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Book Review: Arguing For Atheism: An Introduction To The Philosophy Of Religion

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the materialist paradigm, at least with regard to the problem of continuity between the inorganic and the organic. Griffin might have strengthened his thesis by discussing and offering his reasons for rejecting the current work in theoretical biology.

Second, for most of us the panexperimentalist solution is so radical that it is hard to imagine what kind of sentience is spread throughout the universe. For example, it is much easier to think of such conditions arising on Earth, but what about the sentience that forms the basis of the nuclear-fusion reactions of the sun, the magma of volcanic eruptions or the vast regions of empty space? In this connection, I doubt many will be persuaded by Griffin's insistence on the distinction between true individuals and aggregational composites of such individuals. Panpsychism (in its various forms) has always been an interesting hypothesis, if not somewhat exotic and fantastical. To many this will be its central weakness, namely, the plausibility factor and the obstacle that it is a theory more suited to romantic idealism rather than serious science or philosophy.

As a fellow traveller in this territory, these are some of the lingering doubts that have prevented me from embracing panpsychism with open arms. In my view, however, Griffin does an excellent job of demonstrating that the reigning physicalistic materialism and dualism are even more implausible than panpsychism. The materialist story just doesn't quite add up in the end.

For the reader who is convinced that dualism is a dead-end solution to the debate or simply tired of the arid and colorless discussions of materialism, this work offers refreshing novelty. Griffin's book deserves serious attention in order to provide a much-needed perspective and balance to the mind-body debate.

NOTES

1. See especially, Chapter 3 "The Vindication of Panpsychism," *The Vindication of Absolute Idealism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983).
2. See John L. Casti's discussion of the different biological theories for how life arose from natural, physical processes. Chapter 2 "A Warm Little Pond," *Paradigms Lost* (New York: Avon Books, 1989).

Arguing for Atheism: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion by **Robin Le Poidevin.** Routledge, 1996. Pp. xxvii, 159.

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This book is primarily a text, but, as the title indicates, Le Poidevin also makes a case for atheism. After sketching the contents of the book, I will make some general comments about the author's argument for atheism and discuss his contention that Western religion can survive the rejection of those metaphysical beliefs traditionally associated with theism. I

believe Le Poidevin's treatment of the latter topic to be the best feature of the book. I will conclude with some comments on the merits of the book as a text.

Arguing for Atheism is divided into three parts. In Part I (the contents of which comprise nearly half the book), Le Poidevin's case for atheism consists in a critique of the traditional arguments for the existence of God. The cosmological (both a temporal and modal version) and onto-logical argument are criticized respectively in chapters 1 and 2. Le Poidevin argues in the next chapter that it makes no sense to seek a causal explanation of the existence of the universe, once one properly understands the notion of a causal explanation. In chapter 4 he argues against traditional and probabilistic forms of the teleological argument, and in the fifth chapter considers and then rejects the claim that an athe-istic version of the teleological argument can be constructed in order to explain the natural laws. Part II consists of two moral arguments favor-ing atheism. In chapter 6, Le Poidevin argues that the theist can escape the *Euthyphro* dilemma only at the cost of accepting an objectionable form of moral realism. Chapter 7 is devoted to showing that theistic responses to the problem of evil are unsatisfactory. The final portion of the book treats issues connected with a non-realist view of theistic reli-gion. In chapter 8, Le Poidevin defends a non-realist version of theism deemed *theological instrumentalism*—the view that discourse about God can be viewed as a useful fiction. Chapter 9 is devoted to maintaining that nevertheless, the debate between traditional theists and atheists is a meaningful disagreement. In other words, "Does God exist?" is a gen-uine question which must be settled before one entertains non-realist alternatives. Finally, Le Poidevin contends in chapter 9 that the rejection of traditional theism and its often attendant belief in life after death need not rob life of its value for the atheist.

The reader will find most of the arguments in Parts I and II familiar and handled competently. To his credit, Le Poidevin achieves a fair degree of argumentative depth in *Arguing for Atheism*, despite the fact that the book is meant to function as an introduction to philosophy of religion. However, his case for atheism is weakened substantially by its lack of breadth in two important areas. Now it is true that it would be unreasonable to expect a comprehensive treatment of the theism/athe-ism debate in a book of this nature (and Le Poidevin himself acknowl-edges in the preface that his case for atheism is far from comprehensive), yet one's decisions about what to include or not include become all the more important when space is limited to a significant degree.

