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Book Review: The Untamed God: A Philosophical Exploration Of Divine Perfection, Simplicity, And Immutability

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This brings us full circle back to Grenberg's starting point in Kant's account of finite human rational agency as dependent and corrupt that is given its most notable exposition in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. She articulates that account as "a general claim about the human condition: human beings are desiring and needy beings who tend in a whole variety of ways to value the self improperly relative to other objects of moral value" (p. 48). In a manner that is faithful to Kant's own careful parsing of the differences between the moral and the religious and between the philosophical and the theological, Grenberg tries to provide "a philosophically respectable, and not necessarily religious, account of a transcendent standard, and the limits of human nature in the face of it" as the context in which to make the case for the centrality of humility for a virtuous human life (p. 140). This careful eschewing of paths that lead to the theological—a move that allows affirmation of a "secular (at times gentler), but always radical evil"—respects the a-theological (and even anti-theological) perspectives informing many of the interlocutors her work explicitly engages (p. 42).

I hope, however, that this is does not become the end of Grenberg's "story of dependence, corruption and virtue," because there is reason to think that her work offers something of value for the project of constructing philosophical and theological anthropologies that can reckon with the fractured aftermath of modernity. Grenberg makes a promising start in the direction of providing what Charles Taylor calls an "anthropology of situated freedom" (*Sources of the Self*, p. 515) in her depiction of "the challenge of the human condition" as "the task of learning to love the self well, that is to love the self in a way that does not undermine our equally inherent end of being moral" (p. 48). The theological crux here, of course, is the extent to which such a properly ordered love of self is only possible in view of first being loved by God.

The Untamed God: A Philosophical Exploration of Divine Perfection, Simplicity and Immutability, by Jay Wesley Richards. Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003. 267 pp. \$26.00 (paper).

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Jay W. Richards's book *The Untamed God* is a creative and clearly written work that applies contemporary analytic metaphysics to the doctrines of divine immutability and divine simplicity. As part of his exploration of these two doctrines, Richards interacts with the work of Karl Barth and Charles Hartshorne.

In the first chapter of the book Richards introduces classical theism and some of the logical difficulties the doctrine of God faces within this traditional framework. He begins by discussing the methods classical theists use when developing accounts of God's attributes. After reviewing both Aquinas's doctrine of God and Protestant Scholasticism, Richards suggests that there is a tension in classical theism between biblical claims about God and the doctrine of God developed by Christian scholars. In

particular, he points to three central themes of Christian theology that are in conflict.

The first of these themes is a commitment to the authority of Scripture. The second theme is a commitment to the claim that God is perfect or maximally great. He calls this theme the "Principle of Perfection" (PP hereafter). The final theme is what Richard calls the "Sovereignty-Aseity Conviction" (SAC hereafter). This theme is, roughly, the claim that God is not dependent on anything else and that all creation depends on him.

The above three themes come into conflict because a commitment to Scripture requires that the theologian ascribe to God properties that conflict with versions of the doctrine of divine simplicity and the doctrine of divine immutability. One cannot easily abandon these versions of the doctrines because they are motivated by both PP and SAC. For example, one might ascribe to God the property of *having created Jay Richards* and the property of *being maximally good*. It appears that these two properties are distinct (God has the former contingently and the latter necessarily) and thus ascribing God these properties would violate certain accounts of divine simplicity.

In chapter 2 Richards begins the task of reconciling a commitment to Scripture, PP and SAC. Here he endorses essentialism, "the thesis that persons, objects and entities have some of their properties necessarily or essentially, and others accidentally or contingently" (p. 64, author's italics.) Additionally, he claims that entities have an essence. Richards defends and elaborates on these positions by using the machinery of possible world semantics and the modal logic system S5. Those who do not have experience in modal metaphysics should not shy away from this chapter. Richards presents an accessible account of the development of contemporary possible worlds theory and the distinction between modality *de dicto* and modality *de re*.

Chapter 3 contains Richards's move from essentialism to the position of theological essentialism. He starts by suggesting reasons the theologian might make use of essentialism. Richard looks at the concept of intelligence, the use of counterfactuals in the Bible, and God's name in the Old Testament and concludes that there is some ground for the use of essentialist language in theology. He then goes on to argue specifically for the claim that God has both accidental and essential properties based on the fact that God actually created the world but was free not to. Richards concludes the chapter by filling out the doctrine of theological essentialism. Of particular interest, is his discussion of the Trinity. Richards shows that theological essentialism, at the very least, can articulate an orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. Further, he suggests some ways a Christian might benefit from using theological essentialism in her attempt to give a trinitarian theory.

After chapter 3, Richards begins a section of the book where he compares theological essentialism with the work of Barth and Hartshorne. One may be tempted to skip over these chapters of the book and go straight to the application of theological essentialism to the doctrine of God. One should resist this temptation. Chapters 4–7 are not essential to Richards's argument, but they are one of the most important features of the book.

