

Introduction to Neo-classical Theism

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Classical and Neo-classical Theism: What's So *Neo*?

It is obvious from the title that neo-classical models of the divine nature are described as such in reference to their departure from classical theism. But, as often happens with similar terms such as neo-conservative or neo-orthodox, it's not always completely obvious exactly what is supposed to be *new* about such views, as the Greek prefix suggests. I begin thus, as this volume as a whole does, with classical theism. I'll show how a number of models which get labeled neo-classical are attempts to be continuous, in at least one sense, with classical theism while introducing new ways of conceiving the divine nature which warrant calling them *neo*-classical models.

The exemplar of classical theism in the tradition of perfect being theology is Anselm's famous (or perhaps infamous) 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived.' In describing classical theism in this way, I mean for this description to include what is usually called 'perfect being theology'. However, for reasons that will become apparent below, there are reasons to prefer using the title 'classical theism' over 'perfect being theology' for our present purposes. For Anselm, as for the vast majority of the medievals, God is by definition the most perfect being. More specifically, he understands God to be a being which is 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' and, as such, must have certain perfections. We may also refer to these perfections as great-making attributes or properties. The exact list of these attributes varies somewhat, but it historically has included unity, self-sufficiency, immutability, atemporality, immateriality, perfect power, perfect knowledge, perfect goodness, and necessary existence. While there is debate about the content of the great-making attributes, as well as the proper understanding of the

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attributes themselves, in describing God as 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived', one is predicating of God the entirety of the great-making attributes. Whatever the exact list ultimately comes to. Furthermore, since God is not just greater but 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived'. He not only has these attributes, but has them to the highest possible degree.¹ That is why, on such views, God is not just potent but omnipotent.

Furthermore, according to classical models, God has these attributes in a very special way—He has them necessarily. The reason for this is as follows. It is better to have a great-making attribute necessarily than simply to have that attribute. So, if a being were perfect in knowledge but only accidentally or contingently so, then that being could have been more perfect. But, according to classical theism, such a being wouldn't be God; God thus must necessarily have perfect knowledge. And so on with the other attributes. If these considerations are what characterize classical models of God most generally, then it may seem that what differentiates a neo-classical view is that it departs from perfect being theology so described. That is, it may seem as if neo-classical models of God are models which deny that God is a perfect being in some way or other. But to say this would be to misconstrue a number of views that fall under the neo-classical banner.

I shall give two reasons for resisting this characterization of neo-classical views. First, as Katherin Rogers notes,

To my knowledge it is the case that in all the debates between various conceptions of the nature of God, none of the participants argues for a God whom they judge to be *less* than the best. For example, the process theologians who argue against the traditional view that God is eternal and immutable hold that it is neither possible nor desirable that God should be so transcendent. God is best in virtue of being engaged with the created universe and capable of becoming better than He is. *That* God is the best seems taken for granted. *What that means is the subject of debate.*²

A few pages later, Rogers continues: "If it is the case ... that the vast majority of philosophers who attempt to describe God take their own version of the divinity, whatever it may be, to be the best possible, then it could be argued that in a sense, almost any philosopher who is talking about God is doing perfect being theology."³ And though I have not conducted an exhaustive survey of philosophers of religion, Rogers' point here seems correct.

So, rather than claiming that God is less than a perfect being, most scholars who offer neo-classical models of God want to affirm that God is in fact a perfect being. Where they differ from classical theists, however, is primarily in terms of *how* we

¹ This is, in one sense, loose speak; for as Thomas Williams indicates in his introduction to the previous section, classical theism has also traditionally embraced divine simplicity, according to which "God does not have a variety of features or attributes [including properties] that are distinct from God's nature and from each other" (page ??, this volume). For ease of explication, however, I ignore this complication. For similar reasons, it is technically incorrect to speak of divine attributes, insofar as simplicity entails, for example, that God's perfect power is identical with His perfect goodness. I ignore this complication as well.

² Rogers (2000), 2 (concluding italics added).

