

What Do We Mean by “God”?

Fixing the Meaning of the Largest Word in the Language

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I. Meaning Before Argument

Before anyone argues about whether God exists, both sides need to know what the word means, and asking a believer to say what he means is entirely fair. What is not fair is the next move: declaring that the word must be meaningless because no experiment could ever check it. That objection comes from a rule popular in the 1920s—verificationism, which held that a claim untestable by the five senses is not false but nonsense. Philosophers dropped the rule within a generation, for two plain reasons. It threw out a great deal of ordinary science along with religion. And it failed its own test: you cannot check the rule with your five senses either. The collapse of that rule is widely regarded as the most important event in twentieth-century philosophy of religion, because it reopened the question this essay asks.¹

A definition is not evidence and was never offered as evidence. Nobody complains that the definition of a neutrino gives him nothing to test; the definition tells you what would count as one, and the testing is separate work, done afterward. This essay does the defining. The testing is the work of its companion, *Arguments For God*.

II. The Greatest That Can Be Conceived

The shortest adequate definition is nine centuries old. William Lane Craig states Anselm’s: “God, Anselm observes, is by definition the greatest being conceivable. If you could conceive of anything greater than God, then that would be God.” The test is easy to apply. Whatever you are calling God, ask whether you can imagine anything greater; if you can, the greater thing is God, and you were not talking about God after all. That one rule generates the fuller description—a being lacking nothing of power, knowledge, or goodness, uncaused, unchanging, the maker of everything else—because a being outdone in any of these would fail the test.²

III. Not a Member of Any Class

The first consequence of the definition is the one modern arguments most often miss: God cannot belong to any category or class. Every class groups things that share a nature while differing in existence—many chairs, many men, many stars. A God who was one member of the class “gods,” or even the solitary member of some wider class of beings, would have a nature that could in principle be shared, and something—the class itself, the conditions of membership—would stand behind Him. The greatest conceivable cannot have anything standing behind it. Aquinas drew the conclusion formally: God is not *in* a genus, not even the genus “being,” because in Him essence and existence are identical—He does not *have* existence, as members of classes do; He *is* existence. This is why the New Atheist question “which god don’t you believe in, since you disbelieve thousands” misfires: Zeus, Thor, and the rest were members of the world, items in the inventory. The Catholic claim was never that one more item exists. It is that the inventory has a ground.³

IV. Adler’s Three Ways

How, then, can human words apply to such a being at all? Mortimer Adler laid out the possibilities and showed the list is complete. Words can apply *univocally*—in exactly the same sense, “when we say ‘chair’ of this chair, that chair, or any other chair, without any change of meaning”—or *equivocally*, in senses wholly unrelated, as “rest” names both stillness and a remainder. Say our words apply to God equivocally and nothing can be discussed: Adler observes that if God’s existence were “totally unlike the real existence of everything else we know to exist, we would be using the term ‘real existence’ in a completely equivocal manner,” and the conversation ends before it starts. Say they apply

univocally and God becomes a creature: everything we know univocally is limited, material, changeable, so the sky-grandfather follows, and he should be as easy to find as any other large object. What remains is the third way, likeness without sameness—and only the third leaves us anything to think about.⁴

Flew’s gardener deserves an answer of his own. The parable assumes the believer starts with a visible gardener and qualifies him away under pressure—but the goalposts the skeptic says were moved were planted where they stand from the beginning: “I AM WHO I AM” is Exodus, not a retreat invented when the experiments came back empty, and Aquinas was arguing from the world’s contingency to subsistent being seven centuries before anyone demanded falsifiability. Nor does the believer refuse to say what would count against him. Paul stakes the whole faith on a checkable claim in one sentence: “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile” (1 Cor. 15:17)—a named falsifier, in the founding documents. The classical arguments run from public facts: that anything exists, that the universe began, that its constants permit life, that reason tracks truth. A case built on evidence anyone can inspect is not a claim that forbids every test.

V. The Analogy of Being, and the Rule of 1215

The third way has a name, the analogy of being, and a rule fixed by a council eight centuries ago. When Christians call God good, or wise, or a father, they mean something genuinely similar to human goodness, wisdom, and fatherhood, and never the same thing. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council, correcting the abbot Joachim, laid down the measure still in force: between Creator and creature, however great the likeness, the unlikeness is always greater. The rule is worth knowing when someone alleges that the vague, abstract God was invented recently to dodge hard questions. The rule is medieval, and it was made for the opposite purpose: to stop believers picturing God as a creature grown very large.⁵

VI. What “Almighty” Never Meant

The definition also disciplines the word “almighty,” and answers a family of puzzles that are supposed to embarrass it. Can God make a stone too heavy for Him to lift, a square circle, a married bachelor? The tradition’s answer, given by Aquinas and never improved, is that omnipotence means the power to do everything that can be done. A “square circle” is not a difficult thing; it is not a thing at all, only a pair of words canceling each other. Power over nonsense is not a power anyone lacks, because there is no such thing to have power over. Being able to do anything never included doing the self-contradictory, and the Church has said so for as long as she has used the word. The puzzles refute a definition of omnipotence that no one holds.⁶

VII. The Office and Its Candidates

Roy Clouser adds the finding that reframes the whole debate. Distinguish the office from its occupant—the presidency from the president—and ask the religions of the world not *who* is divine but *what the word means*. On the first question they disagree wildly: one creator, two warring forces, many gods, being itself, emptiness. On the second, Clouser found, “they all agree—amazingly—on this idea of what it means to be divine”: the divine is “the self-existent (unconditionally non-dependent) origin” of everything else. That is what “ultimate Reality” means in Christian use—not the vaguest thing sayable about God but the most exact.⁷

