CRITERIA FOR IDEAS OF GOD
by Charles Hartshorne

Since Plato at least, philosophers have been trying to understand the idea of God. According to Plato himself, there is some reason to doubt the possibility of success in this undertaking. And, after 24 centuries, the whole matter seems still thoroughly controversial. Yet we cannot simply dismiss the question. Religious faith, of many kinds, and also unfaith, is still with us, and if philosophy is of no help in evaluating the various conceptions of deity, in what important matter is it likely to be helpful?

Evaluation implies criteria: by what criteria can conceptions of God be tested? There seem to be three possibilities: scientific tests, philosophic tests, and religious tests. The crucial scientific criterion seems to be in the yielding of successful predictions on as wide a scale as possible. Can ideas of God be tested by their predictive value? Here we must make a distinction. If someone says that God has decreed, and will infallibly bring to pass, a second coming of Christ within ten years, an event to be accompanied by certain definite, easily recognizable circumstances, then if the ten years pass and the predicted phenomena have not taken place, this particular idea about God will have been falsified. But note two things: (1) The failure of the prediction does not imply that God does not exist, for the decree which has been attributed to God is supposed to be his free decision, and all that one could conclude from the failure of the prophecy is that the prophet’s idea of what God intends to bring about has turned out a bad guess. God apparently has other intentions. (2) The essential attributes to be attributed to deity are unaffected by the failure of the prediction. We cannot say, for instance, that since God has not arranged a second coming he must be lacking in goodness or wisdom. For to know what infinite wisdom must bring about in particular cases one would need to possess such wisdom oneself.

I believe that similar arguments will show that there is no way in which the predictive test could apply to the essential “attributes” of God, as distinct from his free decrees. Now it is these attributes which philosophy tries to ascertain. Anything beyond that is a matter for revel-
ation, religious intuition, guesswork, or science. How, you may ask, can science enter into the picture? One way is this: it seems a reasonable view (supposing belief in God) that the laws of nature proceed from something like divine decrees. As we ascertain such laws we can, if we are believers, add to each law the interpretation, "thus has God decreed." For granting—as I would—that some freedom is allotted to the creatures, it seems unlikely that their freedom could go so far as to decide the very laws of nature. Even man seems entirely helpless to decide such laws (as objective regularities, rather than theoretical formulae aimed at their description). At most, man can discover the laws. Hence the believer may well see in natural laws or regularities manifestations of the divine will.

The believer cannot, in the same simple way, see the divine will in particular events, such as those of history, for here creaturely freedom plays its largest role; nor perhaps do we know any very definite laws of history. But, although natural laws do presumably express the divine will, they do not characterize God in his essential attributes unless we suppose, with Spinoza and the Stoics, that God, in instituting laws, acts entirely from the necessity of his nature and not from freedom. Could not God have decreed other laws, and still have been just as wise and good? No one can prove that the particular laws are better or worse than others which might have obtained in their place. It follows that science cannot test the correctness of our beliefs concerning the goodness or wisdom of deity. True enough, for the believer, the laws of nature "declare the glory of God, and the framework of things showeth his handiwork"; but they do not prove, and could not disprove, the validity of this belief. They illustrate its validity, but only for or to the believer, and hence cannot be used either to justify or to discredit his faith.

It is a common notion that the evil in the world furnishes a test of our view of the divine attributes, since it implies that either the goodness and wisdom, or the power, of God must be limited. I hold that this is incorrect. For any notion of divine power which, together with divine wisdom and goodness, seems to imply a world devoid of evil is a notion which will get us into trouble quite apart from the "problem of evil" or from any merely empirical problem. I reason as follows. If the perfection of power meant the ability to decide all events unilaterally, the exercise of this power would mean that the creatures made no genuine decisions at all. But this is doubly absurd, for (1) the creatures would then not even know what it is like to decide, and so they could not conceive divine decisions, and (2) how can the creatures, products of supreme freedom, have simply no freedom? Can the creatures, as effects, be absolutely different from their chief Cause?
If, for these reasons, the notion of a divine decision-making which left nothing for the creatures (any creatures, not just human beings) to decide is absurd, then—evil or no evil—we must conceive the "all-mighty" in such a way that the world is not in its details divinely decided, but is rather the result of the divine decisions plus innumerable creaturely decisions. But then no amount of evil could prove that God has decreed that evil, since creaturely freedom may account for all of it. Thus I conclude that the supposed empirical disproof of the divine attributes is spurious, since the ideas it is supposed to be capable of contradicting include at least one pseudo-conception with no clear and consistent meaning. We do not need observations to get rid of nonsense, but only clear thinking. I am convinced that any divine attribute which appears susceptible of empirical test will prove spurious in similar fashion.

