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BOOK REVIEWS

The Rainbow of Experiences, Critical Trust and God: A Defense of Holistic Empiricism, by Kai-man Kwan. New York: Continuum, 2011. 314 pages. \$120 (hardcover).

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The argument from religious experience is the most significant contribution of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion to natural theology. Other arguments for the existence of God have lately been introduced (e.g., the argument from consciousness) or significantly updated (e.g., contemporary variants of cosmological and teleological arguments), and may or may not be more powerful than the argument from religious experience. But none is at once as original, influential, powerful and *accessible* as the argument from religious experience, an argument which captures the grounds of so many ordinary religious believers (contrast the ontological argument).

Kai-man Kwan recently composed the state-of-the-art essay on the argument for *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*,¹ and now we have his book-length defense of the argument in *The Rainbow of Experiences, Critical Trust and God*. The book features prominently the approbation of Richard Swinburne, the most significant contributor to natural theology, at least since Aquinas, and largely responsible for the contemporary debate about the argument from religious experience. Expectations for this volume will be high; in other words, we risk being easily disappointed.

The book is divided into two parts. The first is devoted mainly, but not exclusively, to general epistemological preliminaries, critiquing the kinds of classical foundationalism and narrow empiricism that would threaten the project, and developing a more pluralistic and holistic empiricism in their place. The second part employs this epistemology in developing a cumulative case from various kinds of experience to the existence of God—experiences of the self and others, moral and aesthetic experience, intellectual and numinous experiences, among others. The book is broad

¹Kai-man Kwan. "The Argument from Religious Experience," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. W. L. Craig and J. P. Moreland (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 498–552.



in coverage, rich in arguments and broaching diverse areas in philosophy. This review can focus on only a few of its parts.

I will first refer to the chapters from the first part not devoted to epistemology generally, chapters 1, 2 and 5. Chapters 1 and 2 are an introduction to the argument from religious experience and a case study of Wittgenstein respectively. The latter displays the diverse kinds of experience had by Wittgenstein, and their profundity—particularly since the experiences forced themselves against a philosophical worldview inimical to them. The study of Wittgenstein is one of two larger case studies, the other being of Einstein (142–146), the greater stein and no less significant with respect to religious experience. However, the studies invite controversy insofar as Wittgenstein and Einstein are both difficult to interpret on the topic of religion, and do not themselves draw from their experiences the conclusion Kwan will draw.

Chapter 5 replies to three traditional objections to the argument from religious experience (from the corrigibility, theory ladderness, and privacy of the experiences), presents three general kinds of responses to the experiences (theism, naturalism, and monism), and then outlines the argument. The replies to the objections are entirely successful, if for the most part familiar. However, the outline of the argument from religious experience is—unfortunately for a book devoted to the argument—a little clumsy.

First, the argument is ambiguous. The argument is initially presented as having two stages: first, an argument for a transcendent being, and, secondly, an argument for the personal nature of that being (92–94); interestingly, this parallels the existence and identification stages of traditional cosmological arguments. But then the second stage of the argument appears to be a stand-alone argument from theistic experience (TE) and a rational principle, the Principle of Critical Trust (PCT; more on this below), to justified belief in God:

1. Type PCT is correct.
2. Theistic experience is a well-established type of experience.
3. It seems (epistemically) to *S* that God exists on the basis of a TE, *E*.
4. The theistic experience, *E*, is not defeated.

Therefore,

5. *S* is justified in believing that God exists. (94)

Secondly, the argument as set forth is not an argument for the existence of God—for “generic theism” (94)—as advertised, but for justified belief in God. Thirdly, the argument, simple as it is, is overly complicated. As the subsequent prose paraphrase of the argument recognizes, premises (1), (2), and (4) are alone sufficient for the conclusion that belief in God is justified.

