



On the representation of the concept of God

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Abstract

While the failure of the so-called classical theory of concepts—according to which definitions are the proper way to characterize concepts—is a consensus, metaphysical philosophy of religion still deals with the concept of God in a predominantly definitional way. It thus seems fair to ask: Does this failure imply that a definitional characterization of the concept of God is equally untenable? The first purpose of this paper is to answer this question. I focus on the representational side of the matter. My goal is to analyze the extent to which the most important problems raised against the classical view of concepts affect a definitional-representational approach to the concept of God. The second purpose of the paper is to deepen into these issues, arguing for a pluralistic view of concepts and outlining a hybrid special theory of concepts, called the theory of ideal concepts. The theory is special because it deals with a special sort of concepts that I call ideal concepts; it is hybrid because, in addition to definitions, it uses another structure in the characterization of concepts: ideals. My goal is to argue that when applied to the concept of God and added to a pluralistic view of concepts, this theory can function as a tenable representational theory of the concept of God.

Keywords Concept of God · Philosophy of religion · Theory of concepts · Ideals · Religious pluralism

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1 Introduction

The debate on the rationality of theism inside metaphysical philosophy of religion has taken place mainly on two fronts: the construction and analysis of arguments for and against the existence of GOD and the analysis of the concept of God.¹ It is a truism that both concern with the *concept of God*; it is also a truism that they presuppose proper ways to represent such concept. What is not a truism is the apparent negligence of metaphysical philosophers of religion with regards to the study of theories of concepts undertaken in philosophy and psychology in the past five decades.

Usually, a theory of concepts addresses psychological issues such as how concepts are acquired and used by people to categorize objects and make inferences, as well as philosophical issues such as the ontological status of concepts. From a general viewpoint, it aims at saying what a concept is; or in other words, filling in the X in the schema below:

(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 & 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:

(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 this is the case, I say the theory is a representational theory of concepts, or an *R-theory of concepts* for short; if it aims at (T), I call it is a *T-theory of concepts*. (T) and (R) can also be thought in terms of individual concepts. For example, applied to the concept of God, (T) and (R) would be as follows:

(T^G) The concept of God is X.

(R^G) The concept of God is to be represented as X.

If a theory of concepts 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 (R^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.

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,² the classical theory takes definitions as

¹ Some people will add a third one: the issue of rational doxastic warrant.

² 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.

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.

The construction and analysis of theistic and atheistic arguments and the analysis of the concept of God rely on something very close to the classical theory of concepts. The analysis of the concept of God, for example, centers around properties (usually called divine attributes, or divine properties) such as omniscience, omnipotence, wholly goodness, eternity, simplicity, incorporeality, etc. Although there have been attempts to present the concept of God in such a way that these properties follow from a general definition—such as Anselm’s definition of God as that than which nothing greater can be thought—or from a sole property—such as Richard Swinburne’s (2016, p. 173) attempt to derive all properties from the property of omnipotence—, the concept of God is mostly characterized through a list of properties that GOD (the entity that falls under *the concept of God*³) is supposed to possess.⁴ For example, in the sections devoted to the concept of God, textbooks and companions on the philosophy of religion tend to deal almost exclusively with these divine properties.⁵ The same happens with arguments for and against the existence of GOD. Arguments from evil, for example, 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 view of concepts undermine its tenability (Rosch, 1978) (Smith & Medin, 1981, p. 26–51) (Laurence & Margolis, 1999, p. 8–27) (Murphy, 2002, p. 11–24). But if classical theory seems to be so ingrained in contemporary philosophical inquiry on God, we can ask: To what extent do these problems affect the representation of the concept of God? Are they enough to undermine the project of definitionally characterizing the concept of God? And what other problems this project faces as a result?

³ In order to distinguish between the concept of God and the (possible) instance of this concept, I will refer to the latter using capital letters. Thus, while “God” means the concept of God, “GOD” means the entity which supposedly falls under the concept of God (although most of the time I will use the complex expression “concept of God”).

⁴ The properties we choose and the way we interpret them give rise to different views on GOD. Examples of this are classical theism, open theism, process theism and deism (which denies that GOD has the property of being known through divine revelation).

⁵ Here are some examples: Chapter 1 of (Rowe, 1993), Part I of (Mann, 2005), Part I of (Mawson, 2005) and Part IV of (Taliaferro et al., 2010).

The first purpose of this paper is to answer these questions. I focus on the representational side of the matter. My goal is to analyze the extent to which the most important problems raised against the classical view of concepts affect a definitional-representational approach to the concept of God. Otherwise said, I want to see if the classical theory can function as a special R-theory applied to the concept of God.⁶ As a result of this effort, I show that the criticisms against the classical theory that do threaten a definitional-representational approach to the concept of God depend on the *plurality* characteristic of interreligious context, which by itself creates further problems.

The second purpose of the paper is to deepen these issues, arguing for a *pluralistic view of concepts* and outlining a hybrid special theory of concepts, called the *theory of ideal concepts*. The theory is special because it deals with a special kind of concepts that 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*. My goal is to argue that when aimed at (R^G) and added to a pluralistic view of concepts, this theory can function as a tenable R-theory of the concept of God.

My focus here is on the monotheistic concept of God. When I write “concept of God” (or simply “God”) I really mean the monotheistic concept of God. The reason for that is very simple. This is the kind of concept that is at the center of the philosophical debate on the rationality of theism. When contemporary philosophers argue for and against the existence of God, or for and against the coherence of the concept of God, they generally assume a monotheistic approach. However, and despite this, I will at end of the paper show how this idealistic R-theory of the concept of God can be extended so as to encompasses polytheistic accounts as well.

