

Necessity and Contingency in God

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Keith Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*, Oxford Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1982, pp 240, £14.00

In a previous book, *The Concept of God*, Keith Ward expressed disdain for purported explanations which probe beyond the laws of nature, and at the notion of a self-explanatory being, and was impressed rather by the impossibility of explaining the contingent by that which is necessary. Recanting now of his former modesty over explanations, he defends the notion of God as a self-explanatory being, necessary both as to his existence and as to at least his formal attributes; adhering still to the requirement that the contingency of the created order must be matched by the contingency of divine creation itself, he propounds the contingency of other attributes of God, to such an extent that God exists and acts in time, is ignorant of the future choices of free creatures, and is liable to modification in the course of interaction between them and himself. Even those who accept the part of this synthesis reminiscent of Anselm (or Hegel), or again those who sympathise with the part which is indebted rather to Whitehead, may well doubt its consistency as a system.

Yet this is also a richly original book from which much may be learned. Thus the chapter on 'Perfection' makes it clear that any doctrine on which the material world is a necessary emanation from the divine being is incompatible with the world's contingency and with the divine purpose. Moreover to represent God as either wholly inconceivable or as possessed of all the attributes of creatures, albeit in eminent form, is absurd. "It is ridiculous to say that God is wholly inconceivable, for that would leave the word 'God' without any meaning. There must be some things which are known about God, if we are to use the word intelligibly" (p 61). God cannot combine properties which are incompatible, and "It is only a verbal sleight of hand to say that what is incompatible on earth will be made compatible in God" (p 52). And if the suggestion that he possesses material properties in a higher manner "means that he may possess a material property which is not mate-

rial, it is senseless" (*ibid.*). Rather they can all be *possible* in God, in that he possesses the ideas of them all. Besides, "One can say that he necessarily possesses various properties, like omnipotence and omniscience, necessity and underivability, without having to say that all those properties are identical with each other, and therefore inconceivable" (p 64). Thus the doctrine of the divine simplicity is misconceived; rational theology requires us to allow of the possibility that the divine nature is internally complex, without the human mind being debarred from arriving at some grasp of its complexity. And the divine nature must indeed be complex if, despite God's necessary attributes, his choice of the actual world from among the myriad of possible worlds is genuinely contingent.

The chapter on 'Purpose' also has much to offer. Here there is an argument to design by a loving spirit based on the premises that the actual world instantiates much that would be of intrinsic value in any possible world, and that a world of intrinsic value is the one and only kind of world which a rational and loving spirit might be expected to design. This argument is neither deductive nor inductive, yet the premises certainly add to the cogency of the conclusion, a conclusion supported also by other theistic arguments. A later chapter on evil attempts to reconcile the evils of the world with this account; though it should be granted that the notion of the best possible world is incoherent, the efforts there to show that all actual evils may be necessary for the occurrence of states of greater intrinsic value are not altogether convincing. Yet the argument from the intrinsic value of the created order may well be susceptible of further development.

One ground for reservation, however, about Ward's claims about the high intrinsic value of the actual world is that he believes the claim that it is purposeless to be an impossible and self-contradictory one (pp 40, 143). Granted God's necessary existence and nature, there could not be a purposeless world. But this conclusion is only sustained by a parody of the views of philosophers who hold that there could have been an omnipotent, omniscient but amoral God. Such a God, far from being "a creature" subject to uncontrolled passions, might have aesthetic purposes but be indifferent to the welfare of sentient creatures; that God is not such must be a conclusion based on how the world actually is, not on how any possible world would have to be.

In point of fact, Ward does not think that the world as it is sufficiently supports this conclusion. "Despite the many pointers to the existence of God, theism would be falsified if physical death was the end, *for then there could be no justification for the existence of this world*" (p 201: my italics). Thus nothing but belief in

life after death can reconcile the world's evils with God's goodness. Yet at page 206 we read that "it must be committed belief in God which leads one to hope for everlasting life". If this implies, as I think that it does, that short of belief in God's goodness, there are insufficient grounds for belief in everlasting life, then Ward is here surely correct; but this, in conjunction with the passage just quoted from page 201, would imply, contrary to Ward's intentions, that in this life we have insufficient grounds for belief in God's goodness, or in everlasting life either; for belief in either would require prior belief in the other.

In any case belief in the necessary intrinsic value of *any* created world is surely in conflict with Ward's stress on the contingency of the created order and of God's choice in creation. In whatever respects God's nature is necessary, we cannot allow that its necessity determines God's choice in creating, as Ward himself remarks from time to time; for otherwise God could not choose differently and the material world would not be contingent at all. A different blend of necessity and contingency in God must thus be sought from that which Ward discerns.

