

Peter Forrest: *Developmental Theism: From Pure Will to Unbounded Love*. Oxford: Clarendon, 2007, 199 pp., £???, ISBN 978-0-19-921458-7

On Forrest's own account, the book under review has three major themes. The first theme is that a 'moderate'—'non-reductive'—materialism can be reconciled with at least the letter of traditional Christian doctrine. The second theme is that God undergoes development, transforming from an unloved and unlovable all powerful and all-knowing impersonal agent to a community of divine love—the Christian Trinity—one person of which becomes fully human and undergoes suffering in order to demonstrate divine love to people. The third theme is that the development that God undergoes is primarily an abandonment of power: God willingly undergoes abridgements of power in order to become a loving God. For reasons of space, I shall direct my comments in this review to the first of these three themes.

Forrest has a number of different things to say about his 'materialism'. He says that his 'moderate materialism' commits him to the claim that the characteristically mental is correlated with the physical by 'metaphysical necessity', i.e. by 'the sort of necessity which precedes creation and constrains even God, assuming there is a God' (23). Moreover, he says that his 'non-reductive materialism' commits him to the rejection of the claim that 'nothing can be understood that cannot just as well be understood in purely physical terms' (53). Finally, he says that his 'moderate materialism' accrues various advantages because it 'distinguishes possibility from conceivability' (23), i.e. because it allows that there are impossibilities that are, nonetheless, genuinely conceivable. (As an example here, Forrest adduces the non-existence of God: in his view, this is not a possibility, even though it is genuinely conceivable that there is no God.)

Since Forrest claims that the characteristically mental is correlated with the physical by metaphysical necessity, he is committed to the claim that God's mind is 'correlated' with something physical as a matter of metaphysical necessity. This might suggest that he is still defending the pantheism of *God Without the Supernatural: A Defence of Naturalistic Theism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996). However, in this new work, Forrest adds that he thinks of 'human beings, and comparable extraterrestrials, as islands in the divine ocean, or as holes in God' (24). I think—though I am by no means sure of this—that, on Forrest's view, at any given time, God's body is (at least approximately) the entity that is left when the bodies of persons are (mereologically) subtracted from the physical universe at that time. Certainly, Forrest does write that 'If there were no non-divine persons, then ... God would be immanent in all things', and that the creating of non-divine persons requires 'a temporary contraction of divine consciousness' (28). (Forrest rejects panpsychism on the grounds that either it attributes genuine consciousness to electrons and positrons—'which is explanatorily redundant assuming they are not agents'—or else it requires something more primitive than consciousness from which consciousness arises—which is inferior because of its 'lack of economy' (46). But this approach might get Forrest into trouble when it comes to very early physical states of the universe. Why should we think that very early states of the universe are better candidates to be agents than are electrons or positrons? Surely at those very early stages—where, for all we currently know, the universe is no larger than an electron or

positron, and possessed of no greater internal structure—it is no more plausible to suppose that the universe is an agent than it is to suppose that an electron or positron is an agent.)

Forrest provides a number of objections to ‘reductive materialism’. (Apart from the characterisation mentioned above, Forrest also says that ‘we may characterise reductive materialism as saying that the science required to understand rocks, metals, water, etc. is sufficient to understand living organisms and, moreover, human beings’ (54).) But, before we get to the objections, it is worth noting that there is room for arguing about exactly what we should mean by ‘reductive materialism’. Forrest himself observes that it is ‘stipulative’ (53) to tie an account of reductive materialism to questions of understanding and explanation. I think that it is no less important to note that the stipulated account is not worth very much until we are told more about the understanding and explanation that are invoked. It seems uncontroversial to say that the science that *we* use in understanding rocks, metal, water, etc. is insufficient to enable *us* to understand and explain living organisms and human beings. But it hardly follows from this that the science that an *omniscient* being would use in understanding rocks, metal, water, etc. would be insufficient to enable *it* to understand and explain living organisms and human beings. Even if *consciousness*, *agency*, and so forth are primitive concepts for us, we should not immediately conclude that they would also be primitive concepts for far more knowledgeable beings than we.

Forrest’s objections to ‘reductive materialism’—variants of Jackson’s knowledge argument and anti-compatibilist choice arguments—seem to me to trade on the above-noted slippage in the interpretation of understanding and explanation. (Perhaps they trade on other kinds of slippage as well. At p.41, Forrest sets out to note ‘aspects of human beings that *defy* a purely physical explanation’, and encapsulates the discussion at p.42 as having observed ‘features of human beings that *are not* explained in purely physical terms’ [my italics in each case]. If that which defies a certain kind of explanation *cannot* have that kind of explanation, then there may also be some modal slippage here.) For this reason, among others, I do not think that friends of reductive materialism should be perturbed by the arguments that Forrest mounts.

