

BOOK REVIEWS

The Good and the Good Book: Revelation as a Guide to Life, by Samuel Fleischacker. Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. 164. \$40 (hardcover), \$25 (paperback).

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In this insightful and thought-provoking work, Fleischacker defends what he calls *revealed religion*. Essentially all of the major world religions, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism fall into this category. What distinguishes these religions is the fact that their beliefs and practices primarily derive not from rational arguments or the individual religious experiences of their adherents but rather from a text they take to be revealed, either by God or by an extraordinary human being who has experienced some extraordinary insight (e.g., Buddha). Furthermore, on Fleischacker's view, commitment to one of these traditions depends primarily on a non-rational faith or trust, and a central part of his book is devoted to explaining "why it might be reasonable to place such a non-rational faith or trust in the teaching of the text, passed down by a community as sacred" (4). What does it mean to say that it is *reasonable* to place a *non-rational* trust in a text? On Fleischacker's view, rational arguments (and especially natural theology) can do very little to bring about religious commitment. Instead, he thinks people are inspired by the vision of life offered by revealed texts. Specifically, such texts can offer us a better account of our *overall good* than any secular approach. Crucially, accepting a text's vision must be compatible with fully accepting modern science and liberal morality. Hence, it can be reasonable to have faith in a text. As he explains, Fleischacker himself is Jewish, and so he takes the Torah as his sacred text, but he explicitly takes his argument to apply to the texts of all the major world religions listed above.

The book itself is a (much) shorter and more accessible version of his arguments in *Divine Teaching and the Way of the World* (Oxford University Press, 2011). Consequently, the arguments on the whole tend to go by very quickly and are often less than convincing. Natural theology, along with the entire project of reformed epistemology, are dismissed in less than



two pages, for example. Nevertheless, his approach to defending revealed religion is innovative and a good reminder, especially to analytic philosophers, of the importance of revealed texts and the central role they can (and should) play in the lives of believers.

Chapter 1 confronts a main problem for those sympathetic to revealed religion: why should we trust a text that has obvious scientific and historical errors, as the Bible does? Why, especially, should we have faith if, as many scholars (including Fleischacker) think, the miracles it reports (including, centrally, the revelation at Sinai or the resurrection of Jesus) never happened? Fleischacker's answer is that, *on their own terms*, we should understand these texts not as presenting historical truths but instead as of giving us some kind of ethical guidance. In the Hebrew Bible, the term generally translated as "true" (*emet*) ordinarily "characterizes a person or a way of acting rather than a sentence" (17). Adducing a variety of examples, he concludes that "the point of calling something 'true' in the Bible seems clearly to be that one can rely on it, not that it has survived the tribunal of logic or empirical evidence" (18). Fleischacker then draws an interesting distinction between *experts* and *authorities*. We use the former when we know what we want to do but need help doing it (e.g., hiring an electrician). We turn to *authorities*, however, when we are trying to figure out what we want to do. In these terms, the Bible (and other revealed texts) function as authorities, not experts. By giving us a vision of our overall good, they offer us guidance on what we should do with our lives. Importantly, they can do that without being true in a propositional sense. Indeed, Fleischacker thinks it's critical that they *aren't* true in that sense: if a text is going to be able to speak to people at all times and places, as it should do if it's genuine revelation, then it will need to be poetic and metaphorical. To illustrate the point, Fleischacker offers the fictional example of the wise and honest sage Aloysius, who tells a person that she will find a great treasure in the village over the mountain. Being greedy, she rushes off to the village, only to find that it is suffering from severe famine. But she stays to help alleviate the suffering, and is powerfully affected by her relief work, with the result that she returns home feeling good about herself. So she did discover a treasure, but it was the joy of helping others, not money. But Aloysius also knew that, before she began the journey, she was not in a position to appreciate such a treasure, and so he gave her advice in the only way he could—metaphorically (21). The point is that guidance about how to live one's life can be offered—sometimes *must* be offered—in poetic, metaphorical, and obscure language. We thus needn't be bothered by historical inaccuracies or wonder whether miraculous events ever occurred; the point of a revealed text is to offer us a vision for our lives.

