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## Book Review: Experience Of God And The Rationality Of Theistic Belief

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by nature,' strengthening 'the natural principles [e.g., conscience] against those things that tend to stupify [*sic*] it and to hinder its free exercise'" (p. 42; the bracketed interpolations are Wainwright's). Special grace is extended only to God's elect and it is by its infusion that they become regenerate, with all that that entails, epistemically and otherwise.

9. For more on this, see the last section of my "Starting from Scripture," *op. cit.* As I say there, in Scripture the *heart* stands for the center of our personalities, the seat and source of all our powers—rational, volitional, emotional, and spiritual—and as such it ultimately determines what we believe, feel, do, and say. Consequently, throughout Scripture its change is singled out as the central and decisive factor in saving belief.

10. So the full picture, according to Edwards, is this:

there is given to those that are regenerated, a new supernatural sense, that is as it were a certain divine spiritual taste, which is in its whole nature diverse from any former kinds of sensation of the mind, as tasting is diverse from any of the other five senses, and . . . something is perceived by a true saint in the exercise of this new sense of mind, in spiritual and divine things, as entirely different from anything that is perceived in them by natural men, as the sweet taste of honey is diverse from the ideas men get of honey by looking on it or feeling of it [RA, 259f.].

11. Jonathan Edwards, *Ethical Writings* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 540. This is found in the second of Edwards's *Two Dissertations*, entitled, *The Nature of True Virtue*. The first dissertation is the previously cited *Dissertation concerning the end for which God created the world*. In the sentence after the one quoted in the text, Edwards says that true virtue, "perhaps to speak more accurately, . . . is that consent, propensity and union of heart to Being in general, that is immediately exercised in a general good will."

*Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* by **Jerome I. Gellman**. Cornell University Press, 1997. Pp. x and 211. \$32.50 (cloth)

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As the author states in the Preface, "This book was written from the conviction that in an impressive number of instances God has been and continues to be known in experience" (p. ix). Gellman's book is an articulation of an argument that on the basis of the apparent experiences of God, it is rational to believe that God exists. A convenient way to view Gellman's project is as an attempt at a synthesis and strengthening of the arguments from religious experience found in the works of Richard Swinburne in *The Existence of God* and William Alston in *Perceiving God*. Like Swinburne, he relies heavily upon a version of the Principle of Credulity. Unlike Swinburne, and like Alston, Gellman argues that apparent perceptions of God are sufficient on their own to show the rationality of belief in God. Gellman thinks that he provides a successful argument for a strong rationality thesis which leads him, unlike Alston,

to draw from it the conclusion that God exists. However, I will argue that he is not successful in providing a satisfactory argument for his strong rationality thesis.

This is what I take to be the argument scheme which is the subject of the book.

- There is a large number and significant array of purported experiences, each of which seems on a phenomenal basis to be an experience of God (pp. 51,53)
- If a person has an experience which seems (phenomenally) to be of a God, then *everything else being equal* the best explanation of the person's having the experience is that the person has experienced God (p. 46) [Principle BEE applied to experience of God.<sup>1</sup>]
- If a person has an experience which seems (phenomenally) to be of God, then our belief that the person's having experienced God is the best explanation (everything else being equal) of the experience, is strengthened in proportion to the number of purported experiences of God there are in proportion to the variability of circumstances in which such experiences occur (pp. 52-53) [Principle STING applied to experience of God.<sup>2</sup>]

Therefore, that God is experienced (and hence exists) is the best explanation of purported experiences of God, and hence it is strongly rational to believe that God exists and not rational to believe that God does not exist.

This is what I take to be the general outline of Gellman's argument, but am not sure that is the way that other readers will see it, nor the way that Gellman himself sees it, for what I found perplexing was that Gellman himself never lays out the argument. This may be a reason why Gellman calls it an "argument scheme rather than an argument" (p. 5), although this is not the reason he states. In any case, it would have been better if Gellman had offered us his own outline of the argument or the argument scheme, and the problems which I will discuss below are, to a large extent, problems predicated upon the unclarity of the way in which the main argument is supposed to proceed.

Besides a few preliminaries in Chapter 1 and the presentation of the argument in Chapter 2, the remainder of the book is primarily taken up with trying to show that the "everything else being equal" clause in Principle BEE used in the main argument is indeed the case. One of the best things about this book is that there is some valuable and insightful consideration of issues relevant to philosophy of religion in every chapter. Gellman is obviously a philosopher with original and mature ideas on the subjects he covers in this book.

In Chapter 1, Gellman delineates what he will take to be an experience of God, and what he takes to be the meaning of the word "God". Like Alston, he takes an experience of God to be a perception of God and he construes the perception of God as analogous to sense perception. Readers who are sympathetic to a perceptual account of the experience of God will probably find the discussion quite reasonable and use-

ful. Of more general interest and value in Chapter 1 seems to me to be Gellman's discussion of the meaning of the word "God". He defends a theory of the name of God which entails that "God" is a proper name, and hence a rigid designator, but that naming takes place within a "naming game" which confers conditions upon an object named. The naming game sets parameters around what the kind of thing is which is being named. One of the interesting features of Gellman's thesis concerning the parameters for "God" is that it not necessarily be taken to entail that God be an absolutely perfect being.

