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former seems to fit better in atheistic discourse. Fair enough, but this results in moral concepts not having the same meaning as they do in theistic discourse.³ In reply to Beardsmore, James Conant ("Reply: Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe on Moral Unintelligibility") gives a careful analysis of the way three very different philosophers have answered the question of whether one can divorce morality from religion without losing morality's intelligibility.

There are so many important insights in and aspects to the papers in this book that I cannot possibly mention them all in this brief review. This is an outstanding collection and an important contribution to the ongoing discussion about the relationship between morality and religion. I highly recommend this book to graduate students as well as professors of philosophy, theology, and religious studies.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Janine Marie Idziak, "In Search of 'Good Positive Reasons' for an Ethics of Divine Commands: A Catalogue of Arguments," in *Readings in Christian Ethics, Volume 1: Theory and Method*, eds. David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 50-61.

2. Some political philosophers in the Kantian tradition, such as John Rawls, believe such a divorce between metaphysics and politics is essential to a just regime. See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). For a discussion of this question by two Christian philosophers, see Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).

3. See George I. Mavrodes, "Religion and the Queerness of Morality," in *Rationality, Religious Belief and Moral Commitment*, eds. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); and J.P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen, *Does God Exist?: The Debate Between Theists and Atheists* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993), 97-135.

Ontological Arguments and Belief in God, by **Graham Oppy**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. xviii, 376. \$59.95 (Cloth)

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Professor Oppy's ambitious book may well provide the most comprehensive coverage of ontological arguments that can be found to date. It is hard to identify another book on the topic which constitutes as rich and extensive a source for such arguments. Oppy has managed to pull together a remarkable wealth of material, and it seems a safe bet that there is no type of ontological argument developed thus far that is worthy of philosophical note but not presented and carefully assessed in this text. Thus, what we have here is arguably nothing short of an intellectual Feast of St. Anselm. Oppy discusses (these are his categorizations) Definitional arguments, Conceptual arguments, Modal arguments¹

Meinongian arguments, Experiential arguments (an intriguing type of ontological argument that seems worthy of more attention than has come its way thus far) and "Hegelian" arguments. Also, the last (roughly) 40% of the book consists of an exceedingly valuable section entitled "literature notes," which Oppy includes in order to "provide more detailed textual support for some of the contentions made in the main text" (p. 200). Immediately following this is very likely the most thorough bibliography currently to be had on ontological arguments and related topics.

It seems to me that Oppy's treatment of his topic is, in the main, philosophically adept and judicious. A clearly meritorious feature of the book is that, while his appraisal of ontological arguments is firmly and unyieldingly negative, his polemic is consistently and admirably workmanlike. Alternatively, he is commendably scrupulous in his overall effort to show that ontological arguments have little to recommend them. This should not, however, be taken to imply that all of Oppy's observations and argumentation are uniformly insightful. Indeed, one finds contentions that range from the seriously problematic to the dialectically bizarre (or what some Latin buffs might be tempted to characterize as clear cases of *Argumentum ad Preposterum*).

It seems to me that a paradigmatic example of the latter makes up footnote #5 in the chapter dealing with the uses of parody as a (classical) way of responding to ontological arguments. Talk of "perfect islands"—thanks, of course, to Gaunilo—has come to be a virtual *sine qua non* of any effort to parody Anselmian arguments, and it is clear that Oppy is no exception in this regard. Here is the relevant footnote (p. 167):

How could there be an island than which no greater island can be conceived—i.e., an island that cannot even be conceived not to exist—given that God has the power to annihilate everything...Surely the acknowledgement that God would have the power to annihilate an island than which no greater island can be conceived is an acknowledgement that it is inconceivable that there is an island than which no greater island can be conceived.

