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Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Preliminaries

Before we discuss the divine attributes – the properties that are typically attributed to God – we need to make some preliminary observations about God, and about the range of properties that are typically attributed to God. At the end of this chapter, I shall construct a taxonomy of divine attributes; along the way, I shall provide some thoughts about attitudes that one might take towards attributing properties to God.

I begin by distinguishing between concepts of God and conceptions of God. While I think that there is just one concept of God, I hold that there are many different conceptions of God. In discussing the divine attributes, I discuss attributes that belong to different conceptions of God without supposing that there is a single coherent conception of God under which all of the attributes that I examine could be attributed to God. Noting that what I am calling ‘divine attributes’ are jointly inconsistent impugns neither the concept of God nor particular conceptions of God, unless those particular conceptions of God accept all of the jointly inconsistent attributes.

1.1 The concept of God

There are many different views that have been held about the content of the idea or concept of God, and many different suggestions that have been made about how to define or analyse the name ‘God’. In the first part of this chapter, I defend the suggestion that to be God is just to be the one and only god, where to be a god is to be a superhuman being or entity who has and exercises power over the natural world [in circumstances in which one is not, in turn, under the power of any higher ranking or more powerful category of beings]. While many will take this to be a rather radical suggestion, it seems to me that there are many good reasons for adopting this proposal, and that there are no telling reasons that

speak against it.¹ Among the other controversial claims that are defended in the first part of this chapter, I might mention in particular the claim that there can be no more than one God, the claim that ‘God’ is not a title-term and the claim that the use of the name ‘God’ by non-believers is not parasitic on the use of this name by believers. Thinking hard about the use of the name ‘God’ turns up all kinds of interesting consequences.

I.I.I *No more than one God*

Belief in a multiplicity of gods appears to have been widespread in times gone by. The belief – that there are many superhuman beings who have and exercise power over the natural world and the fortunes of humanity – was more or less universally accepted in (early) Norse, Greek and Roman cultures, among many others. Moreover, in these cultures it was accepted that there was no further being which held and exercised power over the gods. Perhaps it was allowed that there was a chief among the gods; but this chief god was of the same kind as his fellows, at most excelling in some limited respects. Furthermore, it was widely held in these cultures that there are superhuman beings, who have and exercise power over the natural world and the fortunes of humanity, who are to be distinguished from the gods: there are, for example, *demons* (who have lesser rank than the gods, and over whom the gods do exercise power), and also *heroes* and *demigods* (human beings who have been raised to a condition of immortality by the gods).

In short, then: the gods were held to be superhuman beings who held and exercised power over the natural world and the fortunes of humanity, but who were not themselves in turn under the power of any higher ranking or more powerful category of beings. Moreover, while it was held to be perfectly proper to worship (at least some of) the gods, it is worth noting that (at least some) demons and heroes and demigods were also regarded as perfectly proper objects of worship. The characterising feature of the gods was not their unique suitability as proper objects of worship; rather, what singled them out was their unique standing in holding and

¹ A reader for the publisher objects: ‘No significant Jewish, Christian or Muslim philosopher describes God using the term “superhuman”.’ It is important to note that, if the word ‘superhuman’ were omitted from the definition, and if humans turn out to be the most powerful beings, then it will be a consequence of the definition that human beings are gods. In this context – by stipulation, if you insist – ‘superhuman’ just means ‘being higher ranking or more powerful than human beings and whatever natural aliens there may be’.

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exercising power over humanity, the natural world and anything else that holds and exercises power over humanity and the natural world.²

As Hume suggests, belief in a single God seems to have been a more recent development. The belief – that there is just *one* superhuman being who has and exercises power over the natural world, over the fortunes of humanity and over any other superhuman beings which exercise power over the natural world and the fortunes of humanity – has very widely supplanted the belief that there are *many* superhuman beings who have and exercise power over the natural world, over the fortunes of humanity and over any other superhuman beings which exercise power over the natural world and the fortunes of humanity. Of course, that is not to say that belief in a single God has everywhere supplanted belief in a manifold of gods. In particular, for example, there are contemporary varieties of Hinduism in which there are many gods, and hence in which there is no (single) God.³ (And, obviously, there are also those who reject the claim that there is so much as one superhuman being who has and exercises power over the natural world and the fortunes of humanity.) Nonetheless, it seems relatively uncontroversial to claim that belief in God has largely displaced belief in gods, for those who are disposed to believe that there is at least one superhuman being who has and exercises power over the natural world and the fortunes of humanity.

