

God's Aseity: Is your god worthy of worship?

Gregg Strawbridge¹

As recently as the debate on the meaning of life between Jordan Peterson, William Lane Craig, and Rebecca Goldstein, the *Euthyphro* dilemma arose from the atheistic proponent (Goldstein) in the discussion.² "The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods. . . . It is loved because it is holy, not holy because it is loved?"³ How does one answer this question when framed in a theistic context? Does God love what is good, true, and beautiful, et al because it is already there in reality or does God arbitrarily declare what is GTB? How does a fully developed Trinitarian view address this? I raise this question as a window into the discussion of the attribute of God's *aseity*.

"*Aseity*" literally means "from self," the Latin "a" means "from" and "se" is "self." So, in a word it, means self-existence rather than existence through dependence on another. God exists "*a se*" in Latin terminology.⁴ *Aseity* is, "The divine property of being completely independent of everything distinct from God himself. Everything other than God depends on God, but God depends on nothing besides himself."⁵ I am sure this concept is known well among theologians. I question whether it has been "painted into the corners" very well among evangelical Christians.

For example, all reading or hearing this paper may think *aseity* quite the obvious attribute of the God of the Bible. If this were so, then no Christian one would ever ask, "Who created God?" or "from whence did God come?" From the position of God's *aseity*, such a question is a category mistake. It is like asking what color are circles or what is the smell of a pentagon or what molecules make up a soul. Yet, I personally witnessed an evangelical scholar ask such a question at national ETS meeting.⁶

A men's study through the *loci* of systematic theology in my own congregation alerted me to people in my church that had not really understood the fullest conception of God as *a se*. From my background in philosophy, drawing on the ontological argument seemed useful. Anslem

¹ Pastor of All Saints Presbyterian Church, Lancaster, PA and director of wordmp3.com, an online library of Christian world and life view resources which host all of the ETS digital audio recordings.

² Streamed lived on 1/26/2018: "Is There Meaning to Life? Jordan Peterson, Rebecca Goldstein, William Lane Craig," held at Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto, available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDDQOCXBrAw>

³ Plato's text is widely available, e.g., <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/euthyfro.html>.

⁴ The use of the term, "*aseity*" is not as widespread in protestant theologies. However, the concept is present in all Nicene Christianity. Other terms, like "independence" and the "Creator-creature" concepts to express the same truth.

⁵ The IVP's *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion*, s.v. "*aseity*," 13.

⁶ Ronald Youngblood, professor of Hebrew (Bethel Seminary) asked about the "origins of God" of William Lane Craig at the national ETS meeting in RI, 2008 in my presence. This made an indelible mark in my memory. I hope this is a fault of my memory or even that I missed level of discourse from which this question was asked. Even so, I have heard many Christians pose these kinds of questions even if I have misrepresented Dr. Youngblood.

said, "God is a being than which no greater can be conceived." Many in my Reformed congregation seemed somewhat ignorant by the thought which I will subsume under the category of the Triune God's *aseity*. Some even questioned whether God could have "started" — Now I want to say that if I did not misunderstand them, I truly have been disturbed by the thought that a Christian in Bible-committed, Reformed church could question, deny, suggest, ponder, etc. that God does not exist *a se*.

The Latter Day Saint Denial of Aseity

I have found that talking to Jehovah's Witnesses and the Latter Day Saints (LDS/Mormons) is very instructive for Christian thought. When we speak with those outside our tribe we have a chance to grow and minister. As Philemon 1:6 in the NIV (1984) says, "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ." As we "share" (*koinonia*) our faith we develop a fuller understanding.⁷

In college I began to act as a disciple of Jesus (age 20). I came to understand that Mormons believe that there are many gods and Elohim ("God") is just one of them.⁸ LDS deny the ordinary view of the Trinity.⁹ "As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be."¹⁰ The thought that the God of Scripture could be a creature, made by another creature which was made by another creature is a radically different view from Christian orthodoxy. That God is dependent on another creator is like having an endless train of box cars which never has an engine. "Well why is this boxcar moving? Because the one in front of it is pulling it. Ok, but what's pulling that one? The one in front of it, ad infinitum." This analogy requires a simple level of the knowledge of trains: boxcars have no engines.

