

Reviews

Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine. Edited by Andrei A. Buckareff and Yujin Nagasawa. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 299 pp. US \$74.00 (hardcover).

Alternative Concepts of God came out of the project titled “Exploring Alternative Concepts of God” funded by the John Templeton Foundation. It is a work of philosophy of religion/philosophical theology that deserves careful attention because it brings together a group of prominent contributors who go well beyond various labels assigned to their positions and presents a sophisticated range of philosophical possibilities when discussing the concept of God.

One immediate question that this volume raises is: alternative to what? The answer given is that so-called traditional Judeo-Christian-Islamic theism, in a way, limits our possibilities of philosophizing the concept of God. The book’s contributors give alternatives based on what they consider to be departures from the concept of God according to traditional theist views (“classical theism,” “omniGod theism,” “traditional theism,” “mainstream theism”). “Traditional theism” is primarily a philosophical term of relatively recent origin used by philosophers, primarily within the analytic tradition, and outside of those circles this term is rarely used. It can be found occasionally as a term among academic theologians, and it is used even less for self-description among adherents of various religious traditions. The editors do note that the term “theism” is somewhat protean and that different authors do assume different meanings for that term often without defining it explicitly.

The editors propose the alternatives to traditional theism offered in this volume as a way of constructively engaging various religious traditions typically neglected by philosophical approaches (again, primarily among analytic philosophers). The editors present a case for alternative concepts of God as a way to avoid a supposed trend in current philosophy of religion that reduces it to a debate between theological apologetics and atheism.

The volume for the most part follows the established division of possible alternatives to traditional theism by maintaining philosophical labels used in order to classify possible ways of departing from what is perceived to be the orthodox stance. Options explored include pantheism, panentheism, idealism, and naturalism. Other options explored by different contributors include ultimism, fictionalism, and realism with a discussion of free will and related issues.

The first four essays deal with pantheism understood in several different ways that are interpreted as either alternatives or complementary contributions to classical theism. Peter Forrest argues for a type of “personal pantheism” that extends from classical theism and is not in opposition to it. Karl Pfeifer finds a philosophical opening in the way we use language to represent objects and distinguishes between God understood as a count noun and as a mass noun. Pfeifer also proposes a type of pansychism which ascribes mentality to everything because of its dispositional properties. After reading this essay one wonders if all models of

reality produced by humans who have intentions and mentality will also have intentions because they are conceived in such a way. If this is the case, then how can we ever produce a model devoid of any mentality, leading to the conclusion that intentions cannot be properly basic to reality because we assume mentality already inherent in everything we do?

The essay by John Leslie is a delight to read regardless of what the reader's own position might be. Leslie begins with the question of all questions—namely, why does the world exist? Eventually, he postulates an ethical necessity: that it is a good thing to exist. The world exists because it is a good thing that it exists. Leslie's concept of God is, it seems, an infinite set of infinite minds contemplating infinite universes worthy of contemplation. With that Leslie seems to build on the heritage of Platonism and Neoplatonism. Concluding the first set of four essays, Brian Leftow proposes a critique of a version of naturalistic pantheism by showing it inconsistent with the traditional theistic concept of God.

The next set of three essays deals with pantheism. Yujin Nagasawa proposes what he calls "modal pantheism," in which God is understood as a totality of all possible worlds in which all possible worlds are as real as the actual world. John Bishop and Ken Perszyk address various conceptions of God in the context of the problem of evil and end up proposing a version of euteleological pantheism. Marilyn McCord Adams offers her critique of euteleological pantheism and finds no reliable alternative to traditional theism because every alternative has its own problems and some examples of suffering are simply beyond what can be explained away.

Charles Taliaferro proposes a version of theistic idealism and explains that the primacy of physical over non-physical which is presupposed in naturalism is arbitrary at best and perhaps even untenable. Taliaferro chooses his opponents not among philosophers of religion but philosophers of biology and cognitive science, like Elliot Sober, Paul Churchland, and Daniel Dennett. Taliaferro ends up, somewhat predictably, defending already well-known theories (of Alvin Plantinga, for example).

J. L. Schellenberg offers a concept of God as the ultimate proposition in at least three distinct senses: metaphysical ultimacy, axiological ultimacy, and soteriological ultimacy. Schellenberg's essay also gives a meaningful account of the evolutionary/historical development of human cognition combined with a call to a form of skepticism that is really refreshing in a volume like this.

Robin Le Poidevin's essay gives a perspective that takes into account fictionalism of religious claims. Instead of confusing religious statements with something that can be taken to be true independent of human belief, Le Poidevin proposes understanding religious claims, including the concept of God, as "the content of relevant fiction." Theological discourse is about human ideals and not about the truth value of religious claims.

Willem Drees begins with ontological naturalism, which he proposes as an alternative because these days fewer and fewer people in the West identify with religious communities where traditional religious concepts still hold. Drees is asking whether there are any concepts (he calls them images) of the divine that can still be used meaningfully by people who do not identify with traditional religious communities and whose worldview is defined by modern science. Drees proposes three domains from which such concepts can be drawn: modern science,

mathematics, and morality, and ends up proposing a form of transcendence from a purely naturalistic perspective informed and inspired by modern science. Drees realizes that the end point of his discussion is not necessarily shared by those who practice religion in its traditional forms but he explains that his reasoning can open up such religious concepts to those who are deeply committed to naturalism.