2 Empirical problems and God as an abstract concept

The classical theory of concepts supposes a procedure for unambiguously determining category membership (through a list of conjointly sufficient property conditions). But many concepts appear to be fuzzy or inexact, so that membership determination is not clear. Carpets are furniture? Is olive a fruit? Is Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band a work of art? The fact that many people seem unsure about how to answer these questions or answer them differently at different times seems to be a problem for the aforementioned membership determination procedure.

It also seems to be a problem that people might possess a concept despite being mistaken or ignorant about its defining properties. For example, people used to believe that diseases like smallpox were the effects of evil spirits or divine retribution; they were also ignorant about many properties that we today attribute to smallpox, such as that it spreads through person-to-person contact and saliva droplets in an infected person’s breath. The fact that people might possess a concept despite failing to assign a property which is on the list, or despite assigning

⁶ Although many aspects of my analysis might also apply to this special theory (the classical theory applied to the concept of God) seen as a T-theory.

one that cannot be on the list, seems to show that the classical theory is at odds with concept possession.

These two problems, called respectively the *problem of conceptual fuzziness* and the *problem of error and ignorance*, belong to what might be called the *empirical problems* of the classical theory. They have to do with observable human psychological reality. For a theory of concepts to be empirically adequate, it must explain, or at least be compatible with, observable facts about how people acquire and use concepts.

Perhaps the most famous empirical problem is the *problem of typicality effects*. Experimentation has shown that people consider some exemplars of a category to be more typical or usual than others; trout and sharks are thought to be more typical fish than eels and flounders; robins are more typical birds than chickens and vultures. It has also been shown that when categorization speed and error are at issue, typicality does play a crucial role (Rosch, 1978) (Smith & Medin, 1981). But according to the classical theory, all instances of a concept are on equal footing: if all that is needed for an object to fall under the concept of bird is to satisfy a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, then all (and only) birds should do this equally. The classical view cannot distinguish between typical and atypical members of a category.

One might think that these problems can be dismissed by pointing out that a philosophical approach to concepts should not be concerned with observable human psychological reality. What does the way people categorize objects, for example, has to do with philosophizing about concepts? Well, if the goal of such approach is the proper representation of concepts, that is to say, if it is an R-theory of concepts, then it does not seem absurd to require that it takes seriously into consideration the way people use concepts.

Anyway, assuming for the sake of the discussion that these empirical issues do matter for an R-theory of concepts, we might ask: do they matter for an R-theory of the concept of God? To answer this question, we must go through a couple of peculiarities about the concept of God itself. First, like the concepts of prime number, ideal gas and perfect circle, the concept of God is an *abstract concept*. This can be understood in at least two different ways. Like the concept of prime number, the concept of God is abstract in the following sense: an entity that falls under it cannot be concrete, in the sense of having a spatiotemporal location. If GOD exists, like the prime numbers 7 and 13, it is not in the realm of concrete entities.

But the concept of God is also abstract in another sense. 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 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 the concept of God

is abstract. I call it *idealization-maximal-perfection (IMP) abstractedness*; God, I claim, is an IMP abstract concept or *ideal concept*, for short.⁷

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.⁸

A further remark about abstractedness is order here. I have so far applied to word “abstract” to concepts, arguing that God is an abstract concept. But we know that the word is also applied to objects. Sets, propositions, the number 2 and Dante’s *Inferno* are traditionally seen as abstract 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 above between abstract concepts and the objects that fall under them was in terms of non-concreteness, not abstractedness: I argued 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.⁹ (As I have said,

⁷ It is important to notice that this claim does not exclude views such as open theism and process theism, nor is it an application or reaffirmation of the basic principle of perfect being theology. It is perhaps true that open theism and process theism do not take on the properties of omniscience and omnipotence, respectively, in a maximal way. Nevertheless, at least one other divine attribute is seen in this idealized, maximally perfect way by these views. And that is all the claim entails: that some aspect of the concept of God can be seen in a maximally perfect way; other aspects might be seen differently. It is also important to notice that the claim that concept c is IMP abstract does not imply that an object C that falls under it is an ultimate reality and therefore something that deserves our unconditional concern (although at least one IMP abstract concept, namely the monotheistic concept of God, is generally seen this way).

⁸ From this one might conclude that pantheism does not fit this account of God. Even though it fits in the sense that even the pantheistic concept of God might be seen as an IMP abstraction - after all, in pantheism GOD is identified with the cosmos, so that the maximal aspect is certainly there; some pantheists, such as Zeno of Citium, for example, have defended that nothing is better than the cosmos, incorporating then some type of perfect being theology - one might claim that pantheism clearly sees GOD as concrete. That is not necessarily the case. If we understand the cosmos as the whole (ordered) universe, then the cosmos is not concrete in the sense of having a spatiotemporal location, since time and space are part of the cosmos. That is one way to account for pantheism. This should not be seen, of course, as an endorsement of pantheism as a monotheistic view. (I am obviously aware that pantheism is generally not seen as a monotheistic view, although it does claim that there is only one GOD.) Rather, it should be simply seen as an (extra) indication of the comprehensiveness of my approach.

