

A REFUTATION OF THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

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The following argument presents a refutation of the existence of God under a certain description, which, it will be maintained, is the only description that most traditional monotheists could accept. Therefore, either God, as defined by traditional monotheism, does not exist *or* something that might be called 'God' exists, but would not be acceptable to monotheism as truly being God. Either way, God does not exist.¹

There are basically two ways to prove that something does not exist.

The first is the unpromising one of looking everywhere and showing that you cannot find it. This is unlikely to be satisfactory, as it may always be claimed that there are places, and perhaps ways, in which one has not looked, so that the search cannot at any point be claimed to be conclusively exhaustive, thus allowing for the possibility that one has missed what one was looking for. At best, using this strategy one is going to come up with a probability, perhaps a high probability, that God does not exist. This will be good enough for many, but surely not for those who are inclined to believe in God, for they will seize on the remaining probability that God does exist to maintain their belief, bolstered supposedly by there being many others who share it, regardless of the overall lack of evidence. Indeed, they may well turn it to their advantage in saying that the lack of evidence leaves a place for commitment and faith, which is the only true route to a belief in, and proper understanding of, God. A lack of proof, or indeed evidence in the conventional sense, it may be claimed, is just what is needed and maybe expected.

The second way to show that something does not exist – the strategy adopted here – is to demonstrate that the concept of the posited existent is logically incoherent. Such is the concept of God. The ‘problem of evil’ argument is one example of such an argument as presented by some. (In a weaker form it is used as an improbability argument too.) The way such an argument goes is, posit God existing defined in a certain way, point to other things that are obviously or undeniably the case, and then show that these other things are incompatible with his existing in the way defined, therefore he cannot exist. In the case of the ‘problem of evil’ argument, some people think there are ways of overcoming the apparent contradiction. It is contended that the present argument is immune to such avoidance, although not of course to evasion.

It is important at the outset to arrive upon a definition or exact description of God that a mainstream traditional monotheist could not deny; one he could not fail to accept. Without that, any consequences found logically incompatible with the existence of God as so defined may always be defeated or annulled by arguing that they are compatible with the existence of a God whose definition has been modified in a way that the believer still finds acceptable. What is needed, therefore, is a definition of God such that modifying it in response to the consequences drawn from it would produce a definition that no traditional monotheist could find acceptable as a definition of God. In that case, God could not exist in a way that a monotheist must take him to exist, which would entail that whatever might be said to exist instead could not count as God at all. The price of defeating the refutation would be to give up on the existence of anything that could be acceptable as the existence of God. So, either God does not exist under the acceptable definition, or, at best, something exists that is not God in any sense fundamentally acceptable to a believer. These alternatives are exhaustive, and therefore it would be proved that God does not exist.

If it were difficult to settle upon a definition of God that no monotheist could deny, then any argument based on

the incoherence of the existence of God under that definition could not get confidently off the ground. Fortunately, it may be contended, whatever other features God may have, the ones required for the argument here to go through are uncontentious in being essential to any acceptable definition of what could genuinely count as God. One can call anything one likes 'God', but there must be some bounds on what may genuinely count as God. In fact, it is reasonable to claim that the definition set forth here is not only the one accepted by most traditional monotheists, but one that most people would think of as including at least the necessary features of anything that may truly be God.

The monotheistic description of God, amounting to a definition, or at the least the necessary features of God, involves the classic tripartite features of being omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent.² He knows everything, can do anything, and is everywhere. What these characteristics share is *unlimitedness*,³ that is to say in all these respects and taken together God is *maximally great*. He is all-knowing, all-powerful, and everywhere. To present the definitional characteristics negatively: there is nothing that he cannot know, there is nothing that is beyond his power to do, and there is nowhere he is not. God is not limited in the way in which we are. Our limitedness means there are things that we do not, perhaps cannot, know; there are things that are beyond our powers to do; and there are places we cannot be, let alone be all in the same instance. The central point is that God would have to possess these limits *positively* in some manner similar to a contingent creature such as ourselves, and such a creature could never be God. Any entity capable of thought in its most general sense including conscious awareness of the world would have positively to have the embodied, finite, contingent, fallible and impotent qualities that characterise creatures such as ourselves, if not the identical ones that we happen to have. No such creature could possibly qualify as God. The characteristics of such a creature are necessary conditions for the possibility of thought. We talk of God as

having a mind and thinking, without noticing that the context in which such talk makes sense has been stripped away.