Of course we can test the value for human beings of accepting this or that idea of God. We can compare the behavior of believers and nonbelievers, and see how well each meets certain standards. However, even supposing all difficulties as to the relevance and application of the standards, ethical or practical, can be met, the procedure will at best show nothing as to the existence or nonexistence of God—or as to his essential attributes. For, how far it is needful for man to consciously accept or know God is a question about man's essential nature, not God's. The lower animals cannot be conscious of God; man apparently can be, but apparently also he need not be. Are we able to decide how far a wise and good God would make it necessary, or even helpful, to such more or less "rational" animals as ourselves to reach agreement among themselves concerning their creator's existence and nature?

I conclude that there can be no empirical test of the correctness of the essentials of theistic beliefs. What tests then can there be? If there can be none, philosophy can at most serve to warn us against the vain attempt to apply rational considerations where they cannot be relevant. And then how would we deal with the situation? By sheer faith, or sheer unfaith? But there are many faiths: how should we choose among them? Again, by sheer faith, or lack of it? This seems a counsel of despair.

In mathematics and logic we have tests which are not empirical but intellectual—applications, in some sense, of "pure reason." Traditionally, philosophy has thought that to these should be added tests of metaphysical reasoning, called "dialectic" by Plato. However, today we face a great crisis in what is sometimes called metamathematics, and also in meta-metaphysics—in other words, in the theory of knowledge a priori or by reason alone. There is a strong tendency to attenuate such knowledge, trivialize it, by reducing it to a mere matter of the rules of our
language, or the like. In knowledge by pure reason we are, it is thought, only reminding ourselves of our own communication needs and goals. Thus in the end we come down indirectly to something empirical or contingent after all. This paradox, upheld by Wittgenstein, Quine, and Goodman, among others, but only partially or not at all accepted by other leading logicians, including Popper, Lewis, Whitehead, Peirce, Scholz, Bochensky, Martin, and others, has made it extremely difficult to deal with the theistic question.

It is plain to all that mere deduction alone can tell us only that certain premises entail certain conclusions. And this means that knowledge as to what exists that is achieved by deduction alone can never be more than hypothetical. Thus if to be human is to be mortal and if there are men, then there are some mortal things; but the conclusion is not guaranteed by mere deduction.

Even the ontological proof for the divine existence is hypothetical, so far as the merely deductive part is concerned, and this is clear enough in Anselm's own statements. For one premise of the proof is that even the fool can "conceive" God, meaning, he can have a definite and self-consistent idea of him. Or as Leibniz put it: from the logical possibility of the divine existence, the existence itself may be deduced. But the possibility is not deduced; rather, it is assumed. (In another argument Anselm also attempts to deduce the possibility, but only by further assumptions not then and there deduced.) Always something is taken as otherwise known, if existence is to be proved. This seems to apply even to mathematical "existence." Deduction presupposes "intuition" into truth, if it is to lead to further truth.

Suppose we grant this, does it follow that all knowledge of existence comes around to empirical intuition, observation of mere matters of fact? This is the key question. My answer is in the negative. But to defend this answer is not especially easy.

We know as an historical fact that those who have accepted the ontological argument have tended to assert some version of the Augustinian doctrine of "illuminationism," the view that we have intuitive participation in the divine Light, the divine existence itself. According to this doctrine, the idea of God makes sense for us partly because, in a fashion, we know God himself even in barely thinking him. We can seek him only because we have never entirely lost him. I hold an epistemology from which it follows deductively that either God is impossible or he not only exists but exists as datum of every experience. Hence, even in rejecting the divine impossibility, I am, in my own view, affirming an intuition of God as inherent in all experience. This obligates no one who fails to find such an intuition in his own consciousness. But my proposition is this: those who deny being aware of God can, if they
are willing to pursue the inquiry to the end, be led into difficulties deducible from this denial, whereas the assertion that we do experience God (properly conceived—we are coming to that) leads to no comparable difficulties. The difficulties in question are not conflicts with empirical facts, but mutual conflicts among meanings or purposes. By these conflicts the professed unbeliever betrays his internal disharmony, a disharmony which must arise if it be true that all are bound to experience God.

Is this an argument from a contingent fact? No, for the point is not that we happen in fact to experience God, but that, on the view I am asserting, an experience of which God is not a datum is impossible. Not simply this world as experienced requires God to explain it; but any experienceable world whatever, and any conceivable absence of a world, would equally require God. Thus to experience or think at all is to experience or think God, though not necessarily to do so consciously. Any world must be God's world, and any lack of a world must be God's lack of a world. The term "God" stands either for the principle of all meaning whatsoever, or for nothing at all, not even a possibility.

