CrossMark

Its articulation, in the belief that true philosophy proceeds by divine allotment (that is, from transcendence) is repeated throughout the Platonic corpus: see for instance *Meno* 99e–100b; *Republic* 473c–d. But because Rapp has already relinquished this *telos* of immanence towards the Good (115–120), and advocated in its place an ateleological process of self-transformation, she must also reject Platonic 'participation' and its metaphysic of allotment and gift (both of which receive no mention in *Ordinary Oblivion*), in order to reach, with baffling legerdemain, for their Daoist homonym cited above. Despite its reaction to the valorization of selfhood in western thought, *Ordinary Oblivion* does not succeed entirely in breaking this trend. Though not self-centring, its reading nonetheless internalizes and *psychologizes* the soul, skirting as it does so those aspects of Plato's text which might not only 'show us to ourselves', but also take us out of ourselves.

SIMONE KOTVA
Emmanuel College, Cambridge
e-mail: sak54@cam.ac.uk

***Religious Studies* 51 (2015) doi:10.1017/S0034412514000456**
© Cambridge University Press 2014

John Cottingham *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). Pp. 208. £50.00 (Hbk), £18.99 (Pbk). ISBN 978 1 107 01943 0.

John Cottingham's latest book might seem from its title to be intended as an introduction to the philosophy of religion for advanced undergraduates and graduate students in philosophy. In some ways this perception would be correct. He covers most of the major topics in the philosophy of religion – viz. the arguments for God's existence; the nature and limitations of religious language; the nature and significance of religious experience; the relationship between morality and religion; the problem of evil and suffering; and the related issues of mortality, meaning in life, and the afterlife – and indeed it would be a very fine text to use in either a graduate or upper-level undergraduate course on the philosophy of religion. However, the book is much more than an introduction to the philosophy of religion. It is the best statement to date of Cottingham's distinctive approach to the philosophy of religion, which he has been working out for the past decade. What is most distinctive about Cottingham's approach is that he seeks to bring the subject more in touch with how religious questions and ideas actually operate in the lives of those who are concerned to come to terms – affectively, intellectually, morally, and spiritually – with the human condition. In short, he is arguing for a new direction in the field: 'towards a more humane approach'. Since it offers an important challenge to the standard approaches to the philosophy of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412514000456 Published online by Cambridge University Press

religion, this is a book that should be engaged with by all who work in the field. Moreover, because of its humane approach and clear, elegant, and literate prose – which can be moving at times – it is a book that can be profitably read by anyone who is concerned with the religious dimension of human existence.

Cottingham's chief complaint with the standard approaches to the philosophy of religion is that they too often involve a detached, abstract mode of argumentation that models itself on the methods of the natural sciences. For instance, the typical way of teaching the subject is to focus a great deal of attention on the domain of 'natural theology', i.e. 'the examination of "pure" rational demonstrations or probabilistic arguments about God's existence, which are intended to appeal to any rational inquirer, irrespective of their personal commitments or religious beliefs (or lack thereof)' (9). Cottingham thinks that this detached approach is somewhat disingenuous in that religious belief (or unbelief) is 'something that touches our most profound sense of who and what we are; and hence debating the validity of the theistic outlook can never be something about which the believer [or non-believer] feels entirely detached' (3). Indeed, our personal involvement often plays a key role in whether or not we adopt a theistic outlook. Thus, in place of the 'epistemology of detachment', Cottingham puts forward an 'epistemology of involvement' that appeals to all the resources of human experience, and not merely to the analytic intellect, in order to explore the viability of a theistic outlook. These resources include our responses to music, poetry, scripture, and novels, as well as our experiences of natural beauty, moral demands, suffering, vulnerability, human finitude, and the moral transformation that is brought about through following a path of spiritual practice.

