

Hylotheism

Life as a Slide Show

Jarmo Tarkki

It is fair to state that religion and the word “god” do go together, although it has often been noted that of the major world religions, Buddhists do not worship gods or a God, and in Jainism there is no need for a creator God because the universe is believed to be eternal. While all religions do not have a clear concept of the divine or God, all beliefs in God are nestled in religion.

There is no doubt that the word “god” exists. But does “God” exist is another question. Does the word “god” designate an object or being (realism) or is it a name for the highest values or dimensions of human existence (non-realism or anti-realism, e.g., Ludwig Feuerbach)? Traditional theology has been quite preoccupied with the attributes of God, because God’s being, whatever it might be, was outside of human comprehension.

The word “god” in Wittgensteinian terms is an open-ended term; it has no one particular meaning until it is specified in a clearly defined matrix. Thus the tetragrammaton, YHWH, is one of the religious “theonyms” used by the Israelites to describe the national God of Israel. In this matrix, “God” has a particular meaning, although over time that meaning has changed considerably.

“Hylotheism” is a term used by Alvin J. Reines to describe his own understanding of the word “god.” While others use the term occasionally to denote various forms of pantheism and panentheism, Reines’s use of hylotheism has a very specific meaning. To illustrate where hylotheism is placed in relation to other interpretations, a mental “God-map” is helpful.

There are four categories under which historic expressions of the divine can be classified: theosupernaturalism, theopanism, theonaturalism, and atheonomatism.

Theosupernaturalism

In theosupernaturalism God is generally conceived as a person, a self-conscious being separate from the universe, external to the creation. Because the creator God is not part of the creation, there is absolutely nothing positive we can ever know about this God. Everything that we know, including knowledge itself, ideas, imagination, fantasies, and dreams are part of the universe or the totality

of the creation. Therefore, by definition any ideas that we may have about this God are something other than the true, utterly unknowable creator God who is outside of any direct human experience.

According to kataphatic theology, the infinite is known only through God's self-revelation. Both Judaism and Christianity are revelation-based religions: God appeared to Moses in a burning bush, in Christianity the second person of the Holy Trinity, Logos, becomes incarnate. But even here the very essence of God remains unknown.

According to apophatic or negative theology, the only things we know about God are descriptions of what God is not. We could, for example, state that God is not not-wise, but we could not say that God is wise, because we have no way of imagining what divine, external to the creation, wisdom might be. To say that a wall is blind is meaningless because walls do not have the potentiality of seeing. To say that God is wise would be analogous to saying that walls are blind. Logically, apophatic theology (we can say that x is not not- x , but we cannot say that x is x) does not make much sense and therefore apophatic theology at times seems funny, which it is, but it is fun.

Johannes Scottus Eriugena (c. 800–c. 877) was much influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius of Areopagite (late fifth or early sixth century), a very influential theologian and philosopher whom Thomas Aquinas alone reportedly quoted over 1700 times. Eriugena's translation of Dionysius' work, *Corpus Dionysii*, a gift given to Charles the Bald's father, Louis the Pious, by Michael the Stammerer in 827, rekindled interest in apophatic theology in the Middle Ages. Dionysius' influence is clearly present in Eriugena's reported statement at Charles the Bald's court in 840 that summarizes apophatic theology succinctly: "We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God is not, because He transcends being."

Maimonides (1138–1204), arguably the greatest Jewish philosopher of the Medieval Age, concluded his own meditations on apophatic theology claiming that we have understood the term "God" properly if and when the word "God" is uttered and absolutely nothing comes to our mind. I prefer this theology because I have not been able to figure out on my own what the term "God" actually means. Perhaps, at least in the Maimonidean sense, I have come closer to understanding what the true "God" is as I continue to become less and less knowledgeable about the true God. Lloyd Geering stated essentially the same thing: "The God that is known is an idol. The God who can be defined is no God."¹

Interestingly, God defined as totally separate from the universe, cannot exist, and cannot be, by definition a being like we are. Existence is an attribute that can be predicated only of the creation, just as all beings are part of the creation.

1. Geering, *Reimagining God*, 15.

Thus God is not an existent being, but something utterly different. What some thinkers, for example, Thomas Aquinas, have stated is that we cannot say that God exists, but we can say God is.

