PART TWO

RELIGION, SOCIETY, CULTURE
ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND THE MEDIEVAL PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

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Recent study of anthropocentrism has often focused on the question of whether certain practices and attitudes embody an unethical favouritism in preference of humanity over other animals. The interest in this topic is largely due to the moral value contemporary utilitarianism places upon increasing pleasure and avoiding pain for all creatures capable of those experiences. While precedent for this interest goes at least as far back as John Stuart Mill’s *Utilitarianism*, the recent interest in addressing this type of anthropocentrism was ignited by Peter Singer’s work. However, the intense contemporary focus upon this form of anthropocentrism makes it easy to overlook the fact that anthropocentrism is not a new concept within philosophy.

There is a much older concern about anthropocentrism that has garnered the attention of philosophers and theologians since at least the medieval era. The desire to avoid anthropocentrism permeated medieval thought as theistic philosophers addressed the puzzle and potential dangers of religious language. One significant concern was that if words describing God’s attributes essentially had the same meanings as words describing human attributes then there was a risk of committing anthropocentrism by comparing an infinite and perfect God to finite and imperfect humans.

Centuries before contemporary scientists and psychologists asked whether the concept of God is merely an abstraction of an idealised human, the medieval theists were quite aware of that very danger and sought to avoid it. Of course, the medieval thinkers’ fear was not that

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