IS IT COHERENT TO CONCEIVE OF GOD AS A FREE, PERSONAL AGENT THAT HUMANITY CAN FREELY INTERACT WITH?

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ABSTRACT

How do we conceive of God? How can we understand God's agency? How do we interact with God? Can we say the relationship between God and humanity is one of free inter-personal relations? I argue that the way we conceptualise God demands that we cannot describe God as a free, personal agent or that our relationship with him is free in itself. I analyse what cognitive linguistics has to say about how we understand and assign characteristics to God, all the while measuring these implications with the notion of human and divine free will. I then discuss whether established key characteristics of God are philosophically consistent with cognitive linguistics' suggestions about the method of our conceiving of God. I argue that there are inconsistencies regarding the classical theistic understanding of divine causality and divine qualities which render this understanding of God incoherent. I measure the implications that these suggestions have on the notion of God's free agency. I will not argue for or against the existence of God, but rather comment on the philosophical implications of theological statements about the nature of God and humanity's interaction with God as an abstract concept. I base my understanding of God on a classical theistic foundation. On this understanding God is simple, personal, omni-benevolent, omniscient and omnipotent and can entertain an active relationship with all of His creation. I conclude that this understanding of God is not only internally incoherent, but furthermore literally impossible to accredit to God, since we cannot separate our talk of him from talk of ourselves. This means that we cannot know God, let alone coherently conceive of a 'free' relationship with him.

Keywords: Agency; Classical Theism; Cognitive Linguistics; Free Will; Perfection; Simpleness; Eternity;

INTRODUCTION

The paper is split into six parts:

How do we conceive of God?

How do we distinguish God from Humanity?

Is it coherent to understand God as an agent based on these cognitive linguistic methods?

If God were an agent, and we can have a relationship with God, are we free?

If God were an agent, is He free? Is it coherent to ascribe classical theistic characteristics to God?

Conclusion: It is problematic to think of god as a classical theistic agent that interacts with us

1) HOW DO WE CONCEIVE OF GOD?

Cognitive linguistics provides an invaluable contribution to philosophical theology in demonstrating the impact that language and our embodiment has on conceptualising ourselves, our surroundings, and the idea of the divine and our relationship with the divine.

The core thesis of cognitive linguistics is the idea of embodied cognition, that "human thinking is dependent upon the sensorimotor capacities available to humans….the same neuro-anatomical capacities that allow us to see, hear, move around, and grasp objects also shape our conceptual structures".[1] A key idea in cognitive linguistics is the conceptual metaphor theory, which states that "we understand a target topic such as love in terms of a source domain such as nutrients and magnetism (her love sustains him, he is attracted to her)".[2] From that source domain we then understand meaning through conceptual metaphors which shape the conclusion we try to reach. When it comes to conceptualising the nature of the divine, it is necessary to identify what kind of relationship is possible between God and humanity. How do we understand a super-human concept like God? On a cognitive linguistic basis, this relationship is codified in either literal or metaphorical 'mapping' from human experience to thinking of the divine. Since "meaning depends upon people's embodied cognitive capacities, cultural interaction and hence meaning is… [anthropogenic]".[3] The question arises whether a metaphorical basis for understanding God is problematic for a classical theistic conception of God as an inter-relational personal agent.[4]

2) HOW DO WE DISTINGUISH GOD FROM HUMANITY?

The problem of conceiving of God is a problem not of what the language we use is, but rather how a concept such as agency is applied to God: "the real issue is what we consider dignified or fitting for God to be like".[5] The question here is one concerning what kind of cognitive linguistic terms (mapping) we use in referring to God, and what the implications of these categories have on the understanding and coherence of the God of classical theism's character. God-talk may be 'anthropogenic' but that does not see the end of the debate about how we conceptualise the divine, and what limitations that the nature of this conceptualisation demand from God. 'Metaphorical' and 'literal' mapping enable us to differentiate between what kind of agents are involved. If God talk had a literal foundation, then agency is necessarily existent for Humanity and for God. However, with metaphorical mapping it is not the case that agency is necessary for both humanity and God. If our conceiving of God is purely based on metaphorical mapping, then God's literal agency is not confirmed or necessary. In order to avoid disregarding God's agency, the theologian should find a way to reveal God-talk is somewhat literal rather than a purely metaphorical mapping of anthropogenic principles.

