RELIGIOUS PLURALITY AND THE CONCEPT OF GOD

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1. Introduction

The concept of God is one of the main subject matters of metaphysical philosophy of religion. While arguments for and against the existence of GOD are concerned with whether there is an entity that falls under the concept of God, or whether it is probable (or more probable than not) that there is such entity, the analysis of the concept of God deals with its characterization and coherence.¹ But there are issues related to the concept of God that seem to be of a different, higher order.

For most part, contemporary philosophy of religion assumes a monotheistic view of God; it presupposes what might be termed the assumption of monotheism:

\[ \text{(AM)} \text{ There is at most one entity that falls under the concept of God.} \]

A stronger, extensional version of AM can be stated as follows:

\[ \text{(EAM)} \text{ There is at most one GOD; otherwise said, the number of extensions of the word “GOD” is at most one.}² \]

Another assumption that permeates much of the discourse about God in metaphysical philosophy of religion is the singularity assumption:

\[ \text{(SA)} \text{ There is a unique concept of God.} \]

SA follows from a standard interpretation of the definitive article “the” in the expression “the concept of God”. AM and, as a matter of fact, every positive statement containing the expression “the concept of God” presuppose SA.

SA seems to conflict with the pragmatics or social dimension, so to speak, of the concept of God. Every monotheistic religious tradition—and sometimes every school within traditions—seems to have its own concept of God. According to orthodox Christianity, GOD is a trinitarian entity.³ Islam, on the other hand, emphasizes that GOD is strictly singular (tawḥīd), unique (wāḥid) and inherently One (aḥad) (Esposito 1998, p. 88). The so-called “Hindu bible”, the Bhagavad-gītā, while holding that GOD (who is identified with the speaker of the text, Kṛṣṇa) is one,⁴ claims that He is identical with everything (Resnick 1995, p. 7-9;13-17). There is plurality even within traditions. When dealing with the problem of the Trinity, for example, Christian scholars have proposed different and many times conflicting concepts of God (Tuggy 2016).

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¹ To distinguish between the concept of God and the eventual object that falls under it, I refer to the latter using capital letters. Thus, while “God” means the (or a) concept of God, “GOD” means the entity which supposedly falls under the (or a) concept of God (although most of the time I will use the complex expression “concept of God”).

² Although EAM entails AM, the converse is not true.

³ This appears very clearly, for example, in the Athanasian Creed. Out of its 44 theses, three of them state as follows: (1) “We worship GOD in Trinity and Trinity in Unity... Neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.”; (2) “So the Father is GOD, the Son is GOD, and the Holy Spirit is GOD.”; (3) “And yet they are not three GODS, but one GOD.”

⁴ He is the great Lord of all the worlds (5.29), the Supreme Divine Person (10.12), the God of the gods (10.14) and their origin (10.12, 11.38); no one is equal to or greater than Him (11.38). See (Resnick 1995).
Similarly, philosophers have proposed and defended different concepts of God. There is considerable variety even within what philosophers labeled classical (and neo-classical) theism, pantheism, panentheism, process theism, and open theism. Thus, the claim below seems to be true:

(PG) There is a plurality of concepts of God.

As expected, PG contradicts SA. It also conflicts with EAM. A concept might be instantiated, by which I mean that there might be some entity that falls under it. Since PG claims the existence of several concepts of God, it is possible that more than one of these concepts are instantiated. In the case this possibility is actualized, there would be more than one GOD, which goes against EAM\(^5\). I call this the unicity of extension problem.

This problem might be solved by distinguishing between the concept of God and conceptions of God. Graham Oppy (2014, p. 1) for example, claims that “While I think that there is just one concept of God, I hold that there are many different conceptions of God.” In his turn, Eberhard Herrmann (2008, p. 65) says that “there can be only one complete description of God, only one concept of God, or only one definition of God.” Unfortunately, the distinction Herrmann makes between concept and conception is anything but clear. All he says is that “Whereas conceptions are our understandings, concepts, to put it cautiously, are something else” (Herrmann 2008, p. 63), going on to explain some different approaches to concepts. Oppy offers a clearer account. He takes the following reference-fixing description to be the concept of God: to be God is to be the one and only god, where to be a god is to be a superhuman being or entity who has and exercises power over the natural world and is not, in turn, under the power of any higher ranking or more powerful category of beings (Oppy 2014, p. 1). A conception of God is any way people might conceive God. According to Oppy, despite the enormous disagreement among defenders of different conceptions of God, all of them agree (or should agree) that God is the one and only god (Oppy 2014, p. 14).

