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John-Mark L. Miravalle, GOD, EXISTENCE, AND FICTIONAL OBJECTS: THE CASE FOR MEINONGIAN THEISM

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affects much philosophy, not just ethical or political philosophy but also metaphysics and epistemology.

A number of chapters deal with the intersection of childhood with various identities: gender, race, and disability. Religion comes up most in Clayton's chapter on political neutrality. It's absent in other cases where one might think it could come up, such as Gina Schouten's chapter on schooling, which focuses almost exclusively on the aims and methods of public education. A few times when religion comes up in the volume, it's treatment was critical (though this isn't to say unfairly critical), as for example Colin Macleod's discussion of how some religious fundamentalists who "falsely claim that LBGTQ persons are, in virtue of their sexual orientation, bad parents are themselves responsible for creating a social environment that harms children" (171).

In a few of the canvased debates, Christian philosophers (and religious individuals more generally) may have particular considerations that aren't fully treated in the volume, such as religious reasons for becoming parents, how to understand parental partiality, or issues related to the composition of the family (a topic covered in Daniela Cutas's chapter). But these limitations are, as indicated earlier, inevitable given the nature of such a volume. And these omissions can serve as an opportunity for Christian philosophers to develop distinctly Christian work on these issues in the future.

As someone who's edited a large handbook/companion before, I'm aware that it's very difficult but incredibly valuable to get the contributors to make connections across their respective chapters. On this score, the editors have succeeded well.

While *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Childhood and Children* is neither a work in Christian philosophy nor philosophy of religion, there is much in it that Christian philosophers will find engaging. Indeed, I believe the editors have succeeded in putting together an incredibly worthwhile volume that has the potential to expand the range of projects the Christian philosophical community is collectively engaged in.

God, Existence, and Fictional Objects: The Case for Meinongian Theism, by John-Mark L. Miravalle. Bloomsbury, 2018. Pp. 192. \$114 (hardback).

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In *God, Existence, and Fictional Objects: The Case for Meinongian Theism*, John-Mark L. Miravalle marshals an unexpected soldier, meinongianism,



into a series of well-known battles in contemporary analytic theology. By *meinongianism* (and here I follow his usage in eliminating the initial capital), Miravalle means the thesis that there are some objects that do not exist, but nevertheless possess properties (41). Typical examples of non-existent objects for Miravalle include fictional objects like Sherlock Holmes, who does not exist, but nevertheless is an object about which many true things can be said: Holmes is a detective, solves crimes with his (also non-existent) friend Watson, and so forth. The appeal of meinongianism for Miravalle lies less in its putative ability to make sense of fictional discourse, and more in the potential of its application to a range of philosophically puzzling theological claims, such as “God knew about you before you ever existed” (2). Non-existent objects have being, but not existence, and if they remain uncreated, they remain independent of God. God has knowledge of non-existent objects, and as it will turn out, God’s creative power consists in bestowing existence on non-existents.

The first two chapters introduce the main competitors to meinongianism regarding the question of non-existents. The first chapter considers nominalist accounts, which generally proceed from the assumption that sentences about non-existents cannot successfully refer to non-existents to the strategy of paraphrasing away apparent references. The second chapter concerns realism about fictional objects, focusing mostly on van Inwagen’s theory of creatures of fiction (“Existence, Ontological Commitment, and Fictional Entities,” in Michael J. Loux and Dean W. Zimmerman (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Metaphysics* (Oxford University Press, 2003)), according to which fictional characters exist due to the creative actions of their authors, but that not all sentences about them should be read literally. Sherlock Holmes was created in 1889 by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, but it is only according to the fiction that he solves crimes. The third chapter closes out Part One, and introduces Miravalle’s preferred realism, meinongianism, and defends it.

The arguments presented here will be familiar to anyone who is conversant with the growing literature on fictional objects. Each competitor accounts for some intuitions well while struggling with others. The advantage of meinongianism lies in its relatively minimal use of paraphrase and preservation of some commonsense intuition; Miravalle makes a fair case for meinongianism as a legitimate but often overlooked alternative. The costs lie in separating existence from “to be” and a tremendous population explosion, for those of us with the proverbial taste for desert landscapes. I found myself wishing Miravalle had addressed the following kind of objection. According to Miravalle, authors do not create characters, but merely describe them, discovering them and being the first to have *ideas* about these non-existent objects, which they then share in stories. Imagine two authors from different long-lost civilizations, who independently describe the sun god in identical ways. The anthropologists assure us there was no cross-cultural contact. It seems

right to describe the authors as writing about *different* sun gods, but the meinongian position will have to be that they're both referring to the same object, a non-existent sun god.

