

# Philo

(30 BCE–50 CE)



Given the five features outlined in the previous introduction, it makes sense to claim that the first classical theist was Philo, who was a Jew in the first centuries of both eras who philosophized in Alexandria in Egypt. Philo is noteworthy because he was apparently the first thinker to philosophize about God, so as to reach the conclusion that the concept of God involved the above five features, including belief in divine omnipotence, even if Philo did not quite subscribe to creation *ex nihilo* (see May 1994), and to assume (perhaps erroneously) that this concept of God was an abstract version of the God found in the Bible.

Philo defends a version of the argument from design for the existence of God in which the regularity and order of the workings of nature are evidence of the existence of a divine creator. Although Philo has a very strong apophatic sense (from the Greek *apophatikos* for negativity) of what cannot be said about God, he is like most negative theologians in being profuse in what he does say kataphatically (from the Greek *kataphatikos* for positivity): God is unchangeable, outside of time, creator of time, uncreated, utterly simple, unified, self-sufficient, immovable, omniscient, necessarily existent, passionless, not in space, cause of all, and omnipresent. Quite a list for someone who thinks that we cannot know God! The lesson here is that we ought not to take at face value the alleged humility of apophatic thinkers regarding what they claim not to say about God (Hartshorne 2000, 77–81; also see Philo’s “On the Unchangeableness of God” and other works, vol. 3).

One way to organize Philo’s (and other classical theists’) litany of divine attributes is in terms of the concept of monopolarity. Let us assume for the moment that God exists. What attributes does God

possess? Imagine two columns of attributes in polar contrast to each other:

one	many
being	becoming
activity	passivity
permanence	change
necessity	contingency
self-sufficient	dependent
actual	potential
absolute	relative
abstract	concrete

Philo's classical theism tends toward oversimplification. It is comparatively easy to say, "God is strong rather than weak, so in all relations God is active, not passive." In each case, classical theists such as Philo decide which member of the contrasting pair is good (on the left), then attributes it to God, while wholly denying the contrasting term (on the right). This leads to what Hartshorne calls the monopolar prejudice (Hartshorne 2000, 1–25).

Importantly, monopolarity is common to both classical theism and pantheism, with the major difference between the two being the fact that classical theists admit the reality of plurality, potentiality, and becoming as a secondary form of existence "outside" God (on the right), whereas in pantheism reality is identified with God. Common to both classical theism and pantheism is the idea that the categorical contrasts listed above are invidious. The dilemma these two positions face is that either deity is only one constituent of the whole (classical theism) or else the alleged inferior pole in each contrast (on the right) is illusory (pantheism).

This dilemma is artificial, however, produced by the assumption that excellence is found by separating and purifying one pole (on the left) and denigrating the other (on the right). That this is not the case can be seen by analyzing some of the attributes in the right column. Classical theists are convinced that God's eternity does not mean that God endures through all time. Rather, on the classical theistic view, God is outside of time altogether, and is not, indeed cannot be, receptive to temporal change. Many classical theists follow Aristotle (who, as we

will see, is the greatest predecessor to classical theism) in identifying God as unmoved. Yet both activity and passivity can be either good or bad. Good passivity is likely to be called sensitivity, responsiveness, adaptability, sympathy, and the like. Insufficiently subtle or defective passivity is called wooden inflexibility, mulish stubbornness, inadaptability, unresponsiveness, and the like. Passivity per se refers to the way in which an individual's activity takes account of, and renders itself appropriate to, the activities of others. To deny God passivity altogether is to deny God those aspects of passivity that are excellences. Or, put another way, to altogether deny God the ability to change does avoid fickleness, but at the expense of the ability to lovingly react to the sufferings of others.

The terms on the left side also have both good and bad aspects. Oneness can mean wholeness, but also it can mean monotony or triviality. Actuality can mean definiteness or it can mean nonrelatedness to others. What happens to divine love when God is claimed to be pure actuality? God ends up loving the world, but is not intrinsically related to it, whatever sort of love that may be. Self-sufficiency can, at times, be selfishness.

