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Book Review: Analytic Philosophy Of Religion

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BOOK REVIEWS

Analytic Philosophy of Religion, by James F. Harris. Kluwer, 2002. viii+432 pp. Cloth \$150.00.

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This book is volume three of a series published by Kluwer, *Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Eugene Long, which explores many aspects of contemporary philosophy of religion. Although this book is primarily a survey of the analytical literature, the author often evaluates some of this literature.

Chapter I recounts the origins and development of analytic philosophy and related movements in their various forms, starting at the turn of the 20th century. The author discusses pragmatism, ordinary language philosophy, Moore's common sense philosophy, and logical positivism, with a special emphasis on the importance of linguistic or conceptual analysis.

Chapter II addresses the problem of religious language raised by positivism and Popper's falsificationism and various responses to these challenges. It also deals with the debate over whether religious language is to be taken literally or as metaphor or analogy, and the problem of religious reference. The latter focuses on the debate between those who see religious reference as descriptive and those who see it as causal or nondescriptive.

Chapter III ranges over two main topics, the nature of God and arguments for the existence of God. The former topic includes a survey of recent analytical work on such divine attributes as necessary existence, omnipotence, omniscience, eternality, impassibility, and so forth. Also surveyed is work on the dilemma of divine foreknowledge and human freedom, including the hard fact/soft fact distinction. The latter includes a survey of analytical work on the Ontological, Cosmological, Design, and Cumulative Case Arguments.

In Chapter IV, the author reviews analytic religious epistemology with a special emphasis on the role of religious experience. He discusses the James/Clifford debate and James's Will to Believe Argument, Plantinga's Reformed epistemology, fideism, the evidential weight of religious experience, Alston's views on Christian mystical practice, and various related arguments.



Chapter V addresses the conflict between religion and science. Topics include Galileo's conflict with the Catholic Church, Darwin's impact on philosophical theology and the creationist response to Darwinism, the relativizing of the scientific outlook implicit in the ideas of Kuhn, Feyerabend, and Whorf, the implications of quantum mechanics for the debate between science and religion, and Whitehead's attempt to integrate religion and science through metaphysics.

The main argument against theism in recent analytical work, the problem of evil, is surveyed in Chapter VI. Topics in this chapter include the logical problem of evil, the evidential problem of evil, and responses to these such as Plantinga's free will defense and Hick's soul-making theodicy.

In Chapter VII, the author surveys various attempts to explain religion away and various related attempts to provide a naturalistic account of reality. Included among the former attempts are Freud's psychological account of religion as wish-fulfillment, Durkheim's sociological account of religion in terms of tribalism, and contemporary scientific accounts of the natural functions of living things and their parts in terms of natural selection and of other apparent instances of design in nature. Included among the latter are naturalistic theories of personal identity and naturalistic explanations of near-death and "out of body" experiences.

Chapter VIII surveys analytical work on religion and ethics. Topics include Mavrodes's observation that ethics does not fit readily into a naturalistic framework, various versions of the divine command theory of ethics, the connection between religion and virtue ethics, and the feminist critique of religious ethics.

Chapter IX explores analytical writing on the problem of religious diversity and religious pluralism. The debate between religious exclusivists and religious inclusivists, such as John Hick, concerning religious truth and personal salvation is one of the main foci of this chapter.

Chapter X provides a useful summary of the material covered in the previous nine chapters.

How good a job does the author do in surveying the literature on the topics addressed in each of the foregoing chapters? Generally speaking, the author does a very good job. Chapters I, II, IV-VI, and VIII-IX stand out in this respect. Chapters III and VII are less satisfactory, mainly because the author has either neglected some important literature relevant to his survey, or is unclear himself about some of the crucial concepts involved in this literature. For example, in Chapter III, the author neglects to discuss some of the recent important work analyzing the concept of omnipotence in detail (including that of Hoffman and Rosenkrantz, Flint and Freddoso, and Edward Wierenga) with the result that his treatment of omnipotence and the related paradox of the stone is too sketchy and a bit out of date. Chapter VII is rather a hodge-podge of topics with no clear organizing principle. Moreover, although the author is correct to distinguish between bundle theories and substance theories of personal identity, he seems confused about what a substance theory of personal identity is. On page 313, Harris states that the following quotation from John Hick, provides a "good description of the substance theory of self": "We are using 'self' as the name for...the consciousness which is composing these

sentences....” But Hick has not described a substance theory at all. If he had done so, he would have instead said that “We are using ‘self’ as the name for *the thing which is conscious* of composing these sentences....” Furthermore, the author neglects to discuss genuine substance theories of the self, such as those of R. M. Chisholm, M. Loux, and E.J. Lowe. (The authors of this review also defend in detail the intelligibility both of the concept of a *spiritual substance* and of *dualistic interactionism* in *Substance Among Other Categories*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, with a further application to perfect being theology in *The Divine Attributes*, Blackwell, 2002.) Instead, Harris spends nearly all of his time discussing various versions of the bundle theory of the self, which he correctly says is not compatible with traditional theism. In what follows, we set forth some additional detailed criticisms of the book.

