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Book Review: Knowledge Of God

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ontology of action has this fairly striking entailment: If causal determinism is true, then not only is there no free will, there is also no action or intentional behavior at all. How plausible is this result? (Given the force and creativity of recent compatibilist accounts of freedom and agency, I am inclined, even as a libertarian, to favor a view whereby what is at stake in the compatibility debate is something more modest than the *complete range* of our distinctively human capacities for practical rationality.) These brief questions about some of the central claims of Goetz's book might be taken to imply only what we already knew; namely, that philosophers (like myself) with established positions in this domain are unlikely to be moved its arguments. So be it. There is still much to be learned from Goetz's development of them.

But I have been left with a somewhat deeper structural complaint. I began this review by highlighting the way in which the field of free will is particularly ripe for a large-scale defense of non-causal libertarianism—one that would do for the view what Robert Kane's *The Significance of Free Will* has done for event causalism or what E. J. Lowe's *Personal Agency* promises to do for agent causalism. Unfortunately, I do not believe that *Freedom, Teleology, and Evil* quite fits the bill. And this is not because Goetz is insufficiently careful, creative, or resourceful. Quite the contrary. The problem, instead, is that the book lacks the scope and unity of a paradigm defense. As I have mentioned, each chapter contains argument and criticism absolutely worthy of philosophical attention and reaction. It seems to me, however, that the parts do not hang together as a sustained and comprehensive defense. Goetz moves too quickly away from the core ontological issues that mark out the distinctive boundaries of his position. As a result, almost half of the book—chapters 5 and 6—is committed to issues that are unquestionably interesting and handled well but that do not deeply support the central thesis regarding non-causalism. Put another way, these two chapters are likely to strike readers as composed of material that would have made for a pair of intriguing appendices rather than as material constituting core chapters in a systematic defense. To be fair, Goetz was under no obligation to write the book I anticipated or to take up the defense project I claim remains to be executed. Perhaps it will be enough to note that whoever does eventually take up this project will find ample inspiration and illumination in Goetz's book, especially chapters 2 and 3. Furthermore, each chapter of *Freedom, Teleology, and Evil* will repay careful study on its own terms.

Knowledge of God, by Alvin Plantinga and Michael Tooley. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. Pp. x + 270. \$84.95 (hardcover), \$34.95 (paper).

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Part of a Blackwell series (Great Debates in Philosophy, Ernest Sosa, editor), this specific volume is a debate about "theistic belief, i.e., belief in God, and, more particularly, the epistemology of theistic belief" (p. 1). The

prominent opponents in this rigorous philosophical tussle are University of Notre Dame's Alvin Plantinga and University of Colorado—Boulder's Michael Tooley.

The book consists of six chapters: opposing lengthy opening statements (60 percent of the text), responses, and closing arguments. In addition to an index, each author provides several pages of relevant bibliography on theistic belief (pp. 249–256).

In chapter 1 (“Against Naturalism”), Plantinga jump-starts the debate with “an epistemological attack” on philosophical naturalism (p. 1). Readers familiar with Plantinga's works will not be surprised to read of his “three-part indictment” against naturalism. This includes (a) the affirmation of proper function, which gives epistemological advantage to theism (naturalism doesn't afford us knowledge); (b) naturalism's great difficulty in avoiding skepticism; and (c) the lack of room for mental life/beliefs given naturalism (assuming it implies materialism).

Plantinga describes theism as affirming the existence of a self-existent God with beliefs and affections, aims and intentions, who creates an orderly, science-friendly world with free personal agents. However, Plantinga's reference to God as “a person” (p. 2), while apt for Judaism and Islam, is not so for Christianity, in which God consists of three persons. Thus, “personal being” is more precise and thus preferable.

Plantinga asserts that we can properly believe in God without proofs or evidence; as we do in the case of sense perception, we may simply find ourselves believing in God (via the *sensus divinitatis*), which is a kind of knowledge (p. 9). Plantinga then discusses his views on warrant and proper function: whereas a theistic environment, in which God has created our faculties, is conducive to knowledge, naturalism—which is interested in survival rather than true belief—has no room for knowledge; true belief requires warrant rather than being accidentally true. Plantinga insists that proper function (something assumed by talk of health and sickness) requires design—whether through direct creation or gradualistic evolution. Naturalism has no room for proper function.

