1-1-2013

Book Review of Franklin I. Gamwell, Existence and the Good: Metaphysical Necessity in Morals and Politics

Matthew R. Petrusek

Loyola Marymount University, matthew.petrusek@lmu.edu

readings of Paul still persist in the present volume, and demarcate a site of struggle between modern interpreters. On the one side of this struggle are those who use Paul's letters and the postcolonial posture as ciphers for their own political engagements—scholarship and political action melded together. Examples in the collection can be found in the emphasis on an "ethics of inter-pretation" (p. 174), the plea to the "Christian Occident" to "renounce its complicity in the colonial and neo-colonial enterprise" (p. 222), and the "lessons that Christianity must learn from Marxism" (p. 50). For theologians and scholars of Paul in theological seminaries and divinity schools this politically interested approach is expected. On the other side of the struggle are scholars of religion in universities for whom this politically engaged approach is regarded as unacceptable, and considered symptomatic of a broader problem in the field of biblical studies, namely, theology masking as objective scholarship. A book review is not the place to adjudicate this issue, except to say that postcolonial criticism can be pulled in either direction: as another interpretive tool to mine Paul's letters as historical data; or, as another interpretive tool to mine Paul's letters for homiletic insights. The two are very different.

David A. Kaden
Department for the Study of Religion
University of Toronto
david.kaden@mail.utoronto.ca

***Existence and The Good: Metaphysical Necessity in Morals and Politics.* Written by Franklin I. Gamwell. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012. x + 209 pages. ISBN 1438435924. $24.95 US, $24.95 CDN.**

Existence and the Good: Metaphysical Necessity in Morals and Politics, the latest book by University of Chicago Professor Emeritus Franklin I. Gamwell, reaffirms and enhances the process theologian's reputation for analytic power and systematic clarity in service of democracy and human rights. The text—in many ways a comprehensive synthesis of Gamwell's previous projects—seeks to demonstrate that one cannot identify and justify the existence and nature of the human good, including the goods of human rights and democracy, without engaging in metaphysics.

Gamwell commences by identifying and scrutinizing three foundational theories of morality that, on his reading, all fail to provide a rationally-warranted conception of the good: (1) liberal theories that uphold the existence of universal reason yet reject the possibility of metaphysical inquiry and thus the derivation of morality from the nature of existence itself; (2) classical metaphysical theories that uphold the possibility of deriving a principle of the good from the nature of reality as such, yet allow for the identification of the good by means of negation; and (3) post-modern theories that reject the possibility of universal reason altogether and, thus, the existence of a universal good at all. Gamwell sees Immanuel Kant as paradigmatically representing the first category, St. Thomas Aquinas the second, and Martin Heidegger the third.

Gamwell builds his alternative to these theories atop the foundational insight that the claim "nothing exists" is logically absurd. To argue, for example, that we can only speak of the teleological good by means of negation—as Aquinas seeks to do by establishing an analogical justification for the existence and nature of God—is rationally untenable. If one cannot say something positively univocal about the nature of the good, then, Gamwell argues, one is open to the charge either of articulating nonsense (akin, he says, to asserting the existence of a "colorless yellow rose") or to claiming, implicitly, that "nothing

exists"—which, Gamwell maintains, is pragmatically self-contradictory. Kant's wholesale rejection of the possibility of metaphysical inquiry on the one hand, and Heidegger's rejection of universal reason on the other, do not escape this critique, either: Gamwell seeks to demonstrate that both "Noumena" and "Dasein" are ultimately reducible to the same contradictory, rationally absurd assertion: "nothing exists."

Likewise, Gamwell argues that non-teleological moral theories that seek to make-up for the deficiencies of Kantian ethics by supplying substantive, positive content to the categorical imperative—like those advanced by Alan Gewirth, Jügen Habermas, and Karl-Otto Apel—also fail to provide a rationally-warranted foundation for morality because they commit what Gamwell calls the "partialistic fallacy": in seeking to establish morality independently of any one, telic purpose, they end up, contradictorily, affirming the existence of one telic purpose: that all action ought seek to affirm the reality that there is no telic purpose, which, Gamwell argues, is a kind of telic purpose itself.

