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## Book Review: Logic And The Nature Of God

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*Logic and the Nature of God*, by **Stephen T. Davis**. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983. 171 pp. \$9.95.

Reviewed by EDWARD WIERENGA, University of Rochester.

This book is a closely-reasoned essay from the perspective of a Christian who takes the Bible "to be an authoritative record of God's acts of self-disclosure at various points in human history" (p. 2). The announced aim of the book "is to produce a concept of God that is or at least ought to be satisfying to Christians," according to whom "the term 'God' has meant...an omnipotent, loving spirit who created the world and who works for the salvation of human beings" (p. 1). This might lead one to expect a discussion of divine love, creation, and salvation, but in fact the main focus is on the divine attributes and related topics typically treated by philosophers. Thus, there are chapters on eternity, omniscience, immutability, foreknowledge, omnipotence, benevolence, and the problem of evil. There are, in addition, a pair of chapters on the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity. Throughout Davis aims for clarity and rigor, and though, as he acknowledges, he depends heavily on the work of others, Davis considers a variety of important issues in the philosophy of religion, surveys some of the most important recent discussion of these issues, and frequently adds insights of his own. In what follows, I shall offer some specific criticisms of the book and, in the process, reveal something of its scope and nature.

In the first chapter, which is on God and time, Davis argues that if God is not in time he cannot create and he cannot be "personal, caring, and involved" in history (p. 14), and he claims that the opposing view that God is timeless is "probably incoherent" (p. 11). Davis then considers the recent formulation of divine timelessness by Stump and Kretzmann.<sup>1</sup> One of Davis' objections is that a timeless being as described by Stump and Kretzmann cannot be a cause, since "causes must be *prior* to their effects." This principle, however, holds at most for *event* causation; it does not seem relevant to *agent* causation. So if it is God (and not God's action) that causes a particular effect, there seems to be no reason to insist on a temporal relation between God and the effect.

The next chapter, "Omniscience," is primarily about God and time, as well. Davis argues that there are propositions whose truth value changes over time and that, since God knows them while they are true but not while they are false, there is a respect in which God changes. Davis gives as an example of such a proposition the proposition expressed by

(1) Ronald Reagan is now president

written on 16 June, 1982. Davis notes that some philosophers might claim that (1) on 16 June, 1982 expressed the same proposition as

(2) Ronald Reagan is president on 16 June, 1982,

which does not vary in truth value. Davis' argument against this suggestion depends on the assumption that (1) always expresses the same proposition and that it is one that varies in truth value over time. Given this assumption Davis' conclusion follows: God knows propositions at some times that he does not know at other times. But another possibility is that sentences such as (1) express different eternal propositions at different times, and on this alternative Davis' conclusion does not follow. Davis provides no argument against this alternative, however, and several subsequent arguments (pp. 31, 32, and 37) depend on the same unsupported assumption.

Chapter 4 addresses the alleged incompatibility of divine foreknowledge and human free action. Recent discussions of this topic have concentrated on pointing out the flaws in arguments designed to establish that

(3) God is omniscient

and

(4) Human beings are free

are inconsistent, and this Davis does, too. Indeed his rejoinder to Pike's latest piece<sup>2</sup> is deft and convincing. But Davis claims to do something more: his "aim...is to show that [(3)] and [(4)] are consistent" (p. 53). Davis says that "[o]ne way of showing that [(3)] and [(4)] are consistent is to find some third proposition...which is consistent with [(3)] and which together with [(3)] entails [(4)]" (p. 53).<sup>3</sup> Davis' candidate for the requisite third proposition is

(5) What God knew yesterday is contingent upon what I will freely decide to do tomorrow.

To *show* that (3) and (4) are consistent, however, Davis would have to show that (5) is consistent with (3) (and, hence, that (5) is possible). But Davis admits that he cannot do this; instead he contents himself with replying "to the arguments of those who claim that [(5)] is inconsistent" (p. 54). This is no doubt a worthwhile project, but it is not the same as *showing* that (3) and (4) are consistent.

In Chapter 5 Davis presents and defends a definition of omnipotence. He writes, "a being B is omnipotent at a time *t* if and only if

(D) for any state of affairs *s* after *t* such that there is a possible world sharing the history of the actual world up to *t* in which B brings about *s*, B can bring about *s*.