⁹ Although abstract objects is a controversial topic, this is a view accepted by many contemporary philosophers. For space reasons, I will not be able to elaborate here on its pros and cons. For that, as well as for alternative views, see (Rosen, 2020).

concrete objects are objects that have a spatiotemporal location, which necessarily 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.¹⁰ This is of course needed if we want to cope with the idea that GOD, although non-concrete, can interact causally with the world.

A second peculiarity about God is that the number of instances of the concept of God is either one or zero; like the concept of actual king of France, God is an *extensionally unique concept*. If there was any instance of the concept of actual king of France, it would be at most one. Similarly, if there is any entity which falls under the concept of God, it would be at most one. This is a consequence of the kind of concept of God that I am focusing on here: the monotheistic concept of God; it presupposes what I call the *assumption of monotheism*:

(AM) There is at most one entity that falls under the concept of God.

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

(EAM) There is at most one GOD; otherwise said, the number of extensions of the word “GOD” is at most one.¹¹

Getting back to the empirical problems that helped to undermine the classical theory of concepts, at first glance they do not seem to threaten a definitional-representational approach to the concept of God. First, since we are dealing with an abstract concept that cannot have concrete instances, category membership determination issues such as the ones involved in the problems of conceptual fuzziness and typicality effects do not appear. Unless the candidates for members of a category are observable, which presuppose that they have a spatiotemporal location, there is no

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 Although (EAM) entails (AM), the converse is not true. I come back to this point later.

way people might get confused about whether something belongs or not to it or find some members more typical than others.

Second, the idealized aspect of the concept of God seems to make irrelevant how people conceive GOD. Like the concepts of ideal gas and perfect circle, the concept of God can be said to be the result of a process of idealization where certain things found in our world are conceived in a maximally perfect way. As such, its being possessed by someone seems to depend entirely on the individual assigning the proper properties. If people get it wrong, assigning a wrong property, or failing to assign a correct one, then they simply do not possess the concept of God. Therefore, the problem of error and ignorance does not arise either.

But things are not that simple. It seems arbitrary to claim that someone does not possess the concept of God simply because his/her understanding does not fit some idealized view of GOD. This is especially relevant when we consider the plurality of existing monotheistic views on GOD. Virtually every monotheistic religious tradition—and sometimes every school or order inside traditions—has its own view on GOD, which is shared by many of its members. It is expected that many of these people will err or be ignorant about whatever idealized view on GOD we have. But it seems odd to suppose that thousands and thousands of religious practitioners, from different cultures and historical periods, who have prayed to GOD, worshiped GOD and many times dedicated their entire lives to GOD, did not possess the concept of God. It thus seems that the problem of error and ignorance does not fade away.

3 In-principle problems

The second category of problems that threatened the classical theory is what might be called *in-principle problems*¹²; these are problems that can be stated without referring to psychological empirical data. One example of in-principle problem is the *problem of failure of transitivity*. Many concepts seem to be hierarchically ordered in such a way that the relationship between them is transitive. Robins are birds, birds are vertebrates and vertebrates are animals; hence, robins are also vertebrates and animals. The classical theory not only explains this conceptual transitivity but is bound by it: if A's are B's and B's are C's, then according to the classical theory A's are C's. The problem is that for many concepts, this transitivity seems not to hold. Car seats are chairs; chairs are furniture; but car seats are not furniture. Wooden spoons are spoons; spoons are cutlery; but wooden spoons are not cutlery.¹³

¹² I borrowed this terminology from George Murphy, who divides his section on the problems of the classical theory into two subsections: “in-principle arguments” and “empirical problems” (Murphy 2002, p. 16–24), although my classification does not completely matches his. For a comprehensive overview of the main problems faced by the classical view of concepts see (Rosch, 1978), (Smith and Medin, 1981, p. 26–51), (Laurence and Margolis, 1999, p. 8–27) and (Murphy, 2002, p. 11–24).

¹³ Notice that these claims should be understood in a conceptual, non-empirical context. For example, when I say that chairs are furniture I am not saying that all chairs are furniture, which would be false, but that the property of being a furniture belongs to the list of property conditions that defines the concept of chair (if we characterize the concept of chair according to the classical theory, of course).

Is this a problem for an R-theory of the concept of God? It seems it is not. If our concern is exclusively with the concept of God, eventual relations between the concept of God and other concepts might be neglected, making thus irrelevant the fact that some of these relations are not transitive.

A more threatening in-principle problem is the *problem of lack of successful definitions*, which has been seen by some as the most serious threat to the classical theory of concepts (Margolis & Laurence, 2019). This is the problem that, for most concepts, there seems to be no satisfactory definition. Wittgenstein has famously argued that the concept of game cannot be reasonably defined. Other example from philosophy: since Edmund Gettier first challenged the traditional definition of knowledge as justified true belief, there has been widespread agreement that the traditional definition is incorrect or at least incomplete. But despite the proliferation of proposals and enormous amount of effort that has gone into the matter, philosophers have not agreed on what the correct definition is; as a result, we still lack a satisfactory definition of the concept of knowledge.

There are in fact very few examples in philosophy of successful definitional analyses, none of which are uncontroversial (Wittgenstein, 1953/1958, Fodor, 1981). One might think that outside philosophy, perhaps in certain technical domains such as the natural sciences, concepts might be well defined. Gregory Murphy (2002, pp. 18–19) has argued that this is not true: when one goes deep in such domains, one finds more and more fuzziness, rather than perfectly clear definitions.

