

Competing conceptions of God: the personal God versus the God beyond being

MIKAEL STENMARK

*Department of Theology, Uppsala University, Box 511, 751 20 Uppsala, Sweden
e-mail: mikael.stenmark@teol.uu.se*

Abstract: Among philosophers and theologians today, one of the most important dividing lines is the one separating those who advocate a personal conception of God (personal theism) from those who embrace the idea of a God beyond or without being (alterity theism). There is not much dialogue between these groups of scholars; rather the two groups ignore each other, and each party typically believes that there is a fairly straightforward knockdown argument against the other. In this article I explore these two standard objections – the idolatry objection and the no-sense objection – and show why they both fail to be convincing. This failure to convince is a good thing, because it opens up the possibility that both personal theism and alterity theism are legitimate research programmes, each worthy of being further developed in philosophical theology.

The essays and books written in response to the so-called ‘new atheism’ are numerous (and so are the counter-replies). One interesting feature is that whilst one type of response has been to show why the particular arguments of new atheists are not convincing, another one has been aimed at showing why new atheists miss the mark altogether. It is these different responses and their significance for theology and philosophy of religion that I focus on in this essay. The idea behind the second response is that new atheists miss the mark altogether because the conception of God they presuppose in their arguments is the modern idolatrous conception of God, and not the kind of conception of God which contemporary theologians and philosophers typically embrace. This response to new atheism has been given by, for instance, Karen Armstrong, Richard Grigg, Gavin Hyman, and Jeffery W. Robbins and Christopher D. Rodkey.

I shall argue that these two different ways of responding to new atheism reveal one of the most important dividing lines recognizable among philosophers and theologians today. This line goes between those who advocate a personal conception of God (personal theism) and those who embrace the idea of a God

beyond or without being (what I shall call ‘alterity theism’). There is not much dialogue between these groups of scholars; rather the two groups ignore each other, and each party typically believes that there is a fairly straightforward knockdown argument against the other. In this article I shall explore these two standard objections – the idolatry objection and the no-sense objection – and show why they both fail to be convincing. This failure to convince is a good thing, because it opens up the possibility that both personal theism and alterity theism are legitimate research programmes, each worthy of being further developed in philosophical theology. Furthermore we need them both, because whereas alterity theists run the risk of exaggerating God’s transcendence to such an extent that God becomes just an empty notion with no relevance for society or for the life of religious believers, the risk that personal theists face is rather that of making God into a superman, of conceptualizing God too closely to the level of human beings. Since the two camps run almost directly opposite risks, and for this reason can counterbalance each other, it becomes absolutely crucial that we leave the old days of mutual disrespect behind and engage in a constructive dialogue with each other.

The modern idolatrous conception of God

So what is the problem with new atheism? Karen Armstrong maintains that ‘the new atheists are not radical enough. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians have insisted for centuries that God does not exist and there is “nothing” out there; in making these assertions, their aim was not to deny the reality of God but to safeguard God’s transcendence’ (Armstrong (2009), xvi). But the modern God – the God that the new atheists reject – is only one of the many theologies that have been developed in history. But because God is infinite, nobody can have the last word, and Armstrong is therefore concerned that many people are confused about the nature of religious truth.

Jeffrey W. Robbins and Christopher D. Rodkey hold a similar view, writing: ‘Put succinctly, the new atheism is insufficiently radical’ (Robbins & Rodkey (2010), 26). Theism affirms and atheism denies the existence of God, but we should follow Paul Tillich and declare that ‘God does not exist’, since ‘existence’ is an ontological category for objects and not for God. God is rather being-itself, an ontological category of its own – ‘a radical Other who still has the power to surprise’ (*ibid.*, 27).¹ It is a conception of God beyond cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments for God, and beyond the argument from evil or, say, Dawkins’s Boeing 747 argument against God.

Richard Grigg tells us that:

Most theologians today do not understand God in the same way as is being criticized so heavily in such works as Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*. In fact . . . most theologians left behind an unalloyed, classical theism [built on a notion of a transcendent personal

consciousness who created the world] about two hundred years ago. (Grigg (2008), back cover)

Thus we have to get beyond the God delusion and explore how it is possible to be religious in a scientific age.

