Edward Feser

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Classical theism

The difference between classical theism on the one hand and various modern and popular conceptions of God on the other has been a central theme of many previous posts – of, for example, several posts dealing with divine simplicity (e.g. here and here) and of my series of posts on the dispute between Aristotelian-Thomistic (A-T) metaphysics and "Intelligent Design" theory. It will feature in several forthcoming posts as well. So I thought it would be useful to write up a post which spelled out the key points.

As I have indicated in earlier posts, the doctrine of divine simplicity is absolutely central to classical theism. To say that God is simple is to say that He is in no way composed of parts – neither material parts, nor metaphysical parts like form and matter, substance and accidents, or essence and existence. Divine simplicity is affirmed by such Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thinkers as Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Maimonides, Avicenna, and Averroes. It is central to the theology of pagan thinkers like Plotinus. It is the *de fide* teaching of the Catholic Church, affirmed at the fourth Lateran council and the first Vatican council, and the denial of which amounts to heresy.

The doctrine of divine simplicity has a number of crucial implications, which are, accordingly, also essential to classical theism. It entails that God is *immutable* or changeless, and therefore that He is *impassible* – that is, that He cannot be affected by anything in the created order. It entails that he is *eternal* in the sense of being altogether outside of time and space. It entails that He does not "have" existence, or an essence, or His various attributes but rather *is identical to* His existence, His nature and His attributes: He *is* His existence which *is* His essence which *is* His power which *is* His knowledge which *is* His goodness. (I have discussed some of these points in greater detail in the posts on simplicity linked to above.)

About Me

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I am a writer and philosopher living in Los Angeles. I teach philosophy at Pasadena City College. My primary academic research interests are in the philosophy of mind, moral and political philosophy, and philosophy of religion. I also write on politics, from a conservative point of view; and on religion, from a traditional Roman Catholic perspective.

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Why is divine simplicity regarded by classical theists as so important? One reason is that in their view, nothing less than what is absolutely simple could possibly be divine, because nothing less than what is absolutely simple could have the metaphysical ultimacy that God is supposed to have. For anything which is in any way composed of parts would be metaphysically less fundamental than those parts themselves, and would depend on some external principle to account for the parts being combined in the way they are. In that case, either the external principle itself (or perhaps some yet further principle) would have to be simple, and thus ultimate, and thus the truly divine reality; or there is no simple or non-composite first principle, and thus no metaphysically ultimate reality, and thus nothing strictly divine. In short, to deny divine simplicity is, for the classical theist, implicitly to deny the existence of God.

Now the classical arguments for God as first cause or first principle of the world (by which I mean those developed within classical philosophy, whether Neo-Platonic, Aristotelian, or Thomistic or otherwise Scholastic) are, when properly understood, precisely arguments to the effect that the world of composite things – of compounds of act and potency, form and matter, essence and existence, and so forth – could not possibly exist even in principle were there not something non-composite, something which just is Pure Actuality, Subsistent Being Itself, and absolute Unity. (We saw in an earlier post how this goes in Plotinus. David Braine, in his book *The Reality of Time and the Existence of God*, rightly emphasizes that it is the theme that underlies Aquinas's cosmological arguments as well.) This seems to be what leads Brian Davies to suggest, in the third edition of his book *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, that the core of classical theism is the notion of God as cause of the world. But it seems to me that this is not quite right. Anselm is, after all, a classical theist, and he conceives of God (in his best-known argument, anyway) primarily as That Than Which No Greater Can Be Conceived, rather than as cause of the world. So, it seems to me that what is more fundamental to classical theism is the notion of God as that which is *absolutely metaphysically ultimate* – a notion that encompasses both Anselm's conception of God and the God-as-cause-of-the-world approach of Aquinas, Maimonides, and all the others, and which accounts for the centrality of divine simplicity to classical theism.