The first of two notable absences in Le Poidevin's case for atheism is a failure to address the theist's appeal to religious experience, either as evidence upon which to base belief in the existence of God, or—as reformed thinkers have argued in recent years—as a means of directly justifying belief in God's existence. Though Le Poidevin's charitable treatment of the theist's position is often exemplary, the effect of this absence is to render the theist's position artificially weak. For like him-self, most theists are skeptical about the success of the traditional argu-ments for God's existence. The second gap in the case Le Poidevin

builds for atheism is the absence of a discussion of the evidential as opposed to the logical problem of evil. This is surprising since many today would hold that the former poses the greater challenge to traditional theism. Thus, while a failure to treat the theist's appeal to religious experience artificially weakens the case for theism, the second failure unnecessarily weakens the case for atheism.[1]

As I suggested at the opening of this review, I believe chapter 8 on theological non-realism to be the best feature of this book. I have long thought that the exchange between theological realists and non-realists could be enhanced if the participants were to borrow some of the conceptual resources from related debates in other areas of philosophy (e.g., philosophy of language, philosophy of science and meta-ethics). Le Poidevin attempts to do just that, distinguishing two alternatives to theological realism based on analogous alternatives to scientific realism—the view that scientific theories about unobservables "are true or false by virtue of the way the world is, and independently of the ways we have of knowing about, or observing the world (p.108)." The *theological instrumentalist* holds that "discourse about God is purely fictional (p. 111)." The point of such discourse is not to describe but to transform lives. The *theological positivist*, on the other hand, holds that discourse about God is descriptive but descriptive of moral or psychological truths, not truths about a transcendent being. As Le Poidevin points out by reference to the work of Don Cupitt, theological non-realists sometimes equivocate between these two conceptually distinct alternatives, thereby compounding the difficulty in understanding and assessing such views.

Le Poidevin's conceptual spadework could be fruitfully expanded by also distinguishing between those non-realist views which purport to be capturing the gist of ordinary talk about God[2] and those which incorporate an "error theory." According to the latter revisionary views, ordinary assertions about God are false claims concerning a transcendent being which ought to be re-interpreted in a non-realist manner.[3] This is, in fact, the sort of view Le Poidevin defends. In the remainder of chapter 8, he attempts to answer the difficult question of how if, as he maintains, theological discourse is regarded as fictional, it can continue to exert a powerful influence over our lives by engaging our emotions. As Le Poidevin points out, the problem is not solved simply by pointing out that persons are often emotionally moved by fictional stories; for in the case of religion, one must not only be moved emotionally, but also motivated to engage in religious practice. It is rare to find a theological non-realist who grants that there is a difficulty here, but I suspect that this is a central reason why theists find non-realist accounts implausible.

Le Poidevin's response is to propose that when engaged in religious practice, the theological instrumentalist is engaged in a game of make-believe. She pretends that there is a God who has acted decisively in history in order to bring about humanity's salvation and to whom she directs her worship and prayers. In doing so, she allows herself to become emotionally involved in the drama within which she has located herself. Here one might wonder if there is any significant difference between such play-acting and the sort engaged in by players of the infamous *Dungeons and Dragons*. The difference, presumably, is in the point of the exercise. As Le

Poidevin states, "The immediate object of our emotions is the fictional God, but there is a wider object, and that is the collection of real individuals in our lives. . . What remains when the game of make-believe is over, is an awareness of our responsibilities for ourselves and others, of the need to pursue spiritual goals, and so on (p. 119)." In other words, while God talk itself is not to be understood as veiled discourse of another kind, it is intended to direct us toward truths of another kind. One will presumably continue in one's religious practice insofar as one's exercise in make believe is successful in directing one to these truths.