Gavin Hyman's thesis is that the new atheists actually reject an old (modern but not medieval) conception of God which theologians and some philosophers at the end of modernity have overcome and no longer embrace. So the end of modernity does indeed bring with it the end of atheism. It does not, however, leave things open for a simple return to theism. This is because it is the 'very dualism between theism and atheism that is here called into question' and this 'points to a future that lies beyond the dualistic oppositions of modern metaphysics, a future that is *neither* theistic *nor* atheistic' (Hyman (2010), 175). Instead, like Tillich, Marion, Milbank, and others, we ought to talk about a God beyond or without being, a God who bestows existence but who doesn't himself exist, and who is therefore outside the jurisdiction of metaphysics. Hyman maintains that:

God is therefore not only *not* a 'being,' he is also *not* subordinate to, *nor* contained by, the Being of beings. The whole panoply of metaphysical procedures - rational argument, empirical evidence, experiential inference and so forth - simply cannot apply to God. If they are, they are treating God as an 'object' or 'thing' within the realm of Being, and the conclusion of such an investigation will inevitably be that such an 'idol' does not exist. (*ibid.*, 179)

Moreover, he thinks that in the broad contours of their thinking about God, Tillich, Marion, and Milbank should be understood as being representative rather than exceptional in contemporary theology. Hyman therefore concludes that the 'result [is] that modern atheism comes increasingly to appear as a chimera, trenchantly denying a concept that few now would wish to affirm, not even many of those who wish to define themselves as theists' (*ibid.*, 177).

Armstrong, Hyman, and Robbins and Rodkey also maintain that the conception of God that new atheists reject is an *idolatrous* conception of God. Hyman writes that, for Marion, 'the modern God is an idol because the conception of the divine is limited to what the human gaze can conceptualise and represent' (*ibid.*, 176). Robbins and Rodkey seem to think, following Tillich, that since the God-beyond-God is the true object of Christian belief, it follows that if you conceptualize God in any other way it will simply be an idolatrous conception of God (Robbins & Rodkey (2010), 27). Armstrong tells us that some of the greatest Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians made it clear that God

was not good, divine, powerful, or intelligent in any way that we could understand. We could not even say that God 'existed,' because our concept of existence was too limited. Some of the sages preferred to say that God was 'Nothing' because God was not another being. . . . To these theologians some of our modern ideas about God would have seemed idolatrous. (Armstrong (2009), x)

Because new atheists do not take this theology into account, their analysis is disappointingly shallow.

What is also interesting in Hyman's writing is his suggestion about what an intelligible form of atheism might look like after the end of modernity. He is aware that the new atheists might not be persuaded by this line of reasoning about God, and would probably say that Marion's and other theologians' way of understanding God is empty and vacuous. Atheists would in such a case maintain that they are unable to make any sense of it. Hyman takes D. Z. Phillips to be speaking about such an atheist when he (Phillips) writes: 'It is not that he sees what it means, to say that God exists, but simply does not believe that he does.' This would actually be what characterizes the modern or new atheist.

Rather [Phillips continues], he cannot see what it means to say that God exists. He is not saying, 'I happen to believe that God does not exist, but, of course, he might have.' Rather, he is saying that God *cannot* exist, because to talk of 'existence' in this context simply does not mean anything. Atheism, then, denies *the possibility* of believing in God, for to believe that God exists is to try to say what cannot be said. (Phillips (1996), 144)

Hyman's idea is, then, that

we can imagine someone saying that a God beyond or without being is a vacuous concept. Such a person would be able to make no sense of such talk; it would be unintelligible to him, meaning nothing to him. After modernity, I am suggesting, this is what it would mean to be an atheist. (Hyman (2010), 182–183)

If we move away from the idea of who is before, after, or within modernity in his or her thinking, we have here two interesting forms of atheism:

Ontological atheism is, roughly, the view that denies the existence of a personal God who is the creator of the world.

Hermeneutical atheism is, roughly, the view that states that talk about a God beyond or without being is meaningless, unintelligible, or vacuous.

In consequent parallel, we have also two forms of theism:

Personal theism is, roughly, the view that there exists a personal God who is the creator of the world and it is meaningful to talk about, believe in, or have faith in such a God.

Alterity theism is, roughly, the view that God is beyond or without being, but that it is nevertheless meaningful to talk about, believe in, or have faith in such a God.

Hermeneutical atheists resemble *positivistic atheists* such as A. J. Ayer, in that they deny the meaningfulness of talk about a God beyond or without being, but – unlike positivistic atheists – they neither deny that it is meaningful to talk about a personal God nor embrace the verification principle of meaning. Moreover, it seems possible to be both a personal theist and a hermeneutical atheist at the same time. Such a person would believe that a personal God exists but also regard it as meaningless, unintelligible, or vacuous to talk about a God beyond or without being. Correspondingly it is also possible to be simultaneously both an alterity

theist and an ontological atheist. Such an individual would believe that no personal God exists, because God is beyond or without being.

