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## IS GOD ESSENTIALLY GOD?

If theism is true, then there exists a being to which we appropriately refer with the term ‘God’. This point is analytic. Any object to which we appropriately refer with the term ‘God’ bears certain properties – e.g. omniscience, omnipotence and moral perfection. While the *analyticity* of this point may be a matter of debate, I find no problem granting its *necessary truth*, at least for the purposes of this paper. There are properties essential to the appropriate wearing of the title ‘God’. Does it follow from these claims that the object to which we appropriately apply the term ‘God’ bears the properties in question – omniscience, omnipotence, etc. – essentially? Is God essentially God? Or is it possible that the being to whom we refer with ‘God’ exist but not be God? Many would assume that the answers to these questions are obvious – that God is God essentially, or not at all. However, I wish to argue that there may be properties essential to Godhood, but not essential to the being that is God.

### I

For any description D, there is at least one property p such that, necessarily, an object x falls under D (i.e. the proposition *x is D* is true) only if x bears p. If x falls under D (i.e. *x is D* is true), I will say that

(1) x *qua* D bears p essentially.

(1) is to be distinguished from

(2) x bears p essentially.

(2) is equivalent to

(2\*) For any possible world W, if x exists in W, then x bears p in W.

If x falls under D in the actual world, but there are worlds<sup>1</sup> in which x does not fall under D, then (1) is true and (2\*) (hence, (2)) is false.

Now, it is obvious that there are indeed some objects and descriptions of which (1) is true and (2) is false. For example, I see little difficulty in the claim that it is essential to being the inventor of bifocals that one know

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I will use the term ‘world’ metonymically for ‘possible world’. The implications of my claim for worlds that are not possible worlds – if any there be – is not a concern in this paper.

something about optics. Benjamin Franklin is the inventor of bifocals. It does not follow that it is essential to Benjamin Franklin that he know something about optics. There may be plenty of worlds in which Franklin knows nothing about optics. What does follow is that in none of those worlds is he the inventor of bifocals. He is, nonetheless, still Benjamin Franklin in those worlds.

When I ask 'Is God essentially God?' I am asking whether or not the being that is in fact God (call him 'Yahweh'<sup>2</sup>) bears the properties essential to Godhood essentially. That is, suppose we instantiate (1) and (2) thus: substitute 'Yahweh' for 'x', 'God' for 'D', and any property essential to Godhood (e.g. moral perfection) for 'p'. Will all such substitutions yield true instantiations of both (1) and (2)?<sup>3</sup> This is the question of which I have said many consider the answer to be an obvious 'yes.' I am not convinced. In fact, I have some reason to believe that (at least) some such instantiations will render (2) false. (It should be obvious that any such instantiation will render (1) true.)

I have just noted that it is possible that an object truly fall under a description, but fail to bear the essential properties of that description essentially. Therefore, as far as we know anyway, it may be true that Yahweh *qua* God bears omniscience, omnipotence, etc., essentially, yet false that Yahweh is essentially omniscient, omnipotent, etc. (Of course, any world in which Yahweh fails to bear any of these properties is a world in which he is not God, but my point just is that (for all we know) there are such worlds.) Therefore, the claim that Yahweh is essentially God needs an argument. I know of no full-scale arguments to this conclusion, and only a couple of reasons that have been offered for it. I will argue that these reasons are not good reasons, and that there may even be some good reasons to believe that Yahweh is not (even *cannot be*) essentially God. Much of my argument will centre on properties that are uncontroversially essential to Godhood. Therefore, if Yahweh were to lack them, he would not be God. If it is possible that he lack them and exist, then he is not essentially God. The properties are essential to being God, but not to being Yahweh.

