Review of the book God and goodness
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This excellent small book provides the best defence of the design argument that is presently available. Though it seems to me that the author overstates the importance of the design argument when he claims that ‘there is good reason to suppose that the demise of theistic belief from a sociological point of view reflects a general sense that the design argument has failed to make its case’ (p. 195), a credible restatement of it can still have an important place within natural theology. Mark Wynn, who teaches philosophy of religion at the Australian Catholic University, aims to give such a restatement, by arguing that it is not the evaluatively neutral aspects of the world that require design, but its value and goodness. He claims that ‘the world exists because it is good that it should exist.’ Since it is impossible to prove this thesis conclusively, he tries to show that it ‘is rationally permissible for some, and not rationally obligatory for all’ (p. 1). The elements of goodness in the world on which he particularly concentrates are the world’s beauty (Ch. 1), and its openness to the emergence of life, sentience and concept use (Ch. 2). He then turns towards the principal objection to this line of argument, i.e. ‘that the world seems to be productive not only of values but of disvalues’ (p. 71). With regard to these disvalues, such as evil and suffering, Wynn argues that God is not obliged to create the best (Ch. 3). All that is needed is that the world God creates could be the object of rational choice by its inhabitants when placed in an original position (in the sense in which Rawls has introduced the term) in which not merely the social system can be chosen, but the general character of our world. Given the opportunity to inhabit only one world, any choice but a choice for the best world would be irrational; given the opportunity to inhabit several worlds successively, however, we might have reason to choose various types of world, and thus acquire a richer overall experience. And this is the situation we are in according to traditional theism, which assumes minimally two lives: before and after death (p. 80-81). Moreover, Wynn argues, in a world without evil many of us could not exist, because our identity is formed by nurture as well as by nature, and evil often is part of nurture. That is to say, without evil and suffering many of us would not be who we are. And would it be rational to object to a world without people like us (p. 86-92)? This will not suffice as a full answer to the problem of evil, Wynn admits, but does the transcendence of God not give us independent reason to assume that we are incapable of fully comprehending the ways of God (p. 92-96)? In brief, Wynn gives a type of greater good defence (which he dubs ‘integral whole approach’), which he consequently applies to natural evil (Ch. 4). There, he argues that, when natural phenomena are considered in their ecosystemic context, nature appears to be neither wasteful, nor cruel, nor blind. Moreover, he argues that it is unsurprising that we often fail to grasp the value of the natural world, because we lack the necessary familiarity with relevant ecological theory. In Ch. 5, Wynn complements the evidential approach of the design argument with two moral arguments for believing in God. He argues, firstly, that the trust relationship that we ideally have with our parents, gives us a moral reason to subscribe to their religious views. Subscribing to these views is likely to deepen our relationship with them, rejecting them, on the other hand, would imply that the way they make sense of their lives is fundamentally mistaken. This argument works in favour of theism only if one is brought up a theist and has a valuable relationship with one's parents; for other people, Wynn gives a different argument. He offers the following analogy: If one receives a message that purports to be from one's beloved wife, this uncertain provenance nevertheless gives us some reason to believe the message. This universe may be read as a message from its Creator; does the analogy with the message from one's spouse not show that this alone gives us some reason to accept the message? (Personally, I found this part of the book one of the least convincing parts. What is supposed in the human example, the existence of a loving marriage relationship, cannot, on the penalty of circularity, be assumed in the religious example: a relation of loving fellowship with God. It is only when one enjoys such a relationship, that the possible provenance of a message from God counts as an argument for accepting it; but then, accepting the message as coming from God cannot count as an argument for belief in God's existence.) In Ch. 6, Wynn argues that the design argument is compatible both with the classical view of God as simple and immutable, and with contemporary views 'of God...
as an individual person, who is changing (and therefore temporal), and related to things in the world not only as their cause but also in various respects as their effect’ (p. 143). What is religiously important is that God ‘discloses the nature of existence, in a causally effective way, and offers a radiantly effective synthesis of the goodness evident in created things’ (p. 167). In the final Chapter, Wynn argues that God should not be seen as merely ‘a radiant synthesis of the world’s perfections,’ but as ‘the necessary complement of those perfections’ (188). The goodness of the world is not separable from that of God, nor is the goodness of God separable from that of the world (pp. 183–184). Though the book aims at a specialist audience, it is very accessible. It makes important contributions to the discussion of the design argument, the problem of evil, religious epistemology, and the doctrine of God. That is not to say that it is in all respects convincing. One problem is, that where Wynn draws on scientific literature, he mostly draws on authors with an explicit theological agenda that is congenial to his own (e.g., H. Rolston); his case would be much stronger if he had used the writings of scientists without a religious agenda. And secondly, it is far from clear that all of the features of the world that Wynn tries to explain by means of divine design, really require explanation. To give an example, in his argument from fine-tuning (Ch. 2), he claims that it is very unlikely that a world with potentiality for life-as-we-know-it would come into existence; it is much more likely that another type of world would have come into existence. And consequently, he invokes design to explain the unlikely existence of the actual world. The problem is that the division of types of worlds into ‘this type of world’ and ‘other types of worlds’ is rather arbitrary; there is a wealth of conceivable other types of worlds, and the chances for each of these were tiny. Whatever type of world would have emerged, the chance that precisely that type of world emerged would have been very small indeed; so that the fact that the present world emerged in spite of a very small prior probability, does not require explanation at all, but is just what could be expected.

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