In, *'Theology in the flesh'* Sanders claims that there is not a significant limitation in conceptualising God's agency based on metaphorical mapping from humanity onto God. He writes that we can have a literal base for our understanding to be pinned upon. For example,

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[1] Sanders, John '*Introduction to the topical issue "cognitive linguistics and theology"* Open theology 2018, 4: 541-544 pp 541

[2] Sanders, John '*Introduction to the topical issue "cognitive linguistics and theology"* Open theology 2018, 4: 541-544 pp 543

[3] Masson, Robert '*Conceiving God, literal and figurative prompt for a more tectonic distinction*', Open Theology, 2018 4:136-157 pp 136

[4] Sanders, John '*Introduction to the topical issue "cognitive linguistics and theology"* Open theology 2018, 4: 541-544 pp 541

[5] Sanders, John, "*Theology in the flesh*" Fortress press, USA, 2016 pp 250

there is no metaphorical mapping in the statement that God is love. However, Sanders' argument in support of this conclusion is circular, presupposing God's agency. Sanders states that even though the statement 'God cares' is anthropogenic; it is not purely metaphorical. He compares a statement like 'God cares' to the phrase that the sky is blue. Both are literal and non figurative, though they are anthropogenic in regard to how we access colour. He reinforces this by referring to how colour is not a property of any object but rather a product of relating factors between humanity and the 'colourful' object such as: lighting conditions, the colour cones in the retina, the reflective quality of an object, and the response by the brain from the the neural connection between the retina and the brain. He writes that when we say the "colour of the sky is blue", we attribute to the sky what our visual processes allow us to see. That is, from a human perspective, the sky is blue, but it is not a metaphorical concept since it is based on literal human neuro-anatomical functions. "Similarly, we can say that from a human perspective God is an agent and God is love, but these are not conceptual metaphors for most theists because they believe that God is actually an agent".[6] However, to understand God on a classical theistic understanding requires a knowledge of God's personal and literal agency. The analogy of the sky is limited since the sky is not deemed as an agent, so this analogy cannot demonstrate how we can conceive of God's agency. God-talk inherently presupposes metaphorical mapping that construes 'space and time as a container in which all creatures exists and God is outside or beyond the container'. From a cognitive linguistic perspective, God-talk always will use the metaphorical since all 'categories are containers'. Even using the idea of 'being' itself is part of this container.[7]

3) IS IT COHERENT TO UNDERSTAND GOD AS AN AGENT BASED ON THESE COGNITIVE LINGUISTIC METHODS?

Sanders does not successfully demonstrate how God's literal agency is accessible to humanity separately from our experience of literal physical human agency. It is clearly necessary that such a contrast can be made between supernatural agency and physical human agency (in order to permit that God has a literal agency that is different from literal human agency). On cognitive linguistic terms, 'mapping' the qualities of supernatural agency to the qualities of a physical human agency is undeniably metaphorical mapping. Sanders' argument does not successfully demonstrate how God-talk is thought of and conceptualised through literal not metaphorical mapping. Literal meaning may be defined as "a meaning which is not dependent on a figurative extension from another meaning".[8] We may have a figurative core in a term such as "I love you" which is an "expression that entails a lover, a beloved and a relationship. The words do not depend upon other domains or meanings for its own meaning. The literal idea of love however, is skeletal in meaning and it is figurative language which puts meat on the bones".[9] Without a way to understand God's literal agency that doesn't involve metaphorical mapping, we cannot have a non-figurative base for our understanding of God's agency. This inability to conceive of God's literal agency starts an avalanche of problems for classical theism. Without literal agency, we cannot apply figurative language to "put meat on the bones" of "skeletal" non- figurative language; we cannot convincingly apply characteristics to God if we cannot ascertain his literal agency. Furthermore, does that mean His identity is forever changing and subjective? This seems to
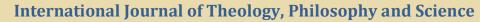
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[6] John Sanders, "*Theology in the flesh*" Fortress press, USA, 2016 pp 265
[7] John Sanders, "*Theology in the flesh*" Fortress press, USA, 2016 pp 256
[8] Dancygrier and Sweetser, cited in John Sanders, "*Theology in the flesh*" Fortress press, USA, 2016 pp 264
[9] John Sanders, "*Theology in the flesh*" Fortress press, USA, 2016 pp 264

undermine any definite dogma and theological teaching about the nature of God, making God an anti-realist concept, clearly at odds with our established classical theism.

