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Parsons, GOD AND THE BURDEN OF PROOF

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dense for students, laypersons, or non-philosophers, especially those on personal identity (chs. 6 & 7). Nonetheless, I would highly recommend it for classroom use and to pass along to thinking friends. It is an important contribution to a most significant topic.

God and the Burden of Proof, by **Keith M. Parsons**. Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1989. Forward by Kai Nielsen. Pp. 156. \$38.95.

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This book is a limited and largely non-technical examination, from a perspective of what the author calls 'secular humanism,' of recent "analytical" defenses of theism. It is limited in that attention is restricted to Plantinga's discussion of belief in God as properly basic, Swinburne's account of the cosmological argument (in Swinburne's *The Existence of God*), and Plantinga's presentation of the free will defense against the argument from evil. Parsons discusses each of these topics in some depth, and reaches the overall conclusion that "...when it comes to philosophical argumentation about the truth of theism, game, set, and match go to the atheists" (147). Readers might find it odd that such a sweeping conclusion is reached after a limited exploration of the field. Partly this conclusion is supported by a re-definition of the term 'atheism.' Parsons follows Flew in taking an atheist to be someone who is not a theist (31). Thus, for him an atheist need not believe that there is no God; simple agnosticism will suffice to count one as an atheist. But, according to Parsons, a person who lacks a belief is under no responsibility to provide grounds for that lack; so, an atheist is under no intellectual or epistemic obligation to provide grounds for her lack of belief. It follows, Parsons holds, that theists have a burden of proof; they are under some sort of obligation to provide justifying grounds for theism. If theists have no good grounds *for* the claim that God exists, then atheism wins the match.

Parsons holds that Plantinga's attempt to show that belief that God exists may be taken as properly basic goes too far. The reason is that this same attempt will license some atheist in taking the belief that there is no God to be properly basic, and thus atheism will be rational at least for this one atheist. The reason is this: Plantinga holds that one must use an inductive procedure to establish criteria for proper basicity. One begins with cases which are *obviously* properly basic in certain conditions, frames hypotheses stating prospective necessary and sufficient conditions for proper basicity, and then tests these conditions against the paradigm cases. Parsons takes this to mean that Plantinga picks beliefs that are obviously properly basic to *him*, and then frames relevant hypotheses. Another person not inclined to theism may find

other beliefs, inconsistent with theism, to be obviously properly basic and then test relevant hypotheses against *these* beliefs. Parsons holds that these individuals will devise different criteria for proper basicity, and so concludes that "...a belief might be rationally accepted as basic by one person but equally rationally rejected by another. Again, it all depends on which set of beliefs is initially taken as obviously properly basic" (51).

It is not clear that Plantinga must be read in this fashion. A more plausible account would have him first finding examples of what just about *anyone* would take as obviously properly basic, figuring out what it is about such examples that qualifies them as properly basic, and then arguing that theistic beliefs meet these conditions. So read, it is clear that Parsons' main criticism of Plantinga does not apply.

Parsons' discussion of Swinburne is also very limited, since he deals only with the latter's treatment of the cosmological argument. Overall, Swinburne's account is presented fully and accurately. Parsons rejects Swinburne's conclusion (that the probability that the universe exists given that God exists is greater than the probability that the universe exists given no God) on two main grounds, both of them involving disanalogies between scientific hypotheses and the God hypothesis. The first is that the God hypothesis is recommended *solely* by its alleged simplicity, while scientific hypotheses are not (82-83). Indeed, when simplicity is the *only* support in favor of a scientific theory, then the entities it postulates are regarded as fictions until empirical confirmation is forthcoming (81-82, 86). A second disanalogy is that scientific theories often systematize known empirical laws, in the way that Newtonian physics explains Kepler's laws of motion by implying them, while Swinburne "...freely admits that no facts about the world can be deduced from the theistic hypothesis" (86). So the sole support for the theistic hypothesis is its alleged simplicity, and Parsons doubts there is any scientific hypothesis that "...to a similar degree stakes its confirmation entirely upon the criterion of simplicity" (87).

It is unclear just how damaging these criticisms are to Swinburne's project. After all, for Swinburne the cosmological argument is just one of the C-inductive arguments he considers, and there are a number of others. To be in a position to conclude that Swinburne has not established the rationality of theistic belief given just the criticisms offered by Parsons one would have to hold that the additional arguments discussed by Swinburne taken together do not suffice to constitute a good P-inductive argument for theism. But nothing in Parsons' discussion of the cosmological argument supports this contention.

Parsons also discusses the logical version of the argument from evil, along with Plantinga's free will defense. He concludes this balanced and fair discussion by conceding that Plantinga has established the consistency of theism and the existence of evil (p. 125). Strangely, instead of going on to discuss

the inductive version of the argument from evil, Parsons confines his attention to the question of whether God would be *justified* in permitting some evil to exist, in some completely undefined sense of 'justified.' In this regard he considers Swinburne's attempt to show that God would be justified in allowing some natural evil to occur, and concludes that Swinburne's arguments on this front fail to establish that God's preventing some natural evils would result in an even worse state of affairs, namely an abridgement or reduction in human free will and responsibility (p. 139-40). Hence, some natural evil is "superfluous," i.e., such that God is not justified in permitting it. Parsons concludes that "...atheists have a strong argument to offer against the truth of theism" (p. 141). Whether Parsons would have grounds for such a conclusion were the inductive argument from evil duly considered, along with perhaps Plantinga's detailed discussion of that argument is another matter.

Parsons' book is clearly written, easy to read and easy to follow. It could prove useful to those who want a good non-technical introduction to the topics he discusses. My biggest reservation, as I have indicated above, is that his general conclusions are not well enough supported given the very limited terrain which he covers.