

UNITED WISDOM

A Personal God and an Impersonal Ground of Being

Traditions and Worldviews

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> *“By God, I mean a being absolutely infinite”*
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> *Benedict Spinoza, Ethics, part I, definition VI. The Russian version was translated by us from R. H. M. Elwes's English translation: Ethics. The definition continues through the concept of substance; only its opening fragment is given here.*

One person addresses the highest as “You.” Another speaks of a ground through which existence itself becomes possible. Their words may express equal seriousness, yet pose different questions. What does being heard mean? And what does having a ground mean?

About this article

The distinction between a personal God and an impersonal ground of being cannot be reduced to a dispute between an emotional person and a rational one. Personal speech can rest on developed philosophy, while an impersonal account can accompany profound religious experience. This article examines the fork itself: the highest is understood either as capable of knowing, willing, and entering relationships, or as an ultimate basis to which such definitions do not apply. We consider particular examples from Vedānta, the Bhagavad Gītā, Christian self-description, and Spinoza's philosophy. We do not declare them secretly identical or arrange them as a ladder of spiritual maturity. We also examine the limits of “personal,” different meanings of unity, and why an experience of meaning does not yet settle a metaphysical dispute. The practical section offers clarification of one's own speech about the highest, preserving the right to faith, doubt, and the absence of a final answer.

I. “Personal” need not mean “humanlike”

Calling God personal usually means a capacity to know, will, love, and enter relationships. Yet this need not be an enlarged human being with a character, dwelling place, and limited interests. Theological reasoning requires these qualities to be clarified: how can they be attributed to what is considered the ultimate source of existence?

Language thus becomes the first question. “God hears” may mean that an address does not remain outside divine knowledge. It need not claim physical hearing. Yet if every relationship to knowledge and response is removed, the personal meaning disappears. Between literal anthropomorphism and complete lack of content lies a field of analogical understanding requiring work of its own.

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An impersonal ground is also easily misrepresented. It need not mean cold matter or an absence of value. A system can speak of consciousness, fullness, or a highest reality while not recognizing in it the intention of an individual agent. “Living feeling against a dead mechanism” therefore fails to encompass the real philosophical fork.

In Jeanine Diller's academic overview God and Other Ultimates, §§1.1–1.2, the concepts of the ultimate and models allow different accounts of the highest to be discussed. A research category does not establish that the corresponding ultimate exists. It helps compare what is claimed and what object is presupposed.

A hypothetical interlocutor says, “I do not picture God as a human being.” This does not establish that they have rejected a personal God. They may reject only a bodily image. A further question is needed: do they recognize knowledge, will, relationship? Likewise, someone speaking of a single consciousness has not yet said whether they consider it able to respond to an address. Precision begins with such distinctions, rather than assignment of people to ready-made camps.

Negations need particularly careful reading. “Not personal” may reject human limitations, reject every capacity for relationship, or decline to apply the category itself. These options differ. Saying the highest cannot be pictured does not yet tell us whether the possibility of address is denied. Speaking of infinity does not yet establish how knowledge and will are understood.

The same applies to “impersonal.” In everyday language it often sounds cold or indifferent. A philosophical text may use it for a wholly different purpose—to limit a category, rather than describe a mood. Replacing function with emotional coloring turns a dispute over concepts into one over preferences. A person begins choosing the more pleasant word instead of examining the claim behind it.

II. Two questions about the highest can coexist

The question of ground asks: through what does the world exist, and its understanding become possible? The question of relationship asks: can the highest be addressed, and what does that contact mean? Some systems join the answers. Others dispute the connection. Personhood and metaphysical primacy are therefore not always opposites: God may be conceived as both the source of being and the addressee of prayer.

Joining them, however, requires grounds. A philosophical argument for a necessary basis cannot simply be taken and given every desirable quality of an interlocutor. Between “the world has an explanation” and “that explanation loves me” lies a substantial transition. A religious tradition may ground it through revelation, its philosophy, and practice, but the transition needs naming.

The reverse error assumes that an experience of relationship automatically explains the world's existence. Someone may experience prayer as an encounter and understand it within their faith. Yet the fact of the experience does not remove every alternative metaphysical interpretation. We can respect the account while distinguishing account, interpretation, and general argument.