Hence in each pair of polar contrasts we should diagram the divine attributes not the way the classical theist does so:

(good) permanence      (bad) change

But rather in the following manner:

being	becoming
(good)	(good)
(bad)	(bad)

The task when thinking of God is to attribute to God all excellences (left and right sides) and not to attribute to God any inferiorities (right and left sides). In short, excellent-inferior, knowledge-ignorance, or good-evil are invidious contrasts, and hence they ought not to be predicated of God, who, by definition, is the greatest conceivable. But one-many, being-becoming, activity-passivity, permanence-change, and the like are non-invidious contrasts. Evil is not a category, and hence it cannot be attributed to God. It is not a category because it is not universal; and it

is not universal because subhuman reality cannot commit it; even if it can be its victims. That is, both animals and God may very well feel evil but they cannot commit it, God because of the supreme goodness of the divine nature, animals because of their ignorance of moral principles.

Within each pole of a noninvidious contrast (for example, permanence-change) are not only invidious or injurious elements (inferior permanence or inferior change), but also noninvidious, good elements (excellent permanence or excellent change). The neoclassical, dipolar, process theist does not believe in two gods, one unified and the other plural. Rather, the process theist believes that what are often thought to be contradictories are really mutually interdependent correlatives, as Hartshorne indicates: “The good as we know it is unity-in-variety or variety-in-unity; if the variety overbalances, we have chaos or discord; if the unity, we have monotony or triviality” (Hartshorne 2000, 3).

Supreme excellence, to be truly so, must somehow be able to integrate all the complexity there is in the world into itself as one spiritual whole. The word “must” indicates divine necessity, along with God’s essence, which is to necessarily exist. The word “complexity” indicates the contingency that affects God through decisions creatures make. In the classical theistic view, however, God is identified solely with the stony immobility of the absolute, implying nonrelatedness to the world. God’s abstract nature, God’s being, may in a way escape from the temporal flux, but a living God is related to the world of becoming, which entails a divine becoming as well if the world in some way is internally related to God. The classical theist’s alternative to this view suggests that all relationships to God are external to divinity, once again threatening not only God’s love, but also God’s nobility. A dog’s being behind a particular rock affects the dog in certain ways; thus this relation is an internal relation to the dog, but it does not affect the rock, whose relationship with the dog is external to the rock’s nature. Does this not show the superiority of canine consciousness, which is aware of the rock, to rocklike existence, which is unaware of the dog? Is it not therefore peculiar that God has been described solely in rocklike terms: pure actuality, permanence, having only external relations, unmoved, being and not becoming?

One may wonder at this point why classical theism has been so popular among philosophical theists when it has so many defects. There are at least four reasons. First, it is simpler to accept monopolarity

than dipolarity. That is, it is simpler to accept one and reject the other of contrasting (or better, correlative, noninvidious) categories than to show how each, in its own appropriate fashion, applies to an aspect of the divine nature. Yet the simplicity of calling God “the absolute” can come back to haunt the classical theist if absoluteness precludes relativity in the sense of internal relatedness to the world.

Second, if the decision to accept monopolarity has been made, identifying God as the absolute is easier than identifying God as the most relative. Yet this does not deny divine relatedness, nor does it deny that God, who loves all, would therefore have to be related to all, or, to use a roughly synonymous word, be relative to all. God may well be the most relative of all as well as the most absolute of all, in the senses that, and to the extent that, both of these are excellences. Of course, God is absolute and relative in different aspects of the divine nature.

Third, there are emotional considerations favoring divine permanence, as found in the longing to escape the risks and uncertainties of life (see Plato’s *Seventh Letter* 325d–326b). Yet even if these considerations obtain, they should not blind us to other emotional considerations, like those that give us the solace that comes from knowing that the outcome of our sufferings and volitions makes a difference in the divine life, which, if it is all-loving, would not be unmoved by the sufferings of creatures.

And fourth, monopolarity is seen as more easily compatible with monotheism. But the innocent monotheistic contrast between the one and the many deals with God as an individual, not with the dogmatic claim that the divine individual cannot have parts or aspects of relatedness with the world.

In short, the divine being becomes, or the divine becoming is. God’s being and becoming form a single reality, and there is no reason that we must leave the two poles in a paradoxical state. As Hartshorne puts the point: “There is no law of logic against attributing contrasting predicates to the same individual, provided they apply to diverse aspects of this individual” (Hartshorne 2000, 14–15). The remedy for “ontolatry,” the worship of being, is not the contrary pole, “gignolatry,” the worship of becoming: “God is neither being as contrasted to becoming nor becoming as contrasted to being; but categorically supreme becoming in which there is a factor of categorically supreme being, as contrasted to inferior becoming, in which there is inferior being” (Hartshorne

2000, 24). In neoclassical or process theism the divine becoming is more ultimate than the divine being only for the reason that it is more inclusive, as we will see.

