

Celebrating Writers and Writing in our Communities

Volume 3

Article 25

2020

Contradictory Theories on Divine Infinity

Sydira Shapiro

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/rwc>

Recommended Citation

Shapiro, Sydira (2020) "Contradictory Theories on Divine Infinity," *Celebrating Writers and Writing in our Communities*: Vol. 3 , Article 25.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/rwc/vol3/iss1/25>

This Poetry Informational/Argument is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Celebrating Writers and Writing in our Communities by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. For more information, please contact kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu.

Contradictory Theories on Divine Infinity

By Sydira Shapiro

*To define the infinite would be to limit-even in thought-the
unlimited.*

-Mortimer J. Adler

Besides God nothing can be infinite.

-Tomas Aquinas

*By God I understand Being absolutely infinite, that is to say,
substance consisting of infinite attributes, each one of which
expresses eternal and infinite essence.*

-Spinoza

Understanding infinity has been a serious challenge for humanity since the beginning of time. An overwhelming majority of people believe that the concept of infinity can never be fully grasped by the human mind. Many people around the globe would associate the concept of infinity with a spiritual belief. Divinity means many different things to different people. The way one views divinity is molded by one's spiritual and religious background. Infinity connected to the divine leaves a lot for the human mind to ponder. Many great philosophers, such as Spinoza and Plato, have tried to define and describe the characteristics of a divine infinity. Because of the vastness of

the topic, as well as people's intrenchment in their perspectives, a consensus has proven impossible to reach. God and infinity both share the complexity of being incomprehensible to the human mind. The study of this topic has produced many different perspectives and theories. Due to the complexity of this topic, the question, "Is God infinite?" can never be satisfactorily answered for all people, resulting in varying theories but no consensus.

Pantheism and Mystical Neoplatonism are both belief systems that acknowledge God as an infinite being. There are many famous philosophers such as Spinoza and Plato that align themselves with this way of perceiving the divine. Pantheism, in its most basic definition is, "... the view that God is identical with the cosmos, the view that there exists nothing which is outside of God, or else negatively as the rejection of any view that considers God as distinct from the universe" (Mander). This belief that everything that exists is part of God gives the divine the property of infinity. Of course, using the word, "God," introduces many more challenges because God is understood so differently by so many different people. Some individuals with contrasting beliefs, such as theists, often take offence at the pantheistic belief that God embodies all, saying that it is not right to call the universe "God" and that pantheism is a euphemism for atheism (Mander). The idea that God is "all" strays from the belief that God is a "being," which makes pantheism unfavorable for individuals that follow religions such as Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Spinoza created his pantheistic belief system called Spinozism. In his book, *Ethics*,

Spinoza defines God as, "...substance consisting of infinite attributes, each one of which expresses eternal and infinite essence" (Spinoza, 355). Although vague, this definition of God is in alignment with the pantheistic faith that there is no limit to what God is, and everything that is, is God. Spinoza's intention behind his definition of God is made clear when he later states in Prop 15 that, "Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can either be or be conceived without God" (360). Spinoza and his followers base their theory on divine infinity on the premise that one substance cannot create a different substance (358). Specifically, Spinoza asserts, "Each attribute of a substance must be conceived through itself" (358). Using Spinoza's logic, if one believes in God, there is no question God is the substance that created all other attributes of himself, from himself, making all things connected by God.

Theism is the belief that God is limitless while rejecting the belief that God is in everything. Theism is the most common belief system in America because it is associated with the most practiced religions such as Christianity and Judaism. Theists believe that God is an infinite being, "...God is absolutely unlimited" (Oaks, 251). Theists believe that there is no limit to God's power and ability but that God is not in everything. The counter argument to this belief would be that God is a being, which puts limits on his existence, therefore, rendering him not infinite. Theists respond to this claim by saying that no one pretends to understand God, so if his infinity does not make sense to us, it is only natural (Cowen). Eli Cowen is a Hasidic rabbi local to Humboldt County who

