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Evans, SUBJECTIVITY AND RELIGIOUS BELIEF

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105) And if this is so, then it is hard to see what the alleged incompatibility amounts to.

What could expressions such as “the interest of truth,” “the project of determining truth,” and so on, mean if they do not refer to human beings discovering some truth, acquiring good reasons for believing some truth, etc.? Surely what the decisive believer holds is that *he* personally has no need of further discussion and investigation on this topic. But he can well hold that further discussion and investigation is necessary for a widespread and general determination of the truth on this topic. Just what sorts of belief will best contribute to such discussions is perhaps an empirical question. But it is not implausible to suppose that such discussions will be most vigorous and penetrating if some of the participants hold their beliefs in the decisive manner. In fact, this benefit may well accrue even if those decisive believers are mistaken about whether they themselves are in epistemic need of further investigation.

In a similar way, Gutting discounts the import of his pragmatic argument for this topic by simply observing that “the prudential or moral goods to be attained by religious belief do not require decisive assent.” (p. 106) No evidence is given for this claim. Here again it would seem to be an empirical question as to whether it is decisive or interim belief which best serves the man who must steel himself to leap over a chasm, or to choose one path rather than another on the stormy mountain. Or (perhaps a more interesting case) is it decisive or interim assent which is best for the woman who chooses this man rather than that for her husband? It is, at any rate, not totally implausible to suppose that there are some affairs of life, maybe some affairs of religious significance, in which we would be better off (pragmatically, at least) with decisive rather than with interim beliefs.

If we are not attracted by (MC), Gutting’s principle of methodological conservatism, we will not find in this book any support for any religious belief beyond minimal theism. And this, as Gutting observes, is not sufficient for a viable religion. Without (MC), therefore, the argument of this book leaves religion in desperate straits. If Gutting’s arguments for (MC) persuade us, on the other hand, then we will be hard put not to find in them a warrant for much more than Gutting allows, a decisive belief in much of the detailed doctrine of some religious tradition.

Subjectivity and Religious Belief, by **Stephen C. Evans**. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982. Pp. 221.

Reviewed by LOUIS P. POJMAN, The University of Mississippi.

Beginning with the observation that religious belief is closely bound up with

the satisfaction of subjective needs and obligations, Stephen Evans tries to show that there are situations where such an alliance is rationally warranted. In religious matters it is not always reasonable to proportion the strength of one's belief to the amount of evidence one has for the proposition in question. Rather, one is often rationally justified in taking one's subjective needs into consideration in forming one's beliefs. In the main portion of the book Evans develops three accounts of subjective rationality: those of Kant, Kierkegaard and William James. The last forty pages of the work consist largely in Evan's own analysis of the problem in the light of these three thinkers.

First Evans clears the ground by distinguishing two senses of 'subjective': that of being arbitrarily personal and that involving the interests of the subject in a way that is not arbitrary. Evans claims that this second sense is based on a proper understanding of human nature as involving the will and feelings, the perspective of the agent. Next Evans argues that his approach has three advantages over objective approaches to religious belief. His approach takes account of the fact that traditional natural theologies have failed to demonstrate the existence of God and recognizes the legitimacy of the will and feelings in becoming human in the full sense of that word (p.7). Evans also makes it clear that he wants to steer a middle course between the dogmatists and fideists, the former unwarrantedly rejecting subjective justifications and the latter unwarrantedly rejecting a strong element of objective justification. The argument of the book is that given a broader notion of rationality, which includes subjective aspects, we can have an account of justification which includes both theoretical and subjective elements.

The major claim is that if we recognize the limits of theoretical justification we shall see the legitimacy of pragmatic considerations in coming to believe propositions. The process goes something like this. I survey all the candidates that I have regarding metaphysical explanations of the universe, estimating the quality of evidence for each one. I find that there is insufficient evidence to justify belief in any of them, though some are plausible, have some evidence in their favor; that is, they are live options. Next I examine the way each of the plausible theories meets my pragmatic needs (including moral and emotional needs). Taking this aspect into the calculation, I decide to believe the hypothesis that comes out ahead in the total reckoning. Evans doesn't give us much information on how we make this calculation. For his purpose it is enough that we recognize the legitimacy of taking the subjective domain into account in the reckoning.

The central sections of the book treat the way in which Kant, Kierkegaard and James carry out the program of subjective justification of religious belief. Essentially, Kant's argument goes as follows:

- (1) Theoretical reasons can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God,

but they allow the proposition as possible or thinkable.

(2) The moral law is only justified if there is a God to guarantee the correlation of morality with happiness.

(3) Since we have a deep need for a justified morality and since it is at least thinkable that God exists, it becomes eminently reasonable to believe that God exists.

Evan's treatment of Kierkegaard is refreshing to the extent that he recognizes that his work can be read as "giving a kind of justification of subjective belief" (p.76). The central argument which Evans develops at length might be reduced to this. Objective reflection fails us in two ways. The first way is, *pace* Kant, that it cannot settle the matter of the truth of metaphysical propositions. Secondly, even if it could, we would reject the proofs as antithetical to authentic human development which involves developing one's will and feelings in situations of deep uncertainty. Leaps of faith are needed to strengthen the volitional leg muscles. To be sure, Evans tries to separate the valid insight in Kierkegaard's account from the more extreme fideist element wherein evidence for the incarnation is deemed unwelcome and unavailable. In a useful comparison between Kant and Kierkegaard Evans shows that Kierkegaard extends the scope of Kant's analysis and applies it specifically to becoming a Christian. That is, whereas the need satisfied by Kant's account is that of moral existence, the need satisfied by Kierkegaard's account is that of full human existence, including but not limited to the moral life. And whereas for Kant it is theism alone that is desideratum, for Kierkegaard it is the notion of God in time.

