Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 30 | Issue 4 Article 9

10-1-2013

Book Review: Probability In Philosophy Of Religion

Paul Draper

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

Recommended Citation

Draper, Paul (2013) "Book Review: Probability In Philosophy Of Religion," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 30 : Iss. 4 , Article 9.
Available at: https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol30/iss4/9

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.

CrossMark
click for updates

This raises the metaontological question of what sort of criterion of ontological commitment Leftow is presupposing throughout the book. Although he does not explicitly address the question, in a number of places it seems that he presupposes the customary view that we are committed to the existence of the values of variables bound by the first-order existential quantifier and to the referents of singular terms in sentences we take to be true (e.g., 77, 81, 96, 307, 480–481, 511). But this metaontological thesis is eminently challengeable and so cannot be merely assumed.

Against those who would challenge premise (10) in the argument above, Leftow argues that truth must have an ontology (24–25). But although he speaks freely of truth-makers throughout the book, his understanding of truth-makers is so thin that the notion of truth's having an ontology becomes utterly obscure. At one point Leftow asks whether, if there were absolutely nothing, it would be the case that 2+2=4. If you think not, then "you accept that the latter claim has some ontology" (25). What is the theist to make of this? If, *per impossible*, there were no God, then, I suppose, we might agree that nothing would be true. But truth's having an ontology in this sense goes no distance toward showing that the singular terms "2+2" and "4" have real world referents, whether divine thoughts or abstract objects. To characterize anti-realist solutions as "no ontology" solutions in so thin a sense is therefore highly misleading. They might perhaps better be classed as "safe ontology" solutions—except that Leftow's discussion of that option then fails to connect with them. In short, as Leftow himself acknowledges, much more remains to be said about anti-realist solutions to the problem of God and abstract objects.[12]

Probability in the Philosophy of Religion, ed. Jake Chandler and Victoria S. Harrison. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 272 pages. $75.00 (hardcover).

PAUL DRAPER, Purdue University

The eleven essays in this collection cover six topics: miracles, design, evil, Pascal's wager, religious disagreement, and faith. As expected, given the book's title, all eleven apply probabilistic thinking to their topics. They are preceded by a helpful introductory chapter in which the editors, Jake Chandler and Victoria S. Harrison, summarize each essay and explain with forgivable hyperbole just how central probability theory has been to the philosophy of religion in the last thirty-five years or so. The essays are technical to varying degrees; some perhaps more than necessary, but

[12]I'm grateful to Brian Leftow for his comments on the drafts of both my reviews.

others—including some of the most technical ones—precisely as much as necessary. The essays also vary in how *successfully* they apply probabilistic thinking to their topics, but overall this is a valuable and well-edited collection, one I recommend to philosophers of religion who are comfortable with mathematical probability.

The body of the book begins with three chapters on miracles, including one by Benjamin C. Jantzen provocatively titled "Pierce on Miracles: The Failure of Bayesian Analysis." This essay criticizes Bayesian analyses of the evidentiary value of historical testimony about extraordinary events. For example, Bayesian analyses often involve making poorly supported judgments about the reliability of individual witnesses. This is not, however, a problem for Bayesianism per se, as Timothy McGrew and Lydia McGrew's Bayesian analysis of testimony concerning miracles in the third chapter of the book demonstrates. On their well-defended view, the specific circumstances of the witnesses at the time they testify (among other things) are used to estimate a relevant Bayes's factor instead of naïve appeals to "principles of testimony" or risky speculations about the moral character or track record of the witnesses.

Jantzen's main point is that Bayesian analyses of historical testimony are flawed because they don't take into account the fact that history tends to preserve some testimony and not other testimony in a biased fashion. Specifically, testimony supporting the occurrence of extraordinary events is often much more likely to be recorded and preserved in the historical record than testimony supporting the non-occurrence of those events. The importance of this "sampling bias" will be overlooked if one simply updates the credence one gives to the occurrence of such an event by conditionalizing on the testimony itself, ignoring the historical process by which such testimony is transmitted to us. Jantzen does not believe that this specific problem has been addressed by Bayesians. That may be true, but the more general mistake of updating on information while ignoring the process generating that information has been addressed by Bayesians, and that mistake, while common, is clearly not essential to Bayesianism.

