

1-1-1997

Book Review: Our Knowledge Of God: Essays On Natural And Philosophical Theology

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Recommended Citation

McLeod, Mark (1997) "Book Review: Our Knowledge Of God: Essays On Natural And Philosophical Theology," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol14/iss1/10>

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Our Knowledge of God: Essays on Natural and Philosophical Theology. **Kelly James Clark, editor.** Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992. Pp. vi and 230. \$99.00 (cloth).

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Our Knowledge of God, as a descriptive title for this somewhat disconnected collection of essays, is in one way misleading. Only half the book's essays deal with the rationality of belief in God, and only one directly with knowledge of God. The remaining essays cover various aspects of God's nature, eternal punishment, and theological methodology. Perhaps the somewhat disparate connection of these essays reflects the fact that a number of them derive from a conference held at Gordon College. Invited papers are often open-ended with regard to their content.

On the other hand, the essays on the whole certainly add to our knowledge of God and his attributes, or in some cases, add to how we should approach the topic of God or belief in God. I shall comment on a number of the essays, leaving the others to the reader.

Norman Kretzmann's, "Evidence Against Anti-Evidentialism" argues that Plantinga's anti-evidentialism is not incompatible with evidentialism, unless the latter is construed in an unnatural and unhistorical way. He further argues that evidentialism is not rooted in foundationalism but, in fact, that the form is logically, psychologically, and probably functionally prior to foundationalism. Kretzmann rightly notes that Plantinga has narrowed the notion of evidence so as to exclude the kinds of grounds that are not propositional. The goal of Plantinga's project, then, is just to show that belief in God can be properly basic on grounds that classical foundationalism traditionally has rejected. The most important issue Kretzmann raises is the distinction between rationality as *support* of a belief and rationality as the *generation* of a belief. He uses this to argue that Plantinga ignores the issue of occurrent beliefs as grounds for the belief in God. The upshot of Kretzmann's discussion is that "Plantinga's project yields not so much theism without evidence as see-no-evidence theism." (31) In this I think Kretzmann is right on the mark.

Alvin Plantinga's contribution, "Epistemic Probability and Evil," combines his earlier claims that belief in God is properly basic and that evil is not a defeater for a belief in God, thus reemphasizing that there are nonpropositional grounds for theistic belief. First Plantinga considers various accounts of probability and finds them wanting simply in regard to being successful accounts of probability. But worse is the fact that if any of these extant theories of probability is true, then "there seems to be no way to develop an atheological probabilistic problem from evil." (p. 50).

This essay is characteristically Plantinga and in some senses contains little that is not present in his other essays. Nevertheless it does draw out in a fuller fashion some important topics. The main one is that some issues that appear to be neutral about religious or ontological matters are ultimately not neutral about those concerns. I agree but on different grounds. Plantinga rejects the claim that all evidence is propositional

and he rejects coherence as sufficient for rationality. However, as I've argued elsewhere, it's not clear that Plantinga's suggestions about proper basicality or warrant as proper function can really get away from a holist position on rationality. In fact, that the starting point for epistemic theories is largely an ontological issue plays into the holist's hand. Of course theists may coherently reject the probabilistic argument from evil. But that the theist may consistently do so does not show us which ontological starting point is the correct one and that, it seems to me, is the real issue.

Peter Forrest, in "Reference and the Refutation of Naturalism," argues that "Naturalism fails when it comes to reference, and that the way it fails provides some indirect support for the claim that human beings can have a non-sentential, inarticulate knowledge of God, prior to reasoning." His argument is this. If Naturalism is true, then reference is grossly underdetermined but, since reference is not underdetermined, Naturalism is false. His basic stand against the gross underdetermination of reference is that we have a piece of not essentially sentential knowledge which we express by saying that we know what it is for a class to be objectively natural. The naturalness here extends to far distant points of the universe—that is, what is a cow here is a cow anywhere. The "not essentially sentential knowledge" ultimately cannot be accepted by Naturalists since for the Naturalist, all nontheoretical knowledge is restricted to what can be observed. Gross underdetermination commits us to possibly many interpretations of a reference, e.g., cows as the animals observable in the field *and* bits of empty space 1 million miles from the field. Yet we rely on our claim that we know what it is for a class to be objectively natural. Since many of the alternative references are not observable, reference cannot be grossly underdetermined. Naturalism, taken as a positive way of understanding the world (and not merely skepticism), cannot give us an understanding of *things* rather than merely beliefs, for reference ultimately fails to pick things out. Forrest suggests, then, that we do have a non-sensory-like knowledge of natural kinds and that the acceptance of this knowledge opens the door to the *sensus divinitatus*—a non-sensory-like means to the knowledge of God.

