

4-1-2008

Book Review: Evidence And Faith: Philosophy And Religion Since The Seventeenth Century

James Taylor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Taylor, James (2008) "Book Review: Evidence And Faith: Philosophy And Religion Since The Seventeenth Century," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 2 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol25/iss2/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

It may not be the case that many will be persuaded, by Bradley's arguments, into accepting the notion that truth has degrees, and that the only genuine individual is the whole of reality. There remains, by the end, a lingering suspicion that Russell's accusations of incoherence may not have been as far off as Allard seems to suggest. But to swell the ranks of absolute idealists is not Allard's goal. What the book does achieve is to present Bradley's metaphysics as far from abstruse, fanciful, meaningless, and easily dismissed, but one rigorously grounded in a theory of logic. Avoiding his holism and monism cannot be satisfactorily achieved by simply ignoring Bradley, but rather by engaging with his solutions to the problems in the philosophy of logic and, to an extent, the philosophy of language. It hardly needs to be stated that the natures of inference, judgment, and truth are of central concern to modern philosophy. Re-engaging with Bradley in the way that Allard does in this book not only affirms his position as one of significant influence, but also provides insights and challenges still relevant and important for metaphysics and the theory of logic.

Evidence and Faith: Philosophy and Religion Since the Seventeenth Century, by Charles Taliaferro. Cambridge University Press, 2005. xi + 457 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), \$29.99 (paper).

JAMES E. TAYLOR, Westmont College

This book is a volume in the Cambridge University Press series entitled "The Evolution of Modern Philosophy," edited by Paul Guyer and Gary Hatfield. Each volume of this series examines the historical development of a current subdiscipline of philosophy from the standpoint of a contemporary practitioner. In this case, the subdiscipline is the philosophy of religion and the practitioner is Charles Taliaferro, whom readers of this journal will recognize as a philosopher eminently qualified to produce a work of this sort. Taliaferro has combined his wealth of knowledge about the history of modern and contemporary philosophy with his expertise as a careful and creative philosopher to produce an excellent contribution to this series.

In the introduction Taliaferro articulates four main features of the philosophy of religion: it raises fundamental questions about human existence and the nature of reality, draws on almost every area of philosophy, is relevant to practical human concerns, and contains important issues addressed by most modern philosophers. Throughout the book, he provides numerous examples of each of these aspects of philosophical thinking about religion.

Though the book is encyclopedic in scope, Taliaferro attempts to provide it with an organizational unity by treating the concept of evidence, broadly conceived and systematically characterized, as a reference point. This and related concepts, together with philosophical argumentation about religious issues, is the primary focus of the book, though Taliaferro does include accounts of historical events, especially at the beginning of most chapters, for some contextualization of the philosophical movements,

theories, arguments, debates, and concepts he discusses. He says his audience is philosophers interested in the philosophy of religion, whether they specialize in this area or not. His main purpose is to provide these people with an historical introduction to the field that explains how the modern philosophical conversation about religion has unfolded and that illustrates how these earlier philosophical contributions can continue to be important matters for serious philosophical reflection. Taliaferro's hope is that his book will encourage more engagement, contribution, and collaboration in the current enterprise of philosophy of religion, which he observes has broadened in scope recently to include nontheistic religious traditions. Taliaferro's work provides resources for both critical and constructive philosophical reflection on a broad and diverse range of topics in religion.

Chapter one is about the Cambridge Platonists. Taliaferro discusses them before their better-known predecessor Descartes because of their transitional role and representative status. He focuses on Ralph Cudworth and Henry More. Cudworth's appeal to the sovereignty of God's goodness over God's will is characteristic of Cambridge Platonism. So also is More's use of God-given but fallible human reason ("the candle of the Lord") to argue for God's existence by means of the internal sign of the concept of God (the ontological argument) and the external sign of design in nature (the teleological argument). The Cambridge Platonists held that this use of reason is both good and compatible with the authority of Scripture. Their account of the relationship between mind and body mirrored their view of God's relation to the universe. Spiritual and material realities are mediated by a "Plastick Nature" (in the case of God and the cosmos) and "plastic vital power" (in the case of the human soul and body) that makes reason, freedom, and value possible. As philosophers who believed that "inquiry into God's reality should be coupled with a genuine desire to find God," they faced such challenges as Hobbesian scientific materialism, religious skepticism about reason (such as that of Montaigne and Luther), and philosophical alternatives to theism (such as atheism and deism).

