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GOD, PERSONHOOD, AND INFINITY: AGAINST A HICKIAN ARGUMENT

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Abstract. Criticizing Richard Swinburne's conception of God, John Hick argues that God cannot be personal because infinity and personhood are mutually incompatible. An essential characteristic of a person, Hick claims, is having a boundary which distinguishes that person from other persons. But having a boundary is incompatible with being infinite. Infinite beings are unbounded. Hence God cannot be thought of as an infinite person. In this paper, I argue that the Hickian argument is flawed because boundedness is an equivocal notion: in one sense it is not essential to personhood, and in another sense — which is essential to personhood — it is compatible with being infinite.

I. INTRODUCTION

A widespread strategy for showing that God cannot be a person is to find a property Q that is traditionally thought to be necessary for God and then arguing that being a person is incompatible with having Q. The latter step usually involves following a tripartite recipe: (a) considering human beings as the paradigm examples of persons, (b) arguing that having Q is incompatible with having some property P that is essential to human beings inasmuch as they are persons, and finally (c) concluding that God cannot be a person. Put otherwise, if properties P and Q — which are essential respectively to human beings inasmuch as they are persons, and to God — are incompatible with each other, then God cannot be a person like us.[1] God cannot be a person in the same sense as we are. Many philosophers have appealed to this argumentative pattern to reject the religious views according to which God is a person. For example, it is argued by some philosophers that God cannot be a person because, on the one hand, embodiment and corporeality are essential to personhood and, on the other hand, God is traditionally thought to be unembodied and incorporeal.[2] In this example, P and Q in the general argumentative pattern are replaced respectively by embodiment/corporeality and unembodiment/incorporeality. This paper aims to shed some light on the relation between personhood and infinitude through investigating a more complicated instance of the arguments that follow the aforementioned general pattern.

II. A HICKIAN ARGUMENT

In one of his very last articles, John Hick criticized Richard Swinburne's conception of God from various perspectives.[3] One aspect of Hick's criticism is focused on the personal conception of God endorsed by

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1   In the least complicated cases the property P could simply be coextensive with the property not-Q. In such cases having the properties P and Q is tantamount to having the properties not-Q and Q at the same time, which is logically impossible. See the example that I shortly describe.

2   See, among others, Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (Hutchinson, 1966), 37–38, Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (Continuum, 2006), 61–62, and Herman Philipse, *God in the Age of Science? A Critique of Religious Reason* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 110.

3   See John Hick, "God and Christianity according to Swinburne", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 2, no. 1 (2010). Hick's main focus in this article is on Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1996).

Swinburne.[4] Hick contends that the idea of an infinite person is incoherent, and that consequently any description of God as an infinite person is indefensible. He says:

> [Swinburne believes that] God is in some sense a person. But in what sense? Surely, if this is to mean anything clear and distinct it must mean that God is literally a person. So Swinburne must mean that God is a person like ourselves, except for being infinite in power, knowledge, extension in time, and except also for being perfectly free and omnipresent and good […]. But does the idea of an infinite person make sense? [To] be a person is to be a particular person, distinct from other persons, each with our own boundaries. When two people are interacting with each other as persons, this is only because they have their own individual borders — otherwise they would not be two distinct persons. In other words, personhood is essentially finite, allowing for the existence of other persons. And so an infinite person is a self-contradiction. God cannot be both a person and infinite.[5]

Hick argues that, according to our understanding of the notion of personhood, which is itself formed through our acquaintance with human persons like ourselves, it is necessary for every person to have a boundary distinguishing her from other persons. But God is supposed to be infinite and unbounded. This means that God cannot have a boundary. Therefore, God cannot be a person. This line of thought can be formalized as follows:

I.   Necessarily, if x is a person, then x has a boundary.

II. Necessarily, if x is infinite, then x has no boundary.

Therefore:

III. Necessarily, if x is a person, then x is finite. Equivalently, nothing can be an infinite person.

But:

IV. Necessarily, God is infinite.

Therefore:

V.   God cannot be a person.

I believe that this formal argument is an accurate formalization of what Hick has put forward in the above passage. Nonetheless, since Hick himself has not presented his argument in this formal way, I do not attribute this formal version of the argument to him. So I simply count it as a *Hickian* argument against the personal conception of God. In this paper, I show that this Hickian argument, despite its strength at first glance, does not work.[6]