One might reply that definitions are simply hard to come by: perhaps we are not clever enough to think of the defining properties of these concepts; or perhaps they will be found in 100 years from now. But another possibility is that our concepts lack that kind the structure that is required by a definition (let us call it definitional structure). Of course, the fact that no one has successfully defined concept C is compatible with both possibilities: that there is a definition out there waiting to be found or that C lacks definitional structure. However, it seems to be incumbent on the defender of the classical theory to explain our failure in finding a satisfactory definition of C, as it is incumbent on him/her to provide the definition in the first place. If the concepts of game, knowledge and dog are definitions, why are we so bad at saying what they are? The defender of the classical theory has no answer.

If we were to characterize the problem of lack of successful definitions in terms of an individual concept C, we would say that it arises from a plurality of attempts to define C, none of which produces something close to a consensus in the relevant community. In the case of the concept of knowledge, we have dozens of attempts to define it, none of which satisfactorily coped with all the criteria required by the community of epistemologists. The situation thus points to a failure of the classical theory to satisfactorily characterize C; in the most skeptical case, it points to C's lack of definitional structure.

Is this the case with the concept of God? It seems it is. First, from a confessional point of view, there is a plurality of definitions with nothing even remotely close to a consensus amongst theists. Christian scholars define the concept of God differently from Jewish scholars, who define it differently from Islamic scholars, who define it differently from theistic Vedanta scholars, and so on and so forth. There is no agreement even within traditions. For example, when dealing with the problem of the

Trinity, Christian scholars have proposed different and conflicting ways to define the Christian concept of God (Tuggy, 2006).

Second, there is plurality and disagreement also from a philosophical standpoint. There is a multitude of philosophical views on GOD: classical theism, process theism, open theism, deism, pantheism. From the standpoint of divine properties, each of these views corresponds to a different definition (or category of definitions, to be more precise) of the concept of God. In fact, there is a multitude of definitions of God that can be obtained from different subsets of divine properties. Even if we speak on what some call minimal theism, that is, GOD as an omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good being who created the world, there is no agreement about the correct meaning of the pertinent terms. In fact, when we take a closer look at the literature, we see that the correct meaning of terms such as “omnipotence”, “omniscience”, “wholly goodness” and “eternity” is still open.¹⁴ From this we can conclude that the classical theory of concepts is unable to satisfactorily deal with the concept of God, or, in the most skeptical case, that it is likely that the concept of God lacks definitional structure.

4 The plurality of concepts of God

Here is where we have got to so far. While a definitional-representational approach to the concept of God is not threatened by most of the criticisms that undermined the classical view of concepts, two problems remain: the problem of error and ignorance and the problem of lack of successful definitions.

As we have seen, for an arbitrary concept C, these problems arise in the context of a plurality of views about C. While the problem of error and ignorance requires a plurality of people who are mistaken or ignorant about the defining properties of C, the problem of lack of successful definitions requires a plurality of unsuccessful attempts to define C. Notice that this plurality must actually refer to C. In the case of the problem of error and ignorance, the concept that people possess must be the same concept C that has been definitionally characterized; in the case of the problem of lack of successful definitions, the proposed definitions must be attempts to define C, not a different but related concept.

Does the plurality of views about GOD relate to the *same* very concept? It depends. From a philosophical viewpoint, things might be ambiguous. While it does make sense to say that the attempts to define God by philosophers are all attempts to characterize the same concept (the God of the philosophers?), the plurality of existing philosophical views on GOD might be used to defend the idea that these views correspond to different concepts of God.

¹⁴ For an overview of the debate on the divine properties see the chapters of Part I of (Mann, 2005) and Part IV of (Taliaferro et al., 2010). For traditional and alternative philosophical views on God see (Owen, 1971), (Oppy, 2014), (Buckareff and Nagasawa, 2016) and (Dombrowski, 2017).

The same cannot be said from a confessional viewpoint. Here things seem to be unambiguous. As I have said earlier in connection with the problem of error and ignorance, every monotheistic religious tradition—and sometimes every school within traditions—has its own view on GOD. And it is far from trivial that these different views correspond to the *same* concept.¹⁵ In fact, considering the sometimes-astonishing differences between them, it is reasonable to suppose the opposite: that they deal with different concepts. If this is right, then we cannot say that there is *the* concept of God, at least not from the viewpoint of religious traditions. Instead, what do exist are different, possibly incompatible, *concepts* of God.¹⁶ Thus, the claim below seems to be true:

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

The implications of (PG) are as follows. First, the problem of lack of successful definitions seems to lose some of its fuel. If the efforts of theologians are not attempts to define *the* concept of God but *a* specific concept of God, then they do not belong to the class of unsuccessful attempts to definitionally characterize the concept of God. Therefore, the diversity of confessional attempts to define God cannot be used to support the conclusion that the classical theory is unable to satisfactorily characterize the concept of God, nor that the concept of God lacks definitional structure.

Second, if in fact there is no unique concept of God, the problem of error and ignorance fades away. Theists do not err, nor are they ignorant about whatever concept of God philosophers are trying to define; they genuinely possess a concept of God, but one which is peculiar to the tradition they belong to. The conclusion then is that the two remaining criticisms to the classical view do not touch the project of definitionally representing the concept of God.

¹⁵ I am using the expressions “view on GOD” and “concept of God” with different meanings. Although a *view on GOD* usually corresponds to some *concept of God*, it might be fuzzy enough to correspond to more than one concept of God or perhaps to no concept of God at all. Second, a view on GOD already presupposes the existence of some superlative being; that is why I use “GOD” instead of “God”.

