

Gods

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 this paper, 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 supernatural being or force that has and exercises power over the natural world but that is not, in turn, under the power of any higher ranking or more powerful category of beings or forces¹. 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. Among the other controversial claims that are defended in this paper—and that I take to be plausible consequences of this main claim—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

¹ Earlier drafts of this paper framed the account in terms of ‘superhuman beings’ rather than ‘supernatural beings or forces’. I intend the former locution to pick out supernatural persons; I intend the latter locution to allow that gods might be non-particular and/or non-personal. It is not entirely straightforward to understand what it would be for a non-particular and/or non-personal ‘force’ to have and exercise power over the natural world. I take it that those who endorse non-particular and/or non-personal conceptions of, say, the Christian God hold, at a minimum, that God is the cause of the existence of everything else, and that God is responsible for the virtues exhibited in everything else. Further, I take ‘supernatural’ persons and forces to include: (a) persons and forces that do not have spatiotemporal locations while nonetheless being causally responsible for and/or having causal effects on, things that do have spatiotemporal locations; and (b) spatiotemporally located persons that bring about causal effects at spatiotemporally remote locations in the absence of spatiotemporally continuous causal processes connecting their actions to those effects in conformity with the requirements of natural law.

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.

1. 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 superhuman 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 superhuman 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 the unique standing in holding and exercising power over humanity, the natural world, and anything else that holds and exercises power over humanity and the natural world.

As Hume suggests, belief in a single God seems to have been a more recent development. The belief, that there is just *one* supernatural being or force that has and exercises power over the natural world, over the fortunes of humanity, and over any other supernatural beings or forces that 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's 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.² (And, obviously, there are also those who reject the claim that

² 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*

there is so much as one supernatural being or force that 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 supernatural being or force that 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.³ Of course, there's 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 supernatural beings or forces that exercise power over the natural world and the fortunes of humanity. Moreover, there's also nothing in the above account alone that rules out there being just one God with a

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.

³ 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'm 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'.

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.)

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 supernatural beings or forces that 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 or forces. However, on some accounts, this is an oversight on my part: gods are supernatural beings or forces that 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 or forces).

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.⁴ 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's 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'm 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

⁴ 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.

orthodox reaction is that there is 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* supernatural beings or forces that have and exercise power over the natural world, over the fortunes of humanity, and over any other supernatural beings or forces that 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* supernatural being or force that has and exercises power over the natural world, over the fortunes of humanity, and over any other supernatural beings or forces that 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* supernatural beings or forces that have and exercise power over the natural world, over the fortunes of humanity, and over any other supernatural beings or forces that 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 supernatural beings or forces that 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 supernatural beings or forces that have and exercise power over the natural world, over the fortunes of humanity, and over any other supernatural beings or forces that 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* supernatural beings or forces that has and exercises power over the natural world, over the fortunes of humanity, and over any other supernatural beings or forces that 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 inclination to maintain that God is the *only* proper object of all 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.⁵ 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?⁶

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 supposed that it can be perfectly proper to

⁵ As noted in a previous footnote, 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.

⁶ 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.

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 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.⁷

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

⁷ 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.

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 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’⁸, 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 spoke to God Gregory last night’. On the evidence of

⁸ As a referee pointed out to me, there are grounds on which one might contest the claim that it is not grammatically in order to say ‘I spoke to the God last night’. Consider the passage at *Romans* 8:31 that is rendered into English as ‘If God is for us, who can be against us?’ (NIV) or ‘If God is on our side, who is against us?’ (NEB). Early Greek versions of this passage have the definite article—*ho theos*—and yet, in other passages from those early Greek versions, the definite article is absent. I hint at a possible explanation of this data in the main body of my paper—see below.

these kinds of cases, it seems to me that there is at least good reason to doubt that Leftow has provided us with a compelling argument for the conclusion that ‘God’ is a title-term.

