

1-1-1986

Book Review: Metaphysics: Constructing A World View

Thomas Morris

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Morris, Thomas (1986) "Book Review: Metaphysics: Constructing A World View," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol3/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

who think we professors decide the truth of religion in the classroom. But there are more graduates of those classrooms who know that “in the real world” institutional change is not so easily brought about by individual intellectual debate. In most churches practical-minded clergy control the reins of power, not professors.

Nevertheless, can university professors become so powerful that they can induce institutional change? Plato wanted philosophers to become kings in order to overcome this split between the yogi and the commissar. Surely Hans Küng must ask himself this question. Should theology professors become popes or should popes become revisionary theologians? To accomplish doctrinal and institutional change it is not enough to publish books or even to travel on the lecture circuit. That has been done before. Quakers, Congregationalists, and Baptists have long worked out doctrinal truth each for himself or herself. But is that avenue open to a Roman Catholic even in this day?

Metaphysics: Constructing a World View, by **William Hasker**. Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1983, pp. 132. Paper, \$4.95.

Reviewed by THOMAS V. MORRIS, University of Notre Dame.

Like many of the readers of this journal, I regularly initiate undergraduates into the ways of philosophy. My introductory lecture course begins with a couple of weeks on the nature of rational belief, moves on into some of the classic problems of metaphysics, and culminates in an examination of some questions central to the philosophy of religion. In the past, I have used the most recent edition of Richard Taylor's *Metaphysics* (Prentice Hall) to cover the second segment of the course. The next time around, I plan to use this new little book by Hasker instead. Although he covers a narrower range of issues than Taylor, the simplicity and clarity of Hasker's exposition, as well as the general accessibility of his argumentation to philosophical novices, in my opinion make Hasker's book preferable to Taylor's for this sort of context. Moreover, this is a book which can hold the attention of the non-philosophical reader, the average student as well as the intelligent layperson. It employs to great effect various pedagogical devices, such as well chosen quotations and illuminating illustrations, often with a touch of humor. All in all, it succeeds in its appointed task admirably well.

What that task is should be made clear. *Metaphysics* is the second volume to have appeared in the new *Contours of Christian Philosophy* series edited by C. Stephen Evans of St. Olaf College and published by a popular, evangelical Christian press. The books in this series are to be short, introductory level texts,

written from a distinctively Christian point of view. As such, they will certainly be welcomed by those who teach philosophy in the Christian college setting. However, judging from the volumes I have seen, their appeal is meant to be much broader than that. They are written in such a way as to be useful in a more secular setting as well. And this is what we find in *Metaphysics*. Hasker makes clear the nature of the faith commitment which underlies his life and activity as a philosopher, and mentions throughout the book the relevance of Christian convictions to the topics being discussed. What is most important to remark upon, though, is the way in which he does this. His tone is always judicious, his claims careful and modest. Although his Christian convictions serve to guide him at various points, never could they be judged to intrude into a line of argument in such a way as to distort what is said, from a philosophical point of view.

The concerted effort to publish a number of philosophical books, all representative of a distinctive sort of world view is, of course, not unprecedented. Prometheus has been doing it for years. What is novel is to see such an effort whose products need not be found distasteful by readers not sharing the operative world view. Hasker, Evans, and Inter Varsity deserve congratulations for the measured and fair tone of the present volume.

Chapter one, "Introducing Metaphysics," helpfully starts out with some methodological remarks on how metaphysical problems can be addressed and how metaphysical views can be evaluated. Parallels are suggested between standard criteria for the appraisal of scientific hypotheses and criteria which may be applied in the assessment of metaphysical positions. The suggestions here are extremely sketchy, but will not be faulted for that, for coming as they do at the very beginning of the book, they serve to give the non-philosophical reader some helpful bearings without confusing him with too much meta-metaphysical detail at the outset.

However, the methodological parallels drawn between science and metaphysics in this chapter do begin to generate a problem which appears fully only in a later chapter. Hasker does not clearly enough differentiate between metaphysics and the natural sciences. He never gives an explicit and general definition of metaphysics, but seems to understand it to be the most general study of ultimate reality. During a discussion of instrumentalism and scientific realism in chapter four, this leads him to say:

The chief positive benefit of scientific realism for metaphysics is that if this perspective is accepted, a great deal of our best scientific knowledge becomes metaphysical knowledge as well. Science will be, quite literally, "falsifiable metaphysics." Scientific theories will be not merely calculational devices for predicting experimental results and promoting

better technology (though they be that), but valid insights into the nature of reality. (98)

But is every insight into the nature of reality a piece of metaphysics? Surely, the paradigmatic problems and methods of metaphysics are interestingly different from those of, say, physics, as the logical positivists were fond of pointing out. But of course, just as surely, there are intriguing relations between metaphysics and the natural sciences distinct from other than any simple inclusion of the latter in the former. There have been important recent explorations into just these issues, for example, in George Schlesinger's fascinating book, *Metaphysics: Methods and Problems* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1983). Hasker's perspective seems not to have been informed by any of this recent work. Minimally, the inclusion view he seems to favor requires a bit more exposition and defense than he gives it in order to have any plausibility at all.

