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BOOK REVIEWS

The Metaphysics of Perfect Beings, by Michael J. Almeida. New York: Routledge, 2008. Pp. 190. $105.00 (hardback).

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In *The Metaphysics of Perfect Beings*, Michael Almeida makes a careful, densely-argued case for some surprising revisions to the concept of God found within the Anselmian tradition of "perfect being theology." In doing so, he shows that many dilemmas recently posed for perfect being theology are in fact unsound (or, at the very least, have not been shown to be sound). For once we articulate Anselmian theology by way of recent philosophical advances in "theories of vagueness, the metaphysics of modality, theories of dynamic choice, the metaphysics of multiverses and hyperspace, the logic of moral and rational dilemmas, and metaethical theory" (1), we can see that the dilemmas posed for Anselmianism naively impute to that theology numerous entailments that do not in fact hold. In these cases, "the deliverances of careful reflection might be radically mistaken" (1). In short, the philosophical theories just named generate "unfamiliar contexts" for *a priori* reflection that may reveal "metaphysically occluded facts" about essential omnipotence, essential omniscience, essential moral perfection, essential rational perfection, and necessary existence. Thus, these theories can be used to clarify and defend the familiar Anselmian concept of God.

In chapter 1 the author examines "Atheistic Arguments From Improvability." These arguments, including William Rowe's most recent version in *Can God Be Free?*, start from an "improvability thesis" that is taken to be grounded in our *a priori* concept of moral perfection: "it is impossible that a perfect being should actualize a world that is improvable" (13). When conjoined with the "no best world" thesis, which holds that "there is an infinite sequence of ever-improving worlds," it follows that God "could actualize no world at all" (13–14). After formalizing Rowe's version of this argument, Almeida argues that attempts by Thomas Morris and William Hasker to refute Rowe's improvability thesis beg the question, since they assume from the outset that Anselmian perfect beings are coherent. Rather, the author's

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way forward is to show that Rowe's own *a priori* case for the improvability thesis begs the question on behalf of the incoherence of theism. Thus, we have little reason to think that Rowe's argument is sound, even if it is valid.

In chapter 2, "Rational Choice and No Best World," Almeida considers how a perfectly rational agent chooses in the "unfamiliar context" of infinite dynamic choice situations, such as the choice to actualize one world from "an infinite sequence of ever-improving worlds" (35). Two principles said to guide the choices of essentially perfectly rational agents are the *Rational Perfection Principle* (such an agent always performs his rational requirements) and the *Consistency Principle* (such an agent can satisfy each of his rational requirements). Almeida shows that these principles, together with some further conditions on rationality (R0–R3), generate a contradiction in the context of infinite dynamic choice. The author's proposal is to retain R0–R3 and reject RPP, thus concluding that a perfectly rational agent *can* actualize an improvable world (i.e., a world that is not as good as another world he could have actualized).

I am not persuaded by Almeida's case for retaining R0–R3 and rejecting RPP. Almeida says that RPP is invalid in this context, since "fulfilling every rational requirement at every world is impossible" (43). Given RPP, Thor would be permitted and not permitted to actualize any particular world. But if the impossibility of fulfilling a principle is sufficient for its invalidity, then why can't we run the same argument against R0–R3? Almeida's idea is that it is too "radical" to deny R2 or R3, since rejecting these principles involves Thor actualizing a less-than-best world in the sequence. But it seems to me that if it is impossible for Thor to do anything *other* than actualize a less-than-best world (including w_d, the "default world"), it follows that rejecting R2 or R3 helps Thor *avoid* an impossibility. And this is the same reason the author gives for rejecting RPP. Thus, while Almeida has given a plausible argument for the rejection of RPP, it is no *more* plausible than those that can be given for the rejection of R0–R3.

Chapter 3, "On Evil's Vague Necessity," tackles Peter van Inwagen's attempted refutation of the "standard position on evil" (the idea that an Anselmian perfect being would not permit any cases of gratuitous evil). Van Inwagen claims that since (i) some evil is necessary for divine purposes, and yet (ii) no evil is the minimum necessary for divine purposes, therefore (iii) "a perfect being can realize his divine purposes only if he permits more than the minimum evil necessary" (58). Since no evil can exceed the minimum necessary (there is no minimum here), God might permit gratuitous evil after all. Almeida provides an elegant refutation of (ii) (the *No Minimum Thesis*), and argues that its most reasonable replacement—a *Vague Minimum Thesis* formulated in accordance with supervaluation semantics—does not threaten the standard position on evil. A perfect being might permit *indefinitely unnecessary* evil, even if he does not permit *definitely* unnecessary evil. Supervaluationism shows that "there is no discrete transition from the evil unnecessary for divine purposes to the evil necessary for divine purposes" (65).

Whereas chapter 3 examines the problem of no minimum evil, chapter 4 considers "The Problem of No Maximum Evil." Warren Quinn's thought experiment about a "self-torturer" was meant to pose a problem for "standard theories of rational choice" (78): the self-torturer could be perfectly rational in accepting (minutely) increasing degrees of pain, even though the end state of such a series of rational choices is an intensely painful one that the self-torturer has no reason to prefer over his initial state. Likewise, an Anselmian perfect being would be perfectly rational in allowing gratuitous evil, and given Quinn's argument there is no maximum to the amount of gratuitous evil that such a being would permit.