But how exactly does this differ from other conceptions of God? Don't they also think of God as metaphysically ultimate? No they don't, at least not in the absolute sense in which classical theism does, which is why I added that qualifier. For example, take Richard Dawkins' conception of God. Dawkins is an atheist, of course, but he thinks that if God did exist, He would be an extremely complex albeit disembodied designing intelligence, comparable to a human designer but with far greater knowledge and power. Dawkins would no doubt be happy to concede that if this intelligence existed and was the cause of the world, it would be more ultimate than the world. But he also says that if such an intelligence existed we should regard it as just as much in need of explanation as the universe itself. And he is quite right about

that, for such a metaphysically complex being would have to be regarded either as the effect of some higher and more simple cause, or as an inexplicable brute fact, in which case chucking out this "designer" and taking the universe itself as the ultimate brute fact could (as Dawkins argues) be regarded as a position more in line with Ockham's razor. Where Dawkins goes wrong is in thinking that this conception of God has anything to do with the conception that prevailed historically within mainstream theology and philosophy.

But it is not only atheists who take such a view. Davies contrasts classical theism with what he calls "theistic personalism" and what the Christian apologist Norman Geisler calls "neo-theism." The theistic personalist or neo-theist conceives of God essentially as a person comparable to human persons, only without the limitations we have. The idea is to begin with what we know about human beings and then to abstract away first the body, then our temporal limitations, then our epistemological and volitional confinement to knowing about and having control over only a particular point of space and time, then our moral defects, and to keep going until we arrive at the notion of a being who has power, knowledge, and goodness like ours but to an unlimited degree. Theistic personalism or neo-theism also rejects divine simplicity and its implications; indeed, this is the motivation for developing a conception of God by abstracting from our conception of human persons, for the theistic personalist objects to the notion of God as immutable, impassible, and eternal – finding it too cold and otherworldly, and incompatible with a literal reading of various biblical passages – and typically has philosophical objections to the notion of divine simplicity. Davies identifies Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne as theistic personalists. As I have suggested in earlier posts, the conception of God one arrives at via the reasoning of William Paley's "design argument" or the arguments of "Intelligent Design" theorists is also essentially a theistic personalist conception. "Open theists" and process theologians are further examples of contemporary thinkers who reject classical theism and divine simplicity in favor of a more "personalist" conception of God (though they would, of course, differ from Plantinga, Swinburne, Paley, and ID theory on various other issues).

I have emphasized as well in earlier posts that *divine conservation* – the doctrine that the world could not exist even for an instant, even in principle, apart from the continuous sustaining action of God – is also central to classical theism. Just as the classical arguments for God as cause of the world are arguments for an absolutely simple first principle, so too are they (for the most part) arguments for God precisely as conserver or sustainer of the world. And just as divine simplicity is no less central to orthodox theology than it is to classical philosophy, so too is divine conservation. (Ludwig Ott's well-known manual *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* classifies it too as a *de fide* doctrine of the Catholic Church.) For classical theism, to say that God creates the world is not merely, and indeed not primarily, to say that He got it going at some time in the past. It is more fundamentally to say the He keeps it going now, and at any moment at which it exists at

all. As Aquinas says, to say that God makes the world is not like saying that a blacksmith made a horseshoe – where the horseshoe might persist even if the blacksmith died – but rather like saying that a musician makes music, where the music would stop if the musician stopped playing.

When combined with the doctrine of divine simplicity, divine conservation entails a very different conception of God's relationship to the world than is entailed by theistic personalism. Theistic personalism tends toward a conception of God as an especially penetrating observer of the world, who learns what is happening in it via epistemic powers that are far more advanced than ours. For classical theism, though, since God doesn't change, neither does he "learn," not even in an extremely effective way. His knowledge of the world is far more intimate than that. He knows it precisely by knowing *Himself* as the sustaining cause of the world, in the very act of causing it. He is not like a machinist who is the keenest possible observer of the operations of a machine he has built. He is, again, more like a musician who knows the music he is playing, not by observing it, but precisely in the act of playing it.

The theistic personalist also generally takes God's miraculous activity to amount to a kind of "intervention" in a natural order that would otherwise operate without him, like that of a machinist who steps in to alter the workings of a machine he had earlier set in motion but which was, before the intervention, carrying on independently of him. For the classical theist, that is simply not the right way to think about miracles, since there is no such thing as the world otherwise carrying on apart from God, given that He is already the sustaining cause of the ordinary course of events itself. If we pursue the musician analogy a bit further, we can say that for the classical theist, the world's regular operations are like the music a musician plays according to a score he has before his mind, and a miracle is like the musician's momentary improvisation or departure from that score. It is not an intervention in a course of events that would otherwise have carried on without God, but rather the suspension of the normal ordering of a course of events that would not in any case have carried on without Him.