Andrei Buckareff argues that a version of pantheism or panentheism should be presupposed by traditional theists because the alternative is metaphysically unsound. Based on Buckareff's arguments about the metaphysics of divine action, it follows that if God is understood as being active in the world then God must be a part of the world and therefore some form of pantheism or panentheism is required in order to maintain traditional theism.

Hugh McCann discusses a possibility of free will in his chapter and offers a defense of a concept of God in order to maintain free decision and action. McCann discusses what forms of freedom are presupposed when considering our decisions and actions. McCann subscribes to a form of theological determinism in order to avoid naturalistic determinism, which he finds incompatible with our experience of free decisions and actions.

Emily Thomas discusses the emergentism of Samuel Alexander and contrasts it with several recent emergent concepts of God. Thomas finds Alexander compelling when compared to Philip Clayton and others. Thomas's critique of Clayton for basing his emergence on naturalism while also presupposing a non-naturalist theology is particularly insightful. Thomas's presentation of issues related to space-time in Alexander's concept of emergence make this essay very relevant.

Finally, Eric Steinhart offers a defense of religious naturalism which he sees as not only a philosophical/theological issue but also as something that is practiced in rituals and religious services.

Some epistemological and perhaps methodological questions remain regardless of the insights detailed in this volume. For example, what role do philosophical concepts of God have in religious behaviors as they evolved in the context of human symbolic behaviors? Are these just attempts to rationalize and justify commitments that precede them or are we supposed to think that they are the source of religious concepts? Another set of questions can be raised about how we can get from human cognition—and theoretical models of various experiences it engenders—to the possible source of such experiences. There is a sense of sheer arbitrariness in human logic if cognition is understood as something that is itself contingent on the underlying processes that produced it. Such questions might be difficult to answer with or without this volume, but after reading various contributions contained here the reader will perhaps come out one step closer to addressing such considerations.

This volume is definitely relevant for anyone interested in religion-and-science because of the role that philosophical inquiry has in that field and the role that the concept of God has in philosophy of religion.

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Brain, Consciousness, and God: A Lonerganian Integration. By Daniel A. Helminiak. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015. 432 pp. US \$95.00.

This book investigates “God in the brain,” the capacity of the human brain to experience God. Helminiak incorporates neuroscience, psychology, spirituality, and theology, each specialization making “its proper contribution,” coalescing “in a coherent and comprehensive explanation of human mentality and its capacity for transcendent experiences” (365). Chapters 3 through 6 correspond to each of these specializations. Helminiak realizes that dealing adequately with this issue requires solving the mind-body problem, and he finds the basis of this solution in Bernard Lonergan’s “epistemology” (27).

Thus, in Chapter 2, “Epistemology: A Portentous Prolegomena,” Helminiak presents Lonergan’s critically realist position that knowing is a compound of experiencing, understanding, and judging. Not all epistemologies identify all three as essential to knowledge. For example, the commonsense realisms of Wilbur, Searle, and Chalmers equate knowledge with experiencing. Lonergan’s more complete identification of knowledge with correct judgment about one’s insights into one’s experiences is an epistemology “adequate to both physical and non-physical reality,” and, therefore, to “the array of questions about the brain, the mind, the spiritual, the Divine, and their distinction and interrelationship” (79).

An epistemology that identifies knowing with experiencing cannot do justice to reality that is imperceptible. If knowing is like taking a look, reality is what can be looked at or otherwise perceived. Unfortunately, such an epistemology cannot make sense of non-material reality, which is “not inherently conditioned by a spatio-temporal array” (75). Lonergan’s epistemology can, because it identifies the real not as the palpably experience-able but as the meaningful/intelligible that can be affirmed on the basis of sufficient evidence. Meaning is “a non-spatial, non-temporal, intellectual content” (77), “in no way perceptible,” and its “potential range transcends the here and now, for example, $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ ” (76). We do not sense the intelligibility of anything, even of material reality, but we understand and affirm it. The same is true of the human mind and consciousness: unlike the brain, it cannot be looked at, but it can be understood and affirmed. If meaningful affirmability, not perceivability, is the criterion of the real, not only can human consciousness be affirmed as real, but “when the meanings really differ, the realities are different” (76), and, therefore, consciousness can be distinguished from the brain.

However, before explaining the mind-body problem in detail in Chapter 4, Helminiak discusses “Neuroscience: The Biological Bases of Transcendent Experiences,” in Chapter 3. He summarizes neuroscientific research and theory that bears on transcendent experiences, saying that it is “only a matter of time before the neurological function” that is the basis of these experiences “will be understood” (107). In any case, “all research points to the same conclusion: biological factors constitute an essential aspect of transcendent experiences” (107). However, the “more pressing need is to turn to these human experiences themselves and to propose a coherent understanding of them and their relationship to neuronal function” (107).

