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Introduction

The existence and nature of God are central concerns of Christian theology. While the systematic theologian may not engage in natural theology but may simply assume on the basis of scriptural teaching that the God of the Bible exists, he cannot be indifferent to the question of the nature or attributes of the biblical God, since God's nature is determinative for the entire Christian theological system. Unfortunately, in the words of Lutheran theologian Robert Preus, "The doctrine of God is the most difficult *locus* in Christian dogmatics."¹ Does God exist necessarily or contingently? Is he absolutely simple or complex? Is he timeless or omnitemporal? Does he transcend space or fill space? Does his almighty power imply the ability to do the logically impossible or are there limits to his power? Systematic theologians have often assumed uncritically traditional answers to these sorts of questions, answers that have been sharply challenged in modern times. During the late twentieth century the concept of God became fertile ground for anti-theistic philosophical arguments. The difficulty with theism, it was often said, is not merely that there are no

¹ Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 2:53.

good arguments for the existence of God, but, more fundamentally, that the concept of God is incoherent.²

It is here that the contribution of contemporary Christian philosophers to systematic theology has been most pronounced and helpful. The anti-theistic critique evoked a prodigious literature devoted to the philosophical analysis of the concept of God.³ As a result, one of the principal concerns of contemporary philosophy of religion has been the coherence of theism.

Two controls have tended to guide this inquiry into the divine nature: Scripture and so-called perfect being theology. For thinkers in the Judeo-Christian tradition, God's self-revelation in Scripture is obviously paramount in understanding what God is like. Still, while Scripture is our supreme authority in formulating a doctrine of God, so that doctrines contrary to biblical teaching are theologically unacceptable, contemporary thinkers have come to appreciate that the doctrine of God is underdetermined by the biblical data. The biblical authors were not philosophical theologians but in many cases storytellers whose accounts of man's relationship with God bear all the marks of the storyteller's art, being told from a human perspective without reflection upon philosophical considerations. The biblical theologian will therefore search in vain for clear answers to many philosophical questions concerning the divine attributes. Answers taken for granted by traditional dogmatists need to be brought anew before the bar of Scripture and their biblical support and consonance re-examined.

In addition, St. Anselm's conception of God as a being than which a greater cannot be conceived (*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*)⁴ or

² Thus, an obviously unsympathetic critic like Kai Nielsen characterizes fellow atheists "who believe 'There is a God' is simply false" as "Neanderthal atheists," whereas atheists like himself "who reject the very concept of God as unintelligible" are "non-Neanderthal atheists" (Kai Nielsen, "A Sceptic's Reply," in *Faith and the Philosophers*, ed. John Hick [London: Macmillan, 1964], 232).

³ See William J. Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion: An Annotated Bibliography of Twentieth-Century Writings in English* (New York: Garland, 1978). Reference works in philosophy of religion thus almost always include a sizable section on the various attributes of God, for example, Chad Meister and Paul Copan, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, Routledge Philosophy Companions (London: Routledge, 2007), pt. 4; Paul Copan and Chad Meister, eds., *Philosophy of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Issues* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pt. 3; Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pt. 2; Charles Taliaferro, Paul Draper, and Philip L. Quinn, eds., *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed., Blackwell Companions to Philosophy 8 (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pt. 4; Charles Taliaferro and Chad Meister, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pt. 1; Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Religion*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021). The same is true of anthologies in philosophy of religion.

⁴ In his *Proslogion* 2 Anselm thus addresses God: "And, indeed, we believe that thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived." Cf. *Proslogion* 3: "this being thou art, O Lord, our God." Hoffman and Rosenkrantz explain, "Another way of putting the matter replaces the partly psychological term 'can be conceived' with the wholly modal term 'is possible,' resulting in a definition which states that God is a being than which nothing greater is possible. Such a revision is advantageous in that the resulting definition is less psychological, and therefore, more objective" (Joshua Hoffman and Gary S. Rosenkrantz, "Divine Attributes" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119009924.eopr0106>). Anselm thought that "if a mind could conceive of a being better than thee, the creature would rise above the Creator; and this is most absurd" (*Proslogion* III). This does not seem to be a very good reason for understanding God to be such a being, since one can conceive of things greater than oneself, whether existent or non-existent. It would be better to stipulate that by "God" one means the being than which a greater cannot be conceived, so that it is impossible to conceive of something greater than God. Intuitively, this is what believers mean by "God."

