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## *Attributes of God*

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Theists believe God exists, atheists believe that God does *not* exist, and agnostics suspend judgment on the issue. But what do each of these *mean* by 'God'? What is the concept of God that underlies the debate?[1]

This essay explains three important features of a widely-accepted idea of God and discusses some puzzles and paradoxes related to their application.

### **1. The "Omni-God" Conception**

In the Abrahamic religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the typical idea of God is that of a perfect<sup>[2]</sup> being who has, at a minimum, three properties or characteristics:

- omnipotence (being all-powerful),
- omni-benevolence (being wholly morally good), and
- omniscience (being all-knowing).

Other commonly attributed properties include:

- necessary existence (God exists, and could not fail to exist),
- aseity (God's existence does not depend on anything else; God is uncaused),
- immutability (God does not change), and
- eternal *or* everlasting existence (God exists at all times *or* outside of time).

This essay focuses on the first three attributes, as these are often taken to be *essential*, meaning that a being would not be God unless it has all three of these properties. The latter attributes are more controversial; e.g., if God exists *necessarily*, then God *exists*, which is not accepted by everyone who is interested in the question of whether God exists.<sup>[3]</sup>

### **2. Omnipotence**

Most people accept that the idea of God is that of an all-powerful, or omnipotent, being. What does that mean?

St. Augustine suggested that omnipotence means that *God can do anything that God wills to do*.<sup>[4]</sup> But what could God will? Could God will what's logically impossible, e.g., that 2 and 3 added together make 4, or create an object that is both round and square at the same time? Most philosophers argue that omnipotence only includes the ability to bring about logically consistent, not contradictory, states of affairs.<sup>[5]</sup>

Even if omnipotence is restricted to what is logically possible, there are puzzles.

A classic paradox, discussed by Islamic philosopher Ibn Rushd, also known as Averroes, asks whether God's omnipotence would allow God to create a stone so heavy God could not lift it. The paradox is this:

- If God *can* create such a stone, then God lacks the power to lift it, and so is not omnipotent.
- But if God *cannot* create this stone, then God is not omnipotent since this is something God cannot do.

Responses often involve arguing that careful analysis of the case shows that there is no actual paradox, e.g., that creating the stone is not in fact logically consistent, as the stone is described as something that both can and cannot be lifted, a contradiction, and so an impossibility.<sup>[6]</sup>

### **3. Omnibenevolence**

What is it to be omni-benevolent, or wholly morally good? Presumably, this means that such a being is perfectly virtuous: e.g., kind, generous and loving; never malicious or cruel; never causes or allows unnecessary harm; always does right and never does wrong.

Does being wholly morally good mean that one is *unable* to do anything morally wrong? Or could an omnibenevolent God choose to do wrong *if* God wished to, even if God never chooses to?

The first option might be problematic: if God's nature or essence would prevent God from doing wrong, is this still goodness in any meaningful sense?

Compare this to human goodness, and imagine two people, Alex and Blair. Alex is kind and generous because she thinks it is the right thing to do and actively seeks to be this way even when tempted to

do otherwise. Blair, however, is kind and generous because he *literally cannot* be any other way: Blair couldn't do wrong even if he wanted to. Who is the better person here? Those who find Alex better might object to understanding God's goodness as *impeccability* or the literal inability to do wrong. Others might deny that the freedom to do otherwise is required for genuine goodness and decide that God could be like Blair without any deficiency in goodness.<sup>[7]</sup>

This is closely related to a problem known as the Euthyphro dilemma: does God do what is good *because it is good*, or is what God does good *because God does it*? The first option seems to make God subject to an independent notion of goodness that even God must conform to. The second option, however, suggests that whatever God wills is automatically good. So, if God could will something horrific, that would make it good.<sup>[8]</sup>

#### 4. Omniscience

Omniscience is often defined as knowing everything there is to be known. Things get complicated, however, when we consider whether God knows facts about the future, and if so, how this bears on our free will.<sup>[9]</sup> For example, if God *knows* that you will submit your term paper 4 minutes before the deadline, that seems to rule out the possibility that you are free to turn it in earlier. Philosophers differ in their reaction to this problem, often on the basis of what they believe it means to have free will and whether God, or anyone, can indeed *know* the future (and whether there are truths about the future *now*).

