

## 1 GOD and Love

I don't remember what I did yesterday, but I recall like it was yesterday giving a class presentation on "God is love" in a secular philosophy class with a secular professor at a secular university in 1977. I was an undergraduate at Michigan State University, and I was in a philosophy class on logical positivism taught by H. G. Bohnert, one of the last living logical positivists.

Logical positivism, a most fashionable philosophy of the 1920s and 1930s, restricted factual knowledge to the sciences and just the sciences; they claimed that anything beyond sense experience is nonsense (roughly, whatever is "meta" (beyond) "physica" (physics) is nonsense). They "argued" that traditional metaphysics, the philosophical exploration of what is beyond sense experience, is meaningless. For example, while it's meaningful to say that the sun is at the center of our planetary system (heliocentrism) or that when closed containers are heated the pressure of the gas inside increases ( $PV = nRT$ ), it's meaningless to say that the ideal of roundness or goodness exist in a perfect, nonphysical realm (Platonism). Moreover, since positivists believed that the reality beyond or behind our sense perceptions is unknowable, they likewise rejected such claims as "gas is composed of tiny particles scooting about rapidly" (aka atoms) as metaphysical nonsense. Now to the theological point: since God lies beyond the physical, all theological statements are nonsense. "God is love" is a prime example of metaphysical balderdash according to positivists.

As meaningless nonsense, God statements couldn't even rise to the level of true or false. Statements about God, according to the positivists, are as nonsensical as Lewis Carroll's intentional gibberish:

Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe

Saying "God is love," then, is like saying (literally), "The color purple ordered the roast beef with a side of mirth," or, again, "silence is golden but melancholy is greedy." Like Lewis Carroll's gibberish, such statements may provide amusement or provoke consternation, and they may make some sort of poetical or metaphorical sense (especially when cashed out into the language of science); however, as literal nonsense, they cannot be either true or false. Religious believers, on this view, are more silly than mistaken. As a Christian, I took offense.

I aimed my presentation mainly at unmasking the presumptions of logical positivism. Its cramped theory of meaning may have valorized the sciences, but it proclaimed as nonsense nearly everything else that humans believe, everything that makes life worth living. For example, if logical positivism were true, then the belief that *the killing of innocent children is wrong* and *Beethoven's*

*music is beautiful* would be nonsense. And if positivism were true, central religious beliefs like “God is love” would be nonsense. Finally, I argued that the claim “only scientific statements are meaningful” is self-refuting because it, itself, is not a scientific statement.

At the conclusion of my presentation, Professor Bohnert, the last living logical positivist, clapped politely and then asked, “So what exactly do you mean when you say, ‘God is love’?”

My twenty-year-old self, with passion exceeding understanding, stammered, “Ummm, ya know, I’m not sure *exactly* what I mean.” Honestly, I wasn’t even sure what I inexactly meant. I found myself saying, “Well, I think it means that God cares deeply for us but *not* in a way that means that God would or should prevent the holocaust or mosquitos or the drowning of an infant.” I had just read John Updike’s *Rabbit Run*, in which Rabbit, the main character, comes home to find that his drunken wife had accidentally drowned their baby daughter in her bathwater. As he stares into the tub, still filled with the deadly water, Rabbit “thinks how easy it was, yet in all His strength God did nothing. Just that little rubber stopper to lift.” Omnipotence evidently doesn’t love in that lifting-rubber-stoppers-to-prevent-babies-from-drowning sort of way. At that time, I could only think of what I don’t mean when I say, “God is love.” So, I stammered some more, returned to my seat, and slumped down.

After working in the philosophy of religion for more than forty years, I’m still not exactly sure what I mean when I say, “God is love” (probably because I understand even less what I mean by “God” and “love”). Let me put it more precisely. I think I have some inkling of some of the various literal and more earthly meanings of human love – I’ve got some sense, when things go right, of what it means for a husband to love his wife, a parent her child, friends their friends, and a neighbor a stranger. I think that I’ve even had some first-hand experience of these various forms of human love. But I think I’m now even more perplexed about what it means to say that God is love – more perplexed about what I mean, what we mean, by “God” and “God is love.” In this Element, I will discuss some of my perplexities.