¹⁶ For example, according to orthodox Christianity, GOD is a trinitarian entity. 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.” Islam, on the other hand, emphasizes that GOD is strictly singular (tawhīd), unique (wāḥid) and inherently One (aḥad) (Esposito, 1998, p. 88). In its turn, the so-called “Hindu bible”, the Bhagavad-gītā, while stating that GOD (who is identified with the speaker of the text, Kṛṣṇa) is one 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), claims that He is identical with everything (7.19, 11.40) (Resnick, 1995, p. 7–9; 13–17). One might reply that these brief descriptions are not conclusive about whether we have three different concepts of God. That is true. However, from the surface, these descriptions of God undeniably contain divergent and conflicting conceptual elements. The same can be said about the descriptions of many other religious traditions. Moreover, it seems that the burden of proof lies with the one who maintains that these views share the same concept of God. Therefore, unless there is a very compelling argument against it, I maintain what seems to be most likely: that the plurality of religious views on GOD involves a plurality of concepts of God.

But this solution to the problems of error and ignorance and lack of successful definitions underestimate (PG). By focusing on a specific concept of God, we automatically disregard the way many religious traditions view GOD. Since (PG) does not imply any kind of hierarchy between the various existing concepts of God, we can ask: If there are several concepts of God, what guarantees that the one we choose to define is the ‘correct’ one? Unless there is a satisfactory answer to this, that is, unless there is a satisfactory argument against what I call the *assumption of conceptual homogeneity*:

(AH) There is a homogeneity in terms of philosophical legitimacy among all concepts of God.

favoring a specific concept of God to the point of nullifying all the others, the project of definitionally representing the concept of God seems to be doomed to failure.

5 Pluralistic view of concepts

But there is an even more fundamental issue. The classical view of concepts assumes what Daniel Weiskopf (2008, p. 150) calls the *singularity assumption*:

(SA) For any category that can be conceptually represented, there is a unique concept of that category.

Like most theories of concepts, the classical theory presupposes that there is such a thing as the unique concept of knowledge, the unique concept of game and the unique concept of God.¹⁷ Indeed, unless there is a unique concept of God, there is no point in offering a definitional characterization of *the* concept of God. That is why a plurality of concepts of God weakens the project of definitionally representing God. This becomes evident when we see that the individual-conceptual version of (SA) applied to God contradicts (PG):

(SAG) There is a unique concept of God.

Weiskopf also mentions other assumption that, according to him, most theories of concepts assume. That is the *uniformity assumption*:

(UA) All concepts belong to a single psychological kind.

By psychological kind Weiskopf (2008, p. 145) means the kind of structure that plays the role of the X in (T) (his focus is on T-theories of concepts). As far as I am concerned, all I need is UA’s representational version, which I call the *representational uniformity assumption*:

¹⁷ It should be noted that Weiskopf does not refer to the classical theory in his paper.

(RUA) All concepts are to be represented with the help of a single kind of structure.

There is a weaker version of (RUA):

(RUA') For every concept C, C is to be represented with the help of a single kind of structure.

, as there is a version of (RUA') applied to God:

(RUAG) The concept of God is to be represented with the help of a single kind of structure.

Like most theories of concepts, the classical theory presupposes (UA) and (RUA): seen as a T-theory, it claims that all concepts are definitions; seen as an R-theory it claims that all concepts are to be represented as definitions.

It seems clear that (UA) and (RUA) are essential assumptions of classical theory. But how about (SA)? Is it possible to reject it and remain within the classical view of concepts? It seems it is, at least as far as our project of definitionally representing the concept of God is concerned. There are at least two paths we could follow that would allow us to reject (SA^G) and consequently retain (PG): to refute (AH), arguing in favor of that concept of God that is the object of our definitional analysis to the point of nullifying all the others, or to take (PG) more seriously into account and definitionally represent each one of the several concepts of God. While the first path does not seem to be feasible, the second one does not seem to involve any big difficulties. We would have a definition of the Christian concept of God, a definition of the Islamic concept of God, a definition of the Jewish concept of God (or more realistically: several definitions of the Christian concept of God, several definitions of the Islamic concept of God, etc.). And, if we accept conceptual plurality also from the philosophical side, we would have a definition of the concept of God associated with classical theism, a definition of the concept of God associated with process theism, and so on and so forth. It would be a kind of pluralistic-definitional-representational approach to the concept of God.

There are however two problems with (PG) that seem to undermine this or any other pluralistic version of a definitional-representational approach to God. I call them the *problem of conceptual unity* and the *unicity of extension problem*. Here is the first problem: 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 even 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?

Focusing on the pluralistic-definitional-representational approach to God suggested above, the problem of conceptual unity would be something like this: in which sense can we say that our definitions, albeit definitions of different concepts, are definitions of *concepts of God*? One might say that what guarantees that these definitions are definitions of concepts of God is that there is a set of Godly distinguishing properties (albeit possibly very small) that is shared by all definitions. But

it is possible that two concepts of God do not share any properties at all. Suppose I have two concepts of God, named God_1 and God_2 . God_1 is characterized as a wholly good being who has created the world, but who is neither omnipotent nor omniscient (although extremely knowledgeable, he might not have perfect future knowledge). God_2 is characterized as an omnipotent and omniscient being who is neither wholly good (although extremely good, he might have some few flaws of character) nor has created the world (the world might have always existed). Although God_1 and God_2 do not have any Godly distinguishing common properties, they both seem to be legitimate concepts of God.