It should be noted before proceeding that the question 'Is Yahweh essentially God?' is non-trivial only if the term 'God' is treated as a definite description, rather than as a proper name. It is one thing to ask if Socrates is essentially the teacher of Plato or the son of Sophroniscus and a far different

<sup>2</sup> To avoid awkward grammatical constructions and distracting pronominal usages, I retain the traditional practice of using masculine pronouns to refer to God. This decision is purely stylistic. Like many, I find the practice of assigning exclusive sexual identity to God to be theologically objectionable, sociologically abhorrent and semantically incoherent. Unfortunately, current English syntax has yet to develop an alternative usage that does not compromise the meaning of a text by calling undue attention to its form. Hence, ever the rhetorical (if not theological) conservative, I take the road more travelled by – for better or worse.

<sup>3</sup> There is, of course, a plurality of such substitutions, since there is a plurality of possible values for 'p'.

thing to ask if Socrates is essentially Socrates. An object may fall under a definite description contingently or essentially. Perhaps Socrates is contingently the teacher of Plato and (if Kripke is correct) essentially the son of Sophroniscus. But there seems little doubt that Socrates is essentially Socrates. Nonetheless, I see no problem with granting the thesis that the term 'God' should be treated as a definite description. As a matter of fact, the term is usually treated this way in contemporary analytic philosophy. (I sometimes wonder if this is a mistake, but I will not pursue that issue here.)

## II

Now to the question at hand: Is Yahweh essentially God? In support of an affirmative answer, J. N. Findlay asserts

Not only is it contrary to the demands and claims inherent in religious attitudes that their object should *exist* 'accidentally'; it is also contrary to these demands that it should *possess its various excellences* in some merely adventitious manner. It would be quite unsatisfactory from the religious stand point, if an object merely *happened* to be wise, good, powerful, and so forth, even to a superlative degree.<sup>4</sup>

In commenting on this passage, Alvin Plantinga agrees with its sentiment.

[T]he greatness of a being in a world *W* does not depend merely upon its qualities and attributes in *W*; what it is like in other worlds is also to the point. Those who worship God do not think of him as a being that happens to be of surpassing excellence in *this* world but who in some other worlds is powerless or uninformed or of dubious moral character.<sup>5</sup>

Plantinga gives two reasons to presume that Yahweh is essentially God. Findlay adheres explicitly to the second of these reasons and (perhaps) implicitly to the first.

First, Plantinga asserts that the greatness of a being in a given world depends on its properties in other worlds. Consider the notion of a great making property – one such that, *ceteris paribus*, a being is greater if it bears it than if it lacks it. Plantinga's point seems to be that, if Yahweh lacks certain great making properties in other worlds, then he is not as great as possible in this world. So great making properties are somehow transworld dependent. The degree to which they are borne in the actual world is dependent, in part, on the degree to which they are borne in other worlds. In order for Yahweh to be great enough to warrant the description 'God', he must bear in all worlds the properties that make him God in the actual world – that is, he must bear them essentially.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> 'Can God's Existence be Disproved?' in Alvin Plantinga, ed., *The Ontological Argument* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p. 117. Reprinted from *Mind* 57 (1948). Emphasis his.

<sup>5</sup> *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 214. Emphasis his.

<sup>6</sup> According to Plantinga's modal theory, an object *S* need not bear a property *p* in every world in order to bear *p* essentially. Rather, *S* bears *p* essentially just in case *S* bears *p* in every world in which *S*

Second, Plantinga notes that those who worship Yahweh do not think of him as one who just happens to possess the great making properties he does. Rather, they see those properties as constitutive of his character. But, Plantinga thinks, this could not be the case if those qualities were not borne essentially. The reasoning seems to be that great making properties borne contingently are not borne significantly, or at least not significantly enough to qualify one for Godhood. In each of the next two sections I will examine each of these reasons.

### III

The key assumption in Plantinga's first line of reasoning – that the greatness of a being in a given world depends on properties it bears in other worlds – seems to me simply false. Apart from the special prejudices and jaundices that inevitably infect those who spend a lot of time thinking about possible worlds, why should we suppose that an object's greatness in the actual world is linked to properties it bears in other worlds? After all, many properties borne in other worlds do not enter into judgements about the object in question in the actual world. When an alleged criminal is on trial for murder, it does not matter to judge or jury how many possible worlds there are in which the accused has motive, intent or opportunity – or even in how many possible worlds she commits the murder in question. Neither her character nor her actions in those worlds have any bearing on the judgement of her status in the actual world.

