

Article

St. John of the Cross and the Monopolar Concept of God in the Abrahamic Religions in Spain

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to philosophically explore the tension between “the God of the philosophers” and “the God of religious experience.” This exploration will focus on the mystical theology of the 16th c. Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross. It will be argued that a satisfactory resolution of the aforementioned tension cannot occur on the basis of the monopolar theism that has dominated the Abrahamic religions. That is, a better understanding of mystics in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam can occur via dipolar theism as articulated by contemporary process philosophers in the Abrahamic religions, especially the thought of Charles Hartshorne.

Keywords: mysticism; St. John of the Cross; Spain; monopolar theism; dipolar theism; process theism; Charles Hartshorne

1. Introduction

A largely neglected feature of the famous *convivencia* or coexistence of the three major Abrahamic religions in Spain is that at a very abstract level, thinkers in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam shared certain questionable assumptions regarding the concept of God. These shared assumptions were due to the way that Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers interpreted their sacred scriptures in light of ancient Greek philosophers, especially Plato and Aristotle (the problem is not so much with Plato, in particular, but rather with the way he was interpreted). One key assumption will be examined here, which is the view of divine attributes as monopolar (to be described momentarily). Influential Jewish thinkers like Philo (1st c.—[Philo 1929–1962](#)) and Maimonides (12th c.—[Maimonides 1885](#)), Christian thinkers like Saints Augustine (4–5th c.—[Augustine 1998](#)), Anselm (11th c.—[Anselm 1962](#)), and Thomas Aquinas (13th c.—[Thomas Aquinas 1972](#)), and Muslim thinkers like Al-Ghazzali (11–12th c.—[Al-Ghazzali 2000](#)) and Averroes (12th c.—[Averroes 1954](#)) were all classical, monopolar theists. They shaped a concept of God that influenced mystics in all three Abrahamic religions in Spain (see [Hartshorne 1953](#), pp. 76–164). Maimonides and Averroes are especially noteworthy because they lived in Spain (also see [Solares 2020](#)).

The problem with the classical, monopolar concept of God that I will analyze is that it is at odds with the God experienced by the great mystics in the Abrahamic religions, including the great mystics in 16th c. Spain, which is something of a peak era in mystical theology, much like Renaissance painting or 19th c. symphonic orchestration. In the present article, I will concentrate on St. John of the Cross ([John of the Cross 1948, 1973](#)), but other mystics in the Abrahamic religions (including kabbalistic and Sufi mystics) would serve just as well, given the pervasiveness of classical, monopolar assumptions regarding the concept of God. It is familiar to hear of “the God of the philosophers” at odds with “the God of religious experience.” My thesis in the present article is that this opposition is actually between “the God of classical, monopolar theism” and “the God of religious experience,” in that an improved neoclassical, dipolar concept of God can be developed that lessens the tension between the *concept* of God and the *experience* of God. Charles Hartshorne is the neoclassical, dipolar theist on whom I will rely most heavily in the development of my thesis in philosophy of religion.

The hope is that I will be able to advance the evolving legacy of Spanish mysticism by providing a concept of God more in line with what the great Spanish mystics, especially John of the Cross, say about the God they experienced. That is, I do not see the present article as a piece of antiquarian lore, but as an exercise in ongoing engagement with the concept of, and experience of, God. Further, in addition to Hartshorne, there are other neoclassical, dipolar theists who have come out of Christianity on whom I could rely, such as Alfred North Whitehead (Whitehead 1967, 1996), John Cobb (Cobb 2007), David Ray Griffin (Griffin 2001), Teilhard de Chardin (Teilhard de Chardin 1971), and Carol Christ, as well as contemporary Jewish neoclassical, dipolar theists like Abraham Heschel and Bradley Artson, and contemporary Muslim thinkers with similar views like Mohammed Iqbal and Mustafa Ruzgar. Further, the view of John of the Cross I will be developing in this article has benefitted greatly from the scholarship of Cristobal Serran-Pagan, who counteracts the view of John of the Cross's thought as world-negating by locating his mysticism in the context of the *conversos*, those Jews and Muslims who converted to Christianity and who enriched the tradition of mysticism in the Abrahamic religions in Spain (see Serran-Pagan 2018).

I should note at the outset that, despite the conceptual similarities I am emphasizing among classical theists in all three Abrahamic religions, there are also obvious differences among them that will not be treated in the present article. For example, regarding mysticism, there is a tendency in Christian mystics like John of the Cross to describe infused contemplation in terms of "mystic union" with God, if not absorption into God. In this regard, John of the Cross's *deificacion o endiosamiento* is like the *theosis* of Eastern Orthodox mystics in emphasizing mysticism as a process whereby one becomes deified. By partial contrast, Jewish mystics tend to emphasize the concept of *devekuth*, a loving intimacy with God, but not union with God or absorption into God. Mystics in Islam are also intent on preserving the view of God as *totaliter aliter* (as totally other). However, the important conceptual similarities among classical theists in general, to be described momentarily, are undeniable. Further, when John of the Cross speaks of *igualdad de amor* with God he is obviously not trying to establish a literal equality between human beings and God, but is rather trying to remove any unnecessary distance between the two such that mystical experience can be facilitated; this consideration tends to lessen any huge gaps among mystics in the Abrahamic religions. That is, in this article I will be dealing with the *common* problem of reconciling the monopolar concept of God with the experience of God, a problem John of the Cross shared with other Iberian mystics like Moses de Leon (Moses de Leon 1988), Abraham Abulafia (see Cole 2007), Ignatius of Loyola (Ignatius of Loyola 1964), Teresa of Avila (Teresa of Avila 1976), Ibn Abbad of Ronda (Ibn Abbad of Ronda 1986), Ibn al-Arabi (see Bashier 2004), etc.

