

1-1-2009

Book Review: Paradox In Christian Theology: An Analysis Of Its Presence, Character, And Epsitemic Status

Dale Tuggy

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

Recommended Citation

Tuggy, Dale (2009) "Book Review: Paradox In Christian Theology: An Analysis Of Its Presence, Character, And Epsitemic Status," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol26/iss1/9>

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.

possibilities." Along the same lines, Heidegger³ writes: "It is not the case that objects are first present as bare realities, as objects in some natural state, and that they then in the course of our experience receive the garb of a value-character, so they do not have to run around naked." From the point of view of an unloving [read: affectively flat] observer, it would not even be self-evident that the external world exists. (p. 101; the first quotation is from Jonathan Lear)

Emotions all presuppose some kind of concern, some kind of caring about things; but in this sense even hatred is love—love of the destruction or suffering of what one hates. The other concept of love, the one that operates in the conclusion that something is lovable, is in the neighborhood of Christian *agape*; such a love, if it were true, could function as the ground of an excellent character and life. Furtak is aware of this distinction and writes of "love [being] cultivated into a caring, unselfish disposition" (p. 121; see p. 98), but we would like to see careful analysis of the distinction and of how the one kind of "love" may develop into the other. I say "at least" two concepts of love are run together, because others are also relevant to the discussion. Kierkegaard distinguishes preferential love from neighbor love (*agape*), and of course there are different kinds of preferential love—friendship, family affection, romantic attachment. But Furtak does not clarify and use these distinctions. Nor does he deal with the problem, in Kierkegaard interpretation, of the accessibility of *agape* to human experience. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard says that neighbor-love was not known to paganism, implying that it is known only through Christian revelation; but he sometimes also seems to treat it as though it is naturally accessible.

Paradox in Christian Theology: An Analysis of Its Presence, Character, and Epistemic Status, by James Anderson. Paternoster Theological Monographs, 2007. Pp. xii + 328. \$43 (paper).

DALE TUGGY, SUNY Fredonia

As far as I know, this book is the all-time most sophisticated, well developed, and plausible defense of the idea that Christians may rationally believe and know apparently contradictory doctrines. Theological literature on "mysteries" is too often marred with unclarity, epistemic carelessness and confusion, and even mystery-mongering, that is, perverse delight in inconsistency (apparent and/or real). In contrast, this book by a philosophically informed and capable young theologian sparkles with Plantingian clarity, sobriety, intellectual honesty, originality, and analytic power (and also, with a lot of Plantingian epistemology, as we'll see.)

³Heidegger's '*Sorge*' seems a better term for the generalized disposition that lies at the basis of all emotional life than 'love.' *Sorge* (as directed at contingent states of affairs) is more properly the opposite of Stoic *apatheia*.

Anderson's ambitious project cuts against the grain of most contemporary philosophical theology. Consider the following inconsistent triad:

- C: If some claim appears after careful reflection to be contradictory I shouldn't believe it.
- O: The orthodox Christian doctrine of X appears after careful reflection to be contradictory.
- B: I should believe the orthodox Christian doctrine of X.

What to do in the face of such a conundrum? There are three popular responses.

Most current-day philosophical theologians—or at any rate, many of the most prominent among them—habitually reject O (while affirming C and B), offering some plausible interpretation of X on which X comes out apparently consistent. Anderson, along with probably many theologians and other believers outside the profession of philosophy, rejects this move, as he holds that the reinterpreted X is in fact always out of line with (1) the mainstream of the historic Christian tradition, (2) the ecumenical creeds, rightly interpreted according to the intentions of their framers, and (3) the Bible itself.

A second response is to reject the Orthodox version of doctrine X; that is, reject B (keeping C and O). Theology is inherently conservative, and in keeping with this tendency, Anderson will have none of it, equating it with an abandonment of Christianity.

The third response is to reject C (keeping B and O); this is Anderson's position, which for lack of a better term I call a "mysterian" stance. He attributes adherence to C to "rationalism," to a prideful preference for our own intuitions over against the clear deliverances of scripture. What is surprising and refreshing is the epistemological sophistication he brings to play in developing and defending this mysterian stance.

The book proceeds as follows. A "paradox" is an apparently contradictory claim. (pp. 5–6) The orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, according to Anderson, are paradoxes. In the second and third chapters he recounts the development of these doctrines in the fourth and fifth centuries, and relentlessly dismisses recent attempts to render these doctrines seemingly consistent, by the likes of Barth, Rahner, Cornelius Plantinga, Swinburne, Brown, Martinich, Rea, Brower, Feenstra, Davis, and Morris. He argues that "those interpretations purporting to avoid both paradox and heterodoxy inevitably fail on at least one of the two counts" (p. 105).