Thus, the theism that I am defending against the classical theism Philo initiated has several features:

1. It is a *dipolar* theism because excellences are found on both sides of the aforementioned contrasting categories (that is, they are correlative and noninvidious).
2. It is a *neoclassical* theism because it relies on the belief that classical theists (especially Anselm, as we will see momentarily) were on the correct track when they described God as the supremely excellent, all-worshipful, greatest conceivable being, but classical theists did an insufficient job of thinking through the logic of perfection.
3. It is a *process* theism because it sees the need for God to become in order for God to be called perfect, but not at the expense of God's always (that is, permanently) being greater than all others.
4. It is a theism that can be called *pan-en-theism*, which literally means "all is *in* God," say through divine omniscience. God is neither completely removed from the world (that is, unmoved by it), as in classical theism, nor completely identified with the world, as in pantheism (the belief that "all is God").

Rather, God is:

1. world-inclusive, in the sense that God cares for the whole world, and all feelings in the world, especially suffering feelings, are felt by God; and
2. transcendent in the sense that God is greater than any other being, especially because of God's necessary existence and God's preeminent love.

We should therefore reject the conception of God as an unmoved mover not knowing the moving world (Aristotelian theism); as the unmoved mover inconsistently knowing the moving world (classical theism); or as the unmoved mover knowing an ultimately unmoving, or at least noncontingent, world (pantheism).

Classical theists such as Philo may raise two objections that ought

to be considered. To the objection that if God changed God would not be perfect, for if God were perfect there would be no need to change, there is this reply: In order to be supremely excellent, God must at any particular time be the greatest conceivable being, the all-worshipful being. At a later time, however, or in a situation where some creature that previously did not suffer now suffers, God has new opportunities to exhibit divine, supreme excellence. That is, God's perfection does not merely allow God to change, but requires God to change. This does not mean that at the earlier time God was less than perfect in that at that earlier point the later suffering did not yet exist.

The other objection might be that God is neither one nor many, neither actual nor potential, and so forth, because no human concept whatsoever applies to God literally or univocally, but at most analogically. A classical theist such as Philo might say, perhaps, that God is more unitary than unity, more actual than actuality, as these are humanly known. Yet one wonders how classical theists, once they have admitted the insufficiency of human conceptions, can legitimately give a favored status to one side (the left side) of conceptual contrasts at the expense of the other. Why, if God is simpler than the one, is God not also more complex, in terms of relatedness to diverse actual occasions, than the many? Analogical predication and negative theology can just as easily fall victim to the monopolar prejudice as univocal predication. "To be agent and patient is in truth incomparably better than being either alone" (Hartshorne 1983, 54). This is preeminently the case with God, and an intelligent human being is vastly more of an agent and patient than a nonhuman animal, which is more of both than a plant or especially a stone. Stones can neither talk nor listen, nor can they decide for others or appreciate others' decisions.

One wonders how Philo and other classical theists can reconcile the self-sufficiency of deity in Aristotle (to be discussed later) with the providential concern and omnibenevolence of the biblical God. One denies and the other asserts a real relatedness between God and the world. Philo initiates this logical contradiction, as the great Philo scholar Harry Wolfson realized (see Wolfson 1948). Philo's and other classical theists' easy acceptance of this contradiction seems to be due to the fact that the sense of God's power is seen as stronger than the sense of God's love, and hence there was no intensely felt need to develop a concept of God that really secured a place for omnibenevolence. And

the highest sort of power has historically been seen in classical theism as pure activity immune to any influence (Hartshorne 2000, 76–77).

Monopolarity works at both a human and a divine level in Philo in that fickleness is seen (but why?) as a worse character trait than selfish rigidity. By contrast, suggesting that the higher the being in question, the higher the level of responsiveness to others, makes sense. If knowledge requires a certain sort of patience with respect to the object known, then beings with lesser knowledge have lesser patience status, whereas the greatest conceivable being would be receptive to all. That is, it is not merely pushing others around that is admirable. How odd it is to privilege impassibility when our very brains are the most responsive portions of ourselves as organisms. On the contrasting dipolar view of neoclassical or process theists, God is supremely passive and complex as well as supremely active and integrated, in the senses that and to the extent that each of these attributes is admirable (Hartshorne 2000, 81).

