

7-1-2009

Peter Forrest, DEVELOPMENTAL THEISM: FROM PURE WILL TO UNBOUNDED LOVE

Daniel Dombrowski

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

Recommended Citation

Dombrowski, Daniel (2009) "Peter Forrest, DEVELOPMENTAL THEISM: FROM PURE WILL TO UNBOUNDED LOVE," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 3 , Article 9.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil200926321

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol26/iss3/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at 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.

too confident in their "abortion choice" beliefs. Wherever the truth lies in this contentious matter, it is not to be found in association with the easy conscience over the practice of abortion that characterizes so many in our culture. We may hope, therefore, that Beckwith's book will prick a conscience or two. The abortion debate should not go away and Beckwith has made a significant contribution to seeing that it doesn't.

Developmental Theism: From Pure Will to Unbounded Love by Peter Forrest. Clarendon Press, 2007. Pp. 199. \$55 (cloth).

DANIEL DOMBROWSKI, Seattle University

Both the existence and the concept of God are examined in this thought-provoking book. The author's treatment of the existence of God is built foursquare on a philosophical anthropology. There is a spectrum of philosophical positions regarding what human beings are: reductive materialism sees consciousness and agency (the mental) as redundant of the physical; moderate materialism sees the mental as nonredundant of the physical, but as nonetheless correlated with the physical in a metaphysically necessary fashion; moderate idealism sees the physical as nonredundant of the mental, but as nonetheless correlated with the mental in a metaphysically necessary fashion; reductive idealism sees the physical as redundant of the mental; and, of course, dualism sees the mental and the physical as correlated only contingently.

Forrest thinks that the probability of theism is negligible only if we are almost certain of reductive materialism. That is, we have good reason to be theists. But the author does not so much think that we should be confident theists as we should not be confident atheists.

Among the options in philosophical anthropology listed in the first paragraph, it is moderate materialism that Forrest defends, a position that coheres with theism better than its chief rival, dualism. Because of the current dominance of materialism in philosophy, he thinks that philosophical theists should pay attention to a type of theism that is built on a moderate materialist basis. One beneficial consequence of a theism that is built on moderate materialism is that it avoids talking of miraculous intervention into the natural world by a supernatural God. It is precisely this sort of talk that often prevents philosophical theists from getting a fair hearing. (Forrest's previous book was titled *God without the Supernatural: A Defense of Naturalistic Theism*.)

Most of the book, however, concerns not the existence of God, but the concept of God. God changes, on Forrest's view, such that the history of religious thought can exhibit genuine, if uneven, progress just as the history of scientific thought can do so. Although he acknowledges that many of his views are like those of Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, and David Ray Griffin (indeed, he calls his position neoclassical theism, which is a Hartshornian commonplace), he does not really engage with process thinkers in any significant way. Rather, he reaches his conclusions

via dialectical exchanges with Richard Swinburne, Robert Adams, Brian Leftow, and other analytic philosophers.

Forrest rejects not only the orthodox view that God is in every respect unchanging, he also rejects the orthodox view that God is a strictly spiritual being with no material embodiment. Like Whitehead, Hartshorne, and Griffin, he rejects the nondevelopmental God of classical theism, and like Hartshorne and Griffin, he defends the concept of a panentheistic God who is the World Soul, the soul not for this or that particular body, but for the whole embodied world.

There are also notable differences from process thinkers, in fact from both classical and neoclassical theists. In some respects Forrest's view is *sui generis*. For example, his concept of God is one wherein the "Primordial God" is initially all powerful but unloving. Once God creates natural laws and free creatures, however, God is thereby limited by these creations. But this is not a total loss in that God gradually acquires a loving character in response to creaturely joys and sufferings. Thus, Forrest's developmental theism traces the movement from a God who was initially omnipotent but not omnibenevolent to one who is omnibenevolent but not omnipotent. (By contrast, Hartshorne's God is consistently omnibenevolent in responding to creaturely suffering and consistently exhibits ideal—if not omnipotent—power.)

