

# The Concept of God

## What you need to know:

God's attributes:

God as omniscient, omnipotent, supremely good (omnibenevolent), and the meaning(s) of these divine attributes

competing views on such a being's relationship to time, including God being timeless (eternal) and God being within time (everlasting).

arguments for the incoherence of the concept of God including:  
the paradox of the stone  
the Euthyphro dilemma

the compatibility, or otherwise, of the existence of an omniscient God and free human beings.

## The Paradox of the Stone

The Paradox of the Stone challenges the concept of omnipotence.

Either God can make a stone which God cannot lift,  
Or God cannot make a stone which God cannot lift

If God can make a stone which is too heavy for him to lift, then it shows his powers are limited because he is unable to lift the stone.

If God cannot make a stone which God cannot lift then this, too, also shows that the power God has is limited as well because he cannot make the stone.

Therefore, it's impossible for a being to be omnipotent because in each theory there is one task God cannot do.

## The Euthyphro Dilemma

Either (1) morally good acts are willed by God because they are morally good or (2) morally good acts are good because they are willed by God.

If (1), then morally good acts are good independent of God's will. This means there is a moral standard independent of God. This might limit his omnipotence.

If (2), then it is inappropriate to praise/worship God for being good. If God sets the standard of goodness, then it seems inappropriate to praise him for meeting it. Equally, there is nothing prior to God's willing that is good, then nothing can guide his willing, so it is arbitrary.

So either God is not omnipotent or he is not worthy of worship.

## The problem of omniscience and free will

P1: God is omniscient if and only if God knows all true propositions.

P2: There are true propositions about the future.

P3: God knows all true future propositions if and only if it is impossible for me to do otherwise than that which God knows.

P4: It is impossible for me to do otherwise than that which God knows if and only if I am not free.

C: Therefore, God is omniscient if and only if I am not free.

## Boethius' ideas

Boethius believes God views time quite differently to the way humans do. For Boethius, God is not subject to time in the way we are. God is timeless or eternal. If God is outside time, he can view all of time in one glance. This means that God does not see our future before it happens, but while it is happening. Thus, although it is necessary, it is only necessary because God is seeing it in the present and humans can act freely. This, he calls, conditional necessity. It is not a simple necessity, which is necessary because of something intrinsic to its nature. God is not seeing our actions before we have done them and so our free will is not limited.

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## Evaluation

- Expecting God to know what free agents will do is logical contradiction and it is not reasonable to expect God to know logical contradictions
- If God is the greatest conceivable being he should know everything, even logical contradictions
- Expecting God to know the future is unreasonable as the future doesn't exist. (Keith Ward)
- Boethius argues that if God is timeless humans still have free will
- Timelessness is hard to conceive
- Boethius' ideas of timelessness owe more to Greek philosophy than the Bible
- If God does not determine the future, then he is dependent on us and so loses his freedom.
- If God sees all time in one glance, time itself is static and so no free will

## Possible Exam Questions

- What does it mean to claim that God is omniscient? (3 marks)
- What does it mean to claim that God is omnipotent? (3 marks)
- What does it mean to claim that God is supremely good? (3 marks)
- What does it mean to claim that God is timeless? (3 marks)
- What does it mean to claim that God is within time? (3 marks)
- Explain the difference between the claims 'God is eternal' and 'God is everlasting'. (3 marks)
- What does it mean to claim that God is eternal? (3 marks)
- What does it mean to claim that God is everlasting? (3 marks)
- Outline the Paradox of the Stone (5 marks)
- Outline the Euthyphro Dilemma (5 marks)
- Briefly define 'omniscience' and then explain the argument that omniscience is incompatible with free human beings. (5 or 12 marks)
- Is the existence of an omniscient God and free human beings compatible? (25 marks)

## Key terms

**Omnipotent**: God is all-powerful. There is nothing God cannot do.

**Omniscient**: God knows all true propositions and God believes no false propositions.

**Omni-benevolent**: God is all-good.

**Transcendent**: God is outside of the universe, space and time.

**Immanent**: God exists throughout the universe

**Anthropomorphic**: God is given the characteristics of a human

**Eternal**: Timeless. God lasts forever. He never had a beginning or an end. He exists outside time.

**Everlasting**: God lasts forever. He never had a beginning or an end. He exists within time.

**Necessary**: A condition that must occur. It cannot not happen

**Contingent**: A condition that may or may not occur. It could happen, but it might not.

**Arbitrary**: based on random choice or personal whim, rather than based on reason or a system.

