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Book Notes

EDITED BY MARTIN STONE

R. A. Sharpe. *The Moral Case Against Religious Belief*. (London: SCM Press, 1997.) Pp. 102. £7.95 pbk.

This book is short, clearly written and a refreshing read. Its aim is to present a series of moral objections to belief in the God of traditional theism. The case is presented in philosophical competent way but without use of technical vocabulary and with little reference to learned literature. The overall thrust of Sharpe's case will be familiar, for it has broad similarities to that presented by the likes of Nowell-Smith and Rachels. Sharpe writes from a teleological, virtues understanding of ethics and tries to show how typical religious attitudes (such as faith, worship and trust) do violence to the moral sensitivities celebrated in that understanding. He argues in addition that traditional Christian teaching on sexual matters similarly falls foul of a reasonable understanding of human relations and character. His case culminates in an attempt to show that belief in immortality is flawed, because immortality would necessarily be tedious for beings like us. This book could serve well as a focal point for discussion of issues surrounding religion and morality in the right kind of context. But its deliberate lack of scholarly sophistication limits its value as a tool in university courses. Many of the criticism of theism depend on a naive, anthropomorphic reading of what 'God' might refer to. While Sharpe might rightly claim that such readings dominate popular belief, they cannot be normative for philosophical discussion. His case is also marred by an inconsistent use of scholarly sources. To make good his conclusion about immortality he has to rely on and cite Bernard Williams' famous paper on the Makropulos case. But to bring in one professional philosopher's arguments to make a point and not discuss other professionals' replies to that point is to mislead readers into believing that it is game, set and match for Williams.

[P.A.B.]

Paul Rooney. *Divine Command Morality*. (Aldershot: Avebury, 1996.) Pp. 128. £32.50.

Students of philosophical debates about the relation between religion and morality will give this book 2 cheers (or perhaps 1 1/2). On the credit side they will note that it vigorously challenges many contemporary orthodoxies; on the debit side they will note signs of disorganisation and haste in the treatment of its subject matter. Rooney at first blush defends a very stark version of divine command theory. Divine commands are necessary and sufficient for the making of acts right or wrong. There are no moral truths uncreated by God. Divine omnipotence holds total sway over the field of ethics. Moral virtue consists in obedience to the divine will. The interest in these contentions lies in Rooney's tackling of standard objections to divine command theory. He takes on and attempts to rebut the charges that they make morality arbitrary and destroy human autonomy. He contends that there is no need

to suppose that moral judgement need be prior to faith because there is no need to exercise such judgement to assess the authenticity or meaning of revelation. While it is good to have dogmas attacked and to endeavour to give new life to old ideas, the demerits of the study surface early on, where it is apparent that divine command theory is given no initial, full definition. It is rather delineated as Rooney proceeds. Its outline then becomes hazy. One of the ways in which Rooney avoids some of the stock objections to divine command theory is through his emphasis on the notion that divine commands have consequences for creation. So that, if divine commands had been different, the ends of human life would have been different. His views then take on some of the flavour of Hugo Meynell's in his well known paper on the Euthyphro dilemma. But Rooney seems to waver somewhat between a modified divine command theory similar to Meynell's and the very stark view previously described. A further area of weakness lies in Rooney's defence of divine command theory. He argues that it is a deduction from divine omnipotence in creation. But he specifically dissents from the Cartesian claim that all necessary truths and abstract objects are created by divine will. He excepts the principles of logic from this divine voluntarism. But unless he also defends some version of logicism, he will have to include under a voluntarist picture of divine creation the principles of arithmetic, geometry and so forth. If he is not willing to pay such a high price, he will have to accept that such truths as '13 times 12 equals 156' are genuinely necessary, not therefore established by divine flat, yet not reducible to logical laws. Then his rather dismissive treatment of the putative necessity of moral principles and/or rules looks weaker still. Perhaps, the most important point to make against this book is that it went to press after the excellent *Religion and Morality* by Sagi and Statman. That fuller and much more sophisticated survey of similar territory rather trumps Rooney's study.

[P.A.B.]

Allen P. F. Sell. *John Locke and the Eighteenth Century Divines*. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997.) Pp. 444. £40.00 hbk.

