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BOOK REVIEWS

Theism and Ultimate Explanation: The Necessary Shape of Contingency, by Timothy O'Connor. Blackwell Publishing, 2008. Pp. xiii + 177. \$74.95 (cloth)

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O'Connor's latest volume has six chapters. In the first and second, O'Connor defends (Plantingian) modal realism and sketches an epistemology of modality. In the third and fourth, he offers a two-part version of the cosmological argument. In the fifth, he considers applications of Anselmian theism to the nature of contingent reality, the problem of evil, the fine-tuning argument, and the metaphysics of modality. O'Connor switches audiences in the sixth chapter. Directing his comments to theologians, he concedes that some philosophical theses concerning God's nature are incompatible with essential tenets of revealed theology; nevertheless, he argues, attempts to do without natural theology entirely are hopeless.

The book begins with one of O'Connor's basic convictions: Some explanations are modal. As he points out, many scientific and non-scientific explanations are *formulated* using modal idioms, and it is natural enough to work from the assumption that those terms are not superfluous. But O'Connor goes further; he argues that some explanations need to be modal to be rational to accept at all. Consider some explanation-expressing sentence of the form, 'All Fs must be Gs.' Suppose that the non-modal version of this sentence is doing the real explanatory work, having the form 'All Fs are Gs.' O'Connor argues that it "is not reasonable to accept a principle that lacks any positive confirmation and that is, in some sense, an 'open question'—given the totality of our cognitive practice and reasoning, it might (epistemic) be false. . . . If, contrariwise, we justifiably hold that the principle is *necessary*, our acceptance of its *truth* is in good order" (p. 13). In other words, if we construe the data as evidence for the non-modal claim, then we have to justify the leap from a sentence of the form 'Some Fs are Gs' to another of the form 'All Fs are Gs', which we can't do. But if we construe the data as evidence for a sentence of the form 'All Fs must be Gs,' then it *is* reasonable to assert the non-modal, universally quantified claim, since if it must be so, it's so. Therefore, we should not



suppose that modal idioms are explanatorily superfluous. This point is applicable both to the justification of elementary truths of logic—e.g., that all contradictions are false—and to the justification of empirical claims. In both cases, the rationality of accepting the claims depends on their being formulated using the language of necessity.

The above paves the way for O'Connor's epistemology of modality. He thinks that if we assume that any of our beliefs are rational, then it must be the case that some of our general or theoretical beliefs are modal and enjoy a priori warrant. Analogously, if any of our empirical beliefs about objects and kinds are rational, then some of them must be modal, and they must be justified by their explanatory value. Here, though, the modal version of Benacerraf's Dilemma looms large: How are the truthmakers for our general or theoretical beliefs involved in the story about how we come to have these beliefs? If they aren't involved at all, then even if our beliefs are true, this may be nothing more than a lucky accident. So, O'Connor sketches the beginnings of a theory on which it is plausible to think that our general or theoretical modal beliefs are not accidental:

An evolutionary advantage accrued to cognizer-types that readily assent to the *actual* truth of core logical and mathematical principles and that systematize the world in terms of natural kinds; some such cognizers in our ancestral history were selected in part owing to this fact; and *the truthmakers for these actual truths are none other than their modalized counterparts.* (p. 59)

This passage does as much to establish a research program as it does to answer the challenge just described. It's also worth pointing out that Quineans can avail themselves of the same resources to respond to the argument in the previous paragraph. Presumably, an evolutionary advantage accrued to the assumption that the world is hospitable to our theorizing about it; those of our ancestors who made this assumption, and so trusted their inductive inferences, were more likely to survive than their counterparts. Inasmuch as evolutionary forces can be trusted to select true beliefs rather than false ones—an assumption that O'Connor isn't in a position to question at this stage in the game—Quineans can reasonably affirm the non-modal generalizations that O'Connor tries to question.

Of course, there are other reasons not to be a Quinean and, if Plantinga is right, then evolutionary arguments like the ones above require the truth of theism anyway. So, if O'Connor is setting out a research program, then his other commitments make it a promising one, and the way that he motivates it is a significant contribution to the epistemology of modality.