III. BOUNDEDNESS, DISTINCTNESS, AND INFINITY

To establish that the Hickian argument fails, I start by investigating the notion of *having a boundary* (or *having a border*) to which the Hickian argument appeals. How should we understand this notion? What does it mean to have a boundary? Unfortunately, Hick himself does not provide any explicit answer to these questions. Nonetheless, the following phrase might help us to achieve a clearer understanding of what he had in mind when he used the notion of having a boundary or border:

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4   Some philosophers, e.g., Adrian Thatcher, "The Personal God and a God who is a Person", *Religious Studies* 21, no. 1 (1985), have argued that that God is personal does not imply that God is a person. To be faithful to Swinburne's approach, I assume that there is no difference between God's being personal and His being a person.

5   Hick, "God and Christianity according to Swinburne", 27. The phrases added in the square brackets are mine. With almost the same wording, the argument reappears in John Hick, *Between Faith and Doubt: Dialogues on Religion and Reason* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 22.

6   See Daniel Howard-Snyder, "John Hick on whether God could be an Infinite Person", *Journal of Analytic Theology* 4, no. 1 (2016) for another line of criticism.

> [To] be a person is to be a particular person, *distinct* from other persons, each with our own *boundaries*. When two people are interacting with each other as persons, this is only because they have their own individual *borders* — otherwise they would not be two *distinct* persons.[7]

Hick contends that two persons cannot be distinct from each other unless they have their own individual borders. He seems therefore to consider a strong connection between the notions of *having a boundary* and *distinctness*, whose nature can be captured by the following principle:

(P) Necessarily, if *x* and *y* are distinct from each other, then each of them has a boundary which distinguishes it from the other.

This principle does not clarify what the property of having a boundary exactly is. It merely suggests a sufficient condition for having this property. If (P) is true, then for anything *x*, *x*'s having a boundary is guaranteed by *x*'s being distinct from other things. But if we endorse this understanding of the notion of a boundary, then the second premise of the Hickian argument would be false. Suppose that *O* and *E* are respectively the infinite sets of odd and even natural numbers. *O* and *E* have no elements in common and are obviously distinct from each other. As a consequence, if (P) is true, we must conclude that each of these two sets has a boundary which distinguishes it from the other set. Thus there are infinite things that have boundaries. This contradicts the second premise of the above argument, i.e., (II). If being distinct from the other things is a sufficient criterion for having a boundary, then many infinite things (e.g., various types of infinite sets) can uncontroversially be considered as having boundaries which distinguish them from other things. Otherwise put, if (P) is true, then (II) is false and the Hickian argument fails.

To save the Hickian argument from this objection, one might complain that the presupposition of mathematical Platonism is implausible. Mathematical objects in general and *O* and *E* in particular do not really exist. They cannot be counted among the existents of the actual world. Accordingly, these sets cannot provide counterexamples to (II). There is no infinite existent, the objector might continue, that is distinguishable from the other existents.

I do not think however that this maneuver can in the end save (P) from the proposed criticism. It is worth noting that the second premise of the Hickian argument expresses a necessary fact. So if we show that there is a possible world in which an infinite entity *x* with a boundary exists, then (II) will be rejected; regardless of whether or not *x* exists in the actual world. Moreover, if the mere fact of being distinct from other things implies having a boundary — as it is suggested by (P) — then (II) will easily be rejected by showing that there could be a possible world in which an infinite entity exists and is distinct from the other existents of that world.[8] This is so regardless of whether or not the aforementioned scenario is realized in the actual world. An immediate consequence of this observation is that the above counterexample of infinite sets of mathematical objects loses its power only if we show that mathematical Platonism is *necessarily* false. As is well known, some philosophers of mathematics believe that although mathematical objects do not exist in the actual world, there is no logical and conceptual impossibility in supposing that there is a possible world in which such objects exist. In other word, such philosophers defend the contingent — but not necessary — falsity of mathematical Platonism.[9] But the existence of infinite sets like *O* and *E*, even in a non-actual possible world, is incompatible with (II). Since they are distinct from each other, they have boundaries which make a distinction between them, or so (P) entails. Therefore, it is not the case that necessarily there is no infinite being which has a boundary. Ergo, (II) is false.