most perfect being (*ens perfectissimum*) has guided philosophical speculation on the raw data of Scripture, so that God's biblical attributes are to be conceived in ways that would serve to exalt God's greatness.⁵ The biblical concept of God's being almighty, for example, is thus to be construed as maximally as possible. John Hick aptly credits Anselm for bringing the Christian doctrine of God to full flower:

Perhaps the most valuable feature of Anselm's argument is its formulation of the Christian concept of God. Augustine (*De Libero Arbitrio* II, 6, 14) had used the definition of God as one 'than whom there is nothing superior.' . . . Anselm, however, does not define God as the most perfect being that there is but as a being than whom no more perfect is even conceivable. This represents the final development of the monotheistic conception. God is the most adequate conceivable object of worship; there is no possibility of another reality beyond him to which he is inferior or subordinate and which would thus be an even more worthy recipient of man's devotion. Thus metaphysical ultimacy and moral ultimacy coincide; one cannot ask of the most perfect conceivable being. . . whether men ought to worship him. Here the religious exigencies that move from polytheism through henotheism to ethical monotheism reach their logical terminus. And the credit belongs to Anselm for having first formulated this central core of the ultimate concept of deity.⁶

Unfortunately, the conception of God as a perfect being is not without its ambiguity. Nagasawa takes God to be "the greatest metaphysically possible being," a view he calls the perfect being thesis.⁷ Nagasawa holds that the perfect being thesis need not be taken to entail that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, since those properties are a matter of philosophical dispute, but simply that God has "the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power, and benevolence."⁸ He thinks that there are neither biblical grounds nor compelling philosophical arguments for the entailment of the omni-attributes "in a philosophically strict sense." That seems to me a dubious stratagem for perfect being theology, since the

⁵ Of Anselm's concept, Brian Leftow comments, "Talk of God as a perfect being is certainly appropriate theologically, and perfect being theology has been the main tool to give content to the concept of God philosophically almost as long as there has been philosophical theology" (Brian Leftow, "The Ontological Argument," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William J. Wainwright [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], 110). Yujin Nagasawa observes that "Perfect being theism is widely accepted among Judeo-Christian-Islamic theists today. It is no exaggeration to say that nearly all the central debates over the existence and nature of God in the philosophy of religion rely on this form of theism" (Yujin Nagasawa, *Maximal God: A New Defence of Perfect Being Theism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017], 2; cf. 7).

⁶ John Hick, "Ontological Argument for the Existence of God," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. Donald M. Borchert (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006), 7:15–20. Nagasawa traces the Anselmian concept of God all the way back to Plato (*Maximal God*, 15–24).

⁷ Nagasawa, 9.

⁸ Nagasawa, 92.

maximal, consistent set of attributes could describe a limited and finite God. Nagasawa's construal seems to rule out the incoherence of theism by definition.

By contrast, Michael Almeida takes as "a defining feature of perfect being theology" the inference from the proposition that God is a perfect being to the conclusion that God has every property that it is better to exemplify than not.⁹ Unfortunately, it will not always be clear which properties it is absolutely better to have than to lack. My own understanding and utilization of perfect being theology is more informative, being what Almeida calls a posteriori Anselmianism, which extrapolates divine attributes from Scripture as greatly as possible.¹⁰

Since the concept of God is underdetermined by the biblical data and since what constitutes a "great-making" property is to some degree debatable, philosophers working within the Judeo-Christian tradition enjoy considerable latitude in formulating a philosophically coherent and biblically faithful doctrine of God. Philosophical theists have thus found that anti-theistic critiques of certain conceptions of God can actually be quite helpful in framing a more adequate conception. Thus, far from undermining theism, the anti-theistic critiques have served mainly to reveal how rich and interesting the concept of God is, thereby refining and strengthening theistic belief.

In what follows we shall explore some of the most important attributes traditionally ascribed to God.

⁹ Michael J. Almeida, "Perfect Being Theology," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119009924.eopr0295>.

¹⁰ Observing that it is hard to deduce divine attributes from the claim that God is a perfect being, Michael Rea suggests, "Perhaps instead. . . we should think that the claim that God is perfect merely imposes constraints on our theorizing about the divine attributes; or perhaps we should think. . . that our grasp of perfection simply helps us to flesh out our understanding of divine attributes that we arrive at via special revelation or some other route" (Michael C. Rea "Introduction," in *Essays in Analytic Theology*, Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology, vol. 1, by Michael C. Rea [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021], 11).