In response to Frank Arntzenius and David McCarthy, who claim that Quinn's paradox is impossible, Almeida vindicates the possibility of the paradox by modeling it in supervaluation semantics. But he also proposes a *Vague Maximum Thesis* that solves the *Problem of No Maximum Evil*, using supervaluationism to undercut positions that implicitly depend on arbitrary precisification of vague predicates (e.g., a state "is more painful than" another state). In this unfamiliar context, we may be surprised to learn the following metaphysical fact: an Anselmian perfect being can permit any of a number of *indefinitely* painful states. Indeed, "a perfect being need not prevent indefinite evils" (87). Almeida goes too far, however, claiming, "the standard position on evil prohibits essentially perfectly good beings from permitting any *definitely painful* experiences" (8; cf. 87). Surely the "standard position" of Rowe and others is that God would prevent *gratuitous* pain, not definite pain *per se*.

The author tackles "the Logic of Perfection" in chapter 5. *Principle A* (it is morally necessary that essentially perfectly good agents never actualize worlds that are less good than some alternative) and the *Moral Perfection Principle* (an essentially perfectly good agent satisfies all of its moral requirements) together entail that there is no essentially perfectly good agent, at least "in contexts of infinitely improving worlds" (93). Almeida responds to this dilemma by arguing that *A*, *MPP*, and the *No Best World* hypotheses are inconsistent. But rather than arbitrarily rejecting one of these principles, Almeida defends a *Logic of Imperfection* that explains how *MPP* is not only false but necessarily false. Surprisingly, Anselmian perfect beings might fail to fulfill a moral requirement. In fact, it might be that an "essentially perfectly good agent in a necessary moral dilemma must fail to satisfy (at least) one moral requirement in every possible world" (104).

According to the property-identical divine command theory (PDCT) defended by Robert Adams and William Alston, "being obligatory" and "being commanded by God" are the same properties (though they are not the same concepts). Their identity is like that which holds between water and H_2O, or between being gold and being the element with atomic number 79 (110). In chapter 6, "Supervenience, Divine Freedom, and Absolute Orderings," the author considers Mark Murphy's argument that the *Free Command Thesis* (the freedom of God's commands depends on their not being wholly fixed by nonmoral facts) and the *Supervenience Thesis* (moral

properties supervene on nonmoral properties) are independently plausible theses that together exclude PDCT. If God's commands do not supervene on nonmoral facts (i.e., they are free), but being morally obligatory *does* supervene on nonmoral facts (the supervenience thesis), then being commanded by God is not identical to being morally obligatory.

Space does not permit an assessment of Almeida's reply to Murphy, except to say that (i) it strikes me as quite rigorous, and (ii) his examples do seem to support his conclusion that Murphy's challenge makes "mistaken assumptions about the substitutivity of metaphysical identicals in contexts of supervenience" (111). His crucial move is to argue that while God's commands may not supervene on nonmoral facts *in the world* (and so in virtue of that are free), they may supervene on God's own purposes, plans, and desires. In effect, "divine purposes" might "determine which moral standards obtain from world to world" (118). Of course, Almeida is clear that this freedom has limits (119).

Almeida articulates principles of "Vague Eschatology" in chapter 7, in response to Ted Sider's argument about the principle of justice that an Anselmian perfect being must use to distribute rewards and punishments to moral agents. Sider argues that such a principle must respect degrees of goodness in these agents, and if it does so, then it cannot be that "some people go determinately and eternally to heaven," while others "go determinately and eternally to hell" (124). These latter eschatological claims must therefore be rejected. Almeida's response is to "offer a countermodel in supervaluation semantics to the proportionality of justice condition" (124). This unfamiliar context helps us see "that the predicates 'is morally worse than' and 'is irredeemably evil' do not sharply divide their positive and negative extensions" (128). In this respect his argument deploys strategies previously pursued in chapters 3 and 4.

The author closes his book with chapter 8, "Theistic Modal Realism, Multiverses, and Hyperspace." According to Philip Quinn, if an Anselmian perfect being creates, he must create a world unsurpassable in moral goodness. But since such a being can actualize only one possible world, it follows that "the actual world, with all of its evil, is as good as any other logically possible world" (135). To the extent that this latter proposition is unlikely, Anselmian theists have a problem on their hands, which Almeida calls the *Less-Than-Best Problem*. The author's preferred response is "theistic modal realism" (TMR), the view that "every possible world is a *real, concrete universe* out there" (135), in the manner of David Lewis's modal realism. Thus, if there are any logically possible worlds that surpass our world in moral goodness, it follows that a perfect being has created those too, and there is no reason why those better worlds should be *our* world. Almeida defends this view against rival theories, such as Donald Turner's *Multiverse Solution*, Derek Parfit's *All-Worlds Hypothesis*, and Hud Hudson's *Hyperspace Solution*.

