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Analytic Theology
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*“None of the heaven which is above the heavens, no earthly poet has sung
or ever will sing in a worthy manner.” – Plato, Phaedrus.*

The attributes of God

The short list of the attributes of God is usually summed up with “the omni-s.” God is said to be omnipresent, omnipotent, omni-benevolent and omniscient. The non-omni-s include: perfect, eternal (or everlasting), just, merciful, slow to anger², spirit. The full list is quite extensive. We will limit our scope today to those attributes discussed in the readings with few excursions. Since each attribute hangs, to some degree or another, on other attributes, I will not be able to keep the discussion as tidy as I would like. In some cases this will require me to assume premises or attributes that have not yet been discussed, or will not be discussed. Sometimes I will be forced to assume a position that will later be challenged to adequately explicate the attribute being examined. I hope this is not seen as a defect in my logic, but rather an example of how tightly interconnected all these concepts are.

Immutability and impassibility

God’s immutability—unchangingness—is generally considered to be a logical consequence of God’s perfection—an attribute not under direct discussion but an excursion that is needful to make sense of what is behind an unchanging God. Most philosophies place a

1. I apologize for the tardiness of this essay—the final reading was not available to me until the last hour. The four dollar fine given to the person who was derelict in returning the recalled book is the sole bit of consolation I can offer. I will make the reading available later today for those who wish to have access to it.

2. אָרְךָ אֵפִים - Lit. “long of nose.”

priority on “being” over “becoming.” What has “being” is more real than what is merely “becoming.” This is a logical preference, it seems to me; I like the ground on which I stand to be stable. We rightfully place our confidence and trust in those things which endure through time, the more they endure, the more confidence we place in them (and here the circle of this explanation becomes clearly visible). Things that change “become” something else and are less trustworthy. Pre-Socratic philosophers like Zeno posited that the real world was motionless and spherical; the world of motion and change, the world of becoming, is merely an illusion. The passage from the Phaedrus quoted at the top is the opening to one of the passages where Plato has Socrates explain what the *real* world, the heaven of the heavens, is; absolute being, absolute knowledge with out any “becoming” in it. This really *real* gives rise to the concept of perfection in Greek thought. A perfect thing lacks in nothing and has no excess. The perfect is unchanging since any change could only be a change for the worse. If it could change for the better, then it would not be perfect. If it can change, it can’t be perfect.

Given this priority for being, which gives us this conception of perfection, and since perfection is one of the attributes of God, God must be immutable since any change in God would result in perfect-God becoming non-perfect-God, which is to say, non-God. For God to be God, God must be immutable.

Creel lifts up a second argument, a logical derivative of the first, that is frequently used to prove God’s immutability: *divine simplicity*.³ Simplicity is not one of the attributes under consideration, but we’ll grant it for the sake of discussion. God is one, perfectly one, and has no parts. Without parts change is impossible. “Further, that which is composite, i.e. made up of

3. Richard E. Creel, “Immutability and impassability” in *A companion to Philosophy of Religion* eds. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Blackwell: 1997).

parts, depends on its parts for its nature and existence, and it depends on something to hold its parts together. But that which is absolutely perfect cannot depend on anything for its nature, existence or unity”⁴ This description depends on independence being a logical consequence of perfection as well. Again, we’ll just grant this position for the sake of our overview.

The third position that Creel lifts up is that of God’s *eternality*—which will be looked at in depth later.⁵ For now, “God is eternal in the sense that he must possess all his life at once, i.e. without succession.”⁶ Change requires the thing being changed to be inside of time, since an eternal God is outside of time, change is impossible.

Creel then presents the two major arguments for God’s mutability. First is the *nature of agency*. That is, for an agent to have power—to cause change to happen—it must stand within time for that power to be realized. And a perfect being must be an agent and not lacking in power, therefore God must be in time. The second argument is that God is omniscient—has perfect knowledge—and since the world changes, that knowledge must change as well. In specialist terms, there are truth-claims which are indexical to their temporal location. Something may be true at one moment and not true later. For God to know the truth of both of those would require God to change—at least in knowledge of the world.