I came to have way of confronting LDS missionaries (when they came to my door; I didn't go stalking them), in light of the theological truth of God's *aseity*. I am not sure that I was always as kind in expressing this as the grace of Jesus would demand. Before denouncing them, I tried to establish their agreement with: "As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be."

⁷ From the NIV (1984), it has in fact been changed in later NIV editions. It is experientially true even if that is not exactly what the Greek words mean. Translations here vary widely. Similar to the NIV "dynamic translation" view, consider the New Living Translation 2nd Ed: "And I am praying that you will put into action the generosity that comes from your faith as you understand and experience all the good things we have in Christ."

⁸ Since the LDS folks seem to change their views with new revelations, etc. they may have changed their view on this. None of the LDS missionaries I have talked with over the years seem to have gotten this memo.

⁹ It is interesting, though not at all persuasive, that some LDS defenders appeal to the "social trinity" views: "More generously interpreted, Mormonism takes a strongly social view of the Trinity, seeing each member as an independent or relatively independent person, a position that is not uncommon among many creedal Christian theologians today." https://www.fairmormon.org/answers/Mormonism_and_the_nature_of_God/Polytheism#Gospel_Topics_on_LDS.org.2C_.22Becoming_Like_God.22 Further, note Mormon apologetics, "the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost are separate and distinct personages, that They are one in purpose." <https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/what-mormons-believe-about-jesus-christ>

¹⁰ Every LDS person I have spoken with about this attributed it to Orson Pratt; however, on the official LDS site, it is referenced in Eliza R. Snow Smith, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (1884), 46; see also "The Grand Destiny of Man," *Deseret Evening News*, July 20, 1901, 22. I quote from: <https://www.lds.org/manual/teachings-of-presidents-of-the-church-lorenzo-snow/chapter-5-the-grand-destiny-of-the-faithful?lang=eng#note1>. Thus, I am not sure of the original source, though many Mormons have confirmed to me personally that it was Orson Pratt.

Then I would confront them: “Your god is not worthy of worship!” In this paper I want to be respectful of our LDS neighbors. Trinitarian Christians and LDS “Christians” (?) share much in terms of objective morality and all that implies. The serious theological question which arises is whether a finite deity is worthy of worship in the fullest sense?

Dealing with many Jehovah’s Witnesses over the years, I have also have used the “worthy of worship” apologetic. Of course the LDS and JW folks have very different world views. If I have to choose between them — “a plague on both your houses.” As a young pastor, for many weeks a JW women came to our home and discussed the Bible over many successive weeks. Somewhere toward the end of that process, as we debated passages in Rev. 4-5 on worship, I asked “tell me about how you worship”? I learned from her that there are about 220 approved hymns for JW worship.¹¹ What? — Whether you can follow the Greek grammar of John 1, issues related to Jesus being the “first-born,” and all that, one thing seems obvious: limiting worship to a few hundred hymns for the God of this actual universe is way out of line.¹² While they do not deny Jehovah’s infinity, they certainly deny Jesus’ infinite and thus, they deny the *aseity* of the God of the Bible. We may ask, Is *their* Jesus worthy of worship?¹³

Picturing Aseity

There is a great illustration of *aseity* vs. finite deity in the Star Trek movie, “The Final Frontier” (1989). The plot is that a manic and charismatic Vulcan guru (?) has very successfully overtaken the starship Enterprise. He has convinced even the most skeptical and logical of them (Bones, perhaps even Spock) of the mission to get to “God.” Finally, they succeed in crossing the “barrier” in the galaxy to this planet upon on which “God” may be found. Once they meet “God,” “God” (after a few affirmations of their quest) is asking to use a starship to be transported away. Here, we have the very helpful office of the skeptic.¹⁴ Captain James T. Kirk asks with hand raised, “Excuse me what does God need with a starship?”¹⁵ To which “God” responds, “Here is the proof you seek,” and zaps him (from his eyes no less, more zapping continues in the scene). While dated, this is a great cinematic presentation of the issue of the *nature* of God. If “God” has needs met from creatures, then “God” is just a big zapping *creature* and is to be worshiped only due to being more powerful than humans.

¹¹ There are 230 pages in the 1984 version of their hymnal, *Sing Praises to Jehovah*.