Apophatic theology has also gained meaningful popularity in postmodern theology. At least it gives the appearance of being sophisticated in spite of the fact that we are attempting to describe the indescribable. It is similar to Kant's "das Ding an sich," the thing-in-itself that is by definition permanently unknowable. But how would we know that something is unknowable beyond the tools of knowing? Apophatic theology, in attempting to define the word "God," suffers from a form of what G. E. Moore called "naturalistic fallacy"; to say that God is not not-wise is to say something about human wisdom without saying anything about God. Should we take Wittgenstein seriously and conclude "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen?"²

Theosupernaturalism among the Israelites started as polytheism, belief that there are many gods. Over time polytheism evolved into henotheism, admission that there are many gods, but only one tribal God is considered to be supreme. The first commandment is an expression of this phase of the evolution in the understanding of the divine. Belief in one God, monotheism, developed during the postexilic period, during the time of the Second Temple (538 BCE onwards). The monotheistic God is a person, a self-conscious being who performs miracles at will. True believers can specifically request miracles. Using priests, saints, or the Virgin Mary to obtain miracles is believed to be advantageous.

Over time monotheism developed into theistic absolutism, that is, God is the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent supreme being. This is the concept that exposes itself to a myriad of problems. Perhaps the most challenging one is omnipotency. Can God create a rock that is so large that God cannot lift it up? Regardless how the question is answered, God of theistic absolutism is in trouble. Or can God be not God? Can x be not- x and still remain x ? Is the God of theistic absolutism liberated from the rules of logic? If so, then God would indeed be beyond any human comprehension. If not, then something would rule supreme over the Supreme Being, that is, rules of logic—unless, as has been suggested, the rules of logic are part of the nature of God.

A second major challenge is the problem of theodicy: whatever God wills must be good because God is omnibenevolent. Whatever God wills must happen because God is omnipotent. Because God is omniscient, God is well aware of the moral quality of what is willed. So all things that appear to us as evil must in fact be good. Failure to see everything as good is due to our imperfect knowledge; the ways of God are mysterious, secret, and unknown to us.

However, if we were able to identify E. S. Brightman's "dysteleological surd," something that is so inherently and intrinsically evil that absolutely no good can

2. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, no. 7.

conceivably emerge out of it, then theistic absolutism would be refuted. Reines offers two examples: the Holocaust and a child born with AIDS. How could we express these in terms of good, some good that inherently resides in these instances? How could one “improve” the Holocaust?

The “four horsemen” of modern atheism, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, have successfully and triumphantly challenged theistic absolutism. While they all do a great service to modern theology by debunking theistic absolutism, we must keep in mind that few, if any, serious modern theologians have attempted to defend theistic absolutism as described by the four horsemen, for the exact reasons they present.

Theonaturalism

God is conceived, as above, separate from the universe, as the creator of the natural universe or is an essential part of processes that bring the natural universe into existence. While God can be conceived of as a person or impersonally, there are no miracles. Natural laws govern the universe without divine interruptions. Certain forms of deism and hylotheism are examples of theonaturalism. Deism emerged during the Age of Enlightenment as a more rational and more justifiable view of the divine than theistic absolutism. The leaders of both the French and American revolutions were influenced by this fashionable philosophy of its own time.

According to the classical form of deism, God is a person who created the universe, set it in motion (as an Aristotelian prime mover), and subsequently left it alone; natural events occur naturally without divine intervention, there is no supernatural providence over the creation, nor is there any supernatural divine revelation. This concept avoids the pitfalls of theodicy; of course, there is evil in the world because God is not present nor has anything to do with anything in the entire creation.

Theopanism

God is conceived not separate from the universe. Pantheism and pantheism are examples of theopanism. Giordano Bruno presented an idea about an infinite but immanent God. The Catholic Church preferred another view and burned him at the stake in 1600. In 1675 Baruch Spinoza in *The Ethics* popularized what Charles Hartshorne called “Classical Pantheism.” Many thinkers, and even American presidents, have embraced pantheism. William Herndon, Abraham Lincoln’s law partner and friend, wrote:

Mr. Lincoln’s religion is too well known to me to allow even a shadow of a doubt; he is or was a Theist and a Rationalist, denying all extraordinary, supernatural inspiration or revelation. . . . At one time in his life, to say the least, he

was an elevated Pantheist, doubting the immortality of the soul as the Christian world understands that term. He believed that the soul lost its identity and was immortal as a force. Subsequent to this, he rose to the belief of a God, and this is all the change he ever underwent. I speak knowing what I say. He was a noble man—a good great man for all this.³

Panentheism, the view that God includes the universe in God's being and that it extends beyond the universe, is embraced by many modern thinkers, notably Jesus Seminar scholar Marcus Borg.⁴

Atheonomatism

Atheonomatism, which includes atheism and agnosticism, is the view that the word "God" has no meaning in reality; "God" does not refer to an actual being, there is no designative usage for it. In this regard some remarkable Christian theologians were atheonomatists, but not atheists, as for example Thomas Aquinas, who argued that God has no body, God is nobody and thus not a being. Martin Luther argued similarly, writing in the explanation of the first commandment in his Large Catechism: "Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God." Luther, along with many others, was a nominalist or non-realist. The word "God" does not refer to a real being but is a name for all that is of highest value in our lives. In this sense both Aquinas and Luther were atheonomatists, in good company with atheists and agnostics.

