

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 32 | Issue 3

Article 12

---

7-1-2015

## Moore, ed., GOD, MIND AND KNOWLEDGE

Joshua R. Farris

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Farris, Joshua R. (2015) "Moore, ed., GOD, MIND AND KNOWLEDGE," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 3 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol32/iss3/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

sketches is quite insightful, might the categories of self-giveness, possibility, and otherness limit our description and analysis of moral emotions?

Furthermore, additional clarification is needed in one central area in Steinbock's overall project. Steinbock's discussion of these moral emotions hinges on his notion of revelation and the kind of givenness appropriate to human persons. Pride, for example, is not "self-revelatory" because pride doesn't "reveal me to myself as I 'am,' Myself, as relational and not self-grounding" (48). But whether this notion of revelation and its characteristics? What exactly distinguishes revelation from the other kinds of vertical givenness (epiphany, manifestation, disclosure, and display) that Steinbock introduced in his previous book? Steinbock described and clarified the nature of epiphany in *Phenomenology and Mysticism*; perhaps he should have done the same with revelation in *Moral Emotions*. Are we to take his notion of revelation to be the same as Levinas's? As I hinted at above in my remarks on remorse, these distinguishing features of givenness matter for his selection, categorization, and description of moral emotions. Elaborating and clarifying these forms of givenness will strengthen Steinbock's project, prevent confusion, and throw relief on the importance of his project.

Notwithstanding these issues, *Moral Emotions* is an important work on human personhood, phenomenology of the emotions, and the social imaginary. It will be of interest for those working on ethics, virtue theory, or moral psychology. Long-time readers of *Faith and Philosophy* will see striking similarities with Bob Roberts's work on the emotions and Plantinga and Wolterstorff's respective attention to evidence and proper domains. Furthermore, though he claims he is not trying to bridge analytic and continental philosophy, only to show "the important and unique interrelations in method," I think Steinbock's work can be a valuable talking point. This is evident in the parallels he draws between phenomenology and ordinary language philosophy. Philosophers of all types will appreciate his brief introduction to phenomenology, which he provides in each of the books. His discussion of these moral emotions will also be of interest to those involved in current research projects on intellectual and moral virtues.

*God, Mind and Knowledge*, ed. Andrew Moore. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2014. 190 pages. \$39.95 (paper).

JOSHUA R. FARRIS, Houston Baptist University and University of Bristol

*God, Mind and Knowledge* includes a rich, diverse set of essays at the intersection of ontology, epistemology, and religion. As a contribution to

philosophy of religion, the authors address such topics as the nature of God, human minds, and religious epistemology. This work began at the British Society of Philosophy of Religion biennial conference of 2011, held at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford University. While a book of this kind cannot capture all the work presented, it offers the reader a sampling of the important topics explored at that meeting.

There is a common worry today against philosophy of religion relevant to our discussion of *God, Mind and Knowledge*: there appears to be an impressive amount of disagreement among philosophers of religion that is unresolvable. Does this reveal a deep shortcoming in the field? *God, Mind and Knowledge* dispels that worry by showing that the disagreements among the contributors are not deep and do not represent intractable problems that eliminate the possibility for consensus. This conciliatory spirit is apparent from the outset as one of the leading philosophers of religion today, John Cottingham, seeks a middle position incorporating elements of two otherwise conflicting positions in religious epistemology. More on this and on the other contributions follow.

All of the contributors enthusiastically agree that philosophy offers clarity to religious problems and some potential solutions to those problems. In section 1, the reader will find several contributions to what is presently a thriving debate in religious epistemology. John Cottingham advances a *via media* between reformed epistemology and evidentialism. He proposes that there are signs or “intimations” of the transcendent in the natural order, but the transcendent is known only in a transformative encounter with God. Cottingham’s approach has some striking similarities to the work of Pascal, Stephen Evans, and Paul Moser. A contrastive epistemology, namely, reformed epistemology, is taken up by Anthony Bolos, who provides a solution to the problem of the value of knowledge raised against reformed epistemology. In short, critics claim that in reformed epistemology, it is difficult to ascertain the significance of knowledge above and beyond that of true belief, but Bolos suggests endorsing an “achievement thesis,” according to which knowledge, unlike mere belief, is a cognitive accomplishment. Charles Taliaferro takes up a contrastive epistemic stance in a philosophy of divine encounter/revelation, in the tradition of William James and Paul Helm. Taliaferro works with critical trust epistemology (following Kai-man Kwan), similar to the principle of credulity, and argues that we should generally trust our religious experiences (contrast this with a similar yet distinct position called “phenomenal conservatism”). Finally, he responds to Anthony Kenny’s charge of religious arrogance and offers some fruitful thoughts on the role of humility in religious epistemology. In the fifth chapter, Gabriel Citron draws from Wittgenstein in proposing several novel solutions to the problem of God and falsifiability originally raised by Antony Flew.