The problem with this account is, first, that there seems to be ‘conceptions of God’ that conflict with Oppy’s view of the concept of God as the one and only God. For example, while a deist GOD might not exercise power over the natural world, in some Vedânta traditions GOD is not conceived as a “superhuman being” in any sense of the term. Second, it seems safe to say that most views about concepts would see Oppy’s conceptions of God as concepts. Thus, in the lack of a satisfactory distinction between concept and conception, it seems reasonable to follow what seems to be the standard in contemporary philosophy of religion and take the words “concept” and “conception” as synonymous. So, the unicity of extension problem remains.

Moreover, PG has also some problems of its own. Is there a best or most defensible concept of God? Or is there a homogeneity in terms of philosophical legitimacy among all concepts of God? Is it possible to take a neutral stance on these issues (as perhaps a genuinely plural approach would require)? I call this the homogeneity/heterogeneity problem. Perhaps more important than that, how to guarantee that all these so-called concepts of God are in fact concepts of God? In other words, if these concepts are so different, in many cases incompatible with each other, what sense is there in the claim that they are concepts-of-the-same-thing? What bonds them all as concepts of God? This is the problem of conceptual unity.

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\(^5\) See that PG does not necessarily conflict with AM. It might be that each one of these concepts of God has at most one instance.
It seems clear to me that a solution to these problems must deal with the representation and nature of the concept of God. As such, they cannot be tackled without resorting to something very close to a theory of concepts. That is why they are higher-order issues.

From a general viewpoint, a theory of concepts aims at saying what a concept is; or in other words, filling in the X in the schema below:

\[ \text{(T)} \] Concepts are X.

Many kinds of structures have been proposed to play the role of X: definitions, prototypes, sets of exemplars, theory-like structures of some sort, perceptual ‘proxytypes’, etc. (Murphy 2002) (Margolis and Laurence 2019). Regardless of the chosen structure, by saying what a concept is, a theory of concepts also says how concepts are to be characterized or represented. It therefore also fills in the X in the schema below:

\[ \text{(R)} \] Concepts are to be represented as X.

Although theories of concepts usually aim at T, they can be also thought as aiming at R. When a theory aims at R, I say it is a representational theory of concepts, or an R-theory of concepts for short; if it aims at T, I call it a T-theory of concepts. T and R can also be thought of as applying to specific types of concepts or individual concepts. Applied to God, for example, T and R would look as follows:

\[ \text{(T)} \text{G} \] The concept of God is X.
\[ \text{(R)} \text{G} \] The concept of God is to be represented as X.

If a theory does not aim at T or R, but at special versions of it, then I say it is a special theory of concepts (as opposed to a general theory of concepts). A theory focused on \( \text{(R)} \text{G} \) would be a special R-theory of concepts, or an R-theory of the concept of God. Most, if not all, theories of concepts are general T-theories of concepts.

But theories of concepts are important not only for higher-order issues. Any talk whatsoever about concepts presupposes ways to represent them. The received view in philosophy on how to represent concepts seems to be what is now called the classical theory of concepts. Rooted in ideas of philosophers like Plato, Aristotle and Locke\(^6\), the classical theory takes definitions as the appropriate way to characterize concepts. According to this view, the concept of bachelor would be characterized through a list of necessary and conjointly sufficient property conditions: a bachelor is an (1) unmarried (2) male (3) adult (4) human being. If an entity \( a \) possesses all properties, then it falls under the concept of bachelor (the conditions are sufficient); and for \( a \) to be a bachelor, it must possess all properties (the conditions are necessary). The X in T and R would thus be something like this: definitions based on lists of property conditions; an object falls under the concept if and only if it possesses all properties of the list.

When dealing with the concept of God, philosophers of religion rely on something very close to the classical theory of concepts. The analysis of the concept of God, for example, centers around divine great-making properties such as omniscience, omnipotence, wholly goodness, eternity, etc. Although there have been attempts to present the concept of God in such a way that these properties follow from a general definition—that is one of the aspects generally stressed by perfect being theologians, for example—the concept of God is mostly characterized through a list of properties that GOD is supposed to possess. The same happens with arguments for and against the existence of GOD. Arguments from evil, for example,

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\(^6\) Locke seems to assume something very close to the classical theory when he gives an account of the concept of sun, for example: “[T]he Idea of the Sun, what is it, but an aggregate of those several simple Ideas, Bright, Hot, Roundish, having a constant regular motion, at a certain distance from us, and, perhaps, some other” (Locke, 1690/1975, pp. 298-299). Plato’s use of what might be seen as the basic tenets of the classical theory can be found in the Euthyphro and Aristotle’s in the Categories.
need God to be characterized as a being who possesses (at least) these three properties: omniscience, omnipotence and wholly goodness.