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

should understand the nature of a perfect being. Neo-classical models of God claim that it is impossible for God to possess all of the great-making attributes to the highest degree in the way held by classical models. (And if this is so, it follows that it is impossible for God necessarily to possess all of the great-making attributes to the highest degree in this way.) Proponents of neo-classical models argue for this claim in a number of ways. One strategy is to argue that the great-making attributes are mutually inconsistent, so that a being who has one (or a set) of the great-making attributes is precluded from having another, or at least precluding from having the other to the highest degree.⁴ So, for example, one might argue that possessing perfect goodness precludes one from being able to do certain sorts of actions, namely evil actions, thereby contradicting perfect power. If this is so, then it is impossible for God to have all of the great-making attributes to the highest degree. Instead, such theorists claim, God has all of the great-making attributes to the degree that is maximally mutually consistent. (I shall return to an recent example of such a view shortly.) For this reason, it is better to speak of classical and neo-classical models of God as differing according to *how* they understand the divine nature vis-à-vis perfections, rather than to say that only classical models are versions of perfect being theology.

There is second set of related considerations which also favor rejecting the implicit claim that neo-classical models of God are those according to which God is less than perfect. Consider whether the term 'God' is taken as a proper name or as a definite description. The latter approach tends to be more common in philosophical theology, especially among classical theists. If, following Anselm again as our exemplar of a classical model, one thinks that what it means to have the title 'God' properly ascribed to a being is just for that being to satisfy the description 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived', then on this approach any being which could be thought to be greater would fail, by definition, to be God. Thus, if 'God' is understood as a definite description in the way that Anselm seems to understand it, neo-classical models of the divine nature simply fail to be *about* God. But the debate between a classical theist and a neo-classical theist are arguably not to be understood as an argument about which of two purported beings exists, but rather about how to properly understand the nature of one and the same being—a point which many classical theists, such as Rogers, are willing to admit:

If one party to the discussion of a particular attribute holds that the views of the other party are demeaning to God, then the one who takes 'God' to be a description may say that what the opposition has called 'God' is not really God at all, whereas the one who takes 'God' to be a proper name may say that the opposition has offered a picture of God which is entirely at odds with the reality.⁵

Thus, following William Alston, it would perhaps be better for us to take 'God' to be a proper name rather than a definite description. He thinks that there at least two practical advantages of doing so:

First, the primacy of direct reference provides a reassurance that God can be successfully referred to by the weak and foolish as well as by the wise and proud. ... Second, the prospects

⁴ Examples of such arguments and references to others, see Nagasawa (2008), 581f. Rogers (2000), 5.

Though common, such a portrait is historically false. While it is true that 'Arianism' was that which 'Catholicism' rejected or left behind,¹⁰ Arius neither set out to undermine orthodox Christian theology nor (at least early in his career) was he at odds with official orthodoxy. Regarding the first point, Arius and his followers considered themselves to be orthodox. Indeed, it was his desire to give an acceptable account of true Christian belief which led Arius to deny that the Son was eternal with the Father. Regarding the second point, which is the more important for our present purposes, until the first council of Nicaea, Arius' understanding of the divine nature had not yet been found wanting in an authoritative and binding way. As Williams' discussion clearly shows, it is important to keep in mind that until the council both 'Arian' and 'Catholic' were coeval as Christians engaged in the definition of the very idea of normative faith.¹¹ It is not the case that the boundaries of what counted as orthodox theology were firmly and clearly drawn in advance of the council; the council instead drew boundaries that were not previously there. Again, to quote Williams: "Before Constantine, the Church was simply not in a position to make universally binding and enforceable decisions. From Nicaea onwards the Church decided, and communicated its decisions, though the official network of the empire; it had become visible to *itself*, as well as to the world, in a new way."¹² On one level, the council of Nicaea is the Christian Church deciding what was to count in the future as orthodox. But it would be inappropriate to hold these prior to the council to a standard that came into existence only as a result of the council.¹³ And it should be kept in mind that all the major parties involved in the Christological debates leading up to Nicaea were attempting to offer orthodox theologies; that is, both sides had the same goal in mind. The question was *how* to give such an account.

Vague Boundaries

Likewise, proponents of both classical and neo-classical theisms are trying to give an account of the divine nature that preserve the central elements of perfect being theology. Some forms of what otherwise can be considered neo-classical theism have become well enough established, at least in their broad contours, that they have

¹⁰ Williams (2001), 1.