But still, how do I know all this? By making the experiment of thinking out consequences of the view, and consequences of its denial, in order to see in which case absurdities result. The absurdities may show themselves in various ways, but never as mere conflicts with fact. Thus the man who says he has no faith in God, but goes on living, thereby shows, one may argue, that he has faith in something. Let him explain what the something is. I believe that, unless it is God, it will turn out not to fit the faith he has in it. You may say that it is mere empirical fact that the man goes on living and thus exhibits, in Santayana's phrase, some sort of "animal faith." But suppose he does not go on living; he then ceases to take part in the argument or to have any opinion concerning God. So the indispensability of faith is a logical one, inherent in thinking as such. In any world whatever, living, and therefore thinking, in that world would express faith of some sort, and I believe the full intelligibility of the faith would always point to God and his essential attributes of power, goodness, and wisdom.

Once more, how do I know all this to be correct? If "knowledge" means having opinions tested by relevant tests then I claim to have some approach to knowledge in this matter. Making this claim does not establish it, but merely invites others to offer their counterclaims so that we can pursue the inquiry further. I have faith that I am on the right path. But there is no use merely declaiming this rightness. I can only try to make my faith intelligible to others.
So far, I have talked as though the term “God” had a fairly definite meaning, and the chief question was whether or not this meaning corresponded to reality. But there are competing conceptions of deity, and we have to choose not simply between theistic and nontheistic philosophies, but also among diverse forms of theism. What is to determine this latter decision?

If there must be an intuitive or experiential basis for the religious idea, it seems reasonable to suppose that it is in some actual religion or religions that this intuition comes most clearly into consciousness. So, competing formulations of theism may be tested by asking: do they express the content of religion in its higher manifestations? Whatever meaning is assigned to the term “God,” it ought to designate the One who is worshipped. If it be asked, “What is worship?” a remarkably lucid definition is implicit in the first “great commandment” of the Old and New Testaments. God is whatever is the adequate object of unstinted or wholehearted devotion, whatever could be loved with all one’s being. Since nothing is as loveable as love itself, the other and more explicit New Testament definition of God as sheer love seems to be deducible. By this criterion, Aristotle’s definition of God must be immediately rejected, for his God loves no one unless himself, and mere self-love is not particularly loveable. Spinoza’s conception also fails, for a similar reason, as does that of Plotinus.

To make worship definitive of the divine nature may seem to be, but is not, a mere argument from an empirical fact, the fact that some people worship, or as one says, have “religious experience.” On the contrary, it is not the fact but the idea of worship from which we derive the definition. Perhaps no one, in fact, loves God, or anything else, with “all his being.” Who could prove that he or another man does this? The point, however, is that we may be able to understand the ideal of such a complete devotion. God then is its appropriate recipient. To believe in him is to believe that if we do not worship, the fault is with us, not with the nonexistence of an appropriate recipient. Moreover, in any possible world in which there were sentient and thinking beings the question would be relevant: “Is there a suitable object of worship, of total devotion?”

To be the appropriate object of total devotion implies radically unique properties. Somehow all value, all meaning, everything even mildly interesting in any way, must be an aspect of God himself. For otherwise, there would be that much of our being which was concerned not with God but with something else. I am convinced that traditional theology failed adequately to understand this. If I see a man in need and try to help him, how can this interest in his need consist entirely in love for God, if God is defined—in the usual manner—as wholly
self-sufficient, *ens a se*, wholly incapable of suffering, or of acquiring value from anything we do? Jesus said that in helping the needy we help him, and if this refers to Jesus as *God*, then God can be helped, and is not in every sense self-sufficient. Our interest in remedying evils must mean an interest in remedying something in God, not just in the world or in any man.

Suppose we take the other definition, that God himself is love. Again we have the question: "What does this mean, if God is simply self-sufficient, absolute, infinite, and incapable of being influenced by the world?" In my judgment, it means nothing at all, on the stated assumption. To love is to be related to, and influenced by, what is loved. Sympathy, participation, sorrowing with the sufferings of others and rejoicing with their joys, these are not dispensable aspects of love, or some inferior version of it; they are its essence. Without sympathy mere "doing good" to others is not love. The sun does good to us, but to all appearances loves us not. Divine love has been compared to the sun, or to a fountain, by those who wished to maintain the divine self-sufficiency. In this they have unwittingly exhibited their lack of interest in the lovingness of deity. A god who showers benefits upon all, but cares nothing for them, a "cosmic benefit machine," is what many philosophers and theologians offer us, not the God of the New Testament, or of any of the higher religions at their best. The only clear alternative to the benefit-machine idea is a God really related by sympathetic participation to his creatures.