2. Monopolar vs. Dipolar Theism

It is widely assumed that "the God of the philosophers" is at odds with John of the Cross's God of mystical experience. However, it will serve us well to be skeptical of the claim that it is the philosophical concept of God per se that is the problem. We would be better served to see what is problematic about the classical concept of God from the perspective of John of the Cross's mystical experience, then explore the possibility of there being a concept of God more congenial to such experience. Granted, as a theologian, John of the Cross was heavily influenced by the classical concept of God, especially as articulated by Thomas Aquinas, but as an author of several classics in the history of *mystical experience*, John of the Cross gives us a quite different view of God. My hope in the present article is to try to close the gap between the concept of God and mystical experience. Although John of the Cross was brought to the Carmelite order by St. Teresa of Avila precisely because of his Thomistic expertise in philosophy and theology so as to give intellectual rigor to the order, it is ironic that the classical theistic view that he knew was at odds with the mystical theology for which he became famous. It must be admitted that there is a tension in his thought between systematic theology and mystical theology, and that he leans in the direction of the latter, but there is no good reason to assume that this tension cannot be relaxed by more carefully examining the monopolar systematic theology in question.

At the outset, I would like to make it clear that by “classical theism” I refer to a view of God in philosophy and theology, not to biblical theism. It is an interesting question, and an open one, whether classical, monopolar theism or neoclassical, dipolar theism (to be explained momentarily) does a better job of preserving the best insights regarding the concept of God in the Abrahamic scriptures. This classical theistic view involves at least the following five features:

1. Omnipotence (including the related claim that God created the world out of absolute nothingness).
2. Omniscience (in the sense of God knowing, with absolute assurance and in minute detail, everything that will happen in the future).
3. Omnibenevolence.
4. Eternity (in the sense not of God existing everlastingly throughout all of time, but rather of God existing outside of time altogether).
5. Monopolarity (again, to be defined momentarily).

It will be to our advantage to be as clear as we can on what we mean by the term “God.” In this effort we will be able to see more clearly the strengths and weaknesses of the classical theistic view. I will use the term “God” to refer to the supremely excellent or all-worshipful being. A debt to Anselm is evident in this preliminary definition. It closely resembles Anselm’s “that than which no greater can be conceived” (see chp. 2–3 of his *Proslogion*).

However, Anselm’s ontological argument is not what is at stake here. Even if the argument fails, the preliminary definition of God as the supremely excellent being, the all-worshipful being, or the greatest conceivable being seems unobjectionable. To say that God can be defined in these ways still leaves open the possibility that God is even more excellent or worshipful than our ability to conceive. This allows us to avoid objections from those in mystical theology in the Abrahamic religions like John of the Cross who might fear that by defining God we might be limiting God to “merely” human language. I am simply suggesting that when we think of God, we must be thinking of a being who surpasses all others, or else we are not thinking of God. Even the atheist or agnostic would admit this much. When the atheist says, “There is no God”, there is a denial that a supremely excellent, all-worshipful, greatest conceivable being exists (see [Mahoney 2004](#)).

The excellent–inferior contrast is the truly invidious contrast when applied to God. If to be invidious is to be injurious, then this contrast is the most invidious one of all when both terms are applied to God, because God is only excellent. God is inferior in no way. To suggest that God is in some small way inferior to some other being is no longer to speak about God, but about some being that is not supremely excellent, all-worshipful, or the greatest conceivable. The dipolar theist’s major criticism of classical theism is that it assumes that all contrasts, or most of them, when applied to God are at least somewhat invidious.

Let us assume that God exists. What attributes does God possess? Consider the following two columns of attributes in polar contrast to each other (see [Hartshorne 1953](#), pp. 1–25):

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

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, the classical theist decides

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). Hence God is one but not many, permanent but not changing, and so on. This leads to what can be called the monopolar prejudice. The classical theist believes that the categorical contrasts listed above are invidious.

The defects found in monopolar, classical theism are artificial. They are 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-hand column. Classical theists in the Abrahamic religions have been convinced that God's eternity means not that God endures through all time everlastingly, but that God is outside of time altogether, and is not, cannot be receptive to temporal change and creaturely feelings. Thomas Aquinas (following Aristotle, who was the greatest predecessor to classical theism) identified God as unmoved; and John of the Cross followed Thomas Aquinas in this regard in his *systematic theology*, but not in what he indicates regarding *mystical experience*. 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, as John of the Cross frequently indicates (e.g., *Spiritual Canticle* 32, 1–2). 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, a reaction that is central to the testimony of the great theistic mystics, including John of the Cross.

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 non-relatedness to others. What happens to divine love when God is claimed by Thomas Aquinas 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.

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; but one–many, being–becoming, and the like are noninvidious contrasts (see Beng 2009).

Within each pole of a noninvidious contrast (e.g., permanence–change), there are invidious or injurious elements (inferior permanence or inferior change), but also noninvidious, good elements (excellent permanence or excellent change). The dipolar, process theist does not believe in two gods, one unified and the other plural. Rather, there is belief that what are often thought to be contradictories are really mutually interdependent correlatives. The good is unity-in-variety or variety-in-unity. Too much variety leads to chaos or discord; whereas too much unity leads to monotony or triviality (see Hartshorne 1948, 1970; Artson 2013; Ruzgar 2008).