¹¹ Ibid., 22.

¹² Ibid., 24. As Lewis Ayres and Andrew Radde-Gallwitz similarly write, "the emergence of orthodoxy after the second century involved not the fighting off of 'heresies' that threatened the apostolic faith, but in many significant cases the overturning and labeling as heresy of previously accepted beliefs," Ayres and Radde-Gallwitz (2008), 865.

¹³ Williams (2001), 90. See also 234ff.

The general point is reinforced even more by remembering fourth-century Arian emperor Valens. He decreed that Arian theology was orthodox and the Nicenean theology was heretical. Arian was declared heterodox at the First Council of Constantinople in 381.

for taking radically different religious traditions to all be referring to and worshipping the same God are greatly increased.⁶

Unlike Alston, it's not clear to me that having all religious traditions use 'God' to refer to the same being really is a benefit. But insofar as the primary debate between proponents of classical and neo-classical models of God is about the nature of God, it is a benefit if the term used for the object whose nature is contested is available to both parties in the debate. But if 'God' is taken to be a proper name rather than a definite description, thereby preserving the debate about how the divine nature should be understood, then it doesn't immediately follow that neo-classical views are those which deny that God's nature is perfect. They simply call for a different understanding of what divine perfection amounts to.

A Parallel

At this point it may be helpful to consider a different theological disagreement which is parallel in some important ways.⁷ The parallel I have in mind is the distinction between orthodox and heterodox views in theology. Please note that I am not equating classical theism with orthodoxy and neo-classical theism with heterodoxy; rather, I'm simply suggesting that an understanding of the developmental issues with respect to the orthodox/heterodoxy distinction can help us understand how neo-classical forms of theism develop from classical forms. In this discussion, I'll focus specifically on Christian theology, and for two reasons. First, it is the theological tradition with which I am the most familiar. Second, the overwhelming majority of contemporary philosophy of religion has been done either from within or engaging Christian theology. While I suspect that other theological traditions have similar developmental issues, these two facts give me good reason for limiting my discussion to Christian theology. More specifically, I'll focus on one particular controversy within the history of Christian theology, namely the Arian controversy of the fourth century.⁸

As Rowan Williams notes in his excellent book on the controversy, "Arianism" has often been regarded as the archetypal Christian deviation, something aimed at the very heart of the Christian confession.... Arius himself came more and more to be regarded as a kind of Antichrist among heretics, a man whose superficial austerity and spirituality cloaked a diabolical malice, a deliberate enmity to revealed

⁶ Alston (1989), 115.

⁷ Of course, the two cases are not parallel in all ways.

⁸ There are numerous other examples. To mention just one other, the theologians Bernard of Clairvaux, Alexander of Hales, and Bonaventure (among others) were not heterodox despite rejecting the immaculate conception of Mary for the simple reason that the immaculate conception was not dogmatized until 8 December, 1854 by Pope Pius IX. For an insightful discussion of these issues, see Adams (2010).

come to be seen as models in their own right. Examples here include process and open models, which are treated separately elsewhere in this volume. Bringing the previous discussions together, I propose that we understand neo-classical models of God to be that family of models which (a) deny that it is possible for God to possess all of the great-making attributes, as traditionally understood, to the highest degree, but are instead in nearby possible space, and (b) aren't sufficiently well-defined at present to be considered standalone models in their own right.¹⁴ Given condition (b), forms of process theism and open theism are sufficiently well-defined that they are not taken to be neo-classical in the sense at issue here. Condition (a) is, of course, vague insofar as it doesn't specify how much a model needs to depart from the Anselmian exemplar of classical theism. But this too seems right, as the degree to which a view is neo-classical as opposed to classical will likely be one of degree, rather than one of kind; thus for some views it will be vague as to whether they are classical or neo-classical. So the term 'neo-classical models', as with the related term 'classical models', will refer to a family resemblance class, rather than a class with completely sharp and defined boundaries.