One should point out the obvious, that God's omnipresence extends across time as well as space, and it is for the former reason that God is more accurately characterised as eternal; he does not just go on existing necessarily for all time, rather he is transcendent in being outside time, and on most monotheists' views, outside space too.

There are however further features usually taken as characteristic of God, which one may contend a monotheist would find very hard to do without as part of his belief in the existence of a personal God. God thinks about things in general, and in particular he thinks about and indeed cares about us. The argument here is that for this to be true one would have to abandon the unlimitedness characteristic of God, and thus in effect abandon the existence of God as usually defined. One could still maintain that there is a very powerful being, but such a being could not be God because it would necessarily stop short of the required sense of being unlimited. A very powerful, but still limited, being could think about things, and might even think about us and care about us, but that being could not be God. The reason for this, as I hope the argument will show, is that thinking about things, about anything, and about us in particular – all thinking in fact in its broadest sense – as well as caring about us, is logically incompatible with his unlimitedness. Thus, the concept of an unlimited God – unlimited in all the ways usually thought of as definitional of God: omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence – who also thinks about things, is logically incoherent.⁴ So either God doesn't think, or some thing merely like God but not God, thinks. Neither option would be attractive or acceptable to a traditional monotheist.

Now we must look at the argument as to why this is so.⁵ To think is to think *about* something. Thought is intentional. But for thought to be *about* something, the thing that the thought is about must be discriminated from its

environment and other things. But things only become discriminated from their environment and other things – they *exist*, taking this in the literal Latin sense of *existere*, ‘to stand out’ – because we have interests through which we care about some things more than others. Of course, for the point of the argument here, it does not matter *which* things we care about more than others, or to what degree – it will in fact be determined by fundamental features of our humanity in interaction with the world – but only *that* we care about some things more than others.⁶ I am using ‘care’ here in a modestly technical sense to mean differentiated interest, attention, and valuation. Some things matter to us more than others. Objects become delineated for us with respect to other things and against a general background. This need not involve an object being conceptualised – having a concept applied to it identifying it as a such-and-such – but only that it is marked out in such a way that it comes to our attention and so becomes an object of thought. The reason we care about some things more than others is because of our limitedness – there are things we cannot know, there are things we cannot do, there are places we cannot be. We are thus forced to deal with the world, and are driven to order things in ‘perspective’. In this process the world presents problems for us, using ‘problems’ in the broadest sense, to cover not only cognitive obstacles, but literal physical obstacles. Our limits present us with a world in which we literally and metaphorically *bump* into things. We bump into things by being engaged in the world. The things we bump into are in that way brought to our attention, and we start to differentiate between things according to the difficulty they present to us and the value we place upon them determined by our fundamental human interests and plans. Such an obstacle may include things being *out of reach* for us. Because of our limits we constantly have to strive in the world and find in it *difficulty*. Thought and experience is possible for us only because we are limited and encounter difficulty, that is, things we bump up against. Without this

nothing would ever be brought to one's attention or notice and exist as an object of thought. It is the difficulty that follows upon the contingent facts of some limited mode of being-in-the-world that forms our having a conception of the world and the possibility of thought about the world, and without which no conception of it or thought about it would arise at all. Limitation in the world is the condition that makes thought possible at all; it is the necessary condition for thought. So, anything that thinks is limited. To think you have to be in the world, and, if you are in the world, you are necessarily limited. The upshot of this is that we have a particular perspective – thinking of this as derived not from passive contemplation but as a product of substantive engagement – on the world, a view from which things have and take on significance and meaning for us, and in a specific way peculiar to the condition of our existence. Only in that way do we have objects of thought, without which thought, because it requires determinate objects, would not be possible.⁷ Thinking only gets off the ground through differential interest, and differential interest depends on encountering the world as a contingent limited creature. The argument does not rest on one *always* having to have interests in order to think about things distinctly, although that may be true, but rather on the idea that *all* thinking about things distinctly is originally dependent upon having such interests. All thinking is parasitic upon differential interest; and that only arises from existing in the world, being configured in a contingent limited manner, and then having to cope with the world's obstacles relative to certain plans. Without that, thought would never get *started*. There would be no motivation to start thinking about anything.

