

WHAT IS CLASSICAL THEISM?

By Spencer Mead

Classical theism refers to a traditional conception of God dating back nearly 2400 years. Classical theists view God as the metaphysically necessary foundation of all reality. I will unpack this notion through the course of this article. Aspects of this view can be found among pagans, Jews, Christians, Muslims, and other purely philosophical theists.

The Greek philosopher Plato (d. 348 BC) is largely regarded as the founder of classical theism. He conceived of God as “The Good,” and his disciples were responsible for expanding this idea in the centuries that followed. As Plato himself said,

The good, then, is the end [or goal] of all endeavor, the object on which every heart is set, whose existence it divines... the good therefore may be said to be the source not only of the intelligibility of the objects of knowledge, but also of their being and reality; yet it is not itself that reality, but is beyond it, and superior to it in dignity and power. (*The Republic*, 505e, 509b)

THE ULTIMATE REALITY

According to classical theism, God is not one item in the world, even the biggest or most powerful. Rather, he is the fundamental reality on which all things depend for their being at any moment. To better understand this, let's consider a deductive argument for God's existence—the famous “third way” offered by St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274 AD).

We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to corrupt, and consequently, they are possible to be and not to be.

But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not.

Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence.

Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing.

Therefore, **if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist;** and thus even now nothing would be in existence—which is absurd.

Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but **there must exist something the existence of which is necessary**.

But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not.

Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes.

Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. **This all men speak of as God.** (ST, Ia. 2, art. 3)

Notice that Aquinas does not invoke God as the best explanation of a scientific puzzle. Appealing to a natural cause (maybe the Big Bang or a “multiverse” of some kind) to explain why nature exists just begs the question. Aquinas argues that contingent things, *including the universe itself*, must have a more fundamental source that grounds them in existence. We refer to this source as “God.”

DIVINE SIMPLICITY

One hallmark tenet of classical theism is the doctrine of divine simplicity. For God to be God, he must be simple. In other words, he cannot be composed of any parts. To have parts is to have potential, and God is fully actual.¹ Also, to have parts is to be composed, and, as Plato argued, all composite beings requires a *composer*. This entails that when we talk about God’s omniscience, omnipotence, goodness, etc., we are really describing one and the same thing.²

While Zeus, Thor, and Osiris might be powerful beings who belong to a class called “gods,” they are still creatures existing within the world. None of them could be the transcendent creator, even in principle, because they are mere instances of a category. If there happened to be only *one* such being, rather than four, or fifteen, or eighty-two, it would make no difference with respect its lack of metaphysical ultimacy. It follows, then, that the God of classical theism does not belong to any created category. He is completely transcendent and uncreated. He is not just a person like us but with more superpowers. He is radically different from all creation.

THE DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

If the absolutely simple God of classical theism exists, what can we say about Him?

¹ To have parts is to have that which could be (i.e. potentially) organized in *some other way*. See episode [CORE #03](#) of the Classical Theism Podcast for a defense of the conclusion that God is fully actual.

² A full defense of these claims is beyond the scope of this article, but see [this episode with Dr. Brian Carl](#) for further explanation and defense of this particular claim about the multiplicity of attributes.

- **Immutability**
 - As the simple and necessary cause of all things outside himself, God cannot undergo change of any kind. This is not to say that God is static or frozen, like an abstract object. On the contrary, he has no potentials, no deficiencies, no limitations; he possesses the fullness of life.³
- **Immateriality and incorporeality**
 - God is not composed of matter (or anything else), so He does not have a body.⁴
- **Omniscience**
 - God's knowledge is analogous to that of an author. Imagine that Tolkien woke up one morning in Oxford and conceived the entire *Lord of the Rings* series, start to finish, in an instant. He would know everything that transpires not through observation of outside events, but through self-contemplation. Similarly, God does not need to gaze into a crystal ball to learn what's going on in the world. He is not an agent observing it from afar. Rather, He is like the author of a novel who is intimately present with His entire story as its creator. In other words, God knows all things by *knowing himself* as their creator.
- **Omnipotence**
 - Since God is the fount of all being, anything that exists or could exist necessarily comes from him. However, God cannot create logical impossibilities, not because he is "bound" by logic, but because logical impossibilities (like married bachelors, square circles, or stones too heavy for God to lift) are not *real things* at all.
- **Eternity**
 - While it is tempting to think of God as being "infinitely old," that is not the right way to consider divine eternity.⁵ Time can only affect those constrained by it, and God, the immutable creator of space and time itself, is not. "Eternity, then," says Boethius, "is the *complete, simultaneous and perfect possession of everlasting life*; this will be clear from a comparison with creatures that exist in time . . . the divine gaze looks down on all things without disturbing their nature; to him they are present things, but under the condition of time they are future things" (*The Consolation of Philosophy*, V.VI).⁶

³ In [this episode](#), Dr. Eleonore Stump explains why God is not to be thought of as frozen or inert.

⁴ Paul Chutikorn explains this in [a previous episode](#) on divine simplicity.

⁵ Dr. Stump explains the "doctrine of eternity" in [this Closer to Truth clip](#).

⁶ The doctrine of eternity as we know it today was first taught by Augustine of Hippo, but more famously expressed by the philosopher Boethius.

