

1 Opening Moves

1.1 Abrahamic Philosophical Theology

This Element is about you and me. It is also about God.

You may find these topics incongruent. Though you and I are alike in various respects, what could we have in common with God? What does our nature have to do with that of the Almighty? Can a metaphysics of God illuminate a metaphysics of human nature? What can we learn about *us* by learning about the one true *God*?

These are the central questions of this Element. Before explaining their content, their significance, and the answers to come, some preliminary points are in order.

The topics at hand belong to philosophical theology. To do theology of any kind is to think about God. But one does not simply think about God. One uses various sources of evidence in building thoughts, comparing them, and evaluating them for coherence or plausibility. Would-be theologians face this question: *which* evidential sources are to be deployed? Some give a narrow answer and limit their attention to select texts as interpreted by a given tradition. Others take a more capacious approach and in addition to sacred texts freely consult deliverances of reason and the natural sciences. Structured approaches are possible too – one could take as evidence only what is revealed by reason while also taking certain dogmatic deliverances (from a midrash, creed, or hadith, say) as inviolable borders or absolute side-constraints. “Reason however you will about God,” says this approach to philosophical theology, “provided that your conclusions respect orthodoxy so defined.”

In this Element, I’ll adopt a structured approach along these lines. But instead of submitting to sectarian dogma, I’ll work within the Abrahamic tradition more broadly. I’ll assume there is such a tradition – more on its content shortly – and that there are views about God on which Jews, Christians, and Muslims can all agree. The rule I’ll attempt to follow may be expressed as this injunction: “Reason however you will about God, provided that your conclusions are consistent with the intersection of Islamic, Christian, and Jewish theology.” For now, we can think of that intersection as centered around and including monotheism – the view that there is one God.¹

Many – probably most – who endorse Abrahamic monotheism endorse quite a bit more besides; they endorse distinctively Jewish, Islamic, or Christian doctrines too. And any complete assessment of relevant evidence would have

¹ The term derives from More (1660), stylized there as “Monotheisme.” For an illuminating treatment of its history since, see Herbener (2013).

to take those doctrines – and their own evidential status – into account. Perhaps doing all this would result in conclusions radically different from those I'll defend: a reasonable thought, and maybe even a worry. I invite readers with worries along these lines to take my arguments in this spirit: they reflect part of what “unaided reason” has to say on the matter. Perhaps a total assessment of the situation requires consulting revelation or tradition too. But the present study is one piece within that total assessment, and an important one in its own right. In accordance with the “unaided reason” dictum, my focus throughout will be abstract (on the ideas and how they hang together), rather than historical (who said what, and where, and when). My approach will, finally, be speculative. Rather than looking for definitive answers or airtight arguments, I'll attempt to find uncharted and fruitful conjectures that deserve further reflection and inquiry.

The questions at hand – questions about connections between *us* and *God* – deserve attention. Here's why. Beyond their intrinsic interest, they bear on a number of important issues across theology and philosophy. First, a growing cadre of avowed monotheists affirm views about human nature that significantly depart from majority views of their home traditions. In particular, many now lean toward *materialist* views about human nature according to which we are wholly material beings. The present study aids in determining whether it is internally coherent to conjoin such materialism with monotheism. Second, were monotheism to comport well with a particular theory of human nature, monotheists would thereby have reason to adopt that theory. Conversely, monotheism's supporting a particular view of human nature that is itself highly implausible would count against monotheism. Though this Element will not contend that monotheism is true, its arguments are still of interest to those who don't already accept monotheism; for its arguments may well bear on reasons to deny monotheism in the way noted previously. In inquiring about the *connections* between various doctrinal nodes, then, we can make progress in understanding which nodes are themselves worthy of assent.

The question of what we are, finally, bears on matters of grand and grave importance. We live and move and have our being in the vast world of nature. We are surrounded by material beings – plants and planets, rocks and trees, and much more besides. So, we are situated within nature in at least some important sense. But in what ways, exactly, are we continuous with nature and its other subjects? Are we full subjects in nature's kingdom, or just guests or permanent residents? I'd like to know the answers to these questions. And so, I wonder what we are. Inquiring into our connections with God is one way to make progress on that front.