There are differences in the patterns of use of title terms in different cultures. In the UK, the title term ‘Minister’ is fine in ‘Yes, Minister’, but not in ‘Minister Smith brought down the budget’ or ‘Yes, Mr. Minister’. In the US, the title term ‘Secretary’ is fine in ‘Secretary Smith brought down the budget’, and ‘Yes, Mr. Secretary’, but not in ‘Yes, Secretary’. Consequently, it seems that we cannot use these kinds of differences in patterns of use to discriminate between title terms and other kinds of terms.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that the only evidence that might plausibly be taken to provide even *prima facie* support for the claim that ‘God’ is a title term is the occasional use of the expression ‘the God’, and the more frequent use of expressions of the form ‘the such-and-such God’ or ‘the God such-and-such’: ‘the one true God’, ‘the God of the Hebrews’, ‘the God in which we believe’, and the like. That is, apart from these cases, there are no instances where ‘God’ behaves like any term that is uncontroversially a title term. Moreover, it also seems to me that there are better explanations of the use of these expressions than the hypothesis that God is a title term. Despite the apparent evidence of early Greek versions of *Romans* 8:31, it seems to me that ‘the God’ is anomalous, except when it can be understood in context as an abbreviation for a more complex expression of the form ‘the such-and-such God’ or ‘the God such-and-such’⁹. Moreover, there is clear evidence that terms that are not title terms can figures in these kinds of constructions: ‘the

armchair tourist's Rome', 'the Rome of his imagination', 'the Rome of Cicero's youth', 'the real Rome', and so forth. In short: all of the data is perfectly well accommodated on the assumption that 'God' is a regular name. Since 'God' does not display the kinds of behaviour characteristic only of other title terms, we do best to conclude that God is not a title term.¹⁰

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 the first two sections of this paper 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

⁹ Most often, 'the God' stands in for variants of 'the one true God' and its ilk. Quite generally, it seems to me that 'the God' is typically appropriate only in contexts in which one is endorsing a particular conception of God: ours is *the* (one true) God.

¹⁰ 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 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 seem not to be *standard* definite descriptions such as 'the one god' and 'the bishop'.

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-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.¹¹ 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.¹²

There are other suggestions that also can be dealt with summarily. For instance, Senor suggests that we might take the canonical reference-fixing description to be ‘the personal

¹¹ Leftow (1998:94) notes that both Aristotle and Plotinus accepted that God exists, but denied that God is providential, “without obviously contradicting themselves”. As a referee for my paper points out, some may dispute these examples. On the one hand, Plotinus denied that God is a particular, and so might be said by some to have lacked the concept of God altogether. On the other hand, Aristotle held that God is ‘pure act’, and so might be said by some to have denied that it is literally true that God ‘exercises power’. I say: (1) that there is a single concept of God that allows that God might not be a particular; (2) that even a being that is ‘pure act’ can ‘exercise power’ in the sense that I give to that expression—cf. footnote 1; and (3) that, in any case, it cannot be ruled out *a priori* that, if God is personal, then God is not providential because morally indifferent (or perhaps even morally pernicious).

¹² Following the lead suggested by Leftow in the previous footnote, we might note 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”.

creator who revealed himself to the Hebrew people'.¹³ Here, there are at least two kinds of difficulties.

On the one hand, I think that it is plausibly 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.¹⁴ 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.

On the other hand, it seems even less plausible to suppose that it is part of the very concept of monotheism that God revealed himself/herself/itself to the Hebrew people. We

¹³ Senor (forthcoming: 6f.) 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.

