

Otherness and Oneness

Rival Conceptions of God

The twin desires for a personal God and a transcendent God, a God who is in the deepest possible relationship with me and a God who is not limited by relating to something “less” than God has led many thinkers in three different directions in forming a concept of God. One is toward what some have dismissively called an anthropomorphic view of God (ontological pluralism) in which God is pictured as something like a human being (though greater by degree). A second is toward ontological monism, or a mystical understanding of the divine reality that erases the distinctions between God and “others” by annihilating the ontological status of difference between these others and God and leaves only undifferentiated oneness. The third, ontological dualism, is a view of God as absolutely “other” and ontologically transcendent of everything other than the divine self. (I will argue that this third view of God, dualism, eventually collapses into the view [monism] that erases all distinctions, including the one of transcendence, between God and everything else.) Having developed a qualified rejection of the second two views, I will return to the ontological pluralism view, but on what I believe are deeper, more satisfying metaphysical grounds than those associated with a primitive anthropomorphism and that are built around the primordial concept of personal agency.

ONTOLOGICAL DUALISM OR RADICAL DIFFERENCE

Let us begin with ontological dualism, the drive toward Otherness and Radical Transcendence, before examining the mystical move toward ontological monism.

Much of western theism is characterized by an insistence on the complete and absolute “otherness” of God from anything that is not God. “Otherness” is a term of art intended to reflect the conviction that whatever God is—in

and of Godself—God must be absolutely, ontologically, or essentially *other than* or *different from* everything that is not-God. Some philosophers call this the “alterity” of God. Some theologians, such as Karl Barth, call God the “Wholly Other.” (The failure to settle on a single term for this phenomenon is due in large part to the paucity of language, a paucity that flows naturally from the premises of dualism. All speech is grounded in our experiences within the finite world and to use such speech to talk about something which is not part of that world is inherently problematic and paradoxical.) Assumedly, to be truly God, God cannot be *part of* or a participant in a reality greater than Godself because that would condition or limit God’s being, at least in some respects, upon or in relation to the world with which God is in relationship. The very notion of “relationship” is fraught with problems for those insisting on radical otherness precisely because relationship entails some kind of continuity or commonality between those “beings” that stand in relation to each other.

We will use the word *world* in this context to refer to the totality of all real things and the conditions necessary for their existence. The world we inhabit, the world whose conditions apply to “us,” in this sense, is the totality of space, time, and matter (STMW). In religious terminology it is often called simply “the finite” or “finitude” to contrast it with what is not finite, or the infinite. (“Infinite” means simply *not* finite, and many claim that it is impossible to ever say what the not-finite really is precisely because it is not finite and we can only think and articulate in concepts drawn from and limited to the finite.) Monotheists assume that God, to be God, must somehow be responsible for as either the creator or origin of this finite totality without being *in* or *part of* it. God must, in some sense, be *outside of* or radically *other than* the world while remaining, in some mysterious sense, related to it as its creator and sustainer.

But the notion of “outside” or “other than” is tricky and conceptually problematic. To say that God is outside the world or other than the world necessarily presupposes that there is something Other than God. And if the “world” is other than God, doesn’t its otherness qualify the fullness or absolute self-sufficiency of God’s reality taken in and of itself? It certainly limits God (at least some people believe this to be the case) by restricting God from *being* this “other” reality that is not God. God cannot “be” finite and still be God, which raises the question of what ontological status does that which is not God have in relation to God? Clearly the finite exists since it forms the foundation for the first attempts to think of God as “other” than the finite. But the tendency to think beyond otherness begins here, because the second option (ontological monism) referred to above promises to resolve the question of how something can be other than God without compromising the absoluteness of God by

subsuming that non-divine reality *intodivinity*, so that otherness itself ultimately disappears. If God *is* the totality of an undifferentiated single reality, then God is not “other” than it and the totality needs no explanation from “outside” itself since there is no outside, by definition, of a totality. But if God is other than the world then God must account for, explain, or somehow cause to be (without literally being a cause in any kind of worldly sense) the entirety of the STMW and this means that God cannot be an object or being *within* that world. That means that God must be radically other than the world.

