Book Review


*Philosophy of Religion for OCR* is a textbook on the Philosophy of Religion for those in their final year(s) of secondary school in the United Kingdom, though the content is quite useful to undergraduate tertiary students as well. After introductory notes about what the Philosophy of Religion is, the difficulties in crafting sound deductive arguments, and the fact that being doubtful is almost always a requirement, the first chapter proper focuses on Plato. The authors discuss Plato's Forms, his dualism, his famous analogies, and some of the problems with his ideas. Chapter 2 moves on to Aristotle and is thus more empirically minded, providing explanations of his four types of causes and his notion of the Prime Mover, with Brown and Greggs finding the latter to be a weak point in his thinking. The third chapter is concerned with souls and minds, including reasonable discussions about substance monism and dualism. I did find the references (throughout) to Richard Dawkins, who is not a philosopher or scholar of religion, to be off-putting, especially the authors' apparent surprise that a non-specialist's views on such matters may not be particularly sophisticated.

The next two chapters deal with some of the more common arguments for God's existence: the teleological, cosmological and ontological arguments. Brown and Greggs do well to refute these arguments effectively, noting the old 'existence is not a predicate' rebuttal to ontological arguments, and they point out some of the fallacies typically employed by apologists, such as the fallacy of composition. Though the book is necessarily limited in scope, it would have been good to include some mention of how certain ontological arguments can be used to 'prove' God's non-existence. In general, it would have been nice to see some more discussion of how such evidence/argumentation may actually support (non-naturalistic) alternatives to theism, but again, that may have been too advanced, and is a relatively new avenue of research for a field
struggling to break free from its Christian/theistic obsession. Chapter 6 describes the many sorts of claims about religious experiences, and the many reasons to reject or at least not be convinced by them, while chapter 7 provides handy explanations of the argument from evil, common theodicies, and the problems with such theodicies. A little more time could have been spent on how ad hoc some of these—generally Christian—responses are. For example, why would the rest of us be placated with unproven notions of original sin, Jesus’ atoning sacrifice, and eternal life in Heaven?

The eighth chapter deals with the attributes normally associated with God, such as omnipotence, omnibenevolence and omniscience, and how they might conflict. This leads perfectly into the next chapter which discusses the many challenges in conceiving and talking about God, who in some cases sounds very much like a figure that does not exist, and includes some good criticism about the analogical approach since we cannot know how valid analogies are when applied to something so unique and transcendent. The chapter ends with some discussion of the mythical approach and how many of the Judeo-Christian Bible’s central claims can be so easily dismissed as being literally true; perhaps the Quran’s failings in this regard could have been mentioned as well. Chapter 10 touches on the difficulties with the cognitivist and non-cognitivist approaches to mainstream religion. The former is not favoured by the available evidence and is becoming increasingly irrelevant as the world progresses, while the latter, for all its benefits, simply does not portray the views of most religious believers.

*Philosophy of Religion for OCR* is an excellent primer for high school students and even university undergraduates. It capably summarises some of the history of the field, key figures, ongoing debates, common arguments, and the problems with these arguments. Towards the end of the textbook there is some helpful advice about essay writing, and a useful glossary.

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