previously resided in Brooklyn, New York, the cultural epicenter for Hasidic Judaism. He shared a story from the Old Testament that is an example of how one cannot truly understand God's will. There are dimensions in the Old Testament that give directions for the building of the inner sanctum, which is a place where one is so close to God that only rabbis can enter. The dimensions are not mathematically correct. There is a missing square foot. The exact dimensions are described in 1 Kings 7:23-26 and Chronicles 4:2-5 (Cowen). Humans cannot comprehend this as anything other than a miscalculation, but God does not make mistakes. For theists, this story is an example of what God does that is beyond their understanding. Using this logic, "theists insist that the domain of natural being does exist in its own right..." whether we understand it or not (Oaks, 252). Therefore, if God was taken out of the picture, matter would still exist because it exists in its own right. It is hard for the logical human mind to reconcile the idea that God is infinite, yet something can exist outside of God. Theists have faith that even though an infinite being is contradictory in itself, God transcends the logical plain of thought, and possesses properties that cannot be understood by the human mind.

Theists' rejection of the theory that God is everything while still asserting that God is infinite is questioned by many. It is difficult to determine the validity of theists' argument from a logical standpoint because they base their belief in faith. In his book, *The Monist*, Helger stated that there is enough philosophical evidence to make theists' claim sound (252). A

sound claim means that there is enough information backing the claim that it can be made and taken seriously. It does not in any way mean that there is enough evidence to prove the claim. Any evidence gathered for theist's claim that God is separate from the universe is subjective. One would have to have beliefs that align with theism in order to take stock in evidence that supports it. It is a leap of faith that is not based in logic. The belief that finite things exist in their own right is proof that God is not in everything. If one does not believe that finite things exist in their own right, then the evidence means nothing to that person. This inability to factually prove God's infiniteness is the reason that this question can never be satisfactorily answered for all people.

Thomas Aquinas blends both perspectives on divine infinity by splitting infinity into two categories: the absolute infinite and the relative or potential infinite. Absolute infinity is reserved for God and is aligned with Spinoza's belief. To be absolutely infinite is, "...the perfection of existence considered absolutely" (Tomarchio). Relative or potential infinity is attributed to matter and quantities. This view maintains the belief that God is "absolutely infinite," while allowing for another type of infinite existence outside of God as "...things other than God can be relatively infinite, but not absolutely infinite" (Adler, 363). Aquinas marries pantheism and theism by stating that God is absolutely infinite and is not composed of any other substance but himself, as well as stating that everything created from God can still have its own infinite properties (Tomarchio). Aquinas asserts that these relative

infinities are similar to the theistic views earlier discussed by showing that his relative infinities are, "... not only relative but negative, for it connotes 'something imperfect.' It signifies indeterminacy or lack of perfection in being" (Adler). The marriage of these two philosophies combines such significant aspects of the varying perspectives from both faiths, that most members of both pantheism and theism are unable to accept this theory. Beliefs based on a combination of faith and logic prove to be extremely difficult to change.

Divine infinity is a topic that has been debated for thousands of years with no consensus ever reached. Theories on divine infinity were created using arguments based in the vastly different perspectives of both logic and faith. A topic which is based on both faith and logic creates too much of a divide for any consensus to be reached. In addition, theories that include aspects of both theism and pantheism become less attractive because there is little desire from any side to compromise on its faith. Different branches of faith have slightly different views on divine infinity, but for the most part, they all fall under the umbrella theories of pantheism and theism. The fact that God is infinite is not argued. What is debated is what God's infinity means. Is God identical to the infinite cosmos? Or is God an infinite being with no limits? These questions will be pondered by future generations as new theories are developed and as more people chase an understanding of the divine.