As Davies has emphasized (at length in his book *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*), theistic personalists and classical theists also differ radically in their understanding of what it means to characterize God as good. For the theistic personalist, since God is a person comparable to us, only without our limitations, His goodness amounts to a kind of superlative moral virtue. Like us, He has moral duties; unlike us, He fulfills them perfectly. But for the classical theist, this is nonsensical. Virtue and duty have to do with habits and actions that allow us to realize the ends set for us by nature and thereby to perfect ourselves. But God, being pure actuality, cannot intelligibly be said to have ends He needs to realize or imperfections He needs to remedy. Accordingly, He cannot intelligibly be said to be "virtuous" or to have "duties" He needs to fulfill.

To say that God is good is for the classical theist to say something very different, and something that it is, frankly, not easy to summarize for readers unfamiliar with certain key metaphysical doctrines characteristic of classical, and especially Scholastic, philosophy, such as the doctrine of the convertibility of the transcendentals, the notion of evil as privation, and the principle of proportionate causality (all of which are explained in my book *Aquinas*). Briefly, though, according to the first of these doctrines, being is "convertible" with goodness, so that whatever is pure actuality or Being Itself is necessarily also Goodness Itself. Furthermore, evil is a privation rather than a positive reality – the absence of good, as blindness is merely the absence of sight rather than a positive attribute. Whatever is pure actuality, and thus Goodness Itself, therefore cannot intelligibly be said to be evil or deficient in any way. Finally, since according to the principle of proportionate causality, whatever is in an effect must in some way be in its cause ("eminently" if not "formally"), God as the cause of all possible good must have all possible good within Him, eminently if not formally.

Obviously this raises all sorts of questions. For example: "Does this entail that God must be green, or smelly, or short, since greenness, smelliness, and shortness are to be found in the world He causes?!" The answer is No, it doesn't entail that, but as I have said, there is no brief way to spell out the metaphysical background necessary to answering such objections here, and I have in any event done so at length in *Aquinas*, to which the interested reader is referred. The point for now is just to indicate how different the classical theist's conception of divine goodness is from that of the theistic personalist – and, for that matter, from the conception taken for granted by atheists who suggest that the existence of evil shows that God, if He exists, must in some way be morally deficient. While God is not a Platonic Form, for the classical theist, to suggest that God is in some way morally deficient nevertheless makes about as much sense as suggesting that Plato's Form of the Good might be morally deficient. The suggestion is unintelligible both because characterizing the God of classical theism as either virtuous or vicious is unintelligible, and because characterizing Him as deficient in any way is unintelligible. An atheist *could* intelligibly deny that such a God exists at all (just as he could intelligibly deny the existence of Platonic Forms), but to suggest that the God of classical theism might be morally deficient merely shows that such an atheist does not understand the view he is criticizing (just as an opponent of Platonism who suggested that the Form of the Good might be unloving or vicious would only show thereby that he doesn't understand what sort of thing a Form is supposed to be).

Now, for the Thomist, a proper understanding of these various aspects of classical theism requires a recognition that when we predicate goodness, knowledge, power, or what have you of God, we are using language in a way that is *analogous* to the use we make of it when applied to the created order. It cannot be emphasized too strongly, though, that this has nothing to do with "arguing from analogy" after the fashion of Paley's design argument; indeed, it is diametrically

opposed to Paley's procedure. It has to do instead with Aquinas's famous "doctrine of analogy," which distinguishes three uses of language: Words can be used *univocally*, in exactly the same sense, as when we say that Fido's bark is loud and that Rover's bark is loud. They can be used *equivocally*, or in completely unrelated senses, as when we say that Fido's bark is loud and that the tree's bark is rough. Or they can be used *analogously*, as when we say that a certain meal was good, that a certain book is good, and that a certain man is good. "Good" is not being used in exactly the same sense in each case, but neither are the senses unrelated, as they are in the equivocal use of "bark." Rather, there is in the goodness of a meal something analogous to the goodness of a book, and analogous to the goodness of a man, even if it is not exactly the same sort of thing that constitutes the goodness in each case.