The section of William James focuses on the essay "The Will to Believe." Evans analyses the concept of a momentous, live option which provides us with the datum for a cost-benefit analysis from which we may decide to believe religious propositions. "If religion be true, this way of life is the highest possible for a man, and the man who is an unbeliever cuts himself off from that way of life" (p. 149). Again our passional nature must be brought into the reckoning in deciding to believe.

In the concluding chapters Evans analyzes the problem of subjective justification, developing George Mavrodes' notion of the person relativity of all argument and the Jamesian idea that belief is important because it is correlated with action. He who forbids us believe that *p* also forbids us to act as though *p* were true (cf. p.212). He struggles to make sense of the idea that we can both doubt and have religious conviction at the same time, but he doesn't tell how this apparent contradiction takes place (alternately?).

While sometimes prolix, the expository sections are lucid, reliable and often perspicacious. One can learn much here. While Evans' own analysis of the issues often are illuminating, too many ideas are left cloudy and the arguments are not as clear as one might desire. Let me illustrate this by pointing to two problems

that I see running throughout the work and coming to a head in the final sections. I call them the problem of volitionalism and the problem of the belief-action correlation.

Evans characterizes all three of his philosophers as volitionalists, that is, as thinkers who affirm our ability to obtain some beliefs by deciding to have them (pp. 56,87,133,151ff,158,181,209). The picture presented is one in which, after gathering evidence for hypotheses and doing a cost-benefit calculation which takes into account subjective needs, one decides to and succeeds in believing the hypothesis in question. First of all, I doubt whether Kant would fit into this sort of schema, due to a rigid truth directed principle emerging from the categorical imperative. But more importantly, I doubt whether we can perform such leaps of belief, obtaining beliefs upon deciding to have them. In this regard I think that Evans repeats the Jamesian fallacy of equating passional or subjective constraints with volitional powers. No doubt our emotional biases and needs are causative in belief formation, but that isn't to say that we consciously choose beliefs. Beliefs seem to be more eventlike than actions; happenings, not volitional doings. Of course, Evans could take the Pascalian line and urge us to go through intermediate processes which would make belief acquisition more likely, but then he needs to discuss the ethics of these maneuvers and whether or not they are psychologically feasible or harmful.

The second problem has to do with the action-belief correlation, wherein Evans seems to be suggesting the Jamesian thesis that belief can somehow be measured or inferred by actions, so that a belief that *p* becomes a necessary condition for requisite actions. That is, if I am to develop myself through certain actions I must believe that *p* obtains. If I am to live according to Christian principles, I must believe the central doctrines of Christianity. While I agree that normally there is a close connection between belief and actions, I see no necessary connection, at least not in the way Evans seems to. One need not believe that something is the case in order to be sufficiently motivated by fear or hope to act on the possibility of a propositions's being true. One may believe the suitcase in the corner of the room has a bomb in it which is about to explode and so quickly flees the room; but one may be sufficiently motivated by fear to act as if there were a bomb in the suitcase merely on believing that there is a 10 percent chance that there is one. The apparent possibility of a state of affairs obtaining is often sufficient to generate emotions which in turn motivate actions. This happens in gambling, in taking out insurance policies and in taking one's umbrella to work when the weather is dubious. Likewise, one could live as if Christianity were true on the basis of hope or fear without definitely assenting to the requisite propositions.

Of course, if one has a behavioral account of belief, Evans and James' thesis might go through. One of the problems in Evans' book is that it looks as though

Kant, Kierkegaard, James and Evans have four different accounts of belief which are never compared or carefully analyzed (i.e., an occurrent notion, a strong volitional notion wherein every belief is volitionally acquired, a behavioral notion and Price's dispositional notion). Until we are clear on what belief is it is difficult to know how it relates to action.

The Concept of God: An Exploration of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God, by **Ronald H. Nash**. Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, 1983. Pp. 127.

Reviewed by CLEMENT DORE, Vanderbilt University.

Professor Nash's book is, on the whole, a clearly written, helpful introduction to contemporary discussions of the nature of God. It will be of particular value for those who are not well acquainted with recent literature on the subject; but it will also be of use to those "analytic" religionists who have paid scant attention to process theology: Nash discusses the differences between process theologians and contemporary Thomists at length.

I have some reservations about the book, three of the most substantive of which I will now mention.

Nash appears to be presenting us on p. 17 with an actualist account of possible worlds, on which any individual in another possible world is identical with an individual in the actual world (though, of course, different in some respects). But surely, e.g., dragons exist in some possible worlds; and it looks as if it is in principle impossible adequately to specify individuals in the actual world who are identical with them. If the actualist chooses to claim that *every* individual in the actual world is a possible dragon, then the reply is that it is possible for there to be a *larger number* of dragons than there are individuals in the actual world. And similar considerations apply to the actualist claim that it is, e.g., actual reptiles (actual flame throwers, etc.) which might have been dragons.

A more fundamental problem is that actualism renders modal arguments for God's existence question-begging. If every individual which exists in a possible world is identical with an actual individual, then claiming that God exists in a possible world (or, borrowing from Plantinga, that there is a possible world in which maximality is exemplified) is *eo ipso* claiming that God exists in the actual world. So the possibility premiss, which is indispensable in all modal arguments for God's existence, would be, in those contexts, as good a candidate for being question-begging as any skeptic might desire, in the absence of a more extensive defense of it than modal arguers generally provide.

It is, of course, true that, in order to establish that God exists *in all his*