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BOOK REVIEWS

The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes. Edward R. Wierenga. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989. Pp. xii and 238. \$28.50.

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Edward Wierenga's *The Nature of God* is a wide-ranging philosophical investigation of the attributes of the God of traditional Christians. The book focusses primarily on the type of power, knowledge, and goodness which can properly be ascribed to such a being. One chapter is devoted to omnipotence, five to omniscience (and such related issues as foreknowledge, freedom, the necessity of the past, middle knowledge, and eternity), and two to perfect goodness and the divine command theory of morality.

There is much to admire in Wierenga's book. The argumentation is careful and precise, and many parts of the work (a prime instance being the masterful chapter on omniscience) are truly exemplary pieces of philosophy. Nevertheless, *The Nature of God* includes several sections which leave something to be desired. Here I will discuss three areas where I feel Wierenga goes astray: his analysis of omnipotence, his defence of the claim that freedom and foreknowledge are compatible, and his presentation of middle knowledge.

Wierenga's discussion of omnipotence utilizes several terms and concepts popularized in the work of Alvin Plantinga, a philosopher whose enormous influence upon Wierenga is acknowledged at the start of the text (p. xi) and is evident throughout the work. Wierenga argues that a proper explication of omnipotence needs to take account of the fact that there are (at least) two ways in which God can be said to bring about a state of affairs *S*—by *strongly actualizing* it (i.e., roughly, by causing it), or by *weakly actualizing* it (i.e., by strongly actualizing some other state of affairs *T* such that God's strongly actualizing *T* counterfactually implies *S*'s being actual). By combining this distinction with the concept of an *initial segment* of a possible world, where the initial segment of a world *W* at a time *t* is represented by *S(W, t)* and is to be thought of roughly as containing the history of *W* at *t*, Wierenga offers the following as a definition of omnipotence:

- (O*) a being *x* is omnipotent in a world *W* at a time *t* =df. In *W* it is true both that (i) for every state of affairs *A*, if it is possible that both *S(W, t)* obtains and that *x* strongly actualizes *A* at *t*, then at *t* *x* can strongly actualize *A*, and (ii) there is some state of affairs which *x* can strongly actualize at *t* (p. 25)

As Wierenga notes (p. 15, fn. 9), this definition is quite similar in motivation to the independent analysis of omnipotence which Alfred Freddoso and I offered several years ago.¹ Each of these analyses was framed with the distinction between strong and weak actualization squarely in mind. Each was also founded upon the assumption that what Plantinga calls Leibniz's Lapse—viz., the thesis that, if a world is logically possible, it follows that God (being omnipotent) had the power to create it—is indeed a lapse, and that we thus need to distinguish between *possible* and *feasible* worlds, where only the latter are actualizable by God. Yet despite these similarities, the analyses ended up differing in significant respects—e.g., our analysis uses the general concept of actualizing which incorporates both strong and weak actualizing, whereas Wierenga's is restricted to strong actualization.

It seems to me that the analysis offered by Freddoso and me is resilient in the face of objections which bedevil a definition such as Wierenga's. Take, for example, the pesky McEar, the famed fellow who is essentially capable only of scratching his left ear. Given (O*), McEar would rank as omnipotent, for (to state things informally) provided that he can scratch his left ear, there are things he can do and he can do anything which it's possible that he do. After some preliminary fussing with precisely how McEar is to be described, Wierenga responds to the challenge posed by this redoubtable figure by throwing him out of the court of the possible:

But is it really possible that there be a being whose abilities are *essentially* limited in this way? For any agent who is incapable of tying a shoe, it would seem to be at least possible that God confer on the agent greater powers that include the ability to tie a shoe. In that case, it would be possible for any such limited being to do more than it is able to do (p. 29).

Let me make two points in response. First, I see little reason to doubt that there could be an essentially limited being of the appropriate sort. Some powers—e.g., to take one mentioned by Wierenga himself in the sentence preceding the above quotation, the ability to create something *ex nihilo*—seem to me to be ones which many (perhaps all non-omnipotent) beings are essentially incapable of possessing, but which we would expect an omnipotent being to possess. Second, it's not clear to me that it's the *possibility* of such an essentially limited being which is really the issue. So long as such a being is both clearly conceivable and clearly not omnipotent, doesn't it follow that Wierenga's definition fails to capture the *concept* of omnipotence, whether or not it offers necessary and sufficient conditions for being omnipotent? Thus, I find it hard to understand why Wierenga is not persuaded that McEar shows that his definition needs to be scratched.