In the fourth chapter he convincingly argues against several alternatives to his mysterian stance: theological anti-realism, anti-deductivism (i.e., qualifying the laws of logic), dialetheism, doctrinal revisionism (i.e., my second response to the inconsistent triad above), what he calls semantic minimalism (claiming that the content of the doctrine in question is too vague to be even apparently contradictory), and the science-inspired theory of "complementarity."

The long fifth chapter starts with a beautiful exposition of Alvin Plantinga's epistemology. He locates an ambiguity in the role of the Bible in

Plantinga's epistemology of Christian belief, and suggests some fixes (pp. 181–189). He points out that in *Warranted Christian Belief* Plantinga is only trying to offer a model of how Christians might be warranted in believing what Plantinga calls “the main lines of the Christian story” (pp. 189–190). Contrary to Anderson, Plantinga assumes that there are orthodox and apparently consistent versions of the Trinity and Incarnation doctrines (p. 215). Moreover, Plantinga's “extended A/C” (Aquinas-Calvin) model covers only beliefs based on the explicit content of the Bible, and not creedal doctrines which are (in Anderson's view) based on the explicit *and implicit* teachings therein (pp. 190–191, 209). Anderson aims to fill this gap.

Anderson thus extends Plantinga's theory further, in the fifth and sixth chapters, to cover how Christian beliefs may, if Christianity is true, be warranted, both for sophisticates and for ordinary believers. While this involves some Reformed assumptions about scripture and tradition, Anderson claims that these are not obviously essential to the success of the project. Basically, if Christianity is true, it is plausible to think that a believer could be warranted in taking the Bible to be a reliable communication from God. And Christian beliefs may be directly or indirectly based on the Bible.

But, comes the objection, if a doctrine appears to be contradictory, shouldn't that trump its claim to be part of a divine revelation? Even if, say, Chrissy Christian's belief in the Trinity were warranted, wouldn't the realization that the doctrine seems contradictory give Chrissy a “defeater” for her trinitarian belief? Anderson takes the bull by the horns here, deploying the whole machinery of undercutting vs. rebutting defeaters, defeater-defeaters, and defeater-insulators. He argues that a warranted belief in divine incomprehensibility will prevent one's beliefs regarding the Trinity and Incarnation from defeat by one's belief that they seem inconsistent (pp. 250–256). (More on this crucial point below.)

In the sixth chapter, Anderson gives the heart of his account of our knowledge of “mysteries,” what he calls his RAPT (Rational Affirmation of Paradoxical Theology) theory. He argues that we should take apparent contradictions in orthodox Christian theology to be MACRUEs (Merely Apparent Contradictions Resulting from Unarticulated Equivocation). When we cannot find adequate terms to express some proposition, we are sometimes driven to assert what appears to be a contradiction, such as “I'm concerned about my wife's operation, and I'm not concerned about my wife's operation” (p. 222). This is a MACRUE, and it in fact expresses a truth, hence a consistent proposition, despite appearances. The equivocation here is in the term “concerned”; he *is* concerned in that he cares about what happens to his wife, but he's *not* concerned in the sense of being worried about the outcome, as he knows the surgeon to be extremely competent (p. 223).

Here though, as Anderson points out, we can grasp both meanings of “concerned” which constitute the equivocation. But theological cases are more worrisome. One paradox he examines is: “God is one divine being and God is three divine beings” (p. 226). None of those terms appear equivocal, and yet at least one must be, if that statement is to only *appear* to express a contradiction. Anderson tries out slapping subscript numbers on various terms (e.g., “God is one divine₁ being and God is three divine₂,”

beings.”), but that seems *ad hoc*, and worse, it seems empty—the epitome of a merely formal or verbal solution to a very real difficulty.

Anderson argues that this move isn't *ad hoc* because if God is incomprehensible (as nearly all Christians grant), then we should expect apparent contradictions to arise in our thinking and speaking about him (pp. 237–243). Moreover, all of this, Anderson argues, fits well with a doctrine of analogy, in light of which we can see that the disambiguated terms needn't be devoid of meaning. Rather, they each have a meaning which partially, but not completely, overlaps how we use those terms in ordinary contexts.