This essay is an interesting argument for the possibility of knowing God and for the rejection of Naturalism. It is strongest in its argument against Naturalism. Nevertheless it is not clear why the Naturalist should be upset over not explaining *things* rather than mere beliefs, so long as beliefs can be explained in non-personal terms, which is precisely what the Naturalist thinks can be done. Put another way, does a Naturalist have to be a realist? No. But why then take Naturalism to be a positive explanation of things (reality?) rather than just *one* interpretation of the universe among many—which seems compatible with gross undetermination? While I may not have done justice to Forrest's essay, it seems that some of the big issues behind the debate between Naturalism and Supernaturalism over reference and realism/anti-realism need to be dealt with at greater length.

William P. Alston's, "The Place of Experience in the Grounds of

Religious Belief" argues that putative experiences of God are (or can be) shored up by other sources of justification so that "although each can be questioned and none renders any of one's beliefs absolutely certain, they lend support to each other as well as to the beliefs they are invoked to support; so that in the way the whole assemblage fits together we have sufficient reason to take the beliefs to be true" (p. 110). This position, and the essay in which it is explained, naturally extend the position on religious experience that Alston has developed over the past two decades. I have only one issue to raise, which I discuss elsewhere at greater length. Does Alston's moderate foundationalism give enough of a place to coherentist considerations in the "interpretation" of theistic experience? I believe not¹.

In "Revelation" Richard Swinburne examines whether we have reason to expect a revelation of propositional truth about God, what such a revelation would be like, and what kind of historical evidence would show that we have got it. Given non-revealed evidence for God's existence, says Swinburne, one should expect a revelation from God about various things, including how humans can move into sainthood. Such a revelation could not be, for logical as well as empirical reasons, culture-free or presuppositionless. Instead, such a revelation would be culturally rooted but God would also provide a means of guidance for extracting the truth out of this culturally rooted revelation. Furthermore, we can evaluate the revelation by two tests. First, does it cohere with our overall philosophical and moral view? Second, is it attended by some supernatural events—the miraculous?

Swinburne's argument turns, it seems to me, on a controversial issue. He argues that it is plausible to believe that there is only one atonement sufficing for the whole human race. "So any revelation of that atonement must have enough connection with the century and culture in which it took place for the report of it to be comprehensible. And that means that there cannot be totally separate revelations for different centuries and cultures. Or at least [this is] an argument for one *final* (his emphasis) major revelation, reporting that atonement." (p.119) What hangs on this is the claim that there is one (final) Christian revelation. But I don't see how Swinburne's argument works. One would think, on Swinburne's *a priori* grounds, that God would reveal the atonement to each and every culture and century—just the reverse of what Swinburne claims.

Nicholas Wolterstorff's "Divine Simplicity" argues that in order to understand the medieval doctrine of God's simplicity we must imaginatively enter into the medieval's ontological style—constituent ontology rather than our relational ontology. For the medieval "everything *is* a nature" rather than our "everything *has* a nature." God is simple, then, in not being complex. God is not accidental. The upshot of this, says Wolterstorff, is that our puzzlement about certain identity claims the medievals made about God (e.g., God's existence is not distinct from his essence) disappears. What we should concentrate on is not the doctrine of simplicity but rather the issues arising from the medieval's ontological style. I have only one question here. Is this just a matter of style? Or

perhaps better, what has Wolterstorff in mind when he talks about style? The difference between a constituent and a relational ontology seems to involve more than a difference in style.

Kelly James Clark adds his "Hold Not Thy Peace at My Tears" to the collection. This essay is a reflection on theological methodology in which Clark argues that there is an impasse between two accounts of God's relationship to suffering. First, there is divine impassibility which rests on tradition, a Platonizing metaphysics and Scripture. Second there is a dynamic view which rests on religious experience, intuitions, feminine understandings of the divine, socio-political reflection and Scripture. Clark's thesis is that inference to the best explanation is a way out of the impasse, and he comes down on the side of dynamism—even though this raises important and deep issues about divine ontology.