What is really remarkable is that Oppy is not in the least *tentative* about this argument. (Note the use of the word "surely"). Oppy is entirely confident that it is not within the compass of God's omnipotence to destroy an island than which a greater is inconceivable. Accordingly—given the unimpeachability of the principle that, necessarily, God can destroy whatever He can create—it follows transparently that it is not within the power of God to *create* such an island. Hence, the greatest conceivable island would (like God Himself) have to be self-existent. However, and even allowing the (problematic) thesis that 'being of kind K that is maximally great' constitutes a coherent function, it is hard to see just what there could be to mitigate the intuitive preposterousness of the contention that the greatest conceivable island—or, for that matter, the greatest conceivable softball or greatest conceivable mountain pass—would have to possess aseity, and, accordingly, be impervious to Divine

omnipotence.

For a good example of the seriously problematic—in contradistinction, of course, to the preposterous—we need simply to consult the page immediately preceding (p. 166). In maintaining that Plantinga's case against the notion of the greatest conceivable island is "inconclusive," Oppy goes on to suggest (following P. Grim) that Plantinga's strictures on that score constitute a polemical boomerang; i.e., can be used to make a very strong case against the idea of the greatest conceivable being. How so? Well, what Oppy proffers here is a (basically inverted) version of the "best conceivable world" argument long associated with Leibniz. Here is how it goes: it is axiomatic that the greatest conceivable *being* could not fail to create the greatest conceivable world. However, there can *be* no greatest conceivable world: "no matter how great a world ... there could always be a greater—that is, one with an even greater number of admirable beings." Accordingly, there could not conceivably exist a maximally great world. The response to this argument seems readily apparent: if there could indeed be no such thing as a maximally great world—i.e., if the notion of such a world is incoherent—then no actualizable world could possibly fit the description "the greatest conceivable world." How, then, could the greatest conceivable being coherently be expected to actualize such a "world?" This would be on the order of claiming that God can coherently be expected to actualize (or create) free slaves. However, even if we allow that there is a greatest conceivable world, how is it clear that it would not be entirely in order for the greatest conceivable being to actualize some lesser world? Robert Merrihew Adams has a very elegant argument—unfortunately ignored by Oppy—in support of precisely this thesis.²

All of this aside, however, it seems to me that the most serious difficulty with Oppy's overall project is his tendency to ride roughshod over important epistemic distinctions. Alternatively, his polemic would seem to be seriously vitiated by epistemological confusion. Here is Oppy's initial statement of his central thesis, as set forth in the first page of the Preface: "... ontological arguments do not provide an agnostic with any good reason to change her view—that is, to give up her agnosticism" (xi). This gets refined just a bit on the subsequent page: "...the main thesis for which I wish to argue is this: that ontological arguments do not give dispositionally reasonable agnostics—theists³ atheists—a reason to change their views" (xii). Alternatively, "there is nothing in ontological arguments that should bring a procedurally reasonable agnostic—theist, atheist—to think that he has been systematically irrational" (xiii). Accordingly, Oppy tends to see conceptual equivalence (or at least mutual entailment) between (a) *Ontological arguments do not provide judicious unbelievers with a reason for converting to theism*, and (b) *Ontological arguments should not cause judicious unbelievers (or disbelievers) to conclude that their unbelief (disbelief) has been irrational*.

This clearly seems misguided, however. Examples are easy to construct. Imagine two dear friends—Don and Sam—who go off together on a trip to Europe. Unfortunately, their aircraft malfunctions and crashes into the ocean. Don manages to survive without serious injury, but is

unable to locate Sam, and, accordingly, is quite worried about him. As it turns out, Sam too has managed to survive without serious injury. Each of them is floating in the water on his inflatable seat cushion, but they are at a considerable distance from each other in the water. Finally, Don happens to spot the person who is Sam (at a distance of about a quarter mile). While Don is strongly inclined to believe that the person whom he sees is indeed Sam, he is sufficiently judicious to be less than fully confident about that since Sam's features can only be discerned rather vaguely given the distance involved. (Don calls out to Sam, yelling his name, but, once again, due to the distance, Sam is unable to hear). Now it turns out that Don has a small portable radio in his pocket that has (*mirable dictu*) remained in working order. Upon switching it on, he manages to pick up some news about the crash. (Helicopters are circling overhead, and their survey of the crash site is presumably the source of the information on the radio.) The announcer reports that the initial estimate of loss of life in the disaster is placed at a staggering 98% of those on board.