In the wake of rejecting these alternatives, Gamwell moves to construct his own theoretical grounding for a rationally-warranted conception of the good, which he identifies as "neo-classical metaphysics." His position is "classical" in that it recognizes the necessity of metaphysics—and, in particular, theistic metaphysics—in order to make rationally justifiable claims about the existence and nature of the good, including the human good. It is "neo," on the other hand, because it rejects the claim common in classical metaphysics that one can know the nature of the good by means of negation. In response, Gamwell seeks to identify positively and univocally the necessary constitutive features both of existence itself (what he calls "metaphysics in the strict sense") and of subjectivity itself (what he calls "metaphysics in the broad sense"). Drawing deeply on the

thought of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, he devotes chapters 2 and 3 to precisely, if densely at times, spelling out this metaphysical vision. This culminates in the demonstration of the existence of a being who, in the author's words, is "an eminently temporal individual, who from everlasting to everlasting has existed and will exist as the ever-changing because of ever-increasing unifications of whatever has occurred in the world" (8).

This divine being's existence and nature, according to Gamwell, can be demon-strated by means of rational reflection alone; indeed, it is this divine being's very temporality—the fact that it exists *in time*—that not only makes it accessible to human reason, but *necessarily* so: each rational person, Gamwell argues, has a constitutive awareness, at least implicitly, of the divine being's existence and totality, which he calls an "original belief." It is this constitutive belief, in turn, that provides the conceptual grounds for pivoting from existence itself to the good itself, and in particular, the human good. By virtue of each person's "original belief," Gamwell contends, one not only necessarily knows the consti-tutive nature of existence, but also necessarily knows it as *teleological*, and in particular, as "the concrete realization of unity in diversity" (11). One knows, in other words, that exist-ence properly understood constitutes the *good*, and it is this constitutive knowledge, in turn, that generates the human capacity not only to make choices, but to be able to make *moral* choices—that is, to choose to act in accord-ance with the comprehensive good that one cannot fail to know, or to choose against it.

From and within this metaphysical and teleological framework, Gamwell then moves swiftly but deftly in chapter 4 to elaborating on this conception of moral freedom and responsibility, which, in turn, he leverages and refines to demonstrate the existence of what he calls "social practices." These practices, authorized by and derived from the

teleological nature of the good, include the foundational principle of "communicative respect," by which Gamwell means the recognition that any claim a subject makes to moral validity—that is, any statement an individual makes to explain and justify her actions—implicitly and necessarily affirms the right for any other subject to contest it and make her own claims to moral validity. This principle, Gamwell emphasizes, is implicitly rooted in the nature of the good but explicitly morally neutral to competing moral visions. It does, nevertheless, establish the grounds for basic human rights.

The principle of communicative respect also provides the foundation for a constitutional principle of authentic religious freedom, according to Gamwell. And it is here, in the final chapters of the book, where he moves from discussing social practices more generally to the justification of democracy more specifically, and in particular, the possibility of a genuinely religiously neutral constitution. In an extended and generously-argued conversation with Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*, Gamwell highlights the strengths of Stout's critiques of what he calls "liberalism" and "the new traditionalism," defined, respect-ively, as the claim that comprehensive visions of the good do not belong in public discourse at all ("liberalism"), and as the competing claim that religiously neutral discourse is impossible because universal moral reason is a fiction (the "new traditionalism"). Yet, not surprisingly, Gamwell ultimately disagrees with Stout's contention that the solution to the standoff is to engage in what Stout calls "ethics without metaphysics." One of the foundational insights Gamwell seeks to advance in the book is that we *cannot*, rationally speaking, cleave the former from the latter. Happily, however, the metaphysical reality Gamwell describes, and the nature of the good he locates within and derives from it includes the recognition of a rationally-warranted principal of religious neutrality, thus solving the problem that Stout, in Gamwell's mind, aptly describes but fails to redress.

Encapsulating *Existence and the Good* is uniquely hazardous because Gamwell's systematic argument, like the metaphysical system he so carefully describes, is meticulously and syllogistically disciplined at every step, and so defies generalization. Yet even in summary form it is clear that the project makes an essential contribution to contemporary moral theory, both in general and in relation to the more specific issues of human rights and the possibility of religiously neutral democratic discourse. Even if one does not finish the book convinced of the rationally demonstrable existence of an all-encompassing temporal being who grows in ever-increasing actuality, perhaps the text's greatest strength is its capacity to illuminate the rational weaknesses of alternative moral paradigms with unassuming but devastating precision. Indeed, given that most contemporary ethicists—including both Rawlsian "liberals" and MacIntyrean "traditionalists"—still appear to agree that Immanuel Kant has had the final word on the validity of metaphysical inquiry in general and metaphysical ethical inquiry more specifically, Gamwell's work brilliantly provides a much-needed rejoinder. Perhaps metaphysics is not dead after all.

Matthew R. Petrusek
The University of Chicago Divinity School
petrusek@uchicago.edu