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from Philosophy
of Religion (2001)

THE IDEA OF GOD

In 1963 a small book was published by an Anglican bishop, a book that caused a religious storm both in Great Britain and America.' In *Honest to God* Bishop John Robinson dared to suggest that the idea of God that has been dominant in western civilization for centuries is irrelevant to the needs of modern men and women. The survival of religion in the West, Robinson argued, requires that this traditional picture of God be discarded in favor of a profoundly different conception of God, a conception Robinson professed to perceive emerging in the work of twentieth-century religious thinkers such as Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann.

Robinson correctly predicted the reaction to his thesis, pointing out that it was bound to be resisted as a betrayal of what the Bible says. Not only would the vast majority of Church people oppose his view, but those who rejected belief in God would resent the suggestion that the idea of God was already dead or at least dying. In letters to the editor of the London Times, in articles in scholarly journals, and in pulpits on two continents, Robinson was attacked as an atheist in bishop's garments, and only infrequently defended as a prophet of a new revolution taking place within the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. A look at some of Robinson's ideas will help us in our effort to sort out different ideas of God and to focus on that idea of God which will be the center of our attention throughout most of this book.

Before the emergence of the belief that the whole world is under the sovereign control of a single being, people often believed in a plurality of divine beings or gods, a religious position called *polytheism*. In ancient Greece and Rome, for example, the various gods had control over different aspects of life, so that one naturally worshipped several gods, a god of war, a goddess of love, and so forth. Sometimes, however, one might believe that there are a number of gods but worship only one of them, the god of one's own tribe, a religious position called *henotheism*. In the Old Testament, for example, there are frequent references to

the gods of other tribes, although the allegiance of the Hebrews is to their own god, Jahweh. Slowly, however, there emerged the belief that one's own god was the creator of heaven and earth, the god not only of one's own tribe, but of all people, a religious view called monotheism.

According to Robinson, monotheism, the belief in only one divine being, has passed through a profound change, a change he describes with the help of the expressions "up there" and "out there." The god "up there" is a being located in space above us, presumably at some definite distance from the earth, in a region known as the heavens. Associated with this idea of God is a certain primitive picture in which the universe consists of three regions, the heavens above, the earth beneath, and the region of darkness under the earth. According to this picture, the earth is frequently invaded by beings from the other two realms--God and his angels from the heavens, Satan and his demons from the region beneath the earth--who war with one another for control over the souls and destiny of those who inhabit the earthly realm. This idea of God as a powerful being located "up there" at some definite place in space was slowly abandoned, Robinson claims. We now explain to our children that heaven is not in fact over their heads, that God is not literally somewhere up in the sky. In place of God as "the old man in the sky," there has emerged a much more sophisticated idea of God, an idea Robinson refers to as the God "out there."

The fundamental change from the God "up there" to the God "out there" is the change from thinking of God as located at some spatial distance from the earth to thinking of God as separate from and independent of the world. According to this idea, God has no location in some spot or region of physical space. He is a purely spiritual being, a supremely good, all-powerful, all-knowing, personal being who has created the world, but is not a part of it. He is separate from the world, not subject to its laws, judges it, and guides it to its final purpose. This rather majestic idea of God was slowly developed over the centuries by great western theologians such as Augustine, Boethius, Bonaventure, Avicenna, Anselm, Maimonides, and Aquinas. It has been the dominant idea of God in western civilization. If we label the God "up there" as "the old man in the sky," we can label the God "out there" as "the God of the traditional theologians." And it is the God of the traditional theologians that Robinson believes has become irrelevant to the needs of modern people. Whether Robinson is right or wrong—and it is rather doubtful that he is right—it is undeniably true that when most of us who are the cultural heirs of western civilization think of God, the being we think of is in many important respects like the God of the traditional theologians. It will be helpful, therefore, in clarifying our own thoughts about God to explore more thoroughly the conception of God that emerged in the thinking of the great theologians.

