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The Infinity of God

“Infinity” is not an easy term to define. The Presocratics from Anaximander to Zeno the Eleatic, to later from Aristotle to Augustine, have wrestled with it in relation to God and his attributes. For the Greek term, *apeiron*, it appears to be originally understood as “without boundary, limit, definition” (*The Presocratics*, Kirk, Raven, and Shofield, Cambridge, 1990, 110). “In classical Greek thought, including Plato and Aristotle, perfection was habitually identified with the finished, the well-defined or determinate – i.e., the finite or limited....The infinite was identified with the indeterminate, the unfinished, the chaotic, the unintelligible, typified by unformed matter.” The term for “perfect” is *telos*, *teleios* – “end” or “limit” (W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *Process Theology*, Baker Books, 1989, 231). As Kirk, Raven and Shofield lay out all the texts of the Presocratics, it becomes clear that Zeno most utilized the contradictory notions of “infinity” in his famous Paradoxes (“Achilles and the Tortoise”, “The Flying Arrow”, etc.). Infinity by nature is undefined. It has no “telos” – no “teleology” or design, purpose or meaning.

So, how did the term come to be used of God? Certainly God is “Perfect”. Why would we not use the term “finite” to define Him? “The infinite is standardly conceived as that which is endless, unlimited, immeasurable. It also has theological connotations of absoluteness and perfection” (*Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “Infinity”, A.W. Moore). We have two definitions.

In mapping the intellectual territory on which the revaluation of infinity started to emerge in the first centuries of the Christian era, we have to take account, on the one side, of the internal monotheistic tendencies of the Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy that were in fact at loggerheads with the overall polytheistic ambience of the Greek world. On the other side we have to consider the ever more powerful Christianity that soon acquired rational ambitions leading it to base its religious truths on intellectual grounds, and, quite understandably, in doing so Christianity stretched out its arm for the rich sources of ancient thought. The junction accomplished in Christian theology between its monotheistic religion and Platonism is of primary importance for the explication of the new attitude towards infinity in the history of Western thought. As tangential phenomena of this major trend, we must view the reconsiderations of infinity induced by the mysteriosophic climate of Hellenism in the areas of Gnosticism and Hermetism” (“Infinity on the Threshold of Christianity: The Emergence of a Positive Concept out of Negativity”, Rein Undusk, 11).

Note the words “revaluation of infinity”, “new attitude towards infinity”, and “reconsiderations of infinity”. Christians *redefined* the Greek connotation. Undusk, like W. Norris Clarke, credit the Greek philosopher Plotinus for the influence on Christianity (by influence, I mean in a negative way

that caused a sharpened positive assertion about the God of the Bible, see C. Van Til, *A Christian Theology of Knowledge*, Baker Books, 1969, 143-ff). This paper cannot be concerned with the rich theological and philosophical aspects of the development of “infinity” as it came to be positively asserted of God’s “essence” itself. In ancient Greek physics and philosophy, “infinity” was a pain. It was abhorred because of the negative problems, riddles, contradictions and paradoxes it contaminated progress with. Thus, it had a negative connotation to it. Plotinus makes a move towards a positive infinity. Christianity, and I am being way too painfully brief here, by the fourth century, began to wrestle with the concept. In the monotheistic conception of God who “is above all” and “knows beginning from end”, the great Jewish philosopher, Philo, was already combining the Hebrew God with Greek terms in the first century (*The Works of Philo*, Trans. C. D. Yonge, Hendriksen Publishers, 1995, “On the Eternality of the World”). With the spread of the Gospel to “the Greeks”, it was inevitable that the Hebrew God would meet the Greek schools.

Suffice it to say, “God is infinite” has become a Christian staple for theology. It is important for our purposes to note the two definitions it employs, negatively, and positively. When we use it of God, we are speaking positively. Jumping ahead, into the Protestant period and the systematic theologies it would produce over the next several centuries, the term “infinity” was now regularly employed. Turretin, who succeeded Calvin, writing in the 17th century, defines the eternal attribute “infinity” as only belonging to God. Since all things were “created” (had a beginning), they cannot, by definition, be “infinite.” Turretin also distinguished between the two definitions mentioned above, namely that of “quantity” that was understood as being “infinitely divisible” and “quality” which is limited, but has no restrictions (*Institutes of Enlentic Theology*, I. 3rd Topic, Q. 8.). Infinity, for God, is “absolute”. “The perfections in created things are included within certain limits beyond which they are not extended and all their activity has a certain sphere beyond which it cannot go.” God, on the other hand, “embraces every degree of every perfection without any limitation.” It is within this definition that “infinity” is applied to God. It is not applied in the sense of infinite divisible quantity – which, if that were the case, God’s knowledge must “learn” and he could not know the “end” of any knowledge, for there would always “be one more” fact to learn next to the last one. It is quite plain that we cannot apply the Greek, Presocratic definition to God, or to creatures.