Wierenga's defense of his definition in the face of other objections is also somewhat puzzling. Arguing (on p. 26) that (O*) is compatible with the claim that God is essentially morally perfect, Wierenga says that the actual world's

initial segment will include God's having made certain promises (e.g., not to lay waste the earth with a flood). On the next page, however, when discussing the claim that God's foreknowledge would raise problems for (O*), Wierenga replies by denying that God's foreknowledge is to be thought of as part of the initial world segment. Such a combination of positions seems rather peculiar. A case could surely be made for saying that *both* divine promising and divine foreknowings are part of the history of the world; a case could also be made for saying that *neither* are part of the history of the world. But to say that the promising are, while the foreknowings aren't, is surely strange.

Wierenga's view on foreknowledge is evident as well in the second of the three areas I wish to examine—his discussion of the alleged incompatibility between divine foreknowledge and human free will. As Wierenga sees it, foreknowledge and freedom can be shown to be incompatible if the following thesis can be shown to be true:

- (C*) There is a concept of accidental necessity satisfying the following conditions: (i) for all times t_1 and t_2 such that t_1 is earlier than t_2 and for every proposition p , if at t_1 God believes p , then at t_2 the proposition, *At t_1 God believes p* , is accidentally necessary, (ii) for every time t and for all propositions p and q , if p is accidentally necessary at t , p entails q , and it is possible that q is false, then q is accidentally necessary at t , and (iii) for every time t_1 and proposition p , if p is accidentally necessary at t_1 , then there is no person S , action A , and time t_2 at least as late as t_1 such that S can do A at t_2 and if S were to do A at t_2 then p would be false (p. 86).

Wierenga looks at several characterizations of accidental necessity and the related hard/soft fact distinction (offered by Freddoso, Eddy Zemach and David Widerker, John Fischer, and Alvin Plantinga), and concludes (to make a very long and detailed story very short) that none of these attempts offers the proponent of (C*) much support because none of them offers an account of accidental necessity which makes condition (i) of (C*) true—i.e., which makes all of God's past beliefs accidentally necessary. Hence, he concludes, the thesis of incompatibility has not been established.

Though I commend Wierenga's conclusion here, there is something about his presentation which leaves me uneasy—something which has more to do with what he implies than what he actually says. For Wierenga at least suggests that the only plausible way of escaping the incompatibility argument is the Ockhamist strategy of denying that God's past beliefs about the contingent future are hard facts about the past. And in this suggestion he is simply mistaken. As Freddoso has pointed out in his recent translation of Part IV of Molina's *Concordia*, the Molinist response to the charge of incompatibility is to frame a concept of accidental necessity according to which although God's past beliefs *are* accidentally necessary, the concept of accidental necessity is *not* closed under entailment, and propositions which are accidentally necessary are *not*

necessarily beyond our counterfactual control.² Putting this in terms of Wierenga's (C*), the Molinist response is *not* the Ockhamist one that, though plausible analyses of accidental necessity can render (ii) and (iii) true, (i) remains false; on the contrary, the Molinist contends that, though the most plausible analysis of accidental necessity renders (i) true, (ii) and (iii) remain false.

My point here is not to argue for the superiority of either the Ockhamist or the Molinist response, but rather to point out that even a careful reader of Wierenga is given no reason to suspect that there so much as *is* a viable Molinist alternative. In short, Wierenga's discussion of this issue, for all its sophistication and analytical merits, is impoverished in a crucial respect. Readers wishing to be introduced to the issue would be better served by examining the clearer, richer presentations offered, on the one side, by Freddoso or, on the other side, by William Hasker.³

Molina's name, of course, is most frequently associated with the notion of middle knowledge, and Wierenga devotes the (by far) longest chapter in his book to his explication and defense of this notion. Wierenga thinks that middle knowledge plays a crucial role in both the Free Will Defense and the concept of providence, and argues (in ways that are virtually always ingenious and frequently convincing) that the objections raised against middle knowledge by such stalwart critics as Robert Adams, Anthony Kenny and William Hasker are unsound. Though I agree wholeheartedly with Wierenga's emphasis on the philosophical and theological importance of middle knowledge, and commend him for most of his responses to the critics of Molinism, I am troubled by Wierenga's handling of the issue, for his explication of the doctrine of middle knowledge strikes me as both historically insensitive and philosophically questionable.