If the above account of God and the gods is correct, then it follows immediately that it cannot be that there are two Gods.⁴ Of course, there

² I gloss over difficulties that henotheism appears to create for my account. That some gods have and exercise power over other gods is consistent with the claim that, as a class, gods have and exercise power over everything else. However, I want to resist the suggestion that the ‘lesser’ henotheistic gods are, strictly speaking, gods.

³ There are also varieties of Hinduism that are widely held to be monotheistic. (Mahadevan (1960: 24) goes so far as to say that ‘it is a truth that is recognised by all Hindus that obeisance offered to any of [the forms and names of the gods] reaches the one supreme God’. But this is surely an exaggeration.) In particular, given that Dvaita Vedanta claims that Vishnu is the singular, all-important and supreme deity, there is at least *prima facie* reason to count this view as a version of monotheism. However, as already noted *inter alia* in the main text, whether we should in the end allow that this really is monotheism turns upon whether or not Vishnu is ‘supreme’ in the relevant sense. If Vishnu is merely a leader among peers, then this is not monotheism; on the other hand, if Vishnu has power over all distinct supernatural beings – i.e. if all distinct supernatural beings are merely devas, avatars and the like – then it seems that we should say that, by the lights of those who believe in Dvaita Vedanta’s Vishnu, Vishnu is God.

⁴ Compare Leftow (1998: 94): ‘We also use “God” like a general predicate. For we can and do ask whether there is more than one God: the concept of God allows this question a “yes” answer.’ If I am right, then while we can sensibly ask whether there is more than one god, it is not true that we can sensibly ask whether there is more than one God. In my view, there is no justification for the claim that we can and do use ‘God’ as a general predicate in a way that contrasts with our use of proper names like ‘Moses’; on the contrary, at least at the level of syntax or grammar, ‘God’ is used in just the same range of ways as names like ‘Moses’.

is nothing in the above account alone that rules out there being just two gods. For all that the account says, there might be one good god and one evil god who jointly hold and exercise power over the natural world, over the fortunes of humanity and over any other superhuman beings which exercise power over the natural world and the fortunes of humanity. Moreover, there is also nothing in the above account alone that rules out there being just one God with a dual nature, one aspect of that nature being good and the other aspect of that nature being evil. While, as a matter of historical fact, it seems that Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism were polytheisms, there is a monotheistic variant of those views – or, at any rate, there is a *prima facie* plausible case for the suggestion that those who endorse the coherence of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity should also be prepared to endorse an analogous claim about the coherence of the neo-Zoroastrian doctrine of the Duality.

Sobel (2004: 4–7) writes:

‘God’ (uppercase) does by a natural and compelling convention of language – explicable in terms of its etymology – purport to name what would be the one and only true god (lowercase) ... My semantic proposal is that the name ‘God’ today expresses our concept of a unique god. It expresses our concept of what would be the one and only true god, even if this concept is not strictly speaking the sense or meaning of this name.

If what I have written above is right, then what Sobel says here is not *exactly* correct. I agree with Sobel that, by something like ‘a natural and compelling convention of language’, it is simply a confusion to think that there could be two Gods. But this is not because we think that God would be the one and only *true* god; rather, it is because we think that God would be the one and only god. (It is noteworthy that Sobel gives no account of how he understands the word ‘god’, nor any account of what it would be for something to be a ‘true god’. Even if you suppose that ‘gods’ are to be contrasted with demons, heroes, demigods, devas, avatars and the like, Sobel’s addition of the word ‘true’ in the current context remains both mysterious and unexplained.)

1.1.2 *No more than one proper object of worship*

In my official account of gods in the previous section, I made no mention of *worship*: gods are superhuman beings who hold and exercise power over the natural world and the fortunes of humanity, but who are not themselves in turn under the power of any higher ranking category of beings. However, on some accounts, this is an oversight on my part: gods are

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superhuman beings who are *to be worshipped because* they hold and exercise power over the natural world and the fortunes of humanity (and are not themselves in turn under the power of any higher ranking category of beings).

While it seems right to say that many of the gods were taken to be proper objects of reverence, adoration, extreme gratitude and worship, and while it also seems right to say that all of the gods were taken to be proper objects of awe, wonder and (perhaps) abasement, it does not seem evidently right to say that all of the gods were taken to be proper objects of reverence, adoration, extreme gratitude and worship. Instead, it seems that some gods were principally to be feared: they were agents of misfortune. These were not beings to be worshipped, praised, revered and adored; nor were they agents to which one could sensibly feel gratitude.⁵ If this is right, then it would seem to be a mistake to insist that it is a necessary condition for being a god that one is a proper object of worship, reverence, adoration, extreme gratitude and the like.

