

John Hick on Whether God could be an Infinite Person

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Abstract: "Who or what is God?," asks John Hick. A theist might answer: God is an infinite person, or at least an infinite personal being. Hick disagrees: "God cannot be both a person and infinite." Moreover, he says, the distinction between being a person and being a personal being "is a distinction without a difference." Thus, God cannot be an infinite personal being either. In this essay, I assess Hick's reasons for drawing these conclusions.

"Who or what is God?," asks John Hick (2009). A theist might answer: God is an infinite person, or at least an infinite personal being. Hick disagrees: "God cannot be both a person and infinite" (2010a, 22; Hick 2010b, 27). Moreover, he says, the distinction between being a person and being a personal being "is a distinction without a difference" (2009, 1). Thus, God cannot be an infinite personal being either.

Let us grant Hick the claim that there is no difference between being a person and being a personal being, whether because we agree with him or because, although we disagree, we want to see how his arguments fare on that charitable assumption. Now: what does Hick mean by "an infinite person"? Hick says he has "Swinburne's concept of God" in mind. So then: who or what is God, according to Richard Swinburne?

Hick tells us that

Swinburne says that (1) 'God is a personal being—that is, in some sense a person. By a person I mean an individual with basic powers (to act intentionally), purposes, and beliefs'. Further, says Swinburne, God is a unique individual, because he is (2) omnipotent—'he can bring about as a basic action any event he chooses'. (3) He is omniscient: 'whatever is true, God knows that it is true'. And (4) he is 'perfectly free, in that desires never exert causal influence on him at all'. And (5) eternal: 'he exists at each moment of unending time'. In addition, God is (6) bodiless, and (7) omnipresent. Finally, (8) God is perfectly good. This, in brief, is Swinburne's concept of God. (2010b, 26-27)

Moreover, commenting on (1), Hick says that, according to Swinburne,

God is in some sense a person. But in what sense? Surely, if this is to mean anything clear and distinct it must mean that God is literally a person. So, Swinburne must mean that God is a person like ourselves, except for being infinite in power, knowledge, extension in time, and except also for being perfectly free and omnipresent and good. (2010a, 27)

Hick is correct: Swinburne says these things. But Hick does not say what Swinburne means by “infinite” when he speaks of an “infinite person.”

According to Swinburne, “the God whom theists (Christian, Jewish, and Islamic, among others) claim to exist” is the cause of everything else; moreover, “every property which every substance has is due to God causing or permitting it to exist” (1996, 19, 43). Furthermore,

Theism postulates for its one cause, a person, infinite degrees of those properties which are essential to persons—infinite power (God can do anything logical possible), infinite knowledge (God knows everything logically possible to know), and infinite freedom (no external cause influences which purposes God forms: God acts only in so far as he sees reason for acting). (43)

So, God “is an infinitely powerful, knowledgeable and free person,” according to Swinburne, by which he means “a person with zero limits (apart from those of logic) to his power, knowledge, and freedom” (19, 44). Moreover, “all the other essential properties of God follow from the three properties of omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect freedom,” (e.g., bodilessness, omnipresence, being the creator of the universe, perfect goodness, everlastingness, and being a source of moral obligation) (47). Finally, God has all these properties essentially, (i.e. without them God cannot exist) (19, 47).

So, Swinburne means by “infinite person” something that has, without any non-logical limit, all “those properties which are essential to persons.” Let’s call those properties *person-making properties*. Hence, the claim that God is an infinite person is the claim that God has, without any non-logical limit, all the person-making properties.

Before we turn to Hick’s argument for the conclusion that God cannot be an infinite person, I want to register a worry about Swinburne’s definition of a person as “an individual with basic powers (to act intentionally), purposes, and beliefs.” The worry is that non-human animals, such as dogs, implausibly turn out to be persons on his definition. This is not the place to delve into the vexed question of what a person is. But if you think dogs—or even cats!—lack self-consciousness, or if you think dogs can’t engage in rational means-end planning about themselves, or some such thing, and if you think one or more of these things is essential to being a person, well, fine. Just add that to Swinburne’s definition, and the discussion will proceed in accordance with that modified definition.

Now: why is it that, according to Hick, God cannot be an infinite person, in the sense just defined? Here are Hick’s words:

But does the idea of an infinite person make sense? We know what it is to be a person because we are ourselves persons. And to be a person is to be a particular person, distinct from other persons, each with our own boundaries. When two people are interacting with each other as persons, this is only because they have their own individual borders—otherwise they would not be two distinct persons. In other words, personhood is essentially finite, allowing for the existence of other persons. And so an infinite person is a self-contradiction. God cannot be both a person and infinite. (2010b, 27; repeated at 2010a, 22)

What, exactly, is the argument here?

