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Gaskin, THE QUEST FOR ETERNITY AN OUTLINE OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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foundationalism. While Reformed theologians have rejected natural theology, Calvin would, I think, be rather surprised by Plantinga's analysis. Calvin does not reject natural theology as such, for he does not discuss proofs for God's existence; rather, he rejects the whole theological method of the Schoolmen. He rejects their employment of philosophical reasoning in theology and he focusses instead on commenting on Scripture, using the tools developed by the Humanists. Also, Calvin expresses admiration for the sciences of the day, and makes no criticisms about how they are ordered. His point is that they are valuable only in relation to earthly things and not for learning about God or salvation. That must come from Scripture. The latter part of Plantinga's essay is devoted to explaining why the fact that belief in God can be basic does not mean that anything goes—such as a belief in the great pumpkin. Belief in God is not groundless and Plantinga indicates in a preliminary way some of its justifying circumstances. Finally, he argues that holding belief in God to be basic does not mean that argument is irrelevant to this belief.

In the final essay, Roy Clouser offers an alternative view of religious language. Language about God is, he says, "ordinary language" rather than analogical language. Against analogy he argues that it requires some likeness between the two realities compared and there is nothing univocally true of God and creatures. Instead Clouser proposes that all properties and relations which Biblical writers attribute to God are created properties, properties which he has taken on in relation to the universe. In this framework the trinity, for example, becomes a created property which God assumes to himself. Clouser's proposal is inventive, but it raises at least as many questions as it answers.

Although the authors of these essays write from diverse philosophical perspectives, they express a unifying theme: reason must be subordinated to the claims of faith. Throughout the authors indicate the limits of reason and the role of commitment. This volume manifests the continuing vitality of the Calvinist tradition and the contribution it is making on the contemporary philosophical scene.

The Quest for Eternity: An Outline of the Philosophy of Religion, by J.C.A. Gaskin. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1984. 197pp. Paper \$4.95.

Reviewed by THOMAS V. MORRIS, University of Notre Dame.

This is a clearly written introduction to rational reflection on the credibility of theism. It is well organized, relatively free of technical philosophical jargon, and devoid of the sort of overly complex arguments beginners to philosophy

often find daunting. In addition, it effectively portrays theism and atheism as providing in the end very different world views with practical implications for how we see ourselves. The publisher advertises the book as an “objective” treatment of its subject matter. And it is evident, upon reading it, that the author sometimes goes out of his way to try to be fair: Although he says that he finds theism “intrinsically incredible,” and considers the argumentative support which can be marshalled in its behalf to be decidedly weak, he attempts to point also to some weaknesses in any atheistic view of the world, and finally concedes that it may be rational for some people to be theists. As a matter of fact, though, the tone of the book is by no means “objective.” Often writing in the first person, Gaskin cannot seem to avoid letting his own perspective at times seriously distort how he handles a theistic claim or argument. His tone is in places quite depreciating, and on occasion he comes far too close to dismissing an important idea or set of arguments in serious philosophical theology with little more than a colorful epithet. For example, after introducing the problem of reconciling God’s omniscience with human free will, he chooses, rather than to consider carefully serious theistic attempts to deal with the problem, merely to generalize about these efforts as involving intellectual “contortions” and “labyrinthine extremities,” and as leading into “a hideous thicket” of “absurdities.” His own biases seem often to function to allow him to cut a discussion short, and to stand satisfied with a point made against theism or some theistic argument which is left at a far from satisfactory stage of development. In the light of all this, it is a bit surprising to find him conclude the book with the rather wistful remark that (p. 179):

As I write this last sentence, my mind inclines to the not altogether disagreeable Epicurean acceptance that the world is as it is, and is all there is; but the hope of other worlds somehow lingers.

In the first chapter, Gaskin argues against a number of contemporary *avante garde* theologians that the religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam depend fundamentally on a metaphysic of theism, the central claim of which is that, in Gaskin’s words, “there exists one God who is creator and sustainer of all things; who is omnipotent, omniscient and eternal; who is an agent able to act everywhere without a body, and who is morally concerned with mankind” (24). It is then the task he sets himself to investigate the rational credentials of this claim.

