



Simon Kittle and Georg Gasser, eds. *The Divine Nature: personal and A-Personal perspectives*. New York: Routledge, 2022. Viii + 347pp. \$170.00 (hc), \$39.71 (ebook)

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It is typical in contemporary philosophy of religion to define ‘God’ as a being with *omni-properties* (e.g., omnipotence, omniscience), and it is also common for talk of God to assume that God is a person or a personal being. Yet within the Christian tradition (which receives a lot of attention in the philosophy of religion literature), there are models of God that deny that God is a person, rejecting or downplaying the *omni-properties* and emphasizing other attributes instead. Broadening the discussion to include other religious or non-religious traditions makes space for an even greater variety of models of God, the divine, or ultimate reality. Kittle and Gasser’s edited volume offers a collection of work that explores and examines these different models. Their volume is divided into three sections: section one focuses on issues related to *a-personal* approaches, section two on topics related to *personal* approaches, and the third section includes discussions related to practical considerations of *personal* and *a-personal* conceptions of the divine.

The introductory chapter highlights four conceptions of the divine (though there is no suggestion that these are exhaustive): classical theism, theistic personalism, a euteleological conception of the divine, and *a-personal* axiarchism. Classical theism generally focuses on the divine attributes of simplicity, timelessness, immutability, and impassibility (though classical theists do not agree on whether these attributes exclude God from counting as a person or not). Theistic personalism maintains that God is a person, oftentimes emphasizing the *omni-properties*. The other two models offer *a-personal* conceptions of the divine that have not received as much attention in the literature. According to a euteleological conception, the divine is the ultimate goodness to which all things in reality are directed—the yet to be realized *telos/end* (pp. 11–12). Axiarchism posits an axiological dimension that serves an explanatory

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role concerning the existence of the universe (“the world exists because it normatively ought to”), where that axiological principle stands for the divine (pp. 14–17).

The chapters in section one primarily addresses a-personal conceptions. Some of these chapters evaluate a-personal approaches as alternatives to the typical theistic frameworks that take God to be a person or to possess the standard *omni*-properties. Yujin Nagasawa (in Chap. 2) considers the putative advantage that a-personal axiarchism has over personal theism given the problem of evil (including the modal problem of evil such that there should be no possible world of appalling evil given the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God), yet he argues that some of the plausible responses (e.g., modal realism, selection of a less than best world, etc.) favors personal theism over axiarchism. Georg Gasser (in Chap. 4) compares theism and a euteological conception of the divine with regards to hope concerning the future, suggesting that both models can rationally maintain hope of different sorts—one focusing on individual immortality and the other the good for all of reality. Other chapters highlight issues within particular religious or philosophical traditions. For instance, Nick Trakakis presents and evaluates (in Chap. 3) the in-house debate among British idealists between personal idealism and absolute idealism. Sam Lebens claims (in Chap. 5) that the theological method of Maimonides may permit a personal God—especially given Hassidic idealism—despite Maimonides’ insistence (based on his acceptance of a strong form of apophaticism) that God is not a person. And Mohammed Saleh Zarepour offers a case (in Chap. 7) for the compatibility of literalism about the Quran (which maintains that God is not a person) with a personal God who can speak.

Natalja Deng’s contribution (in Chap. 6) considers some ways in which a timeless conception of God can play a role in religious practice. An alleged advantage of divine temporality (i.e., the view that God is in time or experiences temporal succession) is that it helps make sense of some religious practices such as worship and prayer, which seem to require a personal God. If divine personhood requires divine temporality, then making sense of religious practices requires accepting divine temporality. However, Deng suggests that the role of mystery and otherness plays a significant role in religious practice (p. 116), and divine timelessness may fit better with such mystery and otherness. Whether this is so or not will require examining specific religious practices and assessing the exact role that mystery plays in it.

Section two includes chapters concerning personal models of God. Richard Swinburne (in Chap. 9) and Christopher Knight (in Chap. 11) consider our epistemic limitations concerning thinking and talking about God, though Swinburne highlights a non-literal and analogical way of understanding God as a person whereas Knight brings perennialist and Eastern Orthodox approaches to bear with respect to understanding God as a personal being. Jonathan Kvanvig (in Chap. 8) lays out three different (metatheological) approaches to conceptualizing God—Creator Theology, Perfect Being Theology, and Worship-Worthiness Theology—with a particular focus on whether these approaches can secure several desiderata with regards to an adequate conception of God. While Perfect Being Theology tends to get a lot of attention in the literature, Kvanvig argues that both Creator Theology and Worship-Worthiness Theology are able to secure personhood better than Perfect Being Theology (though it is unclear if this is a disadvantage for those proponents of Perfect Being Theology

who want to deny God's personhood) and that Creator Theology secures monotheism better than the other two approaches, thereby giving Creator Theology an advantage over these rivals. The contributions by Simon Kittle (in Chap. 10) and Ryan Mullins (in Chap. 12) argue in favor of divine temporality. For Kittle, a personal God will have the kind of free will that involves making choices, which is to be construed diachronically, and hence a personal God must be temporal. Mullins considers an intermediate view between classical theism and theistic personalism developed by Linda Zagzebski, who develops and defends the attribute of divine omniscience (i.e., God's capacity for perfect total empathy), and he argues that such an attribute is incompatible with God's being timeless and immutable.

