

Personal God or Something Greater ?

William Paley thought that his ‘proof’ of God’s existence also, incidentally, proves that God is a *person*.

‘Contrivance, if established, appears to me to prove every thing which we wish to prove. Amongst other things, it proves the *personality* of the Deity, ...’

..... that which can contrive, which can design, must be a person. These capacities constitute personality, for they imply consciousness and thought. They require that which can perceive an end or purpose; as well as the power of providing means, and of directing them to their end. They require a centre in which perceptions unite, and from which volitions flow; which is mind. The acts of mind prove the existence of a mind; and in whatever a mind resides, is a person. The seat of intellect is a person.¹

Many, perhaps most, present day theists believe in a ‘personal’ God, i.e. a God who is a ‘person’; but what does this mean?

In *Knowledge of God*, Alvin Plantinga offers the following characteristics of persons (i.e. people):

- (1) [A person] is the kind of being who is conscious and enjoys some kind of awareness.
- (2) A person has loves and hates, wishes and desires; she approves of some things and disapproves of others; she wants things to be a certain way. We might put this by saying that persons have *affections*.
- (3) A person is a being who has *beliefs*, and, if fortunate, knowledge.
- (4) A person is a being who has *aims* and *intentions*.
- (5) Persons can often act to fulfill their intentions; they can bring it about that things are a certain way; they can cause things to happen.²

Plantinga, like Paley, believes in a personal God. That is to say he believes that God is literally a person and that this person actually exists. He calls this “classical theistic belief – classical Muslim and Jewish as well as Christian belief –”³ Does this mean that there have been *some* Muslim, Jewish, and Christian believers who were personalists, or is Plantinga claiming that this has been the standard view in these religions all along? Is this claim supposed to apply to believers in general or, primarily, to theologians? [I will assume that, for the most part, we are discussing theologians.]

I have two comments to make. The first has to do with affections. If person A really loves person B, then A’s well being, A’s happiness, is, at least to some extent, in B’s

¹ *Natural Theology*, Printed by S. Hamilton, 1813, p. 408.

² Alvin Plantinga and Michael Tooley, *Knowledge of God*, p. 2. I have modified the text in various ways; but have not made any substantial changes. See also Plantinga’s *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, pp. 66-68.

³ *Knowledge of God*, p. 1.

hands. B can harm A – can bring it about that A is less well off than he or she would otherwise be. This, I think, is just a fact about love.

If I am right about this, then, if God is literally a person, one who loves us, wants us to thrive, and wants us to love him or her in return, then we can harm God, diminish his or her happiness by disliking him or her, or deciding that he or she doesn't exist, or just messing up our own lives. Wouldn't God be better off if he or she wasn't vulnerable in this way? [Of course one might hold that being vulnerable in this way is a good thing. Presumably people of this sort are *better people* than those who lack this vulnerability. Nevertheless....]

The rest of this note has to do with the history of Christian theism. As I see it, up until the Reformation, many – perhaps most – of the leading Christian theologians were not personalists in regard to God's nature.⁴ I think, for example, that Augustine and Anselm would have rejected the idea that God literally, in the ordinary everyday sense of these terms, has loves and hates, wishes and desires, aims and intensions. I think their God was not that kind of thing – not literally a person.

It's difficult to spell out traditional alternatives to personalism; but I'll give it a try. Roughly speaking, the idea is that it is permissible to think of God as a person, to speak to him/her as if to a person, and so on, but, in fact, God is not literally, in the ordinary everyday sense of the term, a person. God is somehow, in some ways, like a person, but different than, and superior to, any possible person.

At least two distinct kinds of things would clearly rule out God being a person in the Paily/Plantinga sense. One is ineffability, another is God being Goodness itself, Truth itself, Being itself, or the Ground of Being.

Many traditional theologians have claimed that God is ineffable, incomprehensible, indescribable.

Anselm in his *Monologion*, after discussing the trinity, reminds himself and his readers that the supreme essence (i.e. God) is supposed to be ineffable. How then can Anselm have reasoned his way to the truth about the trinity?

