

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 2 | Issue 2

Article 11

4-1-1985

Freddoso, ed., EXISTENCE AND NATURE OF GOD

William E. Mann

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Mann, William E. (1985) "Freddoso, ed., EXISTENCE AND NATURE OF GOD," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol2/iss2/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

[7] Ross, "Creation," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 77 (1980), pp. 614-29.

[8] Ross, *Portraying Analogy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[9] Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1981).

Goods and Virtues by **Michael Slote**. Clarendon Press, 1983. pp. 148. \$19.95.

Reviewed by ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, Vanderbilt University.

Michael Slote has written an admirable book of a kind too seldom attempted by philosophers. His central concern is not so much to develop a systematic point of view as to identify a range of important considerations which have too often been ignored or put on one side. What he provides is both an agenda of difficulties for moral enquiry and a series of summonses to greater complexity. His central theses are all developed at some length, but he allows himself to make some interesting brief excursions and in so doing not to be haunted by a need always to say something conclusive. This is moral philosophy self-consciously understood, as all philosophy ought to be understood, as contributions to a continuing conversation.

In his first chapter Slote advances objections to the view developed by Thomas Nagel according to which rationality requires that all the periods of a person's life be treated as equally relevant and given equal weight in providing reasons for action at any given moment. So that if it is true that I am going in ten years time to have a reason for doing something or other (and I know it—the formulation of this view raises interesting questions about both the logical and the epistemological status of future contingents), I now have a reason for doing something or other in ten years time. Hence anything that I must do now, if I am to do whatever it is in ten years time, I now have a reason to do. Not so, says Slote. There are some specific periods in human life one of whose central characteristics is that from the point of view that they afford what has happened or is going to happen at certain other periods is unimportant. There are goods which are specific to particular periods of a person's life, which are irrelevant in other periods.

Slote notes that this view commits him to a way of understanding the unity of a human life which is very different from that advanced by Nagel and suggests, obviously rightly, that his own view has some affinity to Aristotle's. He does not pursue this suggestion and therefore does not notice how much of Aristotle's moral and political thinking presupposes that the activities, goods and virtues important at one stage of life differ from those of others. This is, for example, the key to Aristotle's thesis about the place of *theoria* in human life.

In his second chapter Slote argues that some virtues too are specific to particular

periods of life; they are virtues only relative to some time of life and are to be contrasted with virtues *tout court*. Patience and justice are cited as examples of the latter; but the prudence involved in adopting and following a rational life-plan is not. A certain kind of innocent trustfulness, incompatible with rational prudence, is a virtue in children, but would be foolish in adults. The prudence of a rational life-plan is a virtue specific to adult life, and those who have treated it as a virtue *tout court*, such as John Rawls, have been mistaken.

The concepts of a relative virtue and a relative good have other kinds of application. Religious faith may be a good for many people, if it makes them happy, even if God does not exist. If God does exist, then relative to that fact, religious faith, since it enables us to believe what is true, may be a virtue. This last example does suggest that the distinction between what Slote calls 'relative virtues' and what he calls 'virtues *tout court*' or 'absolute virtues' needs more examination. For Slote says of the former that their status as virtues depends "on facts about how human needs vary over time or on deep (contingent) facts about man's place in the universe, rather than in anything subject to human choice or affectable by human belief" (p. 59). I am far from clear about the precise contrast that Slote intends to convey. But there are strong reasons for holding that the status of all virtues as virtues depends on facts about man's place in the universe; were the universe to be different in crucial respects, the virtues would not be virtues. Yet if *all* virtues—including patience and justice—are virtues only relative to certain facts, how is the distinction between relative and absolute virtues to be formulated?

The third chapter advances the thesis that there are virtues which "only count as such when they are attended by certain other virtues" and goods which in similar fashion are to be and are treated as such "only to the extent that further goods underlie them" (p. 61). So, Slote argues, conscientiousness is a trait which is to be accounted a virtue only when joined in a character to certain other traits, such as what he calls 'common human decency, a humane sense of values'. Conscientiousness in a Nazi is not a virtue. "Unless we are prepared to hold—as most people would be reluctant to do—that anyone who acts from conscience automatically does what is right (for him to do), we are not likely to admire the conscientiousness of a Nazi prison-camp guard whose sense of duty dictated that he should simply follow orders, however 'disagreeable'" (p. 63).

We need however to examine a little more closely wherein the badness of such a person lies. A conscientiously cruel prison-guard will characteristically be a worse person than his or her lackadaisical and lazy counterpart. But he or she will be worse precisely because he or she will behave with more cruelty more often. To be cruel to the same degree and to lack conscientiousness would be to be even worse. Or so at least Aquinas argued and without making the least concession to the view that anyone who acts from conscience does what is right.

