

Book reviews

Eugene Fontinell, *Self, God, and Immortality: A Jamesian Investigation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986. XVII and 297 pages. \$34.95.

William James's commentary on religion contains a persistent tension between the attractions of humanism and theism. His twin impulses express an unease in modernist culture between the call to be engaged in this world and the attractions of religious belief. The question of immortality is perhaps the most problematic issue on this front because it is so baldly other-worldly: to anyone even moderately swayed by the call of human reason and moral action, immortality belief seems implausible or even plainly irrelevant. At this impasse, with potential religious believers attracted to religious faith but repulsed by one of its major features, Eugene Fontinell's *God, Self, and Immortality* offers welcome, sane, and judicious commentary and insights. He draws on the work of James and other pragmatists and phenomenologists to investigate the possibility for an immortality belief in the modern cultural context.

Just as James sought to mediate science and religion at the beginning of the modernist era, Fontinell seeks a middle ground which like humanism avoids the escapism of traditional beliefs in immortality, yet like these, recognizes the deep satisfactions and comfort that come with expectation of life beyond this veil of tears and unfulfilled hopes. This is a tall order indeed.

While his challenge is difficult, Fontinell brings to the task a scholar's understanding of pragmatic philosophy and a range of philosophies of immortality and also a creative philosopher's insights on this elusive and pressing religious question. The book is, consequently, in two parts. Part One is an able and erudite explication of James's philosophy and psychology. It is scholarship with an immediate purpose: in this portion of the essay, Fontinell mines James's thought for useful and innovative theories to support the possibility of immortality belief for the modern mind. In Part Two, he asserts his own James-inspired belief in immortality. In the spirit of William James, Fontinell's philosophy is a tentative inquiry, plausible and full of confidence, yet open throughout to opposing points of view.

Fontinell's inquiry leans heavily on James because his pragmatic and pluralistic outlooks provide a starting point for immortality belief which is both unorthodox and well suited to the modern temper. The most important Jamesian text for his purposes is one that has only begun to receive attention in the last thirty years, thanks to the pioneering work of John McDermott and other philosophers who have increasingly taken James's work seriously despite its informal style. In unpublished psychology lectures prepared in 1895–1896, James used the metaphor of "fields" to describe our experience of reality. Within our field of attention, some things are tightly in focus, while others hover at the fringe. Reality as a whole, then, is a complex set of relations among fields between individuals; the individual self is itself a nexus of overlapping fields.

According to the field perspective, boundaries between experiences are not distinct, but rather they are “shifting, overlapping, fusing, and separating” (p. 40). James was not alone in developing this perspective, as Fontinell readily acknowledges: John Dewey maintained that objects are never experienced in isolation, but only in “situation;” the contemporary phenomenologist Richard Stevens talks of our experience of reality in “sensible totals.”

The field perspective has important implications as a way of understanding James’s psychology, his pragmatism, his radical empiricism, and his pluralism; but Fontinell is, of course, most interested in using it to support the plausibility of immortality belief. A psychology of fields is an alternative to the dualism that has been the traditional basis for belief in immortality. The field perspective denies that immortality is a totally distinct, other-worldly phenomena, but rather allows for it to be viewed as a field within human experience, although in varying degrees and generally far on the fringes of ordinary attention. Fontinell agrees with James that the divine world is in a field of experience near to us, yet generally inaccessible. James explains with a helpful and amusing metaphor: “a super-human life” which creates and sustains us, hovers near, “as dogs and cats are in our libraries, seeing and hearing the conversation, but having no inkling of the meaning of it at all.” Religious experience, rituals, prayers, and especially mystical relations occasionally allow us to make contact with the other world, but for the most part it remains a field of experience that is near but elusive.

James’s field approach allows for the interaction of psychology and religion in a way that is relevant to Fontinell’s immortality belief. Because there is no definite boundary between a field’s center and its periphery, the arena of human psychology merges into the mysteries of religion. Personal consciousness and identity lie at the center of an individual’s field of attention, while around it lie fields of lesser intensity, ranging from the margins of perceptual awareness to the vaguely felt, metaphysical and religious “sense of more” ringing its edges. With James providing a modern map of our psychological and religious worlds, Fontinell charts a path toward the plausibility of immortality belief for the contemporary seeker.

Fontinell’s hope for life after death based on field psychology does not come with proof, but it does allow for confirmation through experience to the extent that we can touch on the margins of our consciousness. His belief is not designed to debunk transcendental claims, but to point out their potential accessibility; moreover, he presents immortality belief as not an escape from this world, but as an enhancement of current life, to the degree that we can penetrate and comprehend our spiritual margins. Fontinell’s philosophy of immortality is, therefore, a marriage of theism and humanism: God reigns powerfully and eternally in a field away from, but not discontinuous with, our consciousness, but the divine is finite and growing, demanding our human instructions.