The contention that all thought is *about* something, that it is intentional, is of course not uncontentious, although it has been held by many respectable thinkers. However this may be, there is little gained by denying it, as it avails the monotheist believer in a traditional personal God little or nothing to base a heroic refutation of the argument presented here, on the shaky ground of claiming that some

thoughts are not intentional. Not only would there be open-ended doubt about the security of such an argument, but also it would not deliver what the monotheist believer in a traditional personal God would want. For a God who could perhaps think without an object or not *about* anything could hardly fulfil the role of a traditional personal caring God as portrayed in orthodox religious monotheism. What they want is not a God who can think without an object, or think but not about anything, whatever that would mean, but rather a God who thinks, among other things, about his universe, its parts, and about us. Let us suppose that some thinking is not about some object; that some thinking may not be intentional. This won't help the traditional monotheist at all, because essential to his belief in God is God having thoughts that clearly are intentional and about something, in particular, thoughts about us.

Suppose, in contrast to us, we contemplate the possibility of a being for whom no knowledge was beyond it, for whom nothing it wanted to do would be a difficulty and beyond its power, and for whom there was nowhere to go in time or space where it was not already. What we are looking at is a being for whom nothing is a problem, nothing is an obstacle, nothing that cannot be overcome; nothing would or could ever be bumped into in any sense whatsoever. Indeed, given the eternal nature of such a being, along with the other characteristics, logically everything would be known and done in less than an instant; in no time at all in fact. Such a being could not think about anything because it would not have any objects of thought. None would ever be, or need to be, generated or come into existence for it. Nothing would exist for such a being. For such a being the world would be at best an utterly 'flat' undifferentiated homogeneity, a great nebulous oneness – although even this would be going too far as it would involve the contradiction of contemplating everything against the background of something else. Such a being would not bump into anything either literally or metaphorically. Nothing would be out of reach. It would not have any cause or reason to generate

the meanings and significances that would bring things into existence for it, so that they are discriminated from other things, so that they 'stand out', and so may be objects of thought. Such a being could not have interests, so that it cared about some things more than others. It could not engage in the world. But such an engagement is required for objects of thought to arise. There would be no motivation for such a being to start thinking about anything at all in fact, as nothing could matter more than anything else to it. Things matter to us more than other things because we are limited, because we find things difficult and some more difficult than others. But the being just described has no limits; it is unlimited; it would never generate a perspective whereby things are ordered according to its interests and in perspective, for what generates such interests is necessarily lacking. For a being lacking a perspective, there cannot be objects of thought. If there are no objects of thought, there can be no thinking. For there to be objects of thought there has to be a limited perspective. For thought to be possible it has to be a view from somewhere. It does not really matter where this view is from for the sake of the argument here. It is just that a view with no perspective, a view from nowhere, is no view at all.⁸

The being just described is unfortunately God as he should be thought of following from the way in which he is commonly and acceptably characterised by traditional monotheistic believers, according to the traditional tripartite features previously mentioned. It is the position that God, if he existed, would find himself in. The conclusion is that God's thinking about anything is logically incoherent. For God to think he would require objects of thought; for him to have objects of thought he would have to be limited in respect of some or all of his usual tripartite of definitional features, and have features that are characteristic of contingent creatures who are definitively not God, and with whom any putative God proper is rightly contrasted. But this is a conclusion that no monotheist would find acceptable, for such a being would necessarily be less than God and so

not God. Being God is not a relative notion, any more that being a triangle is.

To counter the argument here by saying God is limited because he is bound by what is logically possible – what is not logically self-contradictory – even supposing that to be so (some have contended otherwise), is a red herring. This is not the required kind of limitation for thought. In talking of the positive limits required for thought, we are talking about limitation within the possible, indeed within what is actual among what is possible. It is not enough for thought to be possible for a being to be limited by logical possibility; it must be positively limited in the manner we are, that is, limited in the world. In each case such limitation is contingent. God cannot be limited in either sense.

Nor may it be said that God could simply have an equal undifferentiated interest in everything. Apart from being false, in that God is portrayed as having more concern for some things than others, it assumes what has to be shown: that God can have an interest in *anything*.

