

Book reviews

Grace Jantzen *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998). Pp. viii + 296. £45.00 (Hbk), £15.99 (Pbk). ISBN 0 7190 5354 4 (Hbk); 0 7190 5355 2 (Pbk).

This book does not take readers on a feminist trek through issues typical of a philosophy of religion syllabus – issues focused on the existence and attributes of God. It is far more subversive than that. Jantzen brings multiple charges against the discipline as it is typically practised; charges which she puts under the umbrella term ‘masculinism’. She nowhere strictly defines ‘masculinism’, but her critique of it is at least sixfold.

First, it concerns the concept of the subject doing the thinking: as a discrete rational agent, unaffected by personal history, psychoanalytic forces or socio-economic context. Jantzen’s point is that this conception of human agents is unrealistic, inspired by (male) ideals of limitlessness, detachment and disembodiedness. The corresponding concept of God is of a totally disconnected, unaffected and all-seeing being, as in Richard Swinburne’s thought-experiment as to what it must be like to be an omnipresent spirit (36–37, 28). Jantzen emphasizes that our limits are bounded by birth. She calls on feminist philosophers to eradicate the valorization of infinity, which renders us unable to accept ourselves and desirous of escaping the flesh.

Mortality is a second aspect of masculinism: the preoccupation with death and the consequent development of theologies built around salvation. Religion, Jantzen argues, should not be about our being rescued from death but about our birth and coming to fruition. Philosophy of religion ought to be adequate to these life-enhancing projects. To this end she builds on the work of Hannah Arendt in giving full theoretical seriousness to the fact of our natality, rather than to the fact that we shall die. A focus on natality situates us bodily, so that we have no truck with a ‘view from nowhere’. It also promotes a practical concern with material suffering as more important than intellectual justifications (167–169).

Preoccupation with justifying beliefs is a third aspect of masculinism. Jantzen justly scorns philosophers who propose that the rationality of belief in God’s existence is ‘one of the most important of human concerns’ (79). Such thinking not only distorts the activity of religious believing, but fails to comprehend that practical and moral struggles necessarily take precedence for most people. Jantzen

sees the goal of religion as our becoming divine. Because the goal is primarily practical she proposes that questions about truth recede in importance. She celebrates a projection theory of religion not because it can support nonrealism, but because it can move us away from that issue altogether and invite us to ask questions about adequacy instead: 'Are the characteristics thus projected really the ones that will best facilitate human becoming? ... Or are they partial, distorting, or inimical to the flourishing of some groups of people?' (89).

The desire for determinative meaning is a fourth masculinist trait. Jantzen favours metaphorical over analogical attempts to speak of the divine. Analogies, which invite us to measure the extent of their adequacy, are used by modern philosophers of religion, not to open up the divine horizon, but to tie down meaning (178–179). In a very clear and illuminating discussion, Jantzen explores the power of metaphors to work in ways that are more than intellectual, that are psychological and cultural, striking at the level of the symbolic (174–193).

Fifthly, the critique of masculinism is a critique of phallogentrism, following but also subverting Lacan. Lacan holds the phallus to be the universal signifier and hence claims that language is masculine. His focus on the phallus as the designator of desire (rather than, say, breasts) seems to him to supply evidence that women do not have a language. To Jantzen, following Irigaray, it is suggestive of male usurpation: it is not that women aren't talking, but that men aren't listening! (51–53). Hence, Jantzen takes issue with Kristeva's adoption of a Lacanian perspective, Kristeva arguing that by entering into the linguistic realm a child's primal 'feminine' creativity is repressed.

Sixthly, it is a critique of the binary oppositions operative in the entire Western symbolic, including the modernist binary between theism and atheism which has philosophers of religion transfixed (e.g., 64–68, 97, 128, 266–267). These oppositions determine the issues and shape of philosophical debate, and result in repression of one half of the binary: for example, belief is debated and configured in opposition to desire, and desire is repressed (86). Similarly obsession with immortality opposes and represses this life: birth, bodiliness, nature, woman (131).

This critique is a multifaceted assault on the intended and supposed neutrality (what feminists sometimes call the generic maleness) of the philosophy of religion as practised by British and North American analytical philosophers. The various strands come together, for example, in a strong critique of theodicy (259–264): as preoccupied with solving an intellectual problem, as working with a Western, masculinist concept of God, as failing to ask who is suffering and who is making progress, as paying insufficient attention to human agency, and as manifesting a necrophiliac concern with the transcendent realm.