Works Cited

- Adler, Mortimer Jerome. "Infinity." 1992. *Great Ideas a Lexicon of Western Thought*, by Mortimer Jerome Adler, Macmillan, 1992, pp. 362-70.
- Cowen, Eli. Interview. Conducted by Ken Scott Shapiro, 6 Oct. 2018.
- Mander, William. "Pantheism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2020 ed., Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 1 Oct. 2012, plato.stanford.edu/entries/pantheism/#Aca. Accessed 4 May 2020.
- Oakes, Robert. "The Divine Infinity: Can Traditional Theists Justifiably Reject Pantheism?" *The Monist*, vol. 80, no. 2, 1997, pp. 251-65. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27903524. Accessed 4 May 2020.
- Spinoza, Baruch. "Ethics." 1677. *Descartes - Spinoza*, compiled by Encyclopedia Britannica, Chicago, William Benton, 1925, pp. 355-463. 60 vols.
- Tomarchio, John. "Aquinas's Concept of Infinity." *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2002, pp. 163-187. *ProQuest*
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/210616675?accountid=185309>.

Bibliography

Adler, Mortimer Jerome. "Infinity." 1992. *Great Ideas a Lexicon of Western Thought*, by Mortimer Jerome Adler, Macmillan, 1992, pp. 362-70.

This is the great ideas essay that explores different theories of infinity. This source provides basic information on the different philosophers that enter the conversation of divine infinity as well as the basics of their theories.

"Aquinas & the Cosmological Arguments: Crash Course Philosophy #10." *YouTube*, uploaded by Crash Course, 11 Apr. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgisehuGOyY. Accessed 4 May 2020.

This is a crash course video about Aquinas' theory on God and why he exists. Helps connections with his other writings.

"Bruno, Giordano." *Encyclopedia. Issues & Controversies*, Infobase, <https://icof.infobaselearning.com/icofencyarticle.aspx?ID=3523>. Accessed 4 May 2020.

This is about a philosophical writer that blended the beliefs of Mystical Neoplatonism and Pantheism.

Cowen, Eli. Interview. Conducted by Ken Scott Shapiro, 6 Oct. 2018.

Eli is my dad's Rabbi. He comes over to our house often to talk about the complexities of God and his infiniteness. He is a very well educated and reliable real world source of information.

Gratt, Barend. *Courtesy of Constant Vecht*. 1666.

This is a portrait of Spinoza that was painted in the mid 1600s.

Mander, William. "Pantheism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2020 ed., Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 1 Oct. 2012, plato.stanford.edu/entries/pantheism/#Aca. Accessed 4 May 2020.

This source provides background information of Pantheism as well as some specific information on the pantheistic view on divine infinity.

Oakes, Robert. "The Divine Infinity: Can Traditional Theists Justifiably Reject Pantheism?" *The Monist*, vol. 80, no. 2, 1997, pp. 251-65. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27903524. Accessed 4 May 2020.

This book contrasts the different theories of divine

infinity. It gives good insight on the reason why it is so difficult for people to reach a consensus on this topic.

Schmaltz, Tad M. "Spinoza's Mediate Infinite Mode." *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 35, no. 2, 1997, pp. 199-235. *ProQuest*,
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/210601283?accountid=185309>.

This is a journal analyzing Spinoza's perception of divine infinity. It has a lot of Spinoza's exact wording, but it also analyzes it for you.

Schweitzer, Don. "Aspects of God's Relationship to the World in the Theologies of Jurgen Moltmann, Bonaventure and Jonathan Edwards." *Religious Studies and Theology*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2007, pp. 5-24. *ProQuest*,
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/194791314?accountid=185309>.

This is an academic journal that discusses the different relationships that philosophers have with divine infinity

Spinoza, Baruch. "Ethics." 1677. *Descartes - Spinoza*, compiled by Encyclopedia Britannica, Chicago, William Benton, 1925, pp. 355-463. 60 vols.

This is an original work of Spinoza's in which he outlines his theory on divine infinity and his proofs for his theory.

Tomarchio, John. "Aquinas's Concept of Infinity." *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2002, pp. 163-187. *ProQuest*,
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/210616675?accountid=185309>.

This is a journal analyzing Aquinas's concept of infinity and more specifically, God's infinity. It addresses the similarities that his theory shares with both theism and pantheism.