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4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we are going to study about the nature and attributes of God. Nature and attributes of God are very important features of all religious traditions. These serve as keys to faith in God for the believers. Here we will discuss the main nature and attributes of God as commonly accepted by the scholars of religious thoughts. We critically examine the theories of different religious thinkers on the nature and attributes of God. By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- Have an over-all glance of the nature and attributes of God.
 - Rationally distinguish between the Infinite Being (God) and finite beings.
 - Appreciate the teachings of various great religious thinkers on this topic.
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4.1 INTRODUCTION

What is God? What do we mean when we use the word 'God'? Do all who use the word God mean the same thing by it? Can we assume that there is just one concept of God? Over the years we know people have thought of God radically different ways. It is perhaps natural to

assume that Judaism, Christianity and Islam share a common concept of God. Their followers profess agreement on some issues such as God is creator of all things, omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good.

Today many philosophical and religious problems about 'God' arise from misunderstandings about exactly what that word is taken to mean in different religious traditions. For example, within Western religious traditions, to speak of God as literally existing in a particular place, a being 'out there' in some way, external to the world, is to limit him. And a being so limited cannot be God. So we need to be clear that any argument about an external, separate entity is not the understanding of God in Semitic religious tradition.

We know ordinary things exist because we can define them, set boundaries to them, know what they are. In other words, things are known to exist because they are limited. We can stand outside them and point to them. But if God is infinite and eternal, he is everywhere all the time. It would not be possible to point to him as we can with the finite objects, because it would not be possible to point away from him. It is, therefore, clear that God is not part of the universe. God is not outside the universe either; for, if he is infinite, he cannot be outside anything.

That does not mean that we cannot employ symbolic and poetic language to express belief in God. But such language needs to be recognized for what it is, and not taken literally. Once taken literally, the God it refers to becomes a useless or dangerous idol. For the purpose of our discussions about the existence of God, we need to have some basic definition of what the term 'God' means. R Swinburne in *The Coherence of Theism* offers the following definition that includes the nature and attributes of God:

God is a person, without a body (i.e. a spirit), present everywhere (Omnipresent), the creator and sustainer of the universe, a free agent, able to do everything (i.e. omnipotent), knowing all things (Omniscient), perfectly good, a source of moral obligation, immutable, eternal, a necessary being, holy, and worthy of worship. Similarly, many thinkers of Religions describe God with many attributes such as: God is – Omnipotent, Omniscient, Eternal, Simple, Necessity, Good, One, Changeless, Love, and Perfect. God cannot be either male or female, but for convenience he will be referred to as male. We shall deal with a few of these attributes of God.

4.2 GOD AS CREATOR

According to traditional theism, God is said to be the creator of the universe, and he is said to have created it out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). This is an important feature of theistic belief, for it implies that God is not an external force working with matter or coming in to animate it, nor is he an agent over against other agents. Rather, he is the absolute origin of everything in the universe. There is no external material object, no ‘nothingness’ out of which things we have in the world can be made. Everything that comes into existence does so as a creative act of God. This is the implication of the idea of God as creator.

Now there is another side to this argument. If there is no matter external to God through which he creates, then God cannot be separate from creation. For example we cannot say ‘There is something of beauty’, and then point to something else and say ‘There is its creator.’ In other words, to say that God is creator *ex nihilo* implies that everything is alive with his life.

According to the eternalist thinkers, temporality is an essential feature of creatures. They hold that the universe was created with time and not in time. It implies that the creation is the product of a divine timeless decree. God is before creation not by virtue of existing at a time when the universe was not yet in existence, but by virtue of his necessity and the creation’s contingency. It implies that everything created is necessarily in time, mutable and so they are corruptible. On the other hand, anything not created is necessarily eternal, immutable and incorruptible.

4.3 GOD IS ETERNAL

What does it mean to call God eternal? Two main answers have been given to this question. According to the first, ‘God is eternal’ means that God is non-temporal or timeless. In other words, He is in no way limited or conditioned by time. According to the second, it means that God had no beginning and that He can have no end that he is interminable. God has always

existed and will continue to exist forever. God's mode of being involves no 'before' or 'after' and no 'earlier than' or 'later than'. In other words, in God past, present and future are all given at once as a single now. It is completely without successiveness. God does not comprise of anything that we could recognize as a history or biography. This view is called 'the classical view of divine eternity.' The second view says that God is temporal, according to which it is incoherent to suppose that God is outside time. But it is coherent to suppose that God has always existed and always will.

