

The Meaning of Theism, ed. J. Cottingham (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).
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SUMMARIES OF THE PAPERS

David Benatar, ‘What’s God Got to Do With It?’

It is commonly thought that theism entails full religious observance and that atheism entails either the abandonment of religious practice or, at least, its reform. Focusing on Judaism, this paper argues against both of these entailment claims. Both theistic departure from religious observance and atheistic adherence to religious practice are coherent. There follows an outline of the features of those religions that make them more conducive to atheistic observance. Finally, various objections to full observance by atheists are considered.

John Cottingham, ‘What Difference Does It Make? The Nature and Significance of Theistic Belief.’

Theism is often supposed to be distinguished from atheism by the heavy weight of metaphysical belief that it carries. This paper argues that this is not as illuminating a way of distinguishing the theist’s from the atheist’s outlook as is often supposed. The key divergence consists not so much in matters of theoretical belief or philosophical argument as in practical differences in affective response and in the adoption of certain models for living. Two characteristically religious virtues, humility and hope, and two distinctively religious responses, awe and thanksgiving, are discussed in order to illustrate this. The paper’s conclusion, while not denying a cognitive core to theism, argues that warranted assent to the metaphysical truth of God’s existence cannot be a precondition for theistic hermeneusis and praxis.

John Haldane, ‘Philosophy, The Restless Heart, and the Meaning of Theism.’

There is a common philosophical challenge that asks how things would be different if some supposed reality did not exist. Conceived in one way this can amount to trial by sensory verification. Even if that challenge is dismissible, however, the question of the relation of the purported reality to experience remains. Writing here in connection with the central claims, and human significance, of theism, and drawing on ideas suggested by C.S. Pierce, C.S. Lewis, Augustine of Hippo, and Thomas Aquinas, this paper aims to turn the tables and argue that the broad structure and basic features of human cognitive and affective experience indicate their fulfilment in God.

Anthony Kenny, ‘Worshipping and Unknown God.’

This paper examines the religious tradition of ‘negative theology’, and argues that it is doubtful whether it leaves room for belief in God at all. Three theologians belonging in different degrees to this tradition are discussed, namely John Scotus Eriugena, Anselm of Canterbury, and Nicolas of Cusa, and it is argued that all three, in maintaining the ineffability of God, reach positions that are in effect forms of agnosticism. There is a paradox here: if God is inconceivable, is it not self-refuting to talk about him at all, even to state his inconceivability? The final part of the paper examines the work of the nineteenth-century poet Arthur Hugh Clough, two of whose poems, *Hymnos Aumnos*, and *Qui Laborat Orat*, explore the paradox of talking about the inconceivable Godhead. Clough gives eloquent expression to the idea that leaving God unnamed is not equivalent to disowning him. There is room for a devout agnosticism.

Michael McGhee, ‘Seeke True Religion. Oh, Where?’

We precipitately express opinions about religion without reflecting critically on our conception of it, and may blame it for conduct that the religious traditions themselves judge unbecoming. A distinction can be drawn between the raw, natural self of the untrained person and the well-tempered demeanour of a spiritually developed person. Such a distinction drives the appropriation of religious beliefs and can survive their demise. ‘Religious belief’ is not to be conflated with Abrahamic notions of ‘belief in God’ and ‘faith’. There are other versions of transcendence and other psycho-dramas. One possible form of transcendence is available within the moral life of human beings.

Richard Norman, ‘The Varieties of Non-Religious Experience.’

This paper considers the suggestion that certain essential components of human experience are by their nature distinctively religious, and thus that the atheist is either debarred from participating fully in such experiences, or fails to understand their real nature. The paper looks at five kinds of experience: the experience of the moral ‘ought’; the experience of beauty; the experience of meaning conferred by stories; the experience of otherness and transcendence; and the experience of vulnerability and fragility. These seem to be integral features of any meaningful human life. They are aspects of what it is to be human. Some theists would simply agree with that statement. Others, however, would say that though essentially human they are also essentially religious, and that the secular humanist’s participation in such experiences is in some way defective. It is argued that this latter claim should be rejected.

Alvin Plantinga, ‘Divine Action in the World’

This paper is a synopsis of the talk presented by Alvin Plantinga at the RATIO conference on *The Meaning of Theism* held in April 2005 at the University of Reading. The synopsis was prepared by the then Editor of RATIO, John Cottingham, with the author’s approval, from a handout provided by the author at the conference. The paper reflects on whether religious belief of a traditional Christian kind can be maintained consistently with accepting our modern scientific worldview. Many theologians, and also many scientists, maintain that the idea of divine intervention is at odds with the framework of natural laws disclosed by science. The paper argues that this notion of a ‘religion/science problem’ is misguided. When properly understood, neither the classical (Newtonian) picture of natural laws, nor the more recent quantum mechanical picture, rules out divine intervention. There is nothing in science, under either the old or the new picture, that conflicts with, or even calls in to question, special divine action, including miracles.