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Gregory Dawes, THEISM AND EXPLANATION

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BOOK REVIEWS

Theism and Explanation, by Gregory Dawes. London: Routledge, 2009. Pp. 211. \$95 (hardcover).

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Richard Lewontin observed that our explanations of material phenomena exclude any role for supernatural demons, witches, and spirits of any kind, including the gods from Adonai to Zeus. Lewontin, it is worth noting, does not say that such explanations *preclude* such a role. It is the central aim of *Theism and Explanation* to consider, on the contrary, whether explanations of material phenomena might include a role for divine action.

The question I am addressing can be variously described. Could any account of divine action have explanatory force? Could the existence and action of a divine agent be the primary causal factor in a satisfactory explanation? Or, to put it crudely, even if all this talk about God were true, could it explain anything? If the answer to these questions is no, then it is not only scientists that have good reason to be methodological naturalists. We all do. (4)

But the questions this nicely written work aims to answer are not merely about the very possibility of a theistic explanation. The question is not merely whether “a proposed religious explanation by its very nature lacks explanatory force,” but also whether “even if there could in principle exist a respectable religious explanation, natural explanations would still be preferable” (6–7). These are respectively the *in principle* and *de facto* questions for theistic explanation.

Dawes aims to answer the *in principle* and *de facto* questions concerning theistic explanation via an examination of explanation in general. The discussion is very accessible but regrettably casual. The concept of explanation is among the most highly refined in the literature and, in general, it receives quite rigorous treatment. So, it's unexpected that, for instance, Dawes's *proposed*, *potential*, and *actual* explanations are not distinguished with much precision. It might be that he prefers to err on the side of accessibility and brevity, but the tradeoff is considerable. A proposed explanation, for instance, is defined as nothing more than a proposition that someone as a matter of fact considers to be explanatory and an actual explanation is

defined as a potential explanation that is true (21). Potential explanations receive somewhat more attention.

Initially, we find a potential explanation H of surprising fact E to be any hypothesis H on which E is not surprising or on which E is a matter of course (21). But call to mind any improbable event that is not surprising. It is not surprising, for instance, that $E = I$ draw an ace from a fair and complete deck of cards. But it is unlikely. Since E is not surprising, it is not surprising on the hypothesis $H = I$ sneeze before drawing the card. But it is hard to see how sneezing might count as a potential explanation of why I drew an ace.

Dawes precisifies the initial suggestion with the subjunctive proposal that a potential explanation H of fact E is such that *were* H true, then E *would not* be surprising or would be intelligible, and he considers the conditions under which we might be justified in accepting a potential explanation. The initial proposal is that we should accept the potential explanation H of E just in case conditions (i) and (ii) are satisfied.

(i) $P(H \mid E \ \& \ k) > .5$,

and

(ii) There is no other hypothesis H' such that $P(H' \mid E \ \& \ k) > P(H \mid E \ \& \ k)$.

We ought to accept the potential explanation H of surprising fact E just in case H makes E more likely than not, and there is no competing hypothesis H' that makes E more likely than H does.

This proposal is puzzling for a variety of reasons. Dawes urges that (i) and (ii) might set the standards for acceptable explanation too high. But that's not the central problem here. The central problem is that the satisfaction of (i) and (ii) is irrelevant to Dawes's preferred analysis of potential explanation. Recall that Dawes recommends that a potential explanation H of fact E is such that *were* H true, then E *would not* be surprising. If we let $\Box \rightarrow$ be our subjunctive conditional operator, then it seems that a potential explanation would be acceptable only if (iii) were satisfied.

(iii) $P(H \Box \rightarrow E) > .5$

According to (iii), the probability that it would be true that E , were it true that H , is greater than .5. If (iii) is true, then E would be (perhaps) unsurprising were H true. But the value of (iii) has nothing to do with the values of (i) and (ii). To offer one example, suppose we let $H =$ you choose a red or green ball from the urn and let $E =$ you choose a ball from the urn. Suppose there are no red or green balls in the urn. Under these conditions, $P(H \mid E \ \& \ k) = 0$ and so (i) and (ii) are both false while (iii) is clearly true. The probabilities of subjunctive conditions are not conditional probabilities. Of course the difficulties are compounded here. Were the value of (iii) equivalent to the value of some conditional probability, one would expect it to be (iv) and not (ii).

(iv) $P(E \mid H \ \& \ k) > .5$

But the value of (iii) is not equivalent to (iv), either.¹ So it is unclear why Dawes even considers conditional probabilities as acceptance conditions given his preferred analysis of potential explanations.