Fontinell’s rich and clearly written account of immortality belief from the pragmatic perspective is most suited to an audience of serious scholars and philosophers. His essay is useful to students of William James because it highlights his field psychology and explains its relevance to other, more

famous, works. Anyone interested in the relation of pragmatism to religion or in process theology, whether for or against, should also take up this volume because it provides a creative set of images and ideas which are useful to an understanding of how these outlooks work in religious belief. Undergraduates will find this book tough going, but graduate students will appreciate its arguments and its helpful summary of pragmatic religion. By making a brave attempt to understand immortality in light of modern perspectives, Fontinell redeems immortality belief from its traditional associations with death, by regarding it as a question of life.

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Graham Parkes (Ed.), *Heidegger and Asian Thought*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987. 282 pages. \$25.00.

Despite the appearance of a certain compatibility between Heidegger's thought and Eastern philosophy the latter was not an important source for Heidegger. It remained, for the most part, only something which intrigued him but which he never got around to studying in earnest – we have only an aborted attempt at translating the book of Lao Tzu, in collaboration with Paul Shih-yi Hsiao in 1946, as evidence of his ever trying to come to grips with an Oriental philosophical text. Nevertheless, the systematic relationships of Heidegger's thinking to Oriental philosophy are well worth investigating. With this volume we have serious attempts to do so by an interesting collection of scholars, many of whom have already distinguished themselves in the field of Heidegger studies. One may feel that the results are incomplete – so many aspects of both Oriental philosophy and Heidegger's writings remain to be explored from this angle – but the anthology represents an important contribution to the comparative study of Heidegger and the field of comparative philosophy in general.

After an introduction by Parkes, J.L. Mehta, in an essay titled "Heidegger and Vedānta: Reflections on a Questionable Theme," explains why Heidegger "lacked Schopenhauerian warmth for Indian philosophy." In seeking a different way of comprehending Being than that launched by the Greeks, i.e., metaphysics, Heidegger sought not so much an alternative as a more foundational way of thinking. Sensing that the Greeks had barely missed it, he felt that one ought to return to the problems with which they were originally occupied and rethink them rather than investigating other, more exotic points of view that might not address the issue of Being as he conceived it at all. Faithful to Heidegger's concern not to perpetuate our ingrained habits of thinking about Being, Mehta advises restraint in comparing his philosophy to Advaita Vedānta. One should not just look for common philosophemes defined in terms of standard metaphysical and epistemological categories, but rather heed Heidegger's call to think the unthought depth of any tradition.

The editor Graham Parkes' essay, "Thoughts on the Way: *Being and*

Time via Lao-Chuang," is perhaps the best study of the volume. It makes significant headway in interpreting a text of Heidegger and exhibits impressive mastery both of Heidegger's thought and an Asian philosophical tradition. Parkes takes up various concepts of *Being and Time* (readiness-to-hand, anxiety, nothingness, death, nature) which appear at first sight to be handled in quite un-Taoist fashion (e.g., the emphasis on *Vorhandenheit* as the horizon for the being of things in the world would seem to reflect a utilitarian attitude toward man and nature) and shows, with considerable ingenuity, that they conceal themes that come out in Heidegger's later writings, which are recognizably Taoist in spirit.

Other fine essays by Otto Pöggeler, Joan Stambaugh, and Michael Levin have been included, but the volume is especially valuable for its contributions from various Chinese and Japanese scholars, smoothly translated into English. There is a reprinted essay by the important contemporary Japanese philosopher, much influenced by Heidegger, Keiji Nishitani, in which he discusses two lectures of Heidegger's in light of Zen Buddhism. Yasuo Yuasa in "The Encounter of Modern Japanese Philosophy with Heidegger" discusses the influence of Heidegger on the thought of Kiyoshi Miki and Tetsuro Watsuji. His article is, more generally, valuable for its summary of the history of the dominant Kyoto School of Japanese academic philosophy. Along with Paul Shih-yi Hsiao's account of his collaboration with Heidegger on the Lao Tzu translation, there are other original, interpretive studies by Akihiro Takeichi, Kohei Mizogushi, Tetsuaki Kotoh, and Hwa Yol Jung ("Heidegger's Way with Sinitic Thinking"). Of these, the article by Kotoh, "Language and Silence: Self-Inquiry in Heidegger and Zen," stands beside that of Parkes in its skillful use of the comparative method to illumine aspects of Heidegger's thought that might otherwise have been missed.

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Peter Winch, *Trying to Make Sense*. Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1987. 213 pages.

This book consists of eight essays (some of them revised) first published between 1976 and 1982, along with five previously unpublished essays. They cover a variety of topics, but are tied together by the author's acknowledgement that "anything I have had to say about any of these topics is grounded in such understanding as I have of Wittgenstein's philosophy" (p. 1).