For the Thomist, this is the key to understanding how it can be the case that God's goodness is His power, which is His knowledge, which is His essence, which is His existence. Such a claim would be nonsensical if the terms in question were being used univocally, in exactly the same sense in which we use them when we attribute goodness, power, knowledge, etc. to ourselves (and as they are used in Paleyan "arguments from analogy"). But neither are the senses utterly equivocal. Rather, what we mean is that there is in God something analogous to what we call goodness in us, something analogous to what we call knowledge in us, and so forth; and in God, it is one and the same thing that is analogous to what are in us distinct attributes. From a Thomistic point of view, it is precisely because theistic personalists apply language to God and creatures univocally that they are led to deny divine simplicity and in general to arrive at an objectionably anthropomorphic conception of God. (It is only fair to note, however, that followers of Duns Scotus, who are classical theists, reject the claim that terms are applied to God and to creatures in analogous rather than univocal senses. For Thomists, the Scotist move away from analogy set the stage for the moderns' move away from classical theism, but Scotists would deny this. But this is a large debate which cannot be settled here.)

In summary, then, classical theism is committed to a conception of God as that which is *absolutely metaphysically ultimate* – that is to say, as that which is ultimate *in principle* and not merely in fact – where this is taken to entail *divine simplicity* and thus *divine immutability*, *impassibility*, and *eternity*; to a doctrine of *divine conservation* on which the world is radically dependent on God for its existence at every instant; and (in the case of Thomists, anyway) to the doctrine that the terms we apply both to God and to the created order are to be understood in analogous rather than univocal senses. Its commitment to divine simplicity and to the implications of divine simplicity sets classical theism at odds with theistic personalism, "open theism," deism, process theology, and other more anthropomorphic conceptions of God. Such rival views also sometimes reject the doctrine of divine conservation, though not in every case; and they also reject the doctrine of analogy, though some classical theists do so as well.

Since classical theism has, as I have noted, been the mainstream understanding of the divine nature through most of the history both of philosophical theology and of the main monotheistic religions, it follows that serious critics of theism ought to devote the bulk of their attention to understanding and rebutting the arguments of classical theists. That means that they ought to be focusing their attention on the arguments of classical writers like Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Maimonides, Avicenna, Aquinas, and Scotus, to name just some of them – and I don't mean the out-of-context two-page snippets one finds in Introduction to Philosophy textbooks (nor quick summaries in blog posts like the one you're reading now), but substantial chunks of their work, as well as the exegetical works of serious contemporary scholars who have written on these thinkers of the past. It means that they ought to familiarize themselves with the work of contemporary philosophers of religion who are working within the classical theist framework – writers like Barry Miller, David Braine, John Haldane, Brian Davies, David Conway, William Vallicella, David Oderberg, Christopher Martin, James Ross, and other writers in the Aristotelian, Neo-Platonic, and Thomistic and other Scholastic traditions. (If they want to read my stuff too, I won't complain.)

And yet very few contemporary atheists show much familiarity with this tradition. Indeed, few even seem to be aware that there is a difference between classical theism and the theistic personalism that underlies so much contemporary writing in theology and philosophy of religion. For example, the atheist philosopher Keith Parsons, who recently made a big show of his abandoning philosophy of religion as no longer worthy of his attention, devoted his main book on the subject (*God and the Burden of Proof*) to rebutting the arguments of just two theists – Plantinga and Swinburne, who are theistic personalists rather than classical theists, and thus simply unrepresentative of the mainstream tradition in Christian thought and philosophy of religion. (In saying so, I do not mean to show any disrespect to Plantinga and Swinburne. You don't need me to tell you that they are very important philosophers indeed. They just aren't classical theists.)

In general, though at least some contemporary atheist philosophers may be said to have a solid enough grasp of the arguments of writers like Plantinga and Swinburne, their grasp of the mainstream classical theistic tradition tends to be at best only slightly better than that of vulgar pop atheist writers like Richard Dawkins (who, as I demonstrate both in *Aquinas* and, more polemically, in *The Last Superstition*, hasn't the faintest clue about what writers like Aquinas really said). And if one hasn't grappled seriously with the arguments of the great classical theists, then one simply cannot claim to have dealt a serious blow to theism as such. Not even close.

Posted by Edward Feser at 12:03 AM

102 comments: