The Old and the New in Philosophy of Religion

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Philosophical reflection on religion has been, since philosophy’s birth, one of the fundamental cornerstones of the whole ‘venture’ that philosophy is. Not always, however, has this particular branch of philosophy been the centre of attention. But, for reasons that could be of interest to historians, the revival of philosophy of religion in recent times can easily be seen as one of the more interesting movements in contemporary philosophy. This volume is a demonstration of this fact.

Written by some of the major experts in the field, this book consists of short essays that are subdivided in four sections. The first three sections treat most of the classical topics in philosophy of religion: ‘Religious Experience and Knowledge’, ‘The Existence of God’, and ‘The Nature and Attributes of God’. The final part confronts some of the new directions that have recently emerged in the research of philosophy and religion and has been called ‘Emerging Themes’. In order to proceed clearly, I will first confront each separate essay and the thematics it addresses after which I will embark upon some general remarks.

The first article is by William E. Mann and treats, as its title states, ‘The Epistemology of Religious Experience’. How can one justify one’s religious experiences – as the author correctly comments, religious experiences are not the same as religious beliefs (9) – and can they be veridical? Mann confronts this problem by focussing respectively on the phenomenological character, the psychological impact and the possible veridicality of religious experiences;
dealing, *en passant*, also with possible types of scepticism regarding these same religious experiences.

The second chapter, ‘Religion and Science’ by John Polkinghorne, tackles one of the trickiest issues in modern scholarship on religion – be it philosophical or not. In fact, Polkinghorne’s essay confronts the century old problematic of *Fides* and *Ratio*. As this topic not only has a history, but also is historical, Polkinghorne starts by focussing on its historical context. The remainder of the article concentrates on some important issues that are particularly of interest in the ongoing ‘dialogue’ between science and religion such as creation, natural theology, divine action, and eschatology.

René van Woudenberg’s essay, ‘Reformed Epistemology’, faces the question whether religious beliefs need justification or if they are intellectually reputable by themselves. He confronts this topic from the stance of contemporary reformed epistemology that has, in recent times, produced some profound innovative reflections regarding this issue.

The final two chapters of this first section are closely related to each other. Both essays, in fact, examine the subject of conflicting truth claims in the different world religions. In the first article, ‘Religious Pluralism’, Joseph Runzo starts by defining pluralism after which he individuates and explains six possible ways of exploring the theme of conflicting truth claims between different religions: religious antipathy, religious subjectivism, religious exclusivism, religious pluralism, religious inclusivism and religious henofideism.

Harold Netland, in the final article ‘Religious Exclusivism’, tackles one of these possible ways, namely religious exclusivism. After a short résumé of the main themes already addressed by Runzo, Netland focuses first of all on the different aspects of religious exclusivism after which he reflects on some offered attempts to avoid the problem of conflicting truths and justification of religious exclusivism.

The second section of this book addresses topics related to the existence of God. Over the centuries, many arguments have been developed that tried to explain, in a logical way, the existence of this supreme Being.
The chapters that are collocated in this second section individually confront the more important ones.

William Lane Craig starts with ‘The Cosmological Argument’. Why there is anything rather than nothing lies at the basis of this cosmological argument, or said differently, the fundamental issue at stake here is the mystery of the universe. Craig looks at this question from two different angles. The first cosmological argument he offers is the one proposed by G. W. Leibniz: the principle of sufficient reason. For the second cosmological argument Craig turns to medieval Islamic theology and its kalam argument that states that ‘if the universe had a beginning, then it seems incredible to think that it came into being uncaused out of nothing’ (88).

A second argument that should demonstrate the existence of God is the teleological argument and is presented here by Robin Collins. This argument comes in many forms and can be considered as ‘one of the strongest arguments for the existence of an intelligence behind or within the universe’ (98). Basically, the argument consists of the fact that given the apparent nature or design of the universe there must be a God (a designer). The teleological argument presented by Collins in this chapter refers to the fine-tuning of the laws that enabled conscious, embodied life, the beauty of the laws and mathematical structure of the universe and the intelligibility and discoverability of the structure of nature (98).

In the third chapter Graham Oppy turns to ‘The Ontological Argument’. Oppy begins his article by making the accurate annotation that many ontological arguments do not end with strict affirmations of God’s existence. What the majority of these arguments claim in the end is that ‘so-and-so’ exist and that this is considered by some theists as God (112). This brief opening comment, however, is paradigmatic for the whole structure of this essay. In fact, more than simply arguing in favour of the ontological argument, Oppy presents us with several contemporary reinterpretations of Anselm’s argument. A number of possible objections regarding these diverse ontological arguments are confronted in the conclusion.
‘A moral universe is far less likely ... if God does not exist’ (127). From this it follows that if we could claim that there are such things as objective moral values then they would be a very solid case for believing in God. This is the basic claim that Paul Copan, in his ‘The Moral Argument’, presents to us. Copan clearly defends this position, but this does not mean that he is unaware of possible objections from naturalist or evolutionary perspectives – both profoundly treated and explained in this essay. A final thought is given the Euthyphro dilemma as it can be found in Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*.

Up until now, arguments that have tried to defend the existence of God, different as they are, have held the scene. This tone changes in the last two chapters of this second section. In fact, the final two articles try to demonstrate the exact opposite, that is, the impossibility of there being a God. A first argument, proposed by Paul Draper, considers ‘The Argument from Evil’. Not all arguments from evil, however, fulfil their duty according to Draper. In order to demonstrate this, the essay begins with the questioning of the MT (*modus tollens*) arguments. After having argued for their failure, Draper constructs his argument that is based on the Bayesian argument, the logical validity of the premises of which he tries to evidence. The second essay focused on refusing the existence of God is Quentin Smith’s ‘A Naturalistic Account of the Universe’. The basic issue in this article is ‘causation’ and the problematic theist affirmation of God being the uncaused cause of all things. For Smith, some of the divine attributes make it impossible for God to be the ‘first cause’. In fact, a simple and partless being such as God can in no logical way cause itself. On the other hand, a whole of parts, such as the universe, can, according to Smith, cause itself. For these reasons, Smith cannot but bestow more value to a naturalistic account of the universe and refuse a theistic one.

In the first essay of the third section, ‘The Coherence of Theism’, Charles Taliaferro tackles the tricky question of whether all the divine attributes are coherent, that is, whether the concept of God, in its wholeness, makes any sense at all. Taliaferro explores this thorny subject from three different angles. The first two arguments, respectively the necessity of a
'decent’ framework for the discussion and the flexibility of the precise concept of theism, are treated briefly in the first sections. In the final section one of the fundamental theistic attributes is addressed (the incorpolarity of God). In it Taliaferro puts into practice the two aforementioned arguments to demonstrate, with the help of concrete theories, the consistency of his vision.

A completely different approach is offered by Robin Le Poidevin in his article ‘The Impossibility of God?’ In fact, more than a different approach, Le Poidevin’s article can easily be considered as doing the exact opposite of Taliaferro. In fact, Le Poidevin tries to demonstrate how the concept of God is internally paradoxical or contradictory. As God is considered the most perfect being this must mean that all his attributes must also be perfectly compatible with each other. For Le Poidevin this is not the case and he tries to show this by confronting God’s being ‘everlasting’ and ‘without a body’ with, on the one hand, His being ‘maker and preserver’ of all things with and, on the other hand, His ‘omnipotence’.

Katherin A. Rogers in her essay ‘God, Time, and Freedom’ focuses on the possible problems that could arise from the coexistence of human freedom and divine foreknowledge. The question Rogers treats consists of the possible contradiction between the fact that God knows beforehand what humans will do and free will, as God’s omniscience could mean that free will is a myth or God does not infallibly know. The solution to this dilemma, proposed by Rogers, can be found in the Anselmian based theory of time which she calls ‘four-dimensionalism’.