But what if we render mathematical Platonism as necessarily false? In that case, there is no possible world — either actual or non-actual — in which such infinite mathematical objects exist. So our mathematical counterexamples are blocked. Nonetheless, I think that we can still reject (II) by constructing other conceivable scenarios. Consider a possible world which includes, perhaps in addition to other things, a

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7   Hick, "God and Christianity according to Swinburne", 27. Emphases are mine.

8   It means that more than one entity must exist in that possible world.

9   Criticising Crispin Wright and Bob Hale, "Nominalism and the Contingency of Abstract Objects", *The Journal of Philosophy* 89, no. 3 (1992), Hartry Field, "The Conceptual Contingency of Mathematical Objects", *Mind* 102, no. 406 (1993) defends such a position.

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locomotive and an infinite land on which a train rail is infinitely extended. Although such a rail does not exist in the actual world, there seems to be no obstacle in the way of imagining a possible world in which the infinite rail and the locomotive actually exist as two *distinct* objects. Such a possible world seems to be perfectly conceivable. But if (P) is true, then that the infinite rail is distinct from the locomotive implies that the infinite rail has a boundary which distinguishes it from the locomotive. So it is not the case that necessarily no infinite object has a boundary. The mere possibility of the existence of such an infinite rail in a non-actual world refutes the necessity expressed by (II). This discussion assures us that if (P) successfully captures Hick's understanding of the notion of border, then the second premise of the Hickian argument cannot be true and the argument is unsound.

The most natural reaction to this line of criticism by a defender of the Hickian argument would be to attack (P). Hick employs the notion of having a boundary to highlight a particular characteristic of persons, i.e., their distinctness from other persons. Although he argues that every person has a boundary which distinguishes her from other persons, he might be reluctant to generalize this claim to non-personal entities, or so an advocate of the Hickian argument could argue. Indeed, Hick can defend the following moderate principle without being committed to (P):

(P') Necessarily, if x and y are *persons* distinct from each other, then each of them has a boundary which distinguishes them from the other.

Compared to (P), (P') suggests a more restricted sufficient criterion for having a boundary that is more difficult to satisfy. (P') does not say anything about non-personal beings. It does not follow from this principle that non-personal distinct things have boundaries which distinguish them from each other. In particular, we cannot conclude from (P') that infinite sets like O and E (even if they actually exist) have boundaries which distinguish them from each other. As a result, the aforementioned non-personal infinite beings cannot be considered as counterexamples to (II). Neither (P) nor (P') determine the exact nature of the property of having a boundary. They just state conditions in which objects are guaranteed to have that property. But if (P') correctly captures everything we know about the notion of having a boundary, then (II) will be undermined only when we show that there possibly exists an infinite *person* — not merely a non-personal infinite being — who is distinguishable from other persons. How could any such person exist?

Consider a pregnant woman and her unborn baby in the last day before delivery. Many scholars believe that such a baby should be counted as a person.[10] If so, the mother and her baby are two distinct persons one of whom is inside the other. Even if one believes that in the actual world fetuses are not persons because they lack some essential attributes of persons (e.g., the capacity to perform conscious actions, self-consciousness, rationality, autonomy, etc.), one can still accept that there are possible worlds in which fetuses satisfy the basic criteria of personhood and have psychologies completely independent from their mothers.[11] Even if human fetuses cannot be considered as persons, this is surely not because of the mere fact of their existence inside other persons. Therefore, I do not see any obstacle in the way of conceiving a fetus-like person who exists inside another person. In other words, it is in principle possible to have two distinct embodied persons one of whom is nested inside the body of the other. This is so even if we cannot consider the actual cases of pregnant women and their unborn babies as examples of such nested persons.

Now consider such a couple of nested and yet distinct embodied persons: a mother-like person M who has a fetus-like person F inside herself. F exists in a hollow womb-like area inside M's body.[12] So F is, in a sense, thoroughly surrounded by M's body. For the sake of simplicity, we can assume that F has a finite

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10   See, for example, John F. Crosby, "The Personhood of the Human Embryo", *The Journal of medicine and philosophy* 18, no. 4 (1993).

11   For classic defenses of the view that a human fetus cannot be counted as a person, see, among others, Mary A. Warren, "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion", *The Monist* 57, no. 1 (1973) and Michael Tooley, *Abortion and Infanticide* (Clarendon Press, 1983).