In chapter two, Gaskin attempts to justify the search for evidence and arguments he plans to pursue by criticizing fideism, which he understands to be the perspective on religious belief that denies the appropriateness or relevance of evidence and rational argument in matters of religion. He offers at least two arguments against adopting this perspective, one which he clearly intends to be attractive to the unbeliever as well as to the religious believer, the other directed primarily

to the believer. Both arguments begin from a common distinction between causes which may have brought about a person's holding of a belief, and any reason for which the belief might be held to be true. The first argument then seems to go like this: A belief is a conviction about a possible state of affairs in the public (presumably, external) world only if it is anchored in a reality beyond the believer's mind by evidence. The major Western religions have presented their central theistic belief as such a conviction. Thus, in order to evaluate them properly, we must ask whether the appropriate sort of evidence exists that theism is true. Naturalistic accounts are available in principle for the rise and persistence of religious beliefs, but they do not alone either preclude or prejudice a search for evidence, or reasons. If we are to judge these religions in accordance with what they claim to be, we are thus both allowed and required to look for evidence and arguments concerning theism. Gaskin then argues that the availability of a naturalistic account of the causes of religious beliefs affects the epistemic dynamics of such beliefs: In order to qualify for rationality, they must be "evidence sensitive." Otherwise, reason demands that we dismiss the beliefs, understanding them only in terms of their causes.

Although he labels the target of his attack here 'fideism,' it is clear that Gaskin would reject the view of religious belief as properly basic developed in recent years by Alvin Plantinga and others, regardless of whether it is accurately categorized together with the irrationalistic disregard of argument of any kind more commonly known as fideism. And in a later chapter on religious experience, Gaskin fails to consider at all the claim that religious belief can be related to religious experience in something like the way in which some beliefs about physical objects are related to the physical object experiences which occasion them—the beliefs being grounded in the experience without being based on anything like evidence or reasons of the sort Gaskin has in mind. In consequence, his apparent insistence on the necessity of positive evidence or cogent pieces of natural theology in support of the existence of God as a requisite for the rationality of theistic belief will be seen by many philosophers as begging some important questions.

Consider the following beliefs we all hold concerning our means for attaining knowledge about the world:

- (1) Sense experience is sometimes reliable.
- (2) Memory is sometimes reliable.
- (3) Testimony is sometimes reliable.
- (4) Inductive reasoning is sometimes reliable.

It cannot be the case that any of these beliefs is reasonable if good (non-circular, etc.) evidence is required for all of them. At least some such beliefs must be held as basic, without the need of being based on evidence. This is widely

accepted nowadays, although Gaskin nowhere recognizes such a limitation on the need for evidence or positive argumentative support. But suppose he did. It might be that, like Anthony Kenny, he holds religious belief to be sufficiently different from these paradigms of basicity to always require evidence. He might think, for example, that although non-circular evidence is not possible for (2) (evidence whose gathering and consideration does not presuppose the truth of (2)), and so not properly required for (2), non-circular evidence is possible in principle for theism, and that this disqualifies religious belief from being properly basic. If he has some such reason for disregarding anything like the basicity option, he should have said so. The view that religious belief is properly basic is too important an option to be just ignored, even in an introductory book.

Chapter three presents us with the ontological, cosmological, and design arguments for the existence of God. After a fairly standard and uninspiring look at Anselm's discovery, Gaskin moves on to give an interesting characterization of those fundamental cosmic questions which give rise to *a posteriori* arguments for theism. This section of the chapter is marred only by a somewhat surprising attack on the idea of creation *ex nihilo*, during which the notion is termed "intuitively odd," "recondite in the extreme," and even "repugnant." He argues that we cannot possibly observe creation *from nothing*, apparently since the truth conditions of the required unrestricted negative existential could never come within our perceptual purview, and so that we have as strong an argument as experience can provide that there cannot *be* creation from nothing. But of course, it is not the case that for just any proposition *p* about the physical world, the lack of, or even the impossibility of, any complete observation of the truth conditions of *p* requires or even permits the rational denial of *p*.¹ It is surprising that Gaskin apparently thinks otherwise.