In Parts Two, Three, and Four, Miravalle argues that accepting meinongianism will help resolve a number of puzzles in philosophical theology. A key premise in many of the arguments that follow is that non-existent objects are independent of God. In the beginning, so to speak, there was God, and a multitude of objects that had being without having existence. God has knowledge of the non-existent objects, and decides freely to bestow existence on some of them. There were horses and unicorns in the beginning, but only horses were blessed with existence.

The fourth chapter introduces the cosmological and ontological arguments for the existence of God. Miravalle takes an interesting approach for the cosmological argument, arguing that the question *why does something exist?* cannot be satisfactorily posed without positing non-existent objects (74–75). If there were no non-existent objects, according to one influential line of thought, there would be no need to explain existent objects at all. "Why are there horses?" would have to be understood as a question about the concept of horse, or about why we group the quadrupeds we see together, or some similar question. Once non-existents are part of the ontology, then the question of why horses exist becomes the question of why God chose to bring horses from non-existence into existence, capturing the intuitions behind the cosmological argument. In Chapter 5, Miravalle considers the link between the ontological argument and non-existent objects (like Gaunilo's perfect island) and agrees with the philosophical consensus that the theses must stand or fall together, but parts ways by arguing that they both stand.

In Part Three, Miravalle considers the nature of creation. In Chapter 6, Miravalle explores how meinongianism offers a way to rescue the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. One might argue that the diversity of creation cannot be explained without diversity from the very beginning. Traditional monotheism holds that God alone exists at the beginning of the universe, so it seems impossible to say whence the diversity that we see around us came. If there is diversity from the very beginning, then God's creative activity consists in moving the building blocks of nature around like so many Lego bricks. If meinongianism is true, Miravalle argues, God's creative activity consists in bestowing existence on those nonexistents that God chooses to create. The nonexistents provide the needed diversity, without committing the theist to diversity in existence at the beginning.

Thus, the diversity problem is solved, though not without some fallout, which Chapter 7 addresses. If God's essence is existence, and existence is a property, then God is both existence itself, and a property. If God bestows the property of existence on choiceworthy non-existents, then creation does not add to God's being, but shares in it (111). This position is known as *panentheism*, everything-in-God, and it's not without controversy

theologically. Miravalle argues that panentheism better accounts for the traditional divine attributes, and that adding meinongianism to panentheism allows his account to avoid the collapse into pantheism that plagues other pantheistic theories. The pantheist holds that everything is God, but Miravalle argues that his panentheism can avoid that conclusion because everything that exists, while it exists *because* of God's decision to bring it into existence, has *being* separate from God. Miravalle writes that a real dog has other features besides existence (viz., properties appropriate to a canine) that God does not have, and "those canine features make the dog not God" (115).

Part Four considers questions of divine providence, evil, and freedom. Chapter 8 presents a very interesting proposal regarding *middle knowledge*, God's knowledge of the "counterfactuals of freedom," counterfactuals that correspond to every possible free creature, and every possible circumstance in which that creature could act freely. On the molinist proposal, these counterfactuals are independent of God's will, and God knows each one. When combined with God's knowledge of what God will create, God can know the entire history of the world. The hope is that molinism provides a way for God to know what will happen without a commitment to theological fatalism, where creatures have no freedom. One objection to molinism, however, is that middle knowledge lacks an object. It can't be the knowledge of an event, or what would have happened if the event had gone otherwise because God has middle knowledge prior to creating anything. Miravalle's solution hybridizes molinism with meinongianism. God's middle knowledge consists in God's knowledge of non-existents. As the non-existents are ontologically prior to God's knowledge of them, God's decision to actualize them does not, Miravalle suggests, negate their freedom.

The ninth chapter deals with a small corner of the problem of evil, the question of how to understand evil as a privation. Evil, on this conception, is the absence of goodness. The harm which occurs when one man strikes another in anger is not a privation, but on Miravalle's view, nor is it evil. The evil is the deficiency in the man's character; the anger is the result. The sinner is lacking a property that they *should* have, resisting divine grace. Miravalle uses the resources of meinongianism to develop the beginnings of an explanation of moral evil. All people begin as non-existents, and their properties come and go with time. Suppose that some properties, such as moral rectitude remain non-existent due to the person's free choices. The person might be "perversely unresponsive to God's existential generosity" (151); but the person did not have to be that way, and so is morally responsible. Were they to choose otherwise, God's grace would bring those character traits into existence. Miravalle argues that non-existents can resist being brought into existence. This might strike some as surprising, but Miravalle's response (152–153) is worth a look.

To return to Chapter 7, I'm not convinced that Miravalle can avoid the collapse of meinongian panentheism into pantheism, and I'll sketch my

concern here. To recap: on Miravalle's proposal, nonexistent dogs have being. God is the property of existence, and perhaps even the property of necessary existence (110). Existence is God's essence. God then bestows existence on a suitable selection of meinongian objects, sharing God's essence (111), and refraining from bestowing it on others. We can infer that the meinongian conception of *being* as independent from God's existence is required for those canine features to do their discriminatory work; otherwise, one would be able to save ordinary pantheism from collapse into pantheism simply by pointing out that dogs have fur and God does not.