It may be useful to think about Zoroastrianism in connection with this point. According to Zoroastrian doctrine, there are two gods, one good, one bad. However, only one of these gods – the good god – is the proper object of worship, adoration, reverence, praise, gratitude and the like; the other god – the bad god – will be vanquished by the good god in the fullness of time. But, even though the bad god will be vanquished by the good god in the fullness of time, that is not to say that the two gods are of different categories; on the contrary, they are twins who are very evenly matched.

The account of Zoroastrianism that I gave in the previous paragraph seems to me to be perfectly in order as it stands: no need for quote marks around the various occurrences of the word ‘god’. Of course, those who think that it is a necessary condition for being a god that one be a proper object of worship, adoration, reverence, praise, gratitude and the like will hardly be persuaded by this; no doubt, for them, the previous paragraph simply grates. But I am inclined to think that it is very much a minority reaction to have one’s hackles raised by the use of the word ‘god’ in the preceding paragraph: the standard or orthodox reaction is that there is

⁵ Matters here are complicated by the fact that some scholars take it to be a necessary condition for being a god that one is actually the subject of a cult and that one actually possesses human followers. So, for example, there is scholarly contention about whether Loki should be counted as one of the Norse gods, or whether he should rather be placed in a lesser category (e.g. demi-god or giant-god), on the grounds that there is no evidence of a cult, or of followers, of Loki.

nothing semantically inappropriate about the expression 'bad god', even when the word 'god' is given its full, standard interpretation.

If it is accepted that it is not a necessary condition for being a god that one is a proper object of worship, adoration, reverence, praise, gratitude and the like, it does not immediately follow that it is then also not a necessary condition for being God that one is a proper object of worship, adoration, reverence, praise, gratitude and the like. However, there is surely at least some *prima facie* plausibility to the thought that, if one could be *one among many* superhuman beings who have and exercise power over the natural world, over the fortunes of humanity and over any other superhuman beings which exercise power over the natural world and the fortunes of humanity, and yet not be oneself a proper object of worship, adoration, reverence, praise, gratitude and the like, then one could be the *sole* superhuman being who has and exercises power over the natural world, over the fortunes of humanity and over any other superhuman beings which exercise power over natural world and the fortunes of humanity, and yet not be oneself a proper object of worship, adoration, reverence, praise, gratitude and the like. Perhaps it might be said that one could only be *one among many* superhuman beings who have and exercise power over the natural world, over the fortunes of humanity and over any other superhuman beings which exercise power over the natural world and the fortunes of humanity, and yet not be oneself a proper object of worship, adoration, reverence, praise, gratitude and the like, if one is in a substantial *minority* of the many superhuman beings who are not proper objects of worship, adoration, reverence, praise, gratitude and the like. But, at the very least, it is not clear how this claim might be supported. And, of course, if we allow that it could be that all (or almost all) of the superhuman beings who have and exercise power over the natural world, over the fortunes of humanity and over any other superhuman beings which exercise power over the natural world and the fortunes of humanity are not the proper objects of worship, adoration, reverence, praise, gratitude and the like, then it seems a very small step to the claim that one could be the *sole* superhuman being who has and exercises power over the natural world, over the fortunes of humanity and over any other superhuman beings which exercise power over natural world and the fortunes of humanity, and yet not be oneself a proper object of worship, adoration, reverence, praise, gratitude and the like.

However things may stand with the claim that it must be the case that God is a proper object of worship, adoration, reverence, praise, gratitude and the like, there are also questions to be asked about the further

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inclination to maintain that God is the *only* proper object of each of worship, adoration, reverence, praise, gratitude and the rest. Sobel (2004: 10) writes:

God would be in an objectively normative manner a proper object for religious attitudes [of reverence, adoration, abasement, awe, wonder, extreme gratitude and, above and before all others not included in it, of worship] ... God would be *the* one and only *proper* object of worship. (Italics in the original.)