Slote gives us no reasons for rejecting Aquinas's view.

He also asserts something in his fourth chapter that Aquinas denies—once again without alluding to Aquinas's discussion—where he claims that there are virtues the exercise of which runs counter to morality, traits that are at once admirable and immoral. Slote's example is "Churchill's single-minded, passionate devotion to Allied victory" (p. 95) in World War II, a single-mindedness which led him to approve the fire-bombing of civilian targets. Slote thinks that only someone under the sway of an *a priori* thesis to the effect that moral considerations must always be overriding would distinguish that in Churchill's resoluteness which was necessary for victory but compatible with the acceptance of moral constraints from Churchill's actual morally unconstrained (in certain respects) single-mindedness and find the former admirable, but not the latter. This dismissive attitude enables Slote to avoid evaluating the arguments which have led Aquinas and others to conclude that it is never permissible (or admirable) to do evil so that good may ensue.

Slote understands himself as championing distinctions embodied in "ordinary moral thinking" and "tendencies" of "everyday thinking" which philosophers have overlooked in the interests of their *a priori* theorising. It is not quite clear whether what he takes to be ordinary prephilosophical moral thinking is, on his view, to be treated as authoritative no matter what philosophers may urge, or only to be treated as authoritative unless and until some cogent theoretical alternative is constructed. But on either construal there are difficulties which Slote has not faced. His claims about everyday moral thinking are presumably empirical claims, but he offers no evidence in their favor, and it is far from clear that they are all true. Moreover Slote's merely negative remarks about philosophical theories leave the reader to guess what he takes a successful philosophical theory to achieve in this area. And this is all the more disappointing because in the last two chapters Slote defends views which seem to need larger theoretical support than he provides.

Slote in these chapters attacks first John McDowell's Platonic thesis that the truly virtuous person who by pursuing virtue foregoes pleasures or wealth loses nothing of value, and secondly what Slote takes to be the Stoic claim that for the ideal person at least the attachments represented by love and friendship are not goods, but rather weaknesses incompatible with the genuine good of self-sufficiency. Slote provides arguments designed to show that pleasure and friendship have the status of goods in such a way that they cannot be deprived of that status in situations in which their cultivation is incompatible with what virtue requires. But what his arguments need, but lack is the backing of a general and comprehensive theory of goods and virtues. In the absence of such a theory the considerations which Slote urges upon us are necessarily inconclusive.

I suggested at the outset that the inconclusiveness of this book is bound up

with its peculiar merits as a stimulus to further enquiry. I add to that now the observation that anyone who is to benefit from the stimulus will have to reconsider Slote's arguments from just the kind of standpoint that he himself abjures—at least in this book, the kind of standpoint provided by some large-scale moral theory, such as Aristotle's, or Aquinas's, or Hume's.

Where the Passion Is: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments, by H. A. Nielsen. Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1983. 204 pages.

Reviewed by STEPHEN N. DUNNING, University of Pennsylvania.

This is an engaging and illuminating book, one which will appeal especially to readers who come to Kierkegaard's *Fragments* not so much to learn about Kierkegaard as to think with him about the problem of knowledge of God. Although Nielsen's own argument—that *Fragments* is a genuine interpretation of New Testament teaching—is not developed until the final pages, his extensive "remarks" on each of the chapters are informed by his conviction that *Fragments* is a philosophical restatement of the biblical idea that faith and human reason are ultimately antithetical. Thus he writes in the Preface of the "brilliant contrast" between philosophy and the New Testament (p. ix), and concludes the book with the claim that *Fragments* presents Christianity as "the detonation on earth of something not of this world" (p. 203). It is this claim which lends unity to the entire project, and which boldly challenges the assumed autonomy and self-sufficiency of philosophical reason.

There are two matters which I wish to discuss in this short review, which illustrate respectively what strike me as the outstanding strength and the single weakness of *Where the Passion Is*. The first involves the complex metaphysical issues raised in *Fragments*, whereas the second has to do with the difficult question of the relation between philosophical reflection and the methods of historical research.

Although Nielsen explores metaphysical matters throughout the book, his analysis of chapter III, "The Absolute Paradox: A Metaphysical Crotchet," serves nicely as a demonstration of his approach. The argument that Climacus states in chapter III is that God is the Unknown which is "the limit to which the Reason repeatedly comes" (*Fragments*, p. 55). Nielsen carefully and insightfully unpacks this concept of God by showing that it is, in Wittgenstein's sense, a "grammatical" rather than a cognitive statement. Both traditional theists and atheists are castigated for trying to grasp "the language of transcendence wrongly as a set of substantive knowing-claims" (p. 79). On the contrary, knowledge about God cannot be abstractly conceived in referential terms: its meaning is to be found