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

We have already noted that according to many major theologians, God is conceived of as a supremely good being, separate from and independent of the world, all-powerful, all-knowing, and the creator of the universe. Two other features that were ascribed to God by the great theologians are *self-existent* and

eternal. The dominant idea of God in western civilization, then, is the idea of a supremely good being, creator of but separate from and independent of the world, all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient), eternal, and self-existent. Of course, this list of the major elements in this idea of God will be illuminating to us only insofar as the elements themselves are understood. What is it for a being to be omnipotent? How are we to understand the idea of self-existence? In what way is God thought to be separate from and independent of the world? What is meant when it is said that God, and God alone, is eternal? Only to the extent that we can answer these and similar questions do we comprehend the central idea of God to emerge within western civilization. Before turning to a study of the question of the existence of God, therefore, it is important to enrich our grasp of this idea of God by trying to answer some of these basic questions.

Omnipotence and Perfect Goodness

In his great work, *the Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas, who lived in the thirteenth century, undertakes to explain what it is for God to be omnipotent. After pointing out that for God to be omnipotent is for God to be able to do all things that are possible, Aquinas carefully explains that there are two different kinds of possibility, *relative possibility* and *absolute possibility*, and inquires as to which kind of possibility is meant when it is said that God's omnipotence is the ability to do all things that are possible. Something is a relative possibility when it lies within the power of some being or beings to do. Flying by natural means, for example, is possible relative to birds but not relative to humans. Something is an absolute possibility, however, if it is not a contradiction in terms. Defeating a chess master in a game of chess is something that is very hard to do, but it is not a contradiction in terms; indeed, it occasionally has been done. But defeating a chess master *in a game of chess after* he has checkmated your king is not just something that is very hard to do, it cannot be done at all, for it is a contradiction in terms. Becoming a married bachelor, making one and the same thing both round and square at the same time, defeating someone at chess after he has checkmated your king, are not possible in the absolute sense, for they are activities which, implicitly or explicitly, involve a contradiction in terms.

Having explained the two different kinds of possibility, Aquinas points out that it must be absolute possibility which is meant when God's omnipotence is explained as the ability to do all things that are possible. For if we meant relative possibility, our explanation would say no more than that "God is omnipotent" means that he can do all things that are in his power to do. And while it is certainly true that God can do all things that are in his power to do, it explains nothing. "God is omnipotent," then, means that God can do whatever does not involve a contradiction in terms. Does this mean that there are some things God cannot do? In one sense it clearly does mean this. God cannot make one and the same thing both round and square at the same time and he cannot defeat me at a game of chess after I have checkmated his king. Of course, God could always checkmate my king before I am in a position to checkmate his. But if he should—for whatever reason—engage me in a game of chess and allow it to happen that I checkmate his king then he *cannot* win that game of chess, He could annihilate

me and the chessboard, but he could not win that game of chess. So there are many things that God, despite being omnipotent, cannot do. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude from this that God's power is somehow limited, that there are things he cannot do which, if only his power were greater, he could do. For power, as Aquinas points out, extends only to whatever is possible. And there is nothing that is possible to be done that God's power is inadequate to accomplish. Thus Aquinas concludes, "Whatever implies contradiction does not come within the scope of divine omnipotence, because it cannot have the aspect of possibility. Hence it is more appropriate to say that such things cannot be done, than that God cannot do them."²

But aren't there some things which, unlike making a round square, are not contradictory and yet such that God cannot do them? Committing suicide or some evil deed are not contradictory. Many theologians, however, have denied that God can destroy himself or do what is evil. For the doing of such things is inconsistent with God's nature-his eternity and perfect goodness. It might be objected that God's perfections imply only that he will not destroy himself or do evil, not that he cannot-he has the power to do evil, but because he is supremely good it is a power he will never exercise. What this objection overlooks, however, is that to attribute to God the power to do evil is to attribute to him the power to cease to have an attribute (perfect goodness) which is part of his very essence or nature. Being perfectly good is as much a part of God's nature as having three angles is part of the nature of a triangle. God could no more cease to be perfectly good than a triangle could cease to have three angles. In view of this difficulty, it is perhaps necessary to amend Aquinas' explanation of what it means for God to be omnipotent. Instead of saying simply that what it means is for him to have the power to do anything that is an absolute possibility, we shall say that it means that God can do anything that is an absolute possibility *and not inconsistent with any of his basic attributes*. Since doing evil is inconsistent with being perfectly good, and since being perfectly good is a basic attribute to God, the fact that God cannot do evil will not conflict with the fact that he is omnipotent.

