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Book Reviews

Adrian W. Moore, *Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty: Themes and Variations in Kant's Moral and Religious Philosophy*. Routledge, London, 2003, pp. 272, ISBN 0415208211

The tension between philosophy and religion as competing discourses through which sense can be made of the world is one that has existed at least since classical times. It is a theme with which many philosophers and scholars of religion will be familiar. That it sometimes manifests as a more specific tension between competing discourses whereby we make specifically *ethical* sense of the world is of no surprise. Given this tension, the temptation to establish some form of rapprochement between these two discourses is particularly enticing and has lured many philosophers. Moore, whose work is not specifically on religion but rather on ethics, proposes such a rapprochement. In so doing he reaches the rather Kantian conclusion that religion can, although by no means must, serve to sustain us in making sense, and particularly ethical sense, of the world. Thus, it is religion's capacity to sustain our sense making that opens it up as a possible support for certain practical or ethical postulations. Moore, like Kant, proposes that religion and metaphysical ideas such as God can serve a decidedly practical purpose, by sustaining those ideas that help us make sense of this world rather than by deflecting our focus beyond it.

Moore's work is primarily philosophical, both thematically and methodologically. Its theme is philosophical ethics, more particularly Kantian ethical thought, and his discussion takes its cue both from issues within the contemporary philosophical discourse on ethics and from within Kant scholarship. The methodology used to engage with these themes is best described as a post-analytic rationalism; a kind of philosophical methodological rapprochement between the Anglo-American tradition of philosophy and philosophical tendencies that lie outside of that tradition. Due to its thematic and methodological orientation, Moore's work will be difficult for those without at least some background in philosophy and, perhaps more pertinently, some background in Kantian philosophy, to access. This difficulty is not, however, insurmountable, and at the end of each of the three chapters that are

specifically devoted to playing out Kantian themes, Moore offers a short bibliographic overview of primary and secondary sources through which his discussion can be expanded. The texts mentioned represent some of the most influential and sympathetic contemporary readings of Kantian philosophy and will prove invaluable both to those seeking to come to terms with Moore's exegesis and in directing further reading. The book's level of sophistication, however, possibly places it beyond most readers working at an undergraduate level.

Excluding the Introduction, the work may be considered as consisting in three main sections, dealing in turn with the themes of morality, freedom and religion. Each of these sections is further divided into two chapters, the first providing an exploration of central themes in Kantian ethics, the second providing a variation on that theme whereby Moore develops his own ideas through reworking and redefining these themes in such a way to move them out of a specifically Kantian framework. Moore's variations are an original, insightful and contemporary presentation of a rationalist approach to ethics that are perhaps more in keeping with the *spirit* of Kant's philosophy than the letter—in keeping with that spirit because Moore seems primarily concerned with preserving the broad structure and motivation of Kant's rationalism rather than its detail. Three core features of Kantian ethics are preserved in Moore's variations. First, the Kantian notion that pure reason can be practical, because certain ways of acting commend themselves to us simply by virtue of our shared rationality. Secondly, the Kantian notion that freedom and reason are intimately linked, because to act rationally is to exercise our freedom through an act of self-determination. Finally, Moore preserves the notion that those ideas that provide fundamental support to our capacity for moral action might just evade proof and hence we are left to believe in them: or—at the very least—to hope that they are indeed true.

The central problem addressed by Moore is: How is it possible for us to make ethical sense of things? Further, what type of objectivity can we ascribe to our ethical thinking? The answer to both of these questions is tightly bound to Moore's rationalist project and his response has two elements. The first element is conceptual: Moore's thesis is that concepts provide a normative or rational constraint for ethical thinking through which we are able, both individually and corporately, to make ethical sense of the world. Hence, the objectivity that is involved in ethical thinking is not the type of objectivity that we associate with our thinking about an independent reality, but rather it is the objectivity that accrues when thought is constrained, conceptually, to go in a certain direction. This might be taken on analogy with mathematics; if one has successfully taken possession of the relevant mathematical concepts, then in thinking through a mathematical problem, one's thoughts, if consistent with those concepts, are constrained to go in

certain directions and to reach a certain conclusion. If we accept this thesis, then it would seem that our ethical thinking is a process of applying what Kant would call pure practical reason, it is a process whereby, through the consistent application of concepts, our thoughts constrain themselves towards a certain direction and a certain conclusion. Secondly, Moore marries this notion of rational conceptual constraint to a moral psychology based in a distinctively rationalist form of cognitive objectivism, whereby ethical actions are underpinned by shared desires. In this case it is the shared desire that we can make sense, both to ourselves and to each other; in other words it is the shared desire for rationality. Hence, for Moore, it is our shared desire to make sense, coupled with the kind of normative constraint that comes with the consistent application of concepts, which themselves are the very tools of sense-making, that sustains the objectivity of our ethical thinking.