Forrest’s use of the distinction between possibility and conceivability is, at best, patchy. There are various places where Forrest insists that conceivability does not establish possibility—e.g., at p.59, he says that ‘the mere conceivability of my surviving bodily fission as the same person does not convince me of its possibility’. Yet, at p.180, in his discussion of the Real Presence, he writes: ‘I would claim that time-travel is conceivable, and *so* a person may indeed be in many places at the same time’ [my italics]. Perhaps this latter inference from mere conceivability to possibility should just be written off as a slip; however, I’m inclined to think that Forrest needed to say more about the methodology that he uses in reasoning about ‘conceivable’ cases. (It might be worth noting that Forrest’s main objection to reductive materialism relies on a ‘conceivable’ case in which there is a person who knows everything that there is to know about the neurophysiology of pain, and anything else there might be to know about the physical explanation of experiences of pain, but who does not herself experience pain. On Forrest’s own account,

why should his opponents be required to concede that Forrest has here described a [metaphysically] *possible* case?)

The advantages that, in Forrest's view, 'non-reductive' or 'moderate' materialism brings to philosophical theology, include the following: (1) it provides some discipline to speculation about the divine nature by restricting the range of possibilities; (2) it helps to defend the thesis of divine non-contingency (through its rejection of the alleged link between conceivability and possibility); (3) it vindicates the project of providing ultimate agency-causation explanations, and it also justifies the rejection of contingent laws correlating the mental with the physical; (4) it underwrites a position that is sufficiently close to pantheism to provide a satisfactory explanation of human knowledge of the divine; (5) it provides a ready explanation of why it is that mystical experiences often seem to be of the God of classical theism; and (6) it helps to generate answers to thorny theological "How is it possible?" questions concerning the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the like. (See pp.23-5, and p.188.)

If materialism brings some discipline to Forrest's speculation about the divine nature, then one can only wonder what that speculation would be like if the materialism were jettisoned. Forrest himself observes that 'I am aware ... that there are those who think I misread the offer to give the Wilde lectures as an offer to give the wilder lectures or even the wildest lectures' (142). Elsewhere, Forrest also notes that 'Somewhere along the line I surely pass from hypotheses that are about as likely as not to mere speculation. And I am under no illusion that speculations which might appear plausible to me might seem crazy to others' (188). So, even on his own account, it seems that materialism does not bring *very much* discipline to philosophical theology. (Of course, others less polite than I would say that the expression 'disciplined philosophical theology' is simply oxymoronic, and that Forrest's book is but a case in point.) While I don't have space to argue this here, I'm not convinced that materialism really brings to philosophical theology any of the other advantages that Forrest alleges.

Rather curiously, Forrest marries his enthusiasm for avowedly speculative philosophical theology with ringing dismissals of atheism and naturalism. On the one hand, when it suits the purposes of his philosophical theology, he is perfectly happy to grant himself an entitlement to hypothesise whatever he wants (see, for example, p.104, where, on his account, he simply helps himself to the assumption that creation was part of the first divine act). On the other hand, 'no rational, well-informed person ... should dismiss classical theism as completely erroneous' (20). ('No one should dismiss the idea that there is something about us human beings, something in the general area of agency and consciousness, that defies understanding in physical terms, and which therefore establishes a precedent for a simple, fundamental, theocentric understanding of things.') That is: on Forrest's account, there can be neither rational, well-informed atheists nor rational, well-informed naturalists.

At the beginning of his argument against naturalism, Forrest writes as follows: 'Naturalists should treat causation as thoroughly anthropocentric. For ... I would say that our ordinary concept of causation is that an X causes a Y if an agent could have brought

about a Y by bringing about an X. We may then extend the concept of causation to cover other cases. Nonetheless, it is rooted in agency as a way of explaining.’ (96) Surely it is incredible to suppose that this part of Forrest’s argument is not rationally resistible: it is, at best, highly contentious to claim that our ordinary concept of causation is rooted in agency; and, even if this contentious claim were correct, its truth would be no barrier to the naturalistic employment of a philosophical conception of causation that is not agential in nature. (The other plank in Forrest’s argument against naturalism rests on the observation that “fundamental physics can be stated without any reference to causation or even the asymmetry between past and future” (96). Again, it is incredible to suppose that the argument that Forrest is mounting here cannot be rationally resisted. Even if current fundamental physics can be stated without reference to causation, that’s no guarantee that the same will be true for future fundamental physics. Even if fundamental physics can be stated without reference to causation, that’s no guarantee that fundamental physics does not carry entailments about causation. Even if we don’t now see how fundamental physics could carry entailments about causation, that’s no guarantee that fundamental physics does not carry entailments about causation. Etc.)

The final paragraph of Forrest’s book begins with the following words: ‘Here is a parody of Socrates that both says and shows my frivolous attitude to most things, including most philosophy, but not to the core traditions of Christianity: the unexamined life is a Soapie, the examined one a Sit Com’ (188). I suspect that many philosophers and many Christians will simply be annoyed by Forrest’s book; other, however, may find that he is but a sheep in wolf’s clothing. (Cf: “You may be thinking that I have crossed over from the radical to the insane, and that I should not be heard. Bear with me, please. I am a sheep in wolf’s clothing. Once all the bits are in place, you will understand why I have colleagues who think I might have been a philosopher if only I could have got the Pope off my back. (29))

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