

Book Review

Clayton Philip, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000; 516 pp.; hb. \$ 39.00; ISBN: 0-8028-3885-5

This book is not for the fainthearted. It is an ambitious exploration of different concepts (or ‘models,’ to use Clayton’s preferred term) of God in the modern era. Clayton’s constructive and critical views are laced into his detailed analyses of works by Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Lessing, Fichte, Schelling, Tillich, and others. This book is best not read at a hurried place; one needs patience and care in reconstructing Clayton’s constructive contribution to our thinking about God today and to follow his commentary on modern philosophy.

Clayton’s metaphysic is pantheistic, a post in-between pantheism and the classical theistic traditions. In philosophical theology he also demarcates a middle position. I quote him at length:

The great break for philosophical theology – and it continues to be the great divide – can be expressed by the opposition ‘Kant versus Hegel.’ Hegel undoubtedly made an advance over earlier rationalists when he proclaimed *Sein als Subjekt*, “being as subject.” But like them (and perhaps even more strongly) he held that reality was fully knowable, that there are no limits to what human reason can attain. Kant is, by contrast, the great advocate of a philosophy of limits – the limits on what reason can know of God. The standpoint from which I defend a modified form of Schelling’s later philosophy seeks to retain the strengths of Hegel’s metaphysics of the self-unfolding subject while preserving the Kantian insistence that not all is (or can be) known, that no place would remain for freedom if everything were deductible from theoretical reason. I presuppose that some such synthesis of Hegel and Kant is both necessary and possible (p. 469).

Like many such middle positions, Clayton’s work will be deemed attractive by opposing camps as well as unsatisfactory. There is an apocryphal story about a soldier in the American Civil War who was sympathetic with both sides and thus wore the military uniforms of both armies with the result that he was shot by all parties. My aim in this review is not to shoot Clayton, though I will raise several questions about the success of Clayton’s project.

Chapter One opens with this claim: ‘Not to put too fine a point on it: The context for treating the question of God today must be scepticism’ (p. 3). This charge is never, in my reading, vindicated. Citing theologians like Gordon Kaufman or polemicists like Kai Nielson hardly secures the certainty of scepticism among mainline philosophers. Clayton refers to A.J. Ayer’s charge that language about God is meaningless (p. 5, p. 47) but, as Clayton notes in the Preface, the last vestiges of positivism have disappeared (p. xi). I do not think it is hard to find vestiges of positivism, but given the inadequacy of positivism (even acknowledged, in the end, by Ayer himself) and its ilk, there seems little ongoing threat to theism from the Vienna Circle. And we are currently in the greatest revival of philosophical theism in modern times.

As a whole, I did not find the opening chapter very useful in clarifying the modern debate over what Clayton refers to as ‘the God problem today’ (p. 12). His very characterisation of theism seems unconventional. ‘The concept of God refers to a reality that is in some essential sense transcendent of, and thus not locatable within, experience’ (p. 3). I am not sure what he means here. Yes, classical Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers hold that God transcends human experience in the sense that God’s reality is not some mode of human life. But many but not all philosophers and theologians in these traditions allow that humans may experience God. It would be absurd (presumably) for a Christian to claim that Jesus Christ is God and man, and to claim that no one can experience Jesus Christ.

Chapter Two contains a trenchant account of Descartes’ Cogito and his ontological argument. I think Clayton rightly underscores Descartes’ reliance on intuition.

Chapter Three contains a modest criticism of perfect being theology. Clayton does not advance any decisive objections. Largely he simply identifies the need for further work by William Alston, T.V. Morris and others in the Anselmian camp.

He [Morris] also admits at one point that the understanding of God as perfect emerged rather late in the history of religions. How did it emerge, and what are the problems inherent in the idea of moral perfection? Is the notion of a perfect being coherent, or does it (like Thomas’s fourth way) depend on assumptions we can no longer make? Detailed historical work (below, and chapter 4), as well as adequate responses to the difficulties raised, will be required to establish this position (p. 133).

I believe that such a bigger picture can readily be filled in which locates the concept of the divine at the very heart of human values. Much of the work in the last half to two thirds of the book contribute to the divine attributes of infinity and perfection. Clayton defends the legitimacy of a cognitive, realist form of theism, over against Kantian strictures.

In the post-Kantian context we must acknowledge the regulation functions of theistic language – its role, for example, in grounding knowledge claims and creating meaning. Yet God-language can also be part of constitutive theories, theories that make claims to truth and can be examined accordingly (p. 275).

The discussion of Kant's late philosophy of God is very useful. As Clayton moves through a discussion of German idealism he constructively builds his case for viewing God and the world as inextricably bound together. 'The basic starting point for modern theistic metaphysics – the understanding of God as infinite – points unmistakably to a particular ontological position: the world cannot be fully separate or different from God' (p. 477).

It would require more space than I can use in a review to pinpoint all the junctures where I believe Clayton underestimates the integrative nature of classical theism. I sometimes wonder whether William James was right about the role of temperament in philosophy. Perhaps Hegel had the sort of personality which made him (literally) unhappy when he entertained the prospects of dualism and theism, a spectre he characterised in terms of an 'unhappy consciousness.' But I end this review by bracketing such speculation about temperament and the broader matters of my disagreement with Clayton over pantheism. Overall, Clayton has achieved something which all branches of theism ('pan' or 'en' or deistic) may appreciate. He has demonstrated that God is at the heart of the Western tradition. And he has wrestled with God philosophically and theologically in this sustained, masterful work.

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