¹⁴ Of course, there are also the various kinds of 'negative' theology to be reckoned 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.

have already noted that there are monotheistic traditions that appear to have grown up independently of the Hebraic tradition. Suppose, for example, that it is the case that, while the one and only god did not make a revelation to the Hebrew people, the sacred texts of Dvaita Vedanta are the direct result of divine inspiration by the one and only god. In that case, it seems to me that we should nonetheless be prepared to accept that God exists, even though there is nothing that satisfies the reference-fixing description that Senor defends. (Of course, even if it is not actually the case that there are monotheistic traditions that have grown up independently of the Hebraic tradition, it is still conceivable that there should have been such traditions, and it is also still conceivable that those traditions should have been the only traditions rooted in genuine divine inspiration. If we judge—as I think we should—that, in that case, it would still be that God exists, then that remains enough to defeat the proposal that ‘the personal creator who revealed himself to the Hebrew people’ is the canonical reference-fixer for the name ‘God’.)

Of course, even if it is agreed that the various proposals that Leftow canvasses are inferior to the proposal that ‘the one and only god’ is the canonical reference-fixer for the name ‘God’, it is nonetheless clear that there might be some hitherto unexamined candidate for that canonical reference-fixing description that is superior to the proposal that ‘the one and only god’ is the canonical reference-fixer for the name ‘God’. In particular, I guess, many philosophers will be inclined to think that something like Swinburne’s account of the canonical reference-fixer for the name ‘God’ comes pretty close to the mark. However, before I go on to examine Swinburne’s proposal, and others

of its ilk, it will pay us to think a bit more about what is properly involved in giving an account of a concept (and, in particular, in giving an account of an individual concept).

4. Concepts and conceptions

Typically, when we are asked for a reference-fixing description for a name, we are satisfied if we can find a description that actually picks out the entity that bears the name. In particular, in the case of many standard proper names, we are satisfied that someone has what it takes to come to know who it is that bears the name provided that the person in question is disposed to rely upon a non-trivial¹⁵ reference-fixing description that actually picks out the bearer of the name. There is at least a loose, intuitive sense in which we will be prepared to say that someone associates an appropriate reference-fixing concept with a name provided that the reference-fixing concept that the person associates with the name does actually and non-trivially pick out the bearer of the name.¹⁶

¹⁵ It is no straightforward matter to say what non-triviality amounts to here. That we need some restriction of this kind seems plain enough: at least in a wide range of contexts, someone who can only supply the description “the bearer of the name ‘N’” won’t count as knowing who N is.

¹⁶ It may also be true that there are cases in which we are prepared to say that someone associates an appropriate reference-fixing concept with a name even though the reference-fixing concept that the person associates with the name does not actually pick out the bearer of the name. Suppose I think that the reference of the name ‘Albert Einstein’ is fixed by the description ‘the German physicist who proved that everything is relative’. In this case, I may well be thought to already have what it takes to come to know who it is that bears the name, even though my reference-fixing description does not pick out the bearer of the name. (A referee’s comments helped in my thinking about this point.)

While this account seems straightforwardly correct for cases in which a name has a unique bearer—i.e., for cases in which there is a unique object that pretty much all competent users of the name pick out with their reference-fixing descriptions—it is less clear what to say about cases in which there is no object that answers to the reference-fixing descriptions that are provided by competent users of the name, or in which it is controversial whether there is an object that answers to the reference-fixing descriptions that are provided by competent users of the name. (It is also less clear what to say about cases in which there are different objects that answer to different reference-fixing descriptions that are provided by competent users of the name, or in which it is controversial whether there is a *unique* object that answers to the reference-fixing descriptions that are provided by competent users of the name. Perhaps we can handle these kinds of cases by adverting to differences in idiolect, or the like; in any case, this is not the kind of example that will be of primary interest to us in the forthcoming discussion.)

