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Goetz, FREEDOM, TELEOLOGY, AND EVIL

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BOOK REVIEWS

Freedom, Teleology, and Evil, by Stewart Goetz. Continuum Books, 2008. Pp. 216.

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Stewart Goetz has been advocating a distinctive view of libertarian free will for some time now. With the publication of *Freedom, Teleology, and Evil*, Goetz gives his account the fullest and most integrated defense to date. The time is right, for reasons I note below.

By way of introduction, remember that the libertarian affirms free will but denies that it is compatible with determinism. Furthermore, while libertarians come in many flavors, it has become standard to sort them into three broad groups. Agent causal libertarians insist that a basic free action is an event that is caused directly by the ontological *substance* that is the agent. Event causal libertarians, by contrast, insist that a basic free action is an event that is caused not by a substance but rather by some *event* that enjoys a privileged role in the agent's motivational system. Notice, however, that both of these views share a commitment to the idea that free action is premised on a causal relation. The third group of libertarians, then (and the group in which Goetz places himself), rejects this commitment. These libertarians argue that an agent's fundamental relationship to her basic action is not best understood in terms of causation. For this reason, the view is typically described as non-causal libertarianism.

I think it is fair to say that the non-causal libertarian position has found itself in need of creative and renewed defense. The alternative causal libertarian positions (event causalism and agent causalism) have been rather ably and fulsomely defended in recent substantial monographs (Kane, Ekstrom, O'Connor, Lowe). By contrast, not since Carl Ginet's *On Action* (1990) has the free will literature been treated to such a monograph in defense of non-causalism. (This is not to downplay the substantial contribution to the debate made, for example, by Hugh McCann's collection *The Works of Agency*. It is only to highlight the dearth of *monographs* focused on the project.) In addition, it has become almost fashionable to be dismissive of non-causalism—either explicitly or by way simply of ignoring the view. Even in Randolph Clarke's eminently fair-minded and sympathetic



Libertarian Accounts of Free Will, non-causalism appears to be damned by feint recognition, receiving perhaps less than ten pages of attention in an otherwise exhaustive treatment of the terrain. All of this is to say that the field would seem to be ready for Goetz's new book. In what follows, I will trace the book's outline and conclude with a small collection of concerns about its overall success.

The core intuition Goetz sets out to defend is that free action is most fundamentally to be explained teleologically rather than causally. This is a suggestive and provocative thesis, introduced very briefly (along with a terse précis of the book) in the first chapter. Goetz wisely attempts to defend his thesis by embedding it in a wider ontology. The central ontological commitments that Goetz is prepared to make emerge in chapter 2. First, choice is the locus of basic free action. This is to say that we enjoy free agency only if we make choices; it is only at the point of choosing that we can express our libertarian freedom. Perhaps you think that I must have mischaracterized Goetz and meant instead to attribute to Goetz the view that we enjoy free agency only if we make *free* choices. In fact, however, it is crucial to see that he is committed to a view whereby the term "free choice" is redundant. There is no such thing as an unfree choice. Choices are, in this ontology, fundamentally free. The buck of freedom stops with choosing since it is mental action *simpliciter*. Furthermore, the exercise of mental power in choice is "essentially and intrinsically active" and therefore not caused or produced by anything at all. Again, this means that if a particular mental event turns out to have any cause whatsoever (whether deterministic or not), it is not a choice. And this is so even if the mental event under consideration is choice-like in every other respect (the agent is deliberating between alternatives genuinely open to her, she believes she has resolved her indecision by selecting one of them, her selection is constituted by this mental event, etc.).

A large part of what accounts for resistance to non-causalism, Goetz claims, is a pervasive and deep confusion about *explanation*. The thesis of universal explanation (that every event has an explanation) is plausible and intuitive. What many have done is confuse this thesis with the thesis of universal causation (that every event has a cause). Not only is there no good reason to accept the thesis of universal causation, claims Goetz; there is also very good reason to resist the default reductive attitude that permeates reflection on the relationship between causation and explanation. Teleological explanations, after all, are neither constituted by nor reducible to causal explanations, according to Goetz. And rational agency is the domain of the teleological.

In chapter 3 Goetz turns his attention to criticisms of non-causalism, especially as they have been leveled by competitor libertarians. Here the big positive claim is that "causation in any form is explanatorily superfluous for providing an adequate conception of libertarian freedom" (36). To show this, Goetz argues, first, that even the agent causalist must invoke teleological explanation in order to preserve the rationality of free action. Second, he attempts to deflate the Davidsonian concern that it is only by appeal to

the “because” of causation that we can distinguish between actions that are performed *for* particular reasons and those that are performed merely in their presence. Here Goetz admits that his approach is purely defensive in the following respect. His arguments show not that the causal theory of action favored by Davidson is wrong but only that there is a coherent non-causal account of how to make the necessary distinction. Finally, this leads Goetz to address a related series of complaints about non-causalism (and counterproposals with respect to the Davidsonian challenge)—enunciated, for example, by Ginet, O’Connor, Clarke, Kane, Ekstrom, and McCann.