Because she calls for such extensive reconstruction, Jantzen produces what might best be understood as a *prolegomenon* to philosophy of religion. She has not yet shown us what an up-and-running feminist philosophy of religion might look like, but has argued that both contextual values, such as conceiving God as an

omnipotent, immutable, omnipresent father, and constitutive values of philosophical method need reconsidering.

The question of how to dismantle and rebuild is always a vexed one for feminists. Jantzen starts with psychoanalysis and with practical tests as to what promotes flourishing. She replaces questions of truth with questions of psychoanalytical theory and transformative effects. She psychoanalyses philosophers of religion and accuses them of masculinist repression and necrophilia. She brings charges that philosophers cannot test by their usual means, and thereby challenges the fundamental ways in which the discipline should be practised. She does not supply 'evidence', for she is suspicious of the focus on evidence, but rather looks for 'suggestions' – the psychoanalyst's approach. She will not be drawn on questions of truth, but is interested instead in conduciveness to flourishing. We do not see extensive examples of how Jantzen's proposals might operate, but we can take up her proposals as one way of investigating her own work.

Her book could be described as constructed around at least two binary oppositions of the kind she contests in the masculinist Western tradition: between death and life; and between reason on the one hand, and the imagination, the symbolic, and creativity on the other (for example, she seems to link the 'imaginary' with the imagination and oppose both to reason (95ff.)). From here we might suggest that she is repressing both death and reason. With regard to the former, Jantzen notes only how (preoccupation with) death takes from life, not how life comes from death. She opposes natality to mortality in a way that belies the dependence of life on death. Such silence, or denial, could suggest that she represses death. Such repression, if it became widespread, would have damaging practical consequences for our wellbeing. Ministers of religion well know that where people are afraid to face death they are afraid to face life.

Similarly, one could ask Jantzen for fuller, fairer and more practice-orientated consideration of rational projects. In redeeming passion, desire, intuition, imagination, emotion and connectedness, feminists must tread carefully around long-standing ideas that women are less rational because more attuned to these bodily aspects of our nature. Feminists do well to show that rational activity, properly understood, is richly involved with these things. Jantzen goes some way down this path, proposing 'a wider understanding of reason that includes sensitivity and attentiveness, well-trained intuition and discernment, creative imagination, and lateral as well as linear thinking' (69, 202). However, she takes this no further because of her objection to a philosophical preoccupation with rationality. Therefore she barely conveys that there are good reasons for attempting to think critically when we think about what we think about God. Even if we prioritize the ethical and practical, as Jantzen does, we need to acknowledge that certain beliefs help us flourish better than others, and therefore that our thinking about beliefs is crucial to the pursuit of goodness and justice. Jantzen

obscures this interaction by promoting a pragmatic concern for flourishing over against an intellectual concern with beliefs. This would seem to be a further binary opposition in her work.

Moreover, Jantzen short-changes her readers by not giving sufficient indication of what feminist critical reasoning skills might look like. She rejects the epistemological concerns of feminist standpoint epistemology and proposes instead that standpoint be applied at a psychological level. Her critique (124–127, 213–214) turns on a crass simplification: either feminist standpoint epistemology must work with a homogenized view of women (an issue which standpoint theorists have corrected since the early 1980s), or ‘if it is granted that a feminist standpoint is irreducibly multiple, then there would seem to be no way to adjudicate between conflicting claims from differing marginal positions’ (124). Feminist standpoint epistemologists do not ‘adjudicate’, but rather encourage discussion that moves all participants towards a stronger objectivity. Jantzen dislikes the implication of moving towards finished knowledge, but this need not be a part of the epistemology. Feminist standpoint involves taking a critical stance with regard to one’s own experience, imaginatively empathizing with others, and attempting discursively to develop a fuller picture of reality. (It is realist.) It is committed to the idea of advancement, if not full arrival, in knowledge.

One would expect Jantzen also to be aiming at advancement, for why would anyone write a book who was not committed to developing her own and other’s understanding? However, she aims at adequacy rather than at knowledge or truth. We might say that she continues the quest for the ‘good’ but not for the ‘true’, and so jettisons a platform upon which to make fundamental representations of the ‘good’.