¹² The greatest response to the JW knock at the door, ever, is longtime Dallas Theological Seminary professor, Howard Hendricks who explained that when home sick one Sunday the JW’s came knocking and began talking of the Greek text of John 1: “In the beginning was the Word ... the Word was a god” (New World Translation) - Dr. Hendrickson simply opened his Greek NT and said, “Let’s read it...” Normally, JW’s do not encounter those who know Greek.

¹³ This despite the fact that in Revelation 5:13, the same worship is given to the One on the throne and the Lamb: “And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, “To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.”

¹⁴ Like MacPhee in C. S. Lewis’s work, *That Hideous Strength*. I highly recommend Lewis’s work of the “Space Trilogy” or “Cosmic Trilogy.”

¹⁵ The clip can be scene here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4HjR5xW7FU>

Are we just worshiping God because he is *a* cosmic bully? This leaves open the possibility that there may be others, Zeus, et al. If God were a mere greater power, would he be worthy of worship? If God were created by another created being could he rightfully demand our ultimate praise and allegiance? If God were just another being in a collection of similar beings, but just happened to have complete control over this planet, does that demand ultimate worship and allegiance? Is the God of Scripture like this deity presented in Hollywood (“Final Frontier”)? Is God like one of the ancient deities, Molech, Baal, Zeus, but stronger? The Triune God of Scripture cannot be the greatest Zeus ever. Our God is a truly awesome God.

An Exegesis of Aseity

I have asserted that the God of Scripture exists *a se*. Many Christian confessions and commentators support this claim. The Nicene Creed implicitly makes this point, “We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of *all* things visible and invisible.” If all classes of things (“visible and invisible”) were made by him, then no other class of “beings” can exist beyond his making. Did God come into being but then create everything else? This is impossible on all apologetic grounds, Thomistic, evidential, classical, or Van Tillian. It is impossible from any orthodox Christian angle. However, I sympathize with John Frame.¹⁶ Can a biblical, exegetical case for *aseity* for the living God, whom Christians confess to be the Triune God be made? Or, is this just the work of Platonic-Aristotelian-NeoPlatonic philosophers?¹⁷

The Athanasian Creed states, “The Father uncreated: the Son uncreated: and the Holy Spirit uncreated.”¹⁸ This places the Triune God in a different eco-system of ontology, what Cornelius Van Til emphasized as the “Creator-creature distinction.” Certainly in my own Reformed tradition all witnesses concur: e.g., Hodge says, “Jehovah, therefore, is the I AM; a person always existing and always the same. Self-existence, eternity, and immutability are included in the signification of the word.”¹⁹ Reformed confessions teach the same truth. “Religious worship is to be given to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; and to him alone: not to angels, saints, or

¹⁶ John Frame writes regarding James Dolezal, *All That Is in God* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017): “When I began teaching theology at Westminster Seminary in 1968, my first elective course was ‘The Aseity of God.’ Van Til, despite his disdain for scholasticism in general, was a strong advocate of divine aseity, what he called ‘the self-contained God.’ In my course, I drew on Van Til, Bavinck, and the Reformed tradition. But I noted that despite the fact that many Reformed theologians considered divine aseity to be a central doctrine, few of them had developed any credible biblical basis for it. Given sola Scriptura, this seemed to me to be a serious lack, and so I spend much of the course trying to develop the doctrine from explicit biblical teaching.” This article is available here: <https://framepoythress.org/scholasticism-for-evangelicals-thoughts-on-all-that-is-in-god-by-james-dolezal>. Frame and Dolezal disagree on some aspects of the attributes of God. This points to the deep rift between a purely biblicism and a classical theism. It is my hope that this rift is somewhat less than a Grand Canyon within Trinitarian Christianity, hence this paper.

¹⁷ What comes to mind is what Peter Enns used as his defense against inerrancy in 2013 ETS national presentation on the subject. Because the Bible (allegedly) assumes the truth of ancient near eastern pantheon of gods, the Bible can be false in many of its claims. Then “Five Views” of this presentation is available here: <http://www.wordmp3.com/product-group.aspx?id=334>.

¹⁸ “The Athanasian Creed,” ed. David Lang, *Creeds, Confessions and Catechisms*. Altamonte Springs: Oak Tree Software, Inc., 2006), paragraph 95.