In Chapter 3 Gellman defends his version of the Principle of Credulity, Principle BEE, against objections which were put forth by Michael Martin and William Rowe in opposition to Swinburne's Principle of Credulity. I thought he effectively blunts Martin's criticisms of the Principle of Credulity, but I do not think that he is quite as successful responding to Rowe's objection. It seems to me that Gellman successfully shows that Rowe's objection is not conclusive, but it does not seem to me that he is successful in showing that Rowe's objections or others like it do not create sufficient doubt to discredit his *strong* rationality thesis. Gellman's strong rationality thesis is that on the basis of religious experience, it is rational to believe that God exists and not rational to believe that God does not exist (p. 2). I will return to this issue at the conclusion of this review. At the close of Chapter 3, he addresses the question of whether or not our belief that God exists on the basis of the phenomenal evidence must be less rational than our belief that physical objects exist. Gellman examines a couple of theses of what he calls "commensurate rationality" and argues quite aggressively that even if it is granted that there is more evidence for the existence of physical objects than there is for the existence of God, it does not follow that this implies that it is less rational to believe that God exists on the basis of the evidence than it is to believe that physical objects exist on the basis of the evidence. Gellman's rationale here is that there "could be a ceiling beyond which *rationality* would no longer increase despite increments in likelihood" (p. 85) and that it could very well be that evidence for the experience of God has reached that ceiling. I think readers will find this discussion quite stimulating and controversial.

In Chapter 4, Gellman discusses a number of different objections to phenomenal evidence of God which are prompted by the consideration of religious diversity. He discusses the alleged incompatibility of reported experiences of God and he offers a number of plausible considerations which would explain the reported incompatibilities from both the subjective and the objective end of the experience. I did think that one proposed explanation of reported incompatibilities which Gellman offered was disturbing. In responding to the charge of incompatible revelations, Gellman suggests that God could reveal falsehoods; this seems to me to be a bad route to take, and his justification confuses the distinction between doing and allowing (p. 98). But my objection to Gellman here is rather trifling, for this chapter is loaded with all sorts of sound, thought-provoking discussions. What is particularly good is the way in which Gellman attempts to adjudicate the conflict between the experi-

ence of the deity as an impersonal, infinite being, say, like Brahman, with the experience of the deity as a personal God. His suggestion is that God is both. "God, then, is not *only* a personal being. He is also an inexhaustible being, possessed of an inexhaustible, hidden plenitude, save for that part of the plenitude with whose open, revealed presence the subject is graced" (p. 118). He applies this approach very nicely also to explain why experiences of God are often described as ineffable. If God's presence has these dual aspects (one as inexhaustible, hidden plenitude, the other as supreme person) it would explain why there are widely variant ways of describing the experience.

Various versions of reductionist objections are considered by Gellman in Chapter 5. And in the last two chapters, Gellman considers the positive evidence for God's nonexistence. Successful refutation of the evidence for God's nonexistence is critical to Gellman's thesis, for his position is that belief in God is "strongly rational" and this entails that it is rational to believe that God exists and not rational to believe that God does not exist (at least on some applications of the canons of rationality). Hence, unless he can show that the atheological arguments are without merit, he wouldn't be able to get the strong rationality thesis; he'd only at best get the weak rationality thesis. In Chapter 6, he addresses purported proofs of God's non-existence based upon the self-inconsistency of the concept of God. In Chapter 7, the final chapter of the book, he addresses the problem of evil. In both of these chapters, he offers valuable, original contributions.

His argument in Chapter 6 against the charges of self-inconsistency is quite simple but good. He points out that the concept of God can be understood on different tiers of particularization. So even if it were shown that omnipotence is self-inconsistent or that omnipotence was inconsistent with omnibenevolence, this would only show that an omnipotent being could not exist or that an omnipotent, omnibenevolent being could not exist. But this would not show that God could not exist. God is the perfect being, but theists need only be committed to a quite generic notion of the perfect being (as set by the parameters of the naming game from Chapter 1), not a being who must be omnipotent, or even a being who must be absolutely perfect in power, knowledge, and goodness. Those who are fans of the Anselmian notion of God, or anything resembling it, as setting the parameter for the concept of God would not be predisposed to accept Gellman's argument. But I am one of those fans of the Anselmian notion of God, and I was impressed by his argument in Chapter 6, particularly when complemented by his discussion on the name of God in Chapter 1.