Two competing research programmes in philosophical theology

This issue – what an appropriate conception of God should look like – quite often stirs up a great deal of emotion, with accusations frequently being made. We have seen that theologians and philosophers who espouse the idea of a God beyond or without being often subject those who embrace the idea of a personal God to accusations of idolatry. We can call this line of criticism the *idolatry objection*. Now, sometimes personal theists return the favour and side with hermeneutical atheists and maintain that a God beyond or without being is simply conceptually confused or means almost nothing. Peter van Inwagen, for instance, maintains that such descriptions, in so far as they mean anything, mean that ‘There is no God’ (van Inwagen (2006), 19). Alvin Plantinga is reported to have replied, when once asked whether God was a being, ‘Of course, what else is there to be?’ (Evans (1996), 64). We can name this line of criticism the *no-sense objection*. So, from each side the accusations have been quite severe. In a way this is understandable, because both sides take the God issue to be of utmost importance. But I still think we should recognize that we have here two legitimate research programmes in philosophical theology, and should try to foster a serious dialogue between the two camps. We can do this because, as I shall aim to show, both of these standard objections fail.

We can see both positions as different forms of theism, because the two research programmes are both about *how to think about and understand God*; and both, of course, also include a historical analysis, in that their respective proponents explore the historical roots of the conception of God which they advocate. Having said that, we must remember that many of the theologians and philosophers who defend the idea of a God beyond or without being do not want to see themselves as theists of any sort. Edward Farley calls the view ‘anti-theism’ and writes: ‘Anti-theism is now so powerfully articulated and so widely persuasive that to confess to be a “theist” is almost a breach of theological etiquette’ (Farley (1996), 40). Farley tells us that anti-theists oppose belief in a God above or beside the world, a conceptualization of God as an entity or a being; or they see theism as a form of dualism, or theism as an idol. This attitude is clearly expressed when in a symposium on ‘God’ it is stated that it is nowadays a truism that ‘*Theos* has become not the ground but the fault line in all onto-theology. How can anyone take seriously any of the modern isms on God: deism, theism, atheism, agnosticism, pantheism, panentheism?’ (Meltzer & Tracy (1994), 570). Others, such as Wesley J. Wildman, rather contrast personal theism with ground-of-being theologies, or talk about ‘God beyond theism’ (Wildman (2006), 612). I have elsewhere referred to the conception of God as a God beyond or without being as

'divine transcendentalism', to distinguish it both from personal theism and from religious naturalism (Stenmark (2013), 540). For my concerns in this article, it does not really matter what we call this view, so long as we understand that it is a research programme which is in competition with personal theism in philosophical theology.

Nevertheless, I shall, in this context, take both views to be different versions of theism, since both are concerned with how we should think about and understand God. Of course the term 'God' is as yet unspecified, and we need to give it some kind of content. We can begin by distinguishing between the concept of God and the conceptions of God. Hence, personal theism and alterity theism can be understood to express two different conceptions of God. If we take the term 'God' to be a title like 'pastor', 'professor', or 'president', rather than a name, then certain requirements have to be satisfied for something to count as God. If we can find some common ground here, then we might say that these research programmes do not merely use the same word 'God' but also share the concept of God, although they offer different conceptions of God. One thing they seem to share is the idea that *God is worthy of worship, devotion, or ultimate trust*. But of course we can worship all kinds of things, including things that are clearly not truly God, so we need to add at least one more element to the concept. My proposal would be that we add that *God is the source or ground for everything that exists*. One must at least (a) be worthy of worship and (b) be the source or ground for everything that exists in order to count as God. So perhaps advocates of both research programmes could agree that a titleholder has, at a minimum, to satisfy these two requirements in order to be God. *Generic atheism* would then be the view that denies that these requirements can be satisfied, whereas *generic theism* would be the view that they could be satisfied.

With this in mind, let us take a closer look both at the no-sense objection to alterity theism and at the idolatry objection to personal theism, and in the process also let us say a bit more about the content of these two research programmes in philosophical theology.