It is this otherness of God that the word “transcendent” is normally meant to reflect when it is applied to God. The problem, of course, is that the more God is made transcendent or other than the world the less God can be understood as having a relationship or connection with the world to which God stands as radically “other.” If some kind of relationship with the Ultimate or divine reality is part of the religious aspiration, then emphasizing the divine Otherness is going to become extremely problematic because a relationship between two different beings or entities presupposes something common between them, some common ground in which they both exist and which makes the relationship between them possible. But otherness, alterity, or transcendence want to deny the common ground between God and what is other than God since placing God on the same ontological ground compromises God’s transcendence of that ground. If God exists, God’s very existence annihilates or cancels the reality of that which is not God. If God is radically or ontologically other than everything finite, and if I am finite, there is no common ground between us, thus annulling the possibility of a relationship between us.

Now, in western theism, the otherness of God is tied closely to what has been called the “classical” view of God. God is held to be transcendent of the world and is characterized as omnipotent, omniscient, immutable, immaterial, and eternal. (Many philosophers have argued that these terms do not attribute qualities directly or positively to God but instead deny God qualities extracted from and more properly attributed to beings *within* the world that God is said to transcend. This is sometimes called “negative” theology.) In this form of classical theology, God is not limited in power and knowledge, is not subject to space, change or mutation, is not material, and is not temporal (i.e., does not exist, persist, or endure “through” time. When God is called eternal it normally means existing beyond or outside of temporal duration). Negative theology, by denying human predicates to God, does not claim to know what God is “in God’s own self,” only what God is not. God’s transcendence is “ontological” and is not to be confused with the kind of transcendence that is more loosely used

in trying to compare a being of superlative degree to an inferior being with “less” of what is being attributed to God. The power of the king far transcends the power of the king’s servant. But this kind of transcendence is transcendence by degree and is not radical or ontological. Only when the very essence or being of something is radically different from or other than something else can we say that it stands in a relation of ontological transcendence to it. This is a relation of course, that is not a “real” relation except in a stretched metaphorical sense since a completely ontologically transcendent God stands in no “relation” to anything other than Godself without compromising God’s transcendence and otherness. This is another way of pointing to the difficulty any conception of a relationship with God has under the rubric of radical divine otherness or alterity. As we will see, one attempt to resolve the difficulty is to say that God has no relationship with us, but that we have a relationship with God because we *participate* in God as the ground of our being. This claim is, I believe, tantamount to identifying us and everything else *with* God and more appropriately falls into the monistic model of undifferentiated oneness. Of course, the temptation is to attempt to attenuate the radicality of otherness and simply concede that God must be like us in some general respects. That at least will resituate God back into a place where we share some ontological ground and thus can be related. But this move is fatal if one wants to avoid anthropomorphism or bringing God “back down” into the reach of human concepts and experiences. And it points to the dilemma around which this study is predicated: how to relate to God religiously in a way that fulfills my being as a human person and how to speak of God in a way that fulfills my desire to make God as mysterious as possible out of a fear of domesticating God by making the relationship with God too much dependent on my retaining my individual human being with all its inadequacies and limitations.

PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS

The difficulty of speaking about a being that ontologically transcends our (finite and conditioned) being has led some theologians to claim that speech about God is logically impossible. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (or Ps.-D, for short), a late fifth and early sixth century Christian writer whose influence on medieval theology was significant, suggested that we have to take the position that language about the ontologically transcendent God is *apophatic*, that is, literally ineffable, unspeakable, or unsayable. Ps.-D reflects the classic Christian conundrum: a felt need to speak about God and an equally strong conviction that no speech about God is ever appropriate since God, given God’s radical

alterity, cannot be reflected or represented in human speech. Denys Turner has captured the paradoxical nature of Ps.-D's apophatic language about God when he calls it "that speech about God which is the failure of speech."¹ A key concept of Ps.-D, as rephrased by Paul Rorem, is the transcendence of knowledge: "since human knowledge is of beings, God who transcends being must also transcend our knowledge."² In a way that anticipates Thomas Aquinas, Ps.-D says "and so it is that as Cause of all and as transcending all,³ he is rightly nameless and yet has the names of everything that is."⁴ Ps.-D acknowledges that theology at times speaks of God "sometimes without, sometimes with distinctions."⁵ The "all" to which God gives rise is differentiated and these differentiations begin with the "processions" out of or from God, the origination of the plurality of beings. How God does this is not clear and can only be expressed by way of metaphor (e.g., God's fullness of Being *overflows* itself and the overflow becomes the world of multiplicity and difference, both between the beings that constitute the world and between God and those beings taken both individually and as a whole). Even though they proceed or emanate from God and even though God's being must somehow "inform" or ground them, they remain differentiated and distinct from God (otherwise they would *be* fully divine themselves and the ontological distinction between God and what is not God would be lost. Finally accepting the logic of this fact will lead ultimately to ontological monism).

