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van Inwagen, GOD, KNOWLEDGE & MYSTERY: ESSAYS IN PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

Frances Howard-Snyder

Daniel Howard-Snyder

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Stenmark's reluctance to allow "the primary scientific standard of predictability" to be applied at any point to religious belief (p. 309). Of course we cannot routinely test religious claims by putting them to a test in the lab, but it seems far from clear that applying the principle of predictability is always inappropriate. Jesus says to a paralytic, "That you may know the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins on earth, I say to you arise, take up your pallet and go to your house" (*Luke* 5: 24). Wouldn't the paralytic or a bystander be justified in assessing the hypothesis *This person has the power to forgive sins* in light of the prediction *The paralytic will rise*, especially given that Jesus says "That you may know..."? It is reported in the *Acts of the Apostles* (c. 5) that Gamaliel, a member of the Sanhedren, argued that if the work of the followers of Jesus was of men it would not succeed, but if of God, it could not be crushed. It is hard to see what is wrong with Gamaliel's way of reasoning or how this way of reasoning is not tantamount to proposing a testable hypothesis. And why couldn't one rightly reason that if participation in a church's life only seems to make people worse, then it probably is not of God? It might be objected that this is to treat religious beliefs as hypotheses; and whatever they are they clearly are not that. But as Stenmark himself observes when commenting on the refusal of D. Z. Phillips, Alvin Plantinga, and others to accept religious language as expressing hypotheses, even if there is something wrong about calling a settled conviction of a believer a "hypothesis," the proposition at issue can certainly be treated as one by a person only looking into the matter (p. 325).

Here and there, then, Stenmark burdens the main argument of his book with misleading statements and dubious contentions inessential to the case. Nonetheless, *Rationality in Science, Religion, and Everyday Life* is an impressive work, widely informed, penetrating, and on the main point quite convincing.

God, Knowledge & Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology, by **Peter van Inwagen.** Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995. Pp. 284. $17.95.

FRANCES & DANIEL HOWARD-SNYDER, Western Washington University & Seattle Pacific University

This volume collects nine essays published by Peter van Inwagen between 1977 and 1995. Part I features, among other things, modal skepticism with respect to ontological arguments and arguments from evil. Part II addresses certain tensions Christians may feel between modern biology, critical studies of the New Testament, and the comparative study of religions, on the one hand, and Christian orthodoxy, on the other. Part III deploys a formal logic of relative identity to model the internal consistency of the orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. In what follows, we summarize and reflect on five essays.[1]

"Ontological Arguments" focuses on valid arguments by that name

which claim or imply that a necessary, concrete being is possible. But how are we to tell whether necessary existence (N) is compatible with concreteness (C)? Conceptual analysis won't do, says van Inwagen; for, firstly, the compatibility of N and C is not a conceptual matter and, secondly, even if it were, analysis would help no more than it would help settle whether '7777' appears in the decimal expansion of π. Perhaps we should believe N is compatible with C anyway, since the possibility is not conceptually precluded; but, says van Inwagen, that's like arguing that we should believe that three-foot-thick sheets of iron could be transparent to visible light since the possibility isn't conceptually precluded—which is absurd. More plausibly, perhaps we *may* rationally believe that N and C are compatible, even though it is false that we *should*. This is Plantinga's line: without argument, we rationally believe that *there is a possible world in which unsurpassable greatness is exemplified* (which is just N and C reved up with perfection) provided we still find it compelling upon examining objections. These conditions are insufficient for rational belief, argues van Inwagen (35-41). That was in 1977. In 1985, Plantinga wrote: "I hope sometime soon to reply to van Inwagen".[2] Thirteen years later, we are still waiting.

Van Inwagen concludes that, barring special revelation, we can't tell whether a necessary, concrete being is possible. This skepticism about extra-mundane modal matters—an affront to many, a breath of refreshing candor to others—permeates the book. Lest it be dismissed as yet another heroic attempt by a theist to save his theism, we note that van Inwagen embraced it long before he became a Christian, he deploys it fairly and, he offers good reason for it (11-14, 19-21, 30-41, 79-86).

