detail we first need a succinct characterization of it. The core of perfect-being theology is the claim that:

(GPB) Something is God only if it has the greatest possible array of great-making properties.<sup>1</sup>

GPB invites us to think about two critical questions: what are “great-making properties,” and how does one specify a greatest possible array of them? We will look at these problems in turn.

What are great-making properties? An obvious answer is that great-making properties are properties that make something great. But this leads to immediate problems. The first is that some properties are great-making in some contexts but not in others. Being tall is a great-making property for basketball players, but not for horse-racing jockeys. Does this mean that the idea of a great-making property makes sense only relative to a certain kind or context – that, for example, we should speak only of properties that are great-making-for-a-jockey or great-making-for-a-basketball-player rather than of properties that are simply great-making, period?

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Morris, *The Concept of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 35.

Thomas Morris argues that while some great-making qualities should be seen as good only relative to a kind of thing, other great-making qualities are good in a non-relative way. On this view there are two broad types of goodness: intrinsic and extrinsic. An object or property is extrinsically good if that object or property is instrumental for bringing about something else that is good. For example, being tall is good for a basketball player because it allows him to shoot unhindered, rebound, and so on. There is nothing about being tall that is good all by itself. Shooting unhindered is a good, but it is merely an extrinsic good too: it is good because it allows the player to score more points, which in turn allows the team to win games, which in turn helps him secure a living, and so on.

But not all goods can be (merely) extrinsic. At some point, extrinsically good things must be good because they bring about something which is good just in itself. Earning a living is good because it is instrumental to, perhaps, being happy. And why is being happy a good thing? One might think that there is no answer to this question: being happy isn't good because it allows us to secure something else; happiness is good just all on its own. That's it. Goods of that sort are intrinsic goods.

Morris avoids the charge that the notion of great-making properties used in perfect-being theology is incoherent by claiming that they are ones that it is intrinsically good for a being to have. As a result, we can say that God is personal, or has wisdom, knowledge, causal power, moral excellence, and so on, not because having these is good for something else but simply because having them is intrinsically good.

The second problem that arises when thinking about great-making properties is that the process of deciding which properties count as great-making seems subjectively or culturally biased. Are there really objective grounds for taking some property or other to be intrinsically good or great-making? Defenders of perfect-being theology respond that such judgments require appeal to our fundamental intuitions about value. Generally and roughly speaking, intuitions are judgments that are based neither on linguistic conventions nor on other evidence but rather on what seems to us (even if not to others) to be obviously and necessarily true. Importantly, philosophical intuitions are different from mere hunches or gut feelings. They are, rather, beliefs about what seems to us to be self-evident or necessary. Beliefs like "two objects can't occupy exactly the same region of space at the same time" or "no human being could survive being transformed into a rock" are

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examples of beliefs based on intuition. If someone were to ask you why you hold these beliefs, you would be hard pressed to answer.

Beliefs based on intuitions, then, are fundamental or bedrock beliefs; and we use them to help us judge the plausibility of other claims. Among our intuitions are intuitions concerning value. For example, we think (typically on the basis of intuition) that human beings have intrinsic moral worth, that it is wrong to torture someone for fun, that it is good to help others in need, and so on. Like other intuitively held beliefs, these are fundamental, not based on or inferred from independent evidence; and, again, we use them to judge the adequacy of other beliefs, including abstract moral theories and principles. Advocates of perfect-being theology argue that we are just as entitled to appeal to intuitions in analyzing our concept of God as we are in the context of moral theorizing.

In making appeals to value intuitions, however, a few cautions are in order. First, one must realize that appeals to intuitions – value or otherwise – are defeasible or subject to correction. Further inquiry might show us that something we initially believed on the basis of intuition is in fact false. Second, appeals to value intuition are only capable of taking us so far in filling out the concept of God. This is true in part because God may have some characteristics that are not relevant to an assessment of God's greatness. For example, if there is a God, and if contemporary scientific estimates about the age of the cosmos are correct, then God has the property of having created the cosmos approximately 14 billion years ago. However, this property could not be derived from the recipe proposed in perfect-being theology, since (as far as we can discern) it is not better to have this property than to lack it. According to Christians, God exists as a Trinity consisting of three persons with one nature. Could this be derived from perfect-being theology? It hardly seems so (though as we will see in chapter 3, some disagree).

In addition, there may be some deep and perhaps intractable disagreements that lie at the very root of our intuitive judgments in this area. For example, within perfect-being theology generally there is a tension between those who think of perfection in terms of the qualities of beings and others who think of perfection in terms of the qualities of persons. Perfection conceived in terms of mere being tends to lead perfect-being theologians to describe God in terms of attributes such as timelessness, unchangeability, causal independence, and the like. Perfection conceived of in a way that