In the final essay of this second but last section, ‘Divine Hiddenness, Death, and Meaning’, Paul K. Moser offers a profound and almost spiritual plea for belief in God – not that Moser engages in some sort of mystical gibberish, on the contrary. In this chapter, Moser considers the possible meaning of death in relation to the presence or absence of God. Furthermore, in defending the theist position, Moser examines the theme of the necessary hiddenness of God as only this aspect of God would give, according to Moser, a true meaning to death (and life as well).
The final section of this volume confronts some emerging themes in contemporary philosophy of religion. Bruce Ellis Benson’s chapter ‘Continental Philosophy of Religion’ is the first one. It should be noted from the beginning, however, that it is rather strange to see continental philosophy of religion as one of the ‘emerging themes’ as one could easily state the exact opposite, that is, that it is analytical philosophy of religion that has only ‘emerged’ recently. In this uniquely concise article, Benson starts by covering the three great European thinkers that have laid the basis for the contemporary themes in philosophy (of religion) namely Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger. After this he turns to Levinas and his concept of the other which is followed by Derrida’s turn to the messianic and, finally, Benson concludes with Marion’s distinction between the idol and the icon.

Gavin Flood, in his article ‘Eastern Philosophy of Religion’, treats the different Asiatic (philosophies of) religions. Considering this chapter as ‘emerging’ could also be justly questioned. In order to be able to confront the ‘enormousness’ of Eastern philosophy of religion, Flood has divided his article. An ‘Indian’ section is where he first treats the Vedic tradition, emphasizing the concept of God and consciousness in these traditions. This section is followed by some considerations on the religious philosophies outside of this tradition. Flood concludes by turning his attention to the religious philosophies in China, paying particular attention to Confucianism and Taoism.

The final emerging theme – and this time the description of ‘emerging’ is (unfortunately) justified – that is treated is ‘Feminist Philosophy of Religion’ and is presented by Pamela Sue Anderson. In this final chapter Anderson puts the necessary stress on the specific characteristics of feminist philosophy such as the importance of gender, practice, and spirituality. Particular attention has been given to God’s relation to gender and the final sections, dedicated to the combination of (‘political’) practice and spirituality, can only be welcomed into any philosophy of religion. Anderson, in fact, demonstrates that any renewed attention to the practice (action) of believing, reconfirming the importance of piety and prayer besides the (all) important (masculine?) aspect of analytical
reflection on God, can only be of major importance for contemporary philosophy of religion.

In conclusion, a first observation that seems necessary is in relation to the aim of this book. As the editors wrote in the introduction: ‘the scope of this volume is broad, but the aim is narrow: to provide a number of central topics in philosophy of religion, both classic and contemporary issues’ (5). Considering this as the true goal of this volume, one can only give credit for the fact that this is exactly what has been done. As such, it must be said that, as a working instrument this publication is of a great value, the concision and thoroughness of the chapters together with the clear and simple examples, and even the user-friendly nature of the book itself, are all student friendly (even if some specific chapters might not be of particular interest to certain readers, the conciseness of the chapters invite you to proceed anyway).

Another plus of this volume is the fact that every section finishes with a series of questions for the reader to ‘check’ whether he or she has understood the argumentation presented. Furthermore, also a small bibliographical list of recommended further readings is consistently present after each article. Additionally, this volume takes in differing perspectives; not all contributors, in fact, are convinced believers, and three chapters – out of eighteen (by Paul Draper, Quentin Smith, and Robin Le Poidevin) – underwrite some form of atheism.

In relation to criticisms, the first one would be the all too frequent auto-referential indications by some of the authors. A second, and more fundamental one, regards the broadness of this volume. Even though it should be acknowledged that the variety of themes confronted is almost ‘enormous’, it should also be mentioned that nevertheless it is strictly limited to a single philosophical tradition, namely analytical philosophy. However, as this book is not intended to convert in any direction, one can only highly recommend it to every possible student who is minimally interested in philosophy of religion – absolutely no harm will be done if confirmed philosophers would also engage in the reading of the varied chapters presented.
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