¹⁹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Accordance electronic ed. (New York: C. Scribner, 1887), 276.

any other creature: and since the fall, not without a Mediator; nor in the mediation of any other but of Christ alone."²⁰

Most theologians from the breadth of Christian traditions appeal to Exodus 3:14 as a proof. Moses asks whom shall I say sends me. "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM'; and He said, 'Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"²¹ Even the *Dead Sea Scrolls Bible* translates the text in this manner: "And God said to [Moses, 'I] AM THAT I AM.' And he said, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"²² I can find no translation that essentially varies from this "I AM-ness" which points to some kind of "otherness." Edersheim notes that "I am that I am" are words "betokening His unchangeable nature and faithfulness."²³ The classic OT Keile and Delitzsch commentary posed of God (Ex. 3:14), "unfettered liberty and self-dependence. This name precluded any comparison between the God of the Israelites and the deities of the Egyptians and other nations, and furnished Moses and his people with strong consolation in their affliction, and a powerful support to their confidence in the realization of His purposes of salvation as made known to the fathers.²⁴ Hence, this is at least a first word pointing us toward the *aseity* of God.²⁵

Brueggemann says, "The name *Yahweh* (יהוה) ostensibly derives from some form of the verb *to be* (היה *hāyâ*) so that God is the power for life, the power of being, the power of newness. This strange formula leaves the door open toward 'being'—toward "ontology"²⁶ The amazing revelation here is quite grammatical, it is a "word" — "Both subject and predicate are left undefined: who God is and what he will be are not indicated."²⁷ Yet this revelation (in context) is not without personality and promise.

Cole says, "this is the only place in the Old Testament where there is any explanation of the meaning of the name YHWH, we ought therefore to take very seriously the association with

²⁰ Robert Shaw, *The Reformed Faith: An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2001), paragraph 688.

²¹ NASB (1995).

²² *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible: The Oldest Known Bible Translated for the First Time into English* by Martin Abegg, Jr., Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich. (HarperCollins, 1999).

²³ Alfred Edersheim, *The Bible History: Old Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2006), paragraph 578.

²⁴ C. F. Keil and Delitzsch F., *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), paragraph 843.

²⁵ "I AM. The personal name of Israel's God, Yahweh (usually rendered LORD, v. 15), is built from the Hebrew verb "to be." Verse 14 uses an alternate form of the verb in the first person, 'I am.'" John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 80.

²⁶ Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus," in General Articles; Genesis-Leviticus, vol. 1 of *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Accordance electronic ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 714.

²⁷ Williams D. Johnstone, *Exodus*, ed. James D.G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 76.

'being' which is clearly stated here. . . . [YHWH] will only be understood by my own subsequent acts and words of revelation'? This would seem to fit the biblical pattern, for in all subsequent Israelite history God would be known as the One who brought Israel from Egypt (Exod. 20:2)."²⁸ The venerable Matthew Henry (1662-1714) urged on this text, "That he is self-existent; he has his being of himself, and has no dependence upon any other: the greatest and best man in the world must say, By the grace of God *I am what I am*; but God says absolutely—and it is more than any creature, man or angel, can say—I *am that I am*. Being self-existent, he cannot but be self-sufficient, and therefore all-sufficient, and the inexhaustible fountain of being and bliss."²⁹

Strong says, "Every being must have the ground of its existence either in or out of itself We have the ground of our existence outside of us. God is not thus dependent. He is *a se*; hence we speak of the aseity of God. God's self-existence is implied in the name 'Jehovah' (Exodus 6:3) and in the declaration I AM THAT I AM (Exodus 3:14), both of which signify that it is God's nature to be."³⁰ Schaff says, "The idea of divinity necessarily includes aseity and eternity. A divinity communicated in time is only a finite being."³¹

This teaching is not just a scholastic proof-texting of Exodus 3:14. In discussing Acts 17:23–25, J. I. Packer's NDT states, "This is his *assets*, the quality of having life in and from himself."³² In the very etymology of the terms scholars acknowledge the deep "ontology" of Exodus 3:14: as "seeing God's aseity, i.e., his being rather than his activism and dynamism, in the name 'I am.'"³³ Alexander connects the "name" with his actions: "his nature does not change. He is the God worshipped by earlier generations (*the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob*) and generations yet to come (*this is my name for ever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation*)."³⁴ Thus YHWH as revealed in Scripture is not an abstraction, but a person who has related by way of covenant. "For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself" (Heb. 6:13).

