
REVIEWS

Philip Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2000. pp. 531. \$30. hardback ISBN: 0802838855.

Pantheism + Personality = Panentheism. This formula, though not actually present in the book being reviewed, points to the needed notion of God for our contemporary setting, which is still under the influence of Kant's strictures against metaphysical speculation. Three critical ideas are involved. First, there is the idea of pantheism: Spinoza's absolute or infinite includes all finite reality within itself but is finally locked immanently within the finite with no transcendence. Second, there is the idea of the divine personality: the later Fichte's understanding of a presupposed absolute which is present in the world while at the same time transcending the world serves as the paradigm of the relation between God and the world. Third, there is the idea of panentheism: Schelling of the middle period stands as the most helpful thinker for bringing the perspectives of pantheism and personality together in a full-blown dialectical notion of God. Such are the distinctions and the moves of which the book under consideration is made.

Philosophical theology has been given fresh air to breathe as a result of the scholarly labors of Philip Clayton in his *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*. This magisterial work clarifies why the notion of God became a problem in the modern world and then proceeds to make a case for panentheism as the best model of God for today. In the process, Clayton offers reconstructions of modern thinkers in the history of philosophy, showing the relevance of their thinking to contemporary reformulating of the notion of God. The fascinating journey is made from Descartes to Leibniz to Kant, then back to Spinoza (and Lessing, Jacobi, and Mendelssohn) before going to Fichte and finally

Schelling. Along the way, Clayton's reconstructions retrieve one contribution or another from each thinker toward constructing an adequate notion of God for our time. His purpose is to "specify a coherent philosophical theology and to assess the conceptual difficulties it faces" (105).

The book is so powerful because of the effective way in which historical philosophical thinkers and contemporary philosophical issues are allowed to illuminate one another. The opening chapter portrays the current intellectual context, highlighting the place of skepticism and pluralism, the hermeneutical shift and the pragmatic shift. But such concerns are not left behind in the unfolding narrative of the early modern history of philosophy. The historical reconstructions are informed by the contemporary questions. The result is a marvelous feast of ideas relevant to articulating a model of God.

In this at once historical and systematic project, the author identifies infinity and perfection as the two qualities that dominated theological and philosophical thinking up through the pre-modern world. These two strands of God as infinity and God as perfection were then combined in an onto-theological understanding that became problematic in the modern era. Clayton maintains that the eventual dissolution of these two ways of thinking about God in modernity was a good thing because "perfect-being theology" as developed most fully by Leibniz is problematic in that it does not allow enough room for divine agency. The logics of the two notions are very different and that of God as infinite leads one in a direction less plagued by difficulties but also toward a new set of models of God that are less traditional. For Clayton, a philosophical doctrine of God starts with the concept of infinity but gives this concept positive content by supplementing

it with other sources. This chosen starting point does direct one, however, toward a model of the world as within God and away from a model of God as separate from the world.

Clayton's reconstruction of Descartes moves creatively against traditional interpretations of him as the father of modern philosophy because of how he grounded all thought in the subject, either by way of his *cogito* argument or his epistemological claims. Instead we encounter the effort to look closely at Descartes's understanding of God and his general metaphysics which posit an infinite subject as the ground of all finite realities and of human knowing. The *cogito* is not properly understood until placed within the context of the infinite. In the process of viewing Descartes's broader concerns, Clayton shows the centrality of theological issues for the agenda of modern philosophy. His book can be understood as a narration of theology's place in the history of early modern thinkers. As is the case with most of the major thinkers treated, the cast of scholars consulted—from Léon Blanchet to Jean-Luc Marion here in the instance of Descartes—is impressive indeed. Clayton offers a rereading of the theistic proofs of Descartes, and while they fail as proofs, they succeed in a fashion as conceptual clarifiers, for in the ontological argument one finds a conceptual apparatus for grasping the infinite ground that is always the presupposition of the thinking subject. Modern thought owes to Descartes the insight that the infinite, or the intuition of the infinite, as prior to finite realities, is the condition of possibility for conceiving them as they actually are.

Clayton incorporates Kant's criticism of theology but then finds ways to move beyond it. Kant's insight into the relation between language and reality cannot be ignored. However, the Kantian limiting of knowledge to objects of the senses is judged to be unacceptable. Theistic language need not be limited to regulative use. Metaphysics and theology of the onto-theological sort are no longer possible after Kant; the epistemic status of metaphysics has changed. However, a theology tending to the epistemic standards of

the day will be able to offer more than theistic language as useful fiction but less than the absolutistic claims of pre-Kantian thinkers: in short, such language will serve regulatively as grounding knowledge claims and creating meaning and constitutively as making claims about the nature of the divine. Clayton offers interesting evidence that the later Kant of *The Critique of Judgment* and other later works was himself moving toward constitutive claims for God. He continues in Kant's wake by developing, with assistance from Scheiermacher's *Dialectics* of 1814, limit notions, which he sees as the means for saving theology from Kant's first *Critique*. Involved here is the distinction between reflecting (thinking) and knowing. Upon hitting an intellectual difficulty, a theology of limit notions does not dogmatically claim an inability to know that which is so difficult or aporetic but instead explores the difficulties and embarrassments of reason in order to learn more and possibly move toward constitutive claims about God. These claims are varied and lead to multiple models and thus to a pluralistic theology. But I would suggest that the phrase "pluralistic theology" is a bit misleading. Clayton endorses what might be called "methodological pluralism," which recognizes the importance of acknowledging plural prospects for rational consideration at critical junctures along the path of metaphysical questing or philosophical narrating or theological formulating. And yet he also acknowledges the metaphysical quest's intrinsic push beyond such plural options to unity, which leads the inquirer to settle on the best candidate for conceptualizing the issue at hand. At the end of the day, the theology possesses a unity, though it is pluralistic in the sense that multiple concepts or models entered into the deliberating process of moving toward that unified notion.