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 creaturely decisions. In the classical theistic view, however, God is identified solely with the stony immobility of the absolute, implying non-relatedness 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 being behind a particular rock affects the dog in certain ways, and 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 by classical theists solely in rocklike terms: Pure actuality, permanence, having only external relations, unmoved, being and not becoming? These terms are very much at odds with the God described in John of the Cross's mystical experiences and in the experiences of other mystics in the Abrahamic religions. Granted, John of the Cross in some sense (in the divine existence and abstract essence) sees God as immutable (*immutable para siempre*), but he is also quick to point out that in another sense, God changes, indeed that God surrenders to us (see, e.g., *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, III, 21). That is, one must question exactly what it *means* to refer to divine immutability.

The dipolar nature of John of the Cross's theism is evidenced when we see him often describing God as just *and* merciful, powerful *and* loving, sublime *and* delicate, etc. This sort of pairing is a commonplace in his thought (see, e.g., *Living Flame of Love*, 3, 2 and 3, 6). In fact, he says that if we are seeking God, it is even more true to say that God is seeking us, is moving toward us (see, e.g., *Living Flame of Love*, 3, 28).

3. Some Criticisms

One may wonder at this point why classical theism has been so popular among Abrahamic theists when it has so many defects. One can imagine at least four reasons, none of which establish the case for classical, monopolar theism: (1) 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, including those who enter into sanjuanistic mystical union with God.

(2) If the decision to accept monopolarity has been made, it is simpler to identify God as the absolute than to identify God as the most relative. Yet this does not deny divine relatedness, nor that God, who loves all, would therefore have to be related to all, or, to use a roughly synonymous term, be relative to all. God may well be the most relative of all as well as the most absolute of all, in the sense that, and to the extent that, both of these are excellences. Of course, God is absolute and is relative in different aspects of the divine nature.

(3) There are emotional considerations favoring divine permanence, as found in the longing to escape the risks and uncertainties of life. 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 (as John of the Cross and other Abrahamic mystics attest), will certainly not be unmoved by the suffering of creatures.

(4) Monopolarity is seen as more easily compatible with Abrahamic monotheism. Yet 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 itself 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 to leave the two poles in a paradoxical state: God *always changes* and both words are crucial. There is no logical contradiction in attributing contrasting predicates to the same individual provided they apply to different aspects of this individual. Hence, the remedy for "ontolatry," the worship of being, is not the contrary pole, "gignolatry," the worship of becoming. God's *existence* is everlastingly permanent, but God's *actuality* (how God exists concretely from moment to moment) is constantly changing (see [Hartshorne 1984](#)).

The concept of God that I am defending is: (a) *Dipolar*, because excellences can be found on both sides of contrasting categories (i.e., they are correlative and noninvidious); (b) a *neoclassical* theism, because it relies on the belief that classical theists (especially Anselm and Gersonides—see [Hartshorne 1953](#), pp. 75, 106, 112, 118, 189, 225) were on the correct track when they

described God as the supremely excellent, all-worshipful, greatest conceivable being, but the classical theists did an insufficient job of thinking through the logic of perfection; (c) 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 (i.e., permanently) *being* greater than all others; and (d) a theism that can be called *panentheism*, which literally means "all in God." God is neither completely removed from the world—i.e., unmoved by it—as in classical theism, nor completely identified with the world, as in pantheism. Rather, God is: (i) World-inclusive, in the sense that God cares for all the world, and all feelings in the world—especially suffering feelings—are felt by God; and (ii) transcendent, in the sense that God is greater than any other being, especially because of God's love. Thus, we should reject the concept of God as an unmoved mover not knowing the moving world (see Aristotle's *Metaphysics*); as the unmoved mover inconsistently knowing the moving world (classical theism); and as the unmoved mover knowing an ultimately unmoving, or at least noncontingent, world (Stoics, Spinoza—see [Spinoza 1992](#), pantheism). Indeed, Heschel refers to God as the *most* moved mover (see [Heschel 1962](#)).

Two objections may be raised by the classical theist 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 who previous 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.

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. The classical theist would 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 concepts, 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 in Abrahamic thinkers can just as easily fall victim to the monopolar prejudice as univocal predication. To be agent and patient together is much better than being either alone. This is preeminently the case with God, and a human being is more of an agent and patient than is an ape, who is more of both than a stone. Stones can neither talk nor listen, nor can they decide or appreciate others' decisions. The problem is not with analogical discourse regarding God per se, but rather with analogical discourse when distorted in a monopolar way.

4. The Importance of Divine Love in the Abrahamic Traditions

It probably does not even occur to classical theists to seriously question the idea that God is wholly immutable and nontemporal in that it is simply assumed that mutability and temporality constitute the order of the created. Or again, Abrahamic classical theists do not see as problematic the seemingly obvious contradiction between a concept of God as not compassionate (because immutable) and the evidence of John of the Cross's mystical experience and of the experience of other Abrahamic mystics wherein God is eminently compassionate and loving. This evidence is found on almost every page of John of the Cross's writings in all four of his major works: *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *Dark Night of the Soul*, *Living Flame of Love*, and *The Spiritual Canticle*. Somehow or other, the classical theist alleges by way of contrast, God helps those in misery without sympathizing with them. It is simply assumed in classical theism that not to suffer is better than to suffer, rather than to think through carefully the dipolar (rather than monopolar) logic of perfection.

In this regard, Jewish classical theists (Philo, Maimonides, etc.), Christian classical theists (Saints Augustine, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, as well as Martin Luther, John Calvin, etc.), and Muslim classical theists (Al-Ghazzali, Averroes, [Avicenna 2005](#) [Ibn Sina]—see [Inati 1996](#)) are saddled with a monopolar metaphysics that is at odds with the great works in mystical theology (especially John of the Cross's) in

these various traditions. Classical theists, in general, have a tendency toward the naked worship of power on the analogy of the political form of coercive power found in the despot, rather than toward responsive love (see [Bushlack 2020](#)). Or at least they have a tendency to put the concept of responsive love in a position subservient to divine omnipotence (see [Sanderline 1989, 1993](#)).