You may at this point still be wondering how the being and oneness of God – monotheism, in a word – could speak to our own nature. Monotheism doesn't seem to say much about many *other* topics, after all. Learning that there is one God, does not, for example, seem to tell us much about the substance of mathematics or science – what properties are enjoyed by all primes over 737, say, or whether gold has a higher atomic number than titanium. There would thus seem to be secular truths – truths that monotheism gives us no reason to revise. Why should truths about our own nature be any different?

In a way, the entirety of this Element is an answer to that question. The arguments that follow will together illustrate in fairly specific ways how metaphysics of the divine bears on metaphysics of the human. But I can make two abstract observations even at the outset. First, monotheists tend to agree that we are made in the image of God, which certainly seems to imply that we are like God in important respects. And that would certainly seem to imply that one way to learn about ourselves is to learn about God – and vice versa. Second, a great many arguments about the metaphysics of human nature – about what we are and what we are like – deploy key premises about what sorts of things there are and what is possible. The existence and attributes of one Almighty God bear on those premises. For the view that there is one God should – and in fact does – make a difference to our sense of what exists and what is possible. And so monotheism turns out to bear on questions about us too.

1.2 Monotheism

The monotheism here in view comprises three core claims: the *existence*, *supremacy*, and *uniqueness* of God. Let's take them up in turn; each will receive more detailed treatment as appropriate in later sections.

God *exists*. There is an incorporeal spirit, distinct from the natural world and anything governed by its laws. God is not a material being. God is not a part of nature, nor is nature a part of God. The monotheism here in view, then, stands in sharp conflict with atheism, pantheism, and panentheism. If monotheism has two parts (the *mono* part and the *theism* part) this is the theism part.

God is *supreme*. Though God is distinct from the natural world, God created it all and enjoys unsurpassed power over all of concrete reality. This doctrine of supremacy gives some content to the *mono* part of *monotheism*. For it specifies a sense in which God is singular. God is not just a god (whether alone or among many). Nor is God yet another (albeit unusually potent) being subject to the laws of nature. The monotheism here in view, then, contrasts with both polytheism and what we might call *demiurge theism*, the doctrine that swaths of the

natural world were uncreated and that a god somehow worked with them to shape the world as we know it.

God is, finally, *unique*. In particular, God is *one*. Astute readers will notice that this slogan may be ambiguous between a thesis about God's simplicity – God has no parts – and God's number – there is one God. I will, in due time, describe more detailed specifications of the uniqueness of God and address that apparent ambiguity. For now, we can think of uniqueness as the thesis that God is not many, whether in number or in any other sense. The doctrine of uniqueness gives further content to the *mono* part of *monotheism*. It, too, contrasts with polytheism.

These three elements together also contrast with what we might call *mere animism*, according to which the world is inhabited by various spirits that each enjoy a natural domain of proper authority and limited control (one in command of a waterfall, another in command of a forest, say). For the God here in view is not tied to particular regions of space and time, nor is God's power or proper authority limited. God's domain is complete.

God exists, God is supreme, and God is unique. Thus monotheism in bare outline. We turn now to rather less exalted subject matter: ourselves.

1.3 Human Nature

What are we? The question, despite its concision, *sounds* deep. But what is it asking and how might it be answered?

One could – perhaps under the influence of various “no self” doctrines – respond by denying that we are anything at all. I shall in what follows presuppose that this approach is mistaken. I shall presuppose that we exist. You are something. So am I. More generally, there are such things as people. This presupposition seems to be a safe bet. It is not, for one, a controversial thesis in at least this important sense: those who disagree with me here maintain that no one disagrees with me. They instead think that no one disagrees with anyone, since there's no one there to do the disagreeing. If uncontroversial theses in this sense are fair to presuppose, then mine is fair as any.

The presupposition at hand is limited. In supposing that we exist, I am not thereby supposing that we have or are in any sense unchanging selves, that we enjoy stable and informative criteria of identity over time, that we enjoy a mind-independent mode of existence, that we are fundamental items within the world, or that we are or have souls.

