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## Jamie Boulding, THE MULTIVERSE AND PARTICIPATORY METAPHYSICS: A THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

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*The Multiverse and Participatory Metaphysics: A Theological Exploration*, by Jamie Boulding. Routledge, 2022. Pp. viii + 189. \$160.00 (hardcover).

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The question surrounding the metaphysical relations between the one and the many has been central to the whole history of philosophy, all the way since the Presocratics questioned the necessity of postulating an *arché*, a principle or origin, to explain the multiplicity of entities they observed, to Aristotle's hylomorphic natural philosophy, and beyond. The same question motivated thinkers of all ages to suggest the existence of God, atoms, and the unity of the laws of nature.

Jamie Boulding takes on this philosophical, and theological, theme to tackle one of the most exciting questions on the relations between theology and science today, namely, that of the multiverse and its implications for theological discourses. Boulding's metaphysical strategy follows that of the most prominent metaphysical thinkers in history: looking at the doctrine of participation to offer a solution to the problem of the one and the many. Plato, Augustine, Dionysius, Proclus, Plotinus, Aquinas, Bonaventure, Nicholas of Cusa, Spinoza, Schelling, Whitehead, Tillich, and so many others have recurred to ideas relating to participatory metaphysics to address the relations between the natural world and that which transcends it. Perhaps the first question one might ask is why choose the three authors with which Boulding decided to engage: Plato, Aquinas, and Cusa. Why not engage with the ideas of Plotinus on the emergence of the many from the one, or Pseudo-Dionysius's and Bonaventure's ideas on the ascent of the mind to God via the many creatures the mind finds in its way, or even Augustine's theological reading of Plato's realm of ideas? Boulding does mention these authors as promising avenues for future theological developments, but I wonder why not recur to them at this stage.

Another preliminary issue to consider before entering into the depths of Boulding's metaphysical analyses might be the way in which he articulates his methodology *against* two other extant theological methodologies: science-engaged theology and postmodern approaches to theology and science. I'll focus on the points he makes to the former and leave the latter for the reader's consideration. Boulding's main point against science-engaged theology is that he wants to open a dialogue between one scientific theory and a whole metaphysical approach, not to concentrate theological efforts into particular and discrete questions, as science-engaged theologians (I'm thinking here of John Perry and Joanna Leidenhag at the



University of St Andrews) want to do. Boulding presents three objections to this approach, affirming, first, that framing theological investigations as discrete puzzles overlooks the vast scope, rich complexity, and limitless ambition of theology; second, that if data and theory from the empirical sciences provide the basis for revising and updating theological claims, then this opens its findings to the prospect that they might be invalidated if and when the relevant science changes; and third, that science-engaged theology appears to understand itself primarily as a scientific enterprise requiring highly specialized scientific expertise (3).

To the first, one may call on the example of one of Boulding's own theologians, Thomas Aquinas, who also engaged with discrete questions (as Perry and Leidenhag suggest theologians who engage with the natural sciences do); these questions always opened the path to new questions, looking to a hugely broad spectrum of theological problems as Boulding requires. So, the strategy of starting with discrete queries does not really go against the broad outlook of theology. To the second objection, even if Boulding's claim is true, one could not really look away from the sciences when speaking about the relationship between the created world and the divine, so this is a risk worth taking (as many a theologian today and in the past has done). And finally, to the third objection, one may suggest that all academic discourse requires a highly specialized academic expertise, and that, again recurring to the example of Aquinas, he had a highly specialized knowledge of Aristotelian natural philosophy from which he sourced tools to solve theological questions. Perhaps instead of offering preliminary answers to objections raised against a different methodology of his own, I should be asking whether Boulding was actually required to show the apparent inconsistencies of other methodologies to advance on his own project. I think that, given the longstanding tradition that the methodological path he followed enjoys, there was no actual need to present it as rising over other alternatives. It would have sufficed to express his preference for one over the other. In any case, this is certainly a minor point of divergence in what I find to be a wonderful piece of scholarship.

The structure of the volume is simple and effective: Boulding takes on the doctrines of participation of Plato, Aquinas, and Nicholas of Cusa, and relates their insights to questions brought about by contemporary scholars. These include, among others, Mary-Jane Rubenstein, Max Tegmark, Robin Collins, Bernard Carr, and Rodney Holder. The themes he creatively addresses to solve tensions brought about to theology by the idea of a multiverse as an alternative to the existence of God are key issues in participatory thought: multiplicity, diversity, infinity, beauty, unity, etc. The main insight of the volume is that, if one looks at it through the lens of participatory ideas, a multiverse should not be conceived as an alternative to ideas of the divine. On the contrary, participatory thought allows one to discover that theological claims about the existence of a transcendent God are not at odds with a cosmic multiverse, as many a theologian would argue today.