The discussion of the cosmological argument is fairly interesting, but contains what seem to me to be a number of flaws and oversights. Consider for instance a problem widely thought to attend the theist's application of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) to derive the existence of God: Very roughly, the theist begins apparently by contending that for everything, for every positive fact, there must be an explanation. With suitable argument, he produces God as a being whose activity of creation provides the requisite explanation for the existence of the world. But then what about God? It looks like PSR will require an explanation of his existence and of his activity's being what it is, and that this explanation will have to be in terms of something else which in turn will need explaining, and so on, *ad infinitum*, so that a full, complete explanation for the contents of reality will never be available, contrary to what PSR demands. So the classical theist, notoriously disinclined to tolerate infinite regresses, brings one on himself by his endorsement and use of PSR.

Gaskin suggests that unless PSR is understood as holding only *within* the

context of the physical universe, such an embarrassing regress is unavoidable. But if this restriction is made, he claims, the principle is saved from such a regress only to render it powerless to generate an argument to the existence of a being outside of, or distinct from, the physical universe. However, the suggestion that PSR be understood as holding only within the context of the physical universe can be taken in either of two ways. On one reading, this restriction delimits the *explananda* (candidates for explanation, or things needing explanation) falling within the scope of PSR to only items within the physical universe. On a second reading, both *explananda* and *explanantia* (facts or objects providing explanations) are limited to the contents of the physical universe. It is only this second reading which will let Gaskin's argument go through, but it is only something like the first reading of this suggestion which will have to be acknowledged by theists if any kind of untoward regress is to be blocked, and of course it is only this sort of construal which will be acceptable to theists in the first place.

More precisely, however, what is required for a non-problematic cosmological argument is not an entirely *ad hoc* restriction of PSR which simply specifies that it applies only to *explananda* within the physical, or natural universe, but rather a two-fold general restriction which arguable will entail that only such *explananda* fall within its scope. First, it can be argued in two distinct ways that PSR must be restricted so as not to apply to free actions. For one thing, Buriden's Ass problems seem to show that such events, and their correlate facts, do not satisfy PSR. Free choices can be made by agents who have no sufficient reason for choosing precisely as they do. So, if PSR is to have any reasonable chance of being true, it must be qualified in the light of this. But in order to justify fully the conclusion that PSR must be restricted so as not to apply to free acts at all, a further and distinct line of argument is needed. The first sort of argument I have just alluded to, the sort of argument which arises from considerations brought to light by Buriden's Ass problems, turns on an interpretation of 'sufficient reason' linked to the sense of 'reason' in accordance with which a reason is something an agent *has*, something entertained and acted on by an agent. But a traditional construal of PSR allows any object, event, or state of affairs *O* to provide a sufficient reason for the existence, occurrence, or obtaining of an *explanandum E* just in case (1) *O* is ontologically distinct from *E*, (2) *O* is not causally dependent on *E*, and (3) *O* entails *E*, regardless of whether *O* contains or involves the sort of sufficient reason an agent might *have* for doing as he does. It might be thought that in this broad and general sense of 'sufficient reason' there could be a sufficient reason for every possible free act even if in many cases the agent involved does not himself *have* a sufficient reason (in the psychological sense) for doing precisely as he does.

But if we do understand PSR in this way as requiring, in the general sense of 'sufficient reason,' explanations involving *explanantia* ontologically distinct