Those who say that God is timeless are committed to the view that God is both changeless and impassible. But divine immutability and impassibility is not entailed by the temporal view of divine eternity. According to its defenders a timeless God must be vastly different from people. Such a God can, for example, have no thoughts which succeed each other. And such a God can have no memories, expectations or emotions. But if God exists in time, then he might be thoroughly mutable. And, like people, he might have thoughts which come after each other. God might also have memories, expectations and emotions. He might be much like us, as defenders of the temporal view often seem to take him to be.

Arguments in Defence of Classical View of Divine Eternity

- God is cause of all change. But change and time are inseparably connected. So God can not be something existing in time.
- God is the creator who accounts for the existence of the universe. But one can only make sense of things existing in time in so far as one thinks of them as parts of the universe. So God can not be something existing in time.
- God is perfect and unlimited. But nothing in time can be this. Among other things temporal existence always implies loss. Things in time lose what they once had because things in time are subject to change. And they are always vulnerable to what the future might bring. But something which is perfect and unlimited can not lose what it has or be vulnerable to what might come.
- God exists is necessarily true. So something about God is his necessary existence. God is all that he can be, for any reality he lacks but could possess would need grounding in something else than himself. So God must be changeless and unchangeable. And if God is this, then God must be timeless.

- Things in time occupy space. But God does not. So God is outside of time.
- If God exists necessarily, and if God is essentially temporal, then time exists necessarily. But temporal things do not exist of necessity. So God should not be thought of as a temporal thing.

God's eternity has been the constant affirmation of monotheistic religious traditions. It follows from divine necessity. For, if God exists necessarily, it is impossible that He does not exist. Therefore, He can never go out or come into being. God just exists without beginning or end.

In other words, Eternity of God has been used in four different senses:

1. Timelessly logical and mathematical truth.
2. Enduring through all times.
3. Time is retained and yet transcended as total simultaneity. And,
4. As the fulfillment of all values in the best way.

Hence it has been maintained by some thinkers that God is changeless with regard to his essence, but has change in so far as his accidents are concerned.

God sees events as taking place in time, but from all eternity those events have been the same to Him as after they have taken place. God's eternity could be described as follows: Eternity is not, as men believe, before and after us, an endless line. No, it is a circle, infinitely great—all the circumference with creation thronged; God at the center dwells, beholding all. And as we move in this eternal round, the finite portion which alone we see, behind us is the past; what lies before we call the future. But to Him who dwells far at the center, equally remote from every point of the circumference, both are alike, the future and the past.

Within the tradition of classical theism which originated from ideas in Greek philosophy and is found developed in the Christian tradition by Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, God is definitely eternal rather than everlasting. He is not simply an ongoing part of the universe, but is beyond the whole process of change.

The Philosophers who regard God as eternal generally see him as embodying the structure of reality, out of which emerges space and time and the world which we encounter with the senses. This is highlighted by the idea of creation out of nothing *ex nihilo*— not at some point in the past, but as a bringing into reality everything that exists here and now.

Check Your Progress I

- Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer
b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. What does the traditional theism say about God as creator?

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2. What are the arguments in defense of Classical view of Divine eternity?

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4.4 GOD IS OMNIPOTENT

The word Omnipotence is composed of two Latin words: *Omnis* (all) and *potens* (powerful). It means the ability to do all things or to have absolute power. God is supposed to be a power to do all things. What can God do? In the Bible, according to the Gospel of Luke, the angel Gabriel tells the Virgin Mary, “with God nothing will be impossible.” God possesses all power. In the book of Genesis 17:1 God declares: "I am God Almighty." The title "Almighty" is applied to Him over and over in the Bible. This title signifies that He possesses all might or power. Again we read in the gospel of Mathew 19:26: "With God all things are possible." Similarly, many other passages in the Bible and scriptures of other religions declare God’s omnipotence.