Fortunately, redundant stages or premises do not deprive an argument of cogency. However, crucial premises that are not plausible do, and while

Kwan devotes extensive effort to supporting premises (1) and (2), the support for (4) is lacking. To be sure, Kwan directs us here to chapters 4, 16 and 17 in particular, which address various objections, including objections from radical constructivism and from diverse and disparate experiences, among others. However, the most powerful potential defeaters—the problems of evil and divine hiddenness—are neglected, which is surprising in a book of such broad coverage.

The other five chapters of the first part are devoted to developing and defending a holistic theory of experience and justification. Chapters 3 and 4 develop Kwan's theory; chapter 6 argues against the rival narrow empiricist theory; chapter 7 argues for Kwan's theory; and chapter 8 compares and contrasts this to yet other theories, displaying its superiority. Kwan's "Critical Trust Approach" (CTA) steers a middle road between the epistemological extremes of a cynicism that leads to skepticism (if we should trust none of our experiences, then we should believe nothing) and a naivety that leads to gullibility (if we should trust every experience, then we should believe anything).

At the heart of the approach is the "Principle of Critical Trust" that would have us believing things to be as they appear, unless and until we have reason for believing otherwise, e.g., in contrary appearances. Kwan carefully distinguishes between various formulations of the principle, diverging in scope (the kinds of experience they apply to) and strength (the degree of justification the experiences confer). The "Moderate Type PCT" at work in the argument above is stated as follows: "Every experience which belongs to a well-established type of experience provides *prima facie* justification for the embodied epistemic seeming" (75).

How well-established a type of experience is depends on the number of experiencers, the variability of the experiential situations, the frequency of experiences, and their explanatory and conceptual coherence. The principle follows in the tradition of others, especially Swinburne's Principle of Credulity: "If it seems (epistemically) to me that *x* is present then probably *x* is present unless there are special considerations to the contrary" (11). However, Kwan promises a "refinement of Swinburne's epistemological approach" (73), particularly in distinguishing between the Type PCT and the Token PCT, which states simply that each token experience confers justification for the embedded epistemic seeming.

The motivation for favoring the Type PCT over the Token PCT allegedly at work in Swinburne's argument is the failure of the latter principle with respect to strange experiences: isolated appearances of e.g., ghosts (73) or UFOs (76) should not confer justification upon belief in such things, but they would given the Token PCT. They would not given the Type PCT, however, since they do not belong to well-established types. This cannot be a very significant advance over Swinburne, who was painstaking in qualifying his Principle of Credulity and emphasizing the considerations that can defeat any justification conferred by isolated appearances, and

such would surely include the bearing of background theory against ghosts and UFOs.

The first part of the book closes by contending that even if the attempt to display the superiority of the Critical Trust Approach with its PCT over rival epistemological frameworks fails, this does not mean that we are not justified in maintaining the PCT. Fair enough: there might be yet other arguments to be had for the approach or we might even be justified in maintaining it without any such arguments. However, Kwan then insists that the critic must show not only the failure of the approach but also the superiority of an alternative:

As long as we have reason to judge that the CTA is not worse than other approaches, and the CTA can withstand objections, theists have as much right to choose CTA as STA [the rival Selective Trust Approach] or other alternatives. . . . If the critics want to defeat the Transcendent ARE [argument from religious experience] completely, they can't be content with showing that CTA is not necessarily compelling for all rational people. They also need to show that STA (or some more restricted framework) is superior to CTA. (134)

The point is made quickly but mistakes the dialectical situation. The critics need not show the superiority of rival approaches, but could be content in admitting that these likewise fail; there's little consolation in having "as much right to choose CTA" as an alternative if there's not much right to choose either. Whether or not we have a more plausible alternative, we could fairly reject the CTA if we could fairly reject Kwan's argument. (To be sure, there is the condition that "the CTA can withstand objections." However, if this means only *some* objections, then withstanding objections need not render a view justifiable; and, if it means *all possible* objections, then the proponent of the CTA still has a long way to go.) However, I think the approach is plausible, and that more than enough philosophers will agree with something similar enough to pursue Kwan's argument further.