It is no surprise then that Cottingham does not think much of the standard arguments for God's existence – viz. the ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments – in so far as they are taken to be demonstrative or probabilistic arguments. He thinks that they are unlikely to be convincing for the sceptic but allows – in the tradition of 'faith seeking understanding' – that 'for those who already are committed or inclined towards theism, reflection on the arguments could succeed in deepening the reach of their faith and illuminating its object' (35). In any case, he thinks that religious conversion will typically have more to do with moral and spiritual change than with mere doxastic change. A large part of Cottingham's scepticism here towards the standard arguments for God's existence is due to his sympathies with the 'Enlightenment critique of metaphysics', especially as found in the works of Hume and Kant, who question our ability to reason from the empirical world to ultimate causes or principles that lie outside it.

While Cottingham is right to think that the arguments do not offer conclusive reasons for belief in God and that other factors are likely to be more important in religious conversion, he does not quite give the arguments enough credit. For instance, they can be inconclusive and yet still leave one cross-pressured about the existence of God. Indeed, it is not without reason that the arguments remain

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412514000456 Published online by Cambridge University Press

enduring philosophical issues and an enduring concern for any human being who seeks to come to terms with the human condition. The arguments may not be the whole issue for the spiritual seeker, but they may be one important issue. In general, Cottingham puts a strong emphasis on the failure of the analytic intellect as the 'be all, end all' of the spiritual life and not as much emphasis on its place in an authentic and mature spiritual life (which is understandable given his concern to get beyond an exclusive focus on the analytic intellect in the philosophy of religion by exploring the resources of other aspects of human experience). However, he does gesture towards an account of the proper place of the analytic intellect in the spiritual life in the last chapter when discussing how philosophy might be conceived of as part of 'a way of life' and as a kind of 'spiritual exercise', following the work of Pierre Hadot (148–151). Moreover, Cottingham's book is itself in part a work of the analytic intellect, and it serves to show how the analytic intellect, in connection with other facets of our human experience, can foster a deeper, more mature spiritual life.

If we return now to the Enlightenment critique, there is a concern that arises: viz. it might seem to imply a scepticism with regard to saying anything positively about God, which could be seen as being functionally equivalent with atheism. This is a conclusion that Cottingham resists since he is in fact a theist and, though he has some affinities with apophatism, he wants to affirm that certain predicates such as wisdom, goodness, and love are 'strictly and literally true of God' (51). Thus, he defends the Thomistic doctrine of analogical predication where our understanding of predicates such as wisdom and goodness is derived from 'their use in the ordinary human world', though they are '*most* appropriately and *most* truly applied to God, because God is the source of all wisdom and goodness' (51–52). But we still need some account of our 'modes of access' to God and why they should be trusted as being veridical (though not necessarily demonstratively or probabilistically). Cottingham argues here for what might be regarded as a revised form of natural theology, which appeals to 'natural intimations of the transcendent' (or the sacred) that can be found in common human experiences of natural beauty, great works of art, and the moral demand. These 'transcendent' experiences, he says,

> involve not so much a revelation of supernatural entities as a heightening, an intensification, that transforms the way in which we experience the world. Terms like 'transfiguration' or 'epiphany' come to mind here, but not in the sense that there is necessarily an explicit invocation of metaphysical objects that transcend ordinary experience, but rather because the categories of our mundane life undergo a radical shift: there is a sudden irradiation that discloses a beauty and goodness, a meaning, that was before occluded. (61–62)

The believer will often interpret such experiences as 'intimations of the divine reality that is the source of all truth, beauty, and goodness', though non-believers can also have these experiences; they are part of 'our ordinary human birthright' (63). Cottingham puts forward here an *argument from integrity* in order to show

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412514000456 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the draw of a theist position. These 'transcendent' experiences are not a body of evidence that can be assessed by any detached observer, but he thinks they can come to anyone who is properly 'attuned' to the world and 'if we honestly interrogate ourselves we are hard-pressed to deny it' (63, 69). The further claim then is that these experiences are *best interpreted* within a theistic framework.