Most if not all monotheistic believers would find accepting a God that cannot think unacceptable enough. Such a God could not figure in any of his usual ways in religious discourse or stand in any of his usual relations to us. He could not care about us, he could not have a plan for us, he could not be a guide, there would be no point in praying to him or entreating him, no point in trying to divine his will and follow it. An unthinking God would be no God at all.

There's worse to come. An unthinking God would not merely be useless in all his usual essential religious roles. We couldn't even bite the bullet and settle for that. This is because an unthinking God existing is logically incoherent. Not to be able to think is surely a limitation, and, by any definition acceptable to a monotheist believer, God is unlimited. A putative God who could not think would not be unlimited. An unlimited God existing who could not think is therefore a contradiction. Therefore, God does not exist.

If God thinks, he would be limited – since only limited beings can think – and if God does not think he would be

limited – since not being able to think is a limitation. Since God must either think or not think, he must be limited. But God by definition cannot exist as a limited thing – anything that is limited could not be God – therefore nothing that exists can be God. Therefore, God cannot exist.

To spell this out further. Either God can think or he cannot think. If God is limited, and thus can think, then in truth God does not exist, for such a limited being could not be God. If God is unlimited, then he cannot exist as a thing that thinks, which contradicts his definition of having no limits, so therefore he cannot exist. Either way God does not exist. Either God is a limited thing that thinks, but then not God in the proper sense because God cannot exist as a limited thing, *or* God is an unlimited thing that cannot think, in which case he would in fact be limited, but then he could not exist as an unlimited thing as he must, as to do so would entail a contradiction. Thus, we have refuted the assertion that God exists.

We may tackle this from another angle. Either a being is limited or unlimited. If a being is *limited* then it can think and exist, but cannot be God, because God is unlimited. Therefore, God does not exist. If a being is *unlimited*, then it cannot think, in which case it cannot in fact exist as an unlimited being, since not thinking would make it limited, but since God can only exist as an unlimited thing if he exists, therefore God does not exist.

The notion of a limited God is not an acceptable definition of God, so God does not exist. The notion of an unlimited God is one of a God who cannot think and so is limited, thus his nature would be a logical contradiction: a being that is limited and not limited. Hanging on to the law of non-contradiction, anything that is logically contradictory cannot exist. Even if this is challenged, I cannot see many monotheists being happy to hold on to a belief in the existence of God at the price of giving up on the law of non-contradiction, thus enabling the contradiction of an entity that both has and does not have certain properties. All pretence in that case that belief in God is in anyway rational

would be swept away. And it could be asked why, if one abandons rationality here, should one not abandon it everywhere in justifying one's beliefs.

It may be noted here that there is a weaker and a stronger claim being propounded. The first is that God *does not* exist and the other is that God *cannot* exist. I am content with the first, although I believe the argument may support the latter. Indeed, it may be argued that the former entails the latter, and that if it is shown that God does not exist, then he does not exist necessarily. If God does not exist, then his failure to exist is not like that of a unicorn, but like that of a square triangle.

The argument can be set out as a proof in a formal deductive manner. Since I believe the argument to be valid, if the conclusion is to be resisted it must be shown that at least one of the premises is false or unjustified. Not only that, the premises would have to be negated in a manner that would not have other unacceptable consequences for any traditional monotheist.

- (1) Limitedness is required for thought
- (2) God cannot exist as a limited thing

- (3) Therefore, God cannot think (from (1) & (2))
- (4) If God cannot think, then he is a limited thing
(from def. of God)

- (5) Therefore, God is a limited thing (from (3) & (4))

- (6) Therefore, God cannot exist (from (2) & (5))

It might be thought that this conclusion can be avoided by modifying the definition of God. But I contend that this is not possible in any way that would leave us with something acceptable as God proper. To believe in a God who exists and thinks, one would have to think of God as limited. This would to most monotheists be unacceptable. A limited

'God' would not be God at all. He would be a kind of mere superhero; just the kind of false idol traditional transcendent monotheism warns us off. If God was limited, his most basic function, to serve as an ultimate explanation of reality or the world, and a being whose word, when reported accurately in scripture and revelation, should be followed without question because he cannot fail to be right, and which gives meaning and purpose to our lives, would be unfulfilled. This kind of 'God' would just be at best a common-or-garden powerful being; a being that would in turn require explanation. In effect, he would just be another natural object in the universe. Just like us, and other things, but more powerful. For most monotheists this would not do. His authority would be fundamentally undermined.