A hypothetical example: a person says they felt support in a difficult moment. They can describe the event, name its religious meaning, and explain why that meaning matters. Different levels of testimony remain for an outside reader. That the person experienced the situation this way, and that the experience proves a particular theory of God, are different claims.

Comparison becomes more productive when both questions remain. A system without a personal God may offer a developed answer about a ground but leave a different mode of approaching the ultimate. Personal religious speech may include ontology without being reduced to comfort. Each solution deserves investigation, rather than having its merits decided by “personal” or “impersonal” in advance.

III. Vedānta cannot fit into a single answer

Vedānta encompasses schools that interpret shared authoritative texts differently. “Indian thought speaks of an impersonal absolute” is therefore too broad. It hides disputes about the relationship between Brahman, the world, and a person, as well as which definitions of the highest are meaningful.

Section 2 of William Wainwright's archived Concepts of God compares Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita. In the first, ultimate reality is not described as a personal agent in the familiar theistic sense; in the second, Brahman is understood as the highest personal God, possessing perfections. The distinction involves substantial questions about qualities, knowledge, and the reality of differences.

A cautious conclusion follows: the same word “Brahman” does not guarantee the same concept. If definitions are considered limited in one case and essential to a true account in another, this is a real dispute. Replacing every word with “the one” cannot remove it.

An Upaniṣadic formula does not settle the dispute without interpretation either. In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, VI.8.7, the address to Śvetaketu connects selfhood with the subtle ground of what exists. Yet the relationship's meaning unfolds through further philosophical work. One chosen formula cannot be presented as a finished proof of every later system.

For the reader, this is an important example of internal variety. Personal and impersonal can be examined within a single family of traditions, without a crude map of “West—personal God,

East—impersonal absolute.” Such a map seems clear until actual texts are encountered. It then impedes precisely where it was supposed to help: it hides the questions over which thinkers actually differed.

IV. The Bhagavad Gītā preserves address and the difficulty of choice

In the twelfth chapter of the Bhagavad Gītā, Arjuna asks about worship of the manifest and the unmanifest. Krishna's answer includes both paths, but distinguishes their difficulty for an embodied person and preserves personal address. This particular textual conversation cannot be entirely converted into a contemporary table of two types of religiosity.

The dramatic form matters: the question is asked by someone already in a relationship with his interlocutor. He does not choose an object solely through abstract classification. Personal address therefore forms part of the path of understanding here. Individual categories need consideration within this speech, rather than extraction solely as ready-made definitions.

Reading requires distinguishing the primary text from the translation version. Edwin Arnold's poetic rendering used here was published as The Song Celestial. It allows particular places to be read, but does not replace a philological study of Sanskrit. Its artistic vocabulary and preface also belong to the translator's period. Historical hypotheses in the preface are not accepted here as an established origin of the text.

For today's reader, the chapter opens a question: does the way of addressing determine the content of what is addressed? A hypothetical person feels able to pray to a personal interlocutor but loses their way before an abstract ground. This is a fact about their mode of participation, rather than immediate proof of one ontology. Conversely, the convenience of impersonal language does not establish the absence of a personal highest being.

The significance of a path's form can be recognized without turning it into a psychological diagnosis of the believer. Personal devotion does not mean a lack of thought; preference for an impersonal account does not mean emotional withdrawal. Both would invent a biography. The text offers specific religious work, and readers may investigate it without a universal explanation of people who choose different ways of speaking.

V. Spinoza changes the meaning of “God” itself

In the first part of Ethics, Spinoza defines God through absolutely infinite substance, then connects what happens with the necessity of divine nature. In proposition XXXII, will is not understood as a free cause in the sense of independent choice. “God” here therefore cannot automatically be read as a personal ruler making decisions like a human being.

Understanding requires following definitions, rather than recognizing a familiar name alone. In one text “God” enters speech about address and response, in another a sequence of ontological arguments. Even if both authors speak of the highest, their claims may differ in what they consider possible action.

Spinoza's example also shows why “impersonal” does not mean “empty.” A philosophical system may have its own ethical and cognitive significance without offering a familiar picture of petition and divine decision. The absence of one model of relationships does not mean an absence of every human relationship to reality.