We know well the chief historic source in the West of the identification of deity with self-sufficiency, rather than with love, properly so-called. This source is Greek philosophy. For Plato—at least as usually interpreted—and Aristotle, the divine may perhaps be loved but it does not love in return; and they held this view for the precise reason that love implies a certain qualification of self-sufficiency, a seeking and finding of part of one’s own good in another than oneself. Medieval theologians wanted to have it both ways, without, so far as I can see, removing the contradiction. They wanted God to have all the self-sufficiency of the Greek deity, and yet so to love the world—and even (as Origen said) be moved by its misery—as to be motivated to send his only son to help mankind.

The more I read in the metaphysics of religion, the more I am impressed by the pervasive role of unnoticed ambiguity in confusing great minds. To say that God is self-sufficient, independent, absolute, the necessary being, has two possible meanings, not one. To see this, let us consider in what sense we creatures are lacking in self-sufficiency, independence, or necessity. That sense is that there is simply no quality of a man, however essential or inessential to his personality, which does
not depend for its coming to be and its continuance upon antecedent or concomitant causes. Thus man, and the other creatures likewise, are in every possible respect dependent and contingent. This leaves open two ways of distinguishing God from his creatures: (1) We may suppose that, as the creatures are in all qualities dependent or contingent, so God is in all qualities independent or necessary. (2) We may suppose that God is in some qualities independent and necessary, but in other qualities dependent and contingent. The main mass of philosophers and theologians took the first way, while a tiny trickle, a most honorable trickle in my view, took the second. Those who took the first way seldom even saw the possibility of the second. This means that they answered a question they had never clearly asked. My philosophical methodology frowns upon such a procedure. If in philosophizing we choose one of two possible views, we should always know clearly what the other view is and why we reject it. The small minority which took the second way of course knew all about the first way; they could not help it, since the adherents of the first way dominated the seats of learning, and wrote nearly all the books. Thus only the partisans of the second view really knew what choice they were making, and insofar only they exhibited a sound methodology!

Since no mere creature is independent in any of its qualities, to exalt God above the creatures it suffices to ascribe to him independence in some appropriate quality. To go beyond this, and declare him independent in every quality is not justified by the legitimate requirement that there be a clear distinction between the worshipped and the worshippers, or between God and other realities. For only God can be self-sufficient in any quality whatever. By what right then do we follow Aristotle in making pure self-sufficiency equivalent to deity? Self-sufficiency in some respect is enough to establish an immeasurable gulf between God and other beings. Self-sufficiency in all respects is therefore at best superfluous for this purpose; but it is worse than superfluous, for it commits us, if we are intellectually serious, to the further Greek view that the gulf between us and God cannot be crossed by God, but only by us. Our love can perhaps reach up to God, but his “love” cannot reach down to us, for that must mean that we contribute some qualities to God, some joy arising from our joy, some sorrow arising from our suffering.

There is another ambiguity by which great men were confused. That we have qualities dependent upon others is not our real defect, which is, rather, that our dependence or limitation is itself a highly dependent or limited one. We depend greatly upon our neighbors, friends, or enemies, but scarcely at all upon multitudes of beings, say the inhabitants of another planet. And we shall never depend upon what remote
posterity may do. Our dependence or limitation, then, is itself dependent or limited. What others can do to influence us depends upon what and where we and they are in the space-time world. Only an insignificant fraction of God’s creatures can have an appreciable influence, and many can have no influence at all, upon us. Very different is the dependence of God upon his creatures. Since his love is the supreme and all-embracing love (otherwise he would not be a suitable object of total devotion) any creature whatever influences God, for its good gives him joy and its evil gives him sorrow. To deny God dependent qualities is then doubly superfluous in that, not only is his incomparable supremacy already guaranteed by his being self-sufficient in some of his qualities, but, in addition, there is a supreme way of having dependent qualities which is alone worthy of God, and possible only for him. This supreme way is the nondependent way of being dependent. The scope of God’s dependency or conditioning is not subject to conditions, it is absolute. We depend upon some, he simply upon all.

The little word "all" is the real key to theistic metaphysics. God is, in certain of his qualities, independent of all things; in others he is dependent upon all. In the former aspect, God is first or supreme cause; in the latter, he is supreme consummation or effect. No creature is, in any respect, either cause of all or effect of all. Always the creature is cause of some things only, and effect of some things only. The creatures are individuals with nonuniversal functions, God the individual with universal functions. Someness is the creaturely trait, allness is divine. God loves and is loved by all; he is influenced by, and influences, all.