It appears to be a *reductio* on the proposition that God is an infinite person. However, one of its premises appears to be this: “to be a person is to be a particular person, distinct from other persons,” which we can gloss as, necessarily, for any x, if x is a person, then there is a y such that y is a person and x is distinct from y. We might balk. After all, that premise implies that it is impossible for there to have been, or for there to be, exactly one person. Hick can get by with a weaker premise, however, one that trades on his thought that to be a person “*allow[s]* for the existence of other persons” (my emphasis), that to be a person involves possessing “boundaries” or “borders” that *could* distinguish one person from another. This premise is compatible with the proposition that there might have been, or may be, exactly one person. I’ll go with the weaker premise in reconstructing Hick’s argument; my concerns about his line of thought arise either way.

So, then, here’s Hick’s argument, as best as I can discern:

1. Suppose that God is an infinite person. (Assumption for *reductio*)
2. Necessarily, for any x, if x is an infinite person, then x is a person with boundaries or borders that could distinguish x from other persons.
3. Necessarily, for any x, if x is a person with boundaries or borders that could distinguish x from other persons, then x is a finite person.
4. Therefore, God is a finite person. (from 1-3, logic)
5. Therefore, God is an infinite person and God is a finite person. (from 1 and 4, logic)
6. Therefore, God is not an infinite person. (1-5, Assumption for *reductio* discharged)
7. Therefore, God cannot be an infinite person. (from 6)

I grant the inference from (6) to (7) on the grounds that, necessarily, for any x, if x is not an infinite person, then x cannot be an infinite person; I will leave this point tacit from here on out. Everything else is sanctioned by logic, except (2) and (3). To assess (2) and (3), we must know what Hick means by “infinite person” and “finite person,” and what he means by “boundaries” and “borders.” We just saw that Hick follows what Swinburne means by “infinite person,” and so, with that in mind, by “finite person” he means something that has, with some non-logical limit, all of the person-

making properties. As for the figurative terms “boundaries” and “borders,” Hick does not say what he means, but from his use of them it appears that he has distinguishing properties in mind. That is, necessarily, for any x , if x is a person, then x has some properties that could distinguish x from other persons.

With these clarifications in hand, we can understand (2) and (3) as follows:

- 2'. Necessarily, for any x , if x has, without any non-logical limit, all of the person-making properties, then x is a person who has properties that could distinguish x from other persons.
- 3'. Necessarily, for any x , if x is a person who has properties that could distinguish x from other persons, then x has, with some non-logical limit, all of the person-making properties.

What should we make of these premises?

While (2') seems right to me, (3') seems dubious, at best. Suppose you have exactly this much information: x is a person and y is a person, and x has some properties that distinguish x from y . Does that, *all by itself*, give you enough information to tell whether any of x 's person-making properties have some non-logical limit? It seems to me that it does not; at the very least, I want some reason to think otherwise.

Hick's talk of “boundaries” and “borders” suggests a reason. Suppose we represent a single finite person—say, Sam—as a geometric figure—say, a circle—on a two-dimensional plane. So, we lay it down that his circle has a diameter of some finite length—say, an inch or so—to represent that finitude. Then we have this picture:

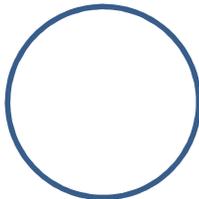


Figure 1.

Figure 1 fits nicely with Hick's claim that to be a person is to have your own “boundaries” or “borders.” You can see them right there on the page. Now suppose we want to represent two finite persons—Sam and Sally. Naturally, equity requires us to represent Sally using the same convention we used for Sam. Moreover, to represent their distinctness, we will lay it down that the boundaries of the circles must be non-overlapping and mutually impenetrable, representing impenetrability by filling in each circle with uniform shading. Then we have this picture:

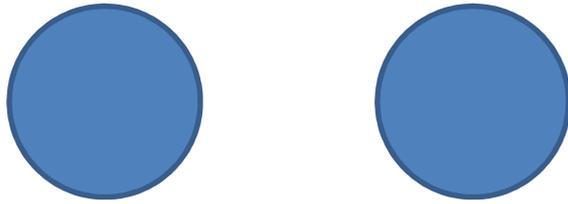


Figure 2.

Figure 2 fits nicely with Hick’s claim that “boundaries” or “borders” are required for distinctness of persons. Now suppose we want to entertain the hypothesis that there is a third person—say, God—who is infinite. Given the conventions already in place, we will naturally represent it with a circle whose diameter is of infinite length. Then we have this picture:

Figure 3.