Impassability is a far less clear concept. Creel’s definition is that “impassability is the property of being insusceptible to causation.”⁷ Nothing anything does to God can cause God to do anything. God cannot be coerced, cajoled or convinced. Secondly God is *pure act*, a concept that comes from Aristotelian metaphysics. God is the cause of everything and uncaused by

4. Creel, 313-314.

5. Sorry for the awful pun. It wasn’t intentional, I promise! But once it was in, I had to leave it.

6. Creel, 314.

7. Creel, 314.

anything, exists by virtue of God's own existence, essence, or will. Third, God must be *perfectly blissful* since any state other than bliss is a lack or deprivation of bliss.

The arguments for passibility stem from God's relationally to the world. God is said to be perfect in love for the world. Surely a perfectly loving God would respond to the concerns and needs of the object of that perfect love—our needs and concerns influence the God who loves us perfectly. The second is similar to the first; God must be able to enter into personal relationships and real relationships (not a given in a metaphysics that denies the reality of becoming) require give-and-take, especially if the other agents are in any way whatsoever free. The third argument for passability is like the second argument for mutability: for God to be omniscient God's knowledge must be caused, at least in part, by whatever is not-god unless God is to forever be ignorant of what is not-god and therefore not omniscient.

Creel is fully committed to a robust description of God as an absolutely perfect being (ABP).⁸ He works to see if impassability and immutability are logically consistent with divine perfection. Creel evaluates these two considerations in relation to God's (1) nature, (2) will, (3) knowledge, and (4) feeling.⁹ I wonder if such an analysis violates the oneness (and thereby perfection) of God? Can a being of *pure act* be said to be in any way divisible into such analytic categories?

8. This concept comes from St. Anselm's ontological argument which refers not to God's perfection (in the two major formulations, but in the third version in response to Gaunlio he does slip into the language of perfection) but rather describes God as "*a being than that which a greater cannot be conceived.*" Since perfection is not on the table, I will leave this distinction—which I think is more than a simple pious formulation—aside for later discussion.

9. Creel, 316.

Creel contends that it is universally conceded that the nature of the perfect being is impassible.¹⁰ But God's "knowledge of actualities may change as the actualities do."¹¹ God knows the indexical propositions to be true as they are true within time. A second possibility is that God's knowledge of indexical propositions is to know the truth of them all at all times outside-of-time. That is, God will know an actuality A to be true at time t1 and not true at t2 while knowing both A_{t1} and A_{t2} eternally and that this knowledge would not constitute a change since both truths are known. I think this move, however, denies that agents have freedom unless God happens to know all such possible truths in all possible worlds, actual or otherwise.

The same arguments hold for the will, but Creel finds the arguments for immutability of God's will to be more convincing, "God can index his will to all possibilities that can be actualized in the world that he intends to create, and he can do this independently of the existence of the world." Again, I think this would require that God index his will against not only the actual world, but all possible worlds at all possible times or else it denies creaturely freedom and renders the concept of will to be very hollow since God would be willing everything possible in every possible world—will crippled by an unwillingness to will, if you will.¹² Creel tries to get around a different formulation of this by differentiating between God's will and God's implementation of that will. His example of a sinner repenting is illuminating (and very Wesleyan I think). "How we experience [God's implementation of God's will] is contingent on how we change in relation to God." While I agree that this understanding of

10. Creel, 316. I think there are some in the process tradition who would not grant this but I do think that Whitehead would grant that God's *primordial nature* is immutable while God's *consequent nature* is ultimately mutable—indeed the most mutable thing there is.

11. Creel, 316.

12. Bad pun #2...

God's impassible will is better than Aristotle's unmoved mover, I still don't find it consonant with the Christian conception of God; this will be more deeply discussed in the section on eternity.