More complications would follow. How limited is this limited 'God'? How do we know any longer which parts of what he says are correct and which incorrect? This 'God' will make mistakes. But which are they among the things he believes and does? The whole point of God in the true sense is to give us the ultimate and absolute touchstone or criterion for judging correct from incorrect beliefs and judgements. The new limited 'God' could not fulfil that role, and we would be in just the same situation in relation to such a 'God' as we would to anything else in the universe. The evidence for his existence would now quite rightly be judged by the same criteria as the existence of any other object in the universe – and such evidence on that basis has surely been found wanting – with no get-out clause allowing one to hide behind such a 'God' being transcendent, unlimited and effable, in such a way that the question of his existence or otherwise may not be appropriately judged by normal evidential standards. Such a limited 'God' may be beyond our full understanding; but our failure to understand would be no different in kind from our not fully understanding what happens in, say, an astronomical black hole or how the brain works. The nature of such a limited being would in all likelihood be utterly incomprehensible, as understanding it would throw up so many

difficulties. By contrast, you know where you are with an absolute totally unlimited being. You know if you follow what such a being says and it goes wrong, then it is either your fault or the going wrong is only an appearance you have misunderstood. And who would decide what the limits of such a 'God' were? You can't refer to 'God's' word any more to answer this, because it would just beg the question as to whether what he said was right. Note this is an additional problem to whether it *is* 'God's' word. In the case of a limited 'God', we would not only not know whether we had got it right, we would not know if the word of such a 'God' was right even if we knew correctly what his word was. Who would judge it proper to call such a powerful but limited being 'God' at all? Was not God proper supposed to be our ultimate guide here also? We would be back with just our own intellectual resources alone, just as I would claim we always were. In fact, one can see the positing of such a limited 'God' as creating more problems that it solves. Now we have a big powerful being that we don't know when to trust.

A God who was limited in the sense of not being omniscient (all-knowing), not omnipotent (all-powerful), and not omnipresent (omni-present), would be one that, respectively, might make mistakes in guiding us, might not be able to help us, and might not be there when we needed him. But monotheists affirm the negation of all of these in their conception of God through their worship.

It may still be contended that I am knocking down a Straw Man, or to be exact, a Straw God, in that the unlimited conception of God is one that some theologians would not defend. There are various answers to this which I think collectively show that my argument cannot be successfully attacked in this way. Some I have already alluded to.

First, I am not necessarily refuting the esoteric conception of God as entertained by theologians, but rather by the traditional monotheistic believer. The idea that God is limited and imperfect, in some subtle way dreamt of by theologians, while still correctly being thought of as God, is

not how most traditional monotheists view God. It just does not fit with what people actually say, when pushed, about God, nor with the point they see in believing in God.

Second, even among theologians and as born out in the creeds of the various monotheistic religions, the idea that God is limited and imperfect is clearly belied by the doctrines preached, which speak of God's absolute power, absolute wisdom, and of his being the only terminal rock of certitude, without which life and the universe would have no ultimate meaning or cause – it is hard to see how any of these functions could ultimately come to rest upon a *limited* 'God', one who was not all-knowing and all-powerful – rather one would end up having to point to something beyond that explains him and justifies his judgements and actions. Ask yourself, as a test: could we be simply right about a judgement or action, and God simply wrong? It's hard to see how this could be denied if God is limited and imperfect – but I cannot see many theologians admitting it, let alone most traditional monotheistic believers. Where would my certitude in anything be then?⁹ It would be just like having no God. Wasn't God supposed to be the ultimate arbiter of whether we have made a mistake or not? Indeed, believers confronted by something that appears to make no sense or seems damagingly false in relation to their religious belief are invariably and firmly told, some taking comfort in the thought, that this is only because they have made a mistake and are limited in their understanding, and that it is one of the 'mysteries' that God, and only God, being unlimited and perfect, will make sense of and explain eventually. That God has figured centrally as the ultimate explanation and justification with respect to anything and everything certainly seems clear even historically, and that is only possible if he is unlimited and perfect. One cannot have it both ways.