In section II, there are several noteworthy insights at the intersection of ontology, religion, and epistemology. Olli-Pekka Vainio and Aku Visala give one intriguing example entitled “Belief Formation and Biased

Minds," in which they explore cognitive bias in religious studies, thereby contributing to the book's interdisciplinary nature. They explicitly answer in the affirmative the question raised above as to whether or not philosophy of religion is successful. They use interesting statistical studies within cognitive science as a means for reflection on "bias" within philosophy of religion. In the end, their three conclusions are relevant not only to religious studies but to outside disciplines. First, as to the lack of hope for progress in philosophy of religion in light of persistent disagreement, Vainio and Visala argue that consensus is rarely achieved in philosophy or science, yet an actual consensus rarely impedes academic advancement. Second, the authors argue that if we are to make further headway, then we need more rigorous communal enquiry into religious studies in order to avoid the kinds of blinders raised by cognitive bias studies, which, in the end, is a general claim that applies not only to religious studies but to all disciplines. Third, they highlight the findings of cognitive science as yielding data concerning common or natural beliefs of a religious and secular nature. The authors point out that there is significant overlap in religious studies and disciplinary studies often considered "secular," and progress in knowledge requires a dialogue between the two.

In section III, Anthony Kenny's piece stands out. He argues for a strong form of apophaticism according to which it is impossible to make any positive predications of God. One of the more illuminating and well-developed chapters in this section is Robin le Poidevin's "Projecting God." Le Poidevin takes a famous objection from self-projection to religious truth (e.g., Hume, Feuerbach, Freud, Dennett) and argues in favour of both projectionism and realism. While the objection is normally taken to show that the perceptual belief, or in this context experience, of God is naturalized or anti-real, le Poidevin shows to the contrary that it is consistent with realism. He addresses this in terms of what may be called the projectionist worry.

The common worry amongst those such as Hume, Feuerbach, Freud, and Dennett seems to be something like the following: "First, that the projectivist account is inconsistent with realism; Second, that, if it is not actually inconsistent with realism, projectivism nevertheless renders theism redundant as an explanation of our religious experience." Le Poidevin responds to each of these threats and finds them unsuccessful against the notion that both projectivism and realism are compatible. By drawing from Locke's notion of secondary qualities (where secondary qualities are properties of the mind that have some causal relationship to properties of the object perceived), le Poidevin defends a representative realist (where our perceptual experiences are objects experienced in the mind that represent a real world) account of theistic experiences.

There is an apparent oddness or queerness when coupling moral values and realism, which le Poidevin uses to illustrate the compatibility of realism and projectionism. If these values had an existence apart from the mind in some mind-independent reality, then it seems unclear how one

would come to know them (following Simon Blackburn). Le Poidevin recognizes that there may be something to this intuition (160). John Locke, however, offers a *via media* for realism and projectivism, namely, representationalism. Herein, Locke makes a distinction between primary and secondary qualities, where primary qualities are inherent in objects for which our minds represent, and secondary qualities are those powers of objects that affect minds. He proposes this view as a way forward for thinking about the “threat” between accepting projectivism and realism. Le Poidevin rightly notes that there is something about the object that is connected to the experience of the object (160–161). He offers a helpful analogy from E. A. Abbot’s *Flatland* to bring out the relation previously mentioned, by discussing depth as a kind of interactive phenomena that cannot be explained by geometry alone, but requires something else. For additional information on this useful analogy, I refer the reader to le Poidevin’s chapter. He concludes, having shown the seeming truthfulness of representationalism, that depth, color, and value have both projectivist and realist elements. Thus, the two are not inconsistent.