In sum, if Christianity were true, we would expect that Christians would reasonably believe in and know about “mysteries,” where a “mystery” is “*a metaphysical state of affairs the revelation of which appears implicitly contradictory to us on account of present limitations in our cognitive apparatus and thus resists systematic description in a perspicuously consistent manner*” (p. 245, original italics). Facts are mysterious in the primary sense, then, and doctrines are mysterious derivatively, insofar as they are about these sorts of facts (p. 246). Note that Anderson avoids the hard to justify claim that a “mystery” is permanently beyond human capacities. The seventh chapter tangles, somewhat less convincingly, with other objections to his mysterious position on the Trinity and Incarnation, and the eighth chapter briefly summarizes his project and suggests a few implications of it for biblical interpretation and apologetics.

A project this ambitious bristles with difficulties, but here I can only sketch out a central one. Anderson's project seems to crucially involve the following *non sequitur*: (1) If God exists, then God is incomprehensible. (2) Therefore, if God exists, then it is likely that humans in thinking about God along the lines of God's self-revelation in the Bible will be forced into apparently contradictory thoughts and statements. The problem is that (2) does not follow from (1), because Anderson's doctrine of “divine incomprehensibility” is just the uncontroversial claim that “although God can be known in part, he cannot be known fully and exhaustively” (p. 237). That is a very weak claim, to which probably no theist will object. Given our limited information, the probability of God's putting us in a paradoxical theological situation is inscrutable, not more probable than not. A child may not understand the sexual aspect of her parents' relationship, but it does not follow that she will probably run into paradoxes in thinking about her parents. Whether she does or not depends on her cognitive capacities, on precisely what information her parents choose to reveal, and perhaps on her own free choices concerning how she reflects on her parents' relationship. It only follows from divine incomprehensibility that we cannot be sure or anything close to it that we will never run into paradoxes in theology. Non-mysterians, it seems to me, can happily admit this, and proceed in their non-mysterian ways.

But if we lack the grounds to expect theological paradoxes, then the clear and stable appearance of contradiction seems to provide an undefeated defeater for the warrant and justification of our paradoxical theological claims after all. (Cf. p. 252) Without a stronger doctrine of incomprehensibility, there is no way to rule out that our cherished paradoxes have been created by our misguided speculations or wrongheaded scriptural exegesis, rather

than being thrust on us by transcendent facts together with our epistemic limits. In sum, it is not clear that the mysterian response to my inconsistent triad above fares better than the other two. Would a stronger doctrine of divine incomprehensibility be worth the price?

This book deserves to be widely read by students of theology, philosophy of religion, and apologetics. It is nicely written, organized, and presented, and features a good index, and only very few (insignificant) typographical errors. It would provide ideal material for graduate level seminars in any of the aforementioned fields. Some readers will, like this reviewer, take this book to suggest that the mysterian defense of Christian belief is a philosophical dead end, while others will take it as presenting an exciting, well-motivated, and genuinely different apologetic option. Either way, there's apt material for reflection here, whether one is trying to come up with a defeater-defeater-defeater, or trying to shore up the mysterian defenses.

The God of Metaphysics: Being a Study of the Metaphysics and Religious Doctrines of Spinoza, Hegel, Kierkegaard, T. H. Green, Bernard Bosanquet, Josiah Royce, A. N. Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, and Concluding with a Defence of Pantheistic Idealism, by T. L. S. Sprigge. Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. 576. \$99.00.

WILLIAM LAD SESSIONS, Washington and Lee University

This is an old-fashioned book, in many ways, and not just in its massive subtitle. Its subject, point of view, and position are all unfashionable, to be sure. But it is out of joint with the philosophical times in many other ways: it is a very long monograph in an era of journal pieces and books that are little more than collections of those pieces (Professor Sprigge confesses that he "is not a great reader of philosophical articles . . . just as I avoid reading short stories. Neither of these forms allows one to immerse oneself in another's world, but acts only so as to jerk one out of one's own." [p. viii]); its style is leisurely and discursive, eschewing precise formalization even when presenting complex arguments; its idioms are often from another era; its masculine pronouns are politically incorrect; it lavishes attention on philosophers mostly ignored or forgotten today (Green, Bosanquet, Royce); and it takes seriously views rarely considered, much less defended in public anymore. In this Age of Naturalism, Professor Sprigge is a resolute defender of Absolute Idealism, something many believe expired in the nineteenth century. "Personally," he says, "I see no more reason why a nineteenth-century thinker might not be right as against what seems undeniable common sense today" (p. 111).

I confess to having enjoyed reading this weighty tome, in daily moderation. It has much to interest an open-minded contemporary reader. I would divide the book into three basic parts (versus Sprigge's ten chapters). First, Sprigge sketches the problematical relation of the God of the metaphysicians to the God of religion, asking both whether a notion of God metaphysically derived overlaps or is congruent with religious conceptions of God and also whether a metaphysical God can serve religious