Luc Bovens (either by lucky coincidence or brilliant editorial intention) specifically discusses, from a Bayesian perspective, the importance of taking into account "protocols" or information-generating processes in chapter 4. His goal is to "vindicate James against Alston" on the issue of whether miracle-like events that happen to oneself provide (or can be reasonably taken to provide) much stronger evidence for God's existence than high quality testimony about miracle-like events that happen to someone else. (William James says "yes," and William P. Alston says "no.") Roughly, Bovens's main point is that when one comes to believe in God because such an event happens to oneself (like St. Paul on the road to Damascus), one typically lacks or is uninterested in base-rate information about the infrequency with which such events happen, information that could lower the evidentiary value of the event since the occurrence

of some miracle-like events is inevitable in a naturalistic world with sufficiently many events. In contrast, testimony about miracle-like events that happen to others often comes with information at least suggesting that such events occur no more often than one would expect by chance. This is a worthwhile point, though it may fall short of vindicating James against Alston, since one might hope that a *very* reasonable victim of a miracle-like event would take the time to inquire about the frequency with which such events occur before doing anything drastic like converting to or helping to create a new religion.

Speaking of seeking base-rate information, Richard Swinburne, a very reasonable theist if there ever was one, evaluates the multiverse objection to the fine-tuning design argument for theism in chapter 6. If sufficiently many and varied universes exist, then perhaps it is to be expected that some of them are fine-tuned for intelligent life even if God doesn't exist. So stated, the objection seems much more straightforward than it really is. Swinburne digs much deeper, ultimately arguing that recognizing the possibility of a multiverse has very little impact on the force of the fine-tuning argument. In part this is because, unlike a theistic multiverse hypothesis, an atheistic multiverse hypothesis capable of accounting for fine-tuning would have to be very complicated and so extremely improbable a priori. Swinburne's chapter follows, quite appropriately, a very ambitious chapter by David H. Glass on the broader issue of how to determine whether or not (or to what extent) design arguments are undermined by scientific explanations of apparent design *that are compatible with theism*. Multiverse explanations of fine-tuning are, of course, a good example of that.

In chapter 7, Richard Otte aims to show that "theists should not believe evil, or our ignorance of a good reason for God to permit evil, is evidence against religious belief or the existence of God, at all" (127). Unfortunately, this result sounds more impressive than it is, and it *is* more impressive than what Otte actually argues for. It is more impressive than what he actually argues for because, while he does argue for the position that neither the existence of evil nor our ignorance of a good reason for God to permit evil is evidence against a certain religious belief that he calls *skeptical theism*, he does *not* argue for the position that neither evil nor our ignorance of a good reason for God to permit evil is evidence against *the existence of God*. Skeptical theism is the hypothesis that "Evil exists and God has a good reason to permit it that we are not capable of understanding" (130). At the very end of his chapter, Otte appears to consider a hypothesis that is closer to theism simpliciter. According to this hypothesis, evil exists and God has a good reason, *whether understandable or not*, to permit it. He thinks, however, that the same results will be obtained because "skeptical theists hold [skeptical theism], and thus assign [non-skeptical theism] a very low probability" (141). Though Otte claims at the beginning of his chapter that his arguments do not presuppose a particular account of probability, this remark appears to presuppose that prior probabilities are subjective, as

does his otherwise inexplicable claim that any evidence against theism is "irrelevant" if it is not also evidence against a typical theist's "religious beliefs as a whole" (129).

Otte's focus on the hypothesis of skeptical theism instead of on theism is also one of the reasons why his thesis is less impressive than it sounds. Notice that this hypothesis entails that evil exists—and so evil is not evidence against it—and it also entails that we are ignorant of a good reason for God to permit evil—and so such ignorance is not evidence against it. If only it were that easy to solve the problem of evil! Let's ignore, however, the fact that he obtains his results by building the evidence into his religious hypothesis. A second, much more important reason why his results are less impressive than they sound is that the strongest arguments from evil are not arguments from the failure of theodicy—they are not based on the fact that we are ignorant of a good reason for God to permit evil. Nor are they based on the bare existence of evil. Instead, they are based on facts about the amount, kinds, and distribution of evils in the world.