from, and not causally dependent upon, whatever *explanandum* is in question then allowing free acts within its scope would itself generate unacceptable infinite regresses within the context of the physical, or natural, universe. For on PSR, the occurrence of a free act would have to be explained in terms of something distinct from the act which was sufficient for its occurrence. But assuming a libertarian conception of free action, which nowadays most theists assume and which seems to have a great deal of congruence with the overall theistic vision, the *explanantia* for any free act could not involve only conditions independent, and outside the control, of the agent of the act, such as natural conditions prior to the act's occurrence. Those *explanantia* would have to involve something for which the agent was freely responsible, say, an intention to so act. But then the obtaining of that intention would also require an explanation, whose terms would, it seems, have to include some distinct entity, event, or mental item again within the control of the agent, and so on, and so on. Unlike the soft determinist, the theistic libertarian would seem, by the application of PSR to contexts involving free actions, to be committing himself to an infinitely regressive explanation for every free act involving the absurd postulation of infinitely many volitional features of the agent, within his control and mediating between him and the act, such as intentions to act, desires to intend to act, intentions to desire to intend to act, and so on, *ad infinitum et absurdum*.

So if the theist wants a plausible version of PSR, the demand for sufficient reasons cannot apply unrestrictedly throughout contexts of free action. But the introduction of such a qualification involves only one component of the two-fold general restriction of PSR needed for a cosmological argument free of unsatisfactory infinite regresses. Recall that the theist being discussed by Gaskin wants to employ a plausible general demand for explanations which can find a natural and proper stopping-point in, and only in, the recognition of the existence and free creative actions of a being such as God. The existence and actions of that being cannot be such as to cry out for explanation just as obviously as any feature of the natural world which can give rise to this sort of argument. Otherwise, the theist cannot plausibly claim the existence and activity of a God to provide an appropriate culmination and end of the explanatory quest.

If the restriction of PSR concerning free actions is to stand, the postulated free, creative activity of God is not such as to require, by the terms of PSR, further explanation. But what of the postulated existence of God? How can the theist call a halt to the demand for explanation here? Will there not have to be an explanation for it, and in turn for the existence or occurrence of whatever explains it, and so on, *ad infinitum*? Typically, the point of such questions is to get the theist to recognize that we must call a halt to the demand for explanations *somewhere*, and that if there is no good reason to think that the postulation of a God's existence is distinctively appropriate as such a stopping-point, there is

no point in extrapolating beyond the bounds of the natural world we all know to exist in the first place.

Some theists have tried to exempt the existence of God from the demand for explanation, and so call a proper halt to any potential, infinitely regressive quest here, by specifying that PSR should be restricted so as to apply only to contingent facts, and never to necessary entities or states of affairs. The claim then is that since God is a necessary being, existent in all possible worlds, the demands of PSR do not apply to him. And of course just as well known as this response is its characterization as begging the question against the non-theist. After all, it is said, if we could accept the description of God as a necessary being, we wouldn't need a cosmological argument to tell us whether such a being exists.

The insight behind this attempted restriction is that, typically, why something is the case requires explanation only if it could have been otherwise. On this common way of thinking, the existence of a necessarily existent being, a being which exists in all possible worlds, will not cry out for explanation, at least not for the sort of explanation demanded by PSR. The world could not have been otherwise. But in order to exploit this common assumption about explanation, the theist need not characterize God as a necessarily existent being. Working from the same assumption, or intuition, about explanation, the theist can carefully suggest that PSR not apply to the existence of any entity which is such that, *if* it exists in any possible world, exists in all. God can be said to satisfy this condition without any blatant question begging against the non-theist, and without rendering superfluous lines of reasoning such as the cosmological argument.

So, for roughly these reasons, reasons which cannot be spelled out any further here, if PSR is restricted so as not to require sufficient, independent reasons for (a) free acts, or for (b) the existence of any entity which is by nature such that if it exists in any possible world, it exists in all, then the theist will have a principle whose scope arguably extends over only *explananda* within the natural, or physical universe (consonant with one reading of Gaskin's suggestion), but which can generate an argument to the existence of a Creator God distinct from the physical universe without pain of regress, contrary to what Gaskin thinks possible. If Gaskin had looked into the matter further, he might have seen that the theist need not judge himself to be in such a position that he has a defensible principle in PSR only if it is a principle which will not lead to theism.