The problems of Saints Augustine and Thomas Aquinas are those of *all* classical theists in creating a monopolar concept of God that is impossible to reconcile with John of the Cross's mystical experience or the mystical experience of other Abrahamic theists. The relations between human beings and God are, from the Thomistic point of view, real to the creatures, but not to God, despite the fact that in mystical experience the mystic senses real relations both ways. The classical theist is imprisoned in the half-truths of monopolarity.

Further evidence of John of the Cross's similarity to mystics in other Abrahamic faiths is not hard to find. For example, there is an "Oriental" layer to the biblical *Song of Songs* that is the basis for his work *The Spiritual Canticle*, as Gerald Brenan has argued (see [Brenan 1973](#)). There is also a Jewish sensibility in evidence in his mystical *knowing by acquaintance* (in contrast to the abstract *knowledge by description* found in systematic theology), which reminds one of "biblical knowing" in the Hebrew scriptures, as Leo Spitzer and Deirdre Green have argued (see [Spitzer 1969](#); [Green 1986](#)). Camille Campbell has gone so far as to suggest that John of the Cross's panentheism was influenced by the Jewish Kabbalah (see [Campbell 1982](#)). In this regard, one is reminded of Teresa of Avila's own well-known Jewish roots and of the fact that Mt. Carmel itself, which was something of a spiritual "Mecca" for both John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, was the site of both Jewish and Christian solitaries over the centuries (see [Dombrowski 1992](#); also [Dombrowski 1994, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2010](#)). Additionally, because John of the Cross's ancestors on his father's side were, like Teresa of Avila's, Toledan silk merchants, there are reasons to suspect that John of the Cross may also have had Jewish roots. And John of the Cross's mother may have had Moorish roots, as Luce Lopez Baralt has emphasized (see [Baralt 1985](#)). Fernand Braudel also argues that John of the Cross's famous dark night may have had an Islamic predecessor in Ibn Abbad (see [Braudel 1975](#); also see [Nieto 1979](#)). That is, despite surface differences among the Abrahamic faiths, philosophers and theologians in these traditions are, like an aquatic plant, rooted beneath the surface by their classical theistic, monopolar assumptions. Likewise, contemporary process theists in different traditions are united beneath the surface in their neoclassical, dipolar theism (see [Bornstein 2019](#)).

5. Metaphysical Considerations

The doctrine of divine monopolarity is integrally connected to substantialist thinking, with John of the Cross's mystical experience by contrast connected to the vision of God as *living* and processual. There is an inverse relationship between classical theism's inability to explain a concept of God compatible with mystical experience in the positive sense of "mystical" and its tendency to proliferate "mystery" in the pejorative sense of the term. Two examples of the latter are: (1) The nastiest version of the theodicy problem created by classical theism's version of divine omnipotence, wherein all of the evils in the world are either sent by, or at least permitted by, the classical theistic God; and (2) the "mystery" of how human beings could be free (and hence responsible for their actions) if God is omniscient even with respect to the outcome of future contingencies such that the classical theistic God knows with complete assurance and in minute detail *everything* that human beings will do even before they act. That is, classical theism inflates "mystery" in the pejorative sense of the term and deflates the positive aspects of mystical experience that are the lifeblood of religious belief.

None of the concrete religious experiences of God in the Abrahamic religions are explicated well by classical theistic abstractions. Luckily, the long reign of monopolarity and etiolatry (worship of divine causality and denigration of divine receptivity) need not last forever. The hope is that Christian and other varieties of mysticism would find a theoretical home. By focusing on divine eternity (in contrast to divine temporal everlastingness) and divine unchangeableness in a classical theistic manner, the very heart of religion in mystical experience is lost or at least denigrated.

The problems with classical theism are ultimately metaphysical in that they involve a defective understanding of the relationship between being and becoming, the abstract and the concrete. Although mystical experience itself is not to be identified with metaphysical thinking, it may very well be the case that the latter is needed to accurately illuminate the former. The proper indictment of classical theism need not imply a veto on mystical experience. Instead, such an indictment can be seen as part of the effort to purify mystical experience and belief and to insure that the rich history of mystical experience (especially evidenced in 16th c. Spain) will not only be remembered, but will inspire a flourishing of mystical experience into the long-run future.

A changeless being cannot love, at least if the love in question is even remotely analogous to what we human beings understand love to be. This is why the greatest conceivable being could not be changeless, despite the entrenched concept of God that is inherited by many religious believers in the Abrahamic religions. Granted, if we abstract from all of God's contingent qualities (as in God's particular responses to those who have had sanjuanistic mystical experiences), the rest of the divine reality is described somewhat accurately by classical theists in that some aspects of God (e.g., God's everlasting *existence*) are in fact unchanging. God is both contingent and necessary in different aspects of the divine life and classical theists are to be thanked for the intellectual progress made with respect to description of the latter aspects. The gradual collapse of classical theism from the time of the Enlightenment until the present is due in large measure, however, to classical theism's inaccurate description of God's contingent aspects. Indeed, these are denied.

God's superiority to us, on classical theistic grounds, is that God only acts and does not interact. This unfortunately eliminates *any* analogy between God and creatures, despite the insightful Thomistic emphasis placed on the doctrine of analogy. The lack of such interaction would, if it occurred, ring the death knell for sanjuanistic and other mystical experience. Luckily there is a dipolar alternative to monopolar classical theism.