If making sense of the world does require modalizing, and if we've got good reason to think that some of our modal beliefs are justified, then two major hurdles for the cosmological argument are out of the way. O'Connor then divides the argument into two parts. The first is The Existence Stage, in which he defends the view that the best explanation of the existence and histories of the particular contingent objects there are requires postulating a being that exists necessarily. The second is The Identification

Stage, in which he argues that we have good reason to think that this necessary being is God.

O'Connor seems to think that the natural view to take is that there is an explanation of the existence and histories of the particular contingent objects there are, and that an explanation that posits a necessary being is the most natural one to offer. Given these assumptions, O'Connor spends most of The Existence Stage undercutting rival explanations that do not posit a necessary being and trying to fend off an objection to the claim that a necessary being can do the relevant explanatory work. This setup is unfortunate because, although O'Connor denies that he is relying on the principle of sufficient reason (or something very much like it), the cosmological argument's plausibility turns on the demand for explanation with which he begins. After all, if one is drawn to the view that there are any brute facts, one can reasonably ask why the existence and histories of the particular contingent objects there are should not be among them. Perhaps for this reason, O'Connor circumscribes the aim of his argument by saying that his hope is to make it reasonable to accept the conclusion of the cosmological argument—not to show that rationality demands it.

The first major challenge that O'Connor considers is from Hume, who famously postulated a beginningless series of causes, each member of which explains the one that immediately follows it. To illustrate the shortcomings of Hume's theory, O'Connor cites Alexander Pruss, whose argument is so good that it deserves to be stated in full:

Suppose a cannon is fired at time t_0 and the cannonball lands at t_1 . Now consider the infinite sequence of momentary events spanning all times between the two events, excluding t_0 and including t_1 . There is no first event in this sequence, as there is no first temporal instant after t_0 . Thus, though the entire sequence has a finite duration, it still meets Hume's envisioned scenario of a beginningless infinite sequence of events, each causally dependent on events that precede it. Hume should conclude that this series is explanatorily complete, but this is evidently false: the entire sequence of events has a partial explanation in terms of the firing of the cannon at t_0 . (p. 75)

John Leslie and Derek Parfit offer a second sort of rival; each suggests that there is some principle that explains the existence and histories of the particular objects there are. Leslie's view is that "the world exists *because it should*" (p. 76). Parfit thinks that we shouldn't suppose that the explanation of our world's features should be offered in terms of our world alone—for all we know, every world exists, or all universes that are sufficiently good exist, or what have you. But however things are on some ultimate scale, he agrees with Leslie that these features can be explained by appealing to the principle that it is best that these facts obtain. O'Connor rightly points out, though, that it is awfully difficult to make sense of how being the best is *responsible* for the obtaining of some state of affairs. Presumably, neither Leslie nor Parfit think that our world is *caused* by the fact that it should obtain, or that it is best that it obtain. But if the explanation isn't causal, then

what sort of explanation is it? It is not clear that they have an illuminating answer to this question.

Perhaps the most interesting objection to The Existence Stage is due to Peter van Inwagen; he argues that the principle of sufficient reason, if understood as a demand for contrastive explanations, leads to the conclusion that every truth is necessary. O'Connor points out, though, that his version of the cosmological argument doesn't rely on the view that all explanations are contrastive. He subsequently outlines a theory of agent-causation on which an agent's intention to act (and subsequent action) is guided, but not determined, by her reasons for acting. The key component of this theory is the thesis that causal capacities are ontologically basic and that agents have them. O'Connor can then say that an agent has the capacity to cause her having some intention, without that intention being the product of antecedent states of the agent. So, if the necessary being is an agent, its existence, causal capacities, and intentions explain the existence and histories of the particular objects there are, and because the intentions are contingent, the existence and histories of the particular objects there are remain contingent. For all that has been said so far, though, someone who denies that all explanation is contrastive could affirm the existence of a necessary being without also affirming that the necessary being is an agent. So, O'Connor turns to The Identification Stage.

O'Connor begins The Identification Stage by rejecting the view that the world itself is a necessary being. His argument against this hypothesis turns on the idea that if a being exists necessarily, the necessity of its existence determines its nature. Existing necessarily is, therefore, a basic property. But O'Connor thinks it implausible that a mereologically-complex entity like the world could have necessary existence among its basic properties, since one would assume that the world's basic properties are had by its constituent parts—not by the world as a whole. And, if the world's constituent parts are necessary beings, then either they have individuating essences, which contradicts the assumption that a being's necessary existence determines its nature, or they do not, in which case there are contingent facts left unexplained by the hypothesis—namely, the number and distribution of the world's constituent parts.

