

Book reviews

Creation, evolution and meaning

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Creation, Evolution and Meaning is a book about God. Attfield's main thesis is a defence of divine creation. In writing about God Attfield exhibits his expertise across an extensive range of philosophical disciplines such as the philosophy of language, the philosophy of science, the philosophy of religion, ethics and the philosophy of value. Attfield's style is consistently and carefully argumentative. This is certainly to Attfield's favour since he engages with key philosophical figures such as David Hume, Michael Dummett, A.J. Ayer, Richard Rorty and D.Z. Phillips, as well as figures from outside of philosophy, such as the scientist Richard Dawkins, and the theologian Keith Ward. The book has three parts; my main focus will be on Part 1 'Meaning and Creation'. But first I'll briefly outline some of the key claims of Part's 2 and 3.

In Part 2, 'Creation and Evolution', Attfield discusses various arguments for the existence of God. His considered position comes in the form of a new version of the design argument, which he takes to be cogent. In the course of defending this argument, Attfield discusses and defends the existence of God against various criticisms, including those coming from versions of the Problem of Evil and those coming from Hume. A further feature of Part 2 is that Attfield argues (against, for instance the likes of Dawkins, and other neo-Darwinians) that the existence of a creator God is consistent with evolution and natural selection, as long as we understand that God *institutes* natural selection, and loves the intrinsic value which is the product of evolution. Attfield also offers insightful exegesis of Darwin's own views on the consistency of evolution and the existence of a creator God.

Part 3, 'Evolution and Meaning', offers reflections upon the meaning of action and life. Attfield argues that 'Life's meaningfulness turns out to involve an integrated sense of priorities, self-awareness and a sense of objective values which the people concerned can see themselves as safeguarding or honouring or promoting. In view of the value of the products of evolution, this can take the form of understanding oneself as a steward or trustee of such value' (p. 2). Furthermore, 'theistic stewardship (motivated by answerability to God the creator, regarded as the source of the world's value) has a greater coherence [than its atheistic counterpart], and much more directly makes life meaningful' (ibid).

Since Attfield wants to defend divine creation his first port of call is to ask what is *meant* by divine creation. In elucidating the concepts involved Attfield tells us that 'Creation... concerns not the Big Bang or some other earliest event, but the dependence of each and every physical entity on a divine creator, not situated in space or in time, possessed of the power and the knowledge to bring the world into being, and to select its natural laws' (p. 1). And regarding the concept of God, we are told that 'implicitly, to be God is to have the power, knowledge and wisdom to bring into being anything that can (without contradiction) be brought into being...' (p. 24). So, Attfield's concept of God is the concept of a non-spatiotemporal *creator* God.

In the course of clarifying the meaning of 'divine creation' Attfield offers a stern defence of a Realist understanding of religious language (he argues against forms of verificationism and the anti-Realism's of Dummett, Rorty, Cupitt, Phillips and Duhem/Quine). But even if we accept Attfield's arguments against anti-Realism, the question remains, as Attfield puts it, 'How [are we to] understand talk of what lies beyond experience when our language is perforce derived from everyday experience, concepts and purposes?' (ibid). Attfield recognizes that 'talk of God as author or as agent... cannot be taken in the ordinary sense of those terms, and the same applies to talk of God's will or purposes' (ibid). We need to know how it is possible to apply those predicates normally applied to people to God. And in finding out how this is possible, we must, Attfield thinks, steer a course between anthropocentrism and equivocation. Hence, Attfield endorses an analogical model of religious language (following Donald MacKinnon).

Ever since the time of Aquinas the analogical model of religious language has been proposed as a means by which we can understand the sense of religious statements such as those that predicate something of God. This, Attfield claims, works in two ways. First, we have the 'Analogy of Attribution', which 'suggests that God is [say] good in the sense of being the ultimate source or cause of goodness... [much like] fresh air... can be said to be healthy as being [a cause] of health' (p. 25). But thus far this is inadequate, as Attfield realises, since it 'fails to capture the meaning of 'God is good' (for much more is usually meant by this than that God is the cause of goodness)' (ibid). Hence, Attfield invokes a second aspect of the analogical model, the 'Analogy of Proportionality' according to which 'God's goodness and other attributes are held to be related to God's nature in the same manner or ratio as human goodness is to human nature' (ibid).

But Attfield seems to have got things the wrong way round in suggesting that the Analogy of Proportionality can pick up the slack left by the Analogy of Attribution. Being told that the ratio of God's goodness to God's nature is analogous to the ratio of human goodness to human nature presupposes that we understand what it is to attribute goodness to God in the first place, and we've already noted that the Analogy of Attribution is not suited to fully capture such understanding. So, at best, the analogical model is an

incomplete model for understanding religious language. Therefore, it is not altogether clear how we are to understand religious language, and unfortunately Attfield doesn't have much else to say on the issue.