Plantinga insists that naturalism leads to skepticism. He cites Nietzsche: “This God left aside, the question is permitted whether being deceived is not one of the conditions of life” (p. 30). Plantinga wonders: Whence the content of a belief if it is merely a neuronal event? And why think *any* belief is true, given naturalism? And survival-enhancing beliefs could just as well be false as true. Why trust that my belief-producing faculties are reliable? Given this “really crushing skepticism,” naturalism turns out to be self-defeating.

Tooley in chapter 2 (“Does God Exist?”) raises some preliminary concerns about the concept/knowledge of God (e.g., which theistic conception to assume; moral problems of hell, original sin, Old Testament ethics; issues with warranted belief). He then reviews *a priori* arguments for the coherence of the divine attributes. Tooley notes how theists disagree about, say, whether God is outside of time or not. And though there are difficulties

with certain divine attributes, he acknowledges, “they do not tell against the concept that is relevant here” (p. 87). Granting God’s existence, Tooley then proposes, there are three (*a priori*) equiprobable scenarios—a perfectly good being, a perfectly evil being, and a morally indifferent being (p. 90). Yet in the absence of any positive reasons for any of them, Tooley proposes that atheism is the default position.

Tooley then offers an empirical argument against immaterial minds (or substance dualism) from a blows-to-the-head type of reasoning (pp. 93–94): the resultant brain damage inflicted corresponds to the ability to think properly. And what about non-human animals such as chimpanzees and gorillas, which seem to have similar psychological capacities? Do they have immaterial minds? Tooley concludes: “there are excellent reasons for believing that human psychological capacities, rather than residing in an immaterial mind, have their basis instead in complex neurological structures” (p. 95).

After noting the apparent hiddenness of God and evil, Tooley rolls out his particular version of the argument from evil. He reviews various formulations of the argument from evil, landing on “the most promising formulations of the argument from evil” as being “concrete, inductive, and deontological” (p. 108). He briefly notes “design faults” (e.g., wisdom teeth, the human spine, humans’ vulnerability to diseases, weak conscience, death’s inevitability), which naturalistic evolution could easily explain. (One wonders if Tooley pushes too hard here. Indeed, Richard Dawkins himself defines biology—and we could throw in the universe’s fine-tuning too, *mutatis mutandis*—as “the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose.”)¹

In his argument from evil, Tooley focuses on one concrete evil—namely, the Lisbon earthquake of 1760, which killed 60,000 human beings—that could have been prevented then by a good God existing at that time; in such instances of evil, their “wrongmaking characteristics outweigh the sum total of any known rightmaking characteristics” (p. 116). In advancing his argument, Tooley rejects William Rowe’s formulation of the problem of evil, which “does not work” (p. 117). Tooley claims his formulation renders God’s existence “extremely unlikely” (p. 146).

Plantinga’s reply to Tooley’s opening statement (chapter 3) begins by acknowledging that the death of the logical problem of evil over the past thirty years means “something of a comedown for atheologists,” who must advance “much messier” probabilistic arguments from evil (p. 152). But even if God’s existence seems improbable in light of evil, one must consider the total evidence (Plantinga mentions the *sensus divinitatis* as one source of justification). He continues by affirming that while God’s existence is necessarily true, like other necessary truths, this may not be self-evident to all humans—and believers could be perfectly justified in their belief that God exists. That is, God could still exist even if evil makes

¹*The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: Norton, 1986), 1.

this seem improbable. Indeed, the intrinsic probability of any necessary proposition is 1 in any possible world (p. 161); God's existence in all possible worlds would be one such instance: thus, "if [God] is necessary, then it is hard to see how Tooley's argument is relevant. It appears to be relevant only if [God] is contingent" (p. 163).

Plantinga presents other challenges to Tooley's claims: Why shouldn't agnosticism be the default position rather than atheism? And, if God is necessarily good, then this rightmaking property outweighs any apparent wrongmaking properties a divine action has. Also, in the biblical tradition, believers candidly acknowledge their horror at and perplexity concerning evil, but they can also reflect on the love of God displayed in the incarnation and atonement of Christ. Plantinga closes with reflections from Job's experience: God doesn't tell Job his reasons for permitting the evils Job has experienced; rather, God's reply indicates that "Job knows far too little" to claim that God has no reasons for allowing these evils.