Provisos. By selecting this text and that thinker and those issues and these responses (and not any number of other texts, thinkers, issues, idioms, and responses), I am constructing a narrative as much as relaying arguments. So I will inevitably tell *my* story of the problems of God and love; others, for sure, would have told a different story. Like the other Elements in this series, I will offer the basic essentials of the issues, the rudiments of the arguments, and a broad sense of the problems – as I see them; others, for sure, see them quite differently. Although there has been voluminous scholarly publication on many

of the issue that I discuss, I will not footnote each jot and tittle; I don't want scholarly minutia to obscure the narrative. I will offer a representative text or set of texts that can serve for deeper and wider exploration. Moreover, every philosophical and theological assertion that I make represents the idea of some participant or set of participants in the relevant debates. And for each assertion, *p*, there is an equal and opposite asserter of *not-p* (and for good reason); again, I understand that not everyone involved in the discussion agrees with me (the reader should understand that eminently reasonable people disagree with me on nearly every point). When faced with such profound intellectual disagreement among sincere truth seekers, humility seems in order. To be clear, I do not mean to assert that those who disagree with me are per force irrational or crazy or immoral (though I think them mistaken). I say this forthrightly because in much discussion of religion and philosophy, disagreement is often allied with unwarranted derision and denigration.

While I will refer to classical thinkers such as Maimonides, Aquinas, and Averroes, I will be primarily referring to contemporary, analytic, philosophical thinkers and discussions.

Finally, I will try to write without assuming that every reader has a background in theology or philosophy (or the Abrahamic religions). As such, I will try to keep jargon to a minimum.

In a text on God and the problems of love, it behooves us to offer some definitions of "God" and "love." To prevent us from talking about, as Locke fetchingly describes matter, the "something we know not what," we need at least some preliminary understanding of our subjects. In this section, I'll discuss the nature of God. But before getting to definitions of God, let's take a brief excursus into just what definitions are and do.

### Thinking and Speaking about Elephants

Sometimes we define something by offering a list of key properties or ingredients for that thing. Sometimes we define by pointing. The first sort of *definition*, as philosophers typically understand these terms, is the *descriptive meaning*, the second sort of definition is the *referential meaning*.

For example, "elephant" might be defined as "the largest living land animal distinguished by a large trunk and two tusks." A complete descriptive definition of "elephant" would say much more, including average weight, evolutionary history, color, shape of skull, weight of brain, diet, and gestation period. But, for most practical purposes, the shorter and appropriately precise the better. What are the practical purposes of descriptive definitions? Descriptive definitions are used, by and large, in *thinking* and *communicating*.

Suppose you take your children to a zoo and they see an elephant for the first time. “What’s that, Daddy,” one asks. You tell her it’s an elephant. “What’s an elephant, Daddy?” You tell her that it’s the largest living land animal distinguished by a large trunk and two tusks. Armed with her new understanding, she looks to her right and says, “Hey, there’s another elephant!” Your daughter has gained a new concept – elephant – used it to cognize her perceptual experience and then to communicate with you. You beam proudly.

However, if your daughter is a thirty-two-year-old biologist, she may wish for more. When she’s completed her studies, her definition of “elephant” may be something like “there are two species of the African elephant: *Loxodonta africana* and *L. cyclotis*, which evolved from the common ancestor, *Moeritherium*; its prominent proboscis, used mainly to drink water, evolved in response to various selection pressures.” And so on.

Such precise definitions, while unnecessary for 99.99999% of human contexts – unnecessary, that is, for elephant identification and human communication – are essential to the development of an intellectual discipline. When charged by an angry elephant in the bush, one needn’t recall “there are two species of the African elephant: *Loxodonta africana* and *L. cyclotis*, which evolved from the common ancestor, *Moeritherium*” before thinking and shouting, “Elephant. RUN!!!!” For most human contexts – identification and communication – a simple, ordinary descriptive definition is fine.

Given the varieties of human contexts and human uses of language, it follows that there’s not just one, privileged, descriptive definition of “elephant.” Moreover, most descriptive definitions are imprecise (but useful).

Suppose, as is not uncommon, that one’s culture told “Just-So Stories” of the origin and nature of various animals. Consider Rudyard Kipling’s, “The Elephant’s Child,” where one reads that elephants live nearabouts the banks of “the great grey-green, greasy Limpopo River” and were full of “satiableness” and initially had no trunk (with a nose no longer than a boot). Elephants got their trunks, in the story, when the “satiably curious” Elephant’s Child, against the advice of the other elephants, visited the Crocodile to ask him what he eats. “Come hither, Little One,” said the Crocodile, “and I’ll whisper.” When he got close, the Crocodile grabbed him by the nose and tried to jerk him into the limpid stream and eat him. Although it “hurt him hijjus,” the Elephant’s Child pulled and pulled and pulled and his nose stretched and stretched and stretched until the Crocodile finally let go. And though he waited for it to shrink, the Elephant Child’s nose grew no shorter. The story concludes: “For, O Best Beloved, you will see and understand that the Crocodile had pulled it out into a really truly trunk same as all Elephants have today.”