The presupposition that we exist is also defensible; it need not be a mere presupposition, though I'm content to treat it that way if necessary. Here is a brief demonstration. Premise: you are a human person. Conclusion: therefore,

something is a human person. The premise seems true. You can think and feel; you have preferred personal pronouns; you can be appropriately addressed with “you” (proof of the premise: I just did so). So you are a person. And you are a human person (you’re not, I presume, a Vulcan, an angel, or even an unusually sensitive brown bear). The conclusion follows from the premise. And the conclusion is equivalent to what I mean when I say that human persons exist. I conclude that the general presupposition at hand – that we exist – is innocuous, defensible, and true.

We exist. We are. But the question remains: *what* are we? And what are we asking when we ask *that* question? It will be helpful to separate three interconnected sub-questions:

- What is our ontological category? (category)
- Do we belong to that category as a matter of necessity? (modality)
- How do our mental properties relate to the physical properties of our bodies? (mentality)

I will now explain these sub-questions in more detail.

Category

We are concerned with the metaphysics of human nature. Our present inquiry thus differs in kind from other possible answers or approaches to the question of what we are – from the approaches of ethics, history, biology, or speculative futurology for example. We seek a special kind of truth about human persons; not just any will do. The claims that *we are each no more than 4,300 years old*, *we each have at least one great-grandparent*, *we are morally pluripotent beings capable of great good and of great evil* or that *we are beings that make tools and love and war* do not answer the question of what we are. They report truths about us, to be sure, but not truths of the right kind. For the question we’re after, I propose, can only be answered by placing us within an ontological category.

To speak of ontological categories is to do metaphysics in the grand old style. It is to specify at the highest level of abstraction how reality divides. Consider, for example, a theory of ontological categories expressed in Figure 1.²

Charts don’t always report doctrines. But this one does. According to the theory charted in Figure 1, for example, every item at all is a thing. There is no non-thing category, and no category higher than “thing.” Similarly, every thing is either a property or an object, and every object is either material or immaterial. Both material and immaterial objects, furthermore, cleave into thinking and unthinking categories. We could also offer purported examples of items within

² On categories and their role in ontology, see van Inwagen (2014).

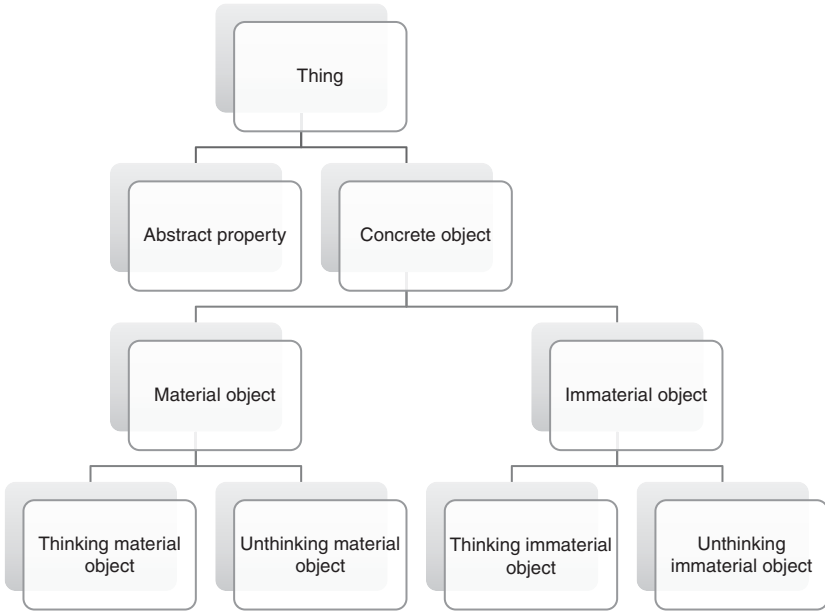


Figure 1 A categorical ontology

each of the four base-level categories (conscious organisms as thinking material objects; rocks as unthinking material objects; angels and demons as thinking immaterial objects; holes as unthinking immaterial objects).

The theory of ontological categories charted here does not settle questions about our nature. It does not say what we are. But it does furnish us with a useful tool for so doing. If you wanted to say what we were, using the chart, it's plain how you'd proceed: point to a node, and say "that's our place in this world; we're *those* things."

Two views about the category we belong to are of special interest and will command special attention in this study. The first – materialism about human persons (henceforth just "materialism") – says that we are thinking material objects. The second – dualism – denies this and says that we are thinking objects that are either partly or wholly immaterial.