Another concern deals with God's impassability in perfect bliss as it relates to God's perfect love. A lover who cannot empathize, that is, share with our pains and suffering on any level, is a deficient lover—unless our sense of love is completely distorted. Impassive indifference is generally seen as callous and unloving, not ultimately loving. While I don't think God is co-dependent or enabling, simply putting up with our nonsense and sharing in our self-inflicted broken hearts, the idea of a God who is unable of genuinely suffering with the object of his love seems less than perfect. Creel agrees, "In brief, that God is touched by our joys and sorrows is what must be saved out of the passibilist position in order that we may believe that God cares about us in the deepest sense and therefore is approachable for companionship in the richest sense."¹³

Eternity or Everlasting

The pair of authors for this section are Leftow¹⁴ and Wolterstorff.¹⁵ Simply looking at the titles will indicate which side each of the authors is on. Leftow formulates the positions as:

(BE) God exists without beginning or end.

(GT) God's existence does not endure through, and has no location in time.¹⁶

13. Creel, 318.

14. Brian Leftow, "Eternity" in *A companion to Philosophy of Religion* eds. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Blackwell: 1997).

15. Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God is Everlasting" in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, Eds. Michael Peterson, et. al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

16. Leftow, 257.

The (GT) notation comes from “Greek Thought” i.e. Platonic idealism. Much of the discussion on immutability and impassability above assumed (GT) or the eternality of God. Some of the moves made on the passible and mutable side assumed, at least tacitly, (BE) or that God is without beginning or end, i.e. everlasting. An everlasting God would exist in time, yet would have neither a beginning nor an end. In Leftow’s analysis a life, even an everlasting life, has divisions. While a mortal life has a clear beginning and end (assuming no everlasting life with God) this isn’t the only division applicable. Lives are divided internally, “boundaries between parts, e.g. that between one’s first and second year. If a life lasts forever in time, always one part of it is past and another is future.”¹⁷ Appealing to the impassible bliss, Leftow argues that (BE) is inconsistent since at least some part of a life would be better than another for any being in time and an impassible being would be “better off” not living the parts that would not be as blissful as the others—“In not living part of His life, God would lose some good involved in living it. [...] Thus having a past and a future would limit the perfection of God’s life.”¹⁸ This, as already stated, assumes perfection implies impassability and perpetual bliss. The most powerful criticism of (BE) that I have found is that it makes God dependent on the existence of time—if time did not exist, God could not exist within that time. I wonder, however, if like God’s nature, will, knowledge and feeling, time could simply be construed as part of God proper. God’s existence is time’s existence in the same sense as the existence of God’s knowledge. I’ve not seen this idea explored anywhere other than maybe by rejection by Leftow: “Time is not God. [...] Whatever time’s precise status, though, theists want to trace to

17. Leftow, 258.

18. Leftow, 258.

God not just concrete things, but the most general conditions under which concrete things exist, time and space themselves.”¹⁹ But I do not think this fully addresses what I am exploring.

(GT) Lifts God out of time, or rather, never has God stand within time. God observes all of time in the actual world simultaneously as a ‘perpetual now.’ Hartshorne’s claim that the deepest ontological claim is “something is happening now” is true even for God, but not “something” rather “everything.” As discussed with indexical statements above, if all of reality at all times, is visible to God then omniscience of all actualities is possible without denying free will. Of course, no change is possible from the one world, there are not other possible worlds, only this actual world since, even though nothing is pre-determined, it is all seen, unchangingly, by God in the perpetual now—assuming divine immutability.

Wolterstorff does not argue for God’s everlastingness (against his eternalness) primarily by appealing to other attributes (although he does deny immutability). Instead he dives directly into the fulness of the Christian witness. He argues that a God who is eternal would completely be unable to relate to the world through history, and most importantly the incarnation, as we claim God has done. “God the Redeemer cannot be a God eternal. This is so because God the Redeemer is a God who changes. [...] A theology which opts for God as eternal cannot be a theology faithful to the biblical witness.”²⁰

Leftow attempts to address this concern by denying that all events have simple dates. “Asked when God knew that He would speak to Moses, a Hebrew Bible author might well have replied ‘eternally’ or ‘from eternity.’ These answers give dates.[...] An event is something that

19. Leftow, 259.

20. Wolterstorff, 140.

happens at some present. An eternal event is just one which happens at a peculiar present, the eternal present.”²¹