Fictional names—i.e. names that are introduced in the course of novels, films, television dramas, songs, and the like—are sometimes held to be difficult cases. However, at least in broad outline, it seems to me to be plausible to suppose that some kind of pretence account of fictional names will prove to be correct. One is a competent user of the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’—one counts as knowing who is Sherlock Holmes—provided that one can provide an appropriate reference-fixing description while playing along with the

pretence that is prescribed by the novels and short stories of Arthur Conan Doyle.¹⁷

Among the questions left open by this very brief sketch, there is the important question of what to say about those who offer what would have been an appropriate reference-fixing description had they been playing along with a prescribed pretence, but who are not in fact playing along with any kind of pretence. In the case of young children who *really* do believe that Santa Claus brings them presents on Christmas Eve, there is a question to be addressed about their competence in the use of the name ‘Santa Claus’.¹⁸ While there may be an element of stipulation in this verdict, I’m inclined to say that one can only be *fully* competent in the use of a fictional name if one knows that the name is indeed fictional; and, more generally, that one can only be *fully* competent in the use of a name if one knows whether or not the name is empty.

¹⁷ This account is only roughly correct. There are other texts—movies, radio plays, etc.—which prescribe rather different pretences for the name “Sherlock Holmes” (as in, e.g., the movie “The Seven Per Cent Solution”). While the use of the name “Sherlock Holmes” in these other texts derives from the use of the name “Sherlock Holmes” in the writings of Arthur Conan Doyle, it seems to me that—at least in some contexts—these other texts would quite properly licence a different range of reference-fixing descriptions. What can be properly pretended in connection with the use of the name “Sherlock Holmes” depends upon the texts and other props that are taken to underwrite the pretence in question.

¹⁸ ‘Santa Claus’ seems to me to be a particularly tricky case, because it is typically unclear how far young children are complicit in the maintenance of the ‘Santa Claus’ fiction. Of course, if we say that young children who *really* do believe that Santa Claus brings them presents on Christmas Eve are not competent in the use of the name ‘Santa Claus’, we shall also want to say that this lack of competence on their part is primarily due to the behaviour of significant adults who confirm them in this incompetence.

Even if it is accepted that the preceding paragraphs are at least in the right ballpark when it comes to ordinary non-empty proper names and fictional names, we are still left with a host of very difficult cases. In particular—and here we approach more closely to the case that is our primary object of interest—there are cases in which there is a group of users of a name who suppose that the name really is borne by a particular individual even though there are many other users of the name who deny—or, at any rate, strongly doubt—that the particular individual in question exists.

Consider, for example, “Atlantis”. Some people think that there really was an island, host to an ancient civilisation, that was lost beneath the waves. Other people think that there was no such island and no such ancient civilisation; rather, what we have are mere stories, or myths, of very ancient provenance. Moreover, among those who suppose that there really was an island, host to an ancient civilisation, that was lost beneath the waves, there is considerable difference in opinion about the approximate location of that submerged island. Thus, if we ask a range of (presumptively) competent speakers to provide reference-fixing descriptions for the name ‘Atlantis’, we will get a range of answers of the form ‘an island, host to an ancient civilisation, submerged in the such-and-such sea [the so-and-so ocean]’, where, in some cases, the answers are intended to be taken at face value, and yet, in other cases, the answers are intended to be understood to involve a playing along with a mistaken theory, or a myth, or a fiction, or the like. (Perhaps this account of the range of reference-fixing descriptions that one can or would elicit for ‘Atlantis’ is not correct. No matter. For present purposes, it will suffice to pretend that it is true. Even if ‘Atlantis’ doesn’t behave in exactly this way, it seems plausible enough to

suppose that there are other names that do (or would) exhibit this kind of pattern of elicited reference-fixing descriptions.)

If the name ‘Atlantis’ works in the way suggested, then it seems to me that it would be quite natural to say that there is a concept that is properly associated with the name, namely the concept of being an island, host to an ancient civilisation, that has been lost beneath the waves. (Perhaps it should also be added that the relevant waves are somewhere in the vicinity of one of the ancient sites of Indo-European civilisation.)