Given these cognitive linguistic methods and implications for our understanding of God, Sanders implies that the best we can do is assume agency, and that this isn't necessarily problematic. He writes that in the same way we talk of "Fr Peter being a good shepherd", even though he is literally a priest and not a literal shepherd, we can similarly conceive of a literal divine agency. This is metaphorical understanding with a literal basis in Fr Peter's agency. Similarly, a phrase like "God is father" is not literal in the sense that God "Impregnates a Goddess in order to have a child", but is metaphorical with a literal base with the assumption of agency. Yet this still does not explain how divine agency is accessible to us in any way that does not totally depend on a metaphorical mapping from human agency to be able to conceive of Godly agency. The only way that the language of God can be literal is to assume an existent yet circular belief in God's agency. However, Sanders' point here is not only circular but fatally reductive in that even this assumption has no literal accessible content so it is not clear what we are even assuming.[10]

Sanders also states that cognitive linguistics demonstrates how it is a default position for humans to think of God as a personal agent, so we should assume literal divine agency, which is a common idea in classical theistic literature: "Whereas theologians work to place ontological distance between Gods and finite beings our minds cannot avoid the use of natural ontological categories".[11] From this, Sanders and others do not consider that comparing human agency to divine agency is problematic for our understanding of God. Rather, he just creates another circular argument that we should conceive of God as a personal agent, because that is what we already are physically programmed to do. Sanders draws on an evolutionary phenomenon called 'agency detection device' (ADD) to support this idea. It is suggested that this is a psychological process through which the human brain instinctively, yet falsely, detects agency in an object that has none. For example, our ancestors may have seen a flickering shadow and erroneously prescribed that shadow with anthropomorphic agency. Since ADD gave an evolutionary advantage to our ancestors, the phenomenon has stuck with us today.[12] However, this point, contrary to Sanders' intentions, all the more demonstrates that there is no literal reference for conceptualising the phrase 'God'. ADD supports the field of metaphorical rather than literal mapping of the concept of God, so Sanders still doesn't appreciate how cognitive linguistics provides dangerous ramifications for God's personal agency.

Must a contrast between human and divine agency be necessary? Perhaps understanding God as a projection of amalgamated human characteristics provides the key that there is some similarity and relationship between God and humanity? Some may argue that God-talk is literal since we refer from literal human source domains, but this denies God transcendence and an individual agency. We may map literal domains onto God to aid an understanding, but without a literal understanding of what the agency of God is, these predicates are unhinged. Nevertheless, we still cannot convincingly or coherently conceive of God's agency.

Some may claim that perhaps this very notion of the unavailability of access into the idea of divine agency may actually help understand and perhaps even confirm that nature of God's personal agency as separate and transcendent in comparison to human agency.

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[10] John Sanders, "*Theology in the flesh*" Fortress press, USA, 2016 pp 264
[11] Tremlin, cited in John Sanders, "*Theology in the flesh*" Fortress press, USA, 2016 pp 262
[12] John Sanders, "*Theology in the flesh*" Fortress press, USA, 2016 pp 264

However, this is still a major problem for coherence within classical theism. To describe the literal unavailability of God's agency enables the idea of God to literally have transcendence, however this kind of agency requires that God be a sort of Pantheistic, a-personal, non-relational force, not a personal and inter-relational agent. I am inclined to agree with this conclusion. However, certainly this latter type of personal, inter-relational agent is the type of God described by classical theism.