12   Moreover, we can assume that there is no umbilical-cord-like conduit between M and F and they have no physical connection to each other.

body.[13] Even if so, there seems to be nothing preventing M from having an infinite body. There seems to be nothing in the Hickian argument which can prevent us from imagining an infinite possible world w^* which satisfies the following conditions: (1) the only inhabitants of this possible world are M and F, (2) M has an infinite body and encompasses the whole world, (3) F is nested in M. In such a possible world—which seems to be consistently conceivable—M and F are two distinct persons one of whom—i.e., M—is infinite. But if (P') is true, then the fact that M is a person distinct from F implies that M has a boundary which distinguishes M from F. This boundary can be the physical boundary of the womb-like area inside's M's body in which F exists (Fig. 1).[14] Consequently, M is an infinite person who has a boundary which distinguishes her from the only other person existing in the same possible world. Thus, we have a counterexample for (II). The Hickian argument is flawed.
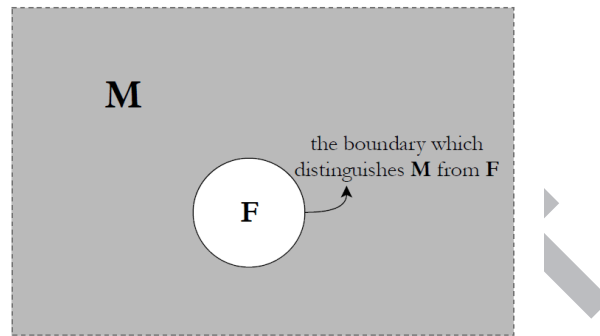

Fig. 1. The rectangle represents an infinite possible world w^*.
M is an infinite person who encompasses the whole world and has **F** inside herself.

One might object that, in the above scenario, M is not an infinite person because she does not occupy all of the space. She does not encompass a finite space occupied by F. Therefore, the objector might conclude, although M is very large or even almost infinite, she is not infinite *per se*. I do not think, however, that the objection is convincing. Being infinite does not automatically entail being all-encompassing. It is in principle possible to have infinities which do not encompass everything. Consider the set of natural numbers bigger than 1—i.e., the set $\{2, 3, 4, 5, \dots\}$—which is obviously infinite but does not encompass all numbers (not even all natural numbers). Similarly, that M does not encompass everything in w^* does not prevent her from being infinite. So the objection does not weaken my argument. Having said that, the general insight behind this objection can be employed to form an argument against the compatibility of personhood with omnipresence. One might argue that personhood implies having a boundary, and having a boundary is incompatible with being present everywhere. Therefore, God cannot be both a person and omnipresent. I believe that this new argument, which definitely deserves an independent assessment, eventually fails. But even if I am wrong, the success of the argument does not seem to have any immediate consequence for the compatibility of personhood and infinity, which is the central concern of this paper. So we can resume our discussion of the Hickian argument.

The above scenario shows that personhood and infinity are in principle compatible. Quite contrary to Hick's claim, being an infinite person is not an internally incoherent notion. As a result, even if there is any incoherency in Swinburne's conception of God, it cannot be just because of describing God as an infinite person. Some other reasons should be provided.

Up until now I have shown that if having a boundary for a person is nothing more than that person's being distinct from other things or persons, then there are counterexamples refuting the second premise

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13   One might even insist that the fact that the body of F is surrounded by the body of M *necessarily* entails that F's body is finite.

14   The external boundary of F's body and the boundary of the womb-like area inside's M's body can in principle be two separate things. In other words, it is possible that the womb-like area of M's body is not entirely occupied with F's body. However, for the sake of simplicity, in Fig. 1 these two boundaries are depicted as being identical to each other.

of the Hickian argument. I argued that if the condition of being bounded can be satisfied merely by being distinguishable from other things, then even an infinite person can be bounded. Being bounded in the aforementioned sense has no conflict with being infinite. The last possible maneuver for rescuing the argument might be claiming that even (P') is false. One might claim that, by contrast with what (P') proposes, being distinct from other persons is not a sufficient condition for having a boundary. In other word, that *x* and *y* are persons distinct from each other cannot guarantee that each of them has a boundary which distinguishes them from the other. Therefore, the notion of having a boundary is somehow richer than (and goes beyond) the notion of distinctness, or so the advocate of the Hickian argument could propound. If we endorse this proposal, then the possible existence of an infinite being who is distinct from other beings (e.g., the case of the infinite mother-like person who has a fetus-like person inside herself) does not suffice for that being's having a boundary. So, the objector might conclude, we still need evidence to show that (II) is false and so the Hickian argument is not yet rebutted. Hick himself does not follow this approach. As we saw, he considers distinctness of persons as a sufficient condition for their having boundaries. But we cannot assume that the Hickian argument is unsound unless we first make sure that this rescue plan is not promising.