The last forty years in philosophy have seen a remarkable increase in the number of philosophers who call themselves Christians and an increase in the number of philosophers who engage in what some might

call "speculative metaphysics." One result of these developments is that the literature in analytic philosophy of religion is growing in both size and sophistication every year. Unfortunately, many theologians, both liberal and conservative, have ignored this trend and not benefited from the work of philosophers of religion. Philosophers of religion often return the favor and do not attempt to engage modern theology. Richards's book challenges this trend and he should be applauded for putting his theory in conversation with two theologians whose work is in a different philosophical tradition. Throughout these four chapters the reader is enriched because he gains a better understanding of both the problems facing theological essentialism and some of the alternatives that have been proposed by theologians.

Chapter 4 begins with a discussion of Barth's view of the Word of God and the Trinity. Richards continues by focusing in on Barth's "actualism." Richards summarizes this view as the claim that "God as the preeminent Subject has his being in his act" (p. 116). Richards focuses on this claim because Barth thought it separated himself from the classical theists who adopted a concept of being inherited from Greek philosophy. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Barth's view of the perfections God. Richards portrays Barth's account as a descendant of classical theism, but argues that Barth breaks with tradition by rejecting the doctrine of divine simplicity.

In chapter 5 Richards explores how Barth's actualism interacts with the three themes of classical theism and the similarities and differences it has with Richards's theological essentialism. In the first part of the chapter, Richards shows how Barth's view contains all three of the themes of classical theism. Richards then moves deeper into Barth's view and considers whether or not Barth would endorse "strong actualism," the view that "For any essential property P, God has P if and only if God has chosen P from a set of alternatives" (p. 134). This discussion is important because if Barth does endorse strong actualism, then there is a major point of dispute between Barth's actualism and theological essentialism. Richards argues that it is not necessary to read Barth as endorsing strong actualism, and that the differences between the two views are relatively minor.

Chapter 6 is the first of two chapters that consider the work of Hartshorne. In this chapter Richards does a fine job of surveying Hartshorne's philosophical and theological commitments. Richards touches on Hartshorne's metaphysical method, his notion of relativity, panpsychism, and his view of events. The chapter ends with a problem for classical theism and theological essentialism. Hartshorne accepts both the claim that God has contingent properties and a version of PP. However, he takes it that if both these claims are true, then panentheism must follow, thus violating SAC.

In chapter 7 Richards responds to the above challenge to theological essentialism. First, he presents Hartshorne's argument for panentheism based on the unsurpassability of God. Richards argues that Hartshorne's argument fails because it equivocates between two different conceptions of perfection. Next, Richards considers Hartshorne's arguments for panentheism based on God's creativity and freedom. Richards rejects these arguments and points to implausible metaphysical assumptions Hartshorne must use if the arguments are to succeed.

Richards's goal in the final two chapters is to show that theological essentialism can adequately account for the doctrines of divine immutability and simplicity and thus reconcile the three themes of classical theism. Chapter 8 starts with a survey of the motivations for the doctrine of divine immutability and the various versions of the doctrine one might hold. Richards then considers the question of whether or not the theological essentialist can adopt the position that none of God's properties can change (he calls this position "strong divine immutability"). Ultimately, Richards concludes that theological essentialism is incompatible with strong divine immutability but that it can save most of what we care about in the doctrine.

In chapter 9 Richards attempts to reconcile the doctrine of divine simplicity with theological essentialism. As in the last chapter, he begins with a look at the motivations for the doctrine and the various formulations of it. He proceeds to show that theological essentialism is compatible with the versions of the doctrine that require that God not be composite and that God's essential properties be coextensive. However, some contemporary scholars insist that an acceptable version of the doctrine of simplicity must entail that all God's properties are coextensive and that all God's properties are identical with God himself. Richards rejects this requirement, arguing that both God's freedom and the doctrine of the Trinity rule out the strongest versions of the doctrine of divine simplicity.

Richards concludes the book by considering someone who, motivated by SAC, worries that theological essentialism requires unacceptable commitment to abstract entities such as possible worlds that are separate from God. Richards sympathizes with this worry and suggests that the theological essentialist adopt the doctrine of divine ideas.

One weakness of the book is that some of the metaphysics done in chapter 2 is misleading. For example, Richards uses the term "mereological essentialism" to label the doctrine that individuals have all their properties essentially (p. 78). This term is more properly used for the doctrine that objects have all of their *parts* essentially. Additionally, he objects to Lewis' account of possible worlds on the basis that it is committed to "nonexistent existents" (p. 57). But this is unfair to the Ludovician. She would agree that there are some objects that exist that are not actual; but she would be merely claiming that there are some objects that are not spatiotemporally related to us. The Ludovician is not a Meinongian, she simply believes that there exists more objects than common sense is willing to grant. Finally, the chapter would be improved by use of the distinction between the actual world (that is the possible world that is actualized) and what some philosophers would call "the World" (that is the thing the possible world represents). None of these problems change the fact that there is a generally accepted account of possible worlds that the theological essentialist can make use of.

Richards's book is ambitious and covers a wide range of material clearly and efficiently. It is a book well suited for classroom use and the research efforts of anyone thinking about divine attributes. Those that see places to object and questions to be raised should take the opportunity to engage in the dialogue that Richards has started.