Here, then, is Don's epistemic situation: he clearly has some justification for believing (what is true, i.e.,) that Sam has survived the crash: namely, that the person whom he has cited *looks* a lot like Sam—albeit, of course, from a distance that precludes anything close to foolproof identification. However, his having this justification for believing that Sam has survived does not entail that it would be irrational of Don to believe that Sam has *not* survived. Rather, what he hears on the radio might rightly be regarded as justification which epistemically *trumps* his perceptual evidence for regarding the person off in the distance as Sam.

Hence, for any person N and proposition p, N's having justification for believing that p does not entail that it would be irrational of N *not* to believe that p. Accordingly, even allowing (as I am glad to do only for present purposes) that there is nothing about ontological arguments that would rightfully cause a judicious nonbeliever to think that her nonbelief has been irrational, one can hardly extract from this that ontological arguments do not provide judicious nonbelievers with some justification for embracing theism. Accordingly, Oppy's conclusion (p. 199) "that ontological arguments are completely worthless" is dialectical hyperbole of the first order. Moreover, the latter claim seems especially odd in light of Oppy's contention (on p. 194) "that it could be reasonable for some theists to hold that there are sound ontological arguments." Does Oppy really mean to suggest that some "completely worthless" arguments could reasonably be believed by theists to be sound? It might prove instructive to have a look at the relevant paragraph (p. 194) as a whole:

It seems to me that it could be reasonable for some theists to hold that there are sound ontological arguments; however, the same cannot be said for arguments that purport to show that atheists and agnostics are, in virtue of their refusal to be persuaded of the truth of theism by ontological arguments alone, irrational. *Prima facie*, this view is absurd; and closer examination does nothing to make it appear more plausible.

Here again is a stark exhibition of Oppy's unfortunate conflation between "N's being presented with a justification for accepting p," and "N's being irrational if he/she does not accept p."

In conclusion, it seems clear that an outstanding illustration of the sort of epistemic clumsiness that attends Oppy's analysis is afforded by his claim that many proponents of ontological arguments (e.g., Plantinga) "have conceded that these arguments are dialectically impotent" (p. 185). What Oppy has in mind here is Plantinga's cautionary note on p. 221 of *The Nature of Necessity* regarding Anselmian arguments (including, of course, his own). What Plantinga asserts there is that such arguments "cannot, perhaps, be said to *prove* or *establish* 'their conclusions'" (Plantinga's italics). But how does that imply that ontological arguments are—in Oppy's words—"dialectically impotent?" (One can rest assured that Plantinga would concede no such 'thing.'). Clearly, Oppy's view can only be (or entail) that a piece of deductive reasoning is "dialectically impotent" if it fails to be probative; i.e., fails to ensure that all rational persons presented with that reasoning would be intellectually perverse or irrational if they failed to accept it. But by that austere a standard, of course, virtually all arguments with philosophically interesting conclusions—not just ontological arguments—would turn out to be "worthless."

In closing, then, while there is little doubt that Oppy's ambitious, comprehensive, and workmanlike book deserves thumbs up, his overall polemic against the dialectical efficacy of ontological arguments disappointingly suffers—or so it seems to me—from some serious epistemological confusion.

NOTES

1. One might appropriately contend that ontological arguments are as *such* essentially or inherently modal, and, accordingly, that it is somewhat puzzling to regard "Modal" arguments as a *type* of ontological argument. What Oppy seems to have in mind here, however, are those ontological arguments which make explicit use of the notions of necessity and possibility.

2. Cf. Robert Merrihew Adams, "Must God Create the Best?," in Thomas V. Morris, *The Concept of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 91-106.

3. Presumably, *the theists* to whom Oppy is referring here are those who would not accept theism solely on the basis of any ontological argument.

Religion, Science and Naturalism, by **Willem B. Drees**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Pp. xvi, 314. \$59.95 (cloth).

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The author of this monograph, Prof. Willem Drees of the University of Twente in the Netherlands, is a rising star in European and American circles of scholarship concerned with religion and science. Drees has advanced degrees in physics and also two doctorates, in theology and