In "The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God," van Inwagen sketches a picture of God's relation to the world according to which elementary particles exist and have their causal powers because and only because God holds them continuously in existence and constantly supplies them with these powers. Occasionally, God may *miraculously* supply these particles with different causal powers simply by "decree". How might chance fit into this picture? An event which is due to chance, says van Inwagen, is one which "is without purpose or significance;...not part of anyone's plan; it serves no one's end; and it might very well not have been" (50). This seems odd. For if this is what chance is, you would not expect van Inwagen to classify events brought about by free human choices as chance events, which he does. This may not matter, however. For he is mainly concerned with events that are not part of *God's* plan, and free human choices fit that description. "God's plan" is the sum total of what God has decreed, excluding decrees issued in response to events that are not part of His plan. Within this picture, two sources of chance other than human free choice might arise: natural indeterminism and the initial state of the world. The latter idea is this: if two possible initial states of the universe—X and Y—could have served God's purposes equally well, then He decrees "Let *either* X *or* Y be,"one of which results. Van Inwagen rejects the alternative—God's either decreeing "Let X be" or decreeing "Let Y be"—because if X and Y were equally satisfactory to God, then, if He chose X rather than Y, His

choice would be entirely arbitrary; but "I find it wholly incongruous to suppose that the Divine Nature contains anything remotely resembling a coin-tossing mechanism" (59). We don't see the alleged incongruity. Which perfection would be sullied if God were, by nature, disposed to decree arbitrarily between equally satisfactory states of affairs?

Van Inwagen speculates that much is due to chance, incuding much suffering. By itself, this does not solve the so-called problem of evil, but it does have the following moral: "Do not attempt any solution to this problem that entails that every particular evil has a purpose, or that, with respect to every individual misfortune,...God has some special reason for allowing it." (65). This has important implications for arguments from evil that appeal to *particular* horrors. For example, William Rowe and Bruce Russell argue that since God must have a reason to permit *this* fawn's or *this* child's suffering (or something comparably bad) and there is no such reason, God does not exist. Critics tend to question the second premise, but van Inwagen rejects the first. God need have no special reason to permit a particular horror, provided He has a general reason to permit a good deal of suffering. To suppose otherwise is like supposing that even if a commander has a general reason to permit his soldiers to suffer, he must have a special reason to permit *that* soldier's suffering. No one has replied to this point. That's understandable, however. Contrast the rhetorical power of "There is no reason for God to permit *this* fawn's being burned or *that* girl's being brutalized" with "There is no reason for God to permit a good deal of horrific suffering".

"The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil" offers a general reason for God to permit human suffering: God created us in His own image, rational and capable of loving Him. This love, our highest good, is impossible without the ability to withhold it. So to fit us for love of Himself, God gave us the power to reject Him. And that's what our ancestors did, thereby ruining themselves morally and intellectually. They began to harm one another and lost their aboriginal power to protect themselves from the potentially destructive forces of nonhuman nature. This condition—their wickedness and helplessness—has persisted through all the generations, being somehow hereditary.

One worry here is that God Himself exhibits the best sort of love and yet God can do no evil. But then, freedom to love and essential goodness are compatible; thus, God could have achieved the highest good for His creatures without permitting evil.[3] In response, one might distinguish love at its best in an essentially good divine being from love at its best in a creature made for love of God, and then argue that while the latter requires the ability to withhold love, the former does not, and hence that the worry is logically invalid. We've yet to see this line of thought worked out. Also, that wickedness is *somehow hereditary* is puzzling, especially if we think of it as genetic. It is not a *natural consequence* of a parent's free choice that her child be genetically disposed to behave similarly. To this, van Inwagen replies that "it is possible to construct models of the Fall according to which its hereditary aspect is due to the effects of unaltered genes operating under conditions for which they were not 'designed'—namely, conditions attendant upon separation from God." Unfortunately, he leaves this tantalizing suggestion undeveloped.