Modality

I have distinguished truths about us that do not address the question of what we are from those that do. Here is one way of making this distinction more precise. Perhaps the former are merely contingent truths, while the latter are necessary. It is *true* that we are all to be found somewhere near the surface of planet Earth. But that truth is contingent – we could have been found elsewhere – and so does

not, despite its grammatical form, say what we are. The hypothesis that each of us is necessarily a rational animal, goes the thought, is much closer to saying what we are because it tries to say more than what we happen to be – it tries to say what we *must be*.

This thought – that necessary truths are a vital element in answering the question of what we are – is not without some initial plausibility. It's unsurprising, then, that many have thought that if we fall under a given ontological category, we do so of necessity. So if we are immaterial thinking things, for example, then we *must be* immaterial thinking things. But modal claims along these lines are, as we'll see, not the only game in town. For now, though, I observe this: necessity and contingency here mark one dimension to the question of what we are. Whichever way one goes along that dimension, to speak to this matter is to specify more closely what we are by saying, if we are a given kind of item, whether we *had* to be that kind of item.

Mentality

You are a human person. You can think. You can feel. You can move about in the world and do all sorts of other interesting things. And you accomplish a great many of these feats with or through your body. You would, at least, be hard pressed to get by without it.

So let's talk next about your body. Your body exists in space and time. It is among your closest associates. You see it when you look in the mirror. Go ahead; take a look. Where it goes, you go. And, one thinks, where you go, it must follow. Indeed, you can make it move through sheer force of will. You bear, in sum, an important and intimate relation to a certain material object.

You are not alone in having a body. I have one too; lucky me. In fact, we all do, it seems. And we each bear some intimate relation to these bodies of ours.

This relation invites – and has received – explication. Some say that we are brains, and thus relate to our bodies by being *parts* of them. Others say that we *are* our bodies. Some say we have, in addition to our bodies, a certain immaterial part – a *soul*. And yet others say that we just *are* immaterial souls and bear some special relation short of identity to our bodies – perhaps we inhabit and control them despite not being them. Each of these views answers a specification of the question of what we are. They answer that question by specifying *how* we relate to our bodies. They thus address a dimension of the question of what we are.

The question of how we relate to our bodies – by inhabitation, identity, parthood, or in some other way – has broader import. For saying, how we relate to our bodies says how we fit into reality and its categories in the broadest

possible sense. To say how we relate to our bodies is to begin answering the category question. That is the point explained previously. But there's another question here as well.

Your body enjoys a host of biological, chemical, and physical features. And its parts – electrons, cells, organs, flesh and bone – are mutually entangled in a web of biological, chemical, and physical relations. Understanding their workings is the business of chemistry, biology, physics, neurology, and so on.

You also have a mental life. You believe, perceive, and feel. There is something it is like to be you. You have a perspective on things. Understanding the workings of your mind is the business of classical psychology and related disciplines.

Thus there are some domains into which you fall – physical and mental. How do these domains relate, though? Are they two, one, or something else? We can put the question a little differently. There must be, many have thought, *some* systematic relation between these biological, chemical, and physical properties – of your body or its parts – and your own mental life. Your own thoughts and perceptions and feelings crucially involve these somatic properties. But how?

There is some intimate relation here between the mental and the physical. And it too invites – and has received – explication. Some say that our mental properties *are* physical properties of our bodies. So when you believe that the sum of two and two is four, for example, that belief just is a state of your body (or your brain, or some other material item). Some say that the somatic properties somehow *constitute* or *ground* the mental properties. And some say that physical properties of our bodies or their parts *cause, but are distinct from* our mental properties. And there are other views besides. The point is this: saying how our mental properties relate to the physical properties of our bodies and their parts is a third and final dimension to the question of what we are. To say how our mental life fits into nature – and reality more broadly – is one more way of saying what we are.

I've identified three dimensions or specifications of the question of what we are. A satisfactory answer to the broader question will address all of them. It will situate us within some ontological category or other; it will say whether we belong there of necessity; and it will say how our mental properties relate to the physical properties of our bodies or their parts. These are distinct but mutually supporting tasks.