After examining one form of the argument from design, and there acknowledging that certain very general questions about the universe may after all provide some weak support for theism, Gaskin turns his attention in chapter four to a consideration of religious experience. He asks whether religious experience can serve as good evidence for the existence of God, and maintains that it can only if it is clearly identifiable as a certain type of experience. Any experience can be categorized, according to Gaskin, as experience of an externally existing

object, such as a stone or tree, or as experience of an internally existing object such as a dream or pain. He says:

By experience of an externally existing object I mean experience such that any other person rightly and possibly situated, with normally functioning senses, powers of attention, and a suitable conceptual understanding, will have the same or a closely similar experience. (80)

A religious experience will have evidential value only if it is clearly identifiable as of this type. And since Gaskin apparently understands the experiential situation of a person only in naturalistic terms, it comes as no surprise that, on the basis of the account just given, he judges it unclear that any religious experience is ever of the appropriate type to serve as part of a case for theism.

In chapter five Gaskin begins to consider problems for theism. After rehearsing very briefly the positivist rejection of religious utterances as cognitively meaningless, he registers his own worries about the sense of religious claims. First, he suggests that non-bodily agency such as theists recognize in the case of God is "on the face of it . . . incoherent," and then he expresses difficulty in understanding how a person could exist without a single point of view from some one point in space. He finally considers that the only way of understanding God's claimed ability to act directly on any part of the universe will involve seeing the world as standing to God in somewhat the way in which (ideally) our bodies stand to us. He quickly, and mistakenly, characterizes this as the view that God just *is* the universe, and then claims that on such a view theism ends up no different from atheism. But of course theists who draw a mind-body analogy between God and the world are dualists of some sort and espouse a view which in no way entails the effacement of the ultimate distinction between theism and atheism. Taking a final parting shot at the traditional claim that God is of a different order of reality from the physical universe, Gaskin indicates that he finds such claims senseless, and wraps up his discussion by saying:

Sensational metaphysics without an iota of empirical evidence in support are snares for the gullible, not paths to reasoned truth. (116)

In chapter six, Gaskin offers a fairly standard presentation of the problem of evil, concluding finally that natural evil constitutes strong evidence against theism. In this chapter, he also presents the problem of foreknowledge and free will and the traditional belief in miracles as embarrassments to theism. He concludes that the rational considerations available to us as we reflect on theism point to its falsehood.

However, as he indicates in the concluding two chapters, one sketching out what he considers unsatisfying moral features of atheism, the other summing up the results of the book, the evidential situation he takes us to be in need not be

thought to eliminate the rationality of anyone's being a theist. The positive evidential considerations there are for theism (as slight as he thinks them to be), coupled with the lack of tight demonstrative proof that theism is incoherent or false, augmented by some pragmatic considerations regarding morality may, according to Gaskin, allow theism rationally to be held.

In the preface to his introductory book in the philosophy of psychology, *Psychological Explanation*, Jerry Fodor a few years ago remarked:²

I think many philosophers secretly harbor the view that there is something deeply (i.e., conceptually) wrong with psychology, but that a philosopher with a little training in the techniques of linguistic analysis and a free afternoon could straighten it out.

Substituting 'religion' for 'psychology' in this quote, I think we would have an illuminating explanation for one of the most common sorts of failing in much recent writing in the philosophy of religion: Too many philosophers have found themselves with a free afternoon. The failing I have in mind is the failure to take seriously the many profound, and profoundly difficult issues at stake in the responsible consideration of the major claims of the theistic tradition. The result is an unsatisfying degree of superficiality and a rash drawing of negative conclusions which, while it does represent one brand of philosophizing (one our students are all too prone to), does not represent the sort of philosophical care we want to find in even an introductory text. Though Gaskin's book is interesting and for the most part enjoyable to read, it seems to me to suffer from this failing throughout.

NOTES

1. Related issues, as the concern theism are explored in "Agnosticism," *Analysis*, (1985), pp. 219-224.

2. New York: Random House, 1968; page vii.

Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas (Series: Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy, Volume 10), by **John F. Wippel**. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984. Pp. xii + 293. \$31.95.

Reviewed by NORMAN KRETZMANN, Cornell University.

The body of this book consists of the three chapters of Part I, "The Nature