One can start to see the neoclassical or process critique of classical theistic omnipotence at this point. Preeminent power would have to involve preeminent “re-sponsiveness,” on this view, rather than aloof “inde-sponsiveness,” if this odd word be permitted in order to make my point. Admittedly, divine rule cannot be overthrown, but this is not because the dipolar God is impassive. God *always changes* and both words are needed. Philo is the first classical theist in that he begins the long tradition of metaphysical abuse of scripture. Saying in biblical fashion that God is one is to show disagreement with polytheism, but this does not necessarily commit one to the claim that there is no internal complexity (say in terms of responding to the multiplicity of sentient beings in the world) in the one God. Supporting the idea that God is timeless on biblical grounds is difficult, to say the least. The idea that change necessarily implies change for the worse is indefensible both on rational and biblical grounds. God’s legitimate “changelessness” can be better understood in terms of God’s always existing, indeed of God’s always changing, and of God’s steadfastness and dependability. The God who always is, as revealed to Moses in the tetragrammaton (the mysterious yet famous four letter response at Exodus 3:14 when Moses asks for the name of God: YHWH), is one who is alive and breathes (Hartshorne 2000, 81–84; also Bowker 2002, 178).

Importantly, the problems I see in classical theism are not due, as



they are often alleged, to the heavy influence of the Greeks on the classical theistic concept of God (even if they are due to the way in which classical theists appropriate the Greeks for their own purposes). For example, philosophical theism was helpful to Philo in escaping from polytheism. This was an ongoing project for the ancient Hebrews since they started out as polytheists (believers in many gods), gradually moved to henotheism (the belief that there is one god who is superior to all the other gods), and then gradually and fitfully moved to monotheism (the belief that there is one God). Thinking categorically (rather than in mythopoetic terms) about God facilitated these transitions. Experts even doubt that Philo had a firm grasp of spoken Hebrew, although he was clearly a master of Greek. But this is not the source of his problems regarding the concept of God, as I see things. We will consider the idea that divine dynamism is part of (albeit a largely neglected part of) the ancient Greek legacy. Philo himself flirts with this dynamism when he contrasts God's essence (*ousia*) with God's powers (*dynameis*) or energies (*energeiai*). Yet he remains a staunch defender of what I call monopolar theism (see Capetz 2003, 12; Armstrong 1993, 68–70, 115).

The Hartshornian judgment that Philo was the first classical theist and the view that his influence was enormous (even if largely unrecognized), rely to a great extent on Wolfson's scholarship, whom Hartshorne sees as one of the greatest historians of philosophy. No doubt some will see Hartshorne's and Wolfson's glorification of Philo as hyperbolic, but the bold (in the Popperian sense) and challenging thesis they present to us is nonetheless hard to refute: Finding a significant statement about the concept of God in medieval philosophy or in the Protestant reformers (except regarding specifically Christian topics such as the Incarnation or the Trinity) that is not found in Philo is difficult. But we have seen that this does not mean Philo's concept of God is unproblematic, a concept that involves a forced marriage between the Greek concept of changeless being and the loving God of the Bible or religious experience. In fact, the identification of God with a principle of fixity does an injustice not only to the God of the Bible, but it is also a corruption of Plato's philosophy. One cannot help but wonder about how intellectual history might have been significantly different if Plato's simplified view and the concept of God he initiated had been informed by the more complex (and, I allege, more accurate) view presented in Plato's dialogues. We should beware not only of views of God

that entirely lack intellectual content, but also of views of God based on bits of philosophy that have no relation whatsoever to religious insight or experience. An example of the latter is Philo's (and Thomas Aquinas's and others') view that the relationship between God and the world is real to the latter but not to the former (Hartshorne 1962, 122–123; 1965, 31, 145; 1967, 28; 1970, 38; 1972, 63; 1983, 7, 67; 1984a, 115; 1990, 31).

Claiming that Philo was not only the first classical theist, but also that he was the first medieval philosopher makes sense. Both Hartshorne and Wolfson tend to see medieval philosophy as that period in the discipline between ancient thinkers who lacked access to scripture and those modern thinkers who had access to scripture but who did not acknowledge its authority. That is, medieval philosophers are those who both have access to scripture and who see it as authoritative. (In this regard it may very well be Spinoza rather than Descartes who is the first great truly modern philosopher.) Seen in this light there is not as much of a gap between Philo and Augustine as might be supposed, given the fact that they adhered to different religions (Hartshorne 1983, 67). Both were monopolar theists who exhibited the five characteristics of classical theism mentioned earlier.