How does this have bearing on the topic of religion? This is a difficult question. Moore paints quite a complex philosophical picture before he specifically takes up the theme of religion, first, by exploring what Kant has to say in the penultimate chapter and, secondly, by developing his own variant on that theme in the final chapter. Again, Moore's conclusions are decidedly Kantian: that there can be an important connection between reason, ethics and religion—even if religion, when bounded by reason, is always going to take a subordinate role to morality. Due to the imperfection of human nature, there is a need for certain non-rational props in order to support morality and Kant describes three of these: freedom, immortality of the soul and God. These three non-rational props are the focus of Moore's exploration of the Kantian theme of religion. This exploration is undertaken with sensitivity to Kant's philosophy and through taking Kant on his own terms. In Kantian terms, these three ideas—freedom, immortality and God—are postulates of pure practical reason, ideas postulated by practical reason in order to sustain morality, but which are completely non-verifiable. We can neither prove nor disprove them, even though reason in its practical application compels us to postulate them. So, while we can never know that these ideas obtain we must believe that they do—otherwise our capacity to sustain morality would begin to falter. This notion that, in order to sustain morality, there are certain ideas that we must believe, despite an inability to verify them, will prove to be of vital importance for Moore's variant on the theme of religion.

Moore provides a detailed account of Kant's reasons for believing that these ideas are necessary to sustain morality. First, in regard to freedom, we can only act, in the true agential sense of the word, if we do so under the idea of freedom. Without postulating freedom, the very notion that we are agents disappears and a deterministic causal web subsumes our activity. If

this is the case then the moral law, *qua* ethical standard, would seem to be a weighty and unfair burden rubbing salt into the wounds of our moral imperfection; if we have no hope of regulating ourselves according to it, because our actions are completely determined, then why ought we hold it before ourselves as a standard of action? We can only do so if we can affirm our capacity to regulate ourselves accordingly. But that means we affirm our capacity to act as agents, we affirm our status as moral agents, we affirm that we act through freedom. Secondly, we must postulate immortality because we must be able to hold to the hope of our own reformation, the hope that we can overcome our imperfection. But the perfection of the human condition is an infinite task, not one that can be accomplished in one lifetime; hence, we must hope that we can carry the impetus to reformation into the infinite. If this were not possible there would be no reason ever to commence the task of reformation and hence the moral law would falter. Finally, we must postulate God in order to reconcile virtue and happiness. For Kant, happiness is associated with the satisfaction of this-worldly goods (such as wealth and honour), and these are qualified goods, they are not always good. Virtue on the other hand is associated with the good will, and is an unqualified good; indeed the will to good is the only unqualified good. These two forms of good are united under the Kantian notion of the highest good whereby the qualified good of happiness and the unqualified good of virtue are in harmony such that we have happiness in accordance with virtue. For Kant, we cannot sustain ourselves in virtuous action without the hope that there is this harmony between virtue and happiness. The need to believe in this harmony in turn requires the belief in a being that is capable of ensuring this harmony, it requires a belief in God. It is for these reasons that—on Moore's account—Kant comes to consider that religion is a vital support for and sustainer of morality; for the sake of morality we must hope that these three postulates obtain and so it is a demand of reason that we believe them.

Moore's variation on this Kantian theme, despite its reliance on notions such as hope and belief, is decidedly secular, which demands a consideration of the role of hope and belief in Moore's ethics. He too believes that in order to sustain us in morality we need certain props, we need to postulate certain ideas that we cannot know obtain but that we must hope are true. For Moore, it is because we must hope that they are true that practical reason lays upon us the practical demand that we ought to believe that they are true. We must hope for what Moore calls the Basic Idea, 'that there is a nisus in all of us, more fundamental than any other, towards rationality' (p. 128), and that this directs us towards making sense, both individually and corporately. This is the belief that we have the power to make sense of our world and of each other, the hope that we, as rational people, can

ultimately make sense of our human predicament. This is a hope that we must share, despite any particular religious affiliation or lack of such, for without this hope a gulf of despair opens before us. If we cannot hope to make sense of things, and, particularly, if we cannot hope that eventually we can make sense of each other, then we begin to lose hope in our capacity for some sort of this-worldly redemption, justice, equality and peace. That this nisus towards rationality exists is something that we can never know, but for Moore it is something for which we can hope.

In his concluding chapter Moore connects this Basic Idea and variations of it to each of Kant's three practical postulates—freedom, immortality and God—to produce a more secular set of practical postulates for which we must hope. Thus Moore develops his final, secular, variation on Kant. Secular, because the onus is on us, it is we that must have faith in our own powers of sense-making, we must hope that we can make sense of the world and our predicament. Despite his secularism, Moore does allow some elbowroom for religion by allowing for a belief in God, while blocking off the idea that God exists. For a belief in God may just be vital to sustaining the Basic Idea, it might just be vital to sustaining the hope that we can make sense of the world, sustaining the hope that we can make sense of each other and in particular a belief in God might give us hope for making sense of the fact that God does not exist. It need not be so and—importantly—this belief in God is not a necessary plank in Moore's thought, which makes his project one that may appeal to both the religious thinker and the secularist alike. Perhaps this serves as a much-needed rapprochement.