The no-sense objection to alterity theism

Let us start the inquiry by looking at Gordon D. Kaufman's view and Peter van Inwagen's response to it. Kaufman writes, in agreement as he says with Immanuel Kant, that: 'To regard God as some kind of describable or knowable object over against us would be at once a degradation of God and a serious category error' (Kaufman (1981), 244). Earlier in *The Theological Imagination*, he maintains that: 'It is a mistake, therefore, to regard qualities attributed to God (e.g. aseity, holiness, omnipotence, omniscience, providence, love, self-revelation) as though they were features of or activities of such a particular being (*ibid.*, 29). Van Inwagen's response is that these 'words mean almost nothing. Insofar as they

mean anything, they mean "There is no God." It is precisely because a significant proportion of the theologians of the last 100 years would not have agreed with this judgment that I exclude any reference to them from my criterion' (van Inwagen (2006), 19). (The criterion in question is the list of properties that van Inwagen thinks that Jews, Christians, and Muslims would all agree upon as belonging to God.) What merit is there to this line of reasoning? Not much, I am afraid to say; at least, if we really seek to understand what alterity theists are trying to tell us and what kind of conception of God they want to develop in their research programme.

We have seen that the core idea of alterity theism is that God is beyond or without being, a God who bestows existence but who does not itself exist. This is because existence is taken to be an ontological category for objects and not for God. To talk about God as a being who exists is to stretch the category of existence beyond its appropriate limits. God is rather being-itself or the ground of being; an ontological category of its own. This idea is not merely something that theologians have entertained for the last hundred years or so, but rather it is something that Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians have insisted for centuries; in making these assertions, their aim is not to deny the reality of God but to safeguard God's transcendence. To regard God as an object would, for these reasons, be at once a degradation of God and a serious category mistake.

People can be selfish or unselfish; trees or genes cannot be, because they are not the sort of things that could be either. A person can be wise, loving, and have an occupation, but a colour or a feast day cannot be wise, loving or have an occupation. It is thus to commit a category mistake to think that trees or genes can be selfish or that feast days or colours can have an occupation. It is to commit the error of assigning to something properties or actions which can only properly be assigned to things of another category.

Now alterity theists take existence to be an ontological category for objects, things, or beings, but not for God. God, as the ground of being, objects, or things, is an ontological category of its own. Therefore we cannot say that God exists, but nor can we say that God does not exist. To say such things about God is to commit a category mistake. God is not a being. It is therefore also an error to regard qualities often attributed to God, such as personality, holiness, omnipotence, omniscience, and love, to be properties of a particular being. God is an ontological category of its own. These properties are properties which only certain things, objects, or beings can have or can lack; but because God is not a thing, object, or being, such properties cannot be attributed to God. Whether or not one accepts this view, it seems to make coherent sense: we know what a category mistake is, and it is possible that God – as the ground of beings – is an ontological category of its own.

Richard Dawkins became famous for talking about the 'selfish gene', even if he seemed to make a category mistake. But as long as the property of selfishness, when attributed to genes, and not to persons or agents, is understood to be a metaphorical attribution (however, he was not consistent on this point;

see Dawkins (1989), 2) this is a legitimate way of attributing a property to a thing or a class of things. Hence, also, alterity theists can and have indeed talked about God as creator, loving, existing, personal, and so forth; it is just that such talk or such attribution of properties to God has to be understood metaphorically. Because of God's *otherness* or *alterity*, God being an ontological category of its own, much talk about God – since human talk is typically about the ontological categories of beings or things, their properties and relations – is metaphorical.

What should we then say about van Inwagen's further point, that these statements of Kaufman amount to saying that 'There is no God'? It seems, to me at least, as if alterity theists can give two different responses to this claim. One answer is to say that the idea is rather that we cannot say that God exists but nor can we say that God does not exist; because God bestows existence but neither exists (as personal theists believe) nor fails to exist (as ontological atheists think). The debate between personal theists and new atheists is, in the eyes of alterity theists, like a debate between those who claim that tigers behave morally and those who deny this, whereas the alterity theists take the position analogously to those who claim that the behaviour of tigers is amoral. The distinction between moral and immoral cannot be applied to tigers. They are amoral creatures. In a similar fashion, the distinction between existing and non-existing cannot be applied to God.

The other answer to the question is to deny that alterity theism entails that there is no God, and to claim that it entails that there is a God. There is a God because there is a source or ground for everything that exists, and this being-itself is worthy of worship. Alterity theism entails the denial of personal theism *and* ontological atheism, but not of generic theism. Alterity theism is not (generic) atheism in disguise because its advocates, as Wildman points out, deny that the universe is ontologically self-explanatory (Wildman (2006), 613). Perhaps we could say that God is real because God is the ground of everything, even if God is not a being who exists or fails to exist or who has or has not properties such as the omni-attributes. Both alterity theism and personal theism, however, entail the rejection of generic atheism.

The idolatry objection to personal theism

We have seen that the no-sense objection to alterity theism cannot be sustained, but what about the idolatry objection to personal theism? Will this standard objection survive a closer scrutiny? The core idea is that if we identify God with any being whatsoever, we have identified God with something less than God, since God is beyond being, and we are therefore guilty of idolatry, of worshipping something that is not God. This argument is pretty straightforward:

- (1) God is not a being, but is rather beyond being.
- (2) God is also the source or ground for everything that exists, that is, for all beings.