To worship Being (or the absolutely independent) is to worship an aspect of God rather than God. When classical theists do precisely this, they should not be surprised that they do not provide a warrant for mystical experience. It will be remembered that Jewish, Christian, and Islamic philosophers alike were heavily influenced by Aristotle in this regard, with Islamic scholars and translators making such influence possible; further, this consideration is not at odds with the thesis that it was actually the Neoplatonists who influenced classical theists in these traditions when it is realized that, regarding the concept of God, the Neoplatonists could just as easily be referred to as Neoaristotelians (see [Dombrowski 2005](#); also [Plato 1999](#); [Aristotle 1984](#)). By confusing the divine fulness with an abstraction like being or absoluteness, classical theists no doubt think that they are doing the concept of God a favor, but what is more likely is that they will make classical theism increasingly unbelievable. Nonetheless, we should thank classical theists for offering us a first approximation, albeit a one-sided one, of the concept of God. At its worst, this concept leads to idolatry. Likewise, classical physics was a first approximation to truth in that discipline, with relativity and quantum theories supplementing the original theory in crucial ways.

If there can be nothing greater or more worshipful than preeminent love, as John of the Cross indicates, especially in *The Living Flame of Love*, then there is something crucially misleading in the classical theistic identification of divine love with strict independence and nonrelativity (i.e., absoluteness). This sort of being would not even be minimally loving, much less worshipfully so. The chief contribution of classical theism is its emphasis on permanence, but the permanence of *divine love* is not explicated well on a classical theistic basis. As before, *God always changes* and both words are crucial. If one prays to the classical theistic God, or if one enters into mystical union with such a God, the divine being is in no way influenced because the God of classical theism influences all, but is in no way influenced. Aristotle accurately saw the consequences of God as an unmoved mover and more consistently owned up to these consequences than classical theists. Aristotle's God knows only itself, does not care for others, and cannot be affected by them, whether positively or negatively. So much the less for the notion that God is an unmoved mover. How can a "God" who is in no way changeable,

is not capable of growth in any sense, is in no way open to influence or enrichment by the creatures, and is wholly self-sufficient, nonsocial, and nonloving (or at least is not loving in any way we can understand or feel) nonetheless be the God of religion and mystical experience?

The basic axioms that underly divine monopolarity are seldom questioned by classical theists, which is why neoclassical theists provide such an important function in the effort to understand John of the Cross's mystical experience. In all cases of knowing that we are able to understand, the knower conforms to and partially depends on the known. However, in classical theism God is made an exception to this understandable view by making the known conform to and depend on the divine knower. To say that God knows the world in classical theism is to say quite ironically that the world is known by God.

The flourishing of various mystics in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in *convivencia* and 16th c. Spain, despite the lack of theoretical support from classical theism for their religious experiences, indicates the vitality and resilience of mystical theology. The attempt to blend total self-sufficiency and nonreceptiveness, on the one hand, with a God of loving relatedness to creatures, on the other, is inherently futile. The fact that God is totally devoid of compassion (or even passion) is a skeleton in the classical theist's closet that is an embarrassment in the face of the long history of mystical experience in 16th c. Spain and elsewhere. Love and compassion need not be seen as signs of weakness: To the contrary! To say that God is an unmoved mover *and* a preeminently loving being is to reduce the analogy between human love and divine love to the vanishing point (see [Payne 1990](#); [Murphy 1996](#)).

The classical theistic world is one devoid of chance due to its view of divine power. This mistaken view acts like a corrosive acid with respect to any effort to extricate the classical theistic God from responsibility for the intense suffering that pervades human history. Or more charitably, if the half-truths of classical theism were recognized as such, rather than confusing them with an approximation to the whole truth, then there could also have been a closer approximation of a concept of God compatible with the testimonies of the famous mystics like John of the Cross. It is quite amazing that the definition of God as immutable perfection without remainder has held sway for two millennia.

The view I am defending in this article is that classical theism is an incorrect translation of the central religious ideas (e.g., love) into philosophical categories. The goal is to preserve, and perhaps even enhance, mystical experience while avoiding contradictions and paradox. Theological paradoxes, it should be noted, tend to be contradictions applied to the divine case. To repeat an example from classical theism itself, if a dog is superior to a pillar because the former is capable of internal relations, whereas the latter is capable only of external relations, and if a human being is far superior to the dog in terms of capacity for internal relations, is it not a "paradox" that the greatest conceivable being was thought to be wholly devoid of internal relations? If God is purely absolute (i.e., purely unrelated), then the only being that God could enjoy is divinity itself and we cannot, even in mystical experience, be related to such a God.

The classics in mystical theology in the Abrahamic religions give testimony not to a God unrelated to creatures, but to a God *supremely* related to creatures. A rock has no internal relations to others, a dog has some, a human being is internally related to a far greater number than a dog and in a qualitatively superior way, and God is either unrelated to creatures in a reversion back to a rock-like existence (as in classical theism) or supremely related to creatures both quantitatively and qualitatively (as in neoclassical theism).

To be known or felt by all subjects is just as distinctive as to know or feel all subjects, on the dipolar view. Whereas classical theism legitimately emphasizes the status of God as the subject-for-all-objects, it is a distinctive feature of neoclassical theism to also see God as the object-for-all-subjects. Neoclassical theism contributes to mystical theology by emphasizing not only that God knows us, but also that we can know and feel God. Our contributions to divine awareness can even be enjoyed by us as such. Preeminent activity *and* passivity should be included in any adequate description of deity. The Jesuit motto derived from St. Ignatius of Loyola and with which John of the Cross was no doubt familiar due to his education under the Jesuits (*ad majorem Dei gloriam*—that we should contribute all for the

greater glory of God), which might function well as a motto for Abrahamic theists in general, makes no sense if God cannot receive our contributions. On a classical theistic basis, it seems that we can only serve ourselves.