Some Other Verses

²⁸ R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 2 of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. IVP/ Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 76.

²⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 2001.

³⁰ Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, Accordance electronic ed. (Philadelphia: Griffith & Rowland Press, 1907), 256-257.

³¹ Philip Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Christianity*, vol. 2 of History Of The Christian Church. Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), paragraph 9773.

³² J. I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. "God," 276.

³³ Referring to E. J. Young, cited in the *Expositors Bible Commentary* "notes" in the Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), paragraph 1150.

³⁴ T.D. Alexander, *Exodus*, ed. D. A Carson et al., *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 96.

The Bible says in various places that we should not worship creatures, however great such creatures may be. John is rebuked for attempting to worship angels (Rev. 19:10).³⁵

- John 1:3 - All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.
- John 5:26 - For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself.
- Acts 17:28 - for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.'
- Hebrews 1:2 - in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.

Some Conclusions about Aseity and Worship

The key to the Euthyphro dilemma is, Craig points out in the debate (above), is that it is a "false dilemma."³⁶ The biblical God has a nature which conforms to the true, good, and beautiful, et al. Even so, when one "sees" this or better, when it is revealed to a person, it is a cause of worship. So if all that is good in creation causes a surge of gratitude and praise, how much more would the fully actualized reality of these "goods" in God require praise and worship?

So is God to be worshiped merely due to power or even being a creator? Let's suppose "artificial intelligence" (AI) produces sentient robots. Should the robot worship the programmer? ("Data" of Star Trek "Next Generation" comes to mind here.) It seems reasonable that (in such a very unlikely scenario) the now conscious robot should indeed give thanks for the programming and the engineering. But the robot is still in the same *class of being* as the programmers and engineers. As I write this I realize that even acknowledging being grateful to a fellow creature presupposes Someone beyond creatureliness.

Worship is connected with the creation of "all things" or "all creation" "Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created" (Rev. 4:11). We worship because God is creator of "all things" which requires that God is outside of creation and not dependent on it.

This is captured in Christian worship when we sing the *Gloria Patri*. "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now, and ever shall be, world without end." Or consider the (edited) morning prayer of the Russian martyr, Alexander Men: "Dear Father, Son and Holy Spirit, help me, without distraction, in body and mind, to appear before You. Strengthen me in faith. Grant me burning love for You. Teach me to discern Your will in every event. Stop my mouth in evil and empty words, and restrain my hand from any evil deed. Should misfortune befall me today, give me strength to accept it in faith and offer it as a sacrifice to You. Make me a source of good for everyone I meet today. Accept my prayer for

³⁵ Revelation 19:10 - "Then I fell at his feet to worship him. But he *said to me, "Do not do that; I am a fellow servant of yours and your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus; worship God. For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."

³⁶ Craig's response to Rebecca Goldstein is an intellectual spanking of no small proportion. "Have you not read" philosophy? This has been answered continually by theistic philosophers.

those who do not know You and deliver them from unbelief. I thank You for my life, for those who are near, and those who are not, for the heavens and the earth, and for Your life-giving love. Grant that this day I may remember Your presence in gratitude because of Christ's sacrifice for me; in His name, Amen." These are not, strictly, "proofs," but they are exemplars of the worship that arises from knowing God's *aseity*.

Concluding Thoughts

The Triune God does not *need* our worship; but we certainly need to worship him. We have lost a rightly aligned relation with him through the fall (Gen. 3) and worship is how we recalibrate. "Let us worship our Triune God." "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now, and ever shall be, world without end."

The glory of our Triune God is that He is not only our unique creator who exists *a se*, but he has entered into our world through the Incarnation of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity. Evangelicals need to reclaim the uniqueness of the God we worship. Often evangelicals are debating amongst ourselves about this or that, instead of giving praise to a being "than which no greater can be conceived" (St. Anselm). We are often playing in the shallows, but we need to plumb the depths of our God's character.