The unicity of extension problem can be explained as follows. Concepts can be instantiated. Since we are admitting the existence of different concepts of God, it seems natural that all of them might be instantiated. But I have argued that the (monotheistic) concept of God is an extensionally unique concept: there can be at most one instance of it. Of course, we might say that each one of these concepts of God individually meets this criterion, that is to say, each one of them satisfies (AM). But then we have a situation where there might be an entity which is the instance of the Christian concept of God, a different entity which is the instance of the Jewish concept of God, a different one which is the instance of the Islamic concept of God, and so on and so forth. And how about if more than one of these possibilities is actualized? We would have more than one GOD, which goes against (EAM).

To see the situation from the perspective of the pluralistic-definitional-representational approach does not make things better. To characterize a concept through a definition only makes sense if it is possible that there is an entity which satisfies all conditions, and therefore falls under the concept. Otherwise, the concept is an impossible concept. Supposing that our definitions of God do not characterize impossible concepts, it might be that two entities satisfy the conditions of two definitions, implying then the existence of two GODS.

To sum up: If we reject (PG), we make the definitional-representational approach to the concept of God susceptible to the problems of error and ignorance and lack of successful definitions. If we accept (PG), on one hand we get rid of these problems, but on the other we get stuck with the problem of conceptual unity and the unity of extension problem. It is important to stress that these two problems—the problem of conceptual unity and the unity of extension problem—are problems not only for a definitional approach to the concept of God, but for any pluralistic approach to the concept of God: they threaten the very tenability of the idea that there is a plurality of concepts of God, which is disturbing, for (PG) seems a very strong and reasonable thesis.

My purpose in the rest of the article is to sketch a pluralistic hybrid R-theory of the concept of God that retains (PG) while solves the problem of conceptual unity and the unity of extension problem. It is hybrid because, in addition to definitions, it uses another structure in the characterization of X in (R): *ideals*. It is in a sense a version of the pluralistic-definitional-representational approach to God that I proposed above that rejects both (SA^G) and (RUA^G).

6 The 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 Medin & 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 is “similarity”. The fact that a single entity is similar enough to the prototype (or set of exemplars) entitles us 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, 2009, 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.¹⁸

Although ideals are individual exemplars of a category, they are not ordinary exemplars. In general, ideals are not found in the concrete world (Weiskopf, 2009, 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, 2009, 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 is the same as why entities that fall under IMP abstract concepts cannot be concrete. Like IMP abstract concepts, 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 the 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, let us call it *m*, but also to a concept, *the concept of* ideal husband, and the corresponding category.¹⁹ Needless to say, the concept of ideal husband is an IMP abstract concept. The argument I gave in Sect. 2 to show that God is an IMP abstract concept can be rephrased to show that the concepts of ideal diet, ideal husband, ideal job, etc. are all IMP abstract.

What is not so obvious is that the category of ideal husbands is a possibly non-empty category of nonabstract entities. In other words, some actual husbands might be ideal husbands. But when an exemplar of the category of husbands is also an

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ I am assuming that *m* itself is not an exemplar of the category of ideal husbands, although it is an exemplar of the category of husbands. The reason for that is that the concept of ideal husband already embodies an idealization maximal perfection; differently from the concept of husband, there is not much to be perfected.

exemplar of the category of ideal husbands? When it is similar to m . In other words, the categorization process of IMP abstract concepts is to be based on similarity to ideals.

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, or IMP abstract concepts²⁰; 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 X to be these abstract objects we call ideals.

As mentioned, alike to prototype theory and exemplar theory, here categorization is also 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 an ideal, abstract exemplar of husband—call it h —that is a perfect provider, perfectly faithful, strong, respectful, sensitive, understandable, etc. 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

²⁰ To minimize terminological confusion, I have so far preferred the expression “IMP abstract concept” over the expression “ideal concept”, even though they are synonymous (see Sect. 2, where the terms are first introduced). From now on I will relax this and allow myself to use freely the term “ideal concept”. The reader however should keep in mind that while “ideal concept” refers to the kind of concept I have so far referred to by the expression “abstract IMP concept”, the term “ideal” refers to a kind of abstract object, a special, idealized member of a category.

X of (R) is best seen as a pair $\langle c, \Delta_c \rangle$, where c is an ideal and Δ_c is a list with the definitional properties of c . It is therefore a hybrid approach composed by two kinds of structures—definitions and ideals—that rejects (RUA). I call Δ_c 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 therefore pluralistic in the sense that it rejects (UA) and (RUA). But it might also be pluralistic in the full sense of rejecting both (UA) and (SA). As any other object, the ideal c might be described in different, sometimes conflicting ways. There might be several Δ_c 's, with different lists of property conditions. C might then be represented as different pairs: $\langle c, \Delta_c \rangle$, $\langle c, \Delta'_c \rangle$, $\langle c, \Delta''_c \rangle$, and so on and so forth. While there is only one I-concept of C, that is, one ideal c , there might be several D-concepts of C.

7 An idealistic R-theory of the concept of God

Let us now see how this full 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.²¹ 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— Δ_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 is not only one Δ_g , but several D-concepts of God.

It is clear, then, that this idealistic R-theory of the concept of God rejects (RUA^G). The X of (R^G) is a pair composed by two kinds of structures: an ideal g and a definition Δ_g . But how about (SA^G)? 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^G) and rejects (PG). There is only one ideal g ; since the concept of God

²¹ The question of what those desirable properties are is answered by specific D-concepts of God (see below). 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 the 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. 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.

might be understood in terms of g , there is a unique concept of God. But looking from the perspective of Δ_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 Δ_g 's and consequently different D-concepts of God. From this perspective, the theory is fully pluralistic: it rejects (RUA^G) and (SA^G), consequently, accepting (PG).