As Molina saw it, middle knowledge amounts primarily (though not necessarily exclusively) to God's knowledge of how any free creature he might create would freely act in any situation in which that creature might be created and left free. As a libertarian, Molina thought of middle knowledge as standing between God's *natural* knowledge (of *necessary* truths which are *not* subject to his free will) and his *free* knowledge (of *contingent* truths which *are* subject to his free will); the objects of middle knowledge are contingent truths which are not subject to his free will. This is the way in which Molina, his supporters and his detractors have consistently understood the term "middle knowledge"; to define it in some other way is sure to lead to confusion.

Wierenga's definition, I fear, is guilty in just this way. Wierenga suggests that, though the principal objects of middle knowledge should be thought of as counterfactuals of freedom, such counterfactuals with fairly thin antecedents do not offer us the most suitable candidates, for it is plausible to deny that the Law of Conditional Excluded Middle applies to them. His solution is to beef up the antecedents. Letting $T(W)$ stand for the largest state of affairs

which God strongly actualizes in W , Wierenga calls any counterfactuals of the forms exemplified by

(37) If God were to strongly actualize $T(W)$ then W would be actual

or

(38) If God were to strongly actualize $T(W)$ then [person] P would do [action] A

counterfactuals of world-actualization (p. 139). He then proceeds to define the doctrine of middle knowledge as the following thesis:

(39) For every counterfactual of world-actualization, $(p \rightarrow q)$, either God knows $(p \rightarrow q)$ or God knows $(p \rightarrow \sim q)$.

The crucial historical problem with viewing (39) as defining middle knowledge is that, much like the frequently expressed but even less historically attuned definition of middle knowledge as just knowledge of counterfactuals of freedom, it does not allow us to distinguish proponents from opponents of the doctrine. For the major historical opponents of middle knowledge, the Thomists, would deny neither that God knows counterfactuals of freedom nor that he knows counterfactuals of world-actualization. Their claim, rather, has consistently been that the counterfactuals in question are part of either God's natural knowledge or his free knowledge, depending upon whether or not God's actions concurrent with the action in question are thought of as being included in the antecedents. In other words, Molinists cannot be separated from non-Molinists just in terms of which counterfactuals God knows.

Wierenga acknowledges in a footnote (fn. 45, pp. 139-140) that his definition is ahistorical in this fashion, but apparently isn't bothered by the fact. Though I question the wisdom of thus endorsing a definition which blurs a significant philosophical distinction, my problems with (39) are not primarily historical. Rather, I think that a careful appraisal of (39) shows that it simply cannot function as our definition of the doctrine of middle knowledge, at least not if we see middle knowledge as playing the crucial role in providence which Wierenga affirms.

Wierenga is surely right in suggesting that counterfactuals with especially thin antecedents cannot plausibly serve as elements of God's middle knowledge. The typical Molinist response to this truth has been to enrich the antecedents of the relevant counterfactuals so that they include an exhaustive statement of the circumstances obtaining prior to and at the time of the action in question.⁴ While the Molinist thus attempts to add some weight to the antecedents, Wierenga opts for the strategy of making them positively obese. For counterfactuals of world-actualization differ from the Molinist counterfactuals just described primarily in the fact that their antecedents can include reference to states of affairs which God strongly actualizes *after* the time of the action in question.

Such an approach seems to me to be exceedingly counterintuitive, for what God does *after* a person acts is in no sense part of the circumstances in which the person acts. But my objection to counterfactuals of world-actualization is not based primarily on my intuitive feel for what the objects of middle knowledge should look like. If Molinist counterfactuals are true, there is no need for us to define the doctrine of middle knowledge in terms of counterfactuals of world-actualization. But it seems to be demonstrable that God's knowledge of counterfactuals of world-actualization can be useful to him only if he *does* know Molinist counterfactuals, and hence that the former counterfactuals are of little help in understanding middle knowledge.