A hypothetical “the world punished me” requires clarification under impersonal causation. An event may follow from an action, but punishment presupposes another meaning: intention, evaluation, a relationship to a rule. This category cannot quietly be transferred to every adverse causal chain. An account of the ground thus has consequences for everyday language.

Comparison with Spinoza is not intended to prove that religious addresses are mistaken. It shows that one word may enter different systems. Before comparing positions, we must ask what qualities an author recognizes and what conclusion they draw. If all uses of “God” are instead united through a feeling of grandeur, substantial differences disappear, together with the possibility of assessing the argument.

VI. Christian communion is not dissolution of personhood

In the Catholic Catechism, §§1023–1029, ultimate fulfillment is described through life with Christ and communion with the Trinity. Personal identity is not declared to disappear. This document expresses a particular Catholic self-description; it is not neutral empirical evidence and does not replace every Christian theological position.

This example helps distinguish unity and identity. Unity may mean fullness of relationship in which the parties do not become the same object. If unity has been defined in advance as the disappearance of all differences, a system for which relationship has enduring meaning will be misunderstood.

The distinction is intuitively accessible in ordinary life: closeness need not require sameness. Yet an everyday analogy does not establish the structure of divine life. It only helps avoid an overly quick logical substitution. Theological content requires its own texts and grounds.

Personal address also does not mean a person can fully describe God. Ultimacy may accompany recognition of the limits of knowledge and language. “A personal God is always simple and intelligible” is therefore mistaken even as a general scheme. Relationship and exhaustive knowledge are different qualities.

Comparison needs to retain both sides: the possibility of address and the impossibility of reducing the addressee to a convenient human model. Keeping only the first yields an anthropomorphic caricature. Keeping only the second dissolves personal meaning into indefiniteness. Within theological writing, the tension may be a subject of sustained work rather than a defect: how to speak truly without treating one's speech as exhaustive.

VII. Neither “one” nor “ineffable” removes the dispute

Two authors may agree that ordinary concepts do not exhaust the highest while differing on whether knowledge and intention can be attributed to it. Recognizing a limit of speech does not yet determine what claims remain possible. “Ineffable” therefore does not automatically bridge every teaching.

Likewise, “one” can mean different relationships. The world depends on one source; one substance exists; multiplicity is included in a wider whole; a person experiences an absence of separation. These are different propositions. Sometimes they are compatible, sometimes not. A conclusion requires examining each, rather than treating shared vocabulary as sufficient grounds.

An honest dispute is also possible about whether language without qualities retains content. If nothing can be affirmed about the highest, on what basis is it distinguished from the absence of an object? A supporter may answer through another kind of knowledge or the limitations of categories. This answer also needs consideration. Recognizing the difficulty lets the position speak, rather than declaring it empty or faultless beforehand.

The personal model, conversely, faces questions about freedom, perfection, and relationship to the world. If the highest is unchanging, what does responding mean? If perfect, what does willing mean? These questions need not refute the model, but reveal the cost of its claims. Comparison matures when each side gains its own difficulty, as well as a beautiful formula.

A useful criterion for the reader is whether the chosen word explains more than it hides. If “one consciousness” automatically answers every question, the questions may simply have ceased to be distinguished. If “God's will” is used for every event without clarification, the explanation likewise loses transparency. Attentive reading restores concepts' specific work and leaves room to test arguments.

Checking such a transition is simple in form, though difficult in substance: name the quality affirmed or denied, and why. Then show the conclusion that follows. If the conclusion depends only on a word's sound, its grounds are not yet established. This check does not determine the reader's religious choice; it makes the choice clearer and allows discussion without attributing qualities to others they have not claimed for themselves.

VIII. What does “response” mean if the highest is unchanging?

Take the difficulty stated above: can an unchanging highest being respond to a person? The question itself contains several possible models. In one, response means a new decision after receiving a previously unknown request. In another, the relationship to the request is included in unchanging knowledge and intention. These alternatives are logically distinct. The second does not require the highest first not to know the person and then learn about them; it does require an explanation of why the connection deserves to be called a personal relationship. This is our analysis of the problem, rather than a finished doctrine of all theists.