Attfield argues for the existence of a creator God, hence it is worth discussing how Attfield conceives of the God/World relation. Although this comes in Part 2 of Attfield's book, it can be linked in with the analogical understanding of religious language that comes in Part 1. We can begin by questioning even the partial meaning captured by the Analogy of Attribution. For example, we can understand the relation between fresh air and good health in physical (biological) terms, and we can understand it as a causal relation. But what about the relation between God and the good? Or, since we are discussing attribution to God *per se*, the relation between God and his creation (i.e. the physical world)? Since God is non-spatiotemporal it is not obvious that we can understand creation in *causal* terms. So how does the analogy help us? This is a difficult question. In a short section of Chapter 8 Attfield addresses the God/World (i.e. God/Creation) relation, and again aims to illuminate it through analogy.

Attfield remarks that, 'Belief in creation certainly means that creatures are dependent on God at all times, but it also means that God bestows on them their form; and this is done not in a single instant, but step by step in the course of evolution' (p. 166). Attfield views this as a 'timeless bestowing' (Chapter Four), but it is 'achieved through created temporal processes continually generating new forms and species... God creates through naturalistic processes, in which 'things make themselves'' (pp. 166-7). And here is where the issue of the relation between God and World comes into view, as Attfield says 'If creation operates in part through natural processes, God is to be seen not only as transcending the natural order but also as immanent in it... God will be present in the evolving world rather as a composer is present as his or her intentions are expressed during a performance of a music work such as a symphony' (ibid).

Attfield is offering a version of *panentheism*. Panentheism is, as Attfield puts it, quoting Arthur Peacocke, 'the belief that the Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in Him, but (as against pantheism) that His Being is more than, and is not exhausted by, the universe'. Accordingly we get a mix of transcendence and immanence, Attfield sums up the position as follows

By actualizing and employing finite and temporal processes of creation, God does not cease to be infinite or eternal... much less become dependent on the created order, and by making creatures make themselves, and thus carry through the creative process, God does not cease to be changeless; nor need classical theism say otherwise. We are not tempted to say, even of a human composer such as Beethoven, that he grows or develops as a work of his is performed, even in

cases where the performance occurs during his lifetime, simply on the basis that the delivery or execution of his intentions is spread across time... All the less should we be inclined to say that because God employs temporal processes of creation and is thus immanent in the world, the creator grows, develops or changes. (p. 170)

Attfield has no direct argument for his panentheism. But this is OK; it serves as an *interpretation* of the God/World relation given what has already been argued in terms of creation and evolution. However, it simply isn't obvious that Attfield can have transcendence *and* immanence; he seems to want to have his cake and eat it. The matter is certainly open to interpretation since Attfield offers no explicit definitions of 'transcendence' or 'immanence' (perhaps because there are none). To return to a quote from earlier in the book, that God transcends His creation is given content in the claim that God is 'not situated in space or time' (and further flourishes on transcendence are that God is 'eternal and unchanging' and 'infinite'). But what is the significance of the term 'situated'? We can ask is God *situated* when He creates? (One might wonder, given what Attfield has to say, whether it even makes sense to talk of *when* God creates). Surely on any non-equivocal understanding of what it is to *create*, especially when we understand creation as motivated by the purposes and intentions of an *agent*, one (the agent) would have to be situated (somewhere) in order to create. And this seems to be what *immanence* captures here – that God is situated *within* his evolving creation. But then transcendence and immanence are completely at odds. God *cannot* be at once *not* in space and time, and *in* space and time. Attfield needs to reconcile creation *qua* 'timeless bestowing' with creation *qua* 'temporal processes of creation' (p. 170).

A further tension is that between Attfield's desire to avoid equivocation on the one hand and the notion of 'atemporal creation', or a 'timeless bestowing' on the other. What notion of atemporal creation uses a non-equivocal conception of creation? It's not clear at all what *atemporal* creation could even be, but whatever it might turn out to be, surely it can be *nothing like* creation as we understand it (i.e. temporal creation). That is, we could not use locutions to characterise atemporal creation such as 'bringing into being' or 'making', without further specifying the *atemporal* sense of such locutions. But what is that sense?

Perhaps we can draw upon the analogy with the composer invoked by Attfield in order to clarify the God/World relation, and hence give some sense to the claim that God creates the world. But again, matters are not so straightforward. The claim is that God will be present in the evolving world as a composer is present as his or her intentions are expressed during a performance of a his or her work. But this suggests that we separate the creation (the composition) from the world (the performance). For example, Beethoven composes the 5th Symphony, and *then* it is performed and *then* Beethoven's intentions get *expression* in the performance of the

Symphony. So, are we therefore to say that God creates the world *and then* God Himself gets expression in the world through evolution? If so then we have resorted to *temporal creation*, as in the Beethoven case. But again this is in tension with Attfield's insistence on *atemporal* creation. What's more, this understanding of the analogy makes creation sound suspiciously like a special event after all, like the special event of Beethoven composing the 5th Symphony. But then this is more like *creationism*.

No doubt, one can understand the above analogy in different ways, and of course, understand 'transcendence' and 'immanence' in different ways. What I have tried to do, using the above quotations, is bring out some tensions and issues that require clarification. My suggestions are not motivated by any kind of anti-Realism, but are rather reactions to the positive things that Attfield himself says about the sense of religious statements. Nevertheless, Attfield's book is a vigorous attempt to defend the existence of a Creator God. The consistent attention to detail and strong argumentation is admirable, and hence *Creation, Evolution and Meaning* is a welcome addition to the philosophy of religion – and it would certainly be a happy supplement to the undergraduate's budding library.