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## Tanner, GOD AND CREATION IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY: TYRANNY OR EMPOWERMENT

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not to deny that God's nature and commands make some things good, bad, obligatory or wrong which would not be so otherwise; nor to deny that God's nature and commands make things more good, bad, obligatory, or wrong than they would be otherwise. My objections are old objections, but an essay in defence of divine command theory will not carry conviction unless the author has something to say about them.

*God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?*, by **Kathryn Tanner**. Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1988. Pp. 196. Cloth \$43.95.

THOMAS F. TRACY, Bates College.

Kathryn Tanner's subtle and historically rich study is centrally concerned with the relations between claims about God's creative sovereignty and creatures' powers of action. Traditionally, Christians have claimed both that 1) "a radically transcendent God exercises a universal and unconditional agency," and 2) creatures possess "their own power and efficacy," and in the case of human beings are "free and therefore responsible for the character of their lives" (pp. 1-2). Under modern conditions of thought, Tanner contends, it has become commonplace to assert that these two statements involve a contradiction. Contemporary theologians uncritically share the modern assumptions that lead to this appearance of inconsistency, and so they seek to solve the problem by weakening one (typically the first) or both of these claims. In doing so, they display a "curious forgetfulness about the rules for proper Christian talk" (p. 5), for there is an earlier and well-established tradition in theology that embodies rules of speech which, if carefully followed, make it possible to affirm both divine sovereignty and creaturely agency. Tanner's program, then, is to uncover these rules, display their mutual consistency, and show how they are distorted or forgotten under the influence of certain avoidable modern assumptions.

Tanner begins with a chapter on method in which she explains the linguistic turn of her approach. Statements about God, she contends, are best understood as instructions about *how to talk* about God. This move to second order discourse is not simply a useful device for analyzing theological utterances. Tanner makes the much stronger claim that this reflects the intrinsic limits of speech about God. She adopts an agnostic reading of Thomas' distinction between the *res significata* and the *modus significandi*:

Theologians simply assume that what they say about God is meaningful and true: they have no way of actually specifying what they are talking about (the *res significata* of their statements) apart from the meanings of the terms they

use and it is just those meanings whose applicability to God they admit to failing to understand (p. 12).

Theological statements are "informationally vacuous," they tell us nothing about God. They do, however, establish rules for what should and should not be said of God, and this linguistic practice shapes Christian religious life.

This account of religious language (and this reading of Thomas) faces a variety of difficulties, and an interest in the regulative functions of theological statements certainly does not commit one to these wider views. On this account, when we say "God is good," it appears that we are saying roughly the following: "It is correct for Christians to say 'God is good,' although we cannot state any positive relation between the meaning of the predicate 'good' when we ascribe it to this subject and when we say of any other subject that it is good. This statement about God, however, is tied in certain ways to other Christian statements (spelled out in further theological rules of discourse) and to the practice of Christian life." This predicative agnosticism bears an uneasy relation to Tanner's concern to show the *consistency* of Christian claims. For, first, if a 'veil of ignorance' is drawn between the way we speak of God (the *modus*) and the referent of that speech (the *res*), then it is not clear that we should worry about contradictions in the former (which need not, after all, signify in God what they signify for us). On this account one might argue that Christians ought not to be troubled if they find the right sort of inconsistencies in their utterances, e.g., inconsistencies that result from conjoining elements of first-order Christian discourse that ordinarily are used to counteract complementary errors in religious practice. This would be a provocative argument to make, but it is not the result Tanner intends.

Tanner indicates that the rules she will identify are highly formal; materially different theologies, using distinctive vocabularies for talk about God and the world, should be able to satisfy them. In each case, the rules will specify how to modify patterns of speech carried over to theology from other contexts; in particular, certain inferences that might ordinarily be warranted in non-theological contexts will be blocked when this language is pressed into theological service. Although these theological rules "fracture" and "violate" the rules of ordinary linguistic practice, they serve to establish "the coherence of Christian claims that otherwise appear to conflict with one another" (p. 27).

The first two rules that Tanner states concern God's transcendence and creative agency. There is a putative contradiction, she contends, between the claims that 1) "God transcends the world," and 2) "God is directly involved in the world as its creator" (p. 38). The tension between these assertions, which she traces in Hellenistic cosmologies, results from defining divine transcendence "contrastively." When the divine is delineated by contrast with

the non-divine, God's transcendence and God's involvement with the world stand in inverse relation to each other. As God's transcendence is emphasized, God's dealings with the world are restricted, and this "inevitably [brings] God down to the level of the non-divine" as one limited being among others (p. 46). Christian discourse, Tanner argues, avoided this paradoxical result by following a rule requiring that God's transcendence be defined non-contrastively, *viz.*, "avoid both simple univocal attribution of predicates to God and world and a simple contrast of divine and non-divine predicates." This rule is conjoined with a second: "avoid in talk about God's creative agency all suggestions of limitation in scope or manner" (p. 47). These two rules are systematically interconnected; we can satisfy the second only if we conform to the first.