- (3) However, the god of personal theism is a being.
- (4) Therefore personal theism entails worshipping what is not God.
- (5) So personal theists embrace an idolatrous conception of God.

The problem with this argument is that it begs the question. The arguer treats the matter under dispute as if it were common ground. It is similar to arguing that:

- (1) God is a personal being.
- (2) Alterity theism denies that there exists a personal God.
- (3) Therefore alterity theism is atheism in disguise.

This latter argument begs the question because it presupposes an understanding of God that alterity theists do not accept. The idolatry objection presupposes in a similar way an understanding of God that personal theists do not accept. Of course, in one sense both of these arguments are successful arguments – *if* the aim is to show that one’s *own* belief in the conclusion is justified! If one is already an alterity theist then this is a reason why, given that framework, it is rational to believe that personal theists embrace an idolatrous conception of God. It is an argument for the already convinced. But if the aim is to try to convince personal theists that their conception of God is idolatrous or at least (with more limited ambition) to try to show those who are interested in the issue but who are neither alterity nor personal theists that personal theists’ conception of God is idolatrous, then this just will not do. And here is one point where my plea for generosity towards one another comes into the picture. Let us try to engage in a constructive dialogue with each other; if and when we do so, merely to make an appeal to internal grounds for the rejection of the others’ research programme is deeply problematic. To conclude, the standard idolatry objection to personal theism cannot be sustained.

But what seems true and not question-begging, however, is that if God is to be conceived as worthy of absolute devotion and of worship, then it won’t do at all to conceive of God too closely to the level of human beings. It won’t do because idolatry is to bestow on a creature the reverence due to God alone. It means that one worships and serves a created thing rather than the Creator, God. So what could make personal theism into an idolatrous conception of God would be if its advocates were to *think of God as too close to the level of human beings*. The consequence would be that the line between the Creator and his creatures would be obliterated, and the worship of an idol would be promoted.

This is a second line of criticism which Hyman develops against the new atheistic conception of God and the form of personal theism which Richard Swinburne – the only contemporary theist that Dawkins discusses at any length in his book *The God Delusion* – embraces (Hyman (2010), 63f.). But Hyman tells us that a whole host of contemporary theologians and philosophers would all regard Swinburne’s conception of God as being incorrigibly modern and religiously

impoverished. Swinburne makes the mistake of thinking of God as too close to the level of human beings, because he only expresses God's transcendence as a *quantitative* difference from the world, rather than a *qualitative* difference from it. This means, for instance, that God's goodness differs from worldly goodness in the sense that it is much greater (in terms of quantity) rather than having a different kind or quality of goodness. But if God is understood in this way, God becomes a 'big person' and we unavoidably end up with an idolatrous conception of God (*ibid.*, 57–59). Let us name this the 'non-standard idolatry objection' to personal theism.

Andrew H. Gleeson, drawing on the writing of D. Z. Phillips, makes a similar argument. Because no relevant difference, except of degree, between the power of God and the power of human beings is acknowledged, the Creator is reduced to a powerful creature and the God of personal theism becomes 'a sort of invisible, super-duper superman' (Gleeson (2010), 609). So, take a man as the model and then increase drastically his power and perhaps a few other things and give him the ability to fly, and you get superman. You get super-duper superman by drawing up a list of human perfections (power, love, knowledge, etc.), using what Christopher Insole has called the 'infinity function' on each of these perfections and then adding in the ability to be invisible (Insole (2001), 475–476). The conclusion is that super-duper superman is just a less flattering name for the God of personal theism. We might further comment that you would get an androcentric conception of God, if you were to use the infinity function on merely stereotypical male perfections.

Now this is a real challenge for personal theism, because there is the constant risk that its advocates create a God in our image. Some of them, those who embrace a Christian form of personal theism, would still say that a central doctrine of their religion is that human beings, in contrast to the other creatures, are created in the 'image of God', so it would not come as a surprise to them that we would have properties that also characterize God. Those who explicate the idea of the Christian God might then be justified in at least not exaggerating the differences between human beings and God. But maybe personal (Christian) theists have picked the wrong properties or have not after all fully emphasized the qualitative difference between these properties as pertaining to humans and these properties as pertaining to God?