The idea of Jesus perhaps helps to provide a literal basis for God, in that Jesus is a tool used to make God relatable and knowable to humanity. Jesus was a literal person and also was believed to literally be God. However, this still does not answer the question of how we understand divine agency, as the only agency we can conceive of Jesus' is his human agency.

We cannot jump the epistemic distance between humanity and the God of classical theism. The consequence of this epistemic distance is that we cannot rely on our very own understanding to confirm that God has agency. This lack of assurance does not necessitate whether the classical theistic God exists or not (that debate is not explicitly related to this discussion). Rather, this 'lack' directs attention to the claim that it is not coherent or us to conceive of divine agency. It furthermore raises the question as to what attributes, if any, that we may be able to we can coherently attribute to the God of classical theism.

4) IF GOD WERE AN AGENT, AND WE CAN HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, ARE WE FREE?

The figure of Jesus is also an expression of a core idea widely upheld within Classical theism: intersubjectivity and a personal relationship between God and humanity. Jesus suffered for humanity and by the hands of humans. This represents how God suffers and sacrificed himself for his beloved creation, humanity. A core premise to classical theism is that God freely chose that it is our free choice to believe in God; our choices matter and have a personal effect on God and affect our own eschatological result. To have any type of inter-personal relationship as described by classical theism, there must be free will on both sides.
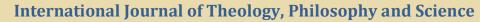
However, if we assert that God is the primary cause of everything in existence, that necessitates humanity's secondary causality. This idea is key to the God of classical theism, as expressed in Aquinas' metaphysics that humanity "exercise[s] secondary causality only in response to the antecedent divine gift of existence and activity".[13] However, this causal relation creates a rather unsettling problem concerning the nature of the relationship between God and his creation (on classical theistic terms). If we accept divine causal primacy and humanly secondary causality (as a classical theism usually has to), this intersubjectivity between God and his creation is sacrificed. This sacrifice leads us to some disgruntling theological conclusions that are incoherent with a classical theistic God. Intersubjectivity implies a "freely chosen reciprocal relation between two subjects of experience".[14] For an intersubjective "relation there can be no distinction between primary or secondary causality in their relation to one another in order to set up a…relationship".[15] This clearly presents a deeply-cutting ontological problem for theology. Intersubjectivity denotes a causal co-

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[13] Joseph A. Bracken, *'Divine-Human intersubjectivity and the problem of evil'* Open Theology 2018 4: 60-70 pp 60

[14] Joseph A. Bracken, *'Divine-Human intersubjectivity and the problem of evil'* Open Theology 2018 4: 60-70 pp 60

[15] Joseph A. Bracken, *'Divine-Human intersubjectivity and the problem of evil'* Open Theology 2018 4: 60-70 pp 61

responsibility of God and Humanity towards the happenings of the world. If we deny this intersubjectivity, then how do humans freely exercise causal power in their own life? Furthermore, this would make God totally responsible for all evil, suffering and damnation.[16] If God were to allow humanity unlimited freedom of choice (and not intervene so that they follow their divinely predestined final cause) then God would not be all powerful, since there is a part of God's character which is powerless over those creatures.

Yet, for humanity to have a totally free choice requires that God is not free to choose for himself or able to have causal primacy, which compromises the classical theistic understanding of God and his relationship with creation. Evil is acceptable by classical theism through humanity's original sin, stemming from their God-given free will and choice to reject God. However, we cannot coherently suggest both human freedom and divine freedom can harmoniously exist as suggested by a classical theistic understanding. The concept of Freedom is an absolute. It is vital that freedom is absolute when referring to the freedom of a 'perfect' divine being and our relationship with Him.

5) IF GOD WERE AN AGENT, IS HE FREE? IS IT COHERENT TO ASCRIBE CLASSICAL THEISTIC CHARACTERISTIC TO GOD AND CALL HIM FREE?

Problems referring to the legitimacy of divine personal agency and the impact of our causal relationship with God on freedom aside, it is pertinent to discuss whether the classical theistic traits of God are internally consistent. What impact might they have on ideas such as Godly and creaturely freedom?