Everyone who is competent in the use of the name ‘Atlantis’ will agree on this much, even if they disagree about whether the concept answers to anything in reality, and even if they disagree about the more precise location of the island (if there is such an island). Of course, we could go on to say, if we wanted, that different speakers have different conceptions that they associate with the name ‘Atlantis’—different further specifications that might be brought out in reference-fixing descriptions—but there is nothing in this further suggestion that defeats the claim that there is a single concept that all competent speakers associate with the name. Moreover, we can also go on to note that, in many conversational contexts, a process of conversational accommodation might well bring it about that participants all behave as if some particular conception of ‘Atlantis’ is actually the concept of ‘Atlantis’ that is properly shared by all speakers of the language.

No one who has read the paper through to this point will be surprised to learn that the proposal that I wish to make about the word ‘God’ is that it behaves in the same kind of way as I have supposed that the name ‘Atlantis’ functions. On the one hand, there is a

wide diversity in the reference-fixing descriptions that people associate with the name ‘God’; on the other hand, the description ‘the one and only god’ is the canonical reference-fixer for the name ‘God’, and it gives expression to the concept that is properly associated with the name. Of course, for many competent speakers, there is an element of pretence involved in the production of this reference-fixing description: in using the word ‘God’, these people understand themselves to be playing along with a mistaken theory, or a mere story, or the like. However, even these people agree that God would be the one and only god, were there such a being.

5. God’s essential attributes

At least sometimes, some theorists suggest that, when we asked for a reference-fixing—‘identifying’—description for a name, we should be satisfied only if we can provide a description that actually picks out the entity that bears the name by picking out (some of) the essential properties that are possessed by the bearer of the name, i.e. by picking out non-trivial properties of the bearer of the name that the bearer of the name possesses in all possible worlds in which the bearer of the name exists. Of course, because of the availability of rigidifying devices, there is a way in which the meeting of this demand can be trivialised: if one has a description that actually picks out the bearer of the name, then, by rigidifying on that description, one can obtain a description that picks out the actual bearer of the name in all possible worlds in which that entity exists (and which picks out nothing in those worlds in which the actual bearer of the name fails to exist). However, having noted this complication, one could give the additional requirement teeth by

insisting that the essential properties that are invoked in the reference-fixing description should not be ‘world-bound’ properties that are constructed by rigidification on non-essential properties that are possessed in the actual world.

Consider, for example, the account of the concept of God given by Swinburne (1979:8). According to Swinburne, the following is a logically necessary truth: God exists iff there exists a person without a body (i.e. a spirit) that is eternal, is perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and the creator of all things. Thus, on Swinburne’s account, God is *essentially* a person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, is perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and the creator of all (other) things. While Swinburne (1979:128) goes on to deny that God is necessarily existent, other philosophers—e.g. Plantinga (1974)—have gone so far as to say, at least *inter alia*, that the following is a logically necessary truth: God exists iff there necessarily exists a person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is necessarily eternal, is necessarily perfectly free, necessarily omnipotent, necessarily omniscient, necessarily perfectly good, and necessarily the creator of all (other) things¹⁹.

Making use of the terminology introduced in the previous section of this paper, it seems to me that we should say that what we are offered by Swinburne, Plantinga, and others who make pronouncements in a similar vein, are accounts of particular *conceptions* of

¹⁹ Note that, in holding that God is necessarily the creator of all (other) things, one need not be committed to the claim that, necessarily, there are some things that God creates. The claim is only that, necessarily, the existence of anything other than God is ultimately explained by God’s creative act.

God that would plainly be quite unacceptable if offered as accounts of the *concept* of God. As I noted earlier, there is genuine—informed, intelligent, reflective—disagreement, both amongst regular believers and theologians, about whether it is appropriate to hold that God is a person, rather than an impersonal principle. Furthermore—as the case of Swinburne and Plantinga illustrates—there is genuine disagreement about whether God is necessarily existent, i.e. about whether there are logically possible worlds in which God fails to exist. Given that there can be serious dispute between thoughtful believers about whether or not God is personal, and about whether or not God exists necessarily, it seems that we have the best of reasons for denying that it is part of the *concept* of God that God is a person and that God exists necessarily. (It would, I think, be passing strange to say, for example, that Swinburne fails so much as to possess the concept of God because he says that God does not exist of necessity. Yet, if it is part of the concept of God that God exists of necessity, then how can it be that Swinburne possesses the concept, and yet fails to acknowledge that God exists of necessity?)