Consider, for example, an evidential argument against theism based on the existence of horrific evils. It is crucial not to conflate such an argument with one based on our ignorance of a good reason for God to permit horrific evils. Given that God exists and that there are horrific evils in the world, it is not all that surprising that we don't know God's actual or potential reasons for permitting those evils, as numerous skeptical theists have pointed out (though William L. Rowe has tried valiantly to show otherwise). Thus, our ignorance of a good reason for God to permit horrific evils is not *strong* evidence against theism (though it would go too far to claim, as Otte apparently would, that it is not any evidence at all against theism). It does not follow, however, that the horrific evils themselves are not all that surprising given theism and so it does not follow that the horrific evils themselves are not strong evidence against theism. Otte recognizes that his points apply only to Rowean arguments from evil and not to these other arguments, but he just *asserts* (on 133) that these other arguments fail.

Michael Tooley's Carnapian argument in chapter 8 of this volume is a good example of an evidential argument from evil that is not vulnerable to any of Otte's criticisms. Tooley's thesis is that the occurrence of a large number of horrific events (like the Lisbon earthquake) makes God's existence extremely unlikely. I cannot do justice here to the technically sophisticated argument that he offers in defense of that thesis, but for what it's worth I will offer a brief *caricature* of his argument. Consider the action of choosing not to prevent an event like the Lisbon earthquake when one knows one has the power to prevent it. Clearly the *known* wrong-making features of such an action outweigh any known right-making features it has, feeble attempts at theodicy notwithstanding. Thus, since unknown right-making features are no more likely than unknown wrong-making features, and since the absence of both unknown right-making features and unknown wrong-making features will render the action wrong all

things considered based on its known moral features, it is probable that such an action's total wrong-making features outweigh its total right-making features and so the action is wrong all things considered. A very large number of events like this, however, have in fact occurred, and so the probability that in every single case the action of choosing not to prevent the event is rendered right all things considered by unknown right-making features is extremely low. Therefore, since theism implies that every one of those actions is right all things considered, it follows that theism is also extremely improbable.

The topic of chapters 9 and 10 is Pascal's Wager. Alan Hájek carefully reconstructs all three of Pascal's formulations of the argument, arguing contra Ian Hacking that none of them are valid. He then offers two reformulations that he believes to be valid. Both, however, assign a negative infinite utility to wagering against God, which Hájek believes to be inconsistent with Pascal's theology. (There are two minor editorial glitches related to Hájek's reformulations. In chapter 1, in their summary of Hájek's essay, the editors mistakenly say that, according to Hájek, one of these reformulations is *consistent* with Pascal's theology; and the heading on page 182 for the section on Hájek's second reformulation says "Salvation has Infinite Utility, Damnation has Negative Utility" when it should say "Salvation has Finite Utility, Damnation has Negative Infinite Utility.") In chapter 10, Paul Bartha addresses the famous many-Gods objection to the wager, arguing for the interesting thesis that the problems it creates for the wager argument are either resolvable or already present in the original one-God formulation of the argument.

Chapter 11 has a misleading title: "Does Religious Disagreement Actually Aid the Case for Theism?" The author, Joshua C. Thurow, makes no attempt to defend an answer to that question. Instead, his goal is to show that it could "well turn out" either that disagreement aids the case for theism or that it aids the case for atheism. So perhaps "*Might* Religious Disagreement Aid the Case for Theism *or Atheism*?" would have been a more accurate title. But even that might be a bit misleading, because it could also well turn out, consistent with everything Thurow argues for in the chapter, that disagreement aids the case for suspending judgment on God's existence.

In the first three parts of the chapter, Thurow introduces, makes, and develops an interesting general point about the epistemology of disagreement. Broadly speaking, Thurow accepts the "equal weight view" on this issue. On this view, when one disagrees with epistemic peers, one should give no more weight to one's own judgment about the relevant evidence than to the judgments of one's peers. One objection to the equal weight view is that it implies "spinelessness": one would have to suspend judgment about almost all interesting philosophical, religious, moral, and political issues. Thurow argues that the equal weight view does not have this implication. Instead, when epistemic peers disagree about the truth-value of p, the appropriate response to such disagreement will vary, depending

in part on the specific source of that disagreement and on the extent to which those peers *agree* about the impact of some of their shared evidence on p's probability. For example, if the two sides agree that part of their evidence strongly supports p (or strongly supports the denial of p) and disagree only on the evidential significance of some other part of their evidence, then giving equal weight to each other's views could result in rational agreement on p's truth (or falsity). In the fourth and final part of the chapter, Thurow suggests optimistically that his point might very well apply to the disagreement between theists and atheists. That, however, would be very difficult to show.

