

INTRODUCTION

The Existence and Nature of Deities

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One of the most significant features that most (if not all) religions share is the belief in the existence of deities. Deities are *usually* taken to be supernatural beings with superhuman powers to control and/or be impactful on some aspect(s) of the world. These aspects may include, but are not restricted to, human life and destiny. Some deities enjoy degrees of perfection that are, at least in some respects, far beyond the maximum degree of perfection that a human being might achieve. It is perhaps because of these things that the followers of a religion worship its deities and take being in relation with them as a vehicle for spiritual growth and happiness.

Given the central roles that deities play in religions, it is quite natural that the most significant philosophical questions regarding a specific religion include (even though not limited to) the questions of the existence, nature, and attributes of the deities that are believed in that religion. In the context of the monotheistic religions, these discussions are exclusively focused on the unique deity accepted in such religions—e.g., God in the Abrahamic religions. That is why much of the contemporary philosophy of religion—which has been largely Christianity-oriented—has focused on discussions regarding the existence and attributes of the Christian God. Of course, due to the similarities between the God of Christianity and those of the other Abrahamic religions (i.e., Judaism and Islam), those Christianity-oriented discussions have been of interest to the followers of the other two religions too. Nevertheless, the extent of negligence of the contemporary philosophy of religion towards the issues that are either (1) exclusively related to the God of Judaism or Islam or (2) related to the existence and nature of deities accepted in non-Abrahamic religions can hardly be exaggerated. This clearly shows that it is vital for diversifying the field of philosophy of religion to encourage and welcome discussions around the existence and nature of deities of all religions and not only Christianity. And this is exactly what this special issue aims to do.

This issue includes six papers which address the topics and problems related to the existence and nature of deities in five of the major religious traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the first paper of this issue, Mikel Burley discusses the nature and significance of the Hindu Divine Mother from a feminist theological (or, as Naomi Goldenberg calls it, ‘theological’) perspective. In particular, by exploring (1) what salient features human’s embodied experience of life and the world have and (2) how the Hindu Divine Mother is often conceptualized, Burley tries to elucidate “the sense that worshipping the Divine Mother can have in a life”.

The second paper of this issue is by Jessica Frazier. She discusses the metaphysical monism of the Vedānta in contrast to the pluralisms of Vaiśeṣika Hinduism and Abhidharma Buddhism. She meticulously shows how this monistic conception of reality is interwoven with the idea of divinity and sacredness in the Vedāntic schools of Indian philosophy. More precisely, Frazier argues that, in the specific monistic framework she sketches, “what makes Brahman sacred is its nature as a universal super-causal ground possessing all reality in *potentia*”. In this sense, Brahman is different from a causal ground whose causes are ontologically distinct from it and built upward only contingently. Finally, Frazier addresses some of the most significant similarities and dissimilarities between Vedāntic monism and the monist metaphysics developed by contemporary analytic philosophers.

In the third paper of this issue, Samuel Lebens engages with the problem of God’s personhood from the perspective of Judaism. He examines a series of theories developed in the Jewish tradition, regarding the question of whether God is a person, from the time of Maimonides until today. Lebens argues against the medieval theories which state that the God of Judaism is not a person as well as their alternatives which render the God of Judaism as a person. God must be seen as both fully personal and fully impersonal, or so Lebens contends. To make sense of this seemingly paradoxical claim, he sketches and defends a Hassidic ontology in which “God is both fully, and not at all, a person”.

Elizabeth Jackson and Justin Mooney, in the fourth paper of this issue, investigate the four possible answers to the question of whether or not God has beliefs and credences: “(1) God has only beliefs, not credences; (2) God has both beliefs and credences; (3) God has only credences, not beliefs; and (4) God has neither credences nor beliefs, only knowledge.” They examine the philosophical and theological costs and benefits of each of these views in the context of the Judaeo-Christian traditions, even though their treatment seems to be applicable to Islam as well.

The fifth paper of this issue offers an intriguing comparative study between the arguments proposed by al-Ghazālī and Alvin Plantinga against the idea of divine simplicity that is widely accepted in the Abrahamic religions. In this paper, Jon McGinnis argues that the similarities between these arguments are so striking that we are justified to say that Plantinga’s attack against the doctrine of divine simplicity is anticipated by al-Ghazālī. This is so despite the fact that, by contrast with al-Ghazālī who responds to the Avicennian conception of divine simplicity, Plantinga is mainly concerned with the Thomist version of this doctrine.

This issue will be closed by a paper on various interpretations of Avicenna’s main argument for the existence of God—i.e., the Proof of the Sincere. In this paper, Mahmoud Morvarid provides a careful analysis of the pivotal notions employed in this argument, which are the notions of *necessary in itself* and *contingent in itself*. Depending on the different understandings of these notions, we have different versions of the Proof of the Sincere, or so we are told by Morvarid. He then scrutinizes the advantages and disadvantages of these different versions over each other.

These articles collectively form a rainbow of various approaches to the problems of the existence and nature of deities in different religious traditions. This collection neither was intended to nor could cover all the relevant topics and approaches. Nevertheless, I hope it can provide at least partial evidence that the field of philosophy of religion will be much richer if philosophical issues regarding other religions are discussed alongside the discussions focused on Christianity. Even through this small number of articles, we can easily see how seemingly very different religious traditions can be concerned with similar philosophical issues. These common concerns provide the initial motivations for philosophical dialogues between the different traditions. This, in turn, promises a more diverse, dynamic, alive, and rich research environment in which any philosopher concerned with any religion is welcome to contribute. And, hopefully, such diverse contributions

help us to attain a better philosophical understanding of ideas like transcendent reality, deity, and God.

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