I suspect that most humans for most of human history learned of the elephant and its distinctive size and trunk from similar Just-So Stories. And, though often wrong about locale, habitat, and trunk, such definitions served perfectly well for human identification and communication. The true etiology of elephants, much of which was deeply mistaken until the time of Darwin, would come hundreds of thousands of years later.

One might think then, and some philosophers do, that descriptive definitions are sometimes irrelevant. None of them – from the Elephant’s Child’s to scientific definitions – is especially useful in identifying or speaking about elephants. Humans for hundreds of thousands of years successfully referred to elephants without having heard Rudyard Kipling’s story or having the slightest idea that elephants had genes at all, let alone that distinctive elephant genetic code. No particular description, not even a true description, is necessary to think and speak of elephants.

What, then, do definitions need to secure their meaning? Sometimes what’s important for identifying and communicating is reference: a long time ago someone, somewhere saw an elephant and pointed to it, perhaps among a group of people, and said, “elephant” (or some early language equivalent). The original use(s) of the term, “elephant,” involved no descriptions whatsoever. There was just a pointing and a naming (perhaps a grunting). And people got it. From then on, a community could communicate about elephants and everyone knew what everyone was talking about. What’s important for meaning then? Reference.<sup>1</sup>

My professor asked, “What exactly do you mean when you say, ‘God is love’?” More broadly, we might wonder, what *exactly* do we mean when we use *any* word? I doubt that we ever *exactly* mean anything. Yet, mostly through reference and sometimes through description, words serve their practical purposes of identifying and communicating.

Enough of elephants. What about God?

### The Abrahamic God

Early human beings lived in a god(s)-haunted world. Just for starters, there were gods of rivers, gods of mountains, gods of weather, and gods of war. In the earliest Hebrew narratives alone (the Jewish *Tanakh*, which Christians call “the Old Testament”), we encounter, in addition to Jehova, Inanna, Anat, Nehushtan, Moloch, Baal, Baal Berith and Beelzebub, Chemosh, Jad, and Shapash (and many more). There were in the Hebrew narrative gods of cities and even gods of persons. Jehova, for example, was “the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (likely to differentiate him from the gods of other people, tribes, and cities).

<sup>1</sup> I am following a line of thought developed by Saul Kripke (1980).

Only much later in the Hebrew narrative is it claimed that there is just one God and all of the others are mere wood and stone (idols). So the first problem when discussing *God* and the problems of love is which God (or, maybe, whose God)?

For purposes of this Element, I will be speaking of *the Abrahamic God*, perhaps more perspicuously *the God of Isaac, Jesus, and Ishmael* (considered the first progenitor of Muslims). I'm writing from the perspective of Western, Judeo-Christian-Islamic monotheism. I am speaking, by name, of Yahweh, G-d, Jehova, the Father, Allah, the Merciful and the All-Compassionate ("Allah" is the Arabic name for God, a name used by Muslims, Jews, and Christians alike in Arab-speaking communities). The Element may have been much different if I had decided to write about Hindu gods, or Buddhism or Sikhism or Taoism. But, given the paucity of my knowledge of, say, Hinduism and Sikhism, it would have been a decidedly weaker book. Best if I write about what I know.

### Do Muslims, Jews, and Christians Believe in the Same God?

Second problem for *God* and love. Do Muslims, Jews, and Christians even believe in the same God? Given the rise of Christian nationalism, the reemergence of anti-Semitism, and the prevalence of Islamophobia, it's worth spending some time on this topic. Indeed, since we'll later discuss human love, it's worth noting that human failures to love are sometimes rooted in beliefs that other humans are impugning God's honor with their false beliefs about God and so, humans sometimes violently attack those with whom they disagree about God. See, for example, ancient Hebrew conquests of idolatrous nations, historic Christian anti-Semitism and recent Christian Islamophobia, and contemporary Islamic terrorism. Nonetheless, maybe, contra appearances, Muslims—Christians—Jews believe in the same God (if not in the exact same ways). Our discussion here will rely on insights gained concerning descriptive and referential meaning in the elephant section.

Suppose there is a God who a long, long time ago spoke to Abraham, promising to bless the world through his descendants. Suppose, beginning with Isaac and Ishmael, his descendants told their friends who told their friends, who told their friends about Abraham's encounter with God, with some of those friends later identifying as Jews, some as Christians, and some as Muslims. Their descriptions agree in many respects, even important ones — they all believe, for example, that God is one, merciful, just, and creator. Their descriptions of God also differ in some respects. Christians, for example, think that God was incarnate in Jesus, while Muslims and Jews reject the Trinity. And they, Muslims—Christians—Jews, sometimes call God different names — among them, Yahweh, the Father, and Allah.