What might a reply from a personal theist look like? William Hasker in his response to Gleeson maintains that the idea, according to personal theism, is not merely that God's power is infinitely greater but that it

must also be kept in mind that God is the creator *and sustainer* of all other beings, *with* their powers; any creature has power only insofar as God, *from moment to moment*, confers continued existence on the creature and all of its powers. Furthermore, God's power, unlike that of any creature, is . . . essentially incapable of being resisted. Is none of this able in any way to make God's power sufficiently different from ours to remove the taint of idolatry? (Hasker (2010), 439)

Swinburne, in his response to theologians such as Hyman, acknowledges this line of criticism against his earlier conception of God. His view is now that God is *in some sense* a person. But he emphasizes that the sense can only be somewhat analogical, because people ‘worship God, among other reasons, because he is supposed to be loving; and we couldn’t understand the claim unless God’s “love” was supposed to be something like human love’ (Swinburne (2010), 2–3).

Perhaps we should add that personal theists also agree with alterity theists that God is a unique ontological category. They merely express this commitment differently. They typically express it by maintaining that God is a *necessary being*, in contrast to contingent beings or creatures; that is, in contrast to everything else that exists. This idea is expressed in different ways by, for instance, classical theists and process theists. But roughly the idea is that we and other created things can fail to exist, but God could not fail to exist and is something which exists under its own steam. God’s existence is of a different order and therefore there is a qualitative difference between God’s form of existence and creatures’ form of existence. God is a necessary being (the one and only one of its kind), whereas creatures are contingent beings (of many different kinds).

What should we then conclude? The standard idolatry objection presupposes a straightforward answer to the question of when is it that someone thinks of God as too close to the level of human beings or creatures; this happens as soon as one thinks about God as a being. God is an ontological category of its own and this is safeguarded by maintaining that God is beyond or without being. God is rather being-itself. But personal theism vouchsafes that God is an ontological category of its own by claiming that God is a necessary being, in contrast to contingent beings or creatures. Therefore, God or the Creator certainly cannot be a thing or a being within the creation on *either* of these accounts. As far as I can see, at this level at least, which one of these rival ontologies one chooses to use in philosophical theology is merely a matter of convention, and for this reason the standard idolatry objection just cannot pose a serious challenge to personal theists.

The non-standard idolatry objection, however, is a real challenge to personal theists, because it presupposes another answer to the question of when someone thinks of God as too close to the level of human beings or creatures; this happens when one does not acknowledge that there is an essential difference between God and the world (including, in particular, human beings), when the difference is expressed as a quantitative rather than as a qualitative difference. What is problematic about this objection is something quite different, namely that many alterity theists do not seem to be ready to follow Hyman and Gleeson in arguing in this way against personal theism. Recall that Kaufman thinks that since God is not a being it follows that it is an error to regard qualities attributed to God such as personality, holiness, omnipotence, omniscience, and love to be properties of such a particular being (Kaufman (1981), 29). Armstrong maintains that some of the greatest Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians have made it clear that God

was not good, divine, powerful, or intelligent in any way that we could understand (Armstrong (2009), xvi). Let us here add one more alterity theist, John Hick. He thinks that we cannot say that God, or what Hick rather calls the Real, is personal or impersonal, good or evil, substance or process, one or many, because God is beyond such human categories and conceptions (Hick (1989), 350). Hick's view is that when we say that God is love and so forth we are rather using inevitable metaphorical language. Hence alterity theists disagree among themselves whether or not we can attribute to God – who is beyond being and beyond existence – qualities like love and power, *even if*, in attributing them to God we do so in a qualitatively different way from when we attribute them to human beings or other created beings. So this objection is neither conclusive (personal theists can at least offer *prima facie* plausible responses to it) nor generally accepted among alterity theists.

Some challenges to alterity theism

We have seen that the standard objection directed by personal theists towards alterity theism fails, and that the standard objection raised by alterity theists against personal theism shares the same destiny. This is sufficient, I hope, to show that there are good reasons to leave the old days of mutual disrespect behind and to engage in a constructive dialogue with each other. Having said that, I believe there still are problems and challenges with both of these research programmes. The non-standard idolatry objection raises one such problem confronting personal theism. In what follows I shall discuss some problems which alterity theism faces.

Hyman is to some extent aware of these problems when he asks:

But if the modern God [that is, personal theism] is now being eclipsed, what is it that contemporary [alterity] theists – those, like Marion, who have taken leave of the modern idolatrous conception of God – affirm? As Marion suggests, this question is extremely difficult to answer in any unequivocal sense for the very good reason that God cannot easily be conceptualized . . . (Hyman (2010), 177)

We can explicate this challenge by recalling that Armstrong wants us to take into account that Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians have insisted for centuries that God does not exist and that there is 'nothing' out there; in making these claims, their aim was not to deny the reality of God but to safeguard God's transcendence (Armstrong (2009), xvi). But is it possible to maintain, as Armstrong does, that God is real, even if we cannot claim that God is a being?