I have already noted that when there were polytheists who believed in many gods, those polytheists typically believed that it was perfectly appropriate to worship, revere, adore and praise demons, heroes and demigods. Moreover, as I also noted previously, there is some reason to think that there are contemporary Hindus who believe that it is perfectly appropriate to worship, revere, adore and praise devas, avatars and the like.⁶ But, if it was perfectly proper and appropriate for polytheists to worship, revere, adore and praise beings who were not gods, why should it be inappropriate for monotheists – merely in virtue of their monotheism – to worship, revere, adore and praise beings who are not God?⁷

Quite apart from the theoretical considerations adduced in the preceding paragraph, it is also worth noting that – on an ordinary understanding of worship, reverence, adoration and the like – there are many contemporary monotheists who suppose that it can be perfectly proper to worship, revere and adore beings other than God. In particular, there are many contemporary monotheists who suppose that it can be perfectly proper to worship, revere and adore angels, saints, martyrs and specially favoured humans (such as the Virgin Mary). Of course, one might think to say that, while these contemporary monotheists apparently do suppose that it is perfectly proper to worship, revere and adore beings other than God, they are simply mistaken in making this supposition. However, even if there is some good sense in which these people are making a mistake, it

⁶ As observed in note 3, matters are complicated by the fact that at least some Hindus think that all manifestations of divinity are manifestations of God. However, even if it were true that most Hindus think that it is perfectly appropriate to worship devas, avatars and the like only because these beings are, in some sense, identical with God, it would nonetheless also be true that there are contemporary Hindus who think that it is perfectly appropriate to worship devas, avatars and the like, even though these beings are not identical to God, and, moreover, even though these beings are not gods.

⁷ Of course, the qualification here is not idle. If you are a monotheist who believes that God has said that you shall worship, revere, adore and praise nothing else, then, of course, you will think that there are no other proper objects of worship, reverence, adoration, gratitude and the like. But, in that case, it is not just your monotheism that is driving your response.

is rather hard to believe that the mistake in question is a merely conceptual mistake about what it takes for something to be worthy of worship, reverence, adoration and the rest.⁸

1.1.3 *A question of occupation?*

Leftow (1998: 94) suggests that ‘the concept of God is a concept of an individual holding a special office’, and then goes on to examine various suggestions about the nature of this ‘special office’: perhaps to be God is to have providence over all; perhaps to be God is to deserve worship; perhaps to be God is to be the most basic reality; perhaps to be God is to be the ultimate source of everything else; and so forth. To justify the claim that the concept of God is a concept of an individual holding a special office, Leftow says:

The ambiguity between name and predicate suggests that ‘God’ is a title-term, like ‘Pastor’ or ‘Bishop’. Many people can be bishops; in this way title-terms are like general predicates. But one can also address the office-holder by the title (‘Dear Bishop ...’); one can use the title as a name for the person who holds the office. Thus, the concept of God is a concept of an individual holding a special office.

The analogy between ‘Bishop’ and ‘God’ seems to me to be very weak and imperfect. While one might think that it is grammatically in order to say ‘I spoke to God last night,’ and yet not grammatically in order to say ‘I spoke to the God last night,’ one will also think that it is grammatically in order to say ‘I spoke to the Bishop last night’ and yet not grammatically in order to say ‘I spoke to Bishop last night’ (assuming, of course, that in this last case one is not meaning to refer to someone whose surname is ‘Bishop’). Furthermore, it will also be grammatically in order to say ‘I spoke to Bishop Gregory last night’; but there is no corresponding use for the word ‘God’, i.e. no grammatically acceptable sentence of the form ‘I

⁸ As Leftow (1998: 94) notes, *inter alia*, one could stipulate that an act is not an act of worship – or is not truly an act of worship – unless the object of the act is God. However, if we are supposing that to be God is to be a being that is properly an object of worship because of its unique role in holding and exercising power over the natural world and the fortunes of human beings, then it seems that the circle of ideas is a little too small: surely, if we are to take this position on our understanding of God, then we need a more independent understanding of what it is to be an act of worship. And, in any case, it is surely quite implausible to suppose that it is built into the concept of worship that one can only worship God. Surely our polytheistic forebears did worship their gods; and, given their view about the nature of things, surely it was no less appropriate for them to do so than it is for contemporary monotheists, given their views about the nature of things, to worship God.

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spoke to God Gregory last night.’ On the evidence of these kinds of cases, it seems to me to be quite clear that ‘God’ is not a title-term.⁹

Even if it is agreed that ‘God’ is not a title-term, it remains open that there might be a close connection between the name ‘God’ and a given definite description. In particular, it might be suggested that there is a definite description that is the canonical reference-fixer for the proper name ‘God’. Moreover, if this view is taken, then one might well construe the argument of sections 1.1.1 and 1.1.2 of this chapter as the initial stages of an argument for the conclusion that the canonical reference-fixer for the proper name ‘God’ is the definite description ‘the one and only god’ (or, perhaps, ‘the god’). On this proposal, if it is not actually true that there is one and only one God, then the name ‘God’ is actually empty. However, if it had been true that there is one and only one god, then it would have been the case that the name ‘God’ was a name for that unique god. (Put another way: in a possible world in which there is one and only one god, if *our* name ‘God’ is in currency in that world, then it is used in that world as a name for the unique god that exists in that world.)