The same is true over his claim that God's existence is every bit as necessary as God's formal attributes are. I welcome Ward's willingness to pursue the explanation of the material world through to a God whose existence has no explanation beyond itself, but cannot accept that the notion of such a being must be such as to entail its existence. Ward has several reasons for positing a self-explanatory being in this very strong sense. First, if God's existence is contingent, we lack a sufficiently complete explanation of the world (p 9). Second, if it is a possibility that God should not have existed, there might have been a universe like this one, but no God (pp 9, 17). Third, if God just happened to be uncaused, then he could have been brought into being, and thus does not sufficiently explain that of which explanation is sought (p 11).

On this last point, a theist must clearly deny that God could have been brought into being. This can be denied without granting that God cannot not exist. This brings me back to the second point; if God's existence is contingent, could there not have been a world but no God? My reply is that this possibility is excluded if either some form of the Principle of Sufficient Reason is a necessary truth, or if, at least, the existence of a material world entails that of God. yet either of these could be true without God's existence being necessary (unless the form of the Principle of Sufficient Reason adopted is, absurdly, one requiring absolutely every contingency to have a non-contingent explanation). Indeed there might have been nothing at all, as Ward seems at one point to allow (p 127), and therefore no material world and no God either; accord-

ingly if God exists, his existence must be contingent, like that of the material world, without this in any way implying that the world could exist without God. As to the first point, about explanatory adequacy, Ward himself allows that not everything can be explained (pp 75, 192, 220). Besides, as he stresses, the necessary cannot explain the contingent (p 8); thus, as that which is to be explained is contingent, there must be an irreducibly contingent element somewhere in its explanation. This granted, the demand for a satisfactory explanation does not constitute an objection to the doctrine that this contingent element is found in the fact of God's existence. The claim that there is, in fact, a God who creates carries explanation beyond that which is creatable to that which is not such; and this is an explanatory gain, even if we here arrive at a point where further explanation becomes impossible.

There would, of course, be a further explanation if, as Ward claims, the ontological argument is successful and it is God's nature which entails his existence. It may be conceded to Ward that this argument is not mere play with words and definitions, and that part of what is at stake is the adequacy of rival concepts of God to the world of our experience. Indeed Ward well parries Kant's objections, invoking the aid of Jerome Shaffer's replies in an article in *Mind*, 1962. But he neglects to reply to Shaffer's own criticisms of the argument in the very same article, criticisms which I have endorsed in *God and the Secular*, (Cardiff, 1978), and which seem to undermine the argument as resuscitated by Ward.

Accordingly the admitted need for an explanation of the existence of the material world does not require belief in a necessarily existent God, nor is there any other ground for this belief. I cannot accept either that it is a requirement of worship. Furthermore, if the arguments for God's necessity are supposed to help in establishing the necessary existence of a deity of necessary goodness, then the project of formulating a consistent concept of a God whose free choices underlie the contingency of creation is also imperilled.

In fact, however, a separate argument for God's necessary goodness is to be found in the chapter on 'The Divine Attributes'. As God has no uncontrolled passions or selfish desires, he must choose states of intrinsic value for his creatures, and *only* such states; for there is nothing else which he could have reason to choose. The states are not good because God chooses them, but "God necessarily wills what is good" (p 146), and necessarily chooses such states. Moreover his omnipotence and omniscience guarantee this *a priori*, and to this extent the other divine attributes entail the divine goodness. (Indeed at any rate these three attributes – omnipotence, omniscience and goodness – are here argued to entail one

another after all.) Here, then, not only is God necessarily good, but his choices too are necessarily of one particular sort. They could still be exercised on alternative possible worlds of equivalent value, but nothing else is contingent about them, at least for this phase of the argument. But this kind of account surely undermines the freedom of God and the contingency of creation (as remarked above), as well as implying the impossibility of worlds less valuable than the actual one, and rejecting the contingency of its striking goodness.

In another phase of Ward's argument, the stress is on God's contingency. Ward here distances himself from Whitehead on the count that Whitehead's account makes God too purely passive to the activities of creatures; but Whitehead is also highly praised. "For the first time in the history of philosophy, a major theistic philosopher not only stresses the reality of the finite, material world unequivocally, but also makes temporality a thing of positive value, the condition of real creativity." Thus God should be understood as everlasting, not timeless, as ignorant of the future actions of free creatures, and as liable to be changed by them (even though, at page 66, he is necessarily immutable).

Yet if God can be changed by creatures, he surely cannot have the kind of changelessness required to explain the phenomenon of change. It might seem that God could at one time authorise himself becoming subject to change at a later time; yet, if so, he would not at the later time be omnipotent, and it is surely incoherent to suggest that he has the power to make himself cease to be omnipotent. In any case all this presupposes that God's action is in time, whereas it is at least plausible that if his action explains that which is temporal it is itself timeless.