There is a symmetry in this view which I believe is a logical merit. It is, I incline to think, something like the sort of symmetry which has led physicists to accept certain views rather than others. The Greek-medi eval view compares God with the creatures in a rather raggedly unsymmetrical fashion: thus, God causally influences all, we only some things; but God is influenced, not—as symmetry implies—by all but by none, while we are influenced, again, by some only. The sole ground for this lack of symmetry must be that to be influenced is felt to be in principle bad, a sign of inferiority. What basis is there for this prejudice? Our ethics does not embody it, no wisdom actually practiced expresses it. There is simply nothing wrong with being influenced, merely as such; though of course there are wrong ways of being influenced, just as there are wrong ways of influencing. The mother who rejoices over her son’s virtue and happiness is surely not inferior to the one who is simply indifferent to a son’s weal or woe. Rather the contrary. The thoughts of a zoologist are influenced by the amoeba or fruit fly he studies. This does not make him inferior to the amoeba or fly. I repeat, there is nothing wrong with being influenced.
The symmetrical view of the divine universality or all-relatedness is logically correlative to devotion as expressing all one's being. For when we take even the least interest in anything, this should, according to the ideal of worship, be an interest in God himself, and this is possible only if the divine life takes into itself all the forms of contingent reality, including even all sufferings. How then, you may ask, can there nevertheless be something absolute, self-sufficient, independent, or necessary in God's nature?

The answer lies in taking seriously the analogy between God and an individual person. This analogy, strangely enough, has, in the scholarly world, seldom been taken seriously. A person has a "character," a set of personality traits, which are relatively fixed in the midst of changing experiences and acts. If the acts are free, they are not wholly dictated by the character and circumstances, but are creative additions to the person's life. This distinction between the fixed or essential characteristics or personality traits, and inessential, changing details of experience and action, may be analogically, or in the "eminent" sense, applied to deity. God then has an invulnerable individuality or unique essence which makes him always "himself," no matter what additional qualities he may or may not acquire. The traditional "attributes," such as omniscience, properly interpreted, express this essential character of God. No matter what happens, God is eminently wise, good, and mighty; this attribute (for, as tradition rightly held, it is really but one) God possesses necessarily and self-sufficiently. We do not make God wise, good, or mighty, and we could not make him otherwise. We can, however, contribute to the empirical content which God wisely, righteously, and mightily receives from the world. We do not determine the infallibility with which God knows the content, the creation; we only determine something of what is infallibly known. Infallibility, by itself, is a mere abstraction; only the content can make it concrete. True, it is not in our power to decide whether or not God shall have concrete content, for his supreme creative power presumably guarantees that he will have some world or other. But we can determine something of the richness and beauty of the world God infallibly knows.

In a sense, the final meaning of God for the creatures is not in what he may do for them, but in what they may do for him. We are all, with all our qualities, contributions to his imperishable life, which alone can appreciate us in our full value. In this way it is literally true that the aim of all creation is the divine glory. Many seem to value God as means to their own future safety and comfort. But serving God now should be our comfort. This doctrine may be termed "contributionism." "Our lives, our souls and bodies," are thus "a reasonable and holy sacrifice" unto him.
Does this mean that God loves us only for himself? No, for it is only because he loves us for ourselves, in our unique actuality, that we contribute anything to his life. Love is essentially participation, appropriation of the life of the other into one’s own life. To suppose that this is true only of inferior or creaturely forms of love, while God’s love is sheer benevolence without appropriation, sympathy, or receptivity, is to forget that our human capacity for taking into our own lives that of others is as severely limited, at least, as our benevolence. The ideal form of sympathy is possible only for God. To say that it is unworthy even of him is to make it a strictly homeless ideal. Infinite receptivity is no less superhuman than infinite independence. Both, I submit, belong to God, and to God alone. To adapt Whitehead’s witty saying, men refused to give unto God what could not belong even unto Caesar.

Those who have read Tsanoff’s *Crossroads of Religion* will probably have noticed some similarities between the view of deity therein set forth and the view which I have defended in this essay. Professor Tsanoff is one of a number of recent writers, well-informed concerning the “great tradition” in religious metaphysics, who have realized that this tradition is capable of improvement in more than trivial aspects and that when these improvements are made, the case for positivism or agnosticism loses at least part of its cogency. In the present century it is this country which has been richest in such writers, and Tsanoff is not the only one of them bequeathed to us by some foreign land. In Europe freedom from the past has, in our sad century, been realized chiefly through nihilistic rejection of metaphysics. In our more hopeful society it is possible to think both freshly and constructively.