If it is agreed that we have fastened on to the right conceptual framework for thinking about the concept of God, it remains open that the details of the account that I have suggested could be disputed. In particular, it might be maintained that, even though Leftow is wrong in his insistence that ‘God’ is a title-term, Leftow is nonetheless correct in thinking that the canonical reference-fixer for the name ‘God’ has a richer content than the simple description ‘the one and only god’. Perhaps it might be suggested that the canonical reference-fixer for the name ‘God’ is the description ‘the one and only being with providence over all’, or the description ‘the one and only being who properly deserves worship’, or the description ‘the one and only being who is ultimately real’, or the description ‘the one and only being who is the source or ground of everything else’, or some other description of this ilk.

The examples that Leftow provides can be dealt with summarily. I have already given my reasons for thinking that the description ‘the one and only being that properly deserves worship’ is not the canonical reference-

⁹ Sobel (2004: 8) writes: ‘I regard as hardly controversial, and as not calling for argument, that “God” in religious discourse and literature is a proper name, not a title-term.’ Since Sobel’s view is plainly controversial – and, indeed, controverted by philosophers such as Leftow – it does call for justification of the kind that I have here supplied. Perhaps it is also worth noting here that Sobel is right to go on to note that ‘The One God’, ‘The True God’ and ‘The Lord’ might well be taken to be title-terms, on a par with ‘The Bishop’. These further expressions are plausibly claimed to be ‘title-terms’; at any rate, they are evidently not *standard* definite descriptions such as ‘the one god’ and ‘the bishop’.

fixer for our name 'God'. The description 'the one and only being with providence over all' fails to fit the bill, I think, because it does not seem incoherent to suggest that it might be the case that God fails to provide for the inhabitants of creation.¹⁰ The description 'the one and only being that is ultimately real' fails to fit the bill because it is unclear what is meant by the words 'ultimately real': many of us think that we understand well enough what is meant by the proper name 'God' even though we can make no sense of the suggestion that reality comes in degrees. Finally, the description 'the one and only being who is the source or ground of everything else' fails to fit the bill, I think, because it does not seem incoherent to suggest that it might be the case that God fashioned the universe from pre-existing materials.¹¹

There are other suggestions that also can be dealt with summarily. For instance, Senor (2008) suggests that we might take the canonical reference-fixing description to be 'the personal creator who revealed himself to the Hebrew people'.¹² Here, there are at least two kinds of difficulties.

On the one hand, I think that it is plainly not part of the concept of God that God is personal. Even within quite mainstream Christian theology, there are those who resist a highly anthropomorphic conception of God, preferring to call God a 'principle', or 'ground', or the like.¹³ And, while it seems reasonable to suppose that very early conceptions of gods were highly anthropomorphic, it is not even clear that later polytheistic conceptions of the gods were similarly anthropomorphic in nature. At the very least, it certainly seems that one can imagine a variant of Zoroastrianism in which the two gods are impersonal principles that govern the operations of the universe. All things considered, it seems rather implausible to suppose that it is part of the very concept of monotheism that God is personal in nature.

¹⁰ Leftow (1998: 94) notes that both Aristotle and Plotinus accepted that God exists, but denied that God is providential, 'without obviously contradicting themselves'.

¹¹ Following the lead suggested by Leftow in note 10 above, we might observe that, while Plato accepted that God exists, the evidence of the *Timaeus* suggests that Plato also accepted that God fashioned the world from independently pre-existing materials 'without obviously contradicting himself'.

¹² Senor (2008: 172f.) actually writes: 'The intensional content of the theistic conception of God is something like "the personal creator who revealed himself to the Hebrew people", with the extension being fixed in a Kripkean, causal manner.' At the very least, this is quite close to the proposal that I have attributed to him in the main text.

¹³ Of course, there are also the various kinds of 'negative' theology to be considered at this point. At the very least, it is clear that there are many in the Christian tradition who have wanted to resist the suggestion that God is *literally* a person. If we are asking for a literal reference-fixer for the name 'God', then it is plainly controversial to include the word 'personal' in that reference-fixer.