Comparison of Spinoza and the Bhagavad Gītā makes the difficulty concrete. In Spinoza, will is not a free cause that could arrange nature arbitrarily; chapter XII of the Gītā preserves the devotee's address to the highest and Krishna's reply to Arjuna. Ethics, I, XXXII–XXXIII; Gītā, XII. Merely replacing “Krishna” with “nature” therefore does not complete the philosophical work. The role of the instruction's addressee changes.

Within a Spinozist framework, an event must be understood through necessity and causes. A request does not become a condition forcing the ultimate ground to choose a different world order. Within religious address, the possibility of being heard by an addressee matters. Before reconciling the positions, we must discover whether this precise possibility remains after translation. If it disappears, the shared word “God” hides the loss of a central claim.

Consider help received after prayer. The account permits several questions: who helped, how the request affected people's actions, what the praying person understood as a response, and what connection with the highest they consider established. The philosophical distinction cannot be reduced to a strong feeling's presence or absence. It concerns the explanation of the help's directedness. Describing a sequence of events alone is insufficient either to confirm or to abolish the entire theory of relationship.

Nor should a choice between models be made through a promise of comfort. Impersonal necessity can free a person from an image of arbitrary cosmic punishment. Personal relationship can give responsibility the meaning of response, rather than solely following conditions. These are different possible consequences of an understanding, not evidence of its truth. A substantive dispute asks what argument supports necessity and what supports the possibility of relationship. Each side then gains its own difficulty, in place of a general instruction to respect different experiences.

IX. One word, “unity,” and two different relationships

Now compare unity in an account of substance with unity in an account of communion. Both words go beyond the image of an utterly isolated person, but the connection points in different directions. Spinoza's substance is understood through existence and conception in itself; the Catholic section on heaven speaks of communion with God while preserving personal identity. Ethics, I, definition III; Catechism, §§1023–1029. This does not yet mean the two texts answer one question in the same way.

Test the relationship through two models of our own that are not pictures of religious truth. A part of a mechanism is included in its structure: its function can be understood through the whole's arrangement. The mechanism does not depict Spinoza's substance here: the example distinguishes inclusion from reciprocity. Two interlocutors are connected through conversation: the connection matters through the participants' difference. Transfer the first image unchanged to the second, and conversation becomes the operation of parts. Transfer the second to the first, and the device gains intentions its description did not presuppose. “Connection” alone justifies neither transfer.

“I am not separate from the highest” likewise needs clarification. It may deny independence of existence: a person is not self-sufficient. It may deny estrangement: a person is in communion. It may deny every real difference. The last version is much stronger than the first two. Agreement about dependence or communion is not yet agreement about identity. This logical distinction preserves the subject of unity without forcing different texts to abandon essential relationships in advance.

For the personal model, the question concerns who enters a relationship and what makes it possible. For an impersonal ground, it concerns how particular existence depends on the whole and can be understood. Both questions can be philosophically complex. Calling one “emotional” and the other “rational” evaluates people before considering their arguments' content. An objection must address the claimed relationship, rather than a supposed supporter's temperament.

The comparison's result therefore takes the form of a fork. We found a shared criticism of absolute human self-sufficiency. We diverged on whether the ultimate connection can be described as communion with an addressee. We noticed that “unity” leaves this question open. This is already substantial agreement and substantial disagreement. They can be investigated further without declaring a personal God a lower stage or animating an impersonal ground for conversational convenience.

X. The fork remains without obligatory ranking

Personal and impersonal accounts address different difficulties. One preserves the possibility of address and relationship; another may reject transferring human action to an ultimate ground. Yet the first cannot be declared childish and the second mature in advance—or the reverse. Such a ladder needs its own argument and often replaces inquiry with evaluation of the practitioner.

A substantive choice starts with what propositions we are prepared to affirm. If will is recognized, its meaning needs understanding. If necessity is recognized, its relationship to human action needs understanding. If qualities are rejected, knowledge needs explaining. If relationship is retained, it must be distinguished from projection of a familiar interlocutor.

We may find local similarities: an effort to overcome a familiar view's limitations, a search for a ground, a changed relationship to the world. Yet local similarity does not abolish disagreement over whether the highest exists as an addressee. “Spirituality” cannot settle this particular question.

An open outcome is also possible. Someone may understand two positions better without choosing either yet. This need not be a lack of seriousness. Sometimes better understanding increases the number of questions actually seen. It makes silence more substantial than a formerly categorical sentence.