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William Arnal, *The Symbolic Jesus: Historical Scholarship, Judaism and the Construction of Contemporary Identity*. London and Oakville, Equinox, 2005, pp. viii-98, ISBN1845530063 (hbk) 1845530071 (pbk)

This is a short book (87 pages of actual text) but it is a thought provoking one. It began as a paper intended to cover scholarly presentations of the Judaism of the historical Jesus. Having reviewed some of the scholarly controversies in recent decades on that topic, Arnal (who did his doctorate under John Kloppenborg) came to the surprising conclusion that there is little fire left in the debate. All those scholars involved in the mainstream of the search for the historical Jesus seem to agree on the Jewishness of Jesus. Yet the very discussion of the Judaism of Jesus among those who would seem to be in agreement generates disputes. Why? The Judaism of the historical Jesus would seem to be a more complex issue than first meets the

eye and Arnal sets out to describe 'the undercurrents, the biases, the hidden agenda that I see lurking behind historical Jesus scholarship' (73). As the author asks, after ably covering the anti-Jewish stance of earlier times in biblical scholarship: 'What is behind the shrill reiteration of Jesus having been Jewish?' (19)

The key to Arnal's answer is this:

> In support of my assertion that the supposed controversy over a Jewish Jesus is no controversy at all, but a manufactured issue, a straw man, I want to draw attention to the fact that a satisfactory definition of just what a Jew is, whether now or, more to the point, in first-century Palestine, has by no means been established (29).

He then proceeds to the defence (at least on the matter of the Jewishness of Jesus) of some of the Third Searchers for an Historical Jesus—John Dominic Crossan and Burton Mack among them. His conclusion is that the charges laid against them of producing a non-Jewish Jesus are based on definitions of Judaism that cannot be supported. However, he does have some interesting things to say about the personal agendas of these scholars, whom he is defending, in the profile of Jesus that they (and others) produce. In short, he concludes, the debates about the Jewishness of Jesus come down to debates about identity issues in today's society.

His conclusion is very interesting.

> The historically relevant and interesting causes of the development and growth of the Christian movement will be found, not in the person of Jesus, but in the collective machinations, agenda, and vicissitudes of the movement itself. And the Jesus who is important to our own day is not the Jesus of history, but the symbolic Jesus of contemporary discourse (77).

This is a very pertinent treatise that I personally would like to see debated further. The book is a good read for anyone interested in historical Jesus research.

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Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology*. Oxford, Blackwell, 2004, pp. 254, ISBN 1405117338 (pbk)

I must confess that my initial reaction to this monograph was 'not another text on Aquinas!' Don't get me wrong. On any listing of the 'top ten' of influential Christian Theologians Aquinas would easily make the cut, but after seven hundred years is there really anything new to add? However, it

didn't take long before this initial reaction make way for admiration for this scholarly and engaging work.

This text not only excels, but sets a standard of what a good theological text should do. Levering doesn't just leave Aquinas in the thirteenth century as an object of historic curiosity, but becomes his apologist to his modern critics and uses his logic and writings to interact with a broad range of our contemporary theologians and their concerns. Essentially, the text allows Aquinas to enter into our contemporary concerns and debates, and allows us to appreciate how Aquinas would argue if with us in person today. Although moderate in size, the text is lavish with footnotes to sources and supporting documents of the author's arguments, easily satisfying further curiosity of the reader.

The text begins defending the methodology of Aquinas, and enters into a discussion that is almost as old as the Christian faith: Should Christians be exclusively deontological in methodology, or interact with speculative philosophy? Levering defends Aquinas as displaying a middle position of interacting with philosophy through the contemplative view of Scripture, which produces wisdom. Indeed, the author argues that Aquinas radically challenges this dichotomy between Scripture and metaphysics urging a robust and vigorous theological and intellectual pursuit whilst wrestling with the living and interactive God of Christian Scripture.

Once this foundation is laid, the interaction with modern critics and their concerns begins with earnest. Levering is to be admired for the breadth of those with whom he allows Aquinas to interact. A broad congregation of Catholic, Protestant and even Orthodox theologians engage with Aquinas, through Levering. Chapter 3 is a passionate engagement with the Jewish Theologian, Jon Levenson, and his perspective of the remoteness of the Yahweh in the face of evil and suffering in the context of the holocaust. Whilst Levering most adequately defends Aquinas' very high view of God's foreknowledge and will, I found his interaction with Process Theology and its nuances slightly lacking. By Chapter 5 we have fully entered the centre of Leverings' argument and the critical discussion as to whether the Christ and the Gospels have a clear Trinitarian understanding. Through these chapters we interact with a broad array of modern theologians, and also one of the oldest Christian adversaries, Arius. I was left slightly unsatisfied by the lack of interaction with the New Testament Epistles, and a failure to explain whether this was the bias of the author or Aquinas.

This text is highly recommended to anyone interested in Aquinas and Christian Theology, especially Trinitarian Theology, and those wishing to be exposed to a range of current and older theological issues. Levering especially conveys his passion for Trinitarian Theology, a need to have a robust understanding of it, and the need and way to articulate it. Levering is to be

commended for the way he allows an ancient figure to intelligently enter into our debates and concerns, setting a standard for other writers of historic and religious figures.

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