Arguably the two most important characteristics of God are divine simplicity and divine eternity (as described by Aquinas). Aquinas writes that divine simpleness is God's core nature: "what gives divinity the necessity peculiar to it is the formal fact that God's nature is nothing other than its own existence, not composed or a substance of anything else". For classical theism, the understanding of God's necessary existence is non-negotiable. Hand in hand with divine simpleness is the idea of God's eternal nature: "[simple] essence cannot be limited by quantity nor by genus or species, since its essence -to be- overflows both genus and species. So what is simple is also unlimited, or…infinite". It is these two core concepts that give the God of classical theism his proposed distinction over humanity: "formal features [of eternity and simplicity] secure the proper distinction of God from the world, thus determining the kind of being said to be just and merciful."[17]

However, delving deeper into the concept of divine eternity reveals problems with regarding God as eternal, simple and free. Aquinas writes that God's eternity is evident since "what is, is now, the one who makes things to be will be primarily and essentially present". Furthermore, "to be finite is bound up with the possibility for change which is in turn bound up with temporality and spatiality". God must have eternity, since he necessarily must (actually and not potentially) exist at every moment: "to have any potentiality at all is, for Aquinas, an imperfection…God is pure actuality".[18] However, this denial of potentiality (necessary for God's simplicity and eternity) also requires that He has no choice in any matter that He may or may not be creating. If God doesn't create something, then He had the potential to create but chose not to. However, God must have all actualities at all moments and no potentialities, so He could not choose to create or not to create lest He have any 'lack'

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[16] Joseph A. Bracken, *'Divine-Human intersubjectivity and the problem of evil'* Open Theology 2018 4: 60-70

[17] David B. Burrell, *Distinguishing God from the* World' cited in Language, meaning and God, edited by Brian Davies OP, Wipf & Stock, USA, 2010 pp 78

[18] Peter Vardy, *'The puzzle of God'* HarperCollins, London, 1999 pp 33

or imperfection. If God has no choice but create, then God is not a free agent, nor can He be praise-worthy for his creation. On this analysis, we cannot say that God is eternal and omniscient or omnipotent. He cannot be perfect and be free, since freedom implies potentiality which denies eternal divine actuality and simpleness.

Moreover, delving into the notion of God's simpleness and perfection brings us to the widely agreed idea of God's omni-benevolence. Yet this also has severe implications on the notion of a free divine agency: God cannot be omni-benevolent and free. If God is omni-benevolent, He must always do the most good and most loving thing at all times (He must not even have the potential to do otherwise). This characteristic leaves no room for eternal divine freedom or simpleness. On a classical theistic understanding, His own nature (for e.g. omni-benevolence) denies Him the actuality of freedom to not be omni-benevolent, so He cannot be wholly simple. He is limited. Yet if He is not simple, then He is not the God of classical theistic understanding. Furthermore, if God is unsurpassably free then He cannot be omni-benevolent, since this would require the ability to have the actual choice to not do the 'most good' thing, which would not be an option for a being that could only have the omni-benevolent reality as its actualities.

Drawing from this point, maintaining the idea of God's simpleness and eternity require Him to be wholly good whilst also being wholly evil (since he must be a perfect being and entertain all characteristics in actuality at every moment so that he cannot have any potentialities or imperfections). However, actually having all these contrary traits, such as absolute evil and absolute goodness, creates a logical impossibility of how a being can exist over time and still be numerically identical throughout time whilst having the total actuality of every single possibility of character. How can one being wholly be quality 'A' and also necessarily wholly be quality 'B', if their existing at the same time and place are contradictions of each other? How can we conceive of such a being?

6) CONCLUSION: IT IS PROBLEMATIC TO THINK OF A GOD AS A CLASSICAL THEISTIC AGENT THAT INTERACTS WITH US

To conclude, I have argued that cognitive linguistics demonstrates how it is incoherent to conceive of divine agency on classical theistic terms. From this point, I argued how we cannot conceive of a relationship with such a being. Similarly, I highlight limitations in our understanding of the God of classical theism's character, referring to incoherences regarding free will and intersubjectivity, causality, divine simpleness, perfection and eternity.

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