Le Poidevin's discussion of theological non-realism and development of an instrumentalist version of it both clarifies the non-realist alternative to traditional theism and enhances its plausibility. I conclude this portion of the review with two questions. First, how are we to understand references by Le Poidevin and other non-realists to "spiritual goals," as distinct from moral or psychological aspirations, once one's religion is purged of its metaphysical truth claims?[4] Second, and perhaps relatedly, is there anything distinctive about religion's ability to direct us toward important truths, or could this be accomplished just as well by engaging oneself imaginatively with a selection of great works of literature?

Finally, some comments about the suitability of this work as a text. I very much like the idea of using a philosophy of religion text like Le Poidevin's which argues both for atheism and for the possibility of a religious brand of atheism. Students who are theists will enjoy trying to find fault with the author's case for atheism, and atheistic students will be challenged by the possibility that the practice of religion may be worthwhile, even if God does not exist. The absence (discussed above) of any discussion of both religious experience and the evidential problem of evil would demand that the text be supplemented by materials on these issues. Also, the text focuses throughout on a broadly Western form of theism, so those who believe that a philosophy of religion text ought not focus strictly on Western forms of religion will need to look elsewhere (see e.g., Taliaferro's *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*). The book's jacket suggests that it also would be suitable for use in a metaphysics course, yet I cannot imagine it being so used (outside parochial settings), given its preoccupation with issues surrounding theism.

Le Poidevin's arguments are clearly articulated and would be accessible to those with little background in philosophy. In fact, Le Poidevin's ability to explain very difficult ideas and arguments concisely is exceptional. The author has chosen not to use reference notes but instead to cite the source of views discussed at the end of each chapter under the heading, "Further Reading." Though this made the text itself very readable, I found myself preferring that the citing of sources be kept distinct from suggestions for further reading. There is a glossary of terms, modest bibliography, and an index at the conclusion of the book.

NOTES

1.   Le Poidevin may have thought that a discussion of religious experience would fit uneasily with his aim in Parts I and II to assess arguments for and against the existence of God in relation to the claim that theism's

explanatory power is greater than that of atheism. But as John Hick has highlighted in his work, religious experience is itself something that both the religious believer and atheist must explain. Another possibility is that the author decided not to address both religious experience and the evidential problem because of his desire to produce a book suitable also for a metaphysics course. (See my comments below on the book's suitability as a text.)

2. See e.g., R. B. Braithwaite, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief," in *Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy*, ed. Ian T. Ramsey (London: SCM Press, 1966), pp. 53-73; and possibly D. Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

3. Such a view is parallel to the meta-ethical error theory of J. L. Mackie. See *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 35.

4. I am not here assuming that the notion of a spiritual goal or truth need necessarily be tied to belief in a transcendent God. However, it does seem plausible to me that a genuine distinction between what is spiritual vs. moral or psychological presupposes metaphysical claims of some kind.

Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion, and Ethics by **Nancey Murphy**. Westview Press, 1977. Pp. xxi, 228.

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According to this brilliant book, "our Western conceptual scheme, at its most basic level, is in the process of change," change so "drastic" that the "radical discontinuity" between ourselves and our most recent predecessors is as great as that "between Descartes and his Jesuit teachers" (pp. 1-2). What makes the argument so bold and challenging is that Murphy locates this sea change, not in the French, poststructuralist philosophies of flux and transgression but in an Anglo-American scene in which Austin, Quine, and Kuhn rather than Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard represent philosophy's answer to the three tenors.

More specifically, Murphy locates the change as occurring in epistemology, philosophy of language, metaphysics; and, since the three themes or strategies being overthrown and replaced can well be taken as utterly basic to philosophical modernity, she appropriates the rubric 'postmodernism' from the French as the most informative name for the intellectual revolution she explores.

In epistemology, modernism is characterized by foundationalism. Murphy does not distinguish between 1) the weak foundationalism that merely claims that while some of our beliefs rest on other beliefs, other, basic beliefs do not and 2) the strong foundationalism that permits as properly basic only those beliefs which, by virtue of the certainty pertaining to them, can provide a *fundamentum inconcussum* for the edifice of knowledge. Most of the time when people talk about the collapse of foundationalism it is strong foundationalism that they have in mind; and many, if not most, of the arguments against the certainty claims of strong foundationalism take the form of attacks on the weak foundationalism it presupposes. Murphy's argument follows this pattern.