Admittedly, there are *some* properties borne by an object in other worlds that can and must be appealed to in making judgements about it in the actual world. For example, if it is true of Archibald that he would have stolen his hostess's purse if given the chance, though he in fact is never given the chance and never steals the purse, this modal property nonetheless bears on judgements regarding his character in the actual world.<sup>7</sup>

However, what is in focus in this case is not simply properties borne in *some* possible worlds, but those borne in so-called *relevantly similar* possible worlds – worlds that have enough in common with the actual world to render truths in those worlds significant to counterfactual judgements in the actual world. Were it true only in very remote worlds that Archibald steals his hostess's purse (worlds, say, in which Archibald has a radically different personality, or significantly less wholesome upbringing), then it would be false to say that

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*exists* (this point is reflected in my (2\*)). However, Plantinga argues in chapters seven and eight of *The Nature of Necessity* that no object bears any properties in any world in which it does not exist (a doctrine he elsewhere labels 'serious actualism'). He uses this doctrine to argue in chapter ten that Yahweh exists in all possible worlds and is God in all possible worlds (his famous modal ontological argument).

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Tom Senor for pointing out to me that this clarification is needed.

Archibald would have stolen the purse if given the chance. The fact that he steals the purse in those remote worlds has no bearing on judgements regarding his character in the actual world. The only point my argument needs is that there are some such worlds, and hence some irrelevant modal properties. There are some worlds (however remote) in which Archibald bears properties that have no significance at all for the properties he bears in the actual world.

Suppose that there are some possible worlds in which Mother Teresa is a prostitute. Suppose there are infinitely many such worlds. Clearly all these worlds would be remote enough from the actual world to make the point irrelevant to judging Mother Teresa in the actual world. In what sense of 'great' does it make sense to say that she is not as great in this world as she would have been if she were essentially not a prostitute? The presence of these remote possibilities does not diminish her actual worth one iota.

If you were told that former world heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson was hunting you down in order to, quote, 'Dance on your face,' unquote, would your fear be diminished at all by the realization that in countless possible worlds he is a 98-pound weakling? Would you infer from this realization that he is not as great as you thought? Of course not. The facts about Tyson's strength in those remote worlds have no bearing on his capacity to damage your body in this one.

Likewise, there may be infinitely many possible worlds in which Yahweh lacks the great making properties essential to Godhood (or lacks the degree of them essential to Godhood), yet exists. But this need have no bearing on his fitness for Godhood in the actual world. Perhaps Yahweh must be God in all relevantly similar possible worlds in order to be God in the actual world, but (for all we know) this may be perfectly consistent with his lacking Godhood in many remote possible worlds. At the very least, it is quite unclear why it is not so consistent.

In fact, there may even be properties borne in other worlds that affect one's greatness in the actual world in a way contrary to that assumed by Plantinga. For example, there are at least two reasons to believe that Yahweh's *failure* to bear moral perfection in some worlds is essential to his being God in the actual world. First, it can be argued that moral perfection, far from being better if borne essentially, can only be borne contingently if at all, even by a being that falls under the description 'God'.<sup>8</sup> Since *ought* implies *can*, and since one is a moral agent only if one has moral obligations, it follows from the claim that Yahweh sins in no worlds (i.e. is essentially morally perfect) that he cannot sin, and therefore has no moral obligations and therefore is not even a moral agent – let alone a morally perfect one. If this argument is sound, the concept of essential moral perfection is incoher-

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Ted Guleserian, 'Can Moral Perfection be an Essential Attribute?', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 46 (1985), 219–41.

ent. Therefore, Yahweh's actual moral perfection would entail his lacking that property in some other worlds. Given that moral perfection is essential to being God, it follows that Yahweh is not essentially God.