Different names and different descriptions. No big surprise, really. Over the course of several millennia and with diverse linguistic groups, theological telephone is likely to produce a lot of variations among both descriptions and names.

But, I contend, if Muslims, Christians, and Jews believe in the God who spoke to Abraham, they believe in the same God. And, if Abraham was directly acquainted with God, they do. God's names and descriptions – same or different – are (mostly) irrelevant.

Many Christians, however, assume that belief in God crucially involves getting one's description of God exactly right.

Christians believe that God was incarnate in Jesus, the second person of the Trinity and that salvation is attainable only through Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross. Muslims and Jews, on the other hand, believe that Jesus was a prophet (not God in the flesh) and that the doctrine of the Trinity violates Jewish and Islamic monotheism.

Different descriptions, different gods. Case closed.

Can two people believe in the same God only if they have identical or nearly identical descriptions of God? This assumption, which may seem obviously true, is flawed both philosophically and spiritually.

Two people can believe in the same God with incomplete, incompatible, and even false descriptions of God.

Let me offer a simple, non-God, example. Douglas Cone, of Tampa, Florida, was married to Jean Ann Cone and together they had three children: Julianne, Douglas, Jr., and Rammy. Douglas Carlson, of Tampa, Florida, was married to Hillary Carlson and together they had two children, Carolee and Fred. Both the Cone and the Carlson children attended the same school, Berkley Prep. Over lunch at Berkley Prep, friends Rammy Cone and Fred Carlson would sometimes speak fondly of their fathers.

In 2003, Tampa was shocked to learn that Douglas Cone and Douglas Carlson were one and the same person, with secret lives and wives. When Rammy and Fred were talking about their fathers in, say, 1999, they were, unbeknownst to themselves, talking about the same person. They both *knew* the same person but by different names and different descriptions. And both Rammy and Fred had *relationships* with the same person.

As long as both Rammy and Fred had both encountered the person variously called "Mr. Cone" and "Mr. Carlson," both were talking about and even relating to the same person. They related to the same person because both were directly acquainted with him, not because of or through their descriptions.

Their descriptions are not, of course, irrelevant. But the descriptions are irrelevant to the two of them relating to, talking about, and even knowing exactly the same person.



Relating to a person requires only that one be *acquainted* with that person, either directly or indirectly (through a chain of testimony that traces back to someone who was directly acquainted with that person). This is a good thing because most descriptions of most people are partial, mistaken, and even contradictory.

Back to God. Muslims—Christians—Jews believe in the same God if they are either *directly acquainted* with God (perhaps through religious experience) or part of a *chain of testimony* that traces back to someone who was directly acquainted with God (say, Abraham). Believing in the same God does not require any religious believers to get their description of God just right (or even right at all).

Here's another way of putting it. Acquaintance with Douglas (sometimes with the surname Cone, sometimes with the surname Carlson) is all that relating to and talking about Douglas requires. *Acquaintance with God* on the part of Muslims—Christians—Jews (either directly or indirectly, say through Abraham) is all that belief in the same God requires.

If Abraham was directly acquainted with God and told his children who told their children, who told their children, . . . , then Muslims, Christians, and Jews believe in the same God. Muslims, Christians, and Jews may worship in different ways, call God different names, and describe God differently (sometimes incompatibly), but they *believe in* the same God.

If I've made the case that when it comes to belief in God – that reference (acquaintance) is more important than description – then we can speak meaningfully of the Abrahamic God, the God of Isaac, Jesus, and Ishmael. I've offered a case, through referential definitions, that Muslims—Christians—Jews believe in the same God.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, and this is the spiritual issue, the religious believer should be grateful that one can believe in God without getting one's description of God just right. After all, given the plethora of beliefs about God, what are the chances that any of one of us has gotten God just right? We should hope for some generosity on God's part when it comes to getting our theology just right, and we should share God's generosity when we make judgments of other people's theology.