In chapter 4, Tooley replies to Plantinga's opening remarks. Tooley disagrees with Plantinga's arguments that health and sickness should be understood in terms of proper function. A virus, say, enters John's body, which prevents him from succumbing to, say, mental deterioration in old age or unpleasant terminal illnesses. Surely, John is healthier than normal! Thus "health cannot be analyzed as proper functioning" (p. 186). Furthermore, Tooley finds problematic Plantinga's externalistic account of justification (which involves proper function) and considers unsuccessful his critique of internalism.

In tackling Plantinga's objection regarding the impossibility of material things having beliefs, Tooley takes a property-dualist framework in discussing propositions, intensionality, and beliefs. He uses the analogy of the simple-"minded" "Robo the Robot," which has merely "quasi-desires" and "quasi-preferences," in contrast to the more complex robot "Robbie," which "has experiences and uses language" (p. 202). Tooley compares their capabilities and properties, claiming that Robbie's indexical beliefs and sequences of experiences/qualia show that "[p]urely material entities . . . can have beliefs and thoughts" (p. 205).

Tooley then addresses Plantinga's "most important argument" — namely, that naturalism is false and self-defeating, given the (either) low or inscrutable probability that our cognitive faculties are reliable. Tooley insists that we can supplement "perceptual experience with scientific reasoning and theorizing, to arrive at beliefs about objects we perceive that are true, rather than false" (p. 216).

In chapter 5 ("Can Robots Think?"), Plantinga offers brief preliminary responses to some of Tooley's arguments before addressing whether robots can think. Plantinga wonders whether Tooley may be trying to "soften us up" by speaking of Robo's "quasi-beliefs/-desires" before making the claim that Robbie can have experiences and beliefs. And just because brain states can cause sensations, this hardly gives us reason to think that material things can *have* experiences. (Note: Plantinga is in "enthusiastic"

agreement with Tooley over animals having immaterial minds [p. 223].) Plantinga dismisses Tooley's arguments here as "the sheerest phantasmagoria;" Tooley may as well claim that "my new and very complex high definition television has beliefs" (p. 234). And what about the content of beliefs? Why *this* belief (say, "I am being appeared to greenly") rather than *that* belief ("I really hate that color" — or "I wish I were in Dixie," for that matter)? Tooley, Plantinga claims, isn't arguing; he's just positing.

Plantinga then questions Tooley's reply to the evolutionary argument against naturalism. Plantinga insists that Tooley just hasn't given any reason to think our beliefs are true or why one form of belief-content rather than any other should supervene upon our neural structures. Why think the belief-content must be true?

In chapter 6, Tooley replies to Plantinga's discussion of God's probability by claiming that beliefs admit of degrees. So Tooley wonders whether one can rightly be called agnostic if he believes that God's improbability is 0.75 or 0.95. And Tooley sees no reason to prefer a good God over an evil one. Applying this to evil, Tooley wonders what is meant by rightmaking/wrongmaking properties if they (seemingly) do not apply to God.

Tooley then offers further challenges to Plantinga's externalist account of justification, followed by questions about the incompatibilities in the various religions, leading Tooley to wonder whether, for instance, there is an inbuilt *sensus divinitatis* and whether religious beliefs are likely to be true. When it comes to evil, Tooley thinks evil presents a defeater to theistic belief since a person's character "consists of the actions he or she performs and intentionally refrains from performing" (p. 245). Tooley concludes by stating that he does not find any inferential arguments for God's existence to be persuasive, though he breezes by the ontological argument, simply appealing to Gaunilo's counterargument without explanation.

In my estimation, the book is an excellent point-counterpoint text. I highly recommend it for a graduate text in philosophy of religion.

Obstacles to Divine Revelation: God and the Reorientation of Human Reason, by Rolfe King. London and New York: Continuum, 2008. Pp. x + 281. \$130 (cloth).

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In this interesting if occasionally problematic book, King argues that while a good and all powerful God would want to reveal himself to us so that he can establish loving relations with us, there are obstacles to his doing so, i.e., "feature[s] of the created order that may either block or hinder a form of divine disclosure, or [have] in some way to be overcome in order for God to disclose himself" (p. 5). Obstacles are a consequence of human limitations: "it is a logically necessary truth that because creatures are limited, the number of ways in which" the God of traditional theism "can reveal himself to them is limited" (p. 54). There is, in other words, a "necessary