Second, even if moral perfection can be borne essentially, it still may be true, *contra* Plantinga and Findlay, that Yahweh's contingent possession of moral perfection actually contributes to, rather than detracting from, his greatness in the actual world. That is, contingent moral perfection may make Yahweh greater than essential moral perfection would. If Yahweh is essentially God, then in no possible world does he exist and fail to be morally perfect. He *cannot* do wrong, both in the sense that he does not have the ability to do wrong and in the stronger sense that there are no possible worlds in which he does wrong. But, we might ask, why is a being who metaphysically cannot do wrong greater than one who has the ability to do wrong, but never chooses to? A case can be made for the opposite claim. Mark Twain is reported to have said something to the effect of, 'I am morally superior to George Washington. He could not tell a lie. I can, but choose not to.'<sup>9</sup> In a more analytic vein, William Rowe argues that, if God is essentially morally perfect, then he is not significantly free with respect to a wide range of important moral actions.<sup>10</sup> Yet it seems that a being free with respect to those moral actions would be greater than one who is not. Much of the power of the free will defense against the argument from evil derives from the notion that significant moral freedom is a tremendously good thing. Yahweh's lacking the kind of freedom that fuels the free will defence calls into question either his greatness or the efficacy of the free will defence. I find the thesis that Yahweh is essentially morally perfect far less costly to surrender, both philosophically and theologically, than either of these two options.

Given such arguments, Yahweh's being morally perfect in the actual world entails that he fails to be morally perfect in some possible worlds, and even has the ability in the actual world to fail to be morally perfect. Hence, Yahweh must actually *fail* to be essentially morally perfect in order to be God. If the arguments of this section are sound, it is essential to Yahweh's being God that he *not* be *essentially* God.

#### IV

Now I turn to Plantinga's second reason for assuming that Yahweh is essentially God: that believers typically do not think of Godhood as some-

<sup>9</sup> Notice that this sense of 'can' assumes no position in the debate over the compatibility of free will and determinism. Even for compatibilism, *J can do A* entails *There is at least one world in which J does A*. (This latter proposition is consistent with *J is (actually) determined to do other than A*.) For any morally wrong action A\*, there are no worlds in which an essentially morally perfect being does A\*. Hence, even under a compatibilist conception of 'can,' it is false that he can do A\*.

<sup>10</sup> 'The Problem of Divine Perfection and Freedom,' in Eleonore Stump, ed., *Reasoned Faith* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

thing that Yahweh just ‘happens’ to bear – or, in Findlay’s words, something Yahweh bears ‘in some merely adventitious manner.’ I assume that a claim of the form *x just happens to bear p* or *x bears p adventitiously* is most naturally understood as the claim that there is no apparent reason for x’s bearing p. That is, the state of the world distinct from x’s bearing p offers little or no indication as to whether or not x bears p. If this is not what Findlay and Plantinga have in mind, then I do not know how to read the claim in such a way that it is true and supports the assertion that Yahweh is essentially God.<sup>11</sup> If it is what they have in mind, I have no trouble granting that traditional theism holds that Yahweh is not adventitiously, capriciously or accidentally God. But all that follows from Yahweh’s failing to be essentially God is that he is *contingently* God. I will argue that it is false that Yahweh’s being adventitiously, capriciously or accidentally God follows from his being contingently God.<sup>12</sup>

Surely there is a difference in saying that Mother Teresa bears her compassion or Mike Tyson his strength and skill contingently, and saying that they bear those properties ‘adventitiously,’ or ‘just happen’ to bear them. Mike Tyson is contingently strong, and Mother Teresa is contingently compassionate. However, Tyson does not just happen to be as strong as an ox. Mother Teresa does not just happen to be an angel of mercy. The bearing of these properties is the direct and expected result of many disciplines designed to cultivate, perfect and sustain them. (This, incidentally, is at least part of the reason why the impressiveness of these attributes is not diminished by the realization that they are lacked in some remote worlds. Such metaphysical musings can never dilute the actual character and commitments that have contributed to their exemplification.)