The Biblical authors typically speak of God's power as a mastery over nature. God has power chiefly as the orderer and ruler of the created world. God is the Lord of the world and it is subject to him. He has power over it. But should it not also be said that God must have power in a somewhat stronger sense – not just power over things, but power of an unlimited or infinite kind? Many thinkers arrive at a conclusion that God possesses power of this kind which is intrinsic to him and therefore he is called Omnipotent.

What does one mean by calling God omnipotent? According to some thinkers, God is omnipotent since he can do even what seems logically impossible. Still others are of the opinion that the omnipotence of God does not mean, that He can do things that are logically absurd or things that are against his will. For example, he cannot lie, because the holiness of His character prevents Him from willing to lie. And He cannot create a rock larger than He can lift; nor both an irresistible power and an immovable object; nor can He draw a line between two points shorter than a straight one; nor put two mountains adjacent to one another without creating a valley between them. He cannot do any of these things because they are not objects of power. They are self-contradictory and logically absurd.

Some scholars think that God's omnipotence means his ability to bring about the existence of any conceivable thing, events or state of affairs. Distinguishing between passive power (as 'I can be shot') and active power (as 'I can sing'), Thomas Aquinas argues that God is omnipotent since he can make (active power) anything to exist which can be thought of as (absolutely speaking) able to be. God is omnipotent in the sense that there is no definite limited range of possibilities in what he can bring about. On the contrary, the beings belonging to a distinct genus and species are limited in the things they can bring about, for they can only produce effects which are characteristics of things in that genus and species. According to Thomas, however, God is not limited in anyway. If God creates out of nothing, his power is not limited. If his act of creation is not something that took place in the past, but an ongoing feature of life, it implies that God brings everything about, without being limited by the material that he uses to do so. In this sense, the idea that God is omnipotent is implied in the doctrine of creation. It would be illogical to call God the 'creator' in this absolute sense and then to say that there are things he cannot do.

4.5 GOD'S OMNISCIENCE

God's omniscience means that he is all-knowing. Since God is not a bodily being he does not possess sense organs and therefore does not have sensations and emotions. It is argued that if God is eternal in the sense that his existence is not extended in time, then he is changeless or immutable then there can be no process in God like he coming to know something or reasoning something out. And if God is not in time then his knowledge can not be located at any moment in time. He must have possessed all knowledge from the beginning; for otherwise He would be learning all the while, and that would of itself constitute a change in Him and would necessarily lead to even more manifest changes. And if God does not depend on creatures for anything, then his knowledge can not in any respect be produced by creatures. It must belong to God as he is in himself. He is omniscient.

According to theism, from all eternity God has possessed all knowledge and wisdom. In the Bible, the evangelist John in his epistle declares that God "knoweth all things" (1 John 3:20). God's omniscience may also be argued from His infinity. In the scriptures God is pictured as an infinite being. Thus His knowledge must be infinite.

Moreover, the necessity of omniscience on the part of God may be seen from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians 1:11 in the Bible, which says that God "worketh all things after the counsel of his own will." Only an omniscient being could work all things after the counsel of his own will.

Some thinkers also argue that God's omniscience includes perfect foreknowledge. From eternity God has known all things that have come to pass and all things that are yet come to pass. He has ever known exactly what things would have come to pass if His immutable purpose had been different from what it is at any point.

The basis of God's foreknowledge of all things that come to pass is His own purpose. God could not have known that a thing would come to pass unless it had been certain to come to pass. God's eternal, immutable purpose is the only scriptural basis for the certainty of future events.

The difference between the intelligence of God and human beings can be stated as follows: God and human beings are intelligent; but in what manner? Man is intelligent by the act of reasoning, but the supreme intelligence lies under no necessity to reason. He requires neither premise nor consequences; nor even the simple form of a proposition. His knowledge is purely intuitive. He beholds equally what is and what will be. All truths are to Him as one idea, as all places are but one point, and all times one moment.

