BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

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Timothy O'Connor. *Theism and Ultimate Explanation: The Necessary Shape of Contingency.* Blackwell, 2008.

The contingent features of our world amaze us. As Peter Unger has indicated, this happens most profoundly when we notice the contingent aspects of the fundamental physical reality. For example, the speed of light in a vacuum is about 299,792,458 meters per second. However, are there any at least logically possible worlds where the speed of light in a vacuum is a bit faster or slower? If there are some, then the actual speed of light is contingent. This consideration poses questions. Why is the speed of light *this* value? What makes this contingent state of affairs the case? This question can be generalized. Why do the particular contingent states of affairs obtain? The central aim of Timothy O'Connor's *Theism and Ultimate Explanation* is to provide an answer to this question.

This book is divided into three parts. An outline of each part is provided below. (This is only an outline, as I shall stress below.)

The first part discusses the general topics of modality. Its main claim is that we should commit ourselves to *substantial* modal truths in order to explain the world. To defend this view, O'Connor responds to the challenges posed by the sceptics about modal truths, both negatively and positively. Negatively, he criticizes several types of philosophers who intend to do without substantial modal notions, for example, Quinean eliminativists and Lewisian reductionists. Positively, he attempts to construct a theory of modal knowledge that would convince the sceptics that we can reach justified beliefs about modal truths. The positive task of modal epistemology will be completed at the end of the next part.

The second part tackles the main problem of this book: *Why do particular contingencies exist?* O'Connor calls a possible answer to this fundamental question 'an ultimate explanation'. He tries to give us the

true ultimate explanation in two steps. I will sum up the central claims, omitting the rationales. (I will come back to the arguments later.) The first step, which he calls 'The Existence Stage', suggests that the formally adequate explanation must posit a necessary being as the ground of the contingencies, and that the personal-creator model of a necessary being is coherent. This stage claims that the true explanation requires the existence of some necessary being, which might be a personal agent, without saying what exactly this being is. The second step, which O'Connor calls 'The Identification Stage', argues that the necessary being is not immanent to the world but transcendent, and that its way of creating reality is not chaotic but well-planned. This stage concludes that the necessary being is transcendent *Logos*, that is, God.

The ultimate explanation that involves God solves the problem of modal knowledge, argues O'Connor. The problem concerns the way to modal knowledge. If we admit, along with O'Connor, that there are *objective* modal truths, then we should explain how we access such truths. This question should be answered by everyone who commits to substantial modal truths. Now, if there is a God (i.e. the rational creator of all reality), then we can be given a possible answer: In designing and making the universe, God ensures that we correctly think about modal relationships. On the contrary, if, for example, the ultimate ground of the reality is not *Logos* but *Chaos*, it will be doubted whether such a chaotic 'creator' can bridge the gap between the range of our cognitive capacity and the objective structure of modality. Is there any way to explain our having modal knowledge without drawing on God? This is O'Connor's point. In this book, he proposes as a possible answer to the question about modal knowledge 'that it is a divine intention that human cognitive abilities are disposed to modalize reliably in accordance with modal fact', and adds the following: 'Our typical naturalist will be scandalized at this Leibnizian solution, but can he do any better?' (p. 129)

The third part is meta-theoretical. It reflects on the relationship between philosophy and theology. While this book eventually identifies the necessary being with God, several theologians will oppose such identification by rejecting the necessary-being conception of God as a mere *God of philosophers*. The orthodox revealed theologians would claim that the abstract conception of God as necessary being is just aping Hellenistic intellectual (possibly, over-intellectual) fashion, and that it has no essential connection with the Christian tradition. However, according to O'Connor, this is a rather simplified and probably distorted

understanding of the relationship between the content of Christian revelation and the role of philosophical or natural theology. He argues that even the typical revealed theologians, whom he calls 'de-Hellenizers', are, *malgré leurs*, doing a bit of natural theology. His reason is that, because the revealed characterizations of God (e.g., God is the Lord, the absolute sovereign), ontologically imply that He necessarily exists, (for, if in some world He didn't exist, He would not be the governor of that world) the revelation theologians also need the philosophical conception of a necessary being in order to *fully* understand what God the Lord is. Warning against the recent overreaction to the research program of philosophical theology, O'Connor concludes that philosophical reflection *is* beneficial to the theological understanding of God.

Because this is only an *outline*, I have skipped over several significant points. However, I suppose that what is very interesting in this book lies in its articulated way of supporting the central claims. Therefore, the details of O'Connor's arguments are worth considering, whether or not you agree with O'Connor's conclusions summed up above.

I conclude my review with two comments on the main part of this book.

Why might the necessary being, who is required to ground the contingent reality, be a personal agent? Further, *a fortiori*, why would it be better if the necessary being was a personal agent, as O'Connor argues? His reason in this book is as follows. If we admit that a necessary being that is the basis of all reality exists, we will be additionally required to avoid the 'absurd conclusion' that there are no contingencies (p. 79). If 'grounding' means 'necessitating' as the ordinary understanding of the word seems to suggest, the necessary ground of the world does not exclude any contingent feature of reality. Therefore, we should find a 'tricky' explanatory framework such that the necessary being does not necessitate, but does ground, all the contingent states of affairs. That is, if you like to say, 'search for a narrow middle way'. One such framework is the personal-creator model. In this model, the necessary being *freely* creates reality in the libertarian sense. In this case, all the contingencies are sufficiently grounded, but not necessitated. Although the libertarian conception of agency is relatively mysterious, O'Connor's solution seems to be one of the best, because I have been unable to find any other 'trick' to go the middle way that does not draw on the likes of a libertarian agency. However, I doubt whether we *should* go the middle way. Certainly, it feels counter-intuitive that there are no contingencies.

But, is it inconsistent to say that the apparently contingent states of affairs are, in reality, only apparent? The counter-intuitiveness of this view does not imply that it is wrong. O'Connor did not justify the requirement that we should avoid the above-mentioned 'absurd' conclusion that there are no contingencies. Therefore, his remaining task is to clarify the motivation for seeking the middle way.

In what sense is the necessary being necessary? Ordinarily, modalities are analyzed in terms of quantifications over worlds. O'Connor himself mentions this analysis (p. 70). However, it is not obvious that the necessity of O'Connor's necessary being can be explained in the ordinary way, because the necessary being is not immanent to any world, but transcendent. Probably, the modal status of an entity can only be analyzed in the possible-world framework when the entity exists inside the worlds. Therefore, I believe that O'Connor cannot say that the necessary being is necessary *because* it exists in every world. Perhaps O'Connor might realize this subtle point because, with regard to the necessary being, he says that it 'exists necessarily *a se* (of itself, rather than having its necessity rest in connection to something else that necessarily exists)' (p. 128). However, he does not give a more detailed analysis on the notion of '*a se* necessity'. Therefore, a consideration concerning the modal status of the necessary being itself might be needed.

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Georg Gasser (ed.), *Personal Identity and Resurrection: How Do We Survive Our Death?* Ashgate, 2010.

Personal Identity and Resurrection offers thoughtful and critical solutions to the problem of personal survival after somatic death. The authors, who participated in the University of Innsbruck 2008 summer conference, rigorously engage in ways to make sense of the conjunction of both personal identity and persistence from somatic death, the possible intermediate state, and the physical resurrection. Yet it offers more than a defense of survival in Christian philosophy of religion and moves beyond the foundations to construct theology. Thus, a careful, yet dense, treatment contributes to the discussion and provides many avenues worthy of further research.