

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 11, 2006

Attributes of God (II) - Infinity



Although the [discussion](#) of divine simplicity continues on the comment board, I will move along my series on the Attributes of God here. Feel free to participate in either or both discussions.

First, a note on the **organization of the series** as a whole. We are beginning (following Thomas Aquinas, the

inspiration and silent conversation partner for this series) with the "metaphysical" attributes of God. These are what we shall call the "NOTs" and the "OMNIs". The "NOTs" are those attributes which remove from God properties belonging only to creatures, such as simplicity (not-composite), infinity, immutability, impassibility. The "OMNIs" are those attributes which are partial in us yet complete in God, such as omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence. These two categories of attributes are "metaphysical" in that they describe God in some relationship (whether negative or positive) to the physical world. I am not necessarily committing myself to the procedure of beginning with these; actually, I intend to perform a little reformulation of these by offering an alternative term for each. But alas, we must begin somewhere, and the NOTs and OMNIs are often what folks first think of when one mentions the attributes of God.

God is infinite. **Infinity** does not mean God is really, really big, although that is often what comes to mind. Infinity is not the enlargement of a known quantity, but its negation. Infinity means not-finite. In order to understand this attribute, then, we must understand what it negates.

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What does word "finite" mean? "Finite" is the word we use to set limits on reality. The related term "definite" brings out this meaning. A "definite" table means this or that table, rather than just tables in general. Finite has an even broader use, however, in that it encompasses ideas too. The idea or concept of a "table" is finite; it does not include every possible idea, but only the ideas pertinent to the concept of "table." Given this definition, we can see that creation as a whole is finite. Finitude is an attribute of creation.

If creation is finite, and God as the creator is other than creation, then God must be infinite. So the logic goes. It seems true enough. But a **question** must be raised at this point: Is God here being defined by creation? Is our knowledge of God utterly tied to our knowledge of the world? If so, how do we know which things in creation ought to be negated? Surely some aspects of creation are held in common with God rather than opposed to him. How do we know which is which? Also, if infinity draws its meaning from contrast with the world, does this mean God needs the world in order to be infinite? Furthermore, what if a created infinity were discovered? Would this too be God? If not, then what does infinity really tell us about God if it does not identify him in distinction from the world? Finally, how are we to know whether this infinite being is the God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Although I think these and other serious problems can be raised, there is still something true about divine infinity. If God is truly the Lord, then he certainly cannot be contained by anything, unless, of course, he chose to be so. More to the point, infinity could be regarded as a conceptual restatement of the Biblical praise that **God is great**. "Great is the Lord," says the Law. "Great is the Lord," says the Psalmist. "Great is the Lord," says the Prophet. "Great is the Lord," says the Apostle. The greatness of God is a biblical theme. The God of the covenant is a great God. Greatness is a fitting attribute of God. It does indicate a comparison (God is *greater* than humanity, *greater* than other gods). But it is not limited to comparison. God is great whether or not there is anything small around with which to compare him. God simply *is* great. It is an attribute of his being. All his other attributes can be modified by this attribute: God's love is great, God's power is great, God's wisdom is great. [Note: this mutual modification of divine attributes is the payoff of the doctrine of divine simplicity]

I suggest that most of what is said about God with the term "infinite" can be said with the term "great." I also might say that what can be said by "infinite" that cannot be said by "great" should not be said at all. In other words, "infinity" may try to reach beyond the God who has revealed himself in the history of the covenant with Israel fulfilled by his Son Jesus Christ. This God has called himself "great." That's good enough for me.

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Of course, as a traditional term, the burden of proof lies with one who wishes to reject it. I do not feel compelled to reject infinity as an attribute of God, although I am dubious about how we come to know his infinity. But don't be surprised if you find me saying "great" a little more often than "infinite." And when I say "infinite," I may be thinking "great."

Any thoughts?

Is my definition of infinity sufficiently clear?

What is your initial reaction to the notion of divine infinity?

How do we know whether God is infinite?

If one were to drop the language of divine infinity, what would be the ramifications for theology?

Labels: [Attributes of God](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 2:08 PM

[3 comments](#)

3 Comments:

At [8:48 PM, October 12, 2006](#), [Matt Guthrie](#) said...

Got nothing to add except thanks for the continual thought provoking ideas relating to serious theology you post. I'm too far out of my element to interact effectively on this one. However, in light of the discussion going on several of the blogs of your IWU buddies (both young and old), this is good for me. It keeps the mind sharp. I miss my seminary days when I had more time to ponder like this.

At [5:39 PM, October 15, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

I'm glad I am not taking this class for credit. I am reading this series every week but fall short of coming up with much to say. It is sort of "devotions" for me and I respond with praise more than deep discussion.

Perhaps that is the goal of good theology: Praise?

At [12:40 AM, October 24, 2006](#), Brandon W. said...

Your definition of "infinity" (at least with respect to God) will be informed by two things: (1) your theory of time (eternalist/presentist); and (2) your understanding of God's relationship to time.

By my lights, God is in time (i.e. God has temporal properties-- though this isn't universally agree upon by philosophers of religion), and presentism is true, therefore I prefer to use the term 'everlasting' to describe God's temporal status.

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