While for atheists the word "God" produces an unpleasant effect, for Abraham Cronbach it created pleasant effects. He used the term "God" in the sense of it creating impressions without any designative use. In this regard Cronbach was not an atheist while being an atheonomatist.⁵

Hylotheism

According to Alvin J. Reines, the term "God" as it is commonly used refers to that which brings into existence that which is. For both the perceived, through our senses, and conceived, through our minds, world, whatever the reason is that produces or makes these experiences possible is termed "God." God is the creator of our world experience.

Sensa and selfa

Our world is brought to us in part through our five senses; the world is perceived by us. What we experience as our world is a collection of individual

3. Adams, "'Pantheist' Lincoln would be unelectable today."

4. Borg, *The God We Never Knew*.

5. Cronbach, *The Realities of Religion*, 37–38. Cronbach would, e.g., tell children: "God

sensum, in plural *sensa* or sense-data. *Sensa* are a product transmitted to us through our five senses from the extramental world.⁶ Propositions that carry information about the extramental world, *sensa*, are subject to verifiability. *Sensa* constitute evidence that is not self-data.

Another part of our experienced world is intramental, that is, all those world experiences that we did not receive as *sensa*, are called *selfum*, in plural *selfa* or self-data. *Selfa* form the evidence that make up our intramental life, they occur in our psyche alone. Experiences that occur in the psyche alone are not perceived, they are only conceived and are not subject to verifiability.

Both *sensa* and *selfa* exist only as long as they are present in our awareness, for as long as we are aware of them. The only entities that we experience are *sensa* and *selfa*, and together they form what we call being.⁷ Therefore, without *sensa* and *selfa*, that is, if only one of them is experienced, there is no being. Perception and conception, *sensa* and *selfa* together, are a necessary matrix for being.

A misinterpreted *selfum* is a *selfum* that has been understood as a representation of the extramental world.⁸ The assessment of what *selfa* are misinterpreted is subjective, no objective evidence can be brought to support the claim that a specific *selfa* is or is not provided from the extramental world.

Thus I consider reports of mystical experiences of the divine or spirits of the dead as *selfa*. Efforts to make them extramental result from misinterpreted *selfa* and are therefore futile; *selfa* are by definition subjective. However, someone who claims to have had mystical experiences may indeed consider them to be *sensa*. Because no objective evidence is available to prove or disprove them, these claims are simply *dixit* evidence to those who have been told about the mystical experiences but who have not had any direct experience of what has been reported. Arguments about these are generally spectacularly unproductive, and one might be wise to stay away from arguing about someone else's *selfa*.

loves you." The point was not to tell the children anything about a being called God but to say: "I like you." This impressive use of the word "God" may be familiar to many in the clergy.

6. Whether the extramental world exists apart from our experiencing it is irrelevant here. Whatever the causes for sensing the extramental world are, the important point is that we have that experience.

7. George Berkeley: *Esse est percipi, (aut percipere)* ("to be is to be perceived [or to perceive]"). Reines would argue, "to be is to perceive and conceive."

8. Illusions, hallucinations, and delusions would be examples of *selfa* that become misinterpreted if they were to be taken as representations of extramental reality. Are there misinterpreted *sensa*, *sensa* that are understood to be representations of intramental world? Reines does not consider this, perhaps because it would be rather strange if a person would consider something perceived and empirically verifiable to be solely in the intramental world. Perhaps a solipsist would argue that, but then for solipsists all that there is would be intramental.

Hylotheism: God as the Enduring Possibility of Being

The term hylotheism has occasionally been used to refer to forms of pantheism and panentheism, in which God and the material universe are one. Here *hyle* is interpreted to mean “matter” or “corporeality” or even “extension.” However, Alvin J. Reines uses the term *hyle* in the Aristotelian sense of “potentiality” or “possibility of being.”