Notice two things about Figure 3 (and, yes: it’s supposed to be blank). First, if we tried to represent any other person in it, we would have to violate our conventions on representing distinctness. Moral: an infinite person does not allow for the existence of other persons. Second, if we tried to represent the existence of no person at all, we would use the same picture. Moral: an infinite person cannot exist. Why? Because it does not allow for the existence of other persons.

If something like this picture-thinking is Hick’s reason for claiming that God cannot be an infinite person, two short comments are in order. First, it has no relevance to the claim that God is an infinite person, as understood by Swinburne and other theists who make that claim. That’s because it defines “infinite” in a way that they do not. Second, while picture-thinking has a place in a well-lived intellectual life (think of Venn diagrams and probability spaces, for example), Hick’s use of it here—if, indeed, he did use it here—is a textbook example of its misuse. You can’t settle whether there can be an infinite person, in Swinburne’s sense of that term, by drawing cleverly-defined circles on your lunch napkin.

Hick might have another line of thought in mind. At any rate, one might read between the lines something like the following reasoning. If God is *infinite*, then God is without limits—without “boundaries” and “borders,” you might say—and, if God is without limits, then, since having a property would limit God—“bound” or “border” God in, you might say—God has no properties at all. Of course, if God is a *person*, then God has the property of being a person, and so, God has some properties. Thus, if God is an infinite person, then God has no properties while having some properties. “And so an infinite person is a self-contradiction. God cannot be both a person and infinite” (2010b, 27).

If this is Hick's reason for claiming that God cannot be an infinite person, two remarks are in order. First, as with the last argument, it has no relevance to the claim that God is an infinite person, as that claim is understood by Swinburne and other theists like him since it defines "infinite" in a way that they do not. Second, it seems to show a bit too much. For, if the argument is sound, it does not pose any particular problem for God's being an infinite *person*; rather, it poses a general problem for God's being an infinite *anything*. Indeed, it poses a problem for God's being *anything*, full stop. That strikes me as a little, uh, excessive.

Aside from the passage I quoted above in which Hick explicitly argues for the conclusion that God is not an infinite person, there are a couple of other lines of thought that could be developed from his writings that would secure the same conclusion (Hick 1989, 1995, 2000, 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2009, 2010a, 2010c). We should consider them for the sake of completeness. But I want to emphasize that Hick never offered these arguments explicitly, to my knowledge. So, I will not attribute them to him, although they are inspired by him; still, you might think of them as "hickian," with a small *h*, in the way we sometimes think of certain views as humean or kantian even though you'd be hard-pressed to find them explicitly in Hume's or Kant's writings.

Without bells and whistles, the first hickian argument is simply this:

8. God is transcategorial.
9. If God is transcategorial, then God is neither a person nor a non-person.
10. So, God is neither a person nor a non-person. (from 8 and 9, logic)
11. So, God is not a person and God is not a non-person. (from 10, logic)
12. So, God is not a person. (from 11, logic)

Of course, if God is not a person, then God is not an infinite person; thus, God cannot be an infinite person.

How should we understand the key notion of transcategoriality here? To say that something is transcategorial, Hick tells us, is to say that it is "beyond the range of our human conceptual systems," although "purely formal" concepts will apply to it (e.g., being transcategorial, and being the referent of a subject term in an English sentence) (1997, 279; 1989, 236; 2004b, 9; 2004a, xix; 2007, 220-221; 2009, 5-6). As you might expect, given this definition of "transcategorial," since being a person and being a non-person are within the range of our human conceptual system, and neither is "purely formal," (9) is clearly true. Since every other premise is secured by logic and prior premises, (8) is the only premise that is the least bit debatable.

I have focused elsewhere on premise (8), extensively, as have many others.¹ In the present context, however, I wish only to make one dialectical point and one substantive point about (8).

The dialectical point is that buying into the premise that God is transcategorial requires intellectual commitment many orders of magnitude greater than buying into

¹ See (Howard-Snyder forthcoming) and the literature cited there.

the conclusion that God is not a person. That's because, unlike the conclusion that God is not a person, the premise that God is transcategorical entails so much more. Specifically, it entails that, for *any* non-formal property F that humans can conceive of, God is neither an F nor a non-F. That's what "God is transcategorical" means in Hick's mouth. The conclusion that God is not a person does not entail anything remotely as intellectually costly as that. Typically, rational people do not affirm the conclusion of an argument when that argument contains a *single* premise that comes at such a steep intellectual price.

