

Copan, P. and P. Moser, eds., *The Rationality of Theism*, London: Routledge, 2003, pp.xi+292

The essays in this book are organised into three groups:

Part I: “Foundational Considerations”

Part II: “Arguments for God’s Existence”

Part III: “Potential Defeater for Theism”

Part I contains essays by William Alston (“Religious Language and Verificationism”); David Clark (“Faith and Foundationalism”); Paul Moser (“Cognitive Inspiration and Knowledge of God”) and Robert Koons (“Science and Theism: Concord, Not Conflict”). Alston argues—against Martin, Nielsen and Flew—that “the verifiability criterion poses no serious threat to the factual meaningfulness of what is said about God” (17). Clark argues that, since the evidentialist rule that every belief must be supported by evidence is self-defeating, it must be the case that it is permissible to take some beliefs—e.g. religious beliefs—to be “properly basic”, i.e. “rightly accepted as a matter of faith”. Koons argues that, in order to be a scientific realist—i.e. “someone who holds that our scientific theories provide models of the real world that we have some reason to believe may be approximately correct” (86)—one must be a theist who believes that the real world was made by God. I think that these arguments rapidly decrease in plausibility as the alphabet advances; however, I also think that Koons’ essay is perhaps the most interesting in the entire collection. (Since I’m on my best behaviour, I won’t mention Moser’s essay again.)

Part II contains essays by Stephen Davis (“The Ontological Argument”); William Craig (“The Cosmological Argument”); Robin Collins (“The Teleological Argument”); Paul Copan (“The Moral Argument”); Doug Geivett (“The Evidential Value of Religious Experience”); and Francis Beckwith (“Theism, Miracles, and the Modern Mind”).

The editors claim that the arguments in Part II “make God’s existence more plausible than not” (11), and that “their failure would secure only a soft agnosticism (having the attitude of truly desiring to know if God exists)” (12/11). The first of these claims is one that even the editors themselves ought to have qualms about. Despite the definitive sound of their titles, many of the essays in Part II actually have far more modest aims than “making God’s existence more plausible than not”.

Davis argues only that Michael Martin’s criticisms of Anselm’s *Proslogion II* argument and Plantinga’s modal ontological argument are less than convincing. Even if Davis’ criticisms of Martin were above reproach, they could not possibly establish that the arguments of Anselm and Plantinga “make God’s existence more plausible than not”, nor even that those arguments have some serious contribution to make to the task of “making God’s existence more plausible than not”. (In fact, Davis’ critique of Martin is less than impressive. To mention but one problem, his discussion and defence of the modal system S5—pp.105-108—is quite egregious.)

Beckwith argues only that two arguments for the conclusion that there cannot be rational belief in the occurrence of miracles fail. Even if Beckwith’s criticisms of these arguments were above reproach, they plainly would make very little

contribution to the cause of “making God’s existence more plausible than not”. This point is so obvious that it is hard to resist the suggestion that this essay would have been better placed in Part III than in Part II. (Curiously, Beckwith concludes with the claim that he has “shown the rationality of belief in the miraculous” (232). But, *at most*, his criticisms of the arguments of Martin and Flew establish that it is possible for there to be rational belief in the occurrence of miracles, and not that there is actually rational belief in the occurrence of miracles. For all that Beckwith argues, it may still be that there is no rational belief in the occurrence of miracles.)

Geivett discusses the difficulties involved in developing arguments from religious experience, and ends with a “sympathetic appraisal” (176). While some aspects of Geivett’s discussion are elusive—for instance, there is no clear statement of the argument with which he is in sympathy—there is no doubt that Geivett does *not* take himself to have discussed an argument that can carry a large part of the load in “making God’s existence more plausible than not”. Moreover, while Geivett himself thinks that it is beyond doubt that some people have “of-God experiences”—i.e. experiences as of God—I think that there is room for serious doubt about this. (How could it be *given in experience* that a being is omnipotent and not merely very powerful? How could it be *given in experience* that a being is perfectly good, and not merely rather good? How could it be *given in experience* that a being is omniscient rather than merely rather knowledgeable? How could it be *given in experience* that a being is metaphysically simple? Typical descriptions of “religious experiences” lend no credence at all to the suggestion that *these* properties are “presented in the experience”.)

Moreland argues only that, given the assumption that there are genuinely non-natural mental states, there is a plausible argument to the conclusion that God exists. Even if Moreland’s argument were above reproach, it is obvious that as it stands it affords little support to the claim that God’s existence is more plausible than not because the key battle over the assertion that there are genuinely non-natural mental states remains to be fought. (Again, Moreland’s arguments are not above reproach. For instance, at p.209, he claims that “the sheer existence of conscious states and the precise mental content that constitutes them are outside the pale of evolutionary explanation”. But—to mention just one obvious difficulty—his argument for this claim overlooks the fact that not all evolutionary explanation is in terms of selectional advantages. It might be, for instance, that “the sheer existence of conscious states” can be explained as a by-product of factors that conferred selectional advantage.)

Collins argues only that “the theistic hypothesis” *fits the evidence* of fine-tuning better than “the atheistic single universe hypothesis”. Even if Collins were right about this, he would have made very little contribution to the task of defending the claim that God’s existence is more plausible than not because *that* conclusion concerns probabilities rather than likelihoods. That $\text{Pr}(\text{Fine-tuning data/theism})$ is relatively high does very little towards establishing that $\text{Pr}(\text{Theism/Fine-tuning Data})$ is relatively high. (Collins claims that “whenever we are considering two competing hypotheses, an observation counts as evidence in favour of the hypothesis under which the observation has the highest probability” (136). This is *not* right: there must be a trading-off of simplicity and goodness of fit when assessing hypotheses in the light of evidence. Collins has committed himself to the claim that observations count

as evidence in favour of maximally gerrymandered hypotheses; I do not believe that this is so.)