- **Goodness**

- God's goodness is often regarded as a moral quality, like that of Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa, but only better. However, not all goodness is moral goodness. A more general way of conceiving of goodness is as the extent to which something lives up to its nature. A three-sided figure drawn on a chalkboard might appear quite good, but it still falls short of perfect triangularity. God, being simple, fully actual, immutable, and so forth cannot fail to exemplify the divine nature. Additionally, God is understood as good because He is the creator of all perfections which must preexist in God in a preeminent way.⁷

THE INFINITY OF GOD

In one of his sermons, Augustine of Hippo (d. 430 AD) says, "If you can grasp it, it is not God. Let us rather make a devout confession of ignorance, instead of a brash profession of knowledge. Certainly it is a great bliss to have a little touch or taste of God with the mind; but completely to grasp him, to comprehend him, is impossible."⁸

Does that mean one cannot talk coherently about God? No. We can make real, meaningful statements about God's nature based on his effects. We can also make true statements about what God is not. For example, in recognizing that the material world is contingent and changing, we can reason that its source is *neither* of those. This is called "negative theology" or "apophatic theology," But it's not all negative; to say that God is neither contingent nor changing is just to say that he *is* necessary and immutable.

From what we can reason about his nature, God is radically *other* and he cannot be fully contained within a finite intellect. To behold the divine essence in full would totally overwhelm any creature, and this is dramatically spelled out in the Book of Exodus:

Then Moses said, "Please let me see your glory!"

The LORD answered: I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim my name, "LORD," before you; I who show favor to whom I will, I who grant mercy to whom I will. But you cannot see my face for no one can see me and live. (33:20, *New American Bible Revised Edition*)

PERTAINING TO CATHOLICISM

Is divine simplicity a doctrine of the Church? The traditional classical theistic conception of God is a definitive teaching of the Catholic Church, affirmed at Lateran IV (1215) and again at Vatican I (1869-1870). From the constitution of the former, "We firmly believe and simply confess that there is only one true God, eternal and immeasurable, almighty, unchangeable,

⁷ See [these episodes](#) on Fr. Brian Davies' position regarding God, goodness, and evil.

⁸ Sermon 117, "On the Gospel of John"

incomprehensible and ineffable, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three persons but *one absolutely simple essence, substance or nature*.”

Is there scriptural warrant for the tenets of classical theism? Yes. There is an abundance of scriptural support for individual divine attributes. But there are also many passages that speak anthropomorphically about God. Analyzing a multitude of passages is beyond the scope of this short essay. Here are a few passages that describe God as the *ultimate reality*, which is central to classical theism:

God speaks to Moses from the burning bush: “But,” said Moses to God, “if I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what do I tell them?” God replied to Moses: I am who I am. Then he added: This is what you will tell the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.’ (Exodus 3:13-14)

Moses wants to know which divinity is speaking to him—a fair question, to be sure, in a world teeming with deities and spirits of every sort. But God does not respond with a proper name with which he can be identified. Strangely, he calls himself “I AM.” St. Thomas Aquinas interprets this as affirming divine simplicity, for God’s being and nature are inseparable. Yet, God is not one god among many to be named like Baal or Thor.

Paul’s sermon on the Areopagus: “What therefore you unknowingly worship, I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and all that is in it, the Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in sanctuaries made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands because he needs anything. Rather it is he who gives to everyone life and breath and everything. He made from one the whole human race to dwell on the entire surface of the earth, and he fixed the ordered seasons and the boundaries of their regions, so that people might seek God, even perhaps grope for him and find him, though indeed he is not far from any one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being,’ as even some of your poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’” (Acts 17:22-28)

Here, Paul addresses the learned of Athens, informing them that the creator God they honor in poetry and philosophy is the same God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Jesus addresses John of Patmos: “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “the one who is and who was and who is to come, the almighty.” (Revelation 1:8)

Alpha (A) and omega (Ω) are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, indicating that God is the source and summit of all creation: eternal, all-powerful, and utterly transcendent. This sort of language, of God’s excellence and transcendence, permeates John’s apocalypse.

But this doesn't sound like the God most people believe in. Fair enough. Not everybody has the time for deep philosophical contemplation, so one should not expect them to have a rigorous understanding of divine simplicity and other related ideas. Just because someone has an inaccurate view of God does not mean that He does not exist.



Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* (1512) on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City.

Religious imagery exemplifies this point. Artists depict God in an exaggerated and anthropomorphic way, using symbolism to convey theological truths to a general population. Some religious traditions strictly forbid this, while some permit far more artistic liberty. Whatever one thinks of the art itself, or the philosophy which drives the artist, it should not be taken literally. To reiterate Augustine's point, God's nature cannot be grasped. The divine essence remains an infinite and ineffable mystery.

FINAL THOUGHTS

In *Thinking About God* (2011), Dominican priest and philosopher Brian Davies summarizes the classical theist's project with one important observation. He writes,

The modern agnostic says 'We do not know, the universe is a mysterious riddle'. One who believes in God does not say this. Yet he can say 'We do not know what the answer is, but we do know that there is a mystery behind it all which we do not know, and if there were not, there would not even be a riddle. This unknown we call *God*. If there were no God, there would be no universe, and nobody to be mystified. (297) ⁹

⁹ Fr. Brian Davies considers the divine attributes, the efficacy of prayer, and various arguments for God's existence in [*Thinking About God*](#) (republished in 2011).

Nothing less than this mystery is worthy of worship.

Resources for Further Study

- Check out the [Talking Points pdf](#) on Classical Theism for a discussion of several of these core ideas.
- *Classical Theism Podcast* [CORE episodes](#) 3, 4, and 5 discuss various proofs for God's existence based on those of Aristotle, Leibniz, and William Lane Craig, respectively.
- Dr. Edward Feser's [Aquinas: A Beginner's Guide](#) (2009) and Dr. David Bentley Hart's [Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss](#) (2014) are excellent introductions to the various concepts affirmed by classical theism.
- The divine attributes are extensively defended in Feser's recent book [Five Proofs of the Existence of God](#) (2017), specifically pp. 169 - 248.
- [The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers](#) (2016) is a print version of Dr. Eleonore Stump's recent [Aquinas Lecture](#) by the same title, which argues that classical theism is consistent with the scriptural conception of God.

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