Cottingham makes his most forceful argument in favour of theism when he seeks to show specifically how the experience of the moral demand (i.e. morality's objective authority over our desires and inclinations) is best interpreted within a theistic framework. Indeed, I think he provides one of the most compelling accounts of the relationship between religion and morality. So much of the discussion in the philosophy of religion about the relationship between morality and religion is focused on divine command ethics. For Cottingham, the moral demand has nothing to do with divine commands; rather, it is best seen as linked to a theistic teleological framework according to which 'our human lives are inescapably oriented towards a final supreme end, the good whose principle nature is love' (85). Without such a teleological framework, we seem to be left with a reduced form of morality based merely on the desires and inclinations we happen to possess for whatever contingent personal, cultural, and evolutionary reasons. This is in fact a conclusion that many secular philosophers accept, though it comes with the heavy cost of claiming that people's experiences of the moral demand are illusory (something similar could be said about deflationary accounts of other 'transcendent' experiences).

Unsurprisingly, there are a number of attempts to offer a secular account of the objectivity of the moral demand. Cottingham considers some of the most well-known versions – viz. those of Parfit, McDowell, and Korsgaard – and finds them lacking. The main reason is summed up as follows: 'without some kind of teleological framework for understanding the nature and ultimate destiny of humanity, there seems no basis for regarding any one of the many competing impulses and goals that provide us with reasons to act as having overriding normative force' (94). Although he mentions his work on several occasions, Cottingham does not discuss here the possibility of a non-theistic cosmic teleological view of the sort endorsed by Thomas Nagel and whether it could ground the normative authority of morality. If such a view could be made compelling – and it is certainly up for debate whether a cosmic teleology is believable without also affirming a purposive divine agent – then it would seem that Cottingham would have to grant that it could provide such a grounding. But the telos would be conceived differently (for Nagel the focus is on our capacity to understand an ultimately impersonal world and to take up the perspective of the whole, in both cosmic and social terms), and it still might be argued that such a view is less existentially satisfying than the personalist world-view of theism, where the world is brought into being out of love and for the telos of love.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412514000456 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A key challenge that Cottingham does take up in regard to his theistic teleological framework, with its 'fundamentally benign' view of reality as expressing 'an eternal and objective moral order', is the problem of evil, suffering, and disorder (98). First, he responds to those who see Darwinian evolution as ruling out any such teleological world-view by arguing that there is in fact no necessary incompatibility. Second, he responds to the prevalent reality of evil and suffering not by trying to explain it away, but rather by showing how a religious perspective can help one to cope with and become morally and spiritually transformed by evil and suffering through providing 'a framework of *moral significance*' whereby, for instance, we are enabled to grow in love (112). However, Cottingham acknowledges, 'there are clearly countless instances where accident, disease, and natural disaster does not just crush a life, but does so in a way that is utterly unrelated to even the possibility of moral transformation' (117). It is at this point that the religious believer might want to put hope in a redemptive afterlife. Cottingham does not deny such a possibility, but he leaves the problem of evil and suffering 'unsolved' and instead focuses on the this-worldly benefits of theistic spiritual praxis with respect to shaping a meaningful way of life (see chapters 6 and 7). In particular, he thinks a theistic teleological framework best supports the path of moral and spiritual growth because of the way it can ground the moral and spiritual demand to change our lives (in a similar way, it also seems to support the other 'transcendent' experiences mentioned above).

For Cottingham, the presence or absence of these 'fruits' or benefits of a particular form of theistic spirituality provides an important way of evaluating its viability (155; cf. 16–18). Of course, a theistic spiritual outlook may have many benefits but still turn out to be false, and there may also be a number of beneficial spiritual paths among which we will have to choose. Thus, other forms of evaluation will also be needed, as indeed Cottingham undertakes (he says more in defence of a general theistic outlook than any particular tradition of spirituality, though his epistemology of involvement proceeds from Judaeo-Christian and especially Catholic reference points). Nevertheless, it is one of the most attractive features of Cottingham's humane approach that he gives such a powerful account of what is at stake in whether or not we adopt a theistic outlook and thus helps to show why the central debates in the philosophy of religion will be an enduring concern for human beings. While Cottingham offers a number of compelling and illuminating arguments throughout the book, what I believe is most valuable about this work is that it shows what a humane approach to the philosophy of religion in particular and to philosophy in general looks like and why it is so important. One should hope that more philosophers heed Cottingham's example.

DAVID MCPHERSON
Creighton University
e-mail: davidmcpherson@creighton.edu

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412514000456 Published online by Cambridge University Press