The seeking of simple explanations for complex issues can indeed prove to be useful as a first step on a long journey. However, there is no virtue in engaging in a method of tenacity in defense of traditional simplifications. Experience does not exhibit the essential inferiority of the contrasting terms to classical theism's preference for permanence and activity. That is, change and receptivity are often *experienced* as positive, as in listening very carefully to someone who thinks that her point of view has been trivialized or ignored in the past, or as in listening for the counterpoint in a difficult piece of music.

6. God as Personal

Whatever happens in the contingent world of becoming must be a matter of indifference to the entirely impassive God of classical theism. This is equivalent to denying that God can love. *Nothing* that we can do or suffer makes a difference to a God who is immune from all passivity and who is identified *simpliciter* with coercive power and sheer causation. Further, this classical theistic worship of naked power has had a negative effect on ecclesiastical polity in different religions, including John of the Cross's Christianity in Spain in the 16th c. Although classical theists in the Abrahamic religions have historically *said* that God is personal, and although they have traditionally derided pantheists because of their impersonal deity, such derision, although understandable, is misplaced given the classical theist's own inability to make room for personal traits in deity. That is, the personal qualities of deity *as articulated by* classical theists are pious fictions.

Another oddity in the classical theistic view is its attempt to appropriate for itself scriptural theism, with its obvious emphasis on divine passivity, love, mutability, and personality, as in the attribution of mercy to God in the *Psalms*, the *Koran*, and elsewhere. Although some scriptural passages can, in isolation and out of context, be used to support classical theistic monopolarity, the weight of the biblical tradition is better supported by the dipolar view. Anselm, although himself a classical theist, has offered a definition of God as that than which no greater can be conceived that facilitates the transition from classical theism to neoclassical theism: It is an open question whether divine perfection is necessarily to be equated with perfect stability or can include as well perfect changes. For Christians, Jesus himself was obviously changeable, hence the need in this tradition to figure out a way to relate his changeableness with the permanent aspect of deity. The process approach to this problem is to emphasize that deity is preeminent change as well as preeminent permanence, to the extent that, and in the ways that, both change and permanence are excellences. In addition to problems trying to render consistent classical theism with the best in scriptural theism, there are related problems trying to render it consistent with trinitarian theology in Christianity, where personhood is central. What sense can be made of the concept of a person who is in every sense unchanging? Wherein lies a believable analogy to human persons?

God must have a pattern of emotions if God is a person, a pattern that presumably would include both suffering and joy in light of the realization that the greatest conceivable being would share not some of, but all of, the sufferings and joys of the creatures. Whereas we are likely to be overwhelmed by the sufferings and joys of others, the greatest conceivable being would be able to sympathize with *all* of them in a qualitatively superior way. Whatever John of the Cross's theological views may have been, it is this sympathetic God that he experienced mystically. Even the least sorrows of creatures would be compassionately felt by the all-worshipful being, as in the biblical line regarding not even the fall of a sparrow escaping divine notice (*Matthew* 10: 28).

To extricate God from all suffering is to (perhaps unwittingly) attribute ignorance to God regarding the suffering of creatures. Process mysticism contains the idea that we are in fact accidents in the divine life, in contrast to the classical theistic view (inherited from Aristotle) that there are no divine accidents: God is pure actuality. There is quite a difference between claiming, as in neoclassical theism, that there

is real process and becoming in God and claiming, as in classical theism, that there is only real process and becoming outside God. Although the language of the mystics like John of the Cross is sometimes cloudy and fanciful, they clearly indicate a view closer to neoclassical theism than to classical theism. Our decisions contribute to divine development. It is true that, lacking familiarity with the dipolar alternative to monopolar classical theism, many of the great figures in mystical theology, including John of the Cross, either give up on “the God of the philosophers” altogether or give half-hearted support to classical theism on the assumption that this was the only intellectual option (see DeWet 2008).

The task for the dipolar panentheist is to make sure that when contrasting predicates are applied to God they apply to different aspects of the divine life so that these contrasting predicates do not degenerate into contradictories, as in the aforementioned claim that on the neoclassical view divine *existence* may be permanent, but God’s *actuality* (or *how* God exists from moment to moment) must be constantly changing. Likewise, by way of analogy, there is no contradiction involved in saying that a particular human being is always honest even if his/her individual utterances constantly change.

On the dipolar view, divine omniscience involves ideal memory such that God exhibits a meticulous care that nothing be forgotten, a point especially emphasized in Judaism. It must be admitted that the heavily sedimented concept of God is such that the very use of the word “God” immediately leads a great number of people to think in classical theistic terms, but an emphasis on these tender aspects of the divine process found in John of the Cross and other mystics can mitigate the damage done by classical theism. Failure to even consider a concept of God other than that found in classical theism is one of the greatest errors in the history of ideas in that the concept of God affects all others, either directly or indirectly, as in the long and dehumanizing history of determinism in the sciences, which is rooted in classical theistic omniscience. At base, all determinism is theological in that the determinist is claiming to have, or at least aspires to have, the sort of foreknowledge (with absolute assurance and in minute detail) of how future “contingencies” will be determined that is claimed for the God of classical theism.

It may be correct, as Joseph Van Ess argues, that the origins in Islam of doctrines like divine omnipotence and divine omniscience with respect to the details of the future (hence determinism) may have been the partial results of *political* disputes in early Islam (Van Ess 1975; also Murad 1987). The same could be said regarding influential envy of Caesar-like power in early Christianity, as Whitehead argues in *Adventures of Ideas*. However, in all of the Abrahamic faiths, there were also *philosophical* or *theological* disputes that led to these doctrines; classical theism is the unfortunate residue of these latter disputes.