While I believe Clark is right in his suggestion here—inference to the best explanation is the most plausible way to settle these differences—I'm not entirely sanguine. I have two concerns. First, running through this essay is the goal of discussing theological method and yet it is focused on one issue alone. That issue is, of course, an important one, but the suggested solution to the impasse leaves open other ontological questions. Won't these in turn need a theological methodology to sort out the issues? Won't we perhaps be back to square one? And second, while inference to the best explanation may be useful where theological conflict arises, is it the method we should use in less controversial areas of theological research?

Marilyn McCord Adams' contribution "Julian of Norwich on The Tender Loving Care of Mother Jesus" argues that God leaves us in certain kinds of ignorance and that these are acceptable given the right views of child-development. We are, in ways, like children. In her insightful way, McCord Adams leads us to think in pastoral but philosophically deep ways about God's care.

Her emphasis, following Julian, on sin as shame and incompetence is very helpful and I think it would serve the Christian community well if more philosophers would explore the nature of sin. The relationship between sin and ignorance in particular is one needing explanation. It was, after all, the tree of the *knowledge* of good and evil.

George N. Schlesinger, in "The Scope of Human Autonomy" argues that perhaps human freedom should be seen as a basis for eternal life in that freedom is so important that its consequences are eternal. As such, humans may not face punishment for past sin but rather have the amount of heavenly virtue attained to be up to us. Alternatively, there may be punishment but it, and its attendant difficulties, are justified by the greatly enhanced role of human autonomy.

Schlesinger's thoughts here are attractive for a number of reasons. First, his emphasis on freedom leaves open a faithfulness to the main traditions in Christianity with regard to eternal punishment while also providing some account which ameliorates the horror of that tradition. Second, and more important, is the openness to the future and to future development implied in his suggestions. As a child I worried that heaven might be terribly dull—after all, we would all have the same goals

and purposes. But perhaps in our full autonomy, we will develop and grow even more in the afterlife than we could ever possibly do in the mundane.

Our Knowledge of God is a collection of good essays, but it is not a good collection of essays. One would enjoy a collection with more thematic unity and a few less typographical errors. Nevertheless, the essays are, by and large, well worth the read.

NOTES

1. See my *Rationality and Theistic Belief*.

Faith in Theory and Practice: Essays on Justifying Religious Belief. **Elizabeth S. Radcliffe and Carol J. White, editors.** Chicago and LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing Co., 1993. Pp. xix and 235. \$34.95 (cloth; \$16.95 (paper).

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This collection derives from a 1991 conference held at Santa Clara University on the topic of the epistemology of religious belief. The editors provide a helpful introduction with a brief description of each essay and an explication of the principle of unity they find running throughout the book: "Faith can be seen as not just a set of beliefs but a special way of living." This book would make an interesting text in an upper-level undergraduate or graduate course in the philosophy of religion. It touches on many of the issues which are at the cutting edge of discussion on the justification of religious belief, and moves that discussion forward in fresh and fascinating ways.

The lead essays by William Alston and Alvin Plantinga are especially intriguing, and the collection is worth having for these alone. In "The Fulfillment of Promises as Evidence for Religious Belief," Alston argues that, within a kind of cumulative-case apologetics for Christianity, "the fulfillment of (alleged) divine promises of spiritual development by a large number of persons provides us with a significant reason for accepting the Christian belief system that involves the claim that such promises have been made" (p. 7). According to Christian teaching, God promises to reward those who are open, receptive, and obedient to him with growth in holiness, or what Alston sometimes calls "spirituality" or "sanctity." Alston concludes that the phenomenon of fulfilled promises is widespread enough that "it raises the probability of the system [of Christianity] sufficiently to be worthy of notice" (p. 12). Alston's case is perhaps strongest when the focus is on lives of the saints, since the spiritual qualities of the saints are difficult to explain in purely natural psychological terms. Many converts have reported that it was the character of the Christians in their acquaintance that was most decisive in their coming to faith, and one can see Alston's essay as making this move epistemically respectable.