At the article's beginning, one person said “You,” another “ground.” A precise conversation can now begin between them. It concerns qualities, knowledge, action, and relationship, rather than who has more feeling or reason. If they reach no single formula, the work is not lost. They see why their own word has meaning and what exactly remains in dispute.

What this means in practice

Record one phrase you usually use for the highest or ultimate: “God guides,” “everything has a ground,” “the world is one,” “I do not know.” Then clarify whether it expresses faith, a philosophical claim, an account of experience, or a metaphor. It need not be reduced to one kind if meanings actually combine. The transitions need noticing.

For a personal phrase, ask what the action means: choice, knowledge, care, response? For an impersonal phrase, what does ground mean: cause, condition, material, order, or ultimate explanation? Remove what you are not yet prepared to affirm. A shorter but more honest formulation sometimes remains.

In conversation with someone else, first ask them to explain their own word. Do not replace their “God” with your absolute or put a familiar personal interlocutor into their ground. You can

paraphrase the answer and check whether they recognize their position. This is ordinary practice in understanding, rather than a spiritual technique or a maturity test.

Finally, return the question to a specific consequence. What does your phrase change in today's action? Does it encourage attention to facts and people or close discussion? A hypothetical “such is the higher will” does not remove the need to explain your act to the other participants in a situation. Nor does an impersonal “everything is causal” make their experiences unnecessary.

The practical result may be modest: saying more accurately what you know, what you believe, and what you leave open. This is enough to prevent talk of the ultimate becoming a way to quietly appropriate another's speech or shed responsibility for one's own.

Key quotation

> *“Which take the better way of faith and life?”*
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> *Arjuna, Bhagavad Gītā, XII.1. Original wording from Edwin Arnold's poetic English translation: The Song Celestial, opening of chapter XII. The question concerns worship of the manifest and unmanifest; the fragment does not replace Krishna's subsequent answer.*

Connections between traditions

These are our analytical comparisons. They show questions and limits of closeness, rather than establish historical influence or universal consensus.

Positions	What is compared	Where difference remains
Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita ↔ Catholic communion with God	The personal meaning of relationship to the highest.	The concepts of Brahman, Christ, and the Trinity are not interchangeable.
Advaita in Wainwright's overview ↔ Spinoza, Ethics, I	Criticism of simply transferring human will to the ultimate.	Brahman and infinite substance belong to different systems; similarity does not make them identical.
Bhagavad Gītā, XII ↔ Catholic self-description	Address and devotion as content of the path.	Addressee, teaching, and ultimate goal differ; this is not the same technique.
Chāndogya, VI.8 ↔ Spinoza, definitions I	The question of a ground of what exists.	Selfhood and substance do not follow from a single argument.
Bhagavad Gītā, XII ↔ Diller's philosophical map	Distinguishing ways of speaking about the highest.	A religious answer in a dialogue and a research classification do different work.

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Primary sources

• Benedict Spinoza. Ethics, translation by R. H. M. Elwes. Part I: definitions, propositions XXIX–XXXIII. Primary philosophical text; the passages used, not a complete reading of all five parts.

• Bhagavad Gītā. The Song Celestial, translation by Edwin Arnold, 1885; hosted edition 1900. Chapter XII, opening and answer. A poetic version, not a philological Sanskrit edition.

• Chāndogya Upaniṣad, VI.8, translation by F. Max Müller, 1879. An example of the connection between selfhood and ground; the translator's notes are distinguished from the text.

• Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1023–1029. Official confessional self-description, not an independent test of metaphysics.

• William Wainwright. Concepts of God, SEP, Spring 2007 archive, §2. Academic comparative reference on Vedānta.

• Jeanine Diller. God and Other Ultimates, SEP, 2021, §§1.1–1.2. Methodological framework and distinction between a model and its object.

Tags

personal God, impersonal ground, being, theism, metaphysics, Brahman, ātman, Vedānta, Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Rāmānuja, Spinoza, Ethics, substance, necessity, will, qualities, knowledge, prayer, devotion, bhakti, Bhagavad Gītā, Arjuna, Krishna, Christianity, Trinity, communion, religious language, comparative philosophy, interpretation

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