The rest of The Identification Stage is devoted to arguing against the most serious contender to the view that the necessary being is an agent (the '*Logos*' theory), which is the theory that the world is caused by an impersonal, necessarily existent 'primordial fount of being,' which O'Connor dubs '*Chaos*.' He identifies and dismisses a few different versions of *Chaos*, and then devotes his attention to *Random Chaos*, "a 'chancy,' indeterministic mechanism, having the capacity to generate any of a very wide range of worlds. [If *Random Chaos* obtains, then it] in fact generated our world, though it need not have done so" (p. 94). Here, O'Connor takes a detour and summarizes the virtues and vices of the fine-tuning argument. Its major flaw, in his view, is that the fine-tuning of the natural world is explained by a state of affairs that is *itself* finely-tuned—i.e., it includes

a personal being with just the right capacities and intentions. If *all* fine-tuning demands explanation, a regress threatens. Alternately, we need some argument to the effect that the world's fine-tuning is explanation-demanding while the world-plus-God's fine-tuning is not. In its absence, the fine-tuning argument fails. That said, if we begin with the conclusion of the cosmological argument thus far, then the fine-tuning argument does give a reason to prefer *Logos* to *Chaos*—"the conditional probability of what we observe, given the *Chaos* hypothesis and our best current theory, is indeed very low. It is reasonable, then, to conditionalize on this information and prefer the *Logos* hypothesis" (p. 109).

O'Connor shifts gears in the fifth and sixth chapters. In the fifth (aptly entitled, "The Scope of Contingency"), O'Connor begins with Anselmian theism and considers its implications. On this assumption, he argues "that it is inevitable both that God create something or other and that He create at least a countable infinity of universes (in the broad sense of causally and effectively isolated totalities or systems" (p. 121). He goes on to claim that the inevitability of God's creating is not incompatible with God's freedom, that the infinitely many universes God creates give us the beginnings of an answer to the problem of evil, and that these universes give us (yet another) reason to question the viability of the fine-tuning argument. He concludes the chapter by briefly revisiting the epistemology of modality, in part to recommend the view that "God's power is the ultimate truthmaker for all possibility" (p. 129). This chapter moves at a fast and furious pace, and I anticipate that it's the one whose claims will win the fewest converts. I, for one, would much prefer to say that it is not inevitable that God create, that God created only one universe, and that the problem of evil should be handled with less metaphysical fanfare. If satisfying these preferences involves abandoning Anselmian theism, then so much for Anselmian theism. Nevertheless, even those who don't find his conclusions compelling should take note of his methodology. If theism is a metaphysical hypothesis, then it is legitimate to use any thesis that it entails to handle problems that may otherwise be intractable. Because God is not invoked solely to handle those problems, there is no reason to worry about the charge that this is 'the God of the gaps.' As a strategy for doing theistic philosophy, O'Connor's approach is unimpeachable.

An excellent example of the strategy can be found in his approach to the metaphysics of modality at the end of the chapter. Earlier, he handled the charge that our modal beliefs are accidental with an evolutionary argument. This argument does not purport to explain the nature of our relationship with the truthmakers of modal claims; it supposes that there is one, and that it is fitness-enhancing. But if God's power is the ultimate truthmaker for all possibility, then being designed by God to modalize reliably *is* to have a non-accidental relationship with the Truthmaker of modal claims. Indeed, one might even be able to develop an independent argument for theism based on the ability of this account—and the inability of others—to explain our relationship to that in virtue of which modal claims are true.

It's also worth mentioning that this connection between our beliefs and their truthmakers enables O'Connor to fend off an important objection. Suppose that O'Connor's hypothesis is correct: Our modalizing ancestors were more fit than their non-modalizing counterparts. But realizing that one should be cautious because there might be a bear in that cave is a long way from realizing that a necessary being is needed to explain the existence and histories of the particular contingent objects that there are. It's more or less clear how beliefs of the former kind have adaptive value; how, though, do beliefs of the latter?

