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Review: William James on Radical Empiricism and Religion

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Recommended Citation
Baggett, David J., "Review: William James on Radical Empiricism and Religion" (2001). *Faculty Publications and Presentations.* Paper 158.
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William James on Radical Empiricism and Religion
David Baggett
The Review of Metaphysics; Jun 2001; 54, 4; ProQuest Religion
pg. 906

Germain Grisez, miss the point (p. 102 and following). Bowlin finds fault also with Ralph McInerny's view that evaluating the morality of an action is largely a matter of determining its place in a hierarchy of natural inclinations (p. 108). Probably inspired by his fixation on contingency, Bowlin assumes that Aquinas does not claim that the first precepts provide moral guidance (p. 115). The reader wonders what Bowlin makes of the assertion "all those things to which man has a natural inclination are naturally apprehended as good and therefore as objects of pursuit" (*Summa Theologiæ*, I-II, 94, 2). It is of course true that the individual virtuous acts do no fall under the natural law, although they are its prolongation. As every student of Aquinas knows, the application of the principles depends also on the circumstances (*Summa Theologiæ*, I-II, 94, 3).

Bowlin argues against McInerny—wrongly to my understanding—that the natural law precepts must not be seen as a specification of the human good that the virtuous person must pursue (p. 129). More astonishing even is his statement: "The first precepts of the natural law leave us very nearly morally destitute" (p. 133). Bowlin does not sufficiently consider the acts that lead to a virtuous deed as an almost organic unity.

In chapter 4 we read that virtues are excellent, not simply but relatively (p. 139; compare p. 145), because one cannot separate them from the conditions which make human life so difficult. However, Thomas says little about fortune's meaning for the virtuous life (p. 167). According to Bowlin successful acts of virtue depend on luck. The reader wonders what "successful" means. Any act of virtue has its own truth, goodness, and beauty. Bowlin does not like Aquinas's saying that Providence will provide us with the amount of external goods we need for a virtuous life (p. 178). Indeed, if one considers the primacy of the spiritual, the quantity of external goods might be minimal for some people. Aquinas gives no reason to think that the happiness of the virtuous is largely a consequence of good fortune (p. 199). At the end of his learned exposé Bowlin comes around to the conclusions every Thomist is familiar with: fortune, lucky family circumstances, and so on, matter less for happiness than acting virtuously (p. 203). He nevertheless sees a conflict between two views: Thomas's confidence that virtues can succeed against fortune and his discontent, perhaps despair, because of their fragility (p. 215).

Bowlin's book is an important and learned study. The author shows a great deal of familiarity with the *Prima Secundæ* of the *Summa Theologiæ*, and raises intelligent questions. However, it is doubtful whether the approach via the role of fortune does justice to what for Thomas is the outstanding value of the virtues as such and the interior acts they allow us to perform in the first place.—Leo J. Elders, *Institute of Philosophy "Rolduc," Kerkrade, The Netherlands.*

BROWN, Hunter. *William James on Radical Empiricism and Religion.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000. 192 pp. Cloth, $40.00—In this