The idea that God's omnipotence does not include the power to do something inconsistent with any of his basic attributes can help us solve what has been called the paradox of the stone. According to this paradox, either God has the power to create a stone so heavy that he cannot lift it, or God does not have that power. If he does have the power to create such a stone, then there is something God cannot do: lift the stone he can create. On the other hand, if God cannot create such a stone, then there is also something he cannot do: create a stone so heavy he cannot lift it. In either case there is something God cannot do. Therefore, God is not omnipotent.

The solution to this puzzle is to see that *creating a stone so heavy that God cannot lift it* is doing something inconsistent with one of God's essential attributes-the attribute of omnipotence. For if there exists a stone so heavy that God lacks the power to lift it, then God is not omnipotent. Therefore, if God has the power to create such a stone, he has the power to bring it about that he lacks an attribute (omnipotence) that is essential to him. So, the proper solution to the puzzle is to say that God cannot create such a stone any more than he can do an evil deed.

This does not mean, of course, that there is some stone in the infinite series of stones weighing 1,000 pounds, 2,000 pounds, 3,000 pounds, 4,000 pounds, and so on, that God cannot create. In the case of an evil deed, God cannot perform that deed because his perfect goodness is essential to him. In the case of a stone so heavy that God cannot lift it, God cannot create such a stone because his omnipotence is essential to him.

We've seen that God's omnipotence is not to be understood as including the "power" to bring about logically impossible states of affairs or to perform actions inconsistent with his essential attributes. What about changing the past? Clearly, God could have prevented Richard Nixon from being a president of the United States. But can God *now* do so? Nixon's never having been president is not a logically impossible state of affairs; nor does bringing it about appear to be inconsistent with God's goodness, or any of his other essential attributes. But it does seem that it is not *now* in the power of any being, including an omnipotent being, to bring about Nixon's never having been president. So, although we have refined our understanding of the notion of omnipotence and come to see that God's omnipotence isn't the power to bring about absolutely anything whatever, we cannot claim to have provided a full explication of the idea that God is omnipotent. For, as we've just seen, certain past happenings cannot now be changed even by an omnipotent being. And there may be other states of affairs that an omnipotent, divine being cannot bring about.

The idea that God must be perfectly good is connected to the view that God is a being who deserves unconditional gratitude, praise, and worship. For if a being were to fall short of perfect goodness, it would not be worthy of unreserved praise and worship. So, God is not just a good being, his goodness is unsurpassable. Moreover, God doesn't simply happen to be perfectly good; it is his nature to be that way. God logically could not fail to be perfectly good. It was for this reason that we observed above that God does not have the power to do evil. For to attribute such a power to God is to attribute to him the power to cease to be the being that he necessarily is.

Are we saying that God is perfectly good by definition? Yes. But we are also noting that the definition of God as perfectly good is connected to, if not grounded in, the religious requirement that God be an object of unconditional praise and worship. And we are making an additional point. For we also have said that *the being who is God* cannot cease to be perfectly good. A bachelor is unmarried by definition. But someone who is a bachelor can cease to be unmarried. Of course, when this happens (our bachelor marries), he no longer is a bachelor. Unlike our bachelor, however, the being who is God cannot give up being God. So, we are not simply saying that God is by definition perfectly good. We are also saying that a being who is God cannot ever be anything other than God. The bachelor next door can cease to be a bachelor. But the being who is God cannot cease to be God. We can put it this way. Being a bachelor is not part of the nature or essence of a being who is a bachelor. So, although by definition someone cannot be a bachelor without being unmarried, that person can cease to be unmarried because he can cease to be a bachelor. But being God is part of the nature or essence of the being who is God. So, since the being who is God cannot cease to be God, that being cannot cease to be perfectly good.

But what is it to be perfectly good? Since God is unsurpassably good, he has all the features that unsurpassable goodness implies. Among these is absolute *moral goodness*. Moral goodness is a vital part, but not the whole of goodness. For there is nonmoral goodness as well. Thus we distinguish two statements that might be made on the occasion of someone's death: "He led a good life." "He had a good life." The first statement concerns his moral goodness, the latter centers chiefly on nonmoral goodness such as happiness, good fortune, etc. God's perfect goodness involves both moral goodness and nonmoral goodness. Of chief interest here is his absolute moral goodness (perfect justice, benevolence, etc.). For God's moral goodness has long been thought to be in some way the source or standard of what it is for human life to be moral. Furthermore, by virtue of his essential moral perfection, some judgments can be made about the world he has created. We may be certain, for example, that God would not create a morally bad world. It might even be true that by virtue of his moral perfection God would be led to create the morally best world he can. These are important topics. We will pursue the second of these topics (what sort of world God would create) when we later consider the problem of evil. It will be helpful here to consider briefly the connection between God's moral perfection and morality in human life.