In Chapter 4, “Psychology: The Problem of a Real Body and a Real Mind,” Helminiak presents various theories on the mind-brain relationship and advances his own position that the mind is a distinct reality with its own laws and acts: self-aware imagery, emotions, memories, insight, choice. These laws and acts of the mind, different from biological laws and acts, are real because they are meaningful and affirmable. The mind emerges as “a higher systematization of the sensate and perceptual functions of the organism and, as such, is different in kind from those functions and from the brain and its organic functioning” (367), that is, its “schemes of recurrence—the interactive function of cells, neurotransmitters, neurological pathways and networks, and patterns of neuronal activity” (239). As we do not study water by studying hydrogen and oxygen, so we do not study the mind by studying “neurons, transmitters, nuclei, tracts, brain networks, and their computer modeling,” but by studying “the person as a functioning whole” (237). While mind and brain are distinct, Helminiak insists on the importance and need of further work on the relationship between them.

In Chapter 5, “Spirituality: Consciousness and Transcendent Experiences,” Helminiak continues to explain the distinct intelligible realities of the human being—organism, psyche, and spirit—and then he investigates transcendent experiences in relation to the human spirit. The *psyche* “encompasses imagery, emotions, conations, and memory, which cohere to form personality structures, patterns of interactions by which people engage the world and one another in their own ways” (368). *Spirit*, the properly human aspect of the mind, is another word for “intentional consciousness,” which includes operations such as insight, judgment, and responsible decision. Human spirituality and properly human consciousness are one and the same, and thus, spirituality, for Helminiak, does not itself have a religious or divine connotation. Transcendent experience is our experience of our own spiritual capacity to know and love, and cultivating the spiritual life is a matter of attending to and encouraging our drive to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible in the quest to know and love.

In Chapter 6, “Theology and Theotics: Union of Creator and Creature,” Helminiak considers God and various ways of understanding what might be meant by the experience of God. He emphasizes that such an experience can only be discerned through faith, not through naturalistic explanation as in neuroscience or psychology. By natural reason, we can affirm a desire to know and love, but not a gifted sharing in God’s own life of knowing and loving through the gifts of the indwelling Spirit and the beatific vision (360). Because we are not God, naturalistic disciplines can study the human spirit and transcendent experiences without appealing to religious faith or God.

Helminiak’s engagement with so many contemporary thinkers and so much research is impressive. If Lonerganians have a reputation of only talking to themselves, this charge cannot be made of Helminiak, who translates Lonergan into the contemporary context of psychology, neuroscience, and analytic philosophy.

Among the most valuable contributions Helminiak makes to a non-Lonerganian audience is the importance of introspective self-inquiry to his anti-reductionist position. Again, a correct theory of knowledge implies that realities are differentiated “on the basis of intelligibility, not palpability, visibility, or imag-

inableness" (237–38), and that "when the meanings really differ, the realities are different" (76). But if one is actually to discover the intelligibility/meaning of the mind, distinct from that of the brain, one must inquire into one's own mental life. While studying sense data yields an understanding of the intelligibility/meaning of "neuronal firing" (122), it is only by investigating the data of one's own consciousness that one discovers the laws of the human mind—such as, what it means to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible. One is attentive if he or she is truly open to the givenness of experience. One is intelligent if one asks questions, has acts of understanding that organize the data of experience in a possibly correct way, or formulates those insights. One is reasonable if one questions the truth of one's insights and makes judgments of fact because one realizes that the evidence is sufficient, that is, because one has asked and answered all the questions relevant to the truth of one's hypothesis. One is responsible if one asks questions about value and makes decisions on the basis of authentic judgments of value. No empirical investigation of the data of sense can tell us any of this—only self-knowledge does. This indicates that one is dealing with a reality different from what neuroscientific study of the brain discovers.

This inquiry into the intelligibility of one's own conscious life is also the basis for Helminiak's account of human spirituality, since I can discover in myself the desire to know and love that is the foundation of the spiritual life. This self-knowledge is also crucial to Helminiak's account of God, because one can discover in oneself an unrestricted desire to know, which anticipates a completely intelligible universe, a key premise in Lonergan's argument for God (345–53).

However, I wonder why this method of self-inquiry did not lead to an examination of Lonergan's later reflection on the (religious) experience of "unrestricted being-in-love," particularly in Helminiak's discussion in Chapter 5 of transcendent experiences. Helminiak does mention it implicitly in Chapter 6's theological account of "presence to God" and sanctifying grace (6.3), and perhaps this is a key to why it is not given fuller treatment. Helminiak wants to talk about spirituality in a way that can be verified naturalistically, and maybe he thinks this "being-in-love" has too many Christian connotations. But perhaps there is a way of phenomenologically investigating one's own state of "being-in-love without limits." Lonergan thinks this would be a source for understanding the Christian doctrine of grace, but if there is such an experience that is open to investigation, there is no reason why it cannot be included in a discourse on spirituality that does not require religious faith as a presupposition. It, too, may be among the intelligible/meaningful realities of the human spirit that self-inquiry discovers and that are not reducible to the brain.

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