Since the 1950’s, and especially from 1970 onward, the classical theory has been under strong attack. Most scholars today believe that the many problems raised against the classical theory of concepts undermine its tenability (Rosch 1978) (Smith and Medin 1981, p. 26-51) (Laurence and Margolis 1999, p. 8-27) (Murphy 2002, p. 11-24). It turns out that some of these problems are fatal to the project of definitionally characterizing the concept of God (Silvestre 2022). Moreover, since the classical theory assumes a general version of SA according to which for any category that can be conceptually represented there is a unique concept of that category (Weiskopf 2009, p. 150), it cannot deal with PG nor with the higher-order issues that arise from it.

The goal of this chapter is to propose a R-theory of the concept of God able to deal with the above mentioned higher-order issues. For this end, I outline a hybrid special theory of concepts called the theory of ideal concepts. The theory is special because it deals exclusively with what I call ideal concepts; it is hybrid because, in addition to definitions, it uses another structure in the characterization of X in T and R: ideals. I then argue that when aimed at R_G and added to a pluralistic view of concepts, this theory solves the unicity of extension problem and the problem of conceptual unity. This is done in Sections 2 and 3. In Section 4 I show how this theory can be formalized within a possible worlds framework. In addition to uncovering some important features of the theory, this formalization allows me to show how it solves the homogeneity/heterogeneity problem.8

2. A Theory of Ideal Concepts

One of the most powerful criticisms against the classical view of concepts was made in the 1970’s by Eleanor Rosch (1975, 1978). Rosch’s criticisms also provided the basis for several early alternatives to the classical view under the rubric of prototype theory. According to prototype theorists, most concepts are complex representations whose structure encodes a statistical analysis of the properties their members tend to have—a list of properties that are found to greater or lesser degrees in the category, for example. From a representational viewpoint, a prototype can then be seen as a list of statistically significant properties.

Many readers, however, have interpreted Rosch’s early writings as suggesting that a concept is characterized by a single prototype or best exemplar of the category (Murphy 2002, p. 41). According to this idea, the category of dogs is represented by a single dog that best embodies the attributes normally found in dogs. A prototype in this case would be this special exemplar of the category. From the point of view of T and R, the basis of the structure kind X would then be a singular individual.

Something similar happens with another alternative to the classical view, first proposed by Douglas Medin and Marguerite Schaffer (1978) in the late 1970s: exemplar theory. According to exemplar theory, the concept of dog is neither a definition nor a list of properties found to greater or lesser degrees in dogs, but (the psychological representation of) a specific set of exemplars of dogs, the dogs that had the strongest effect on someone’s memory, for example (Murphy 2002, p. 49). Here also the basis of X is a singular individual.

Notice that in these two approaches—prototype theory and exemplar theory—there is no longer a list of conditions whose satisfaction would be sufficient to classify something as an instance of a concept. How then, we might ask, do these theories work in relation to conceptual categorization? The keyword here

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7 See (Silvestre 2022) for a comprehensive account of the problems with the classical theory applied to the concept of God.

8 While Sections 2 and 3 rely on (Silvestre 2022), Section 4 partially relies on (Silvestre 2021).
is “similarity”. The fact that a single entity is similar enough to the prototype (or set of exemplars) entitles one to classify it as belonging to the category at hand. A particular object is classified as a chair if it is similar enough to the chair prototype (or chair exemplars, in the case of exemplar theory).

But not all similarity-based processing involves prototypes or sets of exemplars. Barsalou (1985) showed that many concepts are organized around similarity to ideals. An ideal is an exemplar that has the best characteristics of a category (Weiskopf 2008, pp. 152-153): the ideal diet, the ideal husband, the ideal trip, the ideal job, etc. While prototypes represent statistically significant properties, ideals involve superlatively desirable (or ideal) properties for a category. As a result, they are not statistically prominent; in many cases, they are properties that are relevant to what we might call the purpose of the category (which is often culturally determined) (Lakoff 1987, p. 76).

The view that an ideal is an exemplar of a category cannot be underestimated. It implies that the ideal diet, for example, is an exemplar of the diet category in the same way as a vegan diet and a diet for high-performance athletes are. An ideal is a particular instance of a concept, in the case the category can be conceptually represented, of course. Although the term “ideal” is used with other meanings, this is a meaning that is clearly found in the relevant literature.

Although ideals are individual exemplars of a category, they are not ordinary exemplars. In general, ideals are not found in the concrete world (Weiskopf 2008, p. 152). The ideal diet for example has probably zero calories, although no real diet has zero calories (the prototypical diet certainly has more than zero calories) (Weiskopf 2008, p. 152). Most likely, no real, concrete husband has all the attributes, to the right degree, of the ideal husband: perfect provider, perfectly faithful, strong, respectful, attractive, sensitive, understandable, empathic, and so on.

This point is crucial. First, because it implies the existence of exemplars of categories that do not exist in the concrete world (the ideal diet, the ideal husband, the ideal job, etc.). Second because it suggests that, like sets, propositions, the number 2 and Dante’s Inferno, ideals are abstract objects. Third because it indicates that the reason why ideals are not found in the concrete world: ideals embody a view too perfect or excellent of things we find in the world. Among all the members of the category of husbands, there is a special one—the ideal husband—that possesses the best characteristics of that category, which are those resulting from a process of perfecting the relevant properties of the actual exemplars of the category.