Clayton's theology of the infinite moves from Spinoza to Fichte to Schelling. Spinoza is so important because he conceives of an infinite that is distinct from the finite and at the same time encompassing the finite within itself. And yet, he is unsuccessful in deriving the finite from the infinite. Spinoza's *deus sive natura* (God or Nature) cannot be a strict equation. Clayton

concludes that some form of minimal personalist theism or panentheism, drawing on insights of Spinoza, should be allowed to emerge. Fichte becomes important in that emergence. The earlier Fichte endorses an idealistic panentheism; the later, however, sets forth a mystical or ethical panentheism that can be seen as a synthesis of Spinoza and Kant. Combining the need for philosophical speculation and for sharp epistemic limits, Fichte realized that the existence of a finite self-consciousness requires the postulation of an absolute dimension, an absolute Other.

The question remains how to conceptualize the infinite that stands in relation to the finite. It is Schelling's metaphysics of freedom that best fills this need. In fact, the intellectual hero of Clayton's narrative recounting the development of the notion of God in modernity is Schelling. In his middle period, Schelling builds on his early modern predecessors in developing not the notion of infinite substance, as Spinoza had done, but that of infinite subject. Schelling conceives God as genuinely personal. The break with Spinoza comes in his 1809 shift to freedom as the center of his metaphysics. An adequate understanding of subjectivity is key. Utilizing the idealist's distinction between internal (subjective) and external (empirical) necessity, Schelling's richer theory of subjectivity allows him to interpret the world's creation as a free act of the divine. This affirmation of the freedom of God carries with it a lessening of the human's ability to know God: the free God must reveal the divine character to humans via a process of self-manifestation rather than being available via rational scrutiny alone. The world is within God, but the world cannot be identical with God; therefore, God and world are in a dialectical relation. This leads Schelling to affirm that God is both ground and consequent: the dipolar divine reality includes both the infinite ground of all finite reality and the personal divine being who is unfolding within the process of becoming. The ground, then, is best understood as a subject, a subject who objectifies itself in creation through exercising its freedom. The world is the process of God's self-manifestation. Both

the personal God and the world have their ground in the infinite ground. But the world, the creation, is finite, whereas the personal God, while logically dependent upon the ground, shares the ground's infinite nature. The theology of the infinite is the theology of the God of infinite freedom. This dipolar view of God as infinite ground and God as personal subject celebrates the divine life as made possible by "a pure act of freedom" that accomplishes "the transition from the infinite nature of the divine to reality" (507). Such divine freedom makes possible divine love.

One question can be raised in relation to this sure-to-become-a-classic book that Clayton has written. This concerns the absence of Hegel. Early on, Clayton indicates that this English text is closely related to a volume on the problem of God published in Germany in 1996; the two texts, he notes, come to the same conclusions but the arguments differ at a number of points. The German work is designated as the first of two volumes, and at various junctures in the English version the author refers to a future second volume that will continue the historical narrative that here ends with Schelling, responding to the line of thinkers from Hegel to Nietzsche, and offering a systematic defense of panentheism. With the promise to deal with Hegel in another setting, there are no extended treatments of him in this volume. But the references that do appear consistently betray a Hegel of the analytic philosophers whose naïve yearnings for and expectations of obtaining absolute knowledge, systematic completion, and totalistic closure leave him clearly guilty of what Clayton labels "the Hegelian fallacy" (469). Hegel and his followers seem all to be of the "unregenerate" sort, who as absolute idealists claim to know that thought corresponds fully to reality (357). There is, of course, another Hegel: one who is not so wildly rational as to claim full knowledge of the end of history before its end; one who is more the poetic romantic than the austere rationalist; one who carries out a history of philosophy that draws on the strengths of the various thinkers while correcting their weaknesses in a manner not dissimilar to that of our

philosophical theologian; and one who sees the need to examine the empirical deliverances of history in order to grasp the unfolding revelations of the Absolute Spirit, again not dissimilar to the claims of our eminent author. The thinking carried out in this work shares much with what Hegel was up to, so some might find that he is not as absent as Clayton thinks.

Clayton has learned much from Wolfhart Pannenberg, which he acknowledges in his Preface and at crucial moments in his argument. He translated Pannenberg's *Metaphysics and the Idea of God* in the late 80s and clearly received much inspiration from this mentor. He also acknowledges Louis Dupré, his mentor at Yale. Those who give this book a serious read will themselves encounter a knowledgeable and thoughtful mentor, to whom they will feel much gratitude for having written such an erudite and provocative statement about God. On the other side of the reading experience, the formula "Pantheism + Personality = Panentheism" makes good sense. The reader is left with a desire both for experiencing that God more fully and for Clayton's second volume.

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