

Erratum

Unfortunately, the printed version of this Book Review (in Volume 58, No. 3) contained multiple typographical errors. Springer apologizes for these errors and publishes the corrected version in this issue.

Book Review

William L. Rowe, *Can God Be Free?* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004. vii and 173 pages. \$30.

We owe William Rowe gratitude for a well-argued analysis of the consistency of the traditional doctrine of God. He is known best for claiming that the evidential problem of evil shows that no such God exists, but he does not pursue the atheism question in this book.

His book is titled “Can God Be Free?” His introduction suggests the topic as God’s “*freedom and praiseworthiness* in relation to his perfect goodness” (p. 2). His conclusion is that the traditional idea that God is free in a way that deserves praiseworthiness needs to be revised.

Rowe claims that since God is a perfect being, God has to create the best of all possible worlds because of his [Rowe’s adjective] nature. Since God cannot choose otherwise, he is not deserving of our thanks and praise. God is at best free only in a very limited sense, should it turn out that there are several equally possible good worlds, not just one. God might be free to choose among those possible worlds, but since those worlds are equally good, such a freedom is one that does not matter. Rowe likens it to randomness. God, being perfect, has to choose one of the best possible worlds but the choice does not matter since the available choices are equal.

In order to reach his conclusions Rowe looks at the issue of whether there is a best of all possible worlds. Some philosophers have maintained that God has real freedom in his choice of worlds since there is no single best of all possible worlds. Rowe’s conclusion here is that if there is no best of all possible worlds, then there can be no God as defined in traditional terms. If there is no best world, then any world that God creates is surpassable, hence its creator is surpassable,

by a creator who makes a better world, a world which that creator could have made instead.

To build his conclusions he looks first at Leibniz and Samuel Clarke, concluding that Leibniz is right that God must create the best of all possible worlds because of his nature. Clarke is mistaken to think that God might be able to choose not to create such a world because if God is perfect by nature he could not make such a choice. His examination of Edwards reaches a similar conclusion, one which Edwards himself realized.

He looks at the question of whether there can be a best possible world by exploring Aquinas's claim that there is an infinity of good worlds, but no best possible world. He rejects Robert Adams's claim that choosing a less than perfect world is compatible with divine goodness and concludes that it is not. This same issue is debated more fully in chapter 6 which comprises over one-third of the book. In this section he replies to the Howard-Snyders, Hasker, Morris, Wainwright, Langtry, Mensson and Sullivan, Wierenga, and Talbott, who have objected to Rowe's claims that there can be no perfect God if there is no best of all possible worlds. Rowe's argument is that if there is always a better creatable world than any particular one that God could create (see p. 97 and elsewhere), then a God who created any world could be surpassed by a better God, hence a perfect God could not exist. This book of Rowe's is especially welcome because it gathers in one place most of the extensive discussion which has arisen around his 1993 piece on "The Problem of Divine Perfection and Freedom" and related works.

He does not devote as much space to the praiseworthiness matter but does point out in the introduction that since God created because of his nature, God cannot be regarded as worthy of thanks and praise, and adds, in discussions of Wierenga and Morris, that although a being could be praiseworthy if he chose his own nature, God has no choice about his own nature (p. 141, for example). I presume that God is not praiseworthy just because God might have the limited freedom to choose among an number of equally good possible worlds, since that means, as Wierenga has observed, God is free "*only when it does not matter what he does*" (pp. 140, 186). Since Rowe stated in the introduction that his conclusion is that the idea of God as revised does not justify praiseworthiness, we must assume that the kind of freedom Rowe allows God to have does not justify praiseworthiness, although Rowe never explicitly makes that point when he writes about that kind of freedom.

As I mentioned, his book is about whether God can be free and praiseworthy, not about whether there is or is not such a God. We know from his other writings that he believes that the evidential problem of evil makes atheism probably true. His proposed revision would not make the case for God any better. We know that Rowe styles himself a “friendly” atheist, one who agrees that it is possible to remain a theist if one believes that she has very strong reasons that justify her belief in God, hence has reasons to believe that the evidential problem of evil can be solved. Presumably his atheism is still friendly, since his current book merely argues for a change in the traditional concept of God, not a change which would help solve the evidential problem of evil. A theist could revise her conception of God by realizing that her God is not praiseworthy. However drastic that change would be, it would still be rational of her to believe in God if she continues to believe that she has strong reasons to believe that God exists. I would think that her solution of evil would still go through. Despite the fact that God’s creating the world is not praiseworthy, she could still claim that God loves his creatures and could work out a solution to the problem of evil.

Rowe’s critique of the traditional concept of God adds to those of others who allege problems combining unchangeableness and impassibility with love or with interaction in time with free creatures. While Rowe’s own position is that atheism is correct, many others have chosen instead to defend revisions of the traditional doctrine of God, such as by becoming “open theists,” or process theists. My own preferred solution is to defend what is now called “open theism” but blame much of the problem of evil on matter, a solution proposed by Plato and endorsed by Mill.

There are two very minor matters with the book. One is the failure of the bibliography to include William Wainwright’s *Philosophy of Religion*, quoted in the text. The other is two uses of the word “lessor” (pp. 134 and 138). My dictionary reserves that word to persons who convey leases and does not make moral judgments about such persons.

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