Jantzen performs a service in encouraging us to employ philosophy of religion for wider ends, to the nourishment of human life, but I would question her down-playing of beliefs. Belief and practice are intimately interwoven. In fact Jantzen spends much time berating beliefs which have bad consequences, but almost no time on how to develop beliefs that would promote healthier living. She has so stigmatized belief that she asks philosophers to attend psychoanalytically to the symbolic, not epistemologically to truth-claims.

This book is both enjoyable and accessible to read, but its structure and arguments are strangely difficult to represent. This is due to the nature of the issues at play. Jantzen is not so much concerned to set down arguments as to recover what has been repressed. The desire to capture an argument may suggest to her a masculinist desire for control. Perhaps she regards the liberative effects of her book as more important than critical reflection, although she would do better not to dichotomize careful thought and the practical benefits it can yield.

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Mark L. McPherran *The Religion of Socrates*. (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) Pp. xii + 353. US\$45.00 (Hbk), US\$19.95 (Pbk). ISBN 0 271 01581 0 (Hbk), 0 271 01829 1 (Pbk).

McPherran's thesis is that, for Socrates, philosophy is a pious activity whose purposes include showing the limits of human knowledge. Since the ancient Greeks had no word for religion, nor did they share our notion of religion as an organized system of beliefs, McPherran develops Socrates' religious beliefs relative to the Greek notion of piety (*eusebia*), which emphasizes proper conduct toward the gods and knowledge of ritual. McPherran writes within the tradition of contemporary analytic Anglo-American scholarship represented by his teacher Gregory Vlastos and peers such as Nicholas Brickhouse and Thomas Smith. This is a tradition that he knows well and cites copiously. McPherran, however, distinguishes himself from others in this tradition in two ways. First, he is willing to ascribe a small but definite place to divine revelation in Socrates' epistemology. And second, McPherran brings to his book recent work on Greek religion in fifth-century Athens.

In creating a picture of the historical Socrates, McPherran's method is to accept the early Platonic dialogues as exhibiting Socratic doctrines without being literal accounts of them. McPherran supplements the account drawn from the early dialogues with passages from Xenophon and Aristotle.

The Platonic dialogues *Euthyphro* and *Apology* occupy most of McPherran's attention. He develops an account of Socratic piety from the *Euthyphro*. According to this account, piety is a part of justice, the part which is a service of humans to gods. This service involves humans helping gods in their work, and this work of the gods produces good results. One instance of this service is practising philosophy, especially using the *elenchus* – Socrates' method of testing people's beliefs through questions and answers – to rid people of the false and hubristic belief that they could attain wisdom equal to the gods' wisdom.

McPherran argues for other controversial theses. In chapter 4, he addresses the interplay of reason and revelation in Socratic philosophy. He argues that Socrates' *daimonion*, the divine sign that warns Socrates not to take an action, gives Socrates some limited knowledge. In chapter 5 McPherran argues that the teleological proof for God developed by Socrates in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* is indeed Socrates' own.

McPherran's book is useful as a resource on Socrates' religion, and it challenges the reigning view of a more secular Socrates. However, I have two reservations about the work. The first involves his arguments for a Socratic account of piety in the *Euthyphro*. The second concerns the fact that he limits himself to the Olympian gods as a touchstone for an account of Greek religion.

Regarding the first, McPherran recognizes two different possible readings of the *Euthyphro* – the anticonstructivist reading, on which it is an aporetic dialogue

containing no Socratic doctrine, and the constructivist reading, on which we can extract a Socratic account of piety. Although he refutes some anticonstructivist arguments and gives his own constructivist arguments, his arguments are not entirely convincing. Since the account of piety McPherran derives from the *Euthyphro* is central to the rest of McPherran's picture of Socrates' religion, any weaknesses in his constructivist thesis for the *Euthyphro* become weaknesses for the work as a whole.

McPherran argues that after the interlude at *Euthyphro*, 11e, Socrates begins to offer substantial assistance to Euthyphro in his search for a definition of piety, and that in this we can find Socrates' own position on piety. Socrates opens this section by asking Euthyphro whether justice and piety are coextensive, or piety is a proper part of justice. He secures Euthyphro's agreement to the latter. Euthyphro and Socrates then look for the characteristic that differentiates pious justice from the rest of justice. Euthyphro suggests that piety is that part of justice which has to do with our care (*therapeia*) of the gods. While this differentiating characteristic is ultimately rejected by Socrates, McPherran does derive a broader claim, which he labels P₄, from the exchange. He identifies it as a 'Socratically acceptable (though not completely definitional) claim about piety' (48), P₄: 'Piety is that part of justice having to do with the relation of humans to the gods'.