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

- (PG^D) There is a plurality of D-concepts of God.
 (SA^{G1}) There is such a thing as the unique I-concept of God.

the ones below are false:

- (PG^I) There is a plurality of I-concepts of God.
 (SA^{GD}) There is such a thing as the unique D-concept of God.

The fact that these different Δ_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 Δ_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), Δ_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 Δ'_g and Δ''_g , respectively, does not threaten my solution to the unicity of extension problem. The fact that the several Δ_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 Δ'_g or Δ''_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 some very compelling argumentation, 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 (Hume, 1779), 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 the ideal exemplar of a category (the category of beings), 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 in Zalta's logic, the domain D of this logical R-theory of ideal concepts would have two kinds of objects: abstract objects on one hand, and non-abstract, causally efficacious objects on the other (in Zalta's, instead of non-abstract objects we have concrete objects). 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 would be represented in the same way as any other object: through variables and constants. There would be a constant g meant to represent the ideal God. In order to allow for a plurality of Δ_g 's, a modal framework where constants denote the same object in all possible worlds (rigid designators), the objects of D exist in all possible worlds (constant domain) and the set of possible worlds W is not the same as the set of all logically possible worlds (K-semantics)—this is a semantic characterization of the Simplest Quantified Modal Logic (SQML)—would do the job. Each possible world would characterize g differently, corresponding to what might be termed a *theistic world*, that is, a complete way to conceive God. A specific Δ_g would correspond to a set of theistic worlds.

My fifth remark concerns polytheism. So far, I have dealt exclusively with the monotheistic concept of God. But how about a polytheistic view of God? Can my idealistic R-theory account for it? Yes, it can. But before explaining how, I must point out that not everything from my analysis can be applied to polytheism. The unicity of extension problem, for example, is obviously not a problem for polytheism: since there might be several instances of the concept of a god,²² it is not restrained by the monotheistic assumption. Also, the kind of plurality usually associated with the term “polytheism” is different from the plurality I have dealt with here. The polytheistic view is plural because the corresponding versions of (AM) and (EAM).

(AM') There is at most one entity that falls under the concept of a god.

(EAM') There is at most one god; otherwise said, the number of extensions of the word “god” is at most one.

are false: it is extensionally plural. On the other hand, as the formulation of (PG) makes clear, the plurality I have been dealing with here is conceptual. There are, of course, different concepts of a god. The concept of a god in Nordic paganism is different from the concept of a god in ancient Greek religion, which is different from the concept of a god in polytheistic Hinduism. But it seems safe to say that we do not find here the same degree of controversy found on the monotheistic side. Richard Swinburne's (1970, p. 6) definition of a god as a non-embodied rational agent of great power, for example, is probably compatible with most polytheistic traditions.

But independently on the way we characterize it, the concept of a god is also an idealization in the sense of a view too perfect or excellent of things we find in the world. Take Swinburne's definition, for example. I have argued above (footnote 20) how incorporeality can be seen as the result of maximally perfecting the property of corporeality. Also, the power displayed by many gods (that allow them to oversee and exercise control over certain natural phenomena, for example) is a maximization of the power we observe in humans and other animals, usually going beyond what is physically possible.

²² When referring to polytheism, I will use the expressions “god” and “concept of a god”, instead of “God” and “concept of God”, which I keep reserving to the monotheistic view.

Having said that, here is how the idealistic R-theory of the concept of God might deal with polytheism. In the same way that there is an abstract object that is *an* ideal exemplar of the category of beings—that is *g*, which is our I-concept of God—we might claim that there is *an* ideal exemplar of the category of rational beings, which will play the role of the I-concept of a god. Let us call it *g'*. Swinburne's definition might then be seen as a D-concept of a god, that is to say, as an attempt to definitionally characterize *g'*. While *g* is bound by our monotheistic assumptions, *g'* is not. Consequently, there might be several non-abstract objects that fall under the concept of a god. As before, a non-abstract object *x* is said to fall under the concept of a god if it is similar enough to *g'*.

The reason I wrote “an ideal exemplar” and not “the ideal exemplar”, as before, is that since *g* and *g'* might be the best exemplars of the same category (in the case GOD is in fact a rational being), using the definite article “the” would give a sense of unicity incompatible with the situation. This is the only major change necessary for the theory to account for polytheism. Also notice that *g* and *g'* are different from each other. Although related, the concept of God and the concept of a god are different concepts.²³ There are at least four reasons for that. First, as ideals, *g* and *g'* relate to different categories. Second, only *g* is required to be of ultimate value for believers.²⁴ Third, the concept of God and the concept of a god differ with respect to a very important point: the satisfaction of the assumptions of monotheism. While (AM) and (EAM) are true, (AM') and (EAM') are false. But not only that. Apparently, the following assumption (that I call *assumption of polytheism*) is true:

(AP) If there is any entity that falls under the concept of a god, then there is more than one entity that falls under the concept of a god.