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lucid and tightly crafted book, Brown battles fideistic and subjectivist interpretations of James's pragmatism by cogently arguing that his robust empiricism's careful attention to all features of experience imposes a number of constraints on belief formation, constraints metaphysical, noetic, evidential, factual, discursive, and theological. Brown persuasively argues that the issue that concerns James, particularly in his will to believe doctrine, is what would constitute intellectually responsible behavior toward certain existing beliefs, including religious ones that, while inconclusive evidentially, conform to those constraints. Brown thinks that the reasons have not been sufficiently understood why James's belief in the difficulty of disentangling a proposition's probability from its desirability does not force James into an endorsement of wishful thinking, so Brown carefully elucidates James's three distinguishing characteristics of live options to rectify this deficiency. First, liveness involves a strong inclination to believe a proposition. There is distinct imbalance between religious options and alternatives: live theism involves a tenacious passional need, engages one's sympathetic nature in ways not to be found in a purely abstract analysis of theism, and generates an invigorating disposition and intellectual openness. Second, live belief builds on an intellectual plausibility for the subject. Third, live belief arises from a complex interdependence of many influences, the neglect of which in the development of norms for responsible intellectual conduct risks creating only a facade of doxastic responsibility behind which subjectivity may continue to exercise a powerful and unregulated influence. Among what is constitutive of the delicate idiosyncrasy and labyrinthine character of the intellectual life is included an incalculable number of intertwining historical, cultural, linguistic, temperamental, neurological, and volitional influences, which renders irredeemably simplistic those appeals to evidence per se or the deliverances of a dispassionately judicial intellect. (Further explorations of distinctly aesthetic aspects of Jamesean rationality may have proven useful here as well). Brown insists that in James's account subjective influences do not enjoy the degree of autonomy imputed to them by critics who saddle him with the charge of wishful thinking. James depicts subjective states as framed and limited in their influence by their interrelations within the unity of the many elements that together constitute immediate experience, and also by their interrelations with the many different kinds of consequences which flow from particular beliefs. Brown attacks the long-standing propensity among commentators to ignore this complex unity of immediate experience, and neglect therefore the degree to which subjective influences are integrally involved in an immediate, multidimensional concrete relationship with the world which issues in results and consequences that cannot be responsibly ignored. The prudential complaint that James gives primacy to personally desirable consequences in defending theistic belief, and the criticism that James confuses belief with hypothesis-adoption, share the failure to grapple with what consequences were in fact held by James to flow from live theism. The major consequence of theistic belief was the strenuous mood, which suffuses the moral life with the note of infinitude and mystery. Living in the strenuous mood is to reject self-interest,

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to identify with the disenfranchised, to elevate the fervor with which the pursuit of moral discernment is undertaken, and to heighten participation in the historical dialectic of theory and demand. The often trying, counter-cultural, and costly features of the strenuous mood bear little resemblance to easy conformism and personal advantage. James, Brown further argues, was clearly aware that he had chosen to defend the belief state rather than mere hypothesis-adoption; for a wager argument, as even Pascal saw, cannot generate live theism, and because the strenuous mood is uniquely a function of belief. (Here Brown perhaps neglects the way Pascal saw how we can exercise indirect volitional control over belief, though his treatment of Pascal is perceptive). If it should turn out that it is only by according epistemological significance to distinctive experiential states that a particular commensurateness between persons and world can be discovered, then the a priori discounting of those states would permanently preclude finding such truth. As Brown makes clear, James found entirely dubious the cultural propensity to beg such questions by automatically privileging conventional canons of evidentially responsible behavior without due regard for the challenge posed to those very canons by such a recalcitrant phenomenon as live theism.

Brown's careful analysis of live theism, immediate experience, and the strenuous mood in James's philosophy provides a vitally needed corrective to a number of tired, misguided criticisms of James, and his suggestion to locate James more solidly within debates among certain contemporary philosophers—like reformed epistemologists—may well prove most perspicacious. I would highly recommend this book for anyone who wants a more accurate understanding and deeper appreciation of James generally or of his religious epistemology in particular.—David Baggett, *Detriot, Michigan.*

CLAYTON, Philip. *The Problem of God in Modern Thought.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000. xv + 516 pp. Cloth, $40.00—Philip Clayton's newest book investigates the historical antecedents of panentheism. Clayton's aim, however, is more than a historical investigation into the problem of God from Descartes to Schelling. "This book is published not (just) with the goal of winning support for one particular set of conclusions, but equally with the hope of bringing various groups of experts back into dialogue with one another" (p. xiii).

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 opens against the present backdrop of pluralism and skepticism (p. 6). Though Clayton accepts that Putnam, Rorty, Bennett, Derrida, and other current students of Kant have effectively laid to rest the "time-transcendent philosophies" (p. 8) of the past, he is not prepared to accede to extreme pluralism and its attendant relativism. Rather, he opts for "soft" pluralism, which avoids both "full metaphoricity and the univocity of a single established theory" (p. 16) and argues that the very multiplicity of models of God constitutes a drive toward the unity of conceptual expression. "Models

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