Let's take as an example the first case of a free action in a world W . Suppose that God has strongly actualized every contingent state of affairs in this world prior to a time t at which a certain creature (call him Adam) faces a free decision (say, that of eating or not eating an apple which God has forbidden him to eat). Let h stand for the history of the world up to t and e stand for Adam's freely eating the apple. Now, the relevant Molinist counterfactual here would be something like $(h \rightarrow e)$; if God has middle knowledge, then, he would know either $(h \rightarrow e)$ or $(h \rightarrow \sim e)$. And according to the Molinist it would be on the basis of this knowledge that God would exercise his providence and possess foreknowledge with respect to Adam's action. Having known from eternity that, say, $(h \rightarrow e)$ is true, and having providentially decreed that h would obtain, God would have foreknowledge of the occurrence of e .

How, we might ask, is God to exercise such providence or possess such foreknowledge under Wierenga's construal of middle knowledge? According to Wierenga, it might well be that God knows neither $(h \rightarrow e)$ nor $(h \rightarrow \sim e)$, but instead knows some counterfactual of world-actualization such as $[T(W) \rightarrow e]$, where $T(W)$ is thought of as including such later states of affairs as God's punishing Adam at $t + n$. And, Wierenga might argue, it is on the basis of such a counterfactual that God exercises providence and possesses foreknowledge: knowing that $[T(W) \rightarrow e]$, and having providentially decided to actualize $T(W)$, God would foreknow that e would occur.

A moment's (or, at any rate, a few hours') reflection, though, should show that Wierenga's alternative is simply not tenable. For how can God decide whether or not to actualize $T(W)$ unless he first knows whether or not Adam would freely eat the apple when in h ? $T(W)$, like most of the interesting largest states of affairs God might strongly actualize, includes many states of affairs which are most properly seen as *reactions* to what creatures like Adam do—e.g., the punishment which $T(W)$ includes is clearly a consequence of Adam's free sinful action. So how can God decide to actualize such a state of affairs as $T(W)$ unless he already knows that Adam, if placed in the circumstance which that state of affairs entails will occur *before* t , would so act as to justify the punishment which that state of affairs entails will occur *after* t ? Indeed,

how can God so much as know that he has the *power* to actualize $T(W)$ unless he knows whether or not Adam would eat the apple if placed in h ? Hence, God's knowledge of which largest state of affairs he'll strongly actualize must be logically posterior to his knowledge of what Adam would do in h ; if God doesn't first know the latter, there is no way in which he can know the former. But if God can thus employ Wierenga's counterfactuals of world-actualization only if he knows Molinist counterfactuals, then Wierenga's counterfactuals can play no essential role in a theory of middle knowledge.

As is customary in reviews such as this, my remarks have focussed primarily on the faults I find with Wierenga's work, and thus might well mask the large extent to which I find his positions admirably stated and ably defended. Despite what I see as the three significant flaws in the book, and despite the surprisingly careless editing which was done with the text (I noticed well over a dozen cases of misspelling, missing words and the like), Wierenga's *The Nature of God* is a fine piece of work, one which scholars concerned with divine attributes should profit from considerably.⁵

NOTES

1. See "Maximal Power," in Alfred J. Freddoso, ed., *The Existence and Nature of God*, (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 81-113.

2. See section 4.5 of Freddoso's introduction, in his *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 53-62.

3. See Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), chapters 2-7.

4. See, for example, Freddoso's introduction to *On Divine Foreknowledge*, pp. 22, 50.

5. I am grateful to Alfred Freddoso, Alvin Plantinga and Especially Edward Wierenga for comments on an earlier version of this review.

Relativism, Nihilism, and God, **Philip E. Devine**. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989. xix and 119. \$22.95

FREDERICK FERRÉ, The University of Georgia

This is a remarkable little book. It packs plenty of explosives into its 109 pages of text. It reads well, written in a fresh, confident tone. And it is written in a good cause: to provide theoretical underpinnings that permit joint allegiance to the life of faith and the life of reason.

The argument by which this cause is pursued is quite straightforward. In the name of a transcendent Truth, Devine attacks pragmatism, relativism, and nihilism. The first naturalizes the standards of truth, the second pluralizes