Obviously, there have been many intellectually honest classical theists, but this does not mean that they have done an adequate job of fairly examining their basic assumptions. Thomas Aquinas, for example, vigorously played the devil’s advocate for various theorems, but not for alternative fundamental axioms that underlay the theorems, as in the very abstract preference for permanence over change, hence the resulting idea that God is *completely* unchanging. Any sort of intimate mystical experience of God is at odds with such preference, hence my desire to articulate a concept of God that at least reaches rapprochement with sanjuanistic mystical experience.

When classical theists refer to “God,” what they should say is “God in one aspect.” With this simple move, the gap between classical theism and neoclassical theism could be narrowed significantly. Without this move, however, a large gap remains because in classical theism God is treated as an immobile, impersonal object, not as a subject. Unmitigated classical theism leads to contradiction at every turn: God is a power over the utterly powerless, a will that cannot change, a knower of the contingent yet wholly necessary in such knowledge, a lover who is completely unaffected by the subject loved, and so on. Only by distinguishing two different aspects of God—abstract existence and concrete actuality—can such contradictions be avoided.

7. Toward the Future

Another sort of limited thinking is found in the assumption that there are two and only two alternatives: Either belief in the classical theistic God or some sort of religious skepticism. This dichotomy does mystical experience a disservice because the conceptual difficulties found in classical theism from the Enlightenment until the present are assumed to discredit mystical experience as well. A conceptually cogent view of God would help to get mystical experience itself a fairer hearing than it has received in recent centuries. Contrary to popular belief, even in philosophical and theological circles, the problem of theism, including the problem of how to assess mystical experience, is a remarkably new one that has only come into focus as a result of the prominence in the past century of the higher synthesis offered by neoclassical theists in all three Abrahamic faiths, which preserves the best and eliminates the worst in both classical theism and religious skepticism, as well as preserving the best and eliminating the worst in classical theism and pantheism. In addition to the recent neoclassical theists from all three Abrahamic faiths mentioned at the beginning of the present article, we should also note the influential work of Henri Bergson, a Jew who converted late in life to Catholicism. Bergson views the transition from classical theism to neoclassical theism as the transition from closed to open religion, with only the latter really being conducive to mystical experience (see [Bergson 1977](#)). Bergson, it should be noted, was the inspiration for Mohammed Iqbal to bring the neoclassical concept of God to Islam ([Iqbal 2013](#)). Bergson also had an impact on several contemporary translators in Iran who are making the best works in neoclassical theism available in that part of the world.

My project in the present article is very much compatible with the work of the influential Japanese commentator on Islam, Toshihiko Izutsu. This scholar has had a very favorable reception in the Muslim world in part because he was unconnected to the Judeo-Christian world and hence could avoid the concern that he was an “orientalist.” Izutsu was very much aware of the influence of Plato and especially Aristotle on classical philosophers in Islam and then, in turn, on how these classical philosophers in Islam were instrumental in the formation of scholasticism in the West. However, he was also very much attentive to the ways in which language is instrumental in the construction of the Sufi concept of being (*wujud*). It is not too much of a stretch to see Izutsu as a process philosopher in that, in addition to being influenced by Bergson, he was also interested in the ways in which philosophical thinking interacts with mysticism in *dynamic* ways. Further, the ontology that Izutsu finds in the Koran is living and dynamic in its concreteness, in contrast to the static and abstract ontology found in classical theism. The dynamism he and Bergson champion can also be found in the interplay between language and culture (see [Izutsu 1965, 1970, 2008](#), pp. 2–3; [Al-Akoub 2012](#), p. 127; [Sayem 2020](#); [Solihu 2010](#)).

It is understandable why, upon first hearing, many classical theists are turned off by neoclassical theism. It is quite a cipher for them how God could be, say, maximally independent *and* maximally dependent. However, the apparent contradiction is removed when the neoclassical distinction between *existence* and *actuality* is kept in mind. There is no contradiction in God being maximally independent in existence, but *how* God exists (i.e., God’s actuality) largely depends on the creatures, and this due to divine omniscience and omnibenevolence (as understood in neoclassical theism). God’s existence, on this account, is less than the entirety of the divine life. The abstract fact *that* God exists is quite different from concretely *how* God exists, hence contrasting predicates applied to existence and actuality involve no contradiction.

The biblical command “Be ye perfect!” ([Matthew 5: 48](#)) obviously does not mean “Be ye immutable!” The reason for this is that there can be such things as *perfect changes*, say in response to others (see [Enxing 2012](#)). It is for this reason that we should hope not only to develop an adequate concept of God (“the God of the philosophers”) and an adequate understanding of mystical experience (“the God of religion”), but *both together* as part of the overall effort to overcome the bifurcation of nature that has been the hallmark of modernity from the time of Rene Descartes and Galileo until the present. This effort also includes the neoclassical realization that the following features of classical theism tend to mutually reinforce each other, hence the need to rethink classical theism as a whole: The priority of

being over becoming, the reduction of creaturely freedom to the mere reiteration of items decreed by divine fiat, the denial of chance or randomness in the world, and the complete immutability of deity.

In order to break up the block universe that is implied in classical theism (even if this implication is seldom noticed), it is necessary to affirm the theory of time as objective modality. Although the necessary features of reality that always are (as indicated in the proposition “Something exists”) in a way escape the temporal flux (or better, are omni-temporal), the contingent features of reality are inherently temporal: The past is fixed and determinate, the future is at least partially open and indeterminate in that it is not here yet to be determined, and the present is that fleeting region wherein immediate future determinables are rendered determinate. An omniscient being, on this neoclassical view, knows everything that can be known, but no being, not even divinity, can know how future determinables will be rendered determinate before such determination occurs regarding the contingent features of reality. God is not to be conceived on the neoclassical view as a mere *eternal* spectator, but as an *everlasting* existence who enjoys and/or suffers all that occurs in temporal process. God is as great as possible at any particular time, but new events bring with them new possibilities to exhibit divine knowledge and benevolence. In this regard, it makes sense to see God as ideally perfectible. Concrete actuality, even in the divine case, is always contingent, even if divine existence is in itself abstract and immune to coming to be or passing away.