In contrast to each of the previous chapters, the strategy pursued here seems self-defeating. First, Almeida repeatedly raises problems for Turner,

Parfit, and Hudson that seem to apply to his own theory as well. For instance, Hudson's view is untenable because "there is the bizarre metaphysical consequence that everything that could happen does happen" (163). But on TMR, everything that could happen does happen. Yes, it happens in other worlds, but it does happen, because on TMR those worlds are just as spatiotemporally real as our world. Lewis's indexical account of "actuality" doesn't get around this fact. Similar considerations apply to the author's charges that Turner's and Hudson's views are necessitarian and threaten divine freedom, and that Parfit's view is unintuitive—these criticisms seem to apply to TMR as well. If God creates all possible worlds, then in what sense is the existence of any world a contingent matter? If he refrains from creating a world, it would simply be created by another Anselmian being. (Or that world wouldn't so much as exist, which quite implausibly makes the existence of possible worlds contingent.) In addition, if God *could* refrain from creating any possible world (thus preserving his alleged contingency of choice), then in what sense is he in the *Lifeguard Situation* outlined in section 8.6? Again, if Parfit's view is to be faulted because "there is simply no reason to believe that every possible world is actual" (11, cf. 136), then why should we believe, alternatively, that "every possible world is a *real, concrete* universe out there" (11)? Are we to suppose that intuition supports this latter claim over the former?

Second, the proposal seems theologically objectionable as well. Almeida suggests that "at each possible world a perfect being actualized that world" (138). But if a *real* being created each *real* universe, doesn't that mean there *really* are infinite gods? Or, at best, an infinite number of acts of world-creation? Thus, it's not clear we have a solution here to the *Less-Than-Best Problem* that many Anselmians will want. Furthermore, if the problem was to explain how the actual world *with all of its evil* could be reconciled with God's moral perfection, then TMR seems to make things worse. Now God is in the business of actualizing, not only the actual world with its evil, but every logically possible world with its evil as well. (Perhaps, if TMR entails polytheism, the stigma of actualizing an infinite amount of evil is divided up among an infinite number of perfect beings?) And if creation is, as Almeida seems to suppose, the actualization of a possible world, then the possible worlds exist logically prior to the act of creation. In which case, what sense can be attached to the notion of God's creating all possible worlds? There seems to be a circularity problem here. Finally, the "necessity of preventable evil" thesis forwarded by the author seems extremely counterintuitive. It would be not just surprising, but incredible, to discover that a perfectly good, knowledgeable, powerful, and necessarily existent God has no control over whether a very bad world gets actualized. He couldn't simply refrain from creating at all?

Despite these quibbles, *The Metaphysics of Perfect Beings* makes a substantive case for challenging "some common and blithe assumptions about the implications of moral perfection, omniscience, omnipotence, and other attributes" (34). The book is a worthy "sequel" of sorts to Thomas Morris's

Anselmian Explorations, the difference being that—in comparison with Morris's volume—the technical machinery utilized to assess various Anselmian claims is considerably enlarged and sophisticated. Almeida's presentation is often couched in the symbolism of quantified modal logic, and interacts with an impressively large swath of published material on divine freedom, the problem of evil, divine command theory, and related topics. Although he follows in a long line of philosophers of religion who have devoted attention to the coherence of theism, the author's unique contribution in this volume is to (i) assess the divine attributes in "unfamiliar contexts" generated by recent philosophical advances, (ii) argue that these contexts reveal surprising implications of the Anselmian "package" of divine attributes, and thereby (iii) make a sustained case that many recent dilemmas posed for Anselmianism lack cogency. His thesis about "metaphysically occluded facts" should be of great interest to practitioners of philosophical theology, who are often asked (or ask others) to take a fairly permissive stance on the ability of *a priori* intuition alone to reach reliable judgments about metaphysical matters.

Anselm on Freedom, by Katherin Rogers. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. Pp. 217.

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The thesis of this book is that in his writings on free will, Anselm attempts the first systematic libertarian analysis of freedom. The author develops her thesis in significant part by contrasting Anselm's position with that of Augustine, whose views on the subject lay at the center of Anselm's own theological heritage. Her strongest focus is on what Anselm has to say in *De Casu Diaboli* about the fall of the angels, but ample attention is paid to his other writings as well, and frequent use is made of concepts developed by contemporary writers on free will.

The book's Introduction characterizes libertarianism as involving two key principles: that a libertarian free choice cannot be determined, causally or otherwise, by anything outside the agent's own choosing; and that such a choice must ultimately originate in, or be caused by, the agent himself (5). This leads directly to the problem that is the book's central focus. Classical theism, which Rogers describes in chapter 1, held it as a non-negotiable principle that as creator, God is the cause of all that is not God. Anything having positive ontological status either is God or comes from God, who sustains all things in being throughout their existence (16). The problem is to reconcile this with libertarian freedom, which would appear to exclude such a role for God when it comes to human choices. We are told in chapter 2 that Augustine's solution to this problem is to adopt compatibilism—a position, says Rogers, that he maintained throughout his career. To uphold