Third, supposing that God is limited throws up a conception of God that makes him, as has been said earlier, akin to a mere superhero, and that sort of conception *should* not be an acceptable notion of God, regardless of whether as a matter

of historical fact it has been accepted as a conception by some. Apart from the lesser conception undermining most of God's basic functions, in his ultimately explaining the world and explaining and justifying what we ought to do, it is a fatally flawed position in that it, surely unacceptably to most believers, brings God down from the transcendent realm and squarely into that of the empirical and scientific. Not many theologians or religious believers would be prepared to accept that God's existence – as would now follow – should then be judged by just the same criteria as the existence of any old mundane natural object in the universe, such as an oak tree, a zebra, or a black hole – if only because, to put it mildly, such evidence would be rather thin on the ground. Again, you can't have it both ways: a limited God *and* a God whose existence may not properly be judged purely by normal scientific procedures. The conception of a limited God is incoherent as a conception of *God*.

Fourth, no argument can work against the existence of an entity whose conception is constantly shifted, or whose proponents refuse to admit that the shift entailed by avoiding the refutation comes to a conception that is, all things considered, incoherent and inconsistent with the fundamental point of believing in such an entity. Nor can any argument operate against a conception of something that is so complex and hedged-around as to make it impossible to pin down what it is. But this kind of position, although impregnable, is bought at the price of utter incomprehensibility. And if a view may not be attacked, then logically it may not be defended either.

Fifth, one idea that may be floated is that God is greater because he chooses to limit himself. But this looks disturbingly like saying that God is less unlimited because he chooses to limit himself; or, to put it bluntly, the contradiction that God is unlimited because he is limited. But there is a further worry here in that there are logical problems with an unlimited being truly being able to limit itself. If such a being may at any moment reverse such limitations, then it may be said that it has not truly limited itself. I can

play at being limited by agreeing to have a chess game blindfolded, or fight a man with one hand tied behind my back; but clearly I am not really limited in the sense of not being able to swim unaided underwater for a mile, or jump off a skyscraper and fly by flapping my arms. Is God's self-limitation irreversible? It would be a brave theologian who asserts he knows it so. God's unlimited powers are surely inalienable. In any case, none of this answers the question of how such limitation, supposing it to be coherent, is compatible with God's basic religious functions. He may for example have given us the freedom to choose right or wrong so that we are not mere puppets or automata, but that does not mean we are free to *make up* what is right or what is wrong in a manner that could ever show God to be mistaken, so that we would know better than God. Moreover, it is to God that believers look in seeking guidance as to what is right and wrong, on the assumption that he cannot make a mistake. Of course, we can make a mistake in determining his will and are free not to choose to follow it. But there is nothing in the granting of freewill by God that need lead us to suppose that God is limited. Our freedom makes sense precisely as a freedom to choose to follow the will of a God in so far as we may know it, on whom we may rely totally just because he is unlimited and perfect.

Nor does the idea that God limited himself escape the problem of a God who was, 'before' he limited himself, unlimited: the problem that such a being cannot think. If God is now limited by virtue of his choice, then there must have been a point where he was unlimited. But the choice to limit himself requires thought, which would not be available to such an unlimited God if the argument here is correct, and so no such choice could be made. The point about a self-limiting God is therefore irrelevant as a criticism of the present argument.

Finally, one might ponder this. Why would people find it difficult to accept the idea that limitedness is required for thought? I think the answer is that such a view seems to suggest that our view of the world could then only be

deficient, coloured by its origin in our particular perspective from which one can never in the final analysis break free. There is the idea that we should be able to take up the transcendental view from nowhere, without which we may never understand the nature of reality.¹⁰ But such an aim is a hubristic one that attempts to avoid embracing the world as it presents itself to us as our distinctively human world, and would do so similarly to any finite being. It is almost as though it were something shameful we need to rid ourselves of and rise above. There is also for some the worrying suggestion of relativism here. But in response, one can say that it is just about as broad and benign a relativism as one can have, as it refers to the most basic universal features of the human condition and human nature. There is nothing in this view that supports a relativism wherein one view is just as good as any other. It is the idea of God, of God's view, that has misled us to believe that we might utterly transcend our limits, indeed, that we might transcend all limits, so that as Descartes hoped, we would arrive at an absolute conception of reality based on a disinterested disembodied stance stripped of all the contingencies of its being our conception.¹¹ Such a perspective is incoherent, because it is no perspective at all, no view of things at all. It is not that we are too flawed and limited to attain it, it is rather that there is nothing real or possible to attain, nothing attainable, because such an absolute conception is logically impossible. It would contradict the necessary conditions for thought itself.