However odd this view seems at first to classical theists and even to other neoclassical theists, it is certainly worth taking the ride with Forrest through his witty, nuanced, and insightful treatments of what love is (whether human or divine), of why nonhuman animals suffer, and of why his view of theism is the simplest theistic hypothesis. This is the sort of book that amply rewards the reader for his or her efforts. At no point does one get the impression that Forrest is engaging in a strictly "academic" enterprise in the pejorative sense. And despite the heterodox nature of some of the author's conclusions, he heroically tries to show how his views help to clarify traditional problems surrounding the trinity, real presence in the eucharist, and the Chalcedonian account of the incarnation. His heterodox conclusions grow out of thoroughly orthodox concerns and problems.

The Primordial God's "fission" into three persons obviously leads to relations among these three persons, but, according to Forrest, these are not necessarily loving relations. Rather, God *acquires* a loving character only after free creatures are created, whose joys and sufferings, and the divine responses to such joys and sufferings, enable God to increasingly become a loving agent. God grows into an omnibenevolent being. Forrest's view seems to be that before the creaturely joys and sufferings were experienced by God there was little opportunity for God to acquire any character at all, much less a loving one.

God's moral growth, he thinks, is the flip side of God's kenotic abdication of power. This is for two reasons. "In the beginning" God surveys all the possible worlds that could be created, but once the natural laws that govern some particular world are in place they have a force that not even God can completely overturn. Analogously, once God creates libertarian free creatures, divine power is like Swiss cheese, on Forrest's account, in that creaturely power to choose makes a hole in the divine efficacy. And it is only these kenotic abandonments of omnipotent power, he thinks,

that make possible the growth of divine love. In this regard Forrest seems closer to "open" theists like Clark Pinnock than to process theists.

It seems to me that Forrest paradoxically grants both too much and too little power to God. First, he grants too much power to God when he claims that the Primordial God is omnipotent. Forrest himself admits that at the first moment of time God was not entirely alone in that abstract entities (such as universals, logical truths, and so on), which exist necessarily, would have been there to condition divine power. Presumably not even God can violate the law of noncontradiction; hence, not even God is *omnipotent*. And second, it seems to me that Forrest grants too little power to God when he says that, once God creates free agents, God thereby chooses to have no power whatsoever over them. It is not clear that the freedom of the creatures is violated if God has *persuasive* power over them by way of providing ideals to them and offering them a model of perfection. It is only *coercive* divine power over the creatures that threatens their libertarian freedom, or so it could be argued.

Neoclassical (i.e., process) theists will surely welcome this book, despite their disagreement with some parts of it. It is to be hoped that classical theists who are also analytic philosophers will also read it in that they are its intended audience.

One excellent feature of the book that should be of interest to theists of all stripes is its treatment of aesthetics, broadly conceived so as to include an account of pleasurable or painful feeling, from the ancient Greek word for feeling, *aisthesis*. Why did God create the world that was, in fact, created? Forrest's response to this question is in terms of a theory of "hedonic tone." This theory supports the claim that aesthetics, in a way, precedes both ethics and metaphysics. Primitive feelings of joy are presupposed by consequentialists who seek to maximize these, just as primitive sufferings are presupposed by the effort to minimize these both in human society and among sentient beings in general. On Forrest's account, divine beauty seems to consist in both God's ability to bring our world into existence and to lovingly respond to creaturely joys and sufferings once it gets going. Divine beauty, it seems, becomes apparent to us when we try to view the cosmos as a valuable whole and in the long run. Consequentialism actually supports a theistic worldview.

Unfortunately, Forrest denigrates perfect being theology, whether found in classical theists like Katherin Rogers or in a neoclassical theist like (myself or) Hartshorne. The Anselmian effort to reach clarity regarding that than which no greater can be conceived is criticized by Forrest because, although God may become perfectly loving over time, such perfection is not there from the beginning. That is, what is really distinctive about the author's approach is not that he is a developmental theist, but that he denies that what we mean by "God" is a being that is by its very nature perfect.

I would be remiss if I did not mention in closing that there is not the slightest hint of dogmatism in the book. Throughout the book Forrest is genuinely interested in productive dialectical exchange with fellow theists. It would be a mistake, I think, for philosophical theists to put this book at the bottom of their reading lists.