An excellent exemplar of neo-classical theism, so understood, can be found in a recent paper by Yujin Nagasawa.¹⁵ In his "A New Defense of Anselmian Theism," Nagasawa aims to defend a new view of God which he says is broadly Anselmian in orientation—that is, a species of perfect being theology. Commenting on the title he notes (rightly in my view): "I do not, however, imply by the use of the term that Anselmian theism is entirely compatible with everything that Anselm himself says. It might well be the case that, ultimately, the version of theism that I defend is not something that Anselm would endorse."¹⁶ At the heart of his article is the denial of one way of understanding the divine nature—a way that is a typical example of a classical model—and its replacement with a different, neo-classical modal. The understanding of the divine nature that Nagasawa says the perfect being theist need not accept is exemplified by what he calls the 'OmniGod Thesis', according to which God is necessarily omnipotent—that is, necessarily omnipotent, necessarily omniscient, and necessarily omnibenevolent.¹⁷ In its place, he advocates for the 'MaximalGod Thesis', according to which "God is the being that has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power and benevolence."¹⁸ Nagasawa argues that

¹⁴ The term 'neo-classical theism' is often affiliated with the work of Charles Hartshorne, who once said that "Classical theism is for me false a priori, a tragic error" (1982, 17). My use of the term 'neo-classical' differs from Hartshorne's for reasons spelled out in the above paragraph.

¹⁵ Another similar discussion can be found in Oppy (2011). The reader should note, however, that Oppy criticizes Nagasawa's neo-classical model in the final section of his paper.

¹⁶ Nagasawa (2008), 578f.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 579. He continues: "the thesis does not imply that these are God's only attributes or even that they are all of his main attributes. Indeed, most proponents of the omniGod thesis think that God has many other important attributes, such as independence, timelessness, incorporeality, immutability, omnipresence, and so on. In this paper I set aside these attributes for the sake of simplicity" (*ibid.*).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 586.

"Although the MaximalGod thesis is consistent with the OmniGod thesis, it does not imply that God is unquestionably an omnipresent being."¹⁹ His argument that the truth of the MaximalGod Thesis does not entail the truth of the OmniGod Thesis need not concern us here. What is important for present purposes is how the MaximalGod Thesis that Nagasawa endorses illustrates a neo-classical model of the divine nature. For God, on this view, is still a perfect being despite not being necessarily omnipresent; he is perfect because he necessarily has the maximally consistent set of knowledge, power, and benevolence.

Four Neo-classical Arguments

The four papers in this section all deal with motivating and defending neo-classical models of the divine nature, as defined above. The section opens with John Allan Knight's "Descriptivist Reference and the Return of Classical Theism." Knight begins by discussing the recent history of philosophical theology, and the parting of ways between analytic philosophers and theologians which happened during the 1950s and 1960s. While the turning away of theologians from analytic philosophy is often described as a result of the dominance of the Logical Positivists—more specifically the falsification criterion of meaning and their views on the meaningfulness of religious language—Knight argues that the real culprit was the underlying descriptivist view of reference which persisted even after the demise of Positivism. After laying out the broad contours of descriptivist views of reference, Knight shows how such a view underlies Anthony Flew's influential account of religious language. Whereas many philosophers of religion sought to meet Flew's objections head on and soon came to reject the Positivist assumptions upon which it rests, many theologians turned instead to liberation theology which provided a different way of thinking about religious language. While there was merit to this change, it also means that many theologians are unfamiliar with the radical change that philosophy of religion—and analytic metaphysics more generally—underwent since the 1970s. Knight shows how Saul Kripke's contributions to modal logic and possible world semantics played a key role in this change, as did his rejection of descriptivist theories of language. Knight ends by describing how one influential contemporary philosopher of religion, William Alston, used Kripke's rejection of descriptivism to advance a revisionary interpretation of traditional Christian theological claims. While Knight doesn't claim that Alston offers a neo-classical model, he does show how the changes in the ethos of analytic philosophy of religion opened up the space in which neo-classical models have come to flourish.