Miravalle accepts the usual meinongian position with respect to distinguishing non-existent objects. They are objectively distinguished from each other by their properties (57). This is the source of the so-called meinongian population explosion; there are infinite faceless men in bowler hats, distinguished by tiny variations in the fabric of their suits, and all of them are wedged in my doorway. Before the non-existent dog is created, all of its properties are essential to it. A difference in property makes for a different non-existent dog.

After the dog—call her Fluffy—is created, gaining the property *existence* from God's essence, we can ask what is essential to her now. There are three alternatives: (1) all the properties, (2) some properties, but not others, or (3) none of the properties. We can strike the third alternative easily; if none of Fluffy's doggy properties are essential to her, then it seems that they could hardly do the work of distinguishing the dog from other creatures, let alone God. This alternative leads to the Parmenidean conclusion that Miravalle hopes to avoid: "everything is existence, one and homogeneous, without change or variation" (114).

If all of the properties of Fluffy (post-creation) are essential to her, then Fluffy would essentially exist, and thus be elevated to be on a par with God. Or, to put it another way, if existence is just a property like all the other properties, and all of the properties of Fluffy are essential to her, then one must conclude that God, as existence, is ontically on a par with Fluffy's left ear and waggly tail. If Fluffy's properties are essential to her, it seems that the meinongian can't avoid the conclusion that God has been reduced to the level of creatures (112).

There's a deeper objection that pushes on the distinction between being and existence that meinongianism requires. If all of Fluffy's properties are essential to Fluffy, Fluffy can't be identical to the non-existent dog that God chose to create. The non-existent dog—call it Duffy—did not have the property of existence, and non-existent objects are to be distinguished entirely by their properties. Moreover, there is *still* a non-existent dog, Duffy, that is just like Fluffy, except that it lacks the relevant property of existence. One might respond that after Fluffy is created, there is no longer a Duffy; Duffy created just is Fluffy. We can imagine a philosophical library full of extremely coincidental fiction, which tells the adventures of a fictional dog who just so happens to have every property that Fluffy has (minus existence.) Fluffy is a real dog, not a fictional dog, so the stories

can't be about her, so the meinongian still needs to postulate a Duffy to make sense of those kinds of sentences. According to Miravalle, however, the non-existents are prior to creation, so we would need a Duffy and a Fluffy prior to creation in order to explain Duffy-sentences post creation, as the Duffy sentences are not about Fluffy. Prior to creation, however, Duffy and Fluffy have all of the same properties, and so must be identical.

Let's turn to the final alternative. Some of the properties of Fluffy are essential to Fluffy, but not all of them. This seems to be most in spirit with Miravalle's proposal, whereby God chooses which beings to bring into existence, and most in spirit with common sense, whereby we regularly ignore Cambridge-changes and accept that some properties of beings can change without destroying the being. On this alternative, existence is a property that Fluffy has, but existence is not part of Fluffy's essence.

Non-existence or so-called mere being is also a property that Fluffy had, but non-existence cannot be part of Fluffy's essence, because Fluffy now exists due to God's free choice. If being is a property, then it seems there are a couple of options. Being could be a property characteristic of meinongian objects. Meinongian objects have being; ordinary existing objects have existence. If Fluffy exists, then Fluffy is no longer an object that has the being characteristic of non-existent objects.

Recall, however, that *being* was supposed to distinguish meinongian objects from God. They're prior to creation. If Fluffy exists, Fluffy no longer has the right kind of being. Moreover, Fluffy's other properties can't do the work of distinguishing God from Fluffy, because if they could, there'd be no motivation for introducing meinongianism. It seems that we can distinguish between non-existents and God easily, but we cannot distinguish between existents in God, which is no help in avoiding pantheism.

Miravalle has some potential responses that I can see. One could claim that created objects retain the property of being when they gain the property of existence. Being grounds the creature's independence from God; the creature's existence is given by God. Then one would need to explain the difference between being and existence, such that both could be held by an object at the same time, without collapsing the distinction between meinongian objects and existent objects. Another alternative would be to argue that being is not a property, but then one owes an explanation of what it is, and why, if *being* isn't a property, existence is. Either path involves significant, which is not to say insurmountable, challenges.

Overall, the book is successful in taking a fascinating and controversial thesis and applying it to a wide range of puzzles in analytic theology. The book is also clear, non-technical, and remarkably accessible given the subject matter, and I can imagine it easily at home in a seminar for advanced undergraduates. As Miravalle acknowledges, the book is more of the beginning of a conversation about meinongianism and theism than an attempt to have a final word, and I expect that the philosophical conversations that it provokes will be both fruitful and creative.