Several of the essays are largely about the exposition and interpretation of passages in Wittgenstein's writings. I will say no more about them here.

Two of the essays deal with relativism. They are perhaps the most interesting in the book, in part because Winch has sometimes been severely criticized as being himself a relativist in some pejorative sense. In

these essays, however, he rejects the views most commonly associated with that position. In "Ethical Relativism" he gives the clearest short argument I know of against the suggestion that we should replace the notion of truth *simpliciter* with something like truth-for-me, truth-for-you, etc. (p. 182). And in the same article he argues, persuasively, it seems to me, that the absence of cross-cultural ethical principles, in any of several senses which that phrase might bear, does not entail any duty to accept the legitimacy of the actions or principles of other cultures, to be "tolerant" of them, to refrain from making moral judgments about them, or any such thing (pp. 191–193).

The ethical relativism which Winch does accept seems to consist, in this article anyway, in the realization that two people of good will might understand each other and yet continue to hold moral views which conflict with each other (pp. 188, 189).

In "Language, Belief and Relativism" Winch rejects any suggestion that we should eliminate the distinction between what is the case and what is merely thought to be the case (p. 194). He is not, at any rate, a relativist of *that* sort. But he does think that there are deep difficulties in understanding just what it is that a person in a radically different culture believes. Consequently, it is difficult to determine how much incompatibility there is between our beliefs and those of such a person.

The difficulty, as I understand it, consists principally of the problem of understanding what the "aliens" mean by their utterances. Of course, no human culture is completely alien to others; there is much that we share. But some practices – Azande "witchcraft," for example, and the consultation of oracles – have no live analogues in our culture. There is, therefore, no reason to suppose that English already has a way of expressing what the Azande mean when they describe what they are doing as they "consult the poison oracle." The anthropologist, says Winch, "has to learn not merely how the Azande express what they are doing when they consult the oracle, but what they are doing, *what it is* to consult the poison oracle." (p. 198) The discussion of this problem is suggestive, but not at all easy to follow.

Three of the essays seem to belong to the philosophy of religion – "Meaning and Religious Language," "Darwin, *Genesis*, and Contradiction," and "Who Is My Neighbour?"

In "Meaning ...," Winch is primarily concerned with how a religious use of language is to be identified. There are some interesting suggestions about the identification of a religious practice, and then the remainder of the article deals with the relation of religious language to the overall practice of religion. Much of it, it seems to me, is concerned with claiming that religious language is much different from "ordinary" uses of language, and it should not be understood in the same way.

To take one example, Winch says "I want to argue that there is a difference in grammar between 'asking something of God' and 'asking something of the Yugoslav ambassador'" (p. 119). "The point of prayer," he adds, "can only be elucidated to (sic) considering it in its religious context; ... it cannot be elucidated by starting simply with the function 'making requests to x,' substituting 'God' for 'x,' and then asking what difference is made by the fact that God has different characteristics from

other xs.” As a matter of fact, however, Winch does not argue this thesis, or so at least it seems to me. He merely reiterates it in terms of various special cases and applications, such as the role of belief in the existence of the addressee.

I have the impression that the discussion suffers (curiously, for a Wittgensteinian) from beginning with too simplistic a notion of what is involved in the practice of making requests of the Yugoslav ambassador. Of course, we are likely to think first that the point of making such a request must be to obtain the thing requested. And then it is easy to notice that there is a lot of prayer which does not have that point. But in fact there can be many different “points” in making requests of the Yugoslav ambassador. One can make such a request to annoy the ambassador, or to call attention to one’s desperate plight, or to generate a publicity “happening,” or to strike up an acquaintance with the ambassador, or ... And for many of these “points,” obtaining the thing requested is of little importance, or maybe of none at all.

The term, “prayer,” covers a complex array of actions, attitudes, intentions, etc., and probably there is no single “point” which belongs equally to all of them. Some genuine and proper prayer does indeed seek the thing which is requested. (I know that this is sometimes denied. The people who deny it seem to me to be much more spiritually minded than was Jesus.) Much prayer does not. (Much of it, in fact, is not couched in the grammar of requests at all. But so too is it a fact that much communication with the Yugoslav ambassador does not consist of making requests of him.) If we are to assess the extent to which prayer, or some other religious practice, is analogous to some “ordinary” practice, then we must be sensitive to the complexities *on both sides* of the comparison.

“Darwin ...” suggests that the conflict between the darwinian and the biblical account of origins may not be a logical incompatibility, but rather a “conflict *in oneself*, where what is important is to clarify the nature of one’s commitments” (p. 138). “Who ...” uses Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan as a device for examining certain questions in moral philosophy, such as those raised by Elizabeth Anscombe in her 1958 article, “Modern Moral Philosophy.”

All in all, this is an interesting and provocative collection covering a fairly wide variety of topics.

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