In chapter two, Taliaferro turns to Cartesian philosophy of religion. He remarks on both the influence and controversial nature of Cartesian foundationalism and dualism in subsequent philosophy. He aims to encourage a reassessment of Descartes's work for contemporary philosophy of religion by arguing that some standard criticisms of Descartes's project in the *Meditations* are not necessarily decisive. Most interesting to this reviewer is Taliaferro's suggestion that Descartes's attempted solution to the skeptical problem of the criterion is particularist rather than methodist. He proposes that Descartes employs the method of doubt to *discover* rather than *demonstrate* the role a trustworthy God plays in grounding his knowledge. If Taliaferro is right, the Cartesian Circle problem is solved. He also provides a sympathetic reading of Descartes's first causal argument for God's existence in Meditation 3 and touches on the ontological argument in Meditation 5 (Taliaferro's assumption that Descartes offers only two theistic arguments in the *Meditations* is an uncharacteristic oversight on his part). Taliaferro also seeks to encourage further inquiry into Descartes's argument for dualism. He turns the tables on a feminist critique of Cartesianism as devaluing the body by pointing out that Descartes's emphasis on consciousness and rationality provide a firmer

basis for universal rights than does an appeal to the material categories of heredity, wealth, and brute material strength, which have historically been a basis for discrimination.

The primary theme of chapter three is the early modern search for rules of evidence. Though Taliaferro sees John Locke as the initiator of this effort, he discusses the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes first to provide a context for Locke's contribution. In reply to the charge that Hobbes's scientifically-based mechanistic materialism is atheistic, Taliaferro argues that the attention Hobbes pays to Scripture and theology and Hobbes's employment of a cosmological argument make it more likely that Hobbes is a Christian theist. He stresses Locke's agreement with Hobbes that knowledge must be based on empirical evidence. Taliaferro sketches Locke's theory of perception in preparation for discussing Berkeley's rejoinder and development of his subjective idealist alternative. This sets the stage for his brief characterization of Jonathan Edward's similar account of the relation between God and creation. After a passing glance at early American philosophy of religion, Taliaferro moves on to develop the very different views of Leibniz and Spinoza. Though a philosophical generalist, Leibniz placed religious concerns at the center of his thought. As for Spinoza's rationalistic and deterministic monism, Taliaferro resists the interpretation of it as merely mechanistic materialism in religious garb because of Spinoza's frequent admonition to love God. He says this makes Spinoza's philosophy "profoundly religious." He says in summary that the philosophers of this chapter agree that tradition is limited apart from evidence but disagree about the extent to which the Christian tradition need or can be justified evidentially.

Humean philosophy of religion is the focus of chapter four. Taliaferro contends that, in addition to Hume's skepticism about religious claims, Hume also adhered to a "sweeping form of naturalism." In spite of the skeptical conclusions about God, substance, self, and causation Hume drew from his empiricist and evidentialist assumptions, he affirmed the ultimate victory of our animal nature over skepticism when it comes to ordinary (and even scientific) practice. Taliaferro provides a relatively thorough examination of the criticisms of the design and cosmological arguments for God's existence Hume develops in his *Dialogues on Natural Religion*. In place of the relatively narrow inductive approach to reasoning about causes explicitly endorsed by Hume in the *Dialogues* and elsewhere, Taliaferro urges the adoption of a comprehensive and cumulative method of worldview comparison that emphasizes the extent to which a theory can explain our observations. With this in mind, Taliaferro's suggested replies to Philo's five objections to the design argument are forceful. Taliaferro's preferred methodology also puts Hume's argument against the rationality of belief in miracles in a different light. From a naturalistic perspective, Hume's contention that the evidence against miracles always outweighs the evidence for them makes sense. However, from a theistic point of view it may be appropriate to weigh the evidence in such a way that Hume's proportionalist evidentialism would permit belief in miracles. In spite of his disagreements with Hume, Taliaferro characterizes him as a "deeply humane philosopher," who strove to strike a balance between excessive theoretical (and skeptical) detachment and unreflective practice.