Perhaps it is explicable - and hence our conclusions true - only up to a point; while being incomprehensible, and therefore ineffable, as a whole. But what about our earlier conclusion, namely, that the supreme essence is above and beyond all other natures? Given this, when we talk about it, the words may be common to both, but not their meanings.⁵ But which, then, was the sense in which I have taken all the terms in my thought if not the common and ordinary? So if the ordinary sense of words is inapplicable to the supreme essence, whatever I have thought out is inapplicable as well. How then can I

⁴ From here on I mean 'personalist' in the Paily/Plantinga sense.

⁵ Sandra Visser and Thomas Williams in their book, *Anselm*, claim that "Anselm does not in the end accept the claim that the words used of both God and creatures have a different sense in those two uses." p, 121. They know a lot more about Anselm than I do; but I disagree.

have discovered something true about the supreme essence, if what I did discover is so completely different?⁶

What then? Have I, in some way, brought something to light about something incomprehensible, although, in another way, gained no direct insight into it?⁷

If God is incomprehensible then God is not, literally, a person. For instance, God does not, literally, have loves and hates, wishes and desires. I take this to imply that, as Anselm sees it, God [the 'supreme essence'] is not, literally, a person.

How could Anselm have told us anything more about the sort of God he worships if his God is 'incomprehensible'?

What we do, when we cannot, or will not, utter something properly, is to signify it by means of something else – a riddle for example.⁸

So the situation is something like this: We are told that in ancient times the sphinx used to sit outside Thebes asking everyone that came by "What goes on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?"

If the passer-by failed to answer the question correctly the Sphinx killed him or her on the spot. On the other hand, if the traveler answered correctly, the Sphinx would, presumably, commit suicide. The answer to this riddle, in case you have forgotten, is a *human being* – one who typically crawls as a baby, walks on two legs as a mature adult, and totters around with a cane in old age.

How does this work? Actually, of course, human beings do *not* wander around on four legs in the morning. They crawl around on their hands and knees when they are very young. Nevertheless, we see some similarity here. Early childhood is, sort of, in some respects, like morning. It's the beginning of a life, and morning is the beginning of a day. Crawling is a bit like going on four legs. There is an analogy here.

Anselm says that alleged information about God is like this.

Another approach may help.

... often we do not see something properly (i.e. as it is), but we see it by means of some likeness or image – when for instance we make out someone's face in a mirror. Thus we say and do not say, see and do not see, one and the same thing. For it is through something else that we say it, and we see it. But through what is proper to it, we do not.⁹

⁶ Anselm of Canterbury *The Major Works*, p. 71

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 71.

In, say, 1080 AD mirrors were not as good as they are now.

Consider the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius (end of 5th century.) Here is a typical bit:

Never, then, is it true to say, that *we* know God; not from His own nature (for that is unknown, and surpasses all reason and mind), but, from the ordering of all existing things, as projected from Himself, and containing a sort of images and similitudes of His Divine exemplars, we ascend, as far as we have power, to that which is beyond all, by method and order in the abstraction and pre-eminence of all, and is the Cause of all. ¹⁰

As usual, his meaning is not altogether clear; but it is clear that Dionysius was not a personalist. He had substantial influence on subsequent theology. Aquinas often quotes him with approval.

Here is Aquinas on the perfection of existing:

...every perfection is a perfection of existing, for things are perfect in so far as they have existence in some way. God, therefore, cannot lack the perfection of anything. And Dionysius is touching upon this argument when he says that 'God does not exist in any particular way, but possesses all being in himself - absolutely, limitlessly, and in a uniform way.' He goes on to say that 'God is the being of all that subsists.'¹¹

Aquinas was not a personalist. Given that Aquinas, Anselm, and Augustine have been, and still are, taken very seriously by many Christians, my guess is that many Christians have been non-personalists, and some still are.

¹⁰ Christian Classics, Ethereal Library, Dionysius the Aropegite, Works (1897) John Parker (translator). p. 60.

¹¹ Summa Theologiae, Questions on God, Article 2, question 4. P 47, Cambridge texts in the History of Philosophy of Philosophy, p 47.