The next part of the book considers the rainbow of experiences that together with the CTA is supposed to yield the argument from religious experience. Chapter 9 considers our experience of the natural world, including our experiences of the contingency, beauty, apparent design, and intelligibility of nature. Kwan does not treat traditional arguments from contingency or design here. Yet the debate about them is relevant: for example, critics attempt to show that the appearance of design is unreliable, since it can be explained without invoking design. They might thus grant the CTA along with the appearance of design while denying that this points towards design on the grounds that there are defeaters in the explanations not invoking design, and confirmed well enough by our other experiences. The chapter could also have been strengthened by a treatment of Del Ratzsch's paper, "Perceiving Design."²

²Del Ratzsch, "Perceiving Design," in *God and Design: The Teleological Argument and Modern Science*, ed. Neil Manson (London: Routledge, 2003), 125–144.

The chapter ends by summarizing the argument as an inductive argument in which the relative probabilities of the evidence on rival hypotheses $-P(e_1, e_2 \dots e_n/H_t)$ versus $P(e_1, e_2 \dots e_n/H_n)$ —confirm theism. Such a strategy is also employed in chapters 11 and 12, and the second part of the book presents various explanatory arguments for theism, exploring how theism explains and accommodates a whole range of experiences better than do alternative worldviews: experience of the self (chapter 10); existential experience, including the quest for meaning and wholeness (chapter 11); interpersonal experience (chapter 12); moral experience, including experiences of value, evil and conscience (chapter 13); aesthetic experience (chapter 14); intellectual experience, particularly of *a priori* intuitions (chapter 15); and religious and theistic experiences of various kinds (chapters 16 and 17).

However, nowhere are the probabilistic and explanatory strategies introduced, and the connection between the arguments, on the one hand, and the CTA and PCT, on the other, is not always drawn explicitly. I take it that the arguments are essentially two-staged: the CTA secures the content of the experience as premises for the subsequent probabilistic and explanatory arguments for theism—at least where the experiences are not themselves direct theistic experiences and so do not fall neatly into place in premises (1) to (4) stated above. Thus, given the CTA, experiences of e.g., value point towards the existence of value; and, once the existence of value is granted, it is shown best accounted for in the theistic worldview. If this is the strategy, then it could have been more perspicuous; otherwise the design of the second part of the book obscures so much of the effort expended in the first part.

The arguments often attack the prospects of naturalistic accounts of experiences, thus bearing more strongly against naturalism than theism; by eliminating naturalistic candidates they do increase the plausibility of rival worldviews, including theism, but then there remain yet other rivals. For some readers, naturalism and a few of the other hypotheses Kwan addresses (such as monism with its impersonal absolute) will be the only viable contenders against theism, so that by eliminating them, theism is secured. But other readers will need more convincing that theism is a more plausible worldview than rivals incorporating the experiences or their objects, perhaps as irreducible and fundamental, without any theistic ground.

Kwan begins to address such concerns at points. In chapter 13, for instance, after arguing that naturalism cannot account for morality, he assesses the alternative of a non-naturalistic but non-theistic moral realism (of the kind recently advocated by Michael Huemer, Russ Shafer-Landau, and Derek Parfit). Kwan raises various problems for this view (225–226). Some are pressing, albeit familiar, including the problems of knowledge of an inert moral realm, and of the ontological complexity in there being two realms, moral and non-moral. However, Kwan needs to explain further how theism helps answer these problems: how does theism secure

knowledge, including God's knowledge, of an inert moral realm? How does theism provide a unifying explanation of there being two realms? In God's creating both realms? What would such creating amount to, especially if the fundamental moral facts are necessary?