Ward takes God rather to be the contemporary of his creatures, or rather, granted problems about the concept of simultaneity, to be temporally related to the time-sequence of each actual world which he creates. As such, he cannot know the outcome of future creaturely choices; and if he did, they would not be free. That they would not be free does seem to follow if God's necessary knowledge were antecedent to the choices in question; but there would be no such difficulty if God's knowledge were timeless. God's temporality would also imply that he has not yet brought it about that the future will resemble the past, or thus that nature is regular. Ward, for his part, finds Boethius' and others' belief in God's timelessness incoherent, but I am not satisfied that he has made out his case. I, for my part, cannot grant the coherence of God creating "the space-time in which we exist" (p 163), if he himself exists in a time-sequence which is temporally related to that same space-time.

Sometimes the central and later chapters of the book read more like a meditation or a prose poem than a philosophical argument; and some readers will derive benefit from them for that very reason. (I particularly appreciated the simile for an atheist's sense of obligation: "a pointless and empty gesture in a tragic universe, like an arrow carefully aimed at nothing" (p 183) – even though I am unpersuaded by the claim that there is no adequate basis for morality without belief in God.) There is, however, a danger to the extent that meditation on Christian belief merges into the amassing of premises in an argument which, at least formally, is continuously in progress all along. For no claims about revealed truth or assumptions about God's nature or what God has actually done in history are in place where arguments for a certain concept of God and for its applicability to the general facts of experience are at stake. Such illicit reasoning, however, seems occasionally to creep in. Thus at page 215, the coherence of the doctrine of the incarnation is assumed; and, to take just one other example chosen at random, with what grounds is it that "One must say that the possibility of suffering is rooted in the necessary being of God . . . and that in him it is transfigured by that greater beatitude which arises from wider knowledge of the overwhelming value of created existence" (p 199)?

All in all, I conclude that the chapters which stress contingency do so to excess, just as I concluded earlier that the opening chapters exaggerate the divine necessity. I further conclude that the resulting concept of God lacks internal consistency: I cannot see how a God whose nature (and existence) could not be otherwise in so many formal and informal respects can still be free and changeable, and the subject of contingent attributes to the extent alleged. As Ward himself says, "a necessary being cannot give rise to a world of contingent, free creatures" (p 215). The project of a blend of necessity and contingency in God is an entirely proper one, and some such account is surely indispensable if justice is to be done both to God's essential nature and to his sovereign freedom in creation; but its execution is here fatally flawed. As Ward says on another topic (p 206), "The details of my account may be wrong. But some such account is coherent." A satisfactory account must await expression elsewhere.

I have many other reservations about this book. For example, can there really be knowledge by acquaintance without knowledge by description? And can the existence of universals really depend on the divine consciousness? Yet the book remains an original, bold and stimulating one, impressive both as to its illuminating and impressive surveys of the history of theism, the profundity of some of its passages of meditation, and its readiness to challenge

traditional authorities in the interests of clarity and coherence. The discussion of divine simplicity and the account of material properties as possibilities known to the divine mind rather than eminent properties of God himself represent a real advance; and the treatment of intrinsic value and purpose casts new light on the teleological argument and, in some measure, on the relation of God and goodness. The high metaphysical, a priorist approach should not discourage the aspirant reader, who, taking the book with a few pinches of selectivity, will find much that is worth digesting.

Reviews

MEISTER ECKHART, ed. and trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn.
Classics of Western Spirituality (New York and London), 1981. pp xviii + 366. \$8.95.

Amid the flurry of translations of Eckhart's German works, it is a welcome change to receive a volume which contains substantial selections from the Latin works too – almost half of the material contained in the *Classics of Western Spirituality* is taken from the Latin. As the editors point out, it is only by giving equal weight to the Latin and German works that a balanced picture of the author can emerge.

The historical and theological Introduction is judicious, informative and interesting. The selection of texts is sensible. The sample of McGinn's translation from the Latin works which I tested suggests that he is a reliable translator, and I am sure he is right to retain a rather technical language, explaining difficult words in his notes.

The disappointment comes when we reach Colledge's translation from the German works. Unfortunately, judging from the sample which I tested, this is inelegant, imprecise and seriously inaccurate far more often than one would have expected

from so distinguished a philologist. And, granted the generous provision of notes, more could have been done to draw the reader's attention to significant ambiguities in Eckhart's vocabulary. For instance, to understand the famous treatise on Detachment, it is necessary to appreciate that *abegescheidenheit* has metaphysical connotations as well as moral; and the link between *einicheit* and *abegescheidenheit* becomes much clearer when it is remembered that *einicheit* means "aloneness" as well as 'unity'. These ambiguities probably cannot be reproduced in translation, but there is no reason why they should not be pointed out in the notes.

For the German works, then, it is better to stick to Walshe's translation, where it is available; and the four Treatises are all available in Clarke. The value of this new publication is in its reminder of the importance of the Latin works, and in the ample selection from them, and in the excellent Introduction.

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