

humans deserve. Perhaps we can raise no legitimate complaints against God for not loving us. Still, *shlove* isn't what many hoped for (especially those who have been deeply harmed as a result of seeking God), and to our human eyes it may pale in the light of the *love* we sometimes receive from the finite, fallen humans.

*The Christian Idea of God: A Philosophical Foundation for Faith*, by Keith Ward. Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. 229. \$32.99 (paperback).

JORDAN WESSLING, Fuller Theological Seminary

*The Christian Idea of God* is the third installment of Keith Ward's systematic Christian philosophical theology. However, the book is self-contained and meant to stand alone as an exposition and defense of "personal idealism," for the purpose of providing a solid philosophical foundation for Christian belief. In Ward's usage, "idealism" refers to the perspective that "matter cannot exist without mind and depends upon mind for its existence" (1). And while Ward never unpacks this dependency relation in detail, it is clear that the form of idealism that Ward defends allows for the existence of material objects, so long as they are sustained by mind in some way, in contrast to a thoroughgoing immaterialism of the kind that is often attributed to Bishop Berkeley. Roughly stated, personal idealism is the view that there is one personal supreme mind—one that knows, thinks, feels, and intends—on which everything else in the world depends. By design, the offered cumulative case for philosophical idealism does not rise to the level of argumentative rigor typified by journals of analytic philosophy. Instead, the aim is to present a broad framework with wide explanatory scope and practical import. The result is a highly readable exploration of the contours of a comprehensive worldview, which provides a natural home for the Christian faith.

The book contains three parts. In the first part of the book, Ward contends that conscious experience is the best starting point for human knowledge. And when a human scrutinizes her conscious experience, she discovers that sense perceptions, thoughts, and feelings are different in kind than that which is spatially located and publicly observable, and that these mental states are immaterial and possessed by a unitary subject who persists across time and performs intentional actions. Here it seems that Ward affirms some form of substance dualism regarding humans, where the mental and physical are distinct yet tightly integrated, but Ward is not as forthcoming with the details as one would like and expect.



Examining the nature of human conscious experience more fully, Ward contends that the hypothesis that a Supreme Mind exists makes sense of key features of human experience. To make his case, Ward draws a distinction between an *inferential hypothesis* and an *interpretative hypothesis*. The former “is one that explains some observed phenomenon by postulating an unperceived, or even unperceivable, entity or state” (51). An example of such a hypothesis is that the universe began with a “Big Bang.” This widely held hypothesis cannot be perceived by humans, but is inferred from observations, such as the cosmic microwave background and the red shift of expanding star systems. By contrast, an interpretative hypothesis “is one that interprets some experienced reality in terms of concepts that do not derive simply from the observations in themselves” but “introduces concepts that enable perceived data to be interpreted in a particular way” (51). An example of this kind of hypothesis can be found in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, where Kant postulates categories of thought, such as concepts of causality and substance, as necessary conditions for the possibility of human knowledge of objects in the external world. Such categories of thought are not derived by first noticing a range of sense perceptions and then postulating a hypothesis to explain this range of perceptions. Rather, such categories are used as necessary preconditions for interpreting perceptions of the world—or so says Kant. While one might justly complain that the nature and relevance of the distinction between these two kinds of hypotheses are not given the care they merit, Ward postulates the existence of a Supreme Mind as an interpretative hypothesis. He argues that a Supreme Mind provides a plausible interpretative hypothesis that explains the intelligibility of the universe, the objectivity of beauty and moral goodness, and the mysterious but persistent sense that a personal presence pervades our world. The argument for this conclusion comes quick, various complexities are brushed aside, and competing hypotheses are given little attention. Still, for those who take on board many of Ward’s assumptions, the argument does come with a good measure of intuitive force.

The second part of the book further examines the idea of a Supreme Mind as the foundation of the universe. Ward argues that the existence of a Supreme Mind naturally explains why the cosmos generates complex semantic information of the kind that is found in human minds, and, in addition, the Supreme Mind grounds many, if not the full range of, modal truths. That the Supreme Mind grounds necessary truths reveals that it must exist necessarily, since only a necessary being has the resources for explaining why necessary states of affairs are the case. Furthermore, the Supreme Mind creates so that it might realize values outside of itself, but also so that it might progressively “unfold” its “own nature, as a truly creative, dynamic, and relational reality” (137). Here Ward sees a connection between the Supreme Mind and the God of Christian Scripture who is especially identified with self-giving love. Such a God perhaps “has to

create some universe of freely creative and interacting minds if God is to express the divine nature as love" (135).