In the chapter devoted to Aquinas, Boulding offers an example of this theological attitude when exploring ideas of cosmic and divine beauty: Keith Ward holds that a multiverse is extravagant, uneconomical, far too complex, and implausible, while the idea of God as an explanation of the origin of our universe is simpler and more rational. Rodney Holder, Boulding further exemplifies, is of similar ideas. Following on Aquinas' metaphysical participatory thought, however, Boulding shows that the vast diversity of the multiverse could be considered as an expression of God's infinite beauty and goodness, which no single creature is able to represent in its full: "While God's being is simple and one and perfectly beautiful, it is received in creation in many diverse and varied ways. As such, God's beauty is expressed in creation in a diverse manner, and perhaps this will be further illustrated in the context of a tremendous diversity of cosmic realms" (106). There are several such examples of how participation could open paths to consider multiverse theories in a positive and creative relation to theological discourse, all of which are insightful and, at the same time, intriguing.

As an original theological exploration, the volume offers far too much new material to consider and to think about in this review. The author is right when he claims that this is "the first systematic theological engagement with the key metaphysical issues arising from multiverse theory" (1), and he does so in an ingenious and resourceful way. In this regard, I believe this volume could bring about a myriad of new imaginative manners to engage ideas concerning the multiverse from different theological perspectives.

I would like to consider, however, some comments Boulding makes about his methodology, as he seems to claim one thing at the outset while suggesting something rather different along the chapters. I do not want to say that there are inconsistencies in his argument, which I find rather convincing. I only want to remark the importance of the philosophical bridging between scientific and theological narratives when one addresses a theme in the dialogue between religion and science.

In this sense, a quick reader might find Boulding's initial hopes a bit worrisome. In fact, early on in the volume the author states that he wishes this volume to be "useful in demonstrating the way in which theology might confidently and constructively contribute to an important debate in modern physics and cosmology," adding that "scientists and others working on multiverse theory be encouraged [by the book] to view the participatory tradition as a source of insight and illumination regarding their own practices and activities" (2). It would seem that theological or metaphysical considerations can directly contribute to scientific cosmological theories. This kind of statement might make someone wonder whether this move is necessary or even desirable. How would a scientific-cosmological-participatory theory look? What would its epistemological status be like? Would it be scientific? Or metaphysical?

A more careful reading of some of the following pages, however, sheds some light on this initial desire. In fact, Boulding is clear in suggesting all along the book a different kind of engagement, particularly when advising cosmologists to consider participatory thought. As I read Boulding's text, it would seem that what he actually has in mind is that participatory metaphysics can open a path to cosmologists to relate their own scientific theories to theological discourses. See, for instance, his reading of Mersini-Houghton's multiverse theory, in which she uses "strikingly participatory language to describe the common origin of her entangled domains, such as 'sharing,' 'traces,' and 'imprints'" (60). For Boulding, this language points to a philosophical consideration of a cosmos that participates in eternity. True, Mersini-Houghton's using participatory language to refer to and describe her scientific theories is not per se metaphysical, since she remains in the scientific discourse, so one might ask whether hers is a natural participation of sorts. Still, this language clearly leads one to metaphysical and theological considerations.

Another clear example of this reading comes when Boulding analyses Don Page's "reflections on the cosmic diversity implied by string theory" (105). These reflections are specifically theological, since Page considers the implications of string theory on his image of God. As such, Boulding suggests that when reflecting theologically, Page the scientist would be enlightened by resourcing some of Aquinas's ideas on participation, particularly those about beauty and diversity. Thus, Aquinas supplements Page's approach.

In his own words, Boulding has throughout his volume attempted:

"to demonstrate that the vision of a . . . participatory cosmos can come into constructive interaction with the multiverse hypothesis and in unexpected ways might be more consistent with the implications of this hypothesis than is often assumed in contemporary theology, philosophy, and science." (157)

I have often considered that skeptic theological takes on multiverse theories were rushed in their disregard of these theories, but never engaged in this argumentation at length. Boulding has offered in his book a wonderful and original first take which will, I hope, open new ways of engaging cosmological theories with theology now and in the future.