It is important to remark that the expression “ideal husband” is ambiguous. It might refer to an abstract object, the ideal member of the category of husbands, but also to a concept, the concept of ideal husband, and the corresponding category. I call this this kind of concept an ideal concept. The concept of God is an ideal concept. Thus, while “ideal concept” refers to a specific type of concept, “ideal” refers to an abstract object, a special, idealized member of a category.

Ideal concepts are abstract concepts. Take the concept of God, for example. Like the concepts of ideal gas and perfect circle, the concept of God is an idealization in the sense of a view too perfect or excellent of things we find in the world; so perfect that it cannot exist in the world. Even if God as a whole cannot be seen in this idealized, maximally perfect way, some aspects of it certainly can. Most divine properties, for example, can be seen as idealizations in this sense. Omnipotence, omniscience, wholly goodness, eternity and simplicity can all be seen as maximally perfect views of properties we find in the world. Because of that, there cannot be concrete entities—in the sense of having a spatiotemporal

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9 George Lakoff, for example, writes as follows (1987, p. 76): “Many categories are understood in terms of abstract ideal cases—which may be neither typical nor stereotypical. […] Naomi Quinn (personal communication) has observed, based on extensive research on American conceptions of marriage, that there are many kinds of ideal models for a marriage: successful marriages, good marriages, strong marriages, and so on. Successful marriages are those where the goals of the spouses are fulfilled. Good marriages are those where both partners find the marriage beneficial. Strong marriages are those likely to last.” The emphasis is mine.
location—that instantiate them. It is this abstraction based on an idealization in the sense of maximal perfection that I have in mind when I say that ideal concepts are abstract. I call it idealization-maximal-perfection (IMP) abstractedness; God, I claim, is an IMP abstract concept, or an ideal concept, for short. Ideals are abstract objects in the same sense of abstractedness.

The kind of possibility present in the claim that there cannot be concrete instances of abstract concepts depends on the concept at stake. For example, in the case of the concept of prime number, we might say that it is metaphysically impossible that there exist concrete instances of it in the world. But the fact that there cannot be an ideal gas in the world seems to follow from the laws of nature that operate in our world; it is a kind of physical possibility. This is in fact a consequence of the IMP abstractedness of the concept of ideal gas. Since it maximally perfects something we find in the physical world, it goes beyond physical possibility. As far as the concept of God is concerned, it is certainly not absurd to follow the first path and say that it is metaphysically impossible that there exists a concrete instance of it. However, since I am favoring this IMP abstractedness, it is enough for me to understand the claim that there cannot be a concrete instance of the concept of God in the weaker sense of physical possibility.

A further remark about abstractedness is in order. I have so far applied to word “abstract” both to concepts and objects. Given what I said above, the connection between abstract concepts and abstract objects seems obvious: if an object \( x \) falls under an abstract concept, then \( x \) is abstract. This is not the path I will follow here. First because the connection I have made between abstract concepts and the objects that fall under them was in terms of non-concreteness, not abstractedness: I argued that that there cannot be concrete instances of abstract concepts. Second because I will follow what David Lewis (1986, p. 83) calls the negative path and take abstract objects simply as objects that are causally ineffective. (As I have said, concrete objects are objects that have a spatiotemporal location, which involves causal effectiveness.) Since a non-abstract object is one that is causally effective, non-abstractedness and concreteness are not equivalent: non-abstract non-concrete objects, that is, causally effective objects without spatiotemporal location are logically possible. This is of course needed if we want to cope with the idea that GOD, although non-concrete, can interact causally with the world.

Given all this, one might wonder: can the category of ideal husbands, for example, have nonabstract members? Considering the IMP abstractedness of both ideals and ideal concepts, might some actual husband be an ideal husband? The answer is yes. Let us call \( h \) the abstract object, ideal member of the category of husbands, and \( x \) a (ordinary) member of the category of husbands. Following the categorization process behind prototype theory and exemplar theory, it seems reasonable to say that \( x \) is a member of the category of ideal husbands if and only if \( x \) is similar to \( h \). Therefore, depending on the criterion of similarity at stake, an actual husband \( x \) can be seen as an ideal husband.