#### 5. Conclusion: Combining the Attributes

These attributes raise questions and puzzles considered on their own, but other concerns arise from how these attributes relate to each other.

For example, omnipotence and omniscience combined with complete benevolence seem to entail the absence of unnecessary and undeserved suffering: God would *know* when such bad events would take place, and presumably have the *power* to prevent them. As a benevolent being, God would want to eliminate such events, so there should not be any. However, such suffering is arguably a fact of our lives, which calls the compatibility of these attributes into question.<sup>[10]</sup>

The proposed attributes raise difficult questions, but awareness of these issues can help make debates about the nature and existence of God more productive, as well as just make it clearer what sort

of God some people believe exists, others believe does not exist or still others suspend judgment about.

#### Notes

[1] It is important to note that some people use the word 'God' to refer to concepts other than the concept focused on here. For example, someone might think of 'God' as another name for 'love' or 'nature.' While people are free to use the word 'God' pretty much however they'd like, it is important to be clear on one's own concept or idea, so it's clear what is being said or thought. It is also important to clarify one's concept of God before engaging in debate about whether God exists. Imagine two people are discussing the existence of God: the first has a concept of an all-good, powerful and knowledgeable being and claims that such a being exists. The second believes that 'God' is just another name for 'nature.' If we do not narrow things down to a single concept, it seems that the point would be lost (e.g., we wouldn't want to say that both debaters are theists who believe that God exists), and it's also clear that, since nature exists, "God" clearly exists *in this sense* of the word. In order to focus on a specific debate about the existence of God, we will focus on a more common notion, concept or idea of God.

[2] Considering God to be a *perfect* being is directly tied to holding God to have these three attributes: a perfect being would seem to have as much power, knowledge and goodness as it is possible to have.

[3] Some versions of the Ontological Argument hinge on this controversy, e.g., Plantinga's Modal Ontological Argument. See [The Ontological Argument for the Existence of God](#) by Andrew Chapman.

[4] See, e.g., *City of God* Chapter 10.

[5] Many interpret Descartes, however, as having held that God can do anything, even if it is logically impossible, e.g., in his "Letter to Mersenne, 27 May 1630," where he states that "[God] was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal" (1984: 25). See, e.g., Frankfurt (1977) and Geach (1973) for support of this view. See, e.g., La Croix (1984) for a rejection of this interpretation.

[6] Some contemporary philosophers, e.g., Mavrodes (1963) and Savage (1967), have raised interesting response to this problem. Savage argues that even if God cannot create a stone God cannot lift, this is no threat to omnipotence, since this is consistent with God lifting any stone God creates, and also creating stones of any weight. (In other words, if God creates it, God can lift it, and God can create any stone. While

omnipotence requires creating stones of any weight, and lifting stones of any weight, it is asking too much to then ask God to create stones that are also unliftable.)

[7] The discussion of free will and moral responsibility is relevant to this question. See [Free Will and Free Choice](#) by Jonah Nagashima, [Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility](#) by Rebecca Renninger and [Free Will and Moral Responsibility](#) by Chelsea Haramia.

[8] For further discussion, see [Because God Says So: On Divine Command Theory](#) by Spencer Case.

[9] Whether or not future-based propositions have present truth values is a matter of debate. Some philosophers think that future propositions do not have truth values until they are present, while others think that tensed facts are eternally true. It might seem that, e.g., it is true right now that in two minutes you will finish reading this article. Because God is often taken to be eternal, or outside of time, it seems that God should know all facts at all times, regardless of the details of time for beings like us.

[10] For further discussion of this issue, see [The Problem of Evil](#) by Thomas Metcalf

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## About the Author

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