By my lights, the heaviest conceptual lifting is done in chapters 2 and 3. It is in these chapters that Goetz’s distinctive view is developed, compared, and contrasted. And it is with these chapters that libertarians of different stripes are bound to take most substantial issue. Still, chapters 4 and 5 do contribute to the project. In the fourth chapter, Goetz attempts to show that his non-causalism has the resources to respond adequately to the problems of luck that have afflicted libertarianism in general. His characterizations of the problems are illuminating and his responses are intelligent and fair—though it is not clear (to me, at least) that his non-causalism has any special resources to deploy against luck problems not also available to agent causalists. In chapter 5, Goetz defends the traditional and intuitive link between moral responsibility and the freedom to do otherwise enshrined in the now infamous principle of alternative possibilities (PAP). This is a comparatively long chapter that can, I think, stand on its own as a contribution to the ever-growing literature directed at assessing the viability of the counterexample strategy against PAP formally initiated by Harry Frankfurt. Goetz’s optimism about PAP is ably defended in this chapter against a number of the most recent and inventive permutations of the relevant cases.

Finally, Goetz closes his book with a chapter substantially addressed to the problem of evil as faced by traditional theism. More specifically, Goetz outlines an intriguing and unique free will theodicy premised (no surprise here) on an independent commitment to libertarianism, as well as on some additional theses involving self-forming choices (tip of the cap to Robert Kane) and the human pursuit of happiness. Again, it seems to me that much of the material in this chapter can stand on its own as independent contributions to the lively on-going debate over these issues occurring in the philosophy of religion.

It is clear that philosophers working on any of the interrelated issues Goetz addresses will be able to profit from this book and its creativity. I suspect, however, that (like me) its readers will be left with more questions than answers. Ought we abandon the principle of universal causation? (I find myself both drawn to the principle and unimpressed by Goetz’s rather quick dismissal.) How plausible is the claim that there can be no caused choices? (It certainly doesn’t do gory violence to ordinary usage to speak of a choice being caused, at least suggesting that Goetz is using “choice” as a term of art; which may sever it somewhat from the folk context from which his account may be deriving its appearance of plausibility.) In addition, Goetz’s

ontology of action has this fairly striking entailment: If causal determinism is true, then not only is there no free will, there is also no action or intentional behavior at all. How plausible is this result? (Given the force and creativity of recent compatibilist accounts of freedom and agency, I am inclined, even as a libertarian, to favor a view whereby what is at stake in the compatibility debate is something more modest than the *complete range* of our distinctively human capacities for practical rationality.) These brief questions about some of the central claims of Goetz's book might be taken to imply only what we already knew; namely, that philosophers (like myself) with established positions in this domain are unlikely to be moved its arguments. So be it. There is still much to be learned from Goetz's development of them.

But I have been left with a somewhat deeper structural complaint. I began this review by highlighting the way in which the field of free will is particularly ripe for a large-scale defense of non-causal libertarianism—one that would do for the view what Robert Kane's *The Significance of Free Will* has done for event causalism or what E. J. Lowe's *Personal Agency* promises to do for agent causalism. Unfortunately, I do not believe that *Freedom, Teleology, and Evil* quite fits the bill. And this is not because Goetz is insufficiently careful, creative, or resourceful. Quite the contrary. The problem, instead, is that the book lacks the scope and unity of a paradigm defense. As I have mentioned, each chapter contains argument and criticism absolutely worthy of philosophical attention and reaction. It seems to me, however, that the parts do not hang together as a sustained and comprehensive defense. Goetz moves too quickly away from the core ontological issues that mark out the distinctive boundaries of his position. As a result, almost half of the book—chapters 5 and 6—is committed to issues that are unquestionably interesting and handled well but that do not deeply support the central thesis regarding non-causalism. Put another way, these two chapters are likely to strike readers as composed of material that would have made for a pair of intriguing appendices rather than as material constituting core chapters in a systematic defense. To be fair, Goetz was under no obligation to write the book I anticipated or to take up the defense project I claim remains to be executed. Perhaps it will be enough to note that whoever does eventually take up this project will find ample inspiration and illumination in Goetz's book, especially chapters 2 and 3. Furthermore, each chapter of *Freedom, Teleology, and Evil* will repay careful study on its own terms.

Knowledge of God, by Alvin Plantinga and Michael Tooley. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. Pp. x + 270. \$84.95 (hardcover), \$34.95 (paper).

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Part of a Blackwell series (Great Debates in Philosophy, Ernest Sosa, editor), this specific volume is a debate about "theistic belief, i.e., belief in God, and, more particularly, the epistemology of theistic belief" (p. 1). The