God has been held to be the source or standard of our moral duties, both negative duties (for example, the duty not to take innocent, human life) and positive duties (for example, the duty to help others in need). Commonly, religious people believe that these duties are somehow grounded in divine commandments. A believer in Judaism may view the ten commandments as fundamental moral rules that determine at least a good part of what one is morally obligated to do (positive duties) or refrain from doing (negative duties). Clearly, given his absolute moral perfection, what God commands us to do must be what is morally right for us to do. But are these things morally right because God commands them? That is, does the moral rightness of these things simply consist in the fact that God has commanded them? Or does God command these things to be done because they are right? If we say the second, that God commands them to be done because he sees that they are morally right, we seem to imply that morality has an existence apart from God's will or commands. But if we say the first, that what makes things right is God's willing or commanding them, we seem to imply that there would be no right or wrong if there were no divine being to issue such commands. While neither answer is without its problems, the dominant answer in religious thinking concerning God and morality is that what God commands is morally right independent of his commands. God's commanding us to perform certain actions does not make those actions morally right; they are morally right independent of his commands and he commands them because he sees that they are morally right. How then does our moral life depend on God? Well, even though morality itself need not depend on God, perhaps our *knowledge* of morality is dependent (or at least aided) by God's commands. Perhaps it is the teachings of religion that lead human beings to view certain actions as morally right and others as morally wrong. Also, the practice of morality may be aided by belief in God. For although an important part of the moral life is to do one's duty out of respect for duty itself, it would be too much to expect of ordinary humans that they would relentlessly pursue the life of duty even though

there were no grounds for associating morality with well-being and happiness. Belief in God may aid the moral life by providing a reason for thinking that the connection between leading a good life and having a good life is not simply accidental. Still, what of the difficulty that certain things are morally right apart from the fact that God commands us to do them? Consider God's belief that $2 + 2 = 4$. Is it true that $2 + 2 = 4$ because God believes it? Or does God believe that $2 + 2 = 4$ because it is true that $2 + 2 = 4$? If we say the latter, as it seems we should, we imply that certain mathematical statements are true independent of God's believing them. So, we already seem committed to the view that the way some things are is not ultimately a matter of God's will or commands. Perhaps the basic truths of morality have the same sort of status as the basic truths of mathematics.

Self-Existence

The idea that God is a self-existent being was developed and explained by St. Anselm in the eleventh century. By various arguments Anselm had satisfied himself that among those beings that exist there is one that is supremely great and good—nothing that exists or ever did exist is its equal. Of anything that exists, however, Anselm was equally persuaded that we can ask of it, what accounts for or explains the fact that it exists? If we come upon a table, for example, we can ask what accounts for the fact that it exists. And we might answer our question, at least partially, by learning that a carpenter took some wood and made it. So too, for a tree, a mountain, or a lake, we can ask the question, what explains the fact that it exists? In an effort to learn more about the supremely great and good being, Anselm asks it of this being. What is it that accounts for the fact that this being exists?

Before trying to answer the question, Anselm observes that there are only three cases to consider: either something's existence is explained by *another*, explained by *nothing*, or its existence is explained by *itself*. Clearly, the existence of the table is accounted for by something else (the carpenter). So too for the existence of a tree, a mountain, or a lake. Each of them exists because of other things. Indeed, the familiar things in our lives all seem to be explained by other things. But even when we don't know what, if anything, explains the fact that a certain thing exists, it's clear that the answer must be one of the three Anselm proposes. The fact that a certain thing exists is explained either by reference to something else, by nothing, or by itself. There simply are no other causes to consider. What then of the existence of the supremely great and good being? Is its existence due to another, to nothing, or to itself? Unlike the table, the tree, the mountain, or the lake, the supremely great and good being cannot have its existence due to another, Anselm reasons, for then it would be dependent for its existence on that other thing and, consequently, would not be the supreme being. Whatever is supreme over all other things cannot be (or have been) dependent for its existence on any of them. The existence of the supreme being, therefore, must be explained either by nothing or by itself.