Ps.-D even argues that negative theological terms such as ineffability, unknowability, and the transcendence of all finite assertions are, strictly speaking, not applicable to God. God is beyond both positive and negative attribution. Creation becomes a "form of differentiation" in a neo-platonic sense. All things differentiated from their source ultimately participate in God as their source. God, however, is not diminished or emptied by their emanation from God; "He remains one amid the plurality, united throughout the procession, and full amid the emptying act of differentiation."⁶ God is not

1. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 20. Language about God is ultimately "the collapse of our affirmation and denials into disorder, which we can only express, *a fortiori*, in bits of collapsed, disordered language . . ." (22).

2. Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 136.

3. This claim does not explain how something that is radically "other" can be a cause if the meaning of "cause" is derived from that which is caused. See John Morreall, *Analogy and Talking About God: A Critique of the Thomistic Approach* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1979).

4. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 137.

5. *Ibid.*, 138.

6. *Ibid.*, 144.

differentiated, but the beings that flow from the overabundance of God are differentiated both from each other and from God while at the same time remaining ontologically grounded in God. (Note how close to ontological monism is Ps.-D's ostensible ontological dualism: there is differentiation, but it hovers over non-differentiation.) We have clearly entered the realm of linguistic paradox here, but paradox is the inevitable result of trying to use the language that presupposes differentiation (e.g., between subject and object, predicates applied to things, nouns, verbs, etc.) to work at all in order to speak of non-differentiation and unity in God.

Ultimately, Ps.-D argues that it is only by ceasing to be oneself or anything else, that one becomes “supremely united to the completely unknown [God] by the inactivity of all knowledge, and known beyond the mind by knowing nothing.”⁷ This may seem completely nonsensical and unintelligible. How can one claim to be united to that which is completely unknown (unless one has some knowledge of that to which one is united even though the union is itself beyond knowledge and comprehension)? How is knowing by knowing nothing any form of knowing at all? Whatever the limitations of knowledge, knowing has certain characteristics such as the cognitive or mental conceptualization of some object or thing (from which the concept of it is distinguished or differentiated). Knowing nothing is either paradoxical, perhaps a literary way of saying that one does not know *certain things* about an object, or it is meaningless. Knowledge is always intentional (as that term is drawn from phenomenology, not from the philosophy of action): it has an object about which it can conceptually grasp something and articulate that something in differentiating language. But one winds up in these conundrums as soon as one insists that God is radically “other” and ontologically transcendent and at the same time insists that finite thinkers have some cognitive access to God despite God's radical otherness. Ps.-D says at one point in his writings:

Since God is a ‘being’ in a way beyond being, he bestows existence upon everything and brings the whole world into being, so that his single existence is said [in human language] to be manifold by virtue of the fact that it brings so many things to being from itself. Yet he remains one, nothing less than himself. He remains one amid the plurality, united throughout the procession, and full amid the emptying act of differentiation.⁸

7. *Ibid.*, 192.

8. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*. Qtd. in Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 144.

God is said elsewhere to have “turned outward to differentiation”⁹ through a procession from Godself. Clearly differentiation is “other than” God, something below or less than God (though how thorough or absolute that otherness is, is not entirely clear). And yet it is only through differentiation that we acquire the capacity of language and, thereby, the words with which to refer to God who is beyond differentiation. And because words arise from the world of differentiation they are ultimately inappropriately applied to God if applied without qualification since differentiation is other than God. In discussing Ps.-D, Turner focuses on language—not on the concept of God, per se. He is acutely conscious of the paradoxical nature of language about the divine. In this context, Turner reminds us not to consider “difference” between God and everything else as something that can be articulated.

“Difference” and “similarity” are terms which are themselves infinitely deficient in describing features of our language about God. We cannot say what God is because we cannot express what that degree of difference is which falls between what we can say of God and what God is. We know that our language about God fails. But we have no language about our language about God which can adequately describe the extent of the failure of our descriptions.”¹⁰

Sometimes Ps.-D contrasts the darkness of unknowing (in which no differentiation appears because the dark hides all of it) with the light of knowledge. In this respect darkness, the absence of light is superior to the light that illuminates differentiation.