Whether or not it is possible depends on our metaphysical framework.² Normally, I assume, we think that beings can enter into relationships with each other and also have properties. Moreover, we think that other things than beings are real. So you and I are beings, human beings, and we can also say that tigers and other non-human animals are beings, and there is no problem of talking

about plants as beings. We can also call a rock, and perhaps even a particular river, a being. But what about water, gold, the Second World War, employment, colours, heights, virtues, evils, or numbers? Are these beings? I am a being, but my height, hair, and employment as a philosopher of religion are not. These are properties I have or which can be attributed to me. We can also say that Hitler was an evil man or that Socrates was a virtuous person. These attributes are properties that beings can have, but they are not in themselves beings. Properties, numbers, and relations are sometimes called *universals* because they can have instances, so the relations of being 'the father of' or 'a sister to' can have many instances. Numbers are hardly beings. Philosophers typically call them abstract objects or things, in contrast to concrete objects or things. Unlike concrete things one will not meet abstract things anywhere. The number seven is not located in a particular place in space and time. The properties of being good or wise cannot be found and sold in a marketplace near you. But they can nevertheless be real. Even though the shape of my house is not a being, my house still has a shape. Moreover, we would describe the Second World War – as real as it unfortunately was – as an event or a process rather than as a being. So saying that something is not a being does not make it unreal. Given this, what we can call *folk metaphysics upgraded*, it seems possible to deny that God is a being, while still maintaining that God is real.

Within the framework of folk metaphysics upgraded, it makes sense to say that God is not a being, and instead to say that God is (or is more like) a process, a movement, or an event. The movement for women's right to vote, the apartheid regime, and the Second World War were all real, even if they were not beings. One possible way of reading Kaufman would therefore be to take his idea – that, since God is not a being, it follows that it is an error to regard qualities attributed to God (such as personality, holiness, omnipotence, omniscience, and love) as being properties of a particular being – as a suggestion to think of God as a process, like creativity, say, instead of thinking of God as an individual being (no matter how supreme). If this is the idea, then we can also better understand why alterity theists hesitate to say that God is personal, other than in a metaphorical sense. It sounds strange to attribute a quality like 'being personal' to processes or events such as the Second World War, the movement for women's suffrage, and perhaps also to creativity.

Let us now for a moment go back to new atheism and the idea that faith in God must be justified and furthermore cannot, according to the new atheists, fill that bill. Hyman's response, as we have seen, is that since God is beyond being, the 'whole panoply of metaphysical procedures – rational argument, empirical evidence, experiential inference and so forth – simply cannot apply to God' (Hyman (2010), 179). But we can obviously argue about and ask people to justify their beliefs about processes or events (and not just about their beliefs about beings of different sorts). Historians, for instance, argue about and have developed different theories about the Second World War, psychologists argue about creativity, and

people look for evidence of, and draw inferences about, love or lack of it in ordinary life. So even if God is beyond being but is still real, arguments, evidence, and inferences can – contrary to what Hyman thinks – apply to God, or so it seems anyway.

To see why, after all, such application should perhaps be taken to be impossible, we have to acknowledge that alterity theists embrace a different metaphysics. Being, in the *metaphysics of alterity theism*, is a much broader concept than it is in folk metaphysics upgraded: *everything* that exists is taken to be a being. Anything that partakes in being is also called a ‘being’. Hence water, gold, the Second World War, employment, colours, heights, virtues, goods, evils, and numbers are all beings. But to attribute to numbers the same kind of being that people or colours have is to commit a category mistake. So since everything that exists – even events and processes, or for that matter virtues and goods – are beings, and arguments, evidence, and inferences³ are procedures we use to assess beings (in this extremely broad sense), there are at least some reasons to doubt that these epistemic procedures can be applied to a God without or beyond being. But if that is the case, how could God be beyond being and *yet be real* when everything real is a being – even events or processes? It seems like the metaphysics of alterity theism is after all not rich enough to allow us to say that God is real. Or perhaps this is possible? I would like to encourage alterity theists to develop their account on this point.

One possible response from alterity theists would be to say that this statement about God – that ‘God is real’ – also should be taken to be a metaphor, just like statements such as ‘God is personal’ or ‘God is love’. But metaphors are also about what is real, and furthermore epistemic procedures – arguments, evidence, and inferences – can be used to assess whether metaphorical expressions are reasonable or appropriate. We can argue about whether ‘war is a chess game’ or ‘John is chicken’ are appropriate metaphors to use when we describe war or my friend John.