For something to have its existence explained by nothing is for it to exist and yet for there to be no explanation whatever of the fact that it exists rather than not. Could there be something of this sort—something whose existence is simply

an unintelligible, brute fact, having no explanation whatever? Anselm's answer, whether correct or not, is perfectly clear: "It is utterly inconceivable that what is something should exist through nothing."³ Unfortunately, Anselm gives us no explanation as to why we cannot conceive of something whose existence is an unintelligible brute fact. Presumably, he thought the point so obvious as not to require explanation. In any case, we must carefully note the principle Anselm is here expressing, for it will figure later in one of the major arguments for God's existence. Anselm's basic conviction is that *whatever exists must have an explanation of its existence*—there must be something that accounts for the fact that it exists rather than not, and that something must be either something else or the thing itself. To deny this is to view the existence of something as irrational, absurd, utterly unintelligible. And this, thinks Anselm, can no more be true of the supreme being than it can be true of a tree or mountain. The existence of the supreme being, therefore, cannot be explained by nothing. There remains, then, only the third case. Anselm draws the conclusion that the supreme being's existence is due *to itself*.

Of course, it is one thing to conclude that the explanation of the supreme being's existence is to be found within the nature of that very being, and quite another thing to understand what it is within the supreme being's nature that accounts for the existence of that being. Anselm does not profess to understand *what* it is within the divine nature that accounts for God's existence. Nor does he understand just *how* a being's nature might provide the explanation of that being's existence. All that he professes to be sure of is that the existence of the supreme being is due to the supreme being itself. He does not mean, of course, that the supreme being brought itself into existence. For it would then have to exist before it existed in order to bring itself into existence, and clearly that is impossible. Moreover, as we noted earlier, eternity is one of God's characteristics, so he clearly did not come into existence at a certain time.

Anselm does, however, offer an analogy in an effort to help our understanding of this very difficult idea. Using our own example, his point can be expressed as follows: Suppose on a cold night we come upon a blazing campfire. We note that a rock a few feet from the campfire is warm. If we ask what explains this fact about the rock (that it is warm), it would be absurd to suggest that the explanation is to be found within the rock itself, that there is something about the nature of the rock that makes it warm. The fire and the nearness of the rock to the fire explain the rock's warmth. Suppose we then note that the fire is also warm. What accounts for the fact that the fire is warm? Here it does not seem absurd to suggest that the explanation lies within the fire itself. It is the nature of a fire to be warm just as it is the nature of a triangle to have three angles. To avoid confusion here we must keep clearly in mind that it is the fact of the fire's warmth we are trying to explain, and not the fact of the fire's existence. The fact of the fire's existence is not due to the fire but to the camper who built the fire. The fact that the existing fire is warm, however, is a fact about the fire that is accounted for by the nature of the fire, by what it is to be a fire. We have here, then, an example of a fact about a thing (the fire's warmth) that is accounted for not by something else but by the nature of the thing itself (the fire). Anselm's hope is that if we once see

that a certain fact about a thing may be explained not by something else but by that thing's nature, the idea of self-existence will seem less strange to us. Whether this is so or not, it should be clear both what is meant by *self-existence* and why the traditional theologians felt it to be a basic feature of the divine being. For something to be a self-existent being is for it to have the explanation of its existence within its own nature. Since no thing can exist whose existence is unintelligible, lacking any explanation (Anselm's basic principle), and since the supreme being would not be supreme if its existence were due to something else, the conclusion is inevitable that God (the supreme being) has the explanation of his existence within his own nature.

Separation, Independence, and Eternity

We have been exploring the notions of *omnipotence*, *perfect goodness*, and *self-existence* in an effort to enlarge our grasp of the dominant idea of God to emerge in western civilization. Some of the other elements in this idea of God will be explored in later chapters. To complete this beginning exploration, however, it will be instructive to consider the notion that God is *separate from and independent* of the *world* and the conception of God as an *eternal being*.

