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John Leslie, IMMORTALITY DEFENDED

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public reason. Ambitious theocrats endorse the positions that they do for religious reasons. In appealing to religious reasons, ambitious theocrats are embodying the value of liberty of conscience, for it is by their exercise of the liberty of conscience that they come to endorse the positions that they do. For this reason, liberal political theorists ought to be open to the possibility of allowing ambitious theocrats to invoke religious reasons in the public square (p. 125).

Swaine's book should be commended for its sensitive and nuanced treatment of religion. The paradox, of course, is that *Conscience* is not likely to be read by the very theocrats that could most profit from reading it. The most likely readers of *Conscience* are the liberal political theorists who already agree with Swaine's message. The fact that fine books like *Conscience* are probably only going to be read by the people who already agree with them is a testament to the reality that we are not really dialoguing with the other belief systems that exist alongside our own in the contemporary public square. If both sides of the public religion debate were to read reconciliation proposals like Swaine's *Conscience*, it would go a long way toward overcoming this reality.

Immortality Defended, by John Leslie. Blackwell, 2007. Pp. 97. \$19.95 (cloth).

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The title of John Leslie's new slim volume is potentially misleading. Although he offers three varieties of immortality, two of them involve it only in a Pickwickian sense. And the defense he has to offer (of all three) may be thought rather loose, at best. In fact, Leslie uses more than half his space trying to make plausible the underlying metaphysical picture that he is enamoured of, namely a combination of Platonism and Spinozist pantheism.

The most fundamental principle inspiring Leslie's thought in this book is one he attributes to Plato: "The actual world of people and objects is a good one and *it exists simply because it ought to*. Its ethical requiredness—the fact that there is an ethical need for it—*is itself creatively effective*" (p. 2). To this, Leslie adds his own interpretation of Spinoza: "There is a divine mind, a mind whose reality is due to the eternal ethical need for it. We, like all the other intricately structured things of our universe, exist merely because the mind in question thinks of this universe in all its details" (p. 3). As Leslie acknowledges, some theologians will not identify this metaphysical "divine mind" with the personal, self-revelatory (indeed incarnate) God they believe in.

Not content with this degree of speculation, Leslie proceeds to add two dimensions of infinity. Unsatisfactory features of our lives prompt him to speculate that the divine mind might also think of immensely many other universes, thereby making them just as real as the imperfect one we inhabit (pp. 7, 10). Then, without apparent motivation, Leslie announces that "this book will defend a pantheism of infinitely many divine minds,

each contemplating everything worth contemplating" (p. 11). He expands on this in chapter three.

But why should we believe any of this? (And what difference would it make if we did?) In chapter two, Leslie's defense seems to consist of name-dropping and counter-attack. The names mentioned are Plato, Plotinus, Aquinas, Maimonides, Leibniz, Paul Tillich, Hans Kung, Nicholas Rescher, Hugh Rice, and Derek Parfit. But, of course, one could readily compile a similarly comprehensive list of philosophers and theologians who would not touch such speculations with a mental barge-pole. Either way, name-dropping does not get you anywhere in philosophy.

Leslie's objections to objections (pp. 22ff) contain the nearest approximation to philosophical argument that I can see in this book, and I find them weak. He tries to face down the protest that no abstract fact, such as an ethical requirement, can ever influence the world: "What, can't they? Toss a coin ten times. While you might get ten heads, various rather abstract facts make you ten times more likely to get just one." But that conclusion depends on the crucial physical assumption that the coin is a fair one, not unequally weighted toward the side with a head. The relevant mathematical truths (call them facts if you will) only apply to the case on that assumption. A similar point applies to the other two examples Leslie offers—the possibilities and impossibilities of sliding fifteen numbered squares around a board depend on the physical assumption that they are rigid, so they can't be squeezed past or over each other. If three groups of five lions enter a wood and only fourteen come out, the expectation that one lion remains in there depends on the assumptions that there is no other way out (e.g., no tunnels or helicopter lifts), and moreover that the remaining lion has not died and been scavenged, and has not given birth.

Leslie's next ploy is to suggest that an ethical requirement is analogous to a causal requirement in that both can sometimes be said to be satisfied, or fulfilled. But he admits straight away that this cannot prove the Platonic view, it only gives it "a chance of being right" (p. 23)—and there are similar admissions on pages 32 and 34. If that is the best that can be done by way of justifying such metaphysical claims, why bother?

There follows an attack on emotivism, prescriptivism and ethical relativism. But even if we agree with this, and hold that ethical requirements are objective, and that statements of them are true in some sense of that much fought-over word, that does nothing to show that ethical requirements have creative, quasi-causal necessity, as Leslie alleges. He fiercely rejects the suggestion that ethical requirements should be verifiable, or verified experimentally. What he appears to be so scornful about is the idea that they can be demonstrated beyond all logically possible doubt, a standard which few, if any of our beliefs, can reach. We will all agree with Leslie that we are quite certain that babies should be moved away from flames. The point on which I suspect he is so sensitive is that there seems to be no prospect of any sort of justification, let alone conclusive verification, for his metaphysical claims about the causality of the extremely abstract ethical requirement for the world to exist because it would a good thing for it to exist.

The defense of immortality promised in the title comes in chapter four. The first variety is implicit in treating time as a fourth dimension, akin

to space, i.e., seeing the whole scheme of things as an unchanging four-dimensional block universe, as Einstein suggested. On this view, all events—past, present and future—are equally real, and the fact that we are finite in our temporal extent is supposed to be no more regrettable than the fact that our bodies are finite in space. Since there is no real change, all our lives eternally exist as parts of the total four-dimensional block. Whether that measures up to what you may have wanted to mean by ‘immortality,’ I leave it to you, dear reader, to judge. So does Leslie. What he does not seem to offer is any argument to prefer the four-dimensional view to its traditional rival, which takes change to be real in some more substantial sense.

Leslie’s second offer seems to involve a more traditional conception of an afterlife. “Even if our experiences are simply elements in a divine mind’s thinking, why shouldn’t we have new ones after our bodies had died?” (p. 61). In his pantheistic picture, such *post mortem* thoughts and experiences “would simply be cases where the divine thoughts took on a radically new character” (p. 62). Well, as far as I can see, just about anything is possible (apart from contradictions) in Leslie’s pantheistic picture—but I do not find that a recommendation. He suspects that his personal identity “depends as little on my ever *really having had* a body as it does on my toenails” (p. 63). Speaking for myself, as a bassoon-player, a mountain-walker, a husband and a father, I’m not so sure.

The third and last offer is a version of something traditional in some non-Western cultures—absorption into the One. Leslie’s third kind of immortality would consist in the carrying of our life-patterns within a single continued existent—either the universe, or a divine mind. Would this count as personal survival? Leslie finds the concept of personal identity too nebulous to decide (p. 67). If you are not impressed with any of these offers, don’t worry; you can have all three together, says Leslie (p. 68).

According to the blurb from Jack Smart, “this is an admirable piece of philosophical speculation, in the grand manner of great philosophers of the past, but informed by modern cosmology.” I would suggest two amendments to that: (1) Insert ‘some of the’ before ‘great’ (what about Kant?—how can would-be philosophers still indulge in such speculation, without at least addressing his strictures on metaphysics?), and (2) Unless you are prone to admire unbridled, in-principle unverifiable, speculation, delete the word ‘admirable.’