1.4 Preview

There aren't just *views* about what we are. There are also a bevy of *arguments*. These arguments purport to show what category we fall under, whether we do so

of necessity, and what relation binds our mental lives to the activity of the material world.

We are now in a position to more sharply state the questions central to this Element: how does the existence, supremacy, and uniqueness of God bear on these arguments? Suppose there is one God, supreme and unique: what can we then learn about the arguments that purport to show that we are, for example, wholly material or wholly immaterial beings? That our mental lives wholly derive from – or are perhaps entirely untethered to – the activity of the material world?

Those are the questions. Now some answers and a preview of the arguments to come. In Sections 2 and 3, I'll evaluate the prospects for views according to which we are luminous spiritual beings. Though monotheism is indeed a hospitable environment for such views, I'll argue that it also offers resources to undercut some of the usual arguments (and one unusual but intriguing argument that begins with the very concept of a spirit). In Section 4, I will more carefully develop the uniqueness element of monotheism and show that it uncovers a dilemma for anyone who'd argue for any conclusion at all from theological premises. In short: if God is truly and absolutely one in the most demanding sense, then we cannot be like God in any sense. I close the study, in Section 5, by considering and rejecting a *normative* conception of God's uniqueness according to which God alone is infinitely valuable. Having done that, I evaluate the prospects for views according to which we are wholly material beings. I'll argue that the usual suite of arguments along these lines fail, given monotheism. This is perhaps unsurprising. What's more surprising is that heterodox forms of materialism can survive within and indeed cohere well with monotheism. The evidence favors, I'll argue, a *magical*, *plastic*, and *singular* view according to which, though our mental lives do not robustly depend on the workings of the material world, though our nature is highly contingent, and though we figure into the laws of nature in a unique way, we are nonetheless wholly material beings. We are indeed subjects within nature's kingdom. But we're special too.

2 Spirits Human and Divine

2.1 Beyond Nature

If the cosmos is all there is, or was, or ever will be, then there is no God. Nor is there anything like God. All things are, instead, full subjects of nature – bound by nature's laws, born within and confined to space and time, destined to remain there for all their days. And all facts about concrete reality are rooted in facts

about these natural denizens; no danglers lurk outside the realm. This is one way to think about the world and its contents – in a word, *naturalism*.

But if there is, as monotheists suppose, one true God – a supreme incorporeal being who brought that cosmos into existence, then new possibilities emerge. God is a wedge that cracks open our sense of what kinds of things there could be and what reality must be like. For when naturalism is set aside, we need not take the cosmos and its visible furniture – stars, trees, steel beams, and so on – as exhausting reality, or even as paradigms of it. Perhaps there is something more. And perhaps that something more is an item in addition to the Almighty; perhaps there are other beings *like* God in various respects. The assumption of monotheism and the rejection of naturalism invite speculation in this direction.

And so we descend once again to the less exalted subject of ourselves. Might we be, like God, rather different from the other furniture of the cosmos? Might we be spirits too?

Here is an inchoate suspicion: if the Almighty is an incorporeal spirit, then so are we. Or, at least, monotheism is an unusually hospitable framework for the view that we, too, are luminous spiritual beings. In the discussion to come, I'll consider two answers that take us beyond mere suspicion and into the realm of argument. The first begins with the idea that, on monotheism, spirits – incorporeal thinking beings – are *possible*, and supposes that we could have been among them. From this possibility, the argument extracts the conclusion that we are in fact incorporeal thinking beings. The second argument doesn't require that we could have been spirits, or even that they are possible. It instead begins with the simple but controversial assumption that we have the concept of a spirit. And it concludes from that conceptual assumption that we are in fact spirits.

Both arguments begin with premises that the monotheist endorses and move to conclusions about what we are. After developing some terminology and making a few assumptions explicit, I'll contend that they both fail.

2.2 Matter and Spirit

All of this business about spirits and such may rightly prompt suspicion. And though I do not have rigorous definitions of the key ideas here – mentality, material object, human person, spirit – a few remarks will help us focus attention on a common object.

I'll say that someone thinks if and only if they either believe, fear, doubt, desire, or hope – or are conscious: in a state where there is something it is like to be in that state. You are thinking when you hope for rain or when you feel pain, for example. And I'll say something is wholly material if and only if it is at some