We have noted the emergence of monotheism out of henotheism and polytheism. Monotheism is the dominant tradition in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Another view of God has persisted since ancient times, and still flourishes, particularly in the major religions of the East, Buddhism and Hinduism, a view called *pantheism*. According to pantheism, everything that exists has an inner nature that is one and the same in all things, and that inner nature is God. Later, when we examine the experiences of some of the great mystics, we shall consider pantheism more fully. The fundamental idea in monotheism that God is *separate from* the world constitutes a rejection of pantheism. According to the Judeo-Christian and Islamic conception of God, the world is entirely distinct from God; everything in it could be entirely annihilated without the slightest change in the reality of the divine being. There are, of course, things in the world more like God than other things. Since human beings are living and rational they are more like God than are stones and trees. But being *like God* and *being God* are enormously different. The world is not the divine, and the notion that God is separate from the world is meant to emphasize the fundamental difference between the reality of God and the reality of the world.

That God is independent of the world means that he is not governed by any of the physical laws according to which the universe operates. But it means much more than this. It also means that God is not subject to the laws of space and time. According to the law of space, no object can exist at two different places at one and the same time. Of course, a part of an object can exist at one place in space while another part of it (if it is a large object) can exist at a different place. The law doesn't deny this. What it denies is that the whole of an object can exist at two different places in space at the same time. Now if this law applied to God, either God would be at some place in space at a certain time and not at other places at that time or he would be everywhere in space at once, but only a part of him in each part of space. Neither of these alternatives was acceptable to the

great theologians of the past. On the first alternative, while God might be present in Boston at a certain moment, he couldn't, at that moment, be present in New York. And, on the second alternative, although God could be both in Boston and in New York at the same time, it would be one part of God in New York and a different part in Boston. On the traditional idea of God, not only must God be at every place at the same time, the *whole of God* must be at each distinct place at the same time. The whole of God is in Boston and in New York at one and the same time, indeed, at every time. But such a view conflicts with the law of space. And so the idea of God that emerged in western civilization is the idea of a supreme being who is independent of the laws of nature and transcends even the basic law of space.

The idea that God is not subject to the law of time is, as we shall see, closely related to one meaning of *eternify*. According to the law of space, nothing can exist as a whole in two different places at the same time. According to the law of time, nothing can exist as a whole in two different times at the same time. To understand the law of time, we need only consider the example of a man who existed yesterday, exists today, and will exist tomorrow. The whole man exists at each of these different times. That is, it is not that only his arm, say, existed yesterday, his head today, and his legs will exist tomorrow. But even though the whole man exists at each of these three times, the whole temporal *life* of the man does not exist at each of these times. The temporal part of his life that was yesterday does not exist today; at best he can share in it only by remembering it. And the temporal part of his life that will be tomorrow does not exist today; at best he can share in it only by anticipating it. Although the *whole man* exists at each of these three times, his *whole life* exists at none of them. His life, then, is divided up into many temporal parts and at any particular time only one of these temporal parts is present to him. Thus a person's life exemplifies the law of time. For according to that law the individual temporal parts of a person's life cannot all be present to him at once. For reasons we need not pursue here, the great medieval theologians were reluctant to view God's life as split up into temporal parts, and so took the view that God transcends the law of time, as well as the law of space. Even though it is scarcely intelligible, they took the view, as Anselm expresses it, that "the supreme Nature exists in place and time in some such way, that it is not prevented from so existing simultaneously, as a whole, in different places or times. . . ." ⁴ According to this idea the whole beginningless and endless life of God is present to him at each moment of time, and the whole of God is simultaneously present at every place in space.

Eternal has two distinct meanings. To be eternal in one sense is to have endless temporal existence, without beginning and without end; it is to have infinite duration in both temporal directions. Now there is nothing in this meaning of *eternal* that conflicts with the law of time. The law of time would imply only that anything that is temporally infinite has an infinity of temporal parts making up its life such that at no time does it have more than one of these temporal parts present to it, the other temporal parts would be either in its past or in its future. According to the second meaning of *eternal*, however, an eternal being does not have its life broken up into temporal parts, for it is not subject to the law of time.