We've made a case that problem number 2 – that we can speak meaningfully of the Abrahamic God – has a solution. And now on to problem number 3 concerning *God* and the problems of love: we find within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam various and even competing views on *the nature of God* that have consequences for one's views of divine love. These problems arise within one's

<sup>2</sup> Many Christian theologians insist that believing in or referring correctly to God is not the real issue; the real issue is worshipping God, and worship is different among these traditions (according to many Christians, only Christians worship God in the right way). However, at this stage, I am only concerned with *belief in*, not worship of, God.



theology, one's *belief that* God is thus and so. Just as the biologist requires precise descriptive definitions, so, too, theological discussion requires precise descriptive definitions. *Belief in God* requires only knowledge by acquaintance, one's description of God can be flawed. But theological discussion involves claims that God, for example, does or does not have foreknowledge of the future or can/cannot change. Such claims involve descriptive definitions of God, definitions that have import for understandings of divine love.

### Which God?

One year I undertook the project of reading the entire Bible from beginning to end and writing down exactly what it says about God. At the very beginning (in Genesis, "beginnings"), I jotted down that God doesn't know the future and doesn't even know everything about the present ("Where are you?", God asks of Adam in the Garden). Yahweh has regrets and upsetting emotions (Genesis 6:6). Yahweh changes, does not know the future, cannot do certain things, and is dependent on creatures (for emotional states and will). God suffers with us, for example, upon the occasion of the suffering of His children (upon hearing the cries of His people in bondage in Egypt). The future seems as open, unpredictable and even surprising to God as it is to human beings. As such, the theology associated with this description of God has been called *Open Theism*.<sup>3</sup> Finally, according to Open Theism, God responds to prayer, suffers in reaction to human hardships, and works in partnership with humans to carve out an unforeseen but hoped for future. The God of Open Theism walks with me and talks with me.

However, in my philosophy and theology studies, I encountered an entirely different God, captured in so-called *Perfect-Being Theology*.<sup>4</sup> According to Perfect-Being Theology, God has every good-making property and to the maximum. So God has the good-making property of knowing and to the max: God is omniscient (all-knowing); God has the good-making property of power and to the max: God is omnipotent (all-powerful); God has the good-making property of righteousness and to the max: God is perfectly good. And so on.

A maximally perfect being, I would also learn, is not only omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good; God is immutable and impassible.

God is *immutable*: God cannot change. Here's a simple argument for divine immutability. If God were to change for the better, then God would not be perfectly good, and if God were to change for the worse, then God would not be perfectly good; ergo, God cannot change.

<sup>3</sup> Defenses of Open Theism include Swinburne 1993, Pinnock 1994, Sanders 1998, Pinnock 2001, and Hasker 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Defenses of Perfect-Being Theology (classical theism) include Helm 1994, Flint 1998, Craig 2000, Rogers 2000, Frame 2001, Geisler and House 2001, Ware 2001.

God is *impassible* means that God cannot suffer upsetting emotions (*pathos*); God, on this view, is in a state of perpetual bliss (*apathos*: lacking *pathos* or upsetting emotions).<sup>5</sup>

Perfect-Being Theology is also often associated with strong forms of *divine sovereignty* whereby God has complete control over all events in the world; this typically entails a correspondingly less robust form of human freedom. The God of Perfect-Being Theology is high and lifted up.

So does God walk with me and talk with me (and work with me to create a better future) or is God high and lifted up (watching in bliss as His perfect plan for the world unfolds)? Open Theism or Perfect-Being Theology?

Blaise Pascal distinguished between *the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*, on the one hand, and *the God of the Philosophers*, on the other. Let us take these to track Open Theism and Perfect-Being Theology.

As I'm taking it, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is God, more or less, literally revealed in the Bible – the God who does not have complete knowledge of the future, the God who is disturbed by human suffering and even suffers with us, and the God who is empathetically moved to act compassionately in response to unforeseen but desperate situations. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God of Open Theism. Open Theism carries with it its own problems and prospects. Open Theists, for example, claim the following benefits:

- Robust views of human freedom.
- Significant role of human beings working with God to accomplish God's purposes.
- Fit with piety; we need a God who suffers with us and who hears our prayers.
- A natural reading of the Bible (let God tell us who God is).
- Moral evil is wholly attributable to created, free persons.

Its critics allege the following problems for Open Theism:

- God takes risks (re: human salvation, the outcome could be low).
- We want a God not so overcome by emotion that God cannot act in our best interest.
- We don't want a God who accedes to finite, self-interested human prayers.
- Anthropomorphism threatens to create God in our own image.
- Diminishes God's sovereignty and even God.

The God of the Philosophers, on the other hand, abides in a state of eternal bliss, unperturbed by the suffering of His creatures, acting on our behalf through the inevitable unfolding of His divine plan, unsurprised and unmoved by human

<sup>5</sup> For a book-length discussion of impassibility, see Creel 1985.