Those who hold that God is all-knowing give the following reasons:

- God is wholly perfect. He can not be this if he lacks knowledge. Therefore, God is all knowing.
- The Order in the world can be accounted for in terms of a God which has knowledge.
- God is the creator of the universe. But creating is an act of intelligence. So God has knowledge.
- Knowledge is something which exists in the world. Since God accounts for all that exists in the world and since this must reflect that God is, knowledge is something we can ascribe to God.

These arguments prove that God is omniscient or all-knowing.

If God is omniscient, he knows everything. There can be two ways of looking at this argument:

1. If he is eternal, existing outside time altogether, then his omniscience is timeless. His knowledge of past, present and future is simultaneous. It is not that he correctly guesses what will happen in the future, but that – for him – there is no future. His knowledge is eternally present.
2. If he is everlasting, then he will know everything that has happened in the past, and everything that is happening in the present. He will also be aware now of those things in the present which will determine what happens in the future. In this sense, God might be said to ‘know’ the future, even though he has not been there yet!

The central problem with this argument for theists concerns human freedom and responsibility. If God knows what we think we freely choose to do, is not our freedom an illusion? Once someone knows that something is going to happen, then that thing is not a matter of chance, but inevitable. If it's not inevitable, then God cannot know it. In other words, if God knows what is to come, how can the future be anything but predestined or unpreventable?

In Short

- If God is omniscient, he knows everything.

- He therefore knows that I will do X.
- Therefore, I am not free to choose not to do X.

Can we then argue that God's omniscience and contingency are compatible notions? Many philosophers have suggested that we can. Most famous argument is that of Boethius. According to him God is eternal, meaning 'the whole, simultaneous and perfect possession of boundless life.' According to Boethius, therefore, God's knowledge is not best thought of as foreknowledge. It should rather be thought of as 'knowledge of a never passing instant.' In that God sees future things present to him. For Boethius, God does not foreknow, God simply knows. This argument suggests therefore, that God might know that at some point in the future I will freely choose to do X. In this case, my freedom is part of what God knows – therefore I remain free to choose.

But this argument seems to create a logical problem as follows:

- I am free to choose if, and only if, there are at least two possible options at the moment of choosing.
- If God knows that I am free to choose, he must allow two possible outcomes.
- Therefore he cannot know which of those outcomes I will choose without denying me my freedom to make that decision.

An example might be: 'You can choose any colour you like, as long as it's red!' (No freedom) or 'You can choose any colour you like.' (Freedom, but I cannot insist that you choose red.)

One way out of this dilemma could be to say that we freely make choices based on many factors, both conscious and unconscious. We do not fully understand these, and therefore do not fully appreciate why we make the choices we do. On the other hand, an omniscient God would understand all about us, and would therefore know exactly those factors, including our desire not to be predictable, which lead to our apparently 'free' choice.

Check Your progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. State in short the argument of Thomas Aquinas on God's omnipotence.

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2. What are reasons given by those who hold the view that God is all-knowing?

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4.6 GOD IS SIMPLE

The claim that God is simple is an ancient one. But what do we mean to say that God is simple? A famous account of divine simplicity comes in Augustine of Hippo's *The City of God*. Here he says, There is one sole Good, which is simple and therefore unchangeable; and that is God. By this Good all good things were created but they are not simple, and for that reason they are changeable. The term 'simple' applies to things which are in the fullest and truest sense divine, because in them there is no difference between substance and quality.

According to Augustine, God is simple because he is immutable. But Augustine also thinks that God is simple as not possessing different properties or attributes. He says that the expressions such as, 'the knowledge of God' or 'the goodness of God' are not distinct realities in the divine substance.

According to Anselm of Canterbury, 'The supreme nature is simple, thus all things which can be said of its essence are simple one and the same thing in it.' Anselm acknowledges that those who believe in God use different statements when speaking of God's nature. They say, for example,

'God is good', 'God is just', 'God is wise.' But these expressions do not imply that God is something with really distinct attributes. According to Anselm, there is no distinction between God and anything we might want to call 'the attributes of God.' Therefore, both for Augustine and Anselm, the various attributes the believer ascribe to God in sentences such as, 'God is X', 'God is Y', and so on, are not distinct realities in God. They are God.