Throughout the second section of the book (and elsewhere for that matter), Ward speaks of God, or the Supreme Mind, as a kind of "self-unfolding" Spirit that realizes itself progressively by "expressing" itself in and through a developing creation. Unfortunately, it is not clear to what Ward's conception of God amounts, as key concepts are left unexplained. The language of a *self-unfolding* God who is expressed *in* an evolving creation suggests a kind of process panentheistic perspective. However, Ward seems equally willing to embrace traditional attributes of God that do not normally accompany that perspective, such as incredible power, if not omnipotence. In the absence of a clear articulation of what God is envisioned to be like, the reader is left to guess about the details of the book's central explanatory hypothesis.

Having presented a philosophical argument for a Creator, Ward, in the book's third section, turns to theological matters found in Christian revelation. The topics treated include the final judgment, the world to come, and the interrelation between reason and revelation, among others. Ward presents a compelling case for the idea that God must hold humans accountable for their sins, and so must punish those who refuse to align themselves with God's ways of love. However, a perfectly loving God would be a God who is eternally inclined toward forgiveness and reconciliation. Consequently, any punishment inflicted by God would be remedial, not vindictive and retributive, which makes it possible that universal human salvation will eventually transpire in the life hereafter.

Interestingly, Ward's conception of the life to come differs markedly from that which has been popularized by the likes of N. T. Wright and J. Richard Middleton. Whereas the latter authors stress a continuity between this life and the life to come in that God will heal and restore this creation, Ward, relying on St. Paul, stresses the otherworldly nature of the redeemed state. Without denying the physicality of the heavenly state altogether, Ward imagines that the new bodies that redeemed humans will inherit will be dramatically different than the physical objects we currently bump into on a daily basis. One is left with the impression that heaven will be a mostly spiritual reality, where the limitations of physicality are left behind.

The final chapter of the book is entitled "Reason and Revelation." There Ward offers an experiential and gradualist understanding of revelation. Revelation is experiential in that God, the Supreme Mind on which all of reality depends, can be encountered through the manifold values had by creation and through an awareness that there is a personality, or at least some majestic presence, that encompasses the cosmos. And while Christians believe that God's revelation culminates in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ (which is not in itself any kind of experience), the New Testament writings are based upon unique experiences of God in Christ. Revelation is gradualist in the sense that God patiently works

with humans to deepen their perceptions and thoughts over time, rather than “simply ignoring them or replacing them with miraculous divine knowledge” (217). Given this divine way of dealing with creatures, “we might expect that there would be a number of different philosophical and evaluative viewpoints among early humans and that they would develop in differing ways in different cultures and histories” (217). This developmental understanding of revelation thereby enables us to affirm aspects of revelation in more than one religion or philosophical system, and it explains why Christian Scripture contains images of God that are suboptimal and inaccurate and why the Church has failed to recognize important moral truths in her history.

Ward is clear that he does not believe that personal idealism, as expressed in his preferred manner, is taught or entailed by Christian Scripture. Nevertheless, Ward believes that personal idealism is consistent with Scripture and that it renders it natural to expect that God would reveal Godself in some form. Ward thus concludes the book by saying that “personal idealism provides a sound rational and reflective basis” for the Christian faith, and that in this way “reason and faith embrace and enfold each other” (221).

As intimated, those looking for penetrating analyses and rigorous defenses of key concepts will be disappointed by Ward’s book. Indeed, one of the weakest aspects of *The Christian Idea of God* is that it is unclear as to what, precisely, personal idealism is and how it contrasts with competing conceptions of God. Nevertheless, the book lays out a comprehensive worldview in an engaging, winsome, and concise fashion, and Ward presents several interlocking reasons to believe it true, or at least reasonable. Besides that, the book is sprinkled with creative proposals for integrating the deliverances of the natural sciences into Ward’s personal idealism as well as insights into how the Christian faith might be placed into dialogue with alternative religious outlooks. For such reasons, I recommend the book to those who are interested in obtaining a systematic perspective of the fundamental structure of reality and its relation to the Christian faith.