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Book Review: Christian Philosophical Theology

Joshua Thurow

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Christian Philosophical Theology, by Stephen T. Davis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. 312. \$95 (Cloth).

JOSHUA C. THUROW, University of Wisconsin-Madison

In this stimulating and wide-ranging new book, Stephen Davis presents 16 essays on a variety of issues in Christian philosophical theology: four on God and belief in God, six on the resurrection and the incarnation, four on redemption, and two on theological method. With a mixture of new and previously published essays, this book is best regarded as a summary and development of Davis's views on philosophical theology.

Overall, Davis is concerned to demonstrate the rationality of core Christian doctrines, which includes elucidating and defending what he takes to be the best accounts of these core doctrines. In the first section, "Why Believe? God and Belief in God," Davis argues (1) that the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit helps believers to properly weigh the force of the evidence for theism and various Christian doctrines, (2) that the cosmological argument can be used to demonstrate the rationality of Christian belief, (3) that God is a sovereign creator and revealer, and (4) that a version of the social theory of the Trinity called "Perichoretic monotheism" is true. What is distinct about Perichoretic monotheism is that, according to the theory, "the Persons [of the Trinity] are fully open to each other, . . . they 'see with each others eyes,' the boundaries between them are transparent to each other, and each ontologically embraces the others" (p. 72).

In the second section, "Why Believe in Jesus? Resurrection and Incarnation," Davis begins by arguing that the scriptures give us a reliable portrait of Jesus and goes on to argue on a priori grounds, scriptural grounds, and on the basis of the Jesus: Mad, Bad or God argument that God became incarnate in Jesus. He then argues that the New Testament presents Jesus as having been resurrected bodily from the dead and the disciples and others as having literally seen (as opposed to visualizing Jesus by the aid of God) Jesus after he died. Finally, he presents a kenotic theory of the incarnation and argues that his theory is orthodox.

In the third section, "How are we Saved? Redemption," Davis first argues on philosophical grounds alone that grace-oriented systems of salvation are superior to karma-oriented systems. He then argues that God is wrathful towards sin and sinners and that the blood of Christ needed to be shed in order for humans to be redeemed. Finally, he describes the Christian view of salvation by faith in Jesus, arguing along the way (in chapter 13) that the Protestant and Catholic views of salvation and justification do not differ substantially, and defends a 'temporary disembodiment' theory of the general resurrection according to which people exist disembodied between their death and the parousia.

In the fourth and final section, "How to do Theology? Theological Method," Davis defends a kind of mediating view between Catholic and Protestant views on the relation between scripture and tradition. He argues in chapter 15 that, "Tradition is necessary for interpreting Scripture and that Scripture takes priority over Tradition, because it is our highest source and norm of religious truth" (p. 279). Finally, he argues that the best way to understand how the Church uses the Bible is to understand

the Church to believe that God speaks through Bible; so, according to the Church, the Bible is true in two senses: it says true things and it is something we can submit to and trust as a guide for our lives.

Throughout the book Davis is quite ecumenical, most often defending a position that he thinks most Christians could agree on. Indeed, the most interesting and powerful chapters in the book are chapters wherein he discusses the doctrinal differences and commonalities between Catholicism and Protestantism. Chapters 13, "Bodily Redemption," and 15, "Scripture, Tradition, and Theological Authority," stand out in this regard as especially well-argued and persuasive. Davis's work in these chapters demonstrates how good analytic philosophy can usefully contribute to theology.

Although there is much to admire in this book, particularly the two chapters just mentioned, I do have a few questions and criticisms about various arguments in the book.

As I mentioned earlier, Davis's main goal is to demonstrate that belief in some core Christian doctrines is rational. Davis does not intend to argue that these Christian doctrines are rational in the sense that all rational people who carefully consider the evidence ought to embrace them. As he writes, "rationality is in part person-relative. That is, belief in a certain proposition might be rational for one person and irrational for another. Accordingly, . . . no matter how logically impeccable a given piece of natural theology may be, a religious skeptic who wants to resist its conclusions can always find reason to do so" (p. 21). Davis's view here could be interpreted in two different ways; one interpretation is trivially true, the other is dubious and in need of further defense. The first interpretation takes Davis's claim, "belief in a certain proposition may be rational for one person and irrational for another," at face value. This claim is trivially true for it is trivial that two people can have different sets of evidence, and one person's set may justify *p* while the other's set justifies not-*p*. The religious skeptic could (and should) grant that some Christian believers may be rational because the evidence they have supports Christian beliefs and they lack the evidence that the skeptic thinks undermines Christian belief. Even so, the skeptic could say that there is a sense in which Christian belief is irrational: it is irrational considering all the evidence we have (where 'we' includes at least all informed people). This leads to the second interpretation of Davis's claim. Perhaps he means to say that even if two people had all the available evidence, it could be that one was rational in believing in Christianity while the other wasn't. But, this claim is dubious. It is the evidence that justifies one's belief (and we should understand 'evidence' in a broad way so that it includes testimony and religious experiences as evidence) and, in the case imagined, both people have the same evidence. So, whatever proposition the evidence supports is what both people are justified in believing. Furthermore, it seems clear that a given set of evidence can't support both a proposition and its negation; a set of evidence, considered as a whole, either supports *p*, not-*p*, or neither. Consequently, whichever proposition the evidence does support, if any, is what both agents are justified in believing. The two agents cannot rationally have different doxastic attitudes towards Christianity. So, if Davis means to say that two people in this situation could rationally have different doxastic attitudes towards the truth of Christianity, he needs to say more in defense of his claim.