Two forms of existence can be distinguished: the possible and the actual. Thus, for example, clay is matter but at the same time possesses the capacity of being formed into a bust. Clay possesses potentiality but lacks actuality, it is a not-yet-bust. But clay has endurance far beyond a bust. So while a bust has actuality, it lacks endurance. A hylotheistic deity, as defined by Reines, is the “enduring possibility of being” that has both endurance (possibility of existence endures) and actuality in any being (*sensa* and *selfa*). Possible existence endures but suffers from lack of actuality. Being possesses actuality but does not endure. In the hylotheistic deity the two distinct forms of existence are combined.

For Reines, hylotheism must be chosen over other views of deity by Occam’s razor; unnecessary assumptions should be eliminated and the simplest of competing views should be preferred over more complex ones. There is no compelling reason to predicate of the godhead the following three attributes: personhood, omniperfection, and the absolute power to overcome nothingness.⁹ The only assumption in hylotheism is that it postulates that there is someone who is experiencing something and in that experience potentiality is actualized. Whenever a potentiality is actualized, that is where hylotheistic deity occurs and is therefore verified. In other words, whenever we either perceive or conceive the world, the existence of hylotheistic deity shows up to provide the show.

Hylotheistic deity is obviously not a person, a self-conscious being, but rather a pure process¹⁰ through and in which the world is experienced. Perhaps the easiest way to imagine hylotheism is to think of a slide projector. Every slide presents a new possibility of existence. Once a particular slide is shown, it actualizes as a picture, a picture that mere moments earlier was only a potentiality. As long as there are slides, the show will go on. One could imagine one’s life as a very long slide show. The divine occurs in the process of slides moving from

9. No objective evidence exists for any of these attributes. Reines believes that their source “is unconscious projection of parental imagoes onto extramental reality.” Reines, “Hylotheism: A Theology of Pure Process,” 258–59.

10. According to Reines, process theologies are hybrids, not pure. The divine is described as partly static or immutable and partly dynamic or mutable. A hylotheist conceives the deity as entirely and always becoming. Deity is about *venir*, as John Caputo would state. Reines, “Hylotheism: A Theology of Pure Process,” 264.

potentiality to actuality. The hylotheistic deity has no existence apart from this very process, in fact, the process is the deity.

Challenges

Reines proposes that any concept of God should be subject to empirical evidence. He sees that hylotheism is based on empirical evidence, for every actual experienced moment confirms being, being that is produced or “created” by *sensa* and *selfa*.

Reines points out repeatedly that hylotheism is his personal view and should not necessarily be anyone else’s view. His major work in the philosophy of religion is centered on the notion of polydoxy. According to this view, everyone has the right to his or her own religious views, and no one has the right to take that right away from anyone else. A person’s religious freedom ends where another person’s religious freedom begins. Reines hesitated to bring up his own God-view, and he did that somewhat reluctantly at the repeated requests of his students.

One of the challenges is how should we understand *hyle* in hylotheism. What exactly is the “enduring possibility?” Do we even have to assume that there is nothing else but *sensa* and *selfa*, why should we assume that there is a possibility for them? We do have knowledge of *sensa* and *selfa*. That is what our “doing being” (or simply being alive) is all about.

Another challenge is Reines’s requirement of having both *sensa* and *selfa* present to constitute “being.” What if a person has lost all five senses and cannot even potentially experience *sensa*? That person would still be a person, a self-conscious being, albeit that existence is very difficult for us to imagine. Conceivably that person would have some *selfa*. However, given Reines’s description of “being,” that person would not be a being. What would this person then be—a half-being?

Thirdly, hylotheism is challenging to explain and not easily comprehended. It requires philosophical knowledge that most people do not have. Also, many of the details are subject to challenges in addition to the aforementioned ones. Many of these relate to epistemological questions. Some of them have been stated by David Day Griffin in his article “Modern and Postmodern Liberal Theology: A Response to Alvin Reines.”

Conclusion

Hylotheism, in spite of the many challenges, is a concept of God that commands our attention. Alongside some other views, modern versions of pantheism and panentheism, John Caputo’s “weakness of God,” and others, hylotheism is one of the more solidly argued views.

I am deeply indebted to Alvin J. Reines,¹¹ a one time student of Paul Tillich and a Maimonides expert teaching at Hebrew Union College, his many writings, and personal friendship that started in 1978 and continued until his death in 2004. I had the fortune of being his teaching assistant and editor of some of his works. Not only did I learn immensely from him about philosophy, and Jewish philosophy in particular, but I learned how to argue vigorously, robustly, and loudly. This kind of rabbinical tradition of creative learning was rather different from my pietistic Finnish Lutheran tradition, where solemn and pious silence was often preferred and mistaken for profundity. It feels good to be liberated from my roots.

11. Some of Alvin Reines's writings can be found in full text here: <http://polydoxoinstitute.org/>.

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