The main problem with the aforementioned solution is that it casts doubts on the truth of the first premise of the Hickian argument, i.e., (I). It is plausible to think that persons should necessarily be distinguishable from other persons. But if the property of having a boundary is something more than simply being distinct from other things, should we still accept that having this property is a necessary characteristic of personhood? By investigating a real case of the actual world, I will argue that the answer to this question is negative. If having a boundary is understood as a property that cannot be derived solely from the property of being distinct from other things, then having a boundary cannot be essential to persons.

Laleh and Ladan Bijani were Iranian twin sisters conjoined at the brain. They were born in 1974 in Firouzabad, a small city in the Fars province of Iran. Sadly, Laleh and Ladan died in 2003 in Raffles Hospital in Singapore immediately after a complicated separation surgery. Although their brains were fused to each other, they had different personalities. One of them was introvert, the other extrovert: 'Ladan was talkative and wanted to be a lawyer while Laleh was quieter, more introspective, and wanted to be a journalist.'[15] They had different emotions and were of different psychological types: Ladan was 'more dominant'[16] and 'less fearful about the operation than her sister.'[17] They had studied law at the University of Tehran and graduated with different grades. All of these things show that they were two different persons, non-identical to each other. More precisely, they were two *distinct* persons. Thus, if (P') is true, then we should conclude that they have boundaries which makes them distinct from each other.[18] So there is no clash with (I). But if we reject (P') and believe that being distinct from other persons is not a sufficient condition for having a boundary — as suggested by the above objection — then a reasonable question will immediately be raised: is there anything which we can count as a *boundary* between Laleh and Ladan in a sense that is beyond the mere fact that they are distinct persons? Even their physical bodies were fused to each other. There was no clear border between their brains; and that was why the separation surgery was so complicated and unsuccessful in the end. This means that there was no physical boundary between the twins.[19] Indeed, if the existence of such a boundary means something more than the mere fact that they

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15   Jeremy Laurance, "Tears for Ladan and Laleh as debate rages over surgery", *Independent*, 2003 July 9.

16   Laurance, "Tears for Ladan and Laleh".

17   Ibid..

18   Of course a boundary between Laleh and Ladan, as we will shortly see, cannot be a physical boundary.

19   Even if the surgery were successful and they became physically separated, this still would not show that from the outset — i.e., before the separation surgery — they had a clear non-vague physical boundary between their bodies. In the cases of such twins, there are parts that are shared between the two brains and there are also other parts that belong exclusively to only one of them. Even if the two brains share only one cell, the physical boundary between the two brains would be vague. If the shared parts play ineliminable vital roles in the survival of both twins, then the separation surgery would have no hope of success. The surgery has a high risk for at least one of the twins. Otherwise — i.e., if deficiencies in the functions of the shared parts can be compensated by the functions of non-shared parts — then the twins can in principle be separated. A successful separation can create a physical boundary between the two persons, a boundary which would have not existed without the surgery.

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are distinct persons, then there seems to be no boundary — either physical or non-physical — between them. This indicates that if the mere fact of a person's being distinct from other persons does not imply that person's having a boundary which distinguishes her from the other persons, then having a boundary is not an essential characteristic of personhood. Accordingly, (I) is false and the Hickian arguments fails.