There is an analogous objection that one can level against empiricists about mathematical knowledge. A common response to that objection goes like this: It may be obvious how simple arithmetic has adaptive value, and less obvious how the same value could accrue to number theory. But each thesis in the further reaches of mathematics need not be tied to some particular evolutionary advantage; once we've got simple arithmetic, we can build on it using any of the other tools that evolution has provided. If we ultimately end up with number theory, then number theory's justification is derivative; it accrues to number theory in virtue of its being based on the simpler, more obviously adaptive theories that evolutionary forces encouraged.

If this response works, it's because number theory systematizes and explains the truth of other mathematical facts. Can positing a necessary being allow us to systematize and explain the modal facts that we take there to be? If God's power is the truthmaker for modal facts, then we can answer this question in the affirmative. In this case, as in the previous one, theism is a fruitful hypothesis.

The sixth and final chapter delves into philosophical theology. O'Connor rehearses arguments against divine simplicity and immutability. These arguments are designed to show theologians who worry that the God of the philosophers cannot be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that the deliveries of philosophical theology needn't conflict with the claims of revealed theology. He then tries to show that divine sovereignty is incompatible with the view that God exists contingently. This section is supposed to convince theologians that some essential tenets of the faith require philosophical articulation, and so that they entail philosophical theses to which those theologians should be committed. The odds are good that O'Connor is preaching to the choir here, but it's not a bad sermon, and his argument regarding divine sovereignty is certainly provocative enough to be worth one's time.

The great virtue of *Theism and Ultimate Explanation* is the fact that O'Connor begins with the epistemology of modality and eventually shows how the epistemology and the metaphysics of modality are related. Addressing these fundamental issues makes O'Connor's presentation of the cosmological argument far more plausible and powerful than others. Because he tries to cover a remarkable amount of ground in the 144 pages that constitute the body of the book, his arguments can be a bit sketchy. But

O'Connor's writing is suggestive enough that one can usually see how the details should go, and he exhibits so much good philosophical sense that one is inclined to work them out on his behalf. I heartily recommend this volume to anyone working in the philosophy of religion or metaphysics.

Tayloring Reformed Epistemology: Charles Taylor, Alvin Plantinga and the de jure Challenge to Christian Belief, by Deane-Peter Baker. SCM-Canterbury, 2007. Pp. xii + 228. \$90.00 (cloth), \$25.95 (paper)

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It is fairly uncontroversial to note that the contemporary philosophical landscape is balkanized and that meaningful conversation between the various 'factions' is relatively rare. It's not just that members of the different factions have different beliefs; very often there is no agreement on what the important questions are and how they should be approached. Deane-Peter Baker's book should be welcomed as an attempt to bring together two conversations that have been, until now, happening on opposite sides of the 'philosophical room.' As Nicholas Wolterstorff mentions on the dust jacket, "Reformed Epistemologists and Charles Taylor have been like ships passing in the night." While Charles Taylor and the guiding light of Reformed Epistemology, Alvin Plantinga, are both enormously influential, they have had minimal interaction with each other's work and, for the most part, their adherents have followed their lead. The value of Baker's book, however, is not found solely in the conversational bridge built between Taylor and Plantinga. This book will be appreciated by those who are not already fans of Taylor's and Plantinga's work, for it constitutes a substantial and original engagement with some of the most important questions and concepts in the field of religious epistemology.

Baker's goal for his book is twofold: first, "to demonstrate the feasibility of combining the Reformed Epistemologist's position with an argument for theism that I will draw from Charles Taylor's work"; second, to "show the value that would be added to the Reformed Epistemologist's position by such a combination" (p. 2). In the Introduction (not to mention the subtitle), Baker indicates that the primary focus of his volume is what Alvin Plantinga calls the *de jure* objection to theistic belief—"the idea that it is somehow irrational, a dereliction of epistemic duty, or in some other sense epistemically unacceptable, to believe in God" (p. 1). As Baker notes, Plantinga distinguishes the *de jure* objection from the *de facto* objection to theistic belief—"the objection that, whatever the rational status of belief in God, it is, in fact, a false belief" (ibid).

In chapters 1 and 2, Baker provides a very helpful and succinct summary of the arguments for and against the religious epistemologies of Nicholas