The remaining two authors in Part II *do* take themselves to be making a contribution to the task of showing that God's existence is more plausible than not. Craig claims that the *kalam* cosmological argument is a good argument, i.e. "an argument which is formally and informally valid and consists of true premises which are more plausible than their negations" (112). It is a nice question—which Craig leaves unaddressed—how the plausibility of premises is to be assessed. Craig's own method appears to have two parts. First, he consults his own intuitions to determine which premise seems more plausible to him. Second, he argues that his opponents are unable to *decisively establish* the falsity of the premise that he finds more plausible. Given that you are satisfied with this approach, it seems to me that you will find that what you take to be "good" arguments for almost any conclusion you accept are a dime a dozen.

Copan argues for three theses: (1) that objective moral values exists, and that belief in their existence is properly basic; (2) that objective moral values do not make sense in a non-theistic world; and (3) that the Euthyphro argument does not undermine the connection between God and objective moral values. Now, of course, if we have good reason to believe both that there are objective moral values, and that there are objective moral values iff God exists, then we have good reason to believe something far stronger than that God's existence is more plausible than not. Either Copan's argument proves that God exists, or else it makes no contribution at all to the task of establishing that God's existence is more plausible than not. I do not think that it is at all plausible to think that Copan's argument proves that God exists. (Among its faults, Copan's essay is rather shaky on the distinction between objective moral truths, and objective moral properties. At one point, he says: "To the naturalist, we put the question: would moral properties be instantiated even if human beings did not exist? If not, why think that the alleged supervening moral properties have any objectivity at all ...?" (155). If some moral truths are necessary—which it seems plausible to suppose if there are objective moral truths—then those moral truths hold regardless of the properties that are instantiated in the world. Moreover, the supervenience relation itself is surely going to be held to be a matter of necessitation.)

The editors make the "methodological point" that "theistic arguments must be considered not in isolation from, but in combination with, one another" (9). Fair enough: that's a consequence of the more general point that all relevant considerations should be taken into account when making judgements about any subject matter. But, even when we consider all of the arguments from all of the essays put together, it is perfectly clear—despite the insistence of the editors and some of the contributors—that these argument do *not* make—and, indeed, *could* not make—God's existence more plausible than not. (To soften this blow, perhaps it is worth noting that the second of the editorial points mentioned initially is also erroneous. That these arguments fail to make God's existence more plausible than not gives no support to "soft agnosticism", nor to any other non-theistic view. Rather, all that follows is that, to the extent that these arguments are intended to make God's existence more plausible than not, they fail to do what they are intended to do. End of story.)

Part III contains essays by Charles Taliaferro ("The Possibility of God: The Coherence of Theism") and Gregory Ganssle ("God and Evil").

Taliaferro considers arguments for and against the “coherence” of the divine attributes—the “coherence” of divine incorporeality; the “consistency” of divine omnipotence and divine perfect goodness; the “consistency” of divine omniscience and human freedom; and the “coherence” of divine eternity—and endorses the claim that the “coherence” of a concept must be assessed “in the broadest terms, noting its links with other concepts and evaluating it over against competing metaphysical assumptions” (153). (Perhaps it would be useful to recast Taliaferro’s discussion using a variety of modalities: logical, metaphysical, epistemic, doxastic, etc. Do claims about “coherence” require any more than “doxastic possibility”—consistency within a system of beliefs? Do claims about “coherence” require something as strong as metaphysical possibility—consistency with the laws of logic and metaphysics? Or what?)

Ganssle discusses arguments from evil. He swiftly dismisses logical arguments from evil after faulting “Mackie’s argument” for the claim that there is a logical inconsistency between various claims about God and the claim that evil exists. (Of course, this swift dismissal is a mistake, albeit one that has become increasingly common. For all that is argued in connection with “Mackie’s argument”, there may be a logical inconsistency between various claims about God and *other* claims about evil—e.g. that moral evil exists, or that horrendous evil exists, or the like.) Ganssle then goes on to provide fairly standard discussion of the evidential arguments from evil defended by Rowe and Draper.

There have been many collections of essays like this one to appear in recent years (and there will be many more in the near future). They are a product of the fact—almost noted by the editors—that “acknowledgment of God’s reality flourishes and multiplies in the academic world” (1) *in some parts of the United States*. All of the authors are Christians with institutional affiliations in the United States. Many take things for granted that some elsewhere in the planet are likely to contest. For instance, Koons opines that “the country in which the institutions of science are most developed and well entrenched, the United States, is also one of the world’s most religious countries” (74). While it is plainly true that more money is invested in science in the United States than anywhere else—and hence while it is plainly true that scientific “institutions” are better resourced in the United States than elsewhere—it is a matter for contention whether respect for science and insistence on scientific reasoning is better entrenched in the general population of the United States than elsewhere—and hence a matter for contention whether, in *this* sense, the “institutions” of science are better developed and more well entrenched there.

Those unfamiliar with recent developments in philosophy of religion—particularly in the relevant parts of the United States—may well be surprised by both the tone and the contents of this volume. However, those who are already familiar with the work of the contributing authors won’t find much that they haven’t seen before. (For a particularly extreme example, the paragraphs on the Tristram Shandy paradox at pp.123-4 of Craig’s essay are lifted from his 1979 book on the *kalam* cosmological argument, without any concessions to the subsequent critical discussion of the arguments contained therein.) Although the volumes move more up-market, and the self-congratulatory hype grows ever more hysterical, the arguments seem to me to show next to no improvement in quality. Most of the essays are at least

workmanlike—and some rise to the level of engaging and interesting—but there is really nothing here to shake non-theists from their non-dogmatic slumbers.

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