Further, “God cannot produce an infinite effect (because there is none producible).” Note the quantitative use of “infinity” here. Since infinity has no quantity, by definition, Turretin objects on the basis of logic that no infinite effect can be produced, for then it would have no end to it. If God created in the beginning, then the Greek definition of infinity cannot apply to God, for, then, infinity would have had a beginning, which it cannot have, by definition. As to humans who reside in heaven, the “finite is not capable of the infinite” – meaning, creatures can only “know” to a limited degree, and if limited, then there is a “end” (*telos*) to learning for the creature. “Limitless” (the Christian definition for “infinity”) for God is that there is no “cause” to his knowledge. There is no barrier. It is

eternal and entirely pure. We are “limited” because we are finite and subject to various causes. God is subject to none. It is here that Turretin rails against the “Socinians” who “ploughs with their oxen, interfere with this infinity” by applying quantity and divisibility *ad infinitum* to God. This is rejected on the basis that it would logically and necessarily mean God is not omniscient. We must not confuse, then, these two definitions. [...]

As for the eternality of God (Q. X), Turretin notes, “God cannot have succession because of his essence.” That is, there is only one eternal, complete, perfect thought that grasps all things. It is not ever filling up. There is no divisibility in it. As for “time”, it “neither always was nor always will be, but will cease with the world.” This hits home to our problem. If time never ends [...] then some aspect of “eternality” is attributed to it. It then becomes a divisible that never ends, and thus, cannot ever be known by God without involving a serious contradiction to all that Turretin has said so far. The case for “classic theism” is rendered contradictory. God knows all things eternally (remember, eternity is not “time forever” but “timelessness”), precisely because all things, except for Him and His essence, are finite – limited. They have a beginning and an end. That’s what makes them finite. God is “not limited” by anything that enables Him to know all things because all things are made by him and have been known by him eternally. Therefore, they must have an “end” if the classic definition of God be retained.

The great theologian W.G.T. Shedd carried on this idea in his three volume work, *Dogmatic Theology*. “The imperfection of limitation of the finite relates not to *quality*, but to *quantity*” (*ital.* his, volume 1, 339). Also, “eternity” is not “endlessness” (342). That would be committing the mistake of applying definition 1 (infinity of divisibility) with definition 2 (absolute perfection); that is, eternity (definition 2) is not infinite time or endlessness (definition 1). This, of course, is equivocation. Shedd continues to note the distinctions for “eternity” in the “quality” and not “quantity.” Eternity is “successionlessness”. “Eternity with succession is like immensity with extension, and omniscience with contingency” (339). Still further, on page 346, Shedd wrote, “Should we define God’s external causation as an endless succession of creative volitions, then God’s consciousness of his future creative volitions is in the future, like that of a man or angels. This is fatal to omniscience, when the consciousness relates to cognition; and fatal to immutability, when the consciousness relates to action.” I must note that not a word of eschatology has been spoken here. That is, Shedd and Turretin were not speaking from a presupposition of an end of history (which they held), but purely from the perspective of the attributes of God as described in the Bible and applying systematic logical analysis in order to properly issue doctrinal propositions that would be free from contradiction, apparent or real.

In other words, If God was forever bound to endless time when it comes to creation, thus causing ever-increasing things and people, then he cannot be omniscient, nor could he be immutable. [...] What should be coming into focus is that whether we quote from Augustine, Shedd, or Turretin, the

“classic theism” understanding does not define infinity in the way typically defined by mathematicians, Process theologians, or physicists. Christianity supplied the revelation of the Scriptures that solved the riddles created by this definition of infinity. The kosmos have a beginning (creation *ex nihilo*), which solved the problem of infinity in the past. By understanding God as knowing all things, as the Bible unquestionably declares, then all things are finite by the fact that they are created. They were known from eternity. By positing an end (exhaustive knowledge of God of all things), there was no infinite future of cyclical repetitions. It is well known that Christian philosophy, based on the revelation of God’s word, replaced the Greek notion of cyclical time with linear time. History was going somewhere (teleology) precisely because God has planned it to go somewhere according to his purpose. But, an endless duration of time and history would be taking the Greek notion of infinity and trying to apply it to classic theism. It cannot work. If one starts with the classic theism of God’s eternity, then one must end with that definition as well to avoid ambiguity (equivocation). The two definitions are incompatible and contradictory. The early Christians knew this, and thus rejected the meaning of infinity as it had come to them.