Another problem for the book also comes to light in this first chapter. Hasker has what will seem to many readers to be an inadequate conception of the relevance of Christian faith to philosophy and an insufficient view of the possible inter-relation of philosophy and theology. He conceives of philosophy as "a completely nondogmatic subject," and specifies that "Nothing is accepted merely on authority, no matter how reputable" (20), re-emphasizing the point later by saying that "religious authority cannot be accepted as a basis for philosophical assertions," and characterizing philosophy as "a free and independent investigation of fundamental issues" (23). There is a sense in which this sounds more like Enlightenment rhetoric than a Christian conception of philosophy. Why can't any religious authority, or the fact that a proposition is proposed for our assent by a source accepted by Christians as authoritative, serve as *a basis* for philosophical assertions? As a matter of fact, it seems to me that his Christian convictions, presumably derived from some authority (the Bible, the Christian tradition, the Holy Spirit), do serve as *a basis* (among others) for some of the most important metaphysical views Hasker philosophically asserts and defends. It is a surprise that he does not recognize this in the few methodological paragraphs he devotes to commenting on the relation between faith and philosophy in this chapter and elsewhere. He even seems to go out of his way to separate the content of faith from the context of philosophy, as for example when he remarks, in the Epilog entitled "A Christian Metaphysic?", on Christian salvation, that "concerning this great gift philosophy cannot speak..." (121). Why not? Can there not be illuminating philosophical reflection on Christian claims concerning salvation, for instance, on the doctrine of the atonement?

There are points at which Hasker misses the relevance of distinctively Christian, or theistic, commitments to interesting questions concerning metaphysics. Consider for example his apparent understanding of metaphysics as the most general

study of what there is, or, more specifically, of ultimate reality. Let's consider that as a formal definition of 'metaphysics.' Many philosophers object to such a definition by pointing out that if materialism (naturalism) is true, *physics* is the most general study of what there is, and of ultimate reality. And, contrary to what Hasker seems to hold without justification and in the face of clear indications to the contrary, physics is not metaphysics. So if materialism is true, the definition is wrong. If materialism is even possibly true, there is a possible world in which physics is the most general study. But the proposed definition is correct, and thus an analytic, necessary truth, only if there is no possible world in which something is the most general study without being metaphysics, that is, only if materialism is not possibly true. And of course, materialism is not possibly true only if, necessarily, some non-material (e.g. spiritual) being exists. And, interestingly, precisely this is entailed by an Anselmian, Christian theism, a theology according to which one spiritual, non-material being, God, necessarily exists. So, for an Anselmian Christian theist, the understanding of metaphysics Hasker assumes can form a perfectly acceptable, general definition of 'metaphysics.'

Although I would not expect arguments of even this level of complexity to appear in such a book as *Metaphysics* is intended to be, I am slightly disappointed that there is not more explicit recognition in this book of the sorts of fruitful results distinctively Christian commitments can have in the realm of metaphysics.

Chapter two, "Freedom and Necessity," lays out our common belief in our limited but real freedom of will and examines the various standard challenges to this belief. Hasker first argues an incompatibilist line and then attempts to undermine the credentials of determinism. The chapter is well done.

Chapter three, "Minds and Bodies," considers various views on what a human person is. Hasker raises problems with both materialism and traditional dualism, and offers for our consideration a sort of minimal dualism which he has explored elsewhere and labelled 'emergentism.' Chapter four, "The World," looks at a range of issues involving scientific realism and instrumentalism. And the last chapter, "God and the World," categorizes various traditional and contemporary views on the existence of a God and the relation of such a being to the natural world. Naturalism, pantheism, panentheism, and classical theism are briefly canvassed and evaluated. Theism is recommended.

Throughout, this book evinces a scholarly humility which is all too rare. It is attractively written and well produced. I predict that a good many instructors of philosophy will judge it to be just the sort of book to put into the hands of beginners.