One might accept that the distinctness of persons is not because of the physical boundaries which separate their bodies from each other, but still insist that a person cannot be distinct from other persons unless there is a non-physical boundary which distinguishes her immaterial soul from the other persons' souls. Based on this view, it might be argued that the twins are distinct persons because they have distinct immaterial souls which are separated from each other by their non-physical boundaries. Although there is no physical boundary between the bodies of the twins, their immaterial souls have non-physical boundaries which make these twins two distinct persons. If so, the case of such twins cannot be taken as a counterexample to the first premise of the Hickian argument. (1) can still be true. I do not think, however, that this move can save the Hickian argument. I am sympathetic to the view that the distinctness of persons is due to the distinctness of their immaterial souls. But I do not see how an immaterial soul's having a non-physical boundary can be understood as something more than her simply being distinct from the other souls (and, accordingly, from the other persons). A soul's having a non-physical boundary seems to entail nothing stronger than her being distinct from other souls. If so, (P') remains uncontroversial and the Hickian argument fails because of the objections I proposed against (2). As we saw, the truth of (2) cannot be preserved without giving (P') up.

One might also complain that although Laleh and Ladan are two persons, they are not completely distinct from (i.e., not completely non-identical to) each other. Since their brains are fused to each other, they do not satisfy the distinctness condition(s), or so the objector might argue. I do not think, however, that this objection is tenable. I am not sure if talking about two different persons that are not distinct from each other can make any sense at all. If *x* and *y* are not *distinct* persons, they cannot be *two* different persons. So if someone insists that the twins conjoined at the brain are not really distinct persons, she must be content to accept that in such cases we are actually dealing with only one person, rather than two different persons. But considering all the differences between Laleh and Ladan to which I referred (e.g., their different personalities, emotions, decisions, academic results, etc.), it seems to be highly counterintuitive to consider them as just one and the same person.[20]

In sum, if we endorse (P') and accept that the property of having a boundary is derived from the property of being distinct from other persons, then the second premise of the Hickian argument is false. The possible existence of the infinite mother-like person *M* who has the fetus-like person *F* inside herself shows that there is no necessary incompatibility between being infinite and having a boundary. On the other hand, if we deny (P') and consider the property of having a boundary as something beyond the property of distinctness, then the first premise of the argument is false. This is because there seems to be no boundary between the twins conjoined at the brain, if the condition of having a boundary cannot be satisfied simply by their being distinct persons. So regardless of whether or not the property of being bounded can be derived from the property of distinctness, the Hickian argument is unsound. The argument fails to show that the conception of God as an infinite person is internally incoherent.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The second premise of the Hickian argument seems plausible only if we interpret infinity as entailing unboundedness (i.e., having no boundary). I showed however that there can be infinite existents that are distinct from other things. This means that the second premise is true only if unboundedness is compatible with distinctness. But if these two notions are compatible with each other, then it seems possible to have persons who are in a sense unbounded yet still distinguishable from other persons. If so, boundedness is not essential

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20   The case of the twins conjoined at the brain shows that even if distinctness of bodies is a sufficient condition for distinctness of persons, it is by no means a necessary condition.

to personhood and the first premise of the Hickian argument is not true. The moral is that the two premises of the Hickian argument suffer from mutual inconsistency. It seems that an essential characteristic of personhood is being distinct from other persons, rather than having a boundary. Hick takes the latter notion as being entailed by the former notion. But he is unaware that if we understand the property of having a boundary in this sense, there is no contradiction between being simultaneously infinite and bounded. This is because there is no contradiction between being simultaneously infinite and distinct from other things.

Before closing, I should emphasize that I have not defended any specific conception of God. The only thing I hope to have established is that the Hickian argument is unable to show that there is an incompatibility between infinity and personhood. If there is indeed such an inconsistency, it must be justified by other arguments.[21] Giving up the personal conception of God simply on the grounds of the Hickian argument does not seem to be plausible.[22]

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21 For example, if the infinity of God is construed as His having no limitation in the sphere of His causal influences and, moreover, the personhood is taken to necessarily require such a limitation, then there seems to be an incompatibility between God's infinity and His personhood. A well-developed version of this argument is presented by Simon Hewitt, "God is not a person (an argument via pantheism)", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 85, no. 3 (2019). This argument might be resistant to mathematically modeled counterexamples of the sort I discussed in this paper. However, the higher degree of the *prima facie* plausibility of the Hickian argument gives it a priority in being criticised by the proponents of the personal conception of God.

22 I presented earlier versions of this paper at the summer school on *The Nature of God: Personal and A-personal Concepts of the Divine* in Innsbruck (July 2018) and at the workshop on *Abrahamic Reflections on Philosophy, Science, and Religion* in Istanbul (March 2019). I am thankful to my audiences in these occasions and to the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their helpful comments.

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