Taliaferro discusses Kant's contribution to the philosophy of religion in chapter five. Before discussing Kant's critique of three classic theistic arguments, Taliaferro summarizes the revolutionary epistemological theory he develops in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: though pure reason seeks knowledge of transcendent realities such as God, it is limited to a knowledge of the world of our experience which is always, as Taliaferro aptly puts it, "formatted" by means of our basic categories and concepts. So, according to Kant, humans are not capable of proving that a perfect God exists on the basis of the ontological, cosmological, or teleological arguments. After suggesting some defenses of these arguments against Kant's critique, Taliaferro provides a clear and helpful summary of Kant's case for the claim that it is rational for moral agents to postulate the existence of God and an afterlife in order to make sense of their commitment to willing the highest good of ideal happiness and virtue (which could exist only in an afterlife and only with the assistance of a just and all-powerful God). Taliaferro points out that, from the standpoint of this moral argument, theists can contend that Bertrand Russell's commendation of moral action in a godless world is problematic, whereas atheists like Albert Camus can reject traditional morality on the basis of an agreement with Kant that morality depends on God.

In chapter six, Taliaferro provides an overview of the debate between naturalists and idealists about religion. He ends the chapter with a discussion of pragmatism, which he places between these positions. In the camp of those engaged in a naturalistic critique of traditional theism are Mill (who raised philosophical objections), Darwin (whose theory of biological evolution challenged religious belief), and a handful of thinkers who criticized religion from a variety of social scientific perspectives (Feuerbach, Marx, Weber, and Freud). In his discussion of idealism, Taliaferro focuses on Hegel but touches on subsequent idealists as well, such as Bradley (who argued that reality is ultimately a singular Absolute Spirit), McTaggart (who denied the reality of both God and time but affirmed the importance of love), and the Boston personalists (whom Taliaferro likens to the Cambridge Platonists in their resistance to materialism). Before taking up pragmatism, Taliaferro discusses the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century debate over religious experience and the corresponding interest in Eastern religious traditions and philosophies among Western thinkers. Taliaferro's coverage of pragmatism includes Peirce (who emphasized the practical and experiential side of religion), James (whose account of the religious life in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and reply to Clifford in "The Will to Believe" are described and thoughtfully evaluated by Taliaferro), and Dewey (whom Taliaferro believes takes "an approach to evidence and religious faith that takes seriously both tradition and contemporary experience and practice" in spite of his anti-supernatural orientation).

The title of chapter seven is "Continental and Feminist Philosophy of Religion." Taliaferro characterizes continental philosophy as originating in a nineteenth-century revolt against rationalism (in a broad sense that would include not only Descartes but also the empiricists, Kant, and Hegel) that does not devalue evidence but rather affirms a broader conception of it (so as to include *moods*, for example). He begins his overview of continental philosophy with Kierkegaard and restricts himself to Kierkegaard's view

of faith and evidence. Turning to Nietzsche, Taliaferro underscores his Kierkegaard-like opposition to “the dispassionate inquiry of a philosophy that invokes timeless universals” (p. 299) and his eventual championing of the intellectual quest for that which is life-affirming. He then turns to the twentieth century. In keeping with contemporary continental philosophy’s tendency to be “philosopher-centered” rather than “topic-centered” and presumably because of the recency of this tradition (which makes selectivity difficult), Taliaferro devotes each of three sections to four philosophers, with mention of more minor figures in passing. He winds up the chapter with a sympathetic reading and balanced critique of contemporary feminist philosophy of religion. The first set of four continental philosophers is comprised by the “phenomenologists” (inspired by Husserl): Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, and Beauvoir. The second set includes Weil, Buber, Levinas and Marcel. The final four are Gadamer, Ricoeur, Derrida, and Foucault. In the last section, Taliaferro highlights the contributions to philosophy of religion of three female feminist philosophers: Luce Irigaray, Grace Jantzen, and Pamela Sue Anderson.