Elsewhere the puzzles for naturalism are not even apparent. Chapter 10 is devoted to establishing the existence of the self against what we are informed is "the great controversy among philosophers" about its existence, and the "dominant" view among naturalist philosophers of mind that it must be "deconstructed" (162). While Kwan's treatment of the existence of the self is interesting, there is not really any serious controversy about the self's existence. To be sure, there is controversy about the nature of the self—as displayed in e.g., Eric Olson's *What Are We?*,³ including a chapter on the view that there is no self, consideration of which might have been useful here. However, Kwan does not show how naturalism fails to account for the nature of the self, or, rather, why the failures of naturalistic accounts (all face objections, as Olson shows) is especially due to naturalism, and how theism can help.

Kwan saves the best for last. Chapters 16 and 17 are devoted respectively to religious experience in general and theistic experience in particular, and are excellent. Kwan develops a careful taxonomy of religious and theistic experiences, and responds to various objections deftly and forcefully. The constructivist objection from Steven Katz alleges that religious experiences are largely constructions from prior religious frameworks. Kwan replies by showing how experiences do not fit this mold, being had by people without prior belief, or with prior belief at odds with the experience, while not had by others with the right sort of prior belief. The objection from conflicting religious experiences alleges that experiences are too diverse and conflicting to be reliable. Kwan replies by showing that conflicts are prevalent in accounts of other kinds of experience we take to be generally reliable (such as accounts of experiences of historical events), and that despite the conflicts there remains a common core to religious experiences.

Kwan also identifies here (277–278) and at various places (15–16, 119, 129) objections based on what he terms "the super-reliability fallacy." The fallacy is committed when a difference in favour of the epistemic status of one kind of experience is taken to undermine the epistemic status of another kind of experience; e.g., concluding from the greater reliability of ordinary sensory experience that religious experience is unreliable. Kwan deals decisively with such objections, and his identification and emphasis on the fallacy is important since, I think, the fallacy is behind a great deal of skepticism about religious experience.

The book promises a broad and holistic perspective influenced by Kwan's Chinese background, emphasizing the "union of Heaven, earth and human being" (2), and it succeeds in large part by covering a wide

³Eric Olson, *What Are We?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

range of experience within an holistic epistemic setting. However, the book neglects religious experience within Chinese religious traditions, eastern religions more broadly, and non-Christian theistic religions. The Chinese subjects introduced are usually converts to Christianity or missionaries and, if not, at least invoked when they speak in favour of Christianity—as are the practitioners of Eastern religions more generally (140, 232, 234, 218–219, 268, 271). The monism more prevalent in Eastern religions is rejected quickly towards the end of Chapter 17. As for Judaism, the case of a secular kibbutznik becoming a religious Jew after a mystical experience is presented (260–261), but along with the case of Weil's conversion to Christianity (259–260). Religious experience within Islam receives a single mention (271).

On a few minor points, the indices are incomplete, and the book includes quite a few formatting errors, particularly in the offsetting of various items in lists or principles (72, 78, 80, 81, 126) and other typographical errors, including an error in the header of every other page in Chapter 8.

While advancing the debate about religious experience, Kwan acknowledges that his book will not be conclusive, particularly because of the limitations of space provided by a single volume. Skeptical readers will likely not be persuaded by this book. This owes in part to the sheer number of arguments and topics raised (and that then cannot be adequately addressed), but also to particular problems with the arguments, some of which I have identified in this review. However, to conclude that this is not a good book because it is not conclusive would be to commit something analogous to a super-reliability fallacy. After all, the book is often insightful, and even where the arguments do not persuade, they provoke much thought. The book will be of interest to philosophy students and philosophers of religion, particularly those working on religious experience and related topics in epistemology.

Inquiring About God: Selected Essays, Volume, 1 by Nicholas Wolterstorff, edited by Terence Cuneo. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 313 pages. \$85 (hardcover).

Practices of Belief: Selected Essays, Volume 2, by Nicholas Wolterstorff, edited by Terence Cuneo. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 435 pages. \$85 (hardcover).

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As I discussed with some graduate students at my university that I would be working on a review of Wolterstorff's essays, they immediately became interested but asked, "When will a collection of his essays on theological aesthetics become available?" What this question indicates is the wide