The kind of difficulties to which I am alluding here are ubiquitous. For instance, Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2002:13) say that, according to the regulating notion of traditional Western theism, God is the greatest possible being. But, even if it were true that there is a regulating Western *conception* of God according to which God is the greatest possible being, I do not think that it would follow that there is a regulating Western *concept* of God according to which God is the greatest possible being. And, in any case, I do not think that it is even true that there is a regulating Western *conception* of God according to which God is the greatest possible being. True enough, there has, at some times, and in

some places, been widespread acceptance of the claim that God is the greatest possible being. But, even in those times and at those places, this acceptance has sat alongside recognition of the fact that, at other times and in other places, reasonable and well-informed people have disagreed with this judgment. (Some reasonable and well-informed people have thought of God as the source and explanation of everything else, without supposing that the source and explanation of everything else has to be such that it is logically impossible for there to be anything greater than it. Some reasonable and well-informed people have thought of God as the ruler or commander of everything else, without supposing that the ruler or commander of everything else has to be such that it is logically impossible for there to be anything greater than it. And so forth.)²⁰ But, if one is able to acknowledge that there can be reasonable and informed disagreement about whether God is the greatest possible being, then one can hardly think that it is a conceptual truth—part of the very concept of God—that God is the greatest possible being.

I expect that many philosophers will want to resist the line that I have been taking here. In particular, I expect that many philosophers will want to say that concepts are something like functions on logically, or metaphysically, or (perhaps) epistemically,

²⁰ Sobel (2004:17) writes: ‘My position ... is that none of these attributes [omniscience, everlastingness, and the rest] is a part of the shared ordinary concept of God in the modern community of global discourse in English, although these ideas—since widely possessed by members of this linguistic community—are at least candidates for inclusion. My semantic hypothesis is that the ordinary concept of God that is expressed by ‘God’ is confined to the idea of a being worthy of worship.’ As I argued in Section 2 above, even Sobel’s position—while more modest than any other that I have come across—is overstated.

possible worlds: yet, if concepts are something like functions on logically, or metaphysically, or (perhaps) epistemically possible worlds, then concepts cannot possibly behave in the way that I have suggested the concepts of God and Atlantis behave.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I want to directly disagree with any such philosophers. In my view, if we think of concepts as something like functions over “worlds”, then we should take the “worlds” in question to be something much more like *points of view that could be adopted*. Of course, this bare proposal leaves many important questions unanswered. In particular, one might wonder about the constraints that should be imposed on the adoption of points of view: must the adoption be rational or reasonable? must it be well-informed? must it be the product of proper reflection? etc. While I am inclined to think that, at most, there should only be quite weak constraints imposed on the adoption of points of view, I am happy to allow that this is clearly a topic for future careful investigation.²¹

6. And if we say there are no gods

Sobel (2004:9) writes:

²¹ At this point, it is worth recalling the earlier observation about speaker accommodation. Often, when like-minded speakers are gathered together, they will talk *as if* some particular conception associated with a given term is actually the concept associated with that term. However, if we are thinking about the concept that is associated with a term across the broad body of all speakers who are competent in a language, then we will get things wrong if we mistake a particular conception shared by a sub-group of like-minded speakers for the concept in question.

The status of ‘God’ as a name is settled by the intention of believers when using it to refer by tying into a referential chain that goes back to a named being, whether or not they succeed in their intention. The use of this name by unbelievers is parasitic on its use by believers.