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10 Commenting on this view of abstract objects, Gideon Rosen (2020) writes as follows: “It is widely maintained that causation, strictly speaking, is a relation among events or states of affairs. If we say that the rock—an object—caused the window to break, what we mean is that some event or state (or fact or condition) involving the rock caused the break. If the rock itself is a cause, it is a cause in some derivative sense. But this derivative sense has proved elusive. The rock’s hitting the window is an event in which the rock ‘participates’ in a certain way, and it is because the rock participates in events in this way that we credit the rock itself with causal efficacy. But what is it for an object to participate in an event? Suppose John is thinking about the Pythagorean Theorem and you ask him to say what’s on his mind. His response is an event—the utterance of a sentence; and one of its causes is the event of John’s thinking about the theorem. Does the Pythagorean Theorem “participate” in this event? There is surely some sense in which it does. The event consists in John’s coming to stand in a certain relation to the theorem, just as the rock’s hitting the window consists in the rock’s coming to stand in a certain relation to the glass. But we do not credit the Pythagorean Theorem with causal efficacy simply because it participates in this sense in an event which is a cause. The challenge is therefore to characterize the distinctive manner of ‘participation in the causal order’ that distinguishes the concrete entities. This problem has received relatively little attention. There is no reason to believe that it cannot be solved. But in the absence of a solution, this standard version of the Way of Negation must be reckoned a work in progress.”

11 See that \( m \) is a member of both categories.
Building upon this suggestion, as well as upon the idea behind exemplar theory and the initial interpretation of prototype theory I mentioned at the beginning of this section, I propose what I call the theory of ideal concepts. The expression has a double meaning. It is a theory of ideal concepts in the sense that it aims to deal with ideal concepts; it is therefore a special theory of concepts, since it applies only to a specific kind of concept. But it is also a theory of ideal concepts in the sense that it aims to follow the aforementioned idea behind exemplar theory and the initial interpretation of prototype theory and take ideals, that is, specific exemplars of a category, as the basis of the X in T and R. Seen as a T-theory, the theory of ideal concepts claims that the X in T and R is these abstract objects we call ideals.

As mentioned, alike to prototype theory and exemplar theory, here categorization is grounded on some similarity-based process. Suppose c is the ideal that characterizes concept C. Whether an object x is an instance of C depends on how similar x is to c. But similarity between objects is assessed through the properties they possess. To find out whether x is similar to c we need a description of both x and c containing the properties they possess. The theory of ideal concepts therefore needs a list with the properties associated with the concept (in this case the abstract object c). See however that this does not bring us back to the classical view.

First because here the concept is not a definition, but an ideal. Second because the similarity-based process does not need to see the properties of c as necessary and sufficient conditions for category membership. Suppose that the concept of ideal husband is based on h, the ideal, abstract exemplar of the category of husband. Whether a concrete husband x belongs to the category of ideal husbands depends on how much x is similar to h. But x may be similar to h even if it does not have some of the properties of h: it may be that x is not faithful in thoughts, for example. x can be similar to h even if it does not have any of h’s properties: x can be a great provider, but not a perfect provider; he can be very sensitive, but not perfectly sensitive, etc. In fact, since h is an ideal, the properties it possess, with their proper degrees, will never be instantiated in the concrete world.

Nevertheless, this list with the properties that c possesses is still a kind of definition (now applied to c itself, and not to the instances of C). And since the concept of C is to be characterized as the ideal c, this definition is something that a full account of C cannot avoid. Although from the viewpoint of a T-theory the concept is the ideal c, in terms of an intelligible representational structure, which is required by an R-theory, a definition is needed. Therefore, in the R-theory of ideal concepts the X of R is best seen as a pair <c, Δc>, where c is an ideal and Δc is a list with the definitional properties of c. It is therefore a hybrid approach composed by two kinds of structures, definitions and ideals. I call Δc the D-concept of C (D standing for definitional) and c the I-concept of C (I standing for ideal).

This R-theory of ideal concepts is pluralistic. As any other object, the ideal c might be described in different, sometimes conflicting ways. There might be several Δc’s, with different lists of property conditions. C might then be represented as different pairs: <c, Δ1>, <c, Δ2>, <c, Δ3>, and so on. While there is only one I-concept of C, that is, one ideal c, there might be several D-concepts of C.

3. An Idealistic R-Theory of the Concept of God

Let us now see how this pluralistic R-theory of ideal concepts might be applied to the concept of God. First of all, besides meaning an ideal concept and the possible (unique) instance of this concept (that is to say, GOD), the word “God” also means an ideal, an abstract object. Let us call this abstract object g. In the same way that the ideal husband is an (abstract) exemplar of the category of husbands, g might be seen, for example, as the ideal exemplar of the category of beings: it has, in a maximally idealized way, desirable
properties found in the members of this category, which guarantee \( g \) an ultimate value for believers. In this pluralistic R-theory of ideal concepts applied to God, which I call the *idealistic R-theory of the concept of God*, \( g \) plays the role of the I-concept of God. The list of properties which \( g \) supposedly possesses—\( \Delta_g \)—plays the role of the D-concept of God. But as we have seen, different philosophers, traditions, and schools within traditions, disagree about which properties \( g \) possesses. Therefore, there are several D-concepts of God.