I think that this definition is on the right track, but it needs modification. For one thing a definition of a property a being can possess in other possible worlds

should not make essential reference to the actual world, and, for another, the concept of a state of affair's being after a time has not been defined or explained. But my main concern is with the concepts of *bringing about* and *sharing a history*. By "bringing about a state of affairs" does Davis mean making it the case directly—"strongly actualizing" it, to use Plantinga's term? Or does he mean arranging for it to be the case, bringing it about indirectly, perhaps by relying on the cooperation of others? A remark on pp. 83f. suggests that Davis intends the latter, weaker sense, that is, "weakly actualizing" a state of affairs, but this is far from certain. And exactly what is included in the *history* of a possible world? Presumably the history of a world up to a certain time—call it the initial segment of the world to the time—should not include past truths about what agents will freely do in various circumstances after that time, for two worlds can share an initial segment up until the time an agent freely does an act in the one world that he or she freely refrains from doing in the other world. I have argued elsewhere that God can be unable to weakly actualize a state of affairs that given what has already happened is nevertheless possible for him to weakly actualize, and that this is compatible with his being omnipotent.<sup>4</sup> If this is correct, we should try recasting (D) as

(D') A being, *B*, is omnipotent in a world *W* at a time *t* = df it is true in *W* that for every state of affairs *s* such that it is possible both that the initial segment of *W* up to *t* obtains and that *B* strongly actualizes *s* at *t*, *B* can strongly actualize *s* at *t*.

(D') seems to me to be a fine definition.<sup>5</sup>

In Chapter 6, "Benevolence," Davis argues convincingly against some classical arguments for the conclusion that God is unable to do evil. He then claims that "[i]t is both logically possible and within God's power for him to do evil" (p. 94). Davis defends this view by claiming that

[i]f God is actually unable to do evil it is no more morally apt to praise him for his goodness than it is apt to praise the refrigerator for keeping the food cold or a spider for refraining from telling lies. Refrigerators are designed to keep food cold; they aren't agents who make choices; it isn't praiseworthy that they keep food cold. Spiders just aren't able to tell lies; it isn't praiseworthy that they don't. If God's nature causes or determines him to do good in such a way that doing evil is not in his power, I would conclude that he is not a free and responsible moral agent and thus is not a fit object of the praise and thanks of his people. (p. 95)

I find this reasoning unpersuasive. Calvin wrote

...suppose some blasphemer sneers that God deserves little praise for

his own goodness, constrained as he is to preserve it. Will this not be a ready answer to him: not from violent impulsion but from his boundless goodness comes God's inability to do evil?<sup>6</sup>

Of course I do not intend to accuse Davis of blasphemy or even of sneering, but why could not God be praiseworthy for goodness so boundless that it is not even possible for him to do evil? No doubt being essentially good does not make God more *morally* praiseworthy than merely being wholly but contingently good—the difference has to do with how good he is in other possible worlds, and this does not affect his goodness in the actual world. But being wholly good in every possible world would contribute to God's overall *greatness*, and thus provide grounds for praise. Finally, I would suggest that God could be essentially wholly good without being "caused by his nature" to do good.

I have concentrated in this review on my disagreements with Davis, but there is much more to agree with in the book. I hope that I have given some sense of the range of important issues Davis discusses and the honest seriousness with which he conducts that discussion.<sup>7</sup>

## NOTES

1. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981): 429-458.
2. "Divine Foreknowledge, Human Freedom, and Possible Worlds," *Philosophical Review* 86 (1977): 209-216.
3. Davis notes that his use of this strategy derives from Alvin Plantinga's version of the Free Will Defense in *God, Freedom, and Evil*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). Cf. also Roderick Chisholm's use of an equivalent principle in the appendix to *Perceiving: A Philosophical Study*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957), esp. pp. 192f.
4. "Omnipotence Defined," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43 (1983): 363-375, see pp. 370-372.
5. It should—it is very close to the one I defend in "Omnipotence Defined," *loc. cit.*, p. 372.
6. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II, ii, 5, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960). Cf. my discussion of related issues in "A Defensible Divine Command Theory," *Nous* 17 (1983): 387-407, esp. pp. 399-401.
7. I gratefully acknowledge support for writing this review provided by a Mellon Faculty Fellowship from the University of Rochester. Thanks also to Richard Feldman, who provided helpful advice, and to Earl Conee, Rolf Eberle, and Paul Weirich, who provided Feldman helpful advice.