Gellman's argument in Chapter 7 against the problem of evil is a bold one. He argues that the problem of evil, in either its logical or probabilistic form, provides *no* evidence at all against God's existence. He rightly focuses most of the discussion on the probabilistic version of the argument, and particularly on the version proposed by Rowe. Gellman proceeds to show that the success of Rowe's argument rides upon whether or not from the fact that it appears to us that there are no justifying goods for so much suffering in the world that one can infer that we

have no good reason to think that God's justifying reasons for allowing suffering are epistemically inaccessible to us. Gellman then argues, and I think successfully, that Rowe's argument is unsuccessful. If we know that God, a perfect being, exists, and we also know that there are no apparent justifying goods for all the suffering in the world, we can then infer that the justifying goods for all the suffering in the world must be epistemically inaccessible to us.

There is a wealth of thought provoking, sound, interesting discussion in Jerome Gellman's book, and the thesis is definitely one which is significant and worthwhile. Unfortunately, I think that the conclusion of the main argument is not established by the author. As noted above, Gellman wishes to establish what he calls the "strong rationality" of theism.

These are my problems with the argument as presented by Gellman. First, he insists that the Principle BEE is an accepted principle of rationality; and although he considers certain possibilities for discrediting experiences of God as falling under the Principle, I do not think that he adequately addresses the issue which bothers epistemic chauvinists like myself. What about those who think that principle BEE applies, but only to apparent experiences of physical objects? The principle *can* be applied to apparent experiences of spiritual objects, but whether it *ought* to be is something which many are quite skeptical about. Following Alston, he concludes consideration of this sort of objection by leveling the charge of epistemic imperialism (p. 70), but this is not substantive to the issue of whether the objection is correct or incorrect. Gellman's Principle BEE is a general principle which ranges indiscriminately over sorts of objects. But what reason is there for thinking that so general a principle as BEE is a canon of rationality? It seems to me that a strong case could be made that the only evidence we have for the general principle is what we take to be the case about our perception of physical objects; and if that is so, no principle as general as Principle BEE seems to be warranted. Maybe Gellman is more sensitive to this issue than is apparent on the surface, and this may be what is hinted at when he concedes "that at various junctures of our argument a person could make reasonable applications of our principles different from the ones we make which would block our conclusion" (p. 2), but that is difficult to say because he never clearly identifies the various junctures and how at the various junctures the principles could be applied differently to block the conclusion.

This admission brings to light another problem, which is that this makes Gellman's position that theism is strongly rational consistent with the position that atheism is strongly rational. Maybe that is not so bad if that would mean that for some, it is rational to believe that God exists and not rational to believe that God does not exist, and for others, vice versa. However, this is not what Gellman seems to allow, for he states that he is arguing that belief in God is strongly rational "for everyone" (p. 3). Hence, it follows that if both theism and atheism are strongly rational, then that implies that for everyone, there are some reasonable applications of the canons of rationality such that it is rational to believe that God exists and not rational to believe that God does not exist and some other reasonable applications of the canons of rationality such that

it is rational to believe that God does not exist and not rational to believe that God does exist. In the book we don't find how to sort this out. My guess is that Gellman would insist that atheism is not strongly rational; and that is OK, but he hasn't given us sufficient reason for thinking that theism *is* strongly rational and atheism is *not*. He claims to have shown that it is not reasonable to believe that God does not exist (p. 3), but I did not find an argument for that in his book. Gellman also does not address what I think is an important question concerning his position. If not everyone perceives God, wouldn't those who do perceive God be in a different position epistemically from those who do not? I think that the best we get from Gellman is an argument for something which is a bit stronger than what he calls the "weak rationality" of theism; namely, that on some application of the canons of rationality it is rational to believe that God exists. This, I believe, he has shown, and in a new and insightful way. He would have to provide much more for us to be able to see the stronger conclusion. I look forward to his future efforts in that direction.

#### NOTES

1. Principle BEE: If a person, S, has an experience, E, which seems (phenomenally) to be of a particular object, O (or an object of kind, K), then *everything else being equal* the best explanation of S's having E is that S has experienced O (or an object of kind, K), rather than something else or nothing at all (p. 46).

2. Principle STING: If a person, S, has an experience, E, which seems (phenomenally) to be of a particular object, O (or of an object of kind, K), then our belief that S's having experienced O (or an object of kind K) is the best explanation (everything else being equal) of E, is strengthened in proportion to the number of purported experiences of O there are and in proportion to the variability of circumstances in which such experiences occur (pp. 52-53).

*Religion and Contemporary Liberalism* edited by **Paul J. Weithman**. University of Notre Dame Press, 1997. Pp. viii and 315. \$48.00 (cloth)

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This book consists of a collection of essays by a distinguished cast of contemporary scholars. The essays are, in order: an introduction by Paul Weithman on Religion and the Liberalism of Reasoned Respect; Robert Audi on the State, the Church, and the Citizen; Sanford Levinson on what Liberalism demands of the Religiously Oriented Judge; Martha Nussbaum on Religion and Women's Human Rights; Philip Quinn on Political Liberalisms and the Exclusion of the Religious; Nicholas Wolterstorff on rejecting what Liberalism tells us about Speaking and Acting in Public for Religious Reasons; Timothy Jackson on Liberal Theory and Religious Pluralism; Jorge Garcia on Liberal Theory, Human