The question of what those desirable properties possessed by \( g \) (in a maximally idealized way) are is answered by specific D-concepts of God. For example, while possessing intellect and will are in the list of properties of the concept of God linked to most monotheistic views, they are not in the list of a pantheistic concept of God (assuming that pantheism can be included in the class of monotheistic views on GOD). A more fundamental issue comes from the following objection. Most exemplars of beings we know possess the properties of corporeality and complexity. These properties obviously conflict with incorporeality and simplicity, which are often attributed to GOD. Therefore, it seems false that God is an exemplar of the category of beings. In reply to this, I would say that the result of maximally perfecting a property \( P \) might be something quite different from \( P \); it might even be something incompatible with \( P \). For example, considering the perishable nature of material bodies, the result of maximally perfecting the property of corporeality might be its very opposite, that is to say, incorporeality, which of course does not exclude that God has an imperishable non-material body.

Now, how this theory stands in relation to SA—the claim that there is a unique concept of God—and PG—the claim that there is a plurality of concepts of God? There are two perspectives that we can look from to answer this question. Looking from the perspective of the ideal \( g \), the theory accepts SA and rejects PG. There is only one ideal \( g \); since the concept of God might be understood in terms of \( g \), there is a unique concept of God. But looking from the perspective of \( \Delta_g \), the theory allows for a plurality of ways of defining \( g \). \( g \) is one, but there might be different, conflicting attempts to characterize it in terms of the properties it supposedly possesses. Therefore, there might be different \( \Delta_g \)'s and consequently different D-concepts of God. From this perspective, the theory is pluralistic: it rejects SA and, consequently, accepts PG.

Putting it in terms of D-concept and I-concept, while the following versions of PG and SA are true:

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\begin{align*}
(PG^I) & \quad \text{There is a plurality of D-concepts of God.} \\
(SA^I) & \quad \text{There is such a thing as the unique I-concept of God.}
\end{align*}
\]

the ones below are false:

\[
\begin{align*}
(PG^I) & \quad \text{There is a plurality of I-concepts of God.} \\
(SA^{I^2}) & \quad \text{There is such a thing as the unique D-concept of God.}
\end{align*}
\]

The fact that these different \( \Delta_g \)'s are attempts to characterize the *same* object—the ideal \( g \)—guarantees that they are all concepts of the same thing, namely God. In other words, \( g \) bonds all \( \Delta_g \)'s together as concepts of God. Thus, the *problem of conceptual unity* is solved. But since there is only one concept of God—recall that despite the name (D-concept), \( \Delta_g \) is an attempt to characterize this ideal \( g \), which from the perspective of an idealistic T-theory of the concept of God, is the actual concept of God—there will be at most one instance of the concept of God. Thus, the *unicity of extension problem* is solved.

See that a situation where two different non-abstract objects \( x' \) and \( x'' \) satisfy the conditions of \( \Delta'_g \) and \( \Delta''_g \), respectively, does not threaten my solution to the unicity of extension problem. The fact that the
several $\Delta g$’s are attempts to characterize this one object $g$ allows us to talk about the successful attempt to characterize the concept of God, or the proper, correct or best D-concept of God. If objects $x'$ and $x''$ are different, then either $\Delta' g$, $\Delta'' g$ or none of them is the correct D-concept of God.

There are some important remarks to be made about this idealistic R-theory of the concept of God. The first one concerns the functioning of its similarity-based categorization process. It can be thought of in at least two different ways: in a strong way, according to which for a non-abstract object $x$ to be similar to $g$ it must have all $g$’s properties (with the exception of the property of abstractedness, of course), in the proper degree, or in a weaker way, according to which $x$ might be similar to $g$ even if it does not possess all $g$’s properties. While the first case produces an orthodox theistic view according to which $g$’s properties function as necessary and sufficient conditions for instantiation, the second results in a heterodox approach (albeit more traditional, from the perspective of prototype and exemplar theories) with some interesting consequences.

Suppose that $g$ is omniscient, omnipotent, wholly good and has created the world. Suppose in addition that $x$ is a non-abstract object who we know (through compelling arguments, for example) has created the world. It seems reasonable to conclude from that that $x$ has an astonishing amount of power and knowledge, and perhaps some degree of benevolence. It thus makes sense to say that $x$ is similar to $g$, similar enough for it to be taken as an (or the) instance of the concept of God. If we agree on this, we will have to concede that an argument that arrives at the conclusion that $x$ exists is to be considered a successful argument for the existence of God, even though $x$ does not possess all divine properties. Despite all the problems that design arguments have, at least one of the criticisms made against them, that the argument does not arrive at the God of religion, would lose much of its strength. This seem to be an interesting application of this approach. Of course, as in prototype theory and exemplar theory, the challenge is to provide a satisfactory characterization of similarity.