The final section includes chapters that reflect on some of the practical implications of these different models of God. Mark Wynn (in Chap. 13) considers the tension between apophaticism and personalism about God and provides an approach that employs the concept of shared or joint attention, thereby allowing God as appearing as a "Who" or a personal being. Anastasia Scrutton (in Chap. 15) and Mark Berkson (in Chap. 17) bring into the discussion some global traditions that impact the ways in which the divine or ultimate reality is conceptualized. Scrutton examines the interactions of some religious practitioners with Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and Jizo or Bodhisattvas (in Mahayana Buddhism), who appear to be able to bring about significant comfort or consolation given their role as fellow-sufferers, thereby giving some practical reason for believing in a comforter who can also suffer, including God (and so providing some practical support for believing in a passible God). Berkson (in Chap. 17) considers Daoist, neo-Confucian, and Hindu models of ultimate reality, averring that some of these conceptions can be accepted by atheists or nones and suggesting the need to consider different metaphors or symbols for articulating or talking about the divine or ultimate reality. Tim Mulgan (in Chap. 16) and John Bishop and Ken Perszyk (in Chap. 14) address practical concerns for a-personal conceptions, in particular ananthropocentric purposivism and a euteleological conception of God, respectively. Ananthropocentric purposivism (which is a version of axiarchism) maintains that the universe has a purpose but that human beings are irrelevant to that purpose (and where God or the divine is identified with that purpose). In his chapter, Mulgan argues that God as characterized by ananthropocentric purposivism—that is, as a non-human-centered, a-personal being—can be an appropriate object of our worship. Bishop and Perszyk assess whether their euteleological approach to the divine allows for a satisfactory soteriology and eschatology. While their view does not permit individual immortality, they argue that there is a sense in which humans can participate in eternal life by seeking to realize or participate in the realization of the divine or ultimate purpose, which is the supreme good (which Bishop and Perszyk take to be *agape*-love). Soteriologically, their euteleological conception focuses on the ways in which evil is overcome, and while there is no guarantee of the final defeat of evil, the overall outcome may be the continued overcoming of evils where goodness and love are realized in an ongoing way.

Plenty of debates remain. Does theism (whether classical theism or theistic personalism) handle the problem of evil better than axiarchism? Do euteleological conceptions of the divine provide a viable account of salvation and eternal life? Should meaning and immortality include concern for the future of human individuals or

should it only concern the purpose of the universe or ultimate reality? Assessing the methodology by which these models are evaluated and compared would also be a worthwhile endeavor. Does providing a better way of addressing suffering and eternal life point in favor of a particular model? And how do we keep score? Some chapters assumed that maintaining divine personhood is an advantage, but we need a methodology that helps us establish theoretical desiderata and ways of score-keeping. And it is not even obvious if the comparing and assessing of models should even be regarded as competitive; and if not, then stating one as more advantageous than another would be inapt. Recent work on the role and use of theological models would help navigate the direction in answering some of these questions and concerns.

Another area that would benefit from additional conceptual clarification is over the notion of divine personhood. Whether classical theism (of the sort that maintains that God is simple, timeless, immutable, and impassible) requires rejecting divine personhood or not would be helped by such clarification. Moreover, some contributors considered the possibility of something being personal but not being a person. But given the various ways of construing divine personhood, including non-univocal and analogical approaches (even from theistic personalists), it is a conceptually murky and unclear whether there are genuine disagreements between some of these accounts or merely different ways of analyzing or defining some of these terms. Of course, there is genuine conflict between some of these models and approaches, but these debates indicate the need of attaining greater clarity and precision concerning some of these concepts.

Given the need for more engagement with these models of the divine or ultimate reality, Kittle and Gasser's volume provides a valuable service of bringing these discussions closer to the center of attention, especially since these models and approaches have often been neglected or given too little focus in the philosophy of religion. Continued examination of other global traditions, which thankfully is occurring in some quarters within philosophy of religion, seems likely to engender additional models of the divine or ultimate reality, or at least may require some revision, modification, or retooling of existing models and concepts. It may also lead to normalizing some metaphors or symbols that are not frequented in the current literature but are deeply entrenched within specific religious or philosophical traditions. In my view, this is all welcome and for the good of our field.

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