The discussion of specifically theistic explanations focuses on the proposal that such explanations are theoretical, intentional and abductive or arguments to the best explanation. Theistic explanations are theoretical, on Dawes's account, since they posit the existence of an unobservable agent. To this extent, theistic explanations have a feature in common with explanations in the hard sciences that posit unobservables. But theistic explanations also appeal to the intentional actions of a divine being in bringing about or causing what we observe (39). Dawes consistently compares theistic explanation to explanations in the hard sciences. But since theistic explanation is intentional, on Dawes's account, the more illuminating comparison would have been with psychological explanations, or explanations in anthropology or sociology. Alternatively, a comparison to sciences in which teleological explanation is not so foreign—biological sciences, for instance—would have been instructive. But there is almost no discussion of these sciences. To the extent that we get successful explanations in the biological sciences or the soft sciences, we should find congenial the possibility of successful theistic explanation.

It is also noteworthy that there is no mention of the principle of sufficient reason in a monograph focusing on theistic explanation. It is equally strange that there's little discussion of the *apparent* (though perhaps misleading) consistency of theistic and naturalistic explanation. Theistic explanation appeals to the aims, goals or purposes God might have in bringing about some event or state of affairs E. Such explanations offer something close to a teleological explanation or explanation in terms of final causation. The obvious question is how an explanation for E in terms of final causation might conflict with an explanation for E in terms of efficient causation. The assumption throughout is that these explanations are not consistent or are otherwise in tension. But where precisely is the inconsistency? Comparison with the soft sciences on this point is helpful. The complete natural explanation for why Smith raised his hand tells us nothing of Smith's aims, goals or purposes. On the other hand, it clearly does not entail that there are no goals, aims or purposes. Nothing in the logic of explanation generates an inconsistency on the assumption that both explanations are true.

According to Dawes, a successful theistic explanation is one that more or less satisfies a set of explanatory virtues (115). He sets out a set of well-known virtues such as testability, simplicity, ontological economy, and

¹Here's a small example. Suppose every item in the urn is red and no one chooses an item. Let $H = S$ chooses an item from the urn and $E =$ the item is green. The value of (iv) is then zero. But it might also be true that had anyone chosen an item from the urn, it would have contained only green items. It's perfectly possible that I'd have known about it and replaced all the red items with green ones. In that case the value of (iii) is certainty.

informativeness, and offers some informal discussion on how a theistic explanation might rise to the standard of success. Dawes concludes,

if on a number of the criteria we give the theist the benefit of the doubt, we cannot exclude the bare possibility that there might one day exist a successful theistic explanation. As things stand, for instance, proposed theistic explanations are not consistent with the rest of our knowledge. (144)

But, again, how so? Are the conclusions of theistic proofs excluded a priori from “our knowledge”? Do we know that the full range of a posteriori and a priori arguments for God’s existence fail to yield anything rising to the level of knowledge? Is non-inferential knowledge of God ruled out as well? As we’ve already noted, intentional theistic explanations do not conflict with naturalistic explanations in any obvious way; they do not conflict any more than explanations in terms of purposes for events conflict with explanations in terms of efficient causes for events. So we are left with no obvious way in which proposed theistic explanations are supposed to be inconsistent with what we know.

Theism and Explanation is undeniably a well-written and highly accessible book. Dawes’s approach to theories of explanation in general, and theistic explanation in particular, makes for easy reading. The tradeoff is that the details of his account of explanation, theistic and otherwise, lose some clarity and the discussion loses some depth. The tension between naturalistic and theistic explanations, for instance, is not obvious. And the motivation for offering a theistic explanation—which might have been found in some version of the principle of sufficient reason—is obscure. But for readers interested in an introduction to some of these important and complex issues, *Theism and Explanation* offers an easy way into the discussion.

Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology, by Thomas McCall. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010. Pp. 256. \$30 (paperback).

DALE TUGGY, SUNY Fredonia

This is a unique, stimulating and yet unsatisfying book which should be widely read. The answers to the questions in the title, respectively: (1) either a “social” or a constitution theory, (2) Richard Bauckham’s. McCall is a theologian well versed in analytic philosophy. This book attempts, with some success, to bridge the cultural, intellectual, and institutional divides between Christian philosophers and theologians. McCall notes that the book “will at points be less than satisfying to partisans in both camps” (8). In chapter 1, he nicely summarizes much recent positive work on Trinity theories by Christian philosophers, as well as some anti-“social”-theory arguments. In the next two chapters he sets out to correct the oversights and misunderstandings of various of these philosophers by endorsing