Precisely what kind of vision is the subject of chapter 2, which begins with a Euthyphro-like dilemma: "do we learn what is good from our sacred texts or do we bring a notion of goodness with us in coming to those texts?" (26). The answer is both: we need an antecedent understanding of

morality and goodness to assess the trustworthiness of a text, but if the text is to teach us anything, we must also expect that it will revise and even upend our understanding of goodness. And this is how it should be: any overarching vision of a good human life must comport with our commonsense intuitions that, e.g., kindness, generosity, compassion, and so forth, are good, while murder, stealing, and the like are bad. (If a text does not comport with our basic moral intuitions, we have a strong reason for rejecting it.) But when it comes to the question of *how we ought to live our lives*, or about whether there is some great good that can *give meaning to our lives*, (e.g., “being saved by Christ” or “overcoming attachment to oneself”) we are often less sure, and it is here that revealed texts can help. They provide answers (however obscure) to what Fleischacker calls the “telic question” (from the Greek *telos*), which is “the question of how to live overall” (34). The rest of the chapter contains an insightful discussion of the relationship between answers to the telic question and morality, and in particular about the role that telic views play in moral disagreement. A central insight is that adherents of different religions can *disagree* in their telic views while continuing to agree about the central points of morality (which, on his view, largely concerns norms required to have a peaceful and free society). This point leads to an insightful argument for why and how we should not simply tolerate but also respect adherents of other religions (or none) in chapter 7.

Still, why would a person turn to a purportedly revealed text for an answer to the telic question, especially texts written thousands of years ago? Here is one reason: what if “the overall goal of our lives [were] ungraspable by our untutored senses and reason alone?” (43). Fleischacker thinks that this is not only possible but in fact *likely*. The argument proper begins in chapter 3, where he considers naturalistic answers to the telic question, which he variously formulates as “what does the good human life look like?” or “what is the purpose of life?” or even “what is the meaning of life?” (note that these are not obviously the same question!). This chapter is at once the most thought-provoking and also the most frustrating, but it certainly repays careful study. The four naturalistic answers he considers are *helping others*, *love relationships*, *art*, and *the growth of knowledge*. People have often taken these, either singly or (more frequently) in combination as ideals around which to structure their whole lives. Fleischacker’s arguments for rejecting them, however, are not very convincing. Consider love relationships. Fleischacker only discusses two examples, erotic love and the love of parents for their children. Although a new romantic love can make everything else in one’s life seem more worthwhile, that feeling fades after a while, “and most of us look back on that impression as an illusion” (52). That’s certainly true enough, but he fails to consider how, e.g., a more mature marital love, purified by the trials of life, can give one’s life purpose and meaning. Regarding the love for one’s children, he writes, “[w]hen immersed in caring for young children, that can seem an activity of supreme importance, but of all the things we do in life, this

one surely comes under the heading of 'keeping life going so that we can keep life going.' . . . If we are here on earth to raise our children, what are our children here for?" (52). The problem with this analysis is that it conceives of value *only* in instrumental terms. Our relationships with our children are part of what gives our lives value, not because our lives are *for* the production of children, but because the inclusion of children in our lives is a great good for us (and them). A larger worry, however, is the fact that some of the very texts whose telic vision Fleischacker wishes to support themselves appeal to the intrinsic value of love relationships. (In the Christian tradition, e.g., see St. Ignatius of Loyola's *Suscipe* prayer.) More generally, theists, at least, will generally want to affirm the place of all of these things—helping others, love, art, and knowledge—in their account of a worthwhile life. Still, the idea itself will have some appeal to theists, because they will also affirm that *purely secular* versions of these goods, ones not caught up in a relationship with the divine, will be (by themselves) inadequate goods around which to center a person's life. Fleischacker's *arguments* for this claim, however, are woefully underdeveloped (at least in this book).

Chapter 4 turns to the nature of revelation and fleshes out why we might find it inspiring. Fleischacker calls our attention to the fact that nearly all revealed texts are *poems*. The Torah, for example, is a grand epic poem. This is important because "at the core of revelation . . . is the idea that our highest good is essentially mysterious" (67). Consequently, it defies description in analytic philosophy prose and must be expressed instead in verse. Fleischacker offers a few examples of how a text might grab someone's attention with "arresting" and "awe-inspiring" glimpses of our obscure ultimate good. In his case, he trusts the Torah because he "found in it a sublime presentation of the evils of idolatry, and a plausible solution to those evils" (77). Similarly, a Christian might be captivated by Paul's talk of being part of the Body of Christ (whatever that comes to). This chapter, too, wants further development, or at least more examples. Although Fleischacker repeatedly talks about how revealed texts give us inspiring glimpses of a mysterious good that can organize one's entire life, the reader never really gets a sense of that at all.

Granting that one *is* drawn in by the telic vision of, say, the Torah or Paul, why should she *trust* it? Even if she thinks naturalistic values are insufficient for guiding her whole life, it doesn't follow that the view offered by a text, however captivating, is any more reliable. In chapter 5, Fleischacker asks this very question: "my reasons for believing in a God and an afterlife are much like my reasons for believing in the Torah: I think the ethical value of believing these things to be reasons to think that they are true. [But] how can that be? How can ethical considerations ever serve as reasons to believe a factual claim?" (83). To answer, he draws upon Kant's argument for why we should believe in God: "we can reasonably believe in certain factual claims if they cannot be disproven by science or logic, and are necessary to our ability to see our lives as worthwhile"

(84). Readers will find much to think about in his development of this argument, but regardless of how successful one finds it, Fleischacker concludes with a worthwhile insight: “we do not, cannot, love reason alone, or anything at which we arrive by reason alone. What inspires love in us is not reason but something else. So if we are to love our lives, something other than argument will have to orient them” (91).

