

Outline of Western Concepts of God

Michael Sudduth

Western ideas of God encompass both *impersonalist* and *personalist* conceptions. While the former tend to emphasize the transcendence and ineffability of God, western classical theism affirms both the transcendence and immanence of God as a personal being. Impersonalist models are closely associated with the *via negativa* strategy and mystical modes of knowing God. Personalist models employ various *cataphatic* descriptions of God (sometimes along with a limited use of the *via negativa*) as a development of the concept of God as creator or perfect being. And representatives of the latter, believing that positive descriptions are appropriate, tend to defend the legitimacy of proofs for the existence of God.

I. The Via Negativa or Apophatic Theology (e.g., Pseudo-Dionysius, Maimonides)

A. The Via Negativa (way of negation) approach to the knowledge of God maintains that we cannot know the essence of God and must talk about God by way of negations of qualities found in finite, created things. The more systematically this method is followed, the deeper is the knowledge of God. This is also designated apophatic theology.

B. Two Versions of Via Negativa

1. Strong Via Negativa: God can only be known by negative predication.

2. Moderate Via Negativa: God can only be known by negative predication and a highly restricted set of positive descriptions.

C. Sample of Negative Attributes: God is not material (immaterial), God is not an individual thing (one), God does not change (immutable), God does not depend on anything else for his existence (independent), God is not caused to exist (self-existent), and God is eternal (God is not inside time).

D. Justification for Via Negativa: (i) God is the absolute creator of the universe, (ii) an absolute creator is a wholly transcendent being, and (iii) only negative attribution is appropriate when finite beings speak about a wholly transcendent being.

E. Important Qualifications.

1. Some positive attribution seems necessary if the *via negativa* is motivated by the (positive) conception of God as creator. The essence of God is still unknowable.

2. The use of positive attributes (e.g., wisdom, goodness, life) in scripture to speak about God is interpreted as (a) God being the cause of those qualities in created beings, (b) reducible to negation, e.g. wise = not ignorant), or (c) as metaphors indicating God's perfection, i.e., God lacks nothing.

F. In its stronger form the *via negativa* involves an impersonalist conception of God, for the ordinary conception of personhood requires a range of positive descriptions that would not be justifiably attributable to God.

II. Perfect Being Theology (e.g., Anselm)

A. God is a maximally perfect being, that is, a being with the greatest array of compossible great-making properties. (Great-making properties are properties it is intrinsically better to possess than to lack).

1. Some Properties are Negative (*via negativa*): immateriality, immutability, independence.

2. Some Properties are Positive (*via positiva*): necessary existence, omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence

B. This methodology is usually employed to develop a robust concept of God and to prove the existence of such a God by arguing that the possibility of such a being existing entails its actual existence.

C. Although the Scriptures of western theism affirm that God is perfect, philosophically perfect being theology is an a priori approach resting on intuitions about value and modal intuitions (e.g., intuitions about possibility).

D. Traditionally, perfect being theology is a cataphatic approach to God and is grounded in neoplatonist philosophy with its judgments about what constitutes perfections. Perfect being theologians typically make a limited use of the *via negativa*, as some great-making properties are negative properties.

E. While baseline perfections are properties like existence, consciousness, knowledge, power, and goodness, having these to an infinite degree is typically regarded (by perfect being philosophers) as better than having them to some finite degree. Hence, while it is better to be consciousness than to lack consciousness, and better to have knowledge than ignorance, it is better to be a consciousness who knows everything than to have limited knowledge. Similarly, while it is better to exist than not to exist, it is better to be a being whose non-existence is impossible (metaphysically or logically).

F. Since this concept of God derives its content from the set of great-making properties selected, different and conflicting accounts of the nature of God potentially arise using this method. First, there are different intuitions about

great-making properties. Some, for example, regard timelessness as a great-making property; others regard temporality without beginning or end as a great-making property. Secondly, a maximally perfect *person* might differ significantly from a maximally perfect *being*, such that God could not be both. We might suppose, for example, that a maximally perfect person is an agent who responds to others, whereas a maximally perfect being is wholly immutable and timeless entity incapable of responding to anyone.

III. Creation Theology (e.g., St. Thomas Aquinas)

A. God is the being who is the creator of the universe (or any universes that might exist).

B. Inasmuch as the Scriptures of the western traditions identify God as the creator of the universe, this method has revelational sanction. However, philosophically it is an a posteriori approach resting on the application of the principle of causation that links the universe (as effect) to God (as cause). Classically, creation theologians draw heavily on Aristotle.

C. Philosophers using this method derive both a concept of God by reflecting on what kinds of properties a creator must have, but they typically reason to the existence of such a being as required by a principle of sufficient reason or as the best explanation of the universe and its fundamental features. Most creation theologians hold to the general principle that effects resemble their causes, which allows the derivation of attributes of the creator from observations about the universe.

D. Some properties of God will be positive (e.g., creator, wise, powerful, good), whereas others will be negative (not material, not temporal, not dependent). Aquinas, for example, begins with a minimal positive description of God as the causal agent responsible for the world's existence (and its fundamental properties) but then proceeds to unpack this basic idea by denying of God various modes of metaphysical composition that Aristotle used to talk about the nature of the world. As Maimonides argued, the ultimate cause of the universe cannot be like the world. In a sense Aquinas agrees, but Aquinas qualifies this by adding how it is that God's simplicity actually helps us construct a cataphatic theology in which the perfections in the world are in God in an unlimited way.

E. The method is limited in crucial ways with respect to justifying the classical western concept of God since it seems implausible to suppose that a cause of the universe must be omnipotent or omniscient or omnibenevolent, much less all three. Creation theologians often appeal to other principles (such as some version of "simplicity") to get the concept of a being with these "omni" properties.

F. An advocate of creation theology need not maintain that God's being the creator of the universe requires that the universe had a beginning, even

though the majority of them have held this. An eternally existing universe is still in need of an ultimate explanatory principle. God can be the ultimate sustaining cause of an externally existing universe, if that universe is not self-explanatory or self-caused.