Again the notion of relevantly similar possible worlds is helpful in sorting out the distinction between properties borne contingently and those borne adventitiously. By definition, properties borne in some worlds where the object exists but not in others are borne contingently. However, a property is borne capriciously, accidentally or adventitiously only if it is not borne in those worlds relevantly similar to the actual world in some respect, or at least in a significant subset of such worlds. This follows from the characterization of the notion of adventitious property bearing given at the beginning of this section. Adventitious or accidental bearing of a property involves a significant discontinuity between what the world gives us reason to believe (independent of the fact that the adventitious property is borne) and the fact that the property is borne. This discontinuity offers plenty of logical space

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps Plantinga and Findlay use these locutions simply to express the claim that Yahweh is not contingently God. But if this is the proper reading, then of course their assumptions become simply *statements* of the proposition in question, and not *arguments* for it at all.

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the Aristotelian practice of referring to contingent properties as ‘accidental’ has caused some equivocal confusion here.

for worlds significantly relevantly similar to the actual one in which the property is not borne. Hence, adventitious bearing of a property entails its lack in at least a significant number of relevantly similar worlds. However, a property may be borne contingently, but lacked only in remote possible worlds. That is, properties that are borne contingently may nonetheless be borne in every relevantly similar world. Hence, it is possible for a property to be contingent but not adventitious or accidental or any such thing.

Earlier I argued that the fact that Yahweh lacks greatness in some remote possible worlds does not entail his being less great than possible in the actual world. It seems just as clear that his lacking greatness in some remote worlds also does not entail that he bears greatness in the actual world accidentally or adventitiously. In both cases, I suggest, it need only be the lack of such properties in relevantly similar possible worlds that would entail such an actual character deficiency.

This line of reasoning raises many interesting questions. For example, Rowe has pointed out to me that the move seems to challenge the doctrine that God bears his great making properties eternally. The relationship between the disciplines and character of Mother Teresa and Mike Tyson to the great making properties to which they contribute is a temporal one. They both once lacked these properties (or lacked them in sufficient quantity to merit the praise they now deserve), and acquired them (or the praiseworthy quantities of them) over time. Therefore, it seems, if Yahweh's bearing of essential Godhood properties is analogously contingent but not adventitious, then he would have once lacked his Godhood properties (or the sufficient quantities), then developed them over time to the point of 'becoming' God.

In response, I will say only that it is not clear to me that the relationship between the disciplines and properties in question is *necessarily* a temporal one. What is in focus is a relation between the bearing of a property and a certain strength of character or conviction. There is no indication that the history is essential to the bearing of the property or to its being a great making property. All that is clearly essential is the relation between the bearing of the property and the character contributing to it. It is precisely this relation that demonstrates that the property is borne contingently (since it is possible that the relation fail to hold) and non-adventitiously (since the relation holds in the relevant worlds). I cannot pursue these matters here. I wish only to point out that it is nowhere near obvious that Yahweh's being God contingently entails or even suggests his bearing the essential Godhood properties capriciously, adventitiously or in any other philosophically objectionable manner.

There may be reasons for insisting that Yahweh is essentially God other than those offered by Plantinga and Findlay, though I am not sure what they might be. If it is false that Yahweh is essentially God, then it is possible that he lack properties essential to Godhood and continue to exist. Of course,



he would not be God in such a world, and perhaps no one would be. Perhaps it is necessarily true that if anyone is God, Yahweh is. But that is a question for another time.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to the participants of the 1990 Society of Christian Philosophers Midwest Regional Meetings in Lincoln, NE, and the 1993 Society of Christian Philosophers Eastern Regional Meetings in Rome, GA, before whom previous versions of this paper were read. I received especially helpful comments and insights from George Mavrodes, William Rowe, Tom Senor and Eleanor Stump. In addition, I thank Rowe for very helpful spoken and written comments on at least two subsequent drafts. Finally, I thank Keith Cooper for helpful discussions leading to the formulation of the original draft.