And the office never stands empty. Clouser presses the consequence: a theory that takes “matter/energy, or sense data, or mathematical entities and laws” to be “the nondependent origin of all else” has “a divinity belief every bit as much” as any temple. The materialist has not declined to answer the question; he has answered it, and his answer is matter. Whether matter can carry the weight—whether the sort of thing that comes in quantities and changes over time can be the thing that depends on nothing—is a fair argument to have. But it is an argument about occupants, not about whether the office exists. The pagan philosophers had this before the Church did: Pythagoreans nominating number, Plato the Forms, Aristotle the unmoved and self-sufficient. They argued about who holds the office. They agreed about what the office is.⁸

VIII. Saying It Backwards

A great deal of what can be said truly about God must be said backwards, by ruling things out—not limited, not material, not changeable, not caused. Maimonides held that the negations are the true statements: each denial removes a wrong picture rather than adding a right one, and the infinite is approached by clearing away the finite. This is not evasion; it is precision about a subject that exceeds its student. The wrong pictures survive anyway, and Keith Ward diagnoses why: an age that treats whatever can be counted and weighed as the only real thing will turn God into a super-person whose effects can be measured, and a God like that soon looks unnecessary. The bearded old man survives not because the Church teaches him—she has condemned him since 1215—but through a failure of imagination. Michael Novak presses the cost: a self-invented god scaled to our own confusions will deserve the contempt he earns, and the atheist who despises that god is right to. Anything the mind can picture is easy to ridicule; the God of the definition is precisely what the mind cannot picture, only approach.⁹

IX. The God of the Philosophers and the God of Abraham

One rejoinder deserves the floor here: people do not kneel or sing to “a reason there is anything,” so the God of the philosophers seems not to be the God who fills the churches. But listen to what the churches say kneeling: “I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth”—and maker of all things is the reason there is anything, confessed in those words for seventeen centuries. The philosopher’s phrase and the worshipper’s address are two grips on the same One, the way “the surgeon who saved my life” and “Mom” can name one woman without competing. Nobody prays to a description; everybody prays to the One the description picks out. And if the reason there is anything turns out to know you—which is exactly what the doctrine of God claims—then kneeling is not a category mistake. It is the obvious response of a creature to the source of an existence he did nothing to earn.

Pascal, sewn into his coat, carried the famous distinction: the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, not the God of the philosophers. The distinction is real, and it is regularly misread as opposition. What philosophy reaches is the office and its necessary occupant: subsistent existence, the ground of everything. What Israel met at the burning bush was a Person with a name to give—and the name He gave, “I am who am,” is the philosophers’ conclusion spoken in the first person. The tradition has therefore never had to choose. The God of the philosophers is the God of Abraham, described from a distance; the God of Abraham is the God of the philosophers, encountered. The definitions in this essay are the map. The pages of this site on Christ, on the Resurrection, and on the Church are about the territory, and about the Cartographer’s arrival in it.

X. The Reply in Brief

The word is not empty but defined, the way words are defined in every field, and the definition has held for a very long time: the greatest that can be conceived; not a member of any class; describable by analogy, never univocally; almighty over everything that can be done; the self-existent origin on which all else depends. That the definition gives the skeptic nothing to test is true and beside the point—definitions never do; they say what would count. Whether anything answers to this one is the argument of the companion essay. What this essay establishes is smaller and prior: when the Catholic says “God,” he is not naming the largest item in the universe’s inventory. He is naming the reason there is an inventory at all.

Endnotes

1. On verificationism’s collapse, see the survey in Craig, *Does God Exist?* (Philosophy Now, 2013), held in the site’s reference library; the self-refutation point is standard.

2. Craig, in the materials held in the site’s reference library, quoted exactly; Anselm, *Proslogion* 2 (1078), for the original.
3. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 3, aa. 4–5 (God is His own existence; God is not in a genus), summarized rather than quoted.
4. Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Think About God* (1980); the chair example, the “rest” example, and the equivocality sentence are quoted exactly from the copy in the site’s reference library.
5. Fourth Lateran Council (1215), constitution 2, against Joachim of Fiore: *inter creatorem et creaturam non potest similitudo notari, quin inter eos maior sit dissimilitudo notanda* — summarized in translation.
6. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 25, a. 3: omnipotence extends to everything possible; the self-contradictory *does not have the nature of the feasible* — summarized.
7. Roy Clouser, *A New Philosophical Guide for the Sciences*, quoted exactly from the copy in the site’s reference library; the fuller statement is his *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* (rev. ed. 2005).
8. Clouser, same source, quoted exactly on naturalistic divinity beliefs; the pagan candidates are his examples and the tradition’s.
9. Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* I.58, summarized; Keith Ward’s failure-of-imagination diagnosis and Michael Novak’s self-invented-god warning (*Belief and Unbelief; No One Sees God*, 2008) are summarized rather than quoted here; Novak is quoted exactly on the site’s companion panel.

For Further Reading

How to Think About God—A Guide for the 20th-Century Pagan, by Mortimer J. Adler.

The Myth of Religious Neutrality—An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories, by Roy A. Clouser.

God—A Guide for the Perplexed, by Keith Ward.

Defining “God”, by William Lane Craig—Reasonable Faith.

No One Sees God—The Dark Night of Atheists and Believers, by Michael Novak.

Metaphysics & the Idea of God, by Wolfhart Pannenberg.

Our Idea of God—An Introduction to Philosophical Theology, by Thomas V. Morris.

Imagining God—Theology & the Religious Imagination, by Garrett Green.

What Is God Like?, by James V. Schall.

The Concept of God—An Exploration of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God, by Ronald H. Nash.

* * *

“I am who am.” — Exodus 3:14

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author’s articulation of *what the Catholic tradition means by the word God*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church’s teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author’s alone.