I think that it is clearly a matter for contention whether, when believers use the name ‘God’, they do intend to refer ‘by tying into a referential chain that goes back to a named being’. Even if we suppose that [it is widely accepted that]²², across a wide range of cases, names are tied by referential chains to initial baptismal ceremonies in which a presented being is baptised with a name, it doesn’t seem plausible to suppose that most believers think that that is how it is with the name ‘God’. No doubt, there are *some* believers who think that this is how it was: God appeared to some people and (in effect) baptised himself by saying to them ‘I am the Lord your God’, etc. However, I suspect that there are also many believers who think that, when they use the name ‘God’, they are simply intending to refer to the one and only god, and who would go on to reject the claim that it ever actually happened that God appeared to some people and (in effect) baptised himself by saying to them ‘I am the Lord your God’, etc. (There is a wide range of views on such questions as whether God can be perceived; whether God can be conceived; whether God can be ‘named’; whether God could be the object of an act of ostension; and so forth. A

²² In order to gloss over some difficulties that are not relevant to my present concerns, let’s pretend that, even if most people don’t explicitly accept the claim that the reference of names is fixed by referential chains anchored in initial acts of baptism, nonetheless, most people are implicitly committed to the correctness of this claim.

full discussion of the issues raised in this paragraph might delve into all of these further questions; but that's not a task for the present paper.)

If I am right in suggesting that the status of 'God' as a name is not settled in the way in which Sobel says, then it seems to me that there is also room to doubt that it is right to say that the use of the name 'God' by unbelievers is parasitic on the use of this name by believers. In particular, if the name 'God' is understood by everyone to apply to the one and only god, on the assumption that there is just one god, then it seems to me that there is no sense in which the use of the name by unbelievers is parasitic on the use of the name by believers. Even if it were universally agreed that there are no gods—and even if it had *always* been universally agreed that there are no gods—we would have no trouble understanding the claim that God does not exist. Compare this case with, for example, our treatment of the names 'Atlantis' and 'Santa Claus'. I do not think that we want to say that the use of *these* names by those who think that these names are empty is “parasitic” on the use of these names by those who think that these names are borne by actually existing entities.

Drawing on his suggestion that God would be the proper object of worship, Sobel (2004: 24) suggests that it would be possible for one to hold that, even if there is a perfect being—i.e. a being that possesses some traditional list of theologically approved perfections—there is no god. On the contrary, I take it that, if there is a perfect being, then there is a god. So, adopting my view that God would be the one and only god, if it then turns out that, nonetheless, there is no God, that can only be because there is more

than one god. If there is just one perfect being or power that holds and exercises power over the natural world and the fortunes of humanity but that is not in turn under the power of any higher ranking or more powerful category of beings, then that perfect being is God.²³

One final observation. Given the exact wording of my definitions of ‘god’ and ‘God’, it turns out that gods cannot be under the power of higher ranking forces. This might be denied. While it seems right to insist that gods cannot be under the power of higher ranking beings, it might be suggested that gods can nonetheless be subject to the controlling influences of higher ranking forces: that is, one might say that a god is a supernatural being or force that has and exercises power over the natural world but that is not, in turn, under the power of any higher ranking or more powerful category of beings. If one took this view, then it seems to me that, rather than holding that God is the one and only god, one would be obliged to say that God is the one and only being or force that exercises control over the natural world, over the fortunes of humanity, and over all other beings and forces. While I think that this suggestion should be resisted, I do not currently see any *compelling* argument against it.²⁴

²³ In Oppy (2006:259) I begin my discussion of arguments from evil by pointing out that, since I think that there are no supernatural beings of any kind, I don’t attach very much importance to arguments from evil. The present essay helps to make clear the connections that I see between what I take to be the concept of god, the concept of God, and the various different conceptions (or theories) of God that have wide currency. I take it that what I say here is consistent with the views expressed in that earlier work.

²⁴ I am grateful to an anonymous referee at *OSPR* for very helpful, detailed comments that led to various improvements in this paper.

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