The second, substantial point is that the premise that God is transcategorical seems dubious, at best. For even if the principle of property bivalence is false—the Aristotelian idea that, necessarily, for any individual x and any property F, x is either F or non-F, which I tend to think is false due to the possibility of metaphysical indeterminacy—nothing could be as massively indeterminate as God would have to be if God is transcategorical. That's because, in short, nothing can be such that, for some humanly conceivable property F, it is neither an F nor a non-F, unless for some other humanly conceivable property F, it is either an F or a non-F.²

The second argument can be put more informally. I'll meld together two passages to express it, sticking close to Hick's wording, although I will feature the concept of a person where, in one of those passages, other concepts were featured. Because I am taking such liberties with the text, I do not attribute the argument to Hick; I say only that it is hickian.

The concept of a person does not apply to God at all, either positively or negatively. To apply the concept of a person to God in God's ultimacy—or the concept of a non-person, for that matter—is, in modern philosophical terms, a category mistake. To ask whether molecules are stupid does not make sense since they are not the sort of thing that can be stupid or non-stupid. To say, for example, that *molecules are not stupid*, although true, is misleading because it assumes that molecules are the sort of thing of which it makes sense to say that they are either stupid or not stupid. And to say that *God is not a person*, although true would likewise, by itself, be deeply misleading because it assumes that God is the kind of reality to which such a quality could be rightly or wrongly attributed. (Cf. 1995, 61; 2004a, xx-xxi; 2007, 222-223)

Hick's comment here on the statement "molecules are not stupid," when applied to "God is not a person," seems to imply that, although it is "true" that God is not a person, it is "misleading" to say "God is not a person" because the quality of being a non-person cannot be "rightly or wrongly attributed" to God. This is puzzling. How can it be that it is *true* that something is not a person while—assuming, as Hick does, that *being a non-person* is a property—being a non-person is *not* rightly attributed to it?

² For defense, see (Howard-Snyder forthcoming).

Charity invites us to read “true” differently from “rightly.” Unfortunately, the context gives us no basis to accept the invitation.

Leave that aside. The hickian argument seems to be this. To say that molecules are non-stupid—or to ask whether they are—is to assume that they are the sorts of things that can have or lack stupidity. But they are not. To suppose otherwise is to make a “category mistake.” It is to assign to them a property—*being stupid* or *being non-stupid*—neither of which they can have. It is to display a failure to understand the category to which they belong. The same goes for God. To say that God is a person is a category mistake. It is to assign to God a property—*being a person* or *being a non-person*—neither of which God can have. It is to display a failure to understand the category to which God belongs. And the same goes for saying God is a non-person. But, of course, if God is neither a person nor a non-person, then God is not a person, and so, God is not an infinite person.³

What should we say about this argument? Notice that it does not suffer from the dialectical deficiency of the previous argument, not least because of its narrow focus on the concept of a person. Nevertheless, in my opinion, we should not endorse it, for two reasons.

First, even though to ask whether a molecule is stupid or non-stupid may be to presuppose that they are entities that can be stupid or non-stupid, and thus would be an inappropriate or senseless question if asked by someone who knew that they cannot be stupid, it hardly follows that saying that molecules are non-stupid is to say something false or meaningless. On the contrary, that statement is true. Divide reality into what is stupid and what is non-stupid, and you’d be foolish to look for molecules anywhere but in the second class.⁴

Second, crucial to any category mistake argument for the conclusion that God is not an infinite person is an appeal to (i) a comparison class, (ii) a positive/negative property pair, being-an-F/being-a-non-F, and (iii) the *true* claim that each thing in the class is neither an F nor a non-F. In Hick’s argument, the comparison class is molecules, the property pair is being-stupid/being-non-stupid, and the claim is that molecules are neither stupid nor non-stupid. This last claim is false, however; thus, it is unusable in a category mistake argument for the conclusion that God is not an infinite person. The question, then, is whether there is any other comparison class that can do the trick. I rather doubt there is such a category. But I’ve been wrong many, many times before.

To sum up: in my opinion, it is difficult to interpret the words Hick explicitly uses to argue that God cannot be an infinite person in such a way that they contain an argument that lends any credence to that proposition; moreover, the transcategoriality argument suffers from dialectical deficiency and a dubious premise, while the category mistake argument is in need of a usable comparison class. Of course, there may be other arguments that lend credence to the proposition that God cannot be an infinite person, arguments that avoid the defects of Hick’s arguments. Nothing I’ve said rules out that possibility. But if we aim to find a successful argument for the conclusion that God cannot be an infinite person, we must

³ Cf. (the “alterity theists,” Stenmark 2015).

⁴ Cf. (Rowe 1999).

look elsewhere. It is not to be found in John Hick's writings, so far as I have been able to discover.⁵

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⁵ Thanks to Frances Howard-Snyder and Hud Hudson.