My counter is one of introducing a new “omni,” or, rather, reframing everlasting into an “omni.” An everlasting God is omnitemporal—at all times. Rather than being outside of time in a very peculiar eternal present, God is present at all present moments.²² Given our understanding of space-time in relative physics, as opposed to space and time being entirely distinct, would not an omnipresent God (to bring in an attribute not under consideration) be omnitemporal? It does us no pain for God to be omnipresent, within space. Why should it do us pain for God to be within space-time or omnitemporal? Indeed, I wonder if omnipresence makes nonsense of eternity given that presence changes—by being in every space in which events occur, does not God somehow participate in the events? I admit that I bring my own Whiteheadian baggage to the concept of “event” here. Leftow and I may need to work out what exactly we each mean by event in this case, but I am sincere in trying to use his term in his way for the purposes of this analysis.

Omnipotence

Our final attribute for consideration is that of omnipotence.²³ Geach makes the distinction between “almighty” and “omnipotent” in the following way: “I shall use the word ‘almighty’ to express God’s power over all things, and I shall take ‘omnipotence’ to mean

21. Leftow, 263.

22. Bad pun #3—Trifecta!

23. P. T. Geach, “Omnipotence” in *Philosophy* 48 (1973), p. 7-20.

ability to do everything.”²⁴ I find Geach’s definition of “almighty” lacking since it seems to deny creation *ex nihilo*. God’s power is over “all things” and *nihilo* is not properly a thing.

Geach notes that “almighty”²⁵ comes from the creeds of the Church while omnipotence is an import from Greek thought. Geach’s central argument is that “almighty” is absolutely vital to the Christian faith, “it is quite easy to show that this doctrine is indispensable for Christianity.”²⁶ To abandon God being “almighty” is to abandon our hope that God will be able to fulfill the promises made for our salvation. But, a Christian need not believe that God can do everything (construed in several ways) to be almighty. Omnipotence is not needful, but almighty is. “Indeed, the very argument I have just used shows that a Christian must not believe that God could possibly do everything: for he may not believe that God could possibly break his own word. Nor can a Christian even believe that God can do everything that is logically possible; for breaking one’s word is certainly a logically possible feat.”

I’m not convinced that breaking one’s word is logically possible for a supremely loving being, or a supremely moral being—it may still be possible for God to be omnipotent in one of the weaker senses (God can do everything that it is logically possible for a supremely loving/moral being to do) without violating Geach’s principles. However, I find the idea that God is *unable* to break God’s own word to be problematic. If God is *unable* to break God’s own word, then promises are not promises in the strict sense, they are simply *fait accompli* that aren’t *accompli* at this moment. For a promise of God to have moral value, I think God must be *able* to break those promises, but God will not because God is a perfectly moral being—this may seem

24. Geach, 7.

25. The word in the LXX is “pantokrator” but the Hebrew word which was translated this way is אֱלֹהִים (El Shaddai), which has absolutely nothing to do with power—it simply means “God-Breast”.

26. Geach, 8.

to be a distinction without a difference, but I find Geach's position to rob God of real moral content. The distinction between God's *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* raises the same concern that I had earlier: does such a distinction destroy the simplicity of God?

Geach's illustration of God's inability to do every logical possible thing using Miss X's virginity as an example seems to assume God's being in time. Since it is impossible for God to ensure that Miss X will perpetually be a virgin once she has lost her virginity, it seems that God is bound by the rules of a linear logic of time. While he deftly points out St. Thomas' inconsistency in adhering to omnipotence, I think that a robust understanding of either eternity or omnitemporality would obviate this concern. Since Thomas held to eternity, then I must think that he was having an off day when he worked with this question.

Concluding remarks

What I hoped to show was the complex interplay between the attributes by simply discussing a few and drawing on others where they needed to be pulled into the discussion. No one attribute—save maybe perfection—stands alone. The concept of perfection itself is very tricky—is an absolutely perfect being a perfect high-jump? Surely Geach would consider such a question to be gibberish, grammatically well-formed but devoid of any meaning. I raise it to simply highlight one issue on which I think we must get clear before real progress can be made. The network of attributes is tightly woven, not one of our authors stayed within the attribute in the title of their essay. Even my selection of perfection as a kind of root-attribute is open for debate.