This is a full and meticulous survey of reactions to Locke's principal writings on philosophy and religion from British and American authors of the Enlightenment. The structure of the book is simple. Sandwiched between introductory and concluding material are five chapters each of which begins with an outline of a theme in Locke's writings and then plots the debate surrounding this theme in his contemporaries and successors. The themes chosen are: ideas, knowledge and truth; reason, revelation, faith and scripture; morality and liberty; toleration and government; Christian doctrine. The themes plot Locke's endeavour to defend and articulate the Christian scheme through first setting out the fundamentals of epistemology and then moving toward the specifics of Christian doctrine. Individually and collectively the central chapters illustrate and explore how Locke's project met with such diverse reactions, being not only welcomed and attacked by the orthodox, but also welcomed and attacked by various sorts of religious radical. On the whole, Sell endeavours to support Locke from charges of deism, Socinianism and Unitarianism, while acknowledging that Locke's presentation of the themes noted is on occasion ambivalent or weak enough to generate divergent reactions and readings. The book's conclusion attempts to draw lessons from Locke's apologetic strategy for how a defence and articulation of Christian belief might go to day. Sell's work will be warmly welcomed by historians of the English-speaking

Enlightenment for the wealth of material that he has unearthed and made available to his readers. The exposition of Locke and his discussants is supported by 150 pages of endnotes and bibliography. Not every scholar of Locke will agree with the interpretations of Locke's views offered. For example, Sell takes it that Locke on ideas is advancing a representational theory of knowledge and perception (compare and contrast many of the papers on Tipton's collection *Locke on the Human Understanding* in the 'Oxford Readings' series). I found even the mitigated defence of Locke's Trinitarian orthodoxy somewhat hard to swallow, given that Locke had, in the *Vindications* of *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, opportunity to nail his colours to the Calcedonian mast but failed to avow the traditional formulae. Such disagreements are to be expected. A sense of disappointment can be registered over the expansion of the argument to the structure of contemporary apologetics. The brevity of Sell's remarks on this score do not allow him to get very far with this final topic. But he promises another book, to add to this one and his earlier study of British idealists and religion, devoted to taking the debate into the present.

[P.A.B.]

Philip E. Devine. *Human Diversity and the Culture Wars: Philosophical Perspectives on Contemporary Cultural Conflict*. (Wesport, Connecticut: Praeger.) Pp. 192. £43.95.

A great deal of this book is of no direct interest to philosophers of religion, being concerned with discussions of educational and cultural policy in the United States of America. However, substantial parts of Devine's argument are of importance to anyone who has an interest in debates between traditional modes of humanist and religions thought, on the one hand, and varieties of post-modernism and cultural relativism, on the other. Devine snipes continually at the cogency of modish cultural relativism. He questions how far any society can do without a commitment to some form of humanism if it is to rule out some certain forms of social and political behaviour (such as Nazism). He suggests in turn that humanism may only be an option if supported by a religious outlook giving some transcendent anchor to the values and commitments involved. Despite the local and limited character of much of his discussion, Devine's book will be welcomed by all those who have an interest in topics central to the future of education and indeed to thinking in morals, religion and politics. Apart from its parochial character, the work's main limitation lies in the way that the critique of post-modernism/relativism and the argument for humanism is not sufficiently developed.

[P.A.B.]

Colin E. Gunton (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.) Pp. xx+307. £35 hbk, £12.95 pbk.

This first volume in a new series of *Cambridge Companions to Religion* contains fourteen substantial essays by British and North American theologians, including such well-known names as Colin Gunton (editor and contributor), Stanley Hauerwas and Geoffrey Wainwright. The essays fall into two groups, the first six discussing different aspects of the present context of systematic theology, the rest taking a number of

traditional areas like creation, Trinity and eschatology. In a way, the book is celebratory: it reflects the new-found confidence of this branch of study, with an implicit claim to pride of place in the theological field. Confidence born of the decline of modernism has combined with a revival of the broadly Barthian tradition to produce a style of discourse uncommon in British theology two or three decades ago.

Confidence carries risks. There is a tendency to flights of language whose status is uncertain and which cries out for a philosopher; as does the ignoring of difficult subjects, like the problem of evil. Instead, the patristic achievement in trinitarian and christological doctrine is in effect taken for granted and no longer open to serious critical examination. Similarly, despite disclaimers, the Bible serves as a convenient source rather than a historical entity to be first faced in its own extraordinary diversity. There is also a question whether this idiom of Christian talk is not somewhat depressive of spirituality.

The new movement is largely Protestant of the non-Anglican varieties. Roman Catholic thought appears here only occasionally and there is one Catholic contributor (Gerard Loughlin). As a high-grade textbook, this collection is exemplary, so long as it is remembered that it mostly reflects one, currently fashionable, approach to the subject, orthodox and unashamed. Scholars more critical of the tradition, such as John Hick and Maurice Wiles (*a fortiori* Gordon Kaufman and Don Cupitt) find no voice here (but see Kathryn Tanner on christology). The penalty of course is that one talks only to friends.

[J.L.H.]