He responds to two other charges mentioned earlier—redundancy and the activity of engaging in singular thought about an object. He responds to redundancy by showing that there are real objects in the world, yet our thoughts/experiences do contribute something to that reality. However, he recognizes differences between variations of experience, hence disanalogies, which also exist in the case of religious experience. Yet he concludes that these religious experiences have some plausible teleological explanation in theism even if there are structural differences in it in contrast to other kinds of experiences. Having said this, le Poidevin argues that this is not dissimilar to ordinary experiences, which are also explicable in differing structural contexts. Finally, he considers the problem/threat of singular thought. The worry seems to be that on realism, we want to have not only general thoughts about God, but specific thoughts about him or her; and, given representationalism, we need to provide some causal connection between the object and experience of the object. The problem is that the experience could be connected to something other than God, resulting in a “deviant” chain, thus undermining a singular thought about God in the same way that we may have many thoughts about the qualities we predicate of Santa Claus. The causal connection between the object Santa Claus and our belief/experience of the object may result from what our parents have told us—while in fact there is no causal connection to him *per se* because he is a fictional character. Le Poidevin recognizes this difficulty with projectivism + realism, but insightfully points out that this is not wholly dissimilar to the perception persons have of physically concrete objects (e.g., a chair)—or at least seem to. Why is it, then, implausible to say that theism could not provide a causal explanation for one’s religious experience? In the final assessment, le Poidevin shows us that there is some promise in affirming the conjunction of projectivism and

realism in terms of representationalism, and the objections to date offer no overwhelming reason to think otherwise.

In possibly one of the more provocative and creative chapters, Stephen R. L. Clark argues that we have reason to doubt the age-old belief that humans are really special, even divine-like. Clark raises several stimulating questions. What if there are alien minds? If there are alien minds, then what are they like? Would they be like human minds? Does our evolutionary kindredness somehow prep us for personhood? Clark's contention is that we have little reason to sustain the belief in the uniqueness and superiority of humans over other creatures. Given our lateness in evolutionary history and the possibility of other minds (i.e., alien minds), reason seems to suggest that we are not unique, according to Clark. Yet, I take it that while these questions are challenging, they only *superficially* suggest that we are not *really* God's special and unique creation. Clark intimates that belief in the uniqueness of humankind is akin to the belief in a flat earth (see page 171). It is true that astronomy now shows us that the earth is not the centre of God's universe. However, the whole of the Christian narrative really does seem to support the uniqueness of humanity, and this is apparently a part of the doctrinal core of God's story of redemption. Human uniqueness is not only an intuition sustained by a long tradition of reflection found within divine revelation, but there are philosophical reasons one could advance that comport with such an antiquated belief. So, where does one begin in mounting a contemporary case in favor of this traditional notion?

From a Christian vantage point (or, possibly, some other monotheist perspective), I suggest that the burden of proof is not on the traditionalist but on those seeking to undermine such a long-standing conviction. In fact, Clark seems to presuppose the belief in human uniqueness in his discussion of persons as minds. In his discussion on aliens, humans, and God, he assumes something more fundamental to biological kinds—namely, that there is a shared overlap between these entities in terms of personality and mentality. The very fact that human persons are capable of conceiving other personal minds like God or aliens is telling of the reality that persons share in a transcendent reality above the created order. Certainly Clark is not arguing that God is less than or on a par with other created animals. Animals may instantiate mental properties, but they do not seem to instantiate robust mental properties overlapping with the divine mind, whereas human persons do, arguably. The conceivability of other persons on alien planets would not show the “mundane” nature of humans, but, instead, it would further buttress the reality of the uniqueness of persons in the material universe. Their story may be incidentally different, but the mere fact that they can enter into a personal story with God would point to some robust overlap, not the contrary. Thus, traditional Christian theists can with every confidence affirm the story with Aquinas that while God adds extrinsic properties to human beings in glory, he does so on the basis of their being persons capable of entering into robust and meaningful personal relationships.

Several questions emerge upon reading the collection of writings. For example, are there features in our religious experiences that correspond to a particular deity? Are there ways toward a general consensus in philosophy of religion? In relation to such interesting questions, it would have been nice to see some robust engagement with internal realism advanced by Hilary Putnam, namely, the notion that the world is not ontologically independent (i.e., metaphysical realism) but, instead, our minds ontologically constitute the world in some sense. Putnam's work commands additional attention from philosophers working on the topics represented here.

In such a collection, it is difficult to evaluate the whole. There are other aspects of *God, Mind and Knowledge* deserving mention, like the thoughtful and thorough introduction written by Andrew Moore, and Yujin Nagasawa's interesting and creative appropriation of Mary to solve a theological worry, but such detail would take us beyond a standard review. In the end, all I can do is offer a tasting of what I find is a worthwhile contribution to philosophical and religious discourse.