Chapter eight is entitled “Five Major Moves.” In it, Taliaferro addresses the move toward logical positivism, the move away from it, the move to a Wittgensteinian approach to the philosophy of religion, the move to a favorable philosophical conception of religious tradition, and the move toward the inclusion of a plurality of religious traditions. After summarizing the Vienna Circle’s verificationist criterion of meaningfulness, Taliaferro reviews the consequences of this test for religious language, traditional metaphysics, and continental (especially Heideggerian) philosophy. He then enumerates a plethora of problems with positivism responsible for its downfall in most philosophical circles. Taliaferro describes how the positivists were both fascinated and puzzled by Wittgenstein, who, in the *Tractatus*, both denied that religious language is meaningful and yet also affirmed a reverent attitude toward the mystical. It was the later Wittgenstein, however, whose emphasis on the ordinary use of language provided non-traditional philosophers of religion with an alternative to the positivist approach. As representatives of the move toward a more positive philosophical stance toward religious tradition (similar to the Cambridge Platonists), Taliaferro chooses to discuss the Reformed Epistemologists Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff and the anti-enlightenment philosopher Alasdair McIntyre. In the final section of this chapter, Taliaferro discusses the inclusion of nonmonotheistic traditions in recent philosophical conversations about religion. He credits Ninian Smart with inaugurating a cross-cultural philosophy of religion that included Hinduism and Buddhism in addition to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Taliaferro begins the last chapter (“Religions, Evidence, and Legitimacy”) by pointing out that *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which for many years was the standard reference work in the field, was edited by Paul Edwards, whose bias against religion was evident in the work. He goes on to say that more recently, other resources much more favorable to the philosophy of religion have superseded it (Robert Audi’s *Dictionary of Philosophy* and the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, in which much of the philosophy of religion was edited by Eleonore Stump). These resources

are a strong indication that John Searle is wrong to have recently implied that no cultivated and interesting philosophers are currently discussing religious issues. Taliaferro's survey of the current vibrant philosophy of religion scene in the academy begins with the topic of science and religion. He then observes that contemporary philosophy of religion involves a revival of the general approach to philosophy of religion taken by the Cambridge Platonists (with discussions of the divine attributes and the theistic arguments). Taliaferro highlights the problem of evil in the philosophy of religion as a special case study. He then identifies recent instances of cordiality and friendship in some relationships between defenders and critics of religious belief. He closes the chapter with a look at the role of philosophy of religion outside the academy, especially in current debates about the place of religion in the public square.

The book has two appendices. One of them, "A Guide to Further Study," lists centers and societies, journals, and books dedicated to the practice of the philosophy of religion. The other, "Select Contemporary Philosophers," contains four tables listing philosophers (by specific topics) who have done philosophical work in the general areas of (1) non-western and non-traditional religions and movements, (2) divine attributes, (3) theistic arguments, and (4) the problem of evil. Taliaferro also includes a select bibliography. Only a person with a thorough mastery of the field could have provided such complete and helpful lists – indeed, could have written such a valuable and useful book. Philosophers who practice or are merely interested in the philosophy of religion will find this book to be a rich and indispensable resource.

My Way: Essays on Moral Responsibility, by John Martin Fischer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. 250 plus Index. \$45.00 (hardcover)

STEWART GOETZ, Ursinus College

John Martin Fischer is without question one of the leading spokespersons in contemporary philosophy of action for compatibilist views about free will, determinism, and moral responsibility. *My Way* is a collection of first-rate essays by Fischer that have all, except for one (the Introduction), been previously published in other places. The fourth essay in the collection was co-written with Mark Ravizza, while the ninth was co-authored by Eleonore Stump. In this review, I summarize some of the major ideas of *My Way* and then critically interact with a few of them.

Fischer offers us the philosophical view he terms 'semicompatibilism': determinism is incompatible with genuine metaphysical access to alternative possibilities, while being compatible with moral responsibility (p. 133). His primary motivation for defending semicompatibilism is the belief that our fundamental standing as free and morally responsible agents should not depend upon what science might or might not ultimately conclude about the truth of causal determinism (p. 138). (Fischer also is concerned about problems for our basic status as free and morally responsible agents that arise