In order to correct problems with his definition Euthyphro revises it, saying that the kind of care he means is the care of slaves for their masters (13d). Socrates interprets this as a kind of service (*huperetike*) for the gods. Socrates adds that when you assist someone, he must be engaged in some kind of work that you are assisting him in, and Socrates asks Euthyphro what the work (*ergon*) of the gods is. Euthyphro is unable to reply, and slips back into an earlier answer, that the pious is what is pleasing to the gods. Socrates, however, suggests that Euthyphro was very close prior to this to defining piety. McPherran takes from this statement that Socrates does himself have a positive conception of piety, which McPherran sets out as P₆: 'Piety is that part of justice that is a service of humans to gods, assisting the gods in their work, a work that produces some good results' (54).

The bulk of the evidence that McPherran supplies in support of P₆ consists in four claims in support of P₄. He asserts that 'all the evidence in support of P₄ serves as support for P₆ whose form it preserves and from which it derives' (54). These arguments, however, are questionable.

The first argument is that Socrates himself introduces the part-whole distinction which becomes the central point of development for P₄ (48). However, that Socrates introduces this distinction does not show he endorses the thesis that piety is a proper part of justice. (McPherran recognizes possible counterevidence to this thesis in the *Protagoras*, but the way he accommodates it is not entirely convincing.) Perhaps Plato put the part-whole distinction there for the purposes of stimulating philosophical thinking in the reader.

Secondly, McPherran points out that P₄ has a Socratically acceptable definitional form (39). However, it does not follow that anything with an acceptable definitional form is Socrates' own view. This may be a necessary, but it is not a sufficient condition for something being an acceptable definition.

Thirdly, McPherran says that P₄ is nonvoluntaristic. Unlike the rejected definition of the pious as what all the gods love, it does not depend upon an action of the gods. But again, this only shows that P₄ lacks a feature that would make it unacceptable to Socrates.

Finally, McPherran points out that Socrates keeps the form of P₄ constantly before Euthyphro for the remainder of the dialogue and that P₄ remains without a refutation throughout the dialogue. McPherran does not believe that P₄ is merely a dialectical presupposition since, first, using it to mislead Euthyphro about the nature of piety could result in harm to Euthyphro's father. Second, it is not part of an attempt to reduce Euthyphro to a state of *aporia*, because Euthyphro has already confessed to confusion in the aporetic interlude. And third, it is in the proper position to be positive doctrine, since in other dialogues, including the *Protagoras*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, and *Theatetus* positive doctrine follows aporetic interludes (49).

In response to the first point, it appears that McPherran is taking the dialogue too literally. There is not, as he says, a 'real possibility of some harm ensuing,' since Euthyphro is only a character in a dialogue, and we have little reason to think that the conversation portrayed actually took place. The main purpose of dialogues is one devised by Plato relative to his readers, and Plato may intend an ultimately aporetic result vis-à-vis the readers of the *Euthyphro*.

Regarding the third point, the four dialogues that McPherran cites are not appropriate comparisons, since they are each middle or late dialogues which contain Platonic doctrines, unlike the earlier, often aporetic, Socratic dialogues.

My second, less serious, reservation about the book concerns the narrow focus on the similarities and differences between the beliefs and practices of Socrates and the worshippers of the Olympian gods. McPherran has almost no discussion of the relationship of Socrates to the Eleusinian Mysteries. I suspect the reason for this omission is that McPherran associates mystery rites primarily with Plato, who borrows mystical language from the Mysteries in developing his epistemology, which is less sceptical than Socrates'. However, because almost all Athenians were initiated into these mystery rites, I would like to see more about how these rituals did or did not fit into Socrates' religious beliefs.

Anyone trying to give an account of the religion of Socrates faces many methodological challenges. McPherran meets these challenges head-on, but given the nature of the project, McPherran must read into the ancient accounts we have of Socrates, trying to synthesize what we find in the early dialogues or reconcile the accounts of Plato with those of Xenophon. Therefore, the picture of Socrates that emerges is conjectural. However, even where McPherran's arguments are not

conclusive, they are stimulating and well thought out. His book provides us with a good reference work on Socrates' religion.

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