Jonathan L. Kvanvig. *Depicting Deity: A Metatheological Approach.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. xiv+224 pp. £55.00 (hbk).

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Depicting Deity is a carefully paced, judicious, and illuminating tour of the conceptual possibilities for answering what its author, Jonathan L. Kvanvig, reasonably calls the 'meta'-theological question.

Kvanvig suggests that if the central question of Theology is taken to be 'What is God like?', then we may sensibly call the subject-matter of *Depicting Deity*, 'Metatheology'; the central question of Metatheology is 'How do we best think about what God is like?' Kvanvig labels the three families of answers to this question which he considers 'Creator Theology', 'Perfect Being Theology', and 'Worship-Worthiness Theology', building into his characterisation of these positions (by definition) the thesis that each asserts that it alone "is fundamental to an adequate account of the nature of God and that what is valuable in the other approaches can be derived from what is fundamental" (3). Kvanvig also considers what is at least an epistemic possibility at the outset of a metatheological investigation, which he calls 'metatheological anti-fundamentalism'. This is the view that none of these three approaches is individually successful in these ambitious terms, (i) as a result of some fourth alternative being so instead, (ii) as a result of our needing to combine two or more approaches for success, or (iii) as a result of success being impossible. As (iii) is a counsel of despair for the discipline, Kvanvig doesn't dwell on it.

The central idea of Creator Theology is that God should be conceived primarily as that which is the asymmetrical source of all else; the central idea of Perfect Being Theology, that our guiding principle should be to think of Him as the most perfect possible being; and of Worship-worthiness Theology, that He should be thought of primarily as that which is maximally worthy of worship.

Now we come to what we might call the meta-metatheological question: 'How should one judge between different Metatheologies?' In answering the meta-metatheological question, there is a danger of a certain sort of circularity, for example, someone brought up in Perfect Being Theology (which is, as Kvanvig rightly notes, the predominant approach in contemporary Philosophy of Religion as conducted in the Analytic Tradition) might be inclined to criticise, say, Creator Theology on the grounds that it does not conceptually entail God's perfection (at most it metaphysically necessitates it), deploying the principle that Metatheologies which conceptually entail God's perfection are *per se* preferable to those which do not. Kvanvig has some interesting things to say in this vicinity about the limits of what he calls semantic – in contrast to metaphysical – moves of this sort, but the general point about the danger of a certain sort of circularity stands. Nevertheless and despite it, Kvanvig seems tolerably optimistic that we can make progress if we adopt a method for adjudication between Metatheologies that "involves trade-offs between theoretical power and particular judgments

about what is obvious, a process described by Rawls, in a different context, as aimed at reflective equilibrium. When done properly…it results in the kind of rationality and justification for a theory brought about by coherence between the general principles of the theory and particular judgments about what is obvious and what not" (47). And this reviewer at least was satisfied on this point – satisfied in the sense of being stoically resigned to this being the best route to travel, whatever its pitfalls, as there is no alternative route to travel. (For what it is worth, this reviewer has himself always found comfort in this context by reflecting on the fact that such circularity as may be involved here is not unique to the discipline of Analytic Metatheology. The parallel question, 'On what basis may one decide whether one should be a Consequentialist, a Deontologist, a Virtue Theorist, or some fourth thing?' must be answered in a structurally similar way.)

The main body of *Depicting God* then involves Kvanvig assessing the three aforementioned Metatheologies in this manner. And there is much in this assessment that should be of interest to the Philosophical Theologian. Naturally enough – it being constituted by a series of arguments – one may disagree with what one reads, either through rejecting one or more of the premises of one or more particular arguments or the validity of the reasoning; and, in the end, there is of course always the Rawlsian reflective-equilibrium-finding to do, which introduces a slightly different manner in which one might part company with the author, saying words to the effect of, 'I agree Kvanvig: that's a drawback. But I don't weigh it as quite so serious a drawback as you seem to be taking it to be.' But Kvanvig is a careful and non-dogmatic guide and the arguments he gives do tend to push one at least somewhat in the direction of travel he intends one to take. The result is thus that *Depicting Deity* could be read with benefit by anyone trained in Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition. (Kvanvig gives his own account of why he would prefer this construction over the simpler 'Analytic Philosophy'.) Even if one parts company with Kvanvig at some significant juncture (or multiple junctures) before his own journey reaches its particular end, one will have sharpened one's own thinking about why one ends up in a different place from him by having engaged with his work. Having said that – due to the subject-matter, rather than any shortcomings in Kvanvig's writing – *Depicting Deity* would prove hard-going for most undergraduates.

So then, how does Kvanvig himself score things in the end? What's his 'take home message'?

Towards the end of the book, Kvanvig actually gives – literally – a scorecard, though he is quick to concede that it is a "coarse-grained instrument for summarizing…and…elides the important qualifications" with which he has nuanced his discussion of these matters prior to then (Table 10.1, 'Scorekeeping', 186). Nevertheless, this scorecard puts on the page in particularly stark form a number of interesting results. The one that struck this reviewer as most interesting (not simply in that it was the one with which he disagreed most strongly, though that certainly was a factor (!), but also in that it is the one that is most against-the-grain of contemporary work in the field) is that Perfect Being Theology fares *worst* of all three approaches. (For what it is worth, this particular reviewer had not been taken by Kvanvig's earlier argument that Perfect Being Theology cannot derive the conclusion that God is a person, not – as some Classical Theists might hold – because he does not think that God is a person and thus judges any failure of Perfect Being Theology to derive this is no drawback, but because he thought that Kvanvig's particular argument for its failure in this regard is unsuccessful. Neither was this particular reviewer taken by Kvanvig's argument that Perfect Being Theology has difficulty getting to monotheism. But anyway, enough of this reviewer's own scoring.) Given Kvanvig's scoring of Perfect Being Theology, Worship-worthiness Theology comes out with a better score than Perfect Being Theology, as, Kvanvig argues, it

does give us personhood (though again not monotheism). And then Creator Theology comes out – in the table anyway – as best of all, in giving us *both* personhood *and* monotheism, though – in discussion of the table – Kvanvig points out "that some of these derivations are on shakier ground than others, and the shakiness of some of these derivations might incline one towards some version of [metatheological anti-fundamentalism]" (187), this being, it will be recalled, the view that none of the first three approaches on their own will suffice. The best thing to try if one is thus attracted to metatheological anti-fundamentalism, according to Kvanvig, is unsurprisingly some combination of Creator Theology and Worship-worthiness Theology. To quote him (though, I should note that in the passage I'm going to quote, Kvanvig is referring to a slightly different point which he has just made), "This conclusion is less pristine than we might have wished, and the proper response to it is greater perspicacity in philosophical theology than we find in its history" (198). Perhaps. In any case, Kvanvig's own book is a model of both perspicacity and perspicuity.