Some defenders of divine simplicity however, have said more than this. For they add that God is simple in the sense that there is no real distinction between God's nature (or essence) and God's existence. According to their account, God is simple since he is immutable and since he has no attributes really distinct from himself. They also argue that God is simple since existence belongs to God by nature. God is simple since God is Being or existence without qualification. Thomas Aquinas famously puts it, God is *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* (Subsisting Being itself). According to Aquinas, God is simple since he is immutable and since he is not a being with different attributes. For Aquinas however, God is simple since he is not a 'composite' of essence and existence.

The following arguments have been put forward in support of divine simplicity:

- God can not be thought of as having changeable properties, distinct from himself, since God is the source of all changes.
- God can not be thought of as having distinct temporal properties; since God as creator of the universe, must transcend time.
- God is not a material object. So he can not be thought of as having parts in the way that material objects have parts.
- Something with different properties depends for its existence on the existence and conjunction of those properties. But God can not be something which depends for existence on anything. God is the reason why anything exists at all.
- One can not distinguish between God and God's existence or between God's nature and God's existence, since to do so would imply that existence is something which God receives from another. But the being of God is wholly underived.

These lines of argument are insisting that there must be a dramatic difference between God and creatures or contingent beings. Compositeness or lack of simplicity is very much a feature of things in the world. These are material, temporal and dependent. How shall we preserve God's

transcendence in relation to the created order? For defenders of belief in divine simplicity, one way of doing so is to teach that God is simple.

4.7 GOD'S NECESSITY

Since Aristotle, in western philosophical theology God has been conceived as a necessary existent being. Probably, for Aristotle God's necessary existence meant simply his immunity to generation and corruption. This conception is connected with the contemporary notion of God's 'factual necessity' which is stated as follows: given that God exists, it is impossible that he ever came into or will go out of existence. He is uncaused, eternal, incorruptible and indestructible.

During the Middle Ages, Islamic Philosophers such as al-Farabi began to enunciate an even more powerful conception of God's necessity. According to them, God's non-existence is logically impossible. This conception of God's necessary existence lay at the heart of Anselm's Ontological argument. It states: if God's non-existence is logically impossible, it follows that he must exist. God is logically necessary being.

Powerful theological and philosophical reasons are given for taking God's existence to be logically necessary. Philosophically, the conception of God as the greatest conceivable being implies his necessary existence in this sense, since logically contingent existence is not as great as necessary existence. If God is by definition God is necessary being, in the sense of logical necessity, cosmological questions simply do arise with respect to God. His existence is self-explanatory in a way that the existence of no other being is. The existence of necessary being answers the question, "why is there something rather than nothing?" The conceptualist argument also entails the existence of a logically necessary being in order to ground the realm of abstract objects. The moral argument leads naturally to such a being, since moral values and principles are not plausibly logically contingent. The motivation for claiming that God is logically necessary being stems from the conviction that God is necessarily the ultimate being in the universe.

Traditionally, the arguments were given for necessary being for two reasons: The first is to halt the regress of causes. Of necessary being no further questions can be asked. The second function is to provide a sense of ultimacy to the explanation. It eliminates any vagueness or ambiguity in

the answer to the question ‘why is there something rather than nothing at all?’ If God is personal, then we can speak of him as the cause of the universe. There is no mystery about the ultimate foundation of existence, for causal questions and ultimacy questions come together in the one logically necessary person: God.

Check Your progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. What are the arguments put forward in support of divine simplicity?

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2. Traditionally, what are the reasons given for God as necessary being?

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4.8 LET US SUM UP

The discussion on the nature and attributes of God helps us to understand what people mean by God. In the course of our analysis we discovered that God is the creator or the ultimate cause of all the finite beings of the universe. Therefore, he is logically an uncaused cause. He is simple and therefore is not limited in his being and knowledge. The critical and analytical survey of the nature and attributes of God leads us to comprehend the implications this has for religious belief.

By definition God is the locus and source of all values. Such a being is absolute goodness and worthy of worship.

4.9 KEY WORDS

- **Theism:** Belief in the existence of God.
- **Atheism:** The conviction that there is no such being called God.
- **Agnosticism:** The view that there is no conclusive evidence to decide whether God exists or not.
- **Pantheism:** An identification of God with the physical universe.
- **Panentheism:** The belief that God is within everything.
- **Deism:** The idea of an external designer God who created the world, but is not immanent within it.
- **Idolatry:** The literal identification of God with any individual thing or concept.