We are left where we always were. In the end, we have to work things out for ourselves, find our own way. But this is not a handicap, because even if we are bound to make mistakes, it is, and has to be, above all other things *our way*, that is, our human way, and no-one knows it better than ourselves. To be an expert on how to live a life you at least have to actually live it.

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Notes

¹ I should like to thank Harry Lesser and David E. Cooper for helpful comments on the paper.

² William Wainwright, 'Concepts of God', states unequivocally: 'The object of attitudes valorized in the major religious traditions is typically regarded as maximally great. Conceptions of maximal greatness differ but theists believe that a maximally great reality must be a maximally great *person* or God. Theists largely agree that a maximally great person would be omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, and all good.' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/concepts-god/>.

³ The cognates sometimes used are 'Perfect' and 'Absolute'.

⁴ cf. Spinoza, *Ethics* (1677) (trans. Edwin Curley (London: Penguin 1996)). For Spinoza God *sub specie aeternitatis* cannot really be a traditional personal God who cares for us. The idea of a traditional non-immanent God is derived from the inappropriate anthropomorphic idea of a protective father. Spinoza would not accept the argument presented here that God because of unlimitedness cannot think, as shown by *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 1: '*Thought is an attribute of God, or God is a thinking thing.*' However, thinking is not sufficient for being a personal God. If God thinks, *per impossibile*, he could not be a personal God, for if he were able to think in a personal manner then he could not be really be God. As Stuart Hampshire puts it, 'we must not apply to God any part of the vocabulary that is applicable to finite minds.' (*Ibid*, Introduction, p. viii).

⁵ A generalised and more extensive argument for the contentions in this section are in, John Shand, 'Limits, Perspectives, and Thought', *Philosophy* July 2009.

⁶ Support comes from the so-called 'frame problem'. See, Robert de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotions* (Cambridge MA and London: The MIT Press, 1987), and *Why Think?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁷ There is a foundation available here in the tradition of existential phenomenology, as found in the work of Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. There is also the perspectivism of Nietzsche, which opposes an absolute description of reality, which presumably God possess.

⁸ One may draw upon the insights of Wittgenstein to underline the argument here. The nature, and indeed existence, of one's language and thought are dependent upon one's 'form of life'. In this one may see Wittgenstein as in sympathy with Heidegger's *Dasein*, our 'being-there', or Sartre's being-in-the-

world. God as traditionally conceived of could have no form of life whatsoever because such a life emerges from an interaction between contingent facts about what kind of limited creatures we are and the world. It only makes sense in this context. So, while 'If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.' (*Philosophical Investigation*, p. 223. trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974)) because its form of life is so different from our own, with God we take a step further; his life is not merely different, rather there is no form of life to fail to understand at all. Yet it is upon and with a form of life that thought and language are founded and make sense.

Wittgenstein's consideration of the duck-rabbit picture also supports the argument here, and connects to his remarks on the imagination. What makes you see it as a duck and as a rabbit, is not the picture as such, but arises only because it refers to something beyond the picture. What is beyond arises from a differential interest in ducks and rabbits in the world resulting from our form of life being what it is. If one were asked to draw what one saw when one saw the picture as a *rabbit* and as a *duck*, one would draw just the same thing. That we see one or the other, or indeed either, depends on our form of life and our *having* a form of life. But God has no form of life, so the conditions for such differentiation do not exist.

⁹ We are after all told in the Christian tradition that we should convert with the trust and humble simplicity children if we are to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Matt 18:1–6.

¹⁰ This is characterised and explored as the 'transcendental pretence' by Robert C. Solomon in *Continental Philosophy Since 1750: The Rise and Fall of the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹¹ See Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry* (London: Penguin, 1978).