Whatever he says about this matter, Davis would probably insist that, if we considered all the available evidence, that evidence would support Christianity. The problem with non-believers is that they are blinded to the evidence that is there by pride (p. 12). The Holy Spirit, according to Davis, helps believers to assess the evidence properly. Davis writes, "the Spirit's testimony . . . illuminates or renders convincing evidence that is already there. It is not a question of propaganda or brainwashing or of making feeble evidence appear powerful. It is a question of removing blinkers and helping us to grasp the epistemic situation correctly" (p. 17). If the evidence really does support Christianity, and because of sin non-believers simply don't assess the evidence correctly, I would say, in line with my argument in the previous paragraph, that non-believers are irrational and their belief that Christianity is false is unjustified. It may be quite hard for them to find out that their belief is unjustified, but it nonetheless is. After all, we certainly aren't anywhere near close to infallible about figuring out which of our beliefs are justified and which aren't. Davis thinks that non-believers ought to know that God exists and that they are culpable for their non-belief. If we assume the evidence supports Christianity, I would agree, but I would add that part of the reason why non-believers are culpable for their non-belief is that their beliefs are irrational. It would be interesting to know whether Davis would agree with my explanation.

Although many of Davis's other arguments merit close critical attention, I only have space to examine a couple of them. First, in chapter two Davis utilizes the cosmological argument to argue that theism is rational. He asks whether his version of the principle of sufficient reason—(2) everything can be explained—is more plausible than its negation, (2') (the numbering is Davis's). He says, "it does not seem possible to show which is more plausible. We appear to be left with the possibility that the theist's belief in the existence of God might well be rational (given the atheist's rational acceptance of (2)) and that the atheist's disbelief in the existence of God might well also be rational (given the theist's rational acceptance of (2'))." It follows that, "belief in God is rational" (p. 35). This looks like a circular argument. Davis seems to grant that there are no good independent reasons to believe either (2) or (2'), but argues that theism and atheism are rational because theists can rationally accept (2) and atheists can rationally accept (2'). But, if there are no good independent reasons to believe either of these claims, then the only thing that could make belief in them rational is rational belief in either theism or atheism, respectively. But, then the cosmological argument can't be used to *show* that belief in God is rational, since we must assume that it is rational in order to show that belief in (2) is rational.

Second, in chapter 11 Davis argues that Karma theories of salvation are wrong because they can't explain how suffering begins and because one's merely having a soul in common with a later reincarnated person is insufficient for personal identity. Both of these objections can be met. Regarding the first, one could take a page from the theist and suggest that free will is the source of suffering and that karma begins to take effect once some people freely cause suffering. Furthermore, this could be the explanation for the existence of suffering even if persons have always existed.

Regarding the second, surely we regard people who have severe memory loss as identical to their previous selves, so why not regard reincarnation as analogous to severe memory loss? Alternatively, one could say that what happens in reincarnation is just like what happens in Reid's example of the old general, except the whole process happens much quicker, so there is memory continuity even though the newly reincarnated person does not remember anything about his earlier self (just as the old general does not remember anything about what his boyhood self did).

Overall, *Christian Philosophical Theology* is a solid work. Researchers in the field will certainly want to be familiar with its arguments, especially those in chapters 13 and 15.

Crucible of Reason: Intentional Action, Practical Rationality, and Weakness of Will, by Keith D. Wyma. Rowman & Littlefield, 2004. 307 pp. \$85 (cloth), \$29.95 (paper).

NOEL HENDRICKSON, James Madison University

One of the most puzzling aspects of human agency is how we are capable of performing actions that are both intentional and against deeply-held judgments about what should be done (i.e., "akratic" or "weak-willed" actions). This is particularly difficult to understand in light of a central feature of some theories of intentional action, which holds that an action qualifies as intentional only if it is done because of, and according to, a judgment that the action should be done (i.e., "rational-action" theories). While such theories are widely held, they have a notoriously difficult time accounting for weak-willed actions. For, they require of intentional action the very thing that is absent in cases of weakness of the will (namely, conforming to the agent's judgments about what should be done). In the *Crucible of Reason*, Keith D. Wyma thoughtfully tackles this difficult challenge with an extremely intricate examination of attempts by rational-action theorists to account for weak-willed actions. He provides a detailed discussion of the work of R. M. Hare, Donald Davidson, and (especially) Thomas Aquinas. Ultimately, he contends that each theorist is unable to account for the phenomenon of weak-willed actions, especially in its more robust varieties. In response, he develops a new (modified) Thomistic approach to accommodate more fully the real-life experience of weakness of the will. In addition, because this new approach works best in a full-fledged Thomistic and Christian framework, he provocatively suggests that the ability to account for weak-willed actions may serve as a part of the overall inductive case for Christian theism.

Wyma provides a careful, thorough, and charitable examination of each of the three thinkers. Among a variety of criticisms, he insightfully argues that each of them ultimately has to deny the reality of weakness of the will (at least in its most robust forms). Wyma contends that our real-life experience of weak-willed actions includes extremely robust instances such as acting against fully rational judgments, against knowledge that what we are doing is wrong, and even against fully-formed intentions