This theological move was not intended to make God limited, *for this would be the problem if an endless duration to physical history were true*. Positing the Greek notion of infinity to God *reduces* God and *limits* his knowledge [...]. Rather, the eternity of God and the application of “infinity” in the classic theistic sense retains the unlimited nature of his essence and knowledge precisely because there is an end to all he knows – he knows it all. It is in this sense, Van Til argued, that Parmenides posited that “only that which I can think without contradiction, exists” (Van Til, op. cit., 146). For Parmenides, and his disciple, Zeno, infinity as endlessness was a contradiction. There was only the One Proposition. The problem is that the finite, by sheer logic, cannot reach the infinite, and if the infinite is posited (as in Plotinus), it cannot be known. Augustine, wrestling with all of this as he did, answered: “Augustine saw clearly the fact that God is what the Scriptures says he is....he saw clearly that the world is what the Bible says it is” (Van Til, 151). The Greek notion of infinity necessarily reduces God as completely unknowable (since he cannot even know himself if he himself is an endless succession of idea and thought). The Bible, then, nowhere reveals God as “infinite” in this sense. The revelation of God – the Bible – supplied the necessary ingredients for logic to operate successfully. Without it, logic cannot operate at all. Logic, in and of itself, apart from revelation, cannot give any truth. The Greeks struggled with logic and infinity. The Christians solved the problem by positing the Creator God, who knows all things from beginning to end. Logical syllogisms were supplied with revealed propositions so that an entire system could now be attempted, from beginning to end. Christians took Greek capital and spent it on Christian theology on the basis of the Bible. The wealth of the wicked in intellectual capital was taken over, redefined, and deposited to the Church.

Again, by using equivocation (two different senses of a single term), someone may ask if God can know (omniscience, definition 2) an infinite (definition 1) series of events? The question is ambiguous, like, if God is so powerful (omnipotent 1), can he create a stone he cannot lift (omnipotent 2)? These types of paradoxical questions equivocate the terms, and thus are nonsense questions (Nash calls them “pseudo-tasks” – “God’s inability to perform a pseudo-task cannot count against his omnipotence” – or in our case, his omniscience – Ronald H. Nash, *Faith & Reason*, Zondervan, 1988, 185). If the “series of events” are truly infinite (Greek definition) in number, neither God nor man could know them. Same for mathematics: “[I]f the theorems are infinite in number, neither God nor man could know them all, for with respect to infinity there is no “all” to be known. Infinity has no last term, and God’s knowledge would be as incomplete as man’s” (Clark, Gordon H., *The Incarnation*, Trinity Foundation, 1988, 62 – thanks to Jason Bradfield for locating this for me). The considerable confusion found in much theology as it relates to this term is due to the fact that there are two definitions that usually get tangled up in the arguments. One must stick to one definition in a syllogism. It is, also, to be lamented that the term “infinite” came to be associated with God at all, because, as we have seen, the word itself creates the problem because the most common meaning of it is what was imagined by the Greeks. Aquinas spent a great deal of material defining the term, but he got it from recovering the *Physics* of Aristotle. It is only by introducing the idea of infinity in the Greek notion that creates the problem. And this idea I deny is an attribute of God.

We have seen, then, that with the two definitions, theologians do not apply the Greek connotation to God. Carl F. H. Henry, “In Christian theology God is infinite in an objectively perfect and not a privative or indefinite sense. When applied to the God of the Bible infinity means that the attributes comprising the divine character are unlimited by external restriction and are limited only by God’s own nature...God is incapable of increase or diminution” (*God, Revelation, and Authority*, Vol. 5, Crossway Books, 1999, 222). Clearly, then, in classic theism, the Greek connotation of an ever-increasing infinite series cannot be applied to the mind of God as an actual infinity. Through Aquinas, some Protestant theologians have opted for “paradox” by “declaring that divine infinity is an incomprehensible perfection that can be predicated only analogically but not univocally. This view leads to epistemological skepticism” (Henry, 223). Here, the Greek connotation is applied to God, but since it does not make “sense” to our minds, it cannot be univocally stated, and thus, we simply throw our hands up and confess, “paradox” under the pious notion of incomprehensibility. But, this wrecks other aspects about the knowledge of God as well. I will cover these aspects later.

To echo Henry (225), William Lane Craig [...] demonstrates that “an actually infinite number of things cannot exist...God’s infinity is not a collection of an infinite number of definite and discrete finite particulars...God’s infinity is a catch all term for His necessary existence, omnipotence, omniscience, eternality, and so forth.” [...] And he never appeals to eschatology (*Process*

Theology, op. cit., 161). Since two definitions are used, and one clearly rejected, then some theologians have argued that the word “infinity” is perhaps not the best term to use. “Perfect”, or “Absolute” should be used. Remember, at the beginning of this section, infinity for the Greeks meant “chaos, undetermined, unlimited” whereas “finite” meant “complete, perfect.” Infinity, by the Greek connotation, was redefined by the Christians. Somehow, the word that meant “chaos and imperfect” came to mean “complete and perfect”! Hence, the confusion. Wouldn’t it be best to chuck the word altogether? In the section I will come to on the Scriptures, we will find that “infinity” is not meant at all, and the KJV (1611, well after Aquinas and the Reformation) used it only three times. [We] should be aware of the error of anachronism: reading into Scripture later developed meanings of words. A great deal of [our] exegesis is built on rejecting anachronisms, rightly so. Since “infinity” is a Greek concept, was that concept utilized by the biblical authors?