Chapter 6 turns to the process of receiving revelation, and specifically of textual interpretation. He begins by arguing convincingly against fundamentalists who think that a text can be interpreted literally. To his credit, he (at least briefly) addresses the problem of how to interpret morally difficult texts, such as Deuteronomy 21:18–21 (which says that rebellious sons should be stoned to death). He argues that a text must be interpreted holistically and, also, in a community. A text must ultimately be received at the individual level—the question, after all, is how one ought to live one’s *own* life—but reception “is fully received only in community” (107). After all, much of what revealed texts do is structure *communal* practice, because most of how a person lives her life, including work, raising children, and education, is done in her community. Further, different communities give rise to different ways of receiving and interpreting a text: “in the hands of Meister Eckhart and Teresa of Ávila, Christian Scripture looks very different than it does in the hands of Thomas Aquinas” (110). All reception, however, must strike a delicate balance between being faithful to the text itself—one can’t simply read one’s desires into the text—while also interpreting it in light of one’s own moral beliefs. Revelation itself (the text) and the *reception* of revelation are thus equally important.

One of the strengths of the book is chapter 7, which offers a compelling argument for why and how adherents of a particular religious tradition can and should not just tolerate but *respect* other traditions, that is, see them as admirable and as able to teach us something. First, telic visions offered by revealed texts are *obscure*, which should prompt some epistemic humility in us. I might be more inspired by one text than another, but perhaps I haven’t fully appreciated other texts. Further, one’s religion itself can give one reason to respect, and learn from, other religions. Drawing on his own Jewish tradition, Fleischacker points out that the revelation at Sinai happens “immediately after Moses takes advice from his non-Israelite father-in-law” (123). In the book of Jonah, “the Assyrians serve as a model of repentance for Jews” (124). Other traditions can thus be the source of *moral* inspiration. Their telic visions can *also* be valuable, for, Fleischacker argues, they are all trying to answer the same kinds of questions: how to find meaning in life; how to overcome fear of death; how to order the goals of one’s life; and so on. While a person will find the vision of her own tradition the most moving, “we share the idea that these [the telic visions offered by revealed texts] are the right *sorts* of reasons to ground a religious commitment. We can therefore illuminate one another’s understanding of these reasons” (125). A final reason to respect

other religions is that the criticisms made by religions against each other can, at their best, help each tradition to ensure that it is living up to its own telic vision.

Fleischacker's overall goal is to show how trust—faith—in what one takes to be a revealed text is perfectly sensible (indeed, even wise) and fits well alongside liberal morality and modern science. Although readers will no doubt be frustrated by some of the arguments, and find him overreaching in places, the book is clear, interesting, and absolutely worth reading. I was left eager to read the fuller version of the arguments in *Divine Teaching and the Way of the World*.

Taking Pascal's Wager: Faith, Evidence, and the Abundant Life, by Michael Rota. IVP Academic, 2016. Pp. 255. \$20.00 (paperback).

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The first thing to know about this book is that the subtitle—*Faith, Evidence and the Abundant Life*—is much more informative about the contents than the main title, *Taking Pascal's Wager*. The majority of the book isn't really about Pascal's wager at all. There is good old two-step natural theology—arguments for the existence of God followed by Christian apologetics—and some really great case studies of persons of faith. Only the first relatively short section is directly on Pascal's wager: a chapter of preliminary concepts, a statement of the argument, and two chapters of objections and replies, including, especially the “many gods” objection. But since the problem of pluralism is hardly a specialist's objection, the argument really only gets stated in chapter 4, which completes *Part I: Uncertainty and Commitment*. A reader with much familiarity at all with the wager could skip the preliminary chapter as well as the first chapter of objections and replies. *Part II: Evidence* presents a lovely cosmological argument from possibility and necessity of the form that is neglected these days (including a helpful visual schema that I have myself used in classes for years). This is followed by a pretty standard design argument of the fine-tuning variety. There follow two arguments for specifically Christian theism and a single chapter discussing “counterevidence.” Part II is more than twice the size of Part I, which contains the statement of Pascal's wager. The final section, *Part III: Saying Yes to God*, focuses on the lives of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jean Vanier, and Immaculée Ilibagiza, and is very edifying.

What ties the book together is that Rota conceives of his main argument as taking this form (from his Introduction).