On pages 71-72, Harris misleads the reader by making it appear that a descriptivist theory of reference requires the referent *essentially* to satisfy the conditions in certain relevant definite descriptions. According to Harris, “To capture the intuition that underlies the causal theory of reference, we can easily imagine a possible world very close to this one in which the same individual whom we call “Moses” existed but in which that individual was never put in the bulrushes...and we can do this mental experiment with the same results for every single known attribute or property commonly attributed to Moses.” But since a *descriptivist* theory of reference is *also* compatible with this intuition, it is hard to see how this intuition could be the one that “underlies the causal theory of reference.”

According to Harris, “Human agents cannot intend things that are not in their control.” (p. 101). But, clearly, human agents *can* intend things that are not in their control when they don’t *know* that those things are not in their control.

Harris discusses the justified true belief theory of knowledge on pages 141-142. This discussion is peculiar. Harris misleadingly suggests that it is commonplace to equate epistemic justification with adequate evidence. However, this is not commonplace because it is widely thought that such an understanding of epistemic justification would lead to a vicious infinite regress or circle of justification, and thus, would entail that nobody knows anything.

The section on modal disproofs of the existence of God, pages 117-119, would be improved if a discussion of an argument of the following sort were included. “If God exists in some possible world, then he exists in every possible world. God fails to exist in some possible world. Therefore, God fails to exist in every possible world.”

According to Harris, on page 198, “we now know that ‘the best scientific evidence’ that Galileo presented in support of the Copernican theory in his *Dialogue on the Two World Systems* in 1632 was either very weak, misinterpreted, or just plain wrong. Scientists now know that the connections Galileo drew between sunspots and the earth’s tides and the Copernican theory were not justified.” It isn’t clear what the author is claiming here, but surely Galileo’s observations of sunspots *did* provide good evidence that at least one important implication of the Ptolemaic theory is false, namely, that the sun is an immutable perfect sphere.

According to Harris, "the work of Niels Bohr demonstrated that there is an irreducible duality of electrons according to which electrons are both particles and waves." (p. 221). This statement is dubious. Bohr's work certainly doesn't show that some electron is a particle and a wave *at the same time*, for that would entail a contradiction. Perhaps Harris meant that Bohr demonstrated that some electron is a particle *at one time* and a wave *at another time*, or that *some* electrons are particles and *other* electrons are waves. But even these statements are questionable, for arguably, particles (which are *substances*) and waves (which are *events*) differ in their *essential properties*, and all electrons, as members of the same natural kind, have the same essence.

Harris's discussion of "The God of the Gaps" in Chapter VII has gaps of its own. As Harris observes, Darwinian accounts can provide a naturalistic explanation of the natural functions of living organisms and their parts, and hence, a supernatural account of these functions is no longer needed. Harris fails to note, however, that nobody has yet provided a naturalistic explanation of the existence of *the first living organism*. Until such an explanation is actually provided, the gap between the inanimate and animate realms has not been *conclusively* closed. Harris also fails to note the more difficult, and arguably intractable gap, between the mental and non-mental realms; it remains a mystery how consciousness and the qualities of subjective experience are explainable in naturalistic terms.

Harris is unclear about the important distinction between *epistemic* and *metaphysical* criteria for personal identity (pp. 313-314). Harris says that the criterion of personal identity "must allow not just an abstract, metaphysical explanation...it must allow for an individual's phenomenological identity of his current self with earlier states of himself." But, this appears to conflict with Harris's other statement that "there is a physical requirement that must be met if we are ever to grant that successful memory has taken place between a person and an earlier stage of that person." Harris is unaware that in the first quotation he seems to be speaking of an epistemic criterion, whereas in the second quotation he seems to be speaking of a metaphysical criterion. A further related distinction is that of first-person versus third-person epistemic criteria of personal identity.

Harris assumes that there are cases of brain bisection which give rise to two separate streams of consciousness, and that these cases create difficulties for the theory that the self is a spiritual substance. According to Harris, in such a case "a person with a bisected brain appears to have two different souls" (p. 317). But it is at least equally plausible, as well as consistent with the theory that the self is a spiritual substance, that there are *not* two separate streams of consciousness, but rather a single self with a *disorganized mind*. Thus, the apparent problem that Harris proposes here is a non-starter.

Finally, a book such as this one, that is supposed to survey a major field of analytic philosophy, should definitely have a substantial bibliography. This book lacks one altogether.