The second and third remarks concern some ontological issues related to the theory of ideal concepts. As an ideal exemplar of a category (the category of beings, for example), $g$ exists. It exists in the same way that abstract objects such as sets, propositions and the number 2 do. On the other hand, we do not know whether GOD exists, that is, whether there is an instance of the concept of God. But if there is, it exists in a different way, as a non-abstract, causally efficacious object. Notice that this does not imply that GOD is concrete. As I am using the term, a concrete object is one that has spatiotemporal location; a non-abstract object is one that is causally efficacious. And as I have pointed out earlier, the latter does not entail the former: non-abstract non-concrete objects, that is, causally efficacious objects without spatiotemporal location are logically possible.

At this point one might object to the number of non-concrete entities postulated by this theory of ideal concepts. Besides postulating the existence of a platonic realm containing the abstract objects I am calling ideals, it also postulates the existence of non-concrete causally efficacious objects which might be the instances of these abstract concepts. Although I believe that a tenable philosophical defense against such criticism can be built up, I will not try to do that here. The reason for that it that an R-theory of ideal concepts, which is my focus, is not threatened by such objection as much as a T-theory is.

As a representational theory, and this is the fourth remark, all this idealistic R-theory of the concept of God postulates is that concepts be represented as objects. This is not new. In his logical attempt to integrate Leibniz’s metaphysics of individual concepts and logic of concepts, Edward Zalta (2000) represents concepts as abstract objects. Although Zalta does not claim to be following a mere representational approach—he seems to defend the claim that, for Leibniz, concepts are in fact abstract
objects—, his logic of concepts (in the contemporary sense of the term “logic”) and, as matter of fact, any logic of concepts, is more than anything a theory of representation (as well as a theory of inference). Sketching how my R-theory of the concept of God would look like when expanded into a logical theory can thus help me to highlight its representational feature, as well as to uncover some additional important features, such as how it deals with the homogeneity/heterogeneity problem. This is what I plan to do in the following section.

4. A Possible Worlds Approach to the Concept of God

A logical approach to this idealistic R-theory of the concept of God can be constructed within a simple modal, possible worlds framework. To be more specific, it can be constructed within a version of the so-called the Simplest Quantified Modal Logic (SQML). To make the presentation less technical, I will show here only the semantic side of this approach, which is the side that deals with possible worlds.

When building a semantic theory, the domain of objects is usually the first thing to consider. From what has been said so far, it seems obvious that our domain of objects D has two kinds of objects: abstract objects on one hand, and non-abstract, causally efficacious objects on the other. Some of those abstract objects might be ideals, and some of these ideals might be I-concepts. From the point of view of the logical language, abstract objects are represented in the same way as any other object: through variables and constants. In particular, there is a constant g to represent the ideal God (the abstract object which is our I-concept of God).

Since our semantic theory is a modal one, there is a set W of maximally complete states of affairs called possible worlds. Let w be a possible world belonging to W. For each object o belonging to D, w says whether or not o possesses property P, for every property P that can be expressed within the language. w is therefore a complete characterization of o (which might differ from the characterization given by a different possible world w’). As far as the object referred to by g is concerned, w is also a complete semantical characterization of God. It is therefore a (complete) semantic representation of a D-concept of God. (While there is only one I-concept of God, one abstract object which is referred to by the constant g, there is a multiplicity of worlds, and therefore a multiplicity of D-concepts of God.) But more than that. Supposing the language is rich enough, w contains a complete theological description of reality, from the properties possessed by GOD to the origin of the universe and the ethical principles human beings are supposed to follow. w therefore represents a (complete) theological worldview. Besides being a possible world, w is therefore also a theological world.

But there are some constraints that our modal framework should meet. First, constants should denote the same object in all possible worlds. They should be rigid designators. Only then can we guarantee that g refers to the same object in all worlds. Second, the domain D should be constant across worlds. In particular, the objects of D must exist in all possible worlds, otherwise there could be a world w in which the ideal God does not exist. Third, the set of possible worlds W should not be the same as the set of all logically possible worlds; our semantics should be a K-semantics. The idea is that W represents the pertinent theological aspects of the social reality we live in; thus, it should not represent all logically possible theological worldviews and concepts of God, but only those to which we attach some social,

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12 See (Linsky; Zalta 1994) and (Menzel 2018). What Hughes and Cresswell (1968, p. 141-169) call the modal lower predicate calculus is usually seen as a version of SQML.
13 See (Silvestre 2021) for a full account—semantic as well as proof-theoretical—of this logical theory.
14 See (Schurz 2002).
philosophical or religious relevance. The SQML is semantically characterized by these three constraints: rigid designator, constant domain and K-semantics.