It is crucial to emphasize that God’s dependence is just as unique and remarkable and admirable as God’s independence. Therefore, also regarding the other dipolar contrasts. To cite another pair: God’s passivity (say with respect to those who seek sanjuanistic mystic union with God) is just as unique and remarkable and admirable as God’s activity. We are affected by only a relatively few fellow creatures and intermittently so and qualitatively in a manner mixed with our own egoistic concerns. God is affected by *all* creatures *all the time* and in a qualitatively superior way. As before, Heschel emphasizes the idea that God is the *most* moved mover, in contrast to the classical theistic view. Hence, it is one of the biggest mistakes in classical theism to think of independence-dependence and activity-passivity as logical contradictories, rather than as correlative pairs that mutually reinforce each other. This mistake is due to a failure to consider the possibility that these contrasting pairs apply to different aspects of the divine nature, thus avoiding dreaded logical contradiction. Further, there is nothing in dipolar theism that diminishes that aspect of God that classical theists did isolate and explicate rather well, as in God’s envisagement of various conceptual objects, which makes our inferior envisagement of such conceptual objects possible.

Because an understanding of mystical experience has been hampered for many centuries by a defective metaphysics, it can be said that a central *religious* problem is metaphysical. An advance in metaphysical thinking that would aid in the understanding of mystical experience would involve a distinction within the Anselmian concept of that than which no greater can be conceived. There is a crucial difference between God being unsurpassable by another being (the neoclassical theistic view) and God being unsurpassable even by Godself (the classical theistic view). The latter involves the inability to change *simpliciter*, even if such change is by way of addition or enrichment. One model for deity ignored altogether by classical theism is that of dialogue. The classical theistic view has God speaking, but not hearing. This is the supposedly benevolent dictator (not accidentally male—see [Christ 2003](#)) view of deity that is surpassed by a view wherein God is both preeminent speaker *and* listener on the analogy of an ideal human dialogical partner. One is reminded here of John of the Cross’s famous oxymorons regarding silent music (*musica callada*) and sounding solitude (*soledad Sonora*).

Monopolarity is actually a type of idolatry rather than a prominent feature of the worship of deity properly conceived. Even the suggestion that God is infinite in every respect and in no way finite is problematic. It makes sense to see God as infinite in the temporal reach of divine existence, but it also makes sense to see God as finite, yet preeminently so in the way that God relates to *particular* creatures here and now, as so often noticed by John of the Cross. The positive sense of finitude is related to the concept of determinateness and intimacy, in contrast to an indeterminate blob of relatedness to

others. In this regard, the ancient Greeks are instructive in the way they see the infinite (*apeiron*) as *in a sense* inferior to the finite (*peras*). The greatest conceivable being, on the neoclassical theistic view, would be excellently infinite and excellently finite in the ways that both of these are excellences. Mere infinity is empty, formless; nor could the merely infinite (or necessary) know finite (or contingent) things. This is why “infinite” is not a synonym for “supremely good,” nor is “finite” a synonym for “not supremely good.”

A God who gives everything and receives nothing is a radically deficient being, as least if God is one whom we serve, as John of the Cross and other mystics believe. By concentrating too much on the question of the *existence* of God, rather than on the *concept* of God, philosophers and theologians have done a disservice to religious thought. In fact, without an adequate concept of God the very issue of the existence of God seems quite beside the point. The religious view of the world, I assume, is one where God not only loves, but also is loved by others, who contribute to the actuality of God in process. Although God is the necessarily existing individual who is better than those who do not exist necessarily, this does not mean that God is *exclusively* necessary because such a being would be incapable of love and being loved by others and hence would be at odds with the virtue of omnibenevolence. Although sanjuanistic mystical experience can give us insight regarding the quality of divine love and of God being loved, it cannot help us to clarify the thorny conceptual issues entwined within classical theism that give rise to the problem mystics have had historically with “the God of the philosophers” (see *Ascent of Mount Carmel* II, 8–10; *Spiritual Canticle* 38, 8). In a way, classical theists never really believed in what they said in that, from a pastoral point of view or when talking about the trinity, etc., they have always insisted on a personal (or tri-personal) God of love who reacts to us and to our suffering. However, such insistence cannot be based on their own metaphysical views.

Of course, just as the greatest being cannot be pure actuality, it is also true that a perfect being cannot be pure potentiality; likewise, regarding divine activity-passivity, etc. This highlights the great achievement of classical theism *within its own limited sphere*. However, the dual transcendence that characterizes neoclassical theism means that there is twice as much transcendence in this view than is found in monopolar theism. God is transcendentally permanent as well as transcendentally changing, transcendentally active as well as transcendentally passive, and so on. Contrary to the familiar charge made against process theism (counteracted in Loomer 2013), it is actually the classical theistic God who is too small by one-sidedly exhibiting abstractions rather than the fulness of deity. In the dually transcendent God, there is admittedly transcendent unity, but also a sort of divine inclusiveness of all of the diversity of creation; likewise, regarding permanence of existence plus endless novelty. To be universal cause *and* effect is far better than being either alone.

In sum, it is well known that religion, in general, and mystical theology, in particular, have had a rich history. The present article is an effort to ensure that they will have a rich future as well.

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