

LITERATURE REVIEWS

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PHILOSOPHICAL WEEDING

Thinking about God: First Steps in Philosophy. Gregory E. Ganssle. 2004. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 187 p. Paper, \$16.00.

Reviewed by Ashby L. Camp, Tempe, Arizona

Gregory E. Ganssle is a philosopher at the Rivendell Institute and a part-time lecturer in the philosophy department at Yale University. He wrote this book to introduce ordinary people (non-philosophers) to philosophy and to help them think clearly about God.

In Part One (Introduction), Ganssle clears some weeds by explaining why the idea that one cannot “prove” the existence of God is less significant than might appear. If “prove” means to establish with unquestionable certainty, then one cannot prove God’s existence, but neither can one prove that the Rocky Mountains exist independent of one’s mind, that the universe did not pop into existence five minutes ago, or that other people have minds. However, one can provide good reason for believing God exists, just as one can provide good reason for believing that mountains are real, that memories are generally reliable, and that other minds exist.

Ganssle then explains how trusting in God and thinking about God go hand in hand. Believers know certain things are true by means of faith on the basis of the authority of the Scriptures or the church. What they know by faith they seek also to understand on the basis of reason. Whereas it is better to have knowledge by both faith and reason, one does not know less truly or to some inferior degree if one knows only by means of faith in a reliable authority.

The final weed he clears is the notion that one must be neutral in the sense of having no ideas or beliefs about God in order to be open-minded in thinking about God. Virtually everyone has ideas and beliefs about God. The test of open-mindedness is whether one is willing to

identify one's starting assumptions (prior ideas and beliefs) and open them to criticism.

In Part Two (Reasons to Believe in God), Ganssle presents three lines of evidence that he believes make it more likely that God exists than that he does not. He argues: (1) that the existence of the universe is better explained by a first cause who is a powerful person, outside space and time, (2) that the nature of the universe is better explained by a cause that was an intelligent designer who had some interest in a universe that was suitable for life, and (3) that the nature of moral facts indicate that there is a purpose to our lives that comes from outside human culture.

Ganssle believes Darwin has rendered unsound the argument from apparent design in living things to the existence of a designer. Though Darwin's story may not be true, he accepts that it provides a *plausible* explanation for how aspects of living things could appear to be designed without actually having been designed (like the "Old Man in the Mountain" in New Hampshire). Since Darwin's story is available only for things that reproduce, it has no effect on the argument for design from the fine-tuning of the universe (argument 2).

Of course, creationists and many in the intelligent design community challenge the notion that Darwin's story is a plausible explanation for the appearance of design in nature. Ganssle does not explain why he accepts Darwin's story as plausible, but he seems to be relying on the fact "most biologists think that some story pretty much like Darwin's is the way things happened."

In Part Three (God and Evil), the author tackles the philosophical problem of whether the existence of God and evil can be reconciled. He argues that the existence of evil in general does not disprove God's existence (Mackie's argument) because God may have a good reason for allowing evil. He argues that the existence of particular evils for which we can conceive no good reason does not make God's existence improbable (Rowe's argument) because it is reasonable to suppose that God will have reasons for allowing evils that we cannot grasp.

In Part Four (What Is God Like?), Ganssle explores what God can do, what he can know, and whether he communicates. He explains that God cannot do what is logically contradictory (e.g., make a square circle) and that God can know every truth, even the future (though how one analyzes God's knowledge is linked to one's view of God's relationship to time). He ends with suggesting that, in light of what one

can infer about God's existence and nature, it is reasonable to think that God would reveal himself to the human race through language.

This is a good basic introduction to some important philosophical questions about God. Ganssle is a believer who knows the terrain and communicates clearly. Though his purpose in writing was broader, the book will help prepare Christian undergraduates to deal with questions that on too many campuses are presented as unanswerable objections to the faith. Those who are active in Christian apologetics will see much that is familiar, but they also can benefit from Ganssle's analysis of various issues. For those who wish to dig deeper, there is a short list of recommended reading.