At any rate Dionysius holds that all attributes are differentiations and technically speaking cannot apply to God who is not a being but standing in differentiated relationship with other beings. Only by creation, or more properly by emanation flowing from God, does differentiation *between* beings become in some sense “real,” though not ultimately real since no single being or the multitude or totality of beings can ever have complete ontological independence from God. Creation is, in effect, differentiation and differentiation is not an attribute of God prior to creation. (This means, incidentally, that what Christians call the Incarnation, God becoming flesh, is impossible to understand on the basis of ontological dualism or, as it turns out, on ontological monism as well, which may well be why Karl Barth rejects all forms of humanly originated thinking as a way of understanding God.)

9. Ibid.

10. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 43.

Now if the difference or otherness that characterizes God is absolute, God will have no connection with the world. But this absence of any connection eliminates the possibility of thinking of God as the *creator* of what is not Godself. As David Burrell has put it, if we try to think of God as absolutely other, then we cannot use the name “creator” for God or make “divinity in any way accessible to our discourse.”¹¹ Discourse, or speaking about something, referring to something, or making a claim about something, presupposes some differentiation between the speaker and that about which he or she is speaking. Language, in short, only works on the assumption that there are differences between beings or objects in the world to which the speaker is referring. Nouns distinguish one object from another. Adjectives apply to nouns that refer to objects. Now all of this is pretty straightforward until one comes to the problem of speaking about God. If God is not an object *in* the world (as most philosophers who lean toward this way of thinking would agree), then no word whose meaning is originally derived from our experience of objects in the world can refer, without qualification or straightforwardly, to that which is not and cannot be experienced as existing or being in the world. But if God absolutely transcends the world (is not contained in or qualified by any of the conditions that constitute the world), then no word whose origin is from the world can refer to God directly or without qualification. This is obviously true, as we shall see more fully in our treatment of ontological monism, if God is the undifferentiated unity of all “things” (things being in some sense unreal if they are regarded as ontologically distinct from each other). But it is also true if God is the absolutely “other” who transcends the world.

It is not enough simply to assert God’s radical ontological transcendence or otherness because, as Burrell notes, we thereby lose any contact with God if we are that in comparison to which God is transcendent. On the other hand, it is also not possible to assert God’s total presence to us without implying that God is not more or other than us, thinking of God as not totally transcendent but as totally immanent: as an omni-presence, as present to everything that constitutes reality. But being “present to” means present to what is not the divine self or being completely self-present, present only to Godself as containing all things, there being no distinction between God and that which is at first glance seemingly “other” than God. This is another way of stating the difference between ontological dualism and ontological monism and, at the same time, their incredible closeness. Each is an attempt to preserve the mystery of God, to extricate God from the STMW, but without completely losing contact with

11. David Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 17.

God. Without contact, connection, or relationship of some kind, the religious motive for desiring God will be completely extinguished even though it may achieve a certain kind of cognitive satisfaction by having pushed beyond the limits of thought entirely and thereby preserved, in its own way, the absolute mystery of God even at the cost of the meaningfulness of language and the annihilation of thought about God.

To be mysterious, God must be different from us. But the primordial problem for theology and philosophy is just how to articulate that difference in any kind of language whose very condition of meaning is some basic similarity or commonness between the speaker and the object about which he or she speaks, when that object is God.

If God is absolutely other, no words drawn from the reality in comparison to which God is other will ever suffice. If God is absolutely present or immanent, not distinguishable from the totality of all beings that constitute reality, no words can refer to God since reference requires differentiation and distinction among the beings of reality.

No wonder Dionysius's apophatic approach has become so popular. It is tantamount to denying the ability to speak rationally about something, while making the denial in such a way that the subject is actually referred to as precisely that which is not rationally conceptualizable. By saying that God is not finite, one is not describing God (the word "infinite" simply means not finite), but one is conveying *something* meaningful by denying that God is a being within or part of the STMW. That seems to say *something* about God (i.e., that God is absolutely "other") without saying exactly in what God's otherness consists or how to refer to the "content" of that otherness.

JOHN SCOTUS ERIGENA

A clear example of negative theology after Ps.-D that continues his work can be found in the work of the ninth century Christian mystic John Scotus Erigena. In his work *The Division of Nature*, Erigena says that "we can no more express and comprehend His [God's] existence than we can the existence of nothingness. The terms *deus* and *nihil* are therefore logically equal: both express something beyond the pale of existence *as we know it* in the universe. . . . So it is in any doctrine of God: we are trying to name the Nameless." Erigena goes on to distinguish between metaphorical references and metaphysical references to God (which are those of "practical religion"). In metaphysics, metaphor is out of place, and "if we are to make any philosophic statements about God at all, they