Let me highlight yet another, but related, problem with alterity theism. Recall that a central idea of alterity theism is that personal theists commit a category mistake when they think about God as an existing – personal, supreme, and infinite – being. Now the idea behind a category mistake is that a property p (or a set of properties) can adequately be attributed to A but not to B , because A and B belong to different ontological categories. We can say that people are selfish but not that genes are selfish, unless the attribution of the property of selfishness is taken to be metaphorical. But the idea of an ontological category presupposes that *other* properties than p can properly be attributed to B . (For this reason it cannot be metaphors, so to speak, all the way down, not even when we are speaking about God.) If something belongs to the category of numbers and not to the category of persons, then the properties of being odd or even can be attributed to numbers but not to persons. But it must be possible that other properties can be attributed to persons in order for it to be a different ontological category, such as being selfish or unselfish and being employed or unemployed. In other words, it is

possible for personal theists to be committing a category mistake *only if* there are other properties that can be attributed to God than those which personal theists mistakenly attribute to God. The way I see it, alterity theists can respond in two ways to this conceptual truth. The first response would be to maintain that properties can indeed be attributed to God, but then argue that we cannot form any conception of them at all. Everything about God is beyond our grasp. The second response would be to develop an account of what these properties might possibly be which could properly be attributed to God.

Surely our thinking of God is bound to be limited, fragmentary, and halting, and certainly God has many properties of which we do not have concepts, but since alterity theists accuse (rightly so, at least sometimes) personal theists of embracing an idolatrous conception of God then, by implication, they actually attributed to God the property of being worthy of worship. So if alterity theists were to embrace the first response they could not, consistently, direct the idolatrous objection towards personal theism. If alterity theists therefore were in contrast to opt for the second response, we would like to know why a God who is worthy of worship is not also a God of love.⁴ Idolatry means worshipping something *unworthy* of worship. Could a God be worthy of worship, devotion, and ultimate trust who is not, among other things, loving? Perhaps it is possible.⁵ Nevertheless, the values implied in the notion of unworthiness and how these affect the conception of God need to be explicated within the framework of alterity theism.

I don't think that these problems are necessarily insoluble, but they certainly need to be addressed, and perhaps (as I am inclined to believe) the outcome of such an inquiry will be that the differences between alterity theism and personal theism are no longer perceived to be as big as we have been led to believe.

Concluding Remarks

I have tried to show that both personal theism and alterity theism are legitimate research programmes worthy of further development in philosophical theology. (Yet another one is religious naturalism, which I have not addressed in this essay.)⁶ In light of the problems just raised, I am personally more inclined towards exploring the potential of personal theism in philosophical theology than of alterity theism. However, we have to be aware that there are risks involved in engaging in either of these research programmes. Alterity theists run the risk of exaggerating God's transcendence to such an extent that God becomes just an empty notion with no relevance for society and for the life of religious believers. The risk that personal theists face is rather that of making God into a superman, of conceptualizing God too closely to the level of human beings and of created things. Since the two camps run almost directly opposite risks and for this reason also can counterbalance each other, it is desirable that we engage in a constructive dialogue with each other.

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Notes

1. Recall that Tillich writes that:

the question of the existence of God can be neither asked nor answered. If asked, it is a question about that which by its very nature is above existence, and therefore the answer – whether negative or affirmative – implicitly denies the nature of God. It is as atheistic to affirm the existence of God as it is to deny it. God is being-itself, not *a* being. (Tillich (1951), 237)

2. Metaphysics and ontology are in this essay used as synonyms, but to define metaphysics is tricky. One of the definitions I like is Jaegwon Kim's:

Metaphysics is the domain where different languages, theories, explanations, and conceptual systems come together and have their mutual ontological relationships sorted out and clarified. That there is such a common domain is the assumption of a broad and untendentious realism about our cognitive activities. If you believe that there is no such common domain, well, that's metaphysics, too. (Kim (1998), 66)

3. Is it not the case that even arguments, evidence, and inferences are, within the metaphysics of alterity theism, beings, since they also exist?
4. And perhaps also of power, since some kind of power seems necessary in order to practice love – actually to be loving.
5. One solution might be, as one of the referees points out, to embrace as an alterity theist the classical doctrine of divine simplicity. Now there are personal theists who also accept that doctrine so we then need to know what distinguishes an alterity theistic understanding of the doctrine of divine simplicity from a personal theistic one.
6. However, I have done this in Stenmark (2013).