The volume ends on a high note, with a splendid and cautiously titled chapter by Lara Buchak called "*Can* It Be Rational to Have Faith?" (my italics). The first half of the chapter develops a unified account of religious and non-religious faith. The second half attempts to specify the conditions under which faith can be practically rational. Buchak also briefly considers the issue of epistemic rationality, but only in a very weak (subjective Bayesian) sense.

By examining statements involving the word "faith" (both in religious and mundane contexts), Buchak arrives at the following six pre-theoretical desiderata. First, having faith involves taking some proposition to be true (even if one doesn't believe it). Second, the truth or falsity of that proposition is important to the person who has faith. Third, that proposition is uncertain. Fourth, faith makes a difference to one's behavior and so is linked to some action. Fifth, faith is action-relative—one can have faith relative to one action but not another. And sixth, faith involves going beyond the evidence in some way. She also seems to assume that faith is virtuous (or at least not vicious) insofar as she dismisses certain analyses on the grounds that they conflict with "religious ethics and the ethics of friendship" (229 and 230).

Here is a paraphrase of Buchak's elegant formal analysis (234):

> A person S has faith that X, expressed by act A, if and only if (i) S performs A when there is some alternative act B such that S strictly prefers A&X to B&X and strictly prefers B&~X to A&~X, and (ii) S prefers to commit to A before examining additional evidence rather than to postpone a decision about A until examining additional evidence.

On this analysis, whether a given instance of faith is rational (in the practical sense) depends on two factors. First, the credence that the agent ought (in the epistemic sense) to give to the statement X must be sufficiently high to make the action A practically rational. Second, the willingness to commit to A without gathering more evidence must be rational, either (i) because the monetary, cognitive, or interpersonal costs of gathering such evidence or of postponing a decision to do A would be too great, or (ii) because one would rationally do A regardless of what new evidence one might gather, or (more controversially) (iii) because the risk of discovering evidence making it rational not to do A *even though X is true* is too great.

The issue of which instances of religious faith, if any, satisfy these two conditions is beyond the scope of Buchak's paper. It seems likely to me that some will, especially ones that have modest propositional objects and that are expressed by low cost actions. Less likely to pass muster, however, are instances of great faith, such as having faith that the Christian God exists and expressing that faith by an act of martyrdom.

It is worth mentioning in closing, if this is not already obvious, that many of the essays in this volume attempt to address controversial issues in philosophy of religion by first addressing controversial issues in confirmation theory or formal epistemology or decision theory. In some cases, the result is that the papers don't get very far on the actual topics in philosophy of religion that allegedly motivate them. I don't mention this as a criticism of the volume or of any of its essays, but I do hope that some of the talented authors of these essays regard their work here as initiating a research program in the philosophy of religion instead of terminating one.[1]

Moral Perception, by Robert Audi. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013. 194 pages. $35 (cloth).

MICHAEL FUERSTEIN, St. Olaf College

In this relatively compact volume, Robert Audi offers a substantive analytical treatment of moral perception, and situates it within a broader epistemological intuitionism that he has developed elsewhere. Audi's primary thesis is that we can perceive moral properties, and that this capacity for moral perception plays a major role in moral judgment and knowledge. On Audi's view, by establishing a capacity for moral perception, he has also established the possibility of both moral objectivity and the rational resolution of moral disagreement (4).

The first of the book's two sections lays out Audi's conception of moral perception and the primary arguments in its favor. Audi's view is that we perceive moral properties by perceiving their physical "base properties," i.e., the physical properties on which moral properties are "consequential" (39). Thus, when we perceive someone cheating on an exam, we do not directly perceive the moral property of injustice in the way that we directly perceive, say, the property of roundness. Instead, we perceive injustice in virtue of having perceived the ordinary physical properties that instantiate cheating in this case. Audi's view thus aims to show how moral perception is possible while avoiding an ambitious form of moral naturalism, i.e., the view that moral properties are part of the natural order in just the same way that tables, chairs, and other familiar objects of perception are. Audi

[1]I am very grateful to my students, James Elliott, Jonathan Fuqua, and Mark Satta, for helping me with this review.