These rules play a crucial role throughout Tanner's study. It is worth noting, therefore, some puzzles about the notion of a non-contrastive account of transcendence. Are all contrasts between God and world to be denied? Tanner sometimes speaks this way. God, she suggests, "is not characterized by contrast with any sort of being" (p. 46), and "it is the mutual exclusiveness of *all* apparent antitheses...that must give way before such a God" (p. 79). At the very least, however, a contrast is asserted between beings that are defined by some network of contrasts (i.e., finite beings) and that Being who cannot be so defined. Further, the concept of such a Being is paradoxical if defined in terms of contrasts as such (*viz.*, the Being, in contrast to all other beings, who cannot be defined by contrasts) rather than in terms of some particular contrast or set of contrasts. It follows that the argument will fail which claims that establishing a contrast between God and the world inevitably leads to treating God as one limited being among others. The lesson to be learned from Hellenistic thinkers, it would seem, is not that we should avoid contrasting God and world, but rather that we should be careful about *which* contrasts we draw. To say that God is ingenerate does not appear to impose any limitation on God's activity, while to say that God is impassible *may* impose certain limits. The debate on these questions continues, and there seems to be little prospect of ending it with the claim that all such contrasts entail impermissible limitations. On at least one reading, therefore, the first rule does not constitute a necessary condition for satisfying the second.

Given these basic rules of Christian discourse, Tanner turns to the central question of her study: if God's agency in the created world is universal, unconditioned, and immediate, can creatures exercise powers of their own and, in at least some actions, be free? The first two rules, she argues, entail the subsidiary rule that creatures exist in "total and immediate dependence upon God" (p. 84). This has as its correlate the principle that every action of creatures, including free intentional action, is founded in God's prior agency "directly and *in toto*—in power, exercise, manner of activity and effect" (p. 86). Divine and created agencies are not in competition, as though one must

give way to make room for the other. Rather the actions of God and of creatures occur on two different levels—the vertical and the horizontal, or the primary and the secondary—that are reflected in separate “orders of predication.” The statement that an event is contingent or that it is a free intentional action does not conflict with “the creature’s complete determination by God’s creative agency.” For talk of contingency and freedom “simply concern[s] the nature of the relation between created beings and their created effects” on the horizontal level (p. 90). An effect in the world can be entirely attributed to God’s primary causality *and* to the creature’s secondary causality, for God’s creative agency brings about the existence, operation, and effect of the finite agent. These reflections lead to several more subsidiary rules, the heart of which is that God’s agency must in no way be conditioned by creatures, e.g., by operating among creaturely causes as a partial or contributing cause (p. 94), by affecting creatures’ actions rather than by effecting them (p. 95), or by adapting the divine activity to the independent or opposed actions of creatures (p. 96).

Is this broadly Thomistic picture sufficient to demonstrate the compatibility of divine sovereignty with the causal powers of creatures and with human freedom? There seem to be, on this view, real causal relations among creatures. The more difficult question concerns the freedom of finite agents, and one’s answer will depend upon what sort of freedom one thinks it important to claim in Christian theology. Tanner is right that the divine “vertical” determination of a finite agent’s intentional action is compatible with that act being free on the “horizontal” level. One can affirm an incompatibilism that is restricted to the creaturely context of action, i.e., an agent’s free actions are not determined by the prior history of the world and the laws of nature. But is this enough? God’s immediate creative agency brings about not only my ongoing existence as an agent with the capacity to make choices, it also brings about my choices. Although God does not act alongside or among secondary agencies to cause me to act as I do, God’s primary activity constitutes me as the agent who performs *these* acts. God’s creative will includes each of my choices, and God’s will infallibly effects what it intends. Tanner acknowledges that there is an important sense in which the finite agent is not, on this account, “really free to do otherwise” (p. 178, n. 11). But she contends that the interest in claiming some stronger freedom for finite agents reflects the distorting influences of modernity and brings with it the breakdown of coherent Christian discourse. Against this, however, there appear to be considerations *internal* to Christianity that might lead to the affirmation of such creaturely freedom, even if one resists the enchantment of Enlightenment claims about autonomy or of deistic pictures of a world that gets along alright on its own. For example, one might wonder how, on the account Tanner gives, we are to explain the Christian claim that in sin the creature’s will has come

to be *at odds* with God's will. Thomists have various strategies of response to this question, of course. But a theologian who is not convinced of the adequacy of these responses might be led to affirm that part of God's creative purpose for us is to grant us a limited freedom in relation to God as well as to one another. When talk of such freedom is motivated in this way, it is far from clear that it reflects a "theologically inexplicable" (p. 145) departure from the basic rules of Christian discourse.

Given the limits of space, I have not commented here on Tanner's use of materials from the history of theology to illustrate her points. Her interweaving of themes from Aquinas and Barth is particularly noteworthy, and she provides illuminating commentary on a number of past disputes (e.g., between Molina and Bañez). One of the special contributions of this book is that it provides an outstanding model for the use of historical materials in exploring issues of contemporary importance in philosophical theology.

*Explanation from Physics to Theology: An Essay in Rationality and Religion*, by Philip Clayton. New Haven: Yale University, 1989. Pp. ix and 230. \$26.50. ISBN 0-300-0435308.

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Philip Clayton's *Explanation from Physics to Theology* is an intriguing book. It pursues a worthy goal in a highly competent manner. The goal is to counter the tendency of modern liberal theology to take theological assertions as anything but assertions (as expressions of religious feeling, or existential orientation, or as moral recommendations) by showing theology to be enough like science that whatever truth value science has must accrue to theology as well. He begins with an account of the history of philosophy of the natural sciences, since these are taken to be our best examples of rational explanation and warranted assertability. He then turns to the social sciences, whose concern with questions of meaning has long been said to require an entirely different methodology. However, he concludes that the differences have been exaggerated—in both cases the essence of science is providing explanations. These must fit the explanandum into an accepted framework, and must be evaluated by means of a coherence criterion. This move puts him in a position to tackle religion, whose cognitive component is understood as a system of beliefs by means of which individuals and communities attempt to give meaning to the whole of experience. Theology, then, is a discipline that seeks to discover and interpret systems of religious meaning and to assess the truth of the religion's theory about ultimate reality according to the canons of scientific explanation.