But there are some specifics within the SQML. First, unlike some formulations of SQML (Linsky; Zalta 1994) (Menzel 2018), our set of worlds W does not contain a distinguished member meant to represent the actual world. The reason for that has to do with the homogeneity/heterogeneity problem and will be explained in a while. Second, I will deal exclusively with reflexive and symmetric frames. In explain and justify this below.

Following the standard modal logic notation, a frame F is a pair <W,R> where W is a set of possible worlds and R is an accessibility relation between worlds. In SQML, a model is a quadruple <W,R,D,V>, where <W, R> is a frame F, D is a non-empty domain of objects to be used in connection with all worlds (it is a constant domain) and V is a pair of valuation functions <V_C,V_P> such that V_C maps each constant symbol to an object of the domain D, and V_P maps each n-ary predicate symbol and world w ∈ W to a n-tuple drawn from D. While the extension of constants is the same for all worlds—they are rigid designators—the extension of predicates changes from world to world. A frame F = <W,R> is reflexive when for every world w ∈ W, wRw. It is symmetric when, for every w,w’ ∈ W, if wRw’ then w’Rw.

How are we to understand the accessibility relation R? Well, there is a sense in which a theological worldview can be said to accept another theological worldview. For example, a Lutheran worldview would accept most protestant worldviews, and perhaps even most Christian worldviews. It could even be said to accept a Jewish worldview (a

There is a third frame feature, which is pseudo-universality. Since the reason why I need pseudo-universal frames goes beyond the issues deal with in this chapter, I will not explain it. For more on this, see (Silvestre 2021).
D-concept of God; there is no distinguished world meant to represent the actual world. (If one of the theological worlds \( w \) were chosen as the actual world, its corresponding D-concept of God would naturally be taken as the actual or correct D-concept of God.)

But I want to adopt an even more neutral approach regarding the homogeneity/heterogeneity problem. At least epistemologically, I want to take all concepts of God on an equal footing. In other words, I want to endorse the following principle:

\[(\text{AA}_C)\quad \text{We do not know what concept of God is the correct one.}\]

This is what I call the \emph{conceptual agnostic assumption}. There is of course another, more standard agnostic assumption:

\[(\text{AA}_E)\quad \text{We do not know whether GOD exists.}\]

I call this the \emph{extensional agnostic assumption}. In a sense, both AA\(_C\) and AA\(_E\) are general \emph{desiderata} of a genuine pluralistic approach. While AA\(_C\) takes all concepts of God on an equal footing, AA\(_C\) allows for atheistic and agnostic worldviews.

Here one might object that AA\(_E\) cannot be satisfied in my modal approach. It seems that any theological world and theological worldview include the assumption that GOD exists. A Christian worldview seems to include the assumption that there is an entity that falls under the Christian concept of God, for example. As I have said, a theological world \( w \) might be seen as a complete theological worldview. Therefore, the Christian theological world \( w \) obviously includes the assumption that GOD exists. In other words, there is a nonabstract object \( o \in D \) such that \( o \) is an instance of \( g \).

In order to address this, I first point out that not every theological world is theistic. A theological worldview is a worldview that includes a view on God. As such, it might be either positive or negative regarding GOD’s existence. This implies that there are atheistic worldviews and atheist worlds. Even an atheistic worldview includes a specific concept of God. The difference is that an atheistic worldview denies that there is an object that falls under its specific concept of God. A theological world \( w \) is an atheistic world when there is no object \( o \) in \( W \) that is an instance of \( g \) (as characterized in \( w \)).

Second, if we are to have an extended atheistic worldview according to which there is no object that falls under any concept of God, we could see it not as a single theological world \( w \), but as a set of theological worlds, or a model \( M = <W,R,D,V> \) in which, for all \( W \), there is no object \( o \) that is an instance of \( g \) in \( w \). But if \( M \) is such that \( W \) contains both theistic and atheistic worlds, then \( M \) is agnostic. This, plus the fact that \( M \) does not choose one of \( W \)’s theological worlds to be the real world, makes \( M \) silent about the existence of GOD, as well as about which D-concept of God is the correct one. In this case, \( M \) satisfies both AA\(_C\) and AA\(_E\). Since our set of worlds \( W \) is supposed to be contain a plurality of views on God, which include both theistic and atheistic views, a general model \( M \) provides a neutral response to the homogeneity/heterogeneity problem.

### 5. Conclusion

In this chapter I addressed some higher-order issues involving the concept of God: the problem of conceptual unity, the unity of extension problem and the homogeneity/heterogeneity problem. My proposal to solve these problems involved a hybrid special theory of concepts, called the theory of ideal concepts. I argued that when added to a pluralistic view of concepts, this theory answers the problem of conceptual unity and the unity of extension problem. And when formalized within a possible worlds framework, it provides a neutral response to the homogeneity/heterogeneity problem.
References