4.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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4.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. According to traditional theism, God is said to be the creator of the universe, and he is said to have created it out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). This is an important feature of theistic belief, for it implies that God is not an external force working with matter or coming in to animate it, nor is he an agent over against other agents. Rather, he is the absolute origin of everything in the universe. There is no external material object, no 'nothingness' out of which things we have in the world can be made. Everything that comes into existence does so as a creative act of God. This is the implication of the idea of God as creator.

2. Arguments in Defence of Classical View of Divine Eternity

1. God is cause of all change. But change and time are inseparably connected. So God can not be something existing in time.
2. God is the creator who accounts for the existence of the universe. But one can only make sense of things existing in time in so far as one thinks of them as parts of the universe. So God can not be something existing in time.
3. God is perfect and unlimited. But nothing in time can be this. Among other things temporal existence always implies loss. Things in time lose what they once had because things in time are subject to change. And they are always vulnerable to what the future might bring. But something which is perfect and unlimited can not lose what it has or be vulnerable to what might come.
4. God exists is necessarily true. So something about God is his necessary existence. God is all that he can be, for any reality he lacks but could possess would need grounding in something else than himself. So God must be changeless and unchangeable. And if God is this, then God must be timeless.
5. Things in time occupy space. But God does not. So God is outside of time.
6. If God exists necessarily, and if God is essentially temporal, then time exists necessarily. But temporal things do not exist of necessity. So God should not be thought of as a temporal thing.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. Some scholars think that God's omnipotence means his ability to bring about the existence of any conceivable thing, events or state of affairs. Distinguishing between passive power (as 'I can be shot') and active power (as 'I can sing'), Thomas Aquinas argues that God is omnipotent since he can make (active power) anything to exist which can be thought of as (absolutely speaking) able to be. God is omnipotent in the sense that there is no definite limited range of possibilities in what he can bring about. On the contrary, the beings belonging to a distinct genus and species are limited in they can bring about, for they can only produce effects which are characteristics of things in that genus and species. According to Thomas, however, God is not limited in anyway. If God creates out of nothing, his power is not limited. If his act of creation is not something that took place in the past, but an ongoing feature of life, it implies that God brings everything about, without being limited by the material that he uses to do so. In this sense, the idea that God is omnipotent is implied in the doctrine of creation. It would be illogical to call God the 'creator' in this absolute sense and then to say that there are things he cannot
2. Those who hold that God is all-knowing give the following reasons:
 - God is wholly perfect. He can not be this if he lacks knowledge. Therefore, God is all knowing.
 - The Order in the world can be accounted for in terms of a God which has knowledge.
 - God is the creator of the universe. But creating is an act of intelligence. So God has knowledge.
 - Knowledge is something which exists in the world. Since God accounts for all that exists in the world and since this must reflect that God is, knowledge is something we can ascribe to God.

These arguments prove that God is omniscient or all-knowing

Answers to Check Your Progress III

1. The following arguments have been put forward in support of divine simplicity:

- God cannot be thought of as having changeable properties, distinct from himself, since God is the source of all changes.
- God can not be thought of as having distinct temporal properties; since God as creator of the universe, must transcend time.
- God is not a material object. So he can not be thought of as having parts in the way that material objects have parts.
- Something with different properties depends for its existence on the existence and conjunction of those properties. But God can not be something which depends for existence on anything. God is the reason why anything exists at all.
- One can not distinguish between God and God's existence or between God nature and God's existence, since to do so would imply that existence is something which God receives from another. But the being of God is wholly underived.

2. Traditionally, the arguments were given for necessary being for two reasons: The first is to halt the regress of causes. Of necessary being no further questions can be asked. The second function is to provide a sense of ultimacy to the explanation. It eliminates any vagueness or ambiguity in the answer to the question 'why is there something rather than nothing at all?' If God is personal, then we can speak of him as the cause of the universe. There is no mystery about the ultimate foundation of existence, for causal questions and ultimacy questions come together in the one logically necessary person: God.