So, according to this meaning of *eternal*, a being having infinite duration in each temporal direction and subject to the law of time would not be eternal. As the Roman scholar Boethius (A.D. 480-524) noted:

Whatever is subject to the condition of time, even that which-as Aristotle conceived the world to be-has no beginning and will have no end in a life coextensive with the infinity of time, is such that it cannot rightly be thought eternal. For it does not comprehend and include the whole of infinite life all at once, since it does not embrace the future which is yet to come. Therefore, only that which comprehends and possesses the whole plenitude of endless life together, from which no future thing nor any past thing is absent, can justly be called *eternal*.⁵

Boethius, Anselm, Aquinas, and other traditional theologians interpreted the *eternity* of God in the second of the two senses just distinguished. They held that God is outside of time, not subject to its fundamental law. Other theologians, however, took the view that God is eternal in the first sense distinguished, that he has infinite duration in both temporal directions. The eighteenth-century English theologian, Samuel Clarke, for example, rejected the idea that a being might transcend time as a senseless idea, and took the view that to be eternal is simply to be *everlasting*, existing in time but having neither beginning nor end. When we later study the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom we shall reconsider *these two senses of eternity* and note their implications for the doctrine of divine foreknowledge. For the moment, however, it is sufficient to recognize that eternity is a central element in the traditional idea of God and that it has been interpreted in two distinct ways.

We have been exploring some of the basic features making up the idea of God that have been central in the western religious tradition. According to this idea, God is a supremely good being, creator of but separate from and independent of the world, omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, and self-existent. In the course of exploring this idea of God, we have also noted various other conceptions of the divine associated with polytheism, henotheism, monotheism, and pantheism. The idea of God that will be of central importance in this book, however, is the idea elaborated by the traditional western theologians. It is the major idea of God in the three great religions of western civilization: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Up to this point we have used Robinson's expression "the God out there" and the expression "the God of the traditional theologians" to refer to this idea of God. From this point on, however, we shall call this view of God the *theistic* idea of God. To be a theist, then, is to believe in the existence of a supremely good being, creator of but separate from and independent of the world, omnipotent, omniscient, eternal (in either of our two senses), and self-existent. An *atheist* is anyone who believes that the theistic God does not exist, whereas an *agnostic* is someone who has considered the theistic idea of God but believes neither in the existence nor in the nonexistence of the theistic God.

We have just used the terms *theist*, *atheist*, and *agnostic* in a restricted or narrow sense. In the broader sense, a theist is someone who believes in the existence of a divine being or beings, even if his idea of the divine is quite different from the idea of God we have been describing. Similarly, in the broader sense of the

term, an atheist is someone who rejects belief in every form of deity, not just the God of the traditional theologians. To avoid confusion, it is important to keep in mind both the narrow and the broader senses of these terms. In the narrow sense, the Protestant theologian Tillich is an atheist, for he rejected belief in what we have called the theistic God. But in the broader sense he is a theist since he believed in a divine reality, albeit different from the theistic God. For the most part I shall use the terms *theism*, *atheism*, and *agnosticism* in the narrow sense. Thus when we consider the question of what grounds there are for theism, we shall be concerned with whether there are rational grounds for the existence of the theistic God (the God of the traditional theologians). And when we ask, for example, whether the facts about evil in the world support the truth of atheism, we shall be asking whether the existence of evil provides rational grounds for the conclusion that the theistic God does not exist.

Having clarified the idea of the theistic God, we can now consider some of these larger questions. And we shall begin with the question of whether belief in his existence can be rationally justified.

Notes

1. John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1963).
2. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q 25, art. 3, in *The Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945).
3. St. Anselm, *Monologium*, VI, in *Saint Anselm: Basic Writings*, tr. Sidney N. Deane (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Co., 1962).
4. St. Anselm, *Monologium*, XXII, in *Saint Anselm: Basic Writings*.
5. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, prose VI, tr. Richard Green (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1962).

Topics for Review

1. Briefly define the concepts *polytheism*, *henotheism*, and *monotheism*.
2. Explain how God can be omnipotent and yet not have it in his power to do evil.
3. What is meant by a self-existent being, and for what reasons does Anselm think that God is a self-existent being?
4. State the law of space and the law of time, and indicate the connection between the law of time and what is meant by the eternity of God.
5. Describe the theistic idea of God and what is meant by *theism*, *atheism*, and *agnosticism*.

Topics for Further Study

6. How would you define the term God? If your definition of God is different from the theistic idea of God, explain the differences and give reasons why your idea of God might be a better one.
7. What reasons would you give to show that God exists, as you've defined *God*? What reasons might someone give for rejecting either your definition of *God* or your claim that God (as defined by you) actually exists? How would you respond?