Levering, Matthew. *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation: Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017, 372, $44.99, hardcover.

Matthew Levering is one of the most prominent contemporary Roman Catholic systematic theologians, the author or editor of many books on topics ranging from Mary to predestination. Readers of this journal will appreciate his ecumenical posture with evangelicals: he is a member of Evangelicals and Catholics Together and is noted for his constructive engagement with evangelical thought. He currently holds an endowed chair at Mundelein Seminary.

This book is the third in Levering’s series on topics in systematic theology (following books on revelation and the Holy Spirit). Levering starts by considering God as the creator with chapters on the divine ideas and on divine simplicity; more on those later. Levering then considers creation itself, arguing that the unnecessary diversity of creation—such as vast numbers of extinct species and regions of empty space—are not evidence against God’s goodness. These are followed by chapters defending a substantivist view of the *imago dei*, the command to be fruitful and multiply in light of contemporary environmental concerns, a historic Fall, and a broadly retributive atonement theory. In each chapter Levering draws heavily on Aquinas while engaging with a wide variety of contemporary theological, philosophical, and scientific interlocutors.

Levering’s chapters on God are refreshing to this philosopher in that they tackle two subjects that are too rarely discussed, particularly by evangelical theologians: divine ideas and divine simplicity. Given this rarity, some introduction may be in order; I’ll introduce divine simplicity and Levering’s work on it first.

Everyone agrees that God lacks physical parts, since God lacks a body. But traditionally Abrahamic theists have gone further: they hold that God lacks parts of any kind, including putative metaphysical parts such as properties, aspects, powers, or actions. Traditionally, this doctrine has been considered vital to theology; Levering quotes David Hart as saying that “[n]o claim… has traditionally been seen as more crucial to a logically coherent concept of God than the denial that God is in any way composed of separable parts, aspects, properties or functions” (90). The main reason for this is that anything composite is thought to be dependent in some way on its parts, or on something else to put the parts together; so without divine simplicity God is just another dependent being like the rest of us rather than the Originator of all. This idea has many philosophical and theological critics, however; Levering’s chapter is devoted to defending Aquinas’ version of the doctrine from Orthodox-inspired opposition. The main objection he responds to claims that a simple God (at least as Aquinas conceives of a simple God—a qualification I’ll leave out hereafter) could not possibly be free to create. For God’s act of creation is identical to God, since a simple God has no distinct actions. Since God exists necessarily, so must creation as well. The result is what philosophers call “modal collapse”: this world, down to its tiniest detail, is necessary, with no possibility that anything could have gone otherwise than it did.

Levering’s first response to this argument is that creation is not necessary, since creatures are “contingent by nature” (103) upon God. By “contingent by nature” Levering seems to mean that creatures are dependent upon God. This is surely true, yet it does nothing to solve the problem. As Levering himself seems to note, the claim that creatures are dependent upon God means only that creatures do not determine God; it does not mean that there is any possibility of God making a different world. Levering’s second response is that we cannot know *how* God’s act of creation could possibly be free, since our minds are incapable of understanding a simple God; yet we must acknowledge both God’s simplicity and freedom even though we cannot comprehend how they could both be true. This raises difficult questions of theological method. I will here just register my concern that apparent incoherence is a high price to pay, and that Levering’s retreat into apophaticism looks uncomfortably *ad hoc*. (Better ways of addressing the problem of divine freedom and simplicity include Timothy O’Connor’s *Theism and Ultimate Explanation* and Chistopher Tomaszewski’s “Collapsing the modal collapse argument”, forthcoming in the journal *Analysis*.)

The doctrine of divine ideas states that God has an eternal idea of each creature (or each type of creature); these ideas are often taken to be key to God’s relationship to creation, and to perform philosophical work of the sort done by Platonic forms.

In Levering’s chapter on the divine ideas his main burden is to defend Aquinas from two accusations made by Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky. First, Lossky argues that Aquinas’ theory of the divine ideas leaves God unfree; instead of freely coming up with what to create, God must check his data-bank of ideas. Second, Lossky argues that Aquinas makes creation importantly less valuable than divine ideas, making creation something of a disappointing knock-off of the more perfect ideas in God. (In other words, Lossky worries that divine ideas are better than creation in the same way that Plato thought the forms are better than material beings.)

In reply, Levering claims that God’s ideas are (given Levering’s strong doctrine of divine simplicity) absolutely identical to God (though there is a kind of “logical” difference between God’s different ideas (62)). This, combined with the view that God creates outside of time, means that God’s freedom is not hindered. Why not? Because God does not create by *first* checking the divine ideas to see what is possible and *then* selecting some of those ideas to actualize (63). Levering’s response here is not convincing. It is true that an eternal God’s act of creation is not temporally ordered. But philosophers often distinguish between temporal order and logical order, where the latter is something like an order of reasons for God’s action, and is quite consistent with the claim that God is outside of time. For example, supralapsarians and infralapsarians disagree about whether God ordained salvation because of God’s permission of the fall, or the other way around; and Molinists believe that God possesses a “middle knowledge” that structures God’s decisions about how to create. So barring an argument that there is no logical ordering within God (an argument Levering does not give, and which might be difficult for him given that he wants logically distinct ideas within God), Lossky could simply put his argument in a logical key: God’s ideas are (presumably) logically prior to God’s decision about what to create, and so they constrain God’s decision even if they are not temporally prior to it. Rather than focus on God’s eternality, Levering would have done better simply to make the case that anything identical to God cannot be a problematic restriction on God’s freedom.

Levering replies to Lossky’s second criticism by saying that, since creatures possess a different sort of reality than divine ideas, they are not “poor cop[ies], ontologically speaking, of the divine ideas” (63). It is not clear to me how Levering can say this. If the divine ideas are identical to God, then the claim that God is “ontologically” greater than creatures (a claim Levering certainly would endorse) implies that God’s ideas are greater as well (since they are just God under a different name).

More generally, Levering’s work, while possessing many scholarly virtues (such as an acquaintance with a wide variety of material from disparate disciplines and time periods), is weighed down by a lack of clarity and precision. In other respects, however, the first two chapters are fine examples of “old school” medieval-style theology; there is a lot to be learned in them about the important western and eastern figures Aquinas and Palamas, as well as about recent theologians and philosophers working in their traditions. However, those new to the metaphysical issues involved should start elsewhere (I recommend Edward Feser’s accessible book *Aquinas*). The remaining chapters are not unduly technical and will be accessible to most students; each should be an excellent introduction to a relatively conservative Roman Catholic position on its subject.

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