My last remark concerns the debate on the rationality of theism. Its two main ‘fronts’—the construction and analysis of arguments for and against the existence of GOD and the analysis of the concept of God—can be described in terms of the concept of God as well as in terms of criteria of rational acceptance. For the sake of simplicity, I explain this from a theistic perspective. A theistic argument is concerned with the actuality of GOD, the supposed entity which falls under the concept of God; it therefore functions as a *positive-ontological criterion of rational acceptance*. On the other hand, one of the main concerns of the analysis of the concept of God is the question of whether God is a possible or coherent concept. To rationally believe in GOD, the first thing one must do is to make sure that God is not

²³ Because of that, the following alternative account is not feasible: having only one ideal to represent a generic concept of god, and the several monotheistic and polytheistic concepts being attempts (D-concepts) to characterize it. According to the account I am proposing, the Nordic concept of a god and the concept of God of classical theism, for example, are not on the same level: while the former would take the shape of a D-concept meant to characterize the ideal *g'*, the later would correspond to a D-concept meant to characterize a different ideal, that is *g*.

²⁴ I am assuming that, although believers in the polytheistic traditions attach great value to the gods, and may even place greater value on one specific god, no god has an *ultimate* value like that of God in monotheistic traditions.

an impossible concept. It therefore functions as a *negative-conceptual criterion of rational acceptance*.

But it seems that there is something between these two extremes, namely a *positive-conceptual criterion of rational acceptance*. A great deal of people would perhaps reject, from mere conceptual reasons, the belief in the existence of a tribal, exclusivist and vengeful GOD who demands exclusive worship for himself, even if it corresponds to a coherent concept. On the other hand, viewing GOD as a forgiving and compassionate father who loves equally all human beings, for example, seems to play the opposite role in many people's acceptance of theistic belief. From a general point of view, plausibility or likelihood is what lies between possibility and actuality. It thus seems reasonable to take the plausibility of the concept of God as the core of this positive-conceptual criterion of rational acceptance.

One of the problems with this idea is that plausibility and likelihood are terms that we usually attach to propositions, not concepts. Furthermore, a reduction of plausible concepts from plausible propositions is not as trivial as a reduction of possible concepts from possible propositions.²⁵ To go on with this idea, it seems that we need at the very minimum a theory of concepts that allows the discourse on the plausibility of concepts.

It turns out that the theory of ideal concepts allows that. Since it makes sense, in this theory, to talk about Δ_g as the proper, correct or best D-concept of God, it also makes sense to talk about Δ_g as a plausible D-concept of God; it also makes sense to say that Δ_g is more or less plausible than another D-concept of God. The other way to see this is to note that Δ_g might be represented as a proposition, namely one stating that g possesses properties $P_1, P_2 \dots$ and P_n , for all properties P_i 's contained in Δ_g . As such, at least in principle we can talk about the plausibility or likelihood of Δ_g .

Of course, this is the very minimum, as I said. To have a theory of the plausibility of the concept of God we will need to argue for some general criteria of conceptual plausibility applicable to all concepts, as well as for specific criteria applicable only to the concept of God.²⁶ Nevertheless, the fact that we can, within this idealistic R-theory of the concept of God, speak about the plausibility of the concept of God, along with the other issues discussed—the problem of conceptual unity and the unity of extension problem, the similarity-based categorization process, the

²⁵ Let P_C be the proposition that there is an object which falls under concept C . C is a possible concept iff P_C is a possible proposition. On the other hand, the claim that P_C is a plausible proposition is one of the things that might appear as conclusion of an argument for the existence of GOD, in this case an inductive or evidential argument. It does not seem to concern with the concept of God itself.

²⁶ With the help of these general criteria of conceptual plausibility we could compare, for example, the concept of God with the concept of a god. But what are these criteria? Keeping in mind that answering that question is definitely beyond the scope of this article, here are some ruminations that might be proved useful. First of all, for a concept to be plausible it must be coherent: possibility is a precondition of plausibility. Second, fruitfulness seems to be a *desideratum* of conceptual plausibility. A concept is fruitful if it has a high explanatory power. In its turn, a concept has a high explanatory power if it is an indispensable part of a very compelling explanation of phenomena for which there is no consensually accepted explanation. Third, it also seems desirable that a plausible concept be simple, or as simple as the other constraints allow. Finally, all that makes sense only if the concept is precise, in the sense of being described in clear terms.

tenability of its being formalized within the SQML and my proposed polytheistic account—seem to point to the fruitfulness of the theory.

8 Conclusion

In this article I have analyzed some of the main criticisms against the classical theory of concepts regarding its use in the characterization of the concept of God. One of the results of this analysis was that the problems that threaten a definitional-representational approach to the concept of God—the problem of error and ignorance and the problem of lack of successful definition—depend on the plurality inherent to the religious context. This plurality depends on (SA^G), the thesis that there is a unique concept of God. Once we reject it and accept its negation—the thesis that there is a plurality of concepts of God (PG)—we get rid of these two problems; on the other hand, we get stuck with two new problems: the problem of conceptual unity and the unity of extension problem. These problems threaten the tenability of the very idea that there is a plurality of concepts of God as well as the prospects of any pluralistic approach to the concept of God.

In the second part of the paper, I outlined a hybrid special theory of concepts, called the theory of ideal concepts. The theory is special because it deals with a special kind of concepts, called ideal concepts, to which the concept of God belongs. It is hybrid because, in addition to definitions, it uses another structure in the characterization of X in (T) and (R): ideals. I then argued that when aimed at (R^G) and added to a pluralistic view of concepts, this theory answers the problem of conceptual unity and the unity of extension problem. I called this pluralistic theory of ideal concepts applied to the concept of God the idealistic R-theory of the concept of God.

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