Jaas J. Kraay's "Divine Unsurpassability" more directly argues for the need for a neo-classical model of God. Rather than being lead in a neo-classical direction by *a posteriori* considerations of the problem of evil (as is Nagasawa), Kraay is

motivated primarily by an *a priori* argument against classical models of God. According to an influential argument defended by a number of philosophers, the most notably by William Rowe,²⁰ a classical model of God's nature cannot be correct. This argument begins with the rejection that there is a best possible world (or equally best set of worlds). According to the 'No Best World' assumption:

For every world *w* that is within God's power to actualize, there is a better world... *x*, that God has the power to actualize instead.

Rowe and others use the 'No Best World' assumption to argue against the existence of God as follows:

- (P1) If it is possible for the product of a world-actualizing action performed by some being to have been better, then, *ceteris paribus*, it is possible for that being's action to have been better.
 (P2) If it is possible for the world-actualizing action performed by some being to have been better, then, *ceteris paribus*, it is possible for that being to have been better.
 (C) Therefore, if the 'No Best World' assumption is true, then there does not exist a being 'than which nothing greater can be conceived'.²¹

Kraay mentions a number of ways in which the proponent of a classical model of God could respond to this argument. First, one could reject the 'No Best World' assumption; but if that move is to preserve a classical model of God, one is committed to the counterintuitive Leibnizian claim that the actual world is the best possible world. A second line of response is to argue that the conclusion that God exists understood along is classical model, is more reasonable than either (P1) or (P2). The difficulties here, however, are well known. The most natural response is then either to argue against either (P1) or (P2). Kraay outlines a number of such arguments and finds none of them convincing. But, even if the 'No Best World' argument succeeds, it doesn't disprove theism, but only theism understood along a classical model. The argument can be seen as showing the need for a neo-classical conception of God.

The first two articles in this section thus provide motivation for neo-classical models of God, versions of which are advanced in the remaining articles in this section. Yujin Nagasawa's "The MaximalGod and the Problem of Evil" extends his earlier neo-classical approach, described above. After briefly outlining his reasons for preferring the MaximalGod Thesis to the OmniGod Thesis, he shows how this model can deflect the problem of evil. (Nagasawa focuses here only on the logical problem of evil, but his discussion also provides a general understanding of how he'd respond to the evidential version of the problem of evil as well.) Rather than arguing against the soundness of the logical problem of evil, as most classical philosophers of religion like Alvin Plantinga do, Nagasawa argues that even if

²⁰ See, most fully, Rowe (2004).

²¹ Technically, the argument does not need the 'No Best World' assumption to be actually true, but only possibly true to refute the classical Anselmian model of God which it targets. However, this need not concern us at present.

the logical problem of evil does not establish the non-existence of a perfect being. The most that it does establish is that God is not an omnipotent being; but Nagasawa touches the MaximalGod Thesis. Nagasawa then differentiates his approach from other responses to the problem of evil which deny that God is a perfect being by, for example, abandoning either omnipotence or omnibenevolence. In contrast, the MaximalGod response leaves it an open question whether or not God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent once these attributes are understood neo-classically. Such a response is advantageous to the perfect being theist insofar as it allows one to resolve the problem of evil without committing oneself to specific necessities of divine power and goodness. Nagasawa's essay concludes by showing how the viability of responses to the problem of evil which do give up omnipotence and omnibenevolence also support neo-classical replies based on the MaximalGod Thesis.

The final reading in this section, Daniel Dombrowski's "Infinity, the Neo-classical Concept of God, and Oppy," explores the relationship between finitude and infinity in our understanding of the divine nature, an issue that is at the heart of the classical/neo-classical distinction. While Dombrowski's own understanding of God's nature is informed by process theology (treated more fully in the next section of this volume), the considerations he raises in this article primarily motivate the need to revise the classical model of God, thus opening the way for either a neo-classical or process model. (It also reinforces the point made earlier that the boundaries of neo-classical models are vague.) Via a discussion of Zeno's paradoxes and Kant's first antinomy, Dombrowski argues that issues related to infinity are significantly more problematic than many philosophers, including many philosophers of religion, realize. He also thinks that classical models have overemphasized the infinite plays in a proper understanding of God's nature. However, insofar as the infinite plays a more restricted role in neo-classical theism than it does in classical theism, the problems arising from infinity do not plague all models of God equally. God, Dombrowski claims, should not be understood as the maximally infinite in the way that classical models typically presuppose.²²

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