

BOOK NOTICES

Goodman, Lenn. 2014. *Religious pluralism and values in the public sphere*. Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press.

In times during which religiously inspired wars and terror attacks are almost permanently present in global news reporting, books on pluralism and tolerance, on democracy and free speech, are sure to appeal not only to experts, but even to the wider masses. This makes the book of Lenn Goodman into the right item at the right time. While his approach is definitely intellectual, though, he may also appeal to nonspecialists in the philosophy of religion, theology, political philosophy, or sociology, as the book—which compiles earlier and separately written papers and essays—is written in a light and accessible style. In the first essay, the author identifies three classes of attitudes towards religious difference. According to the first, belief can be considered as a personal matter, while the second focuses on the essence of faith, as distinguished from so-called “accidental” qualities. The second attitude is that the former is believed to be common to all religions, while the third would be particular and nonimportant. The third attitude implies the romanticizing and stereotyping of religions. Rejecting all one-sided or reductive approaches, the author underscores the importance of recognizing one’s own finitude, without which neither study nor open discussion will ever have a chance to succeed. The second essay confronts John Rawls’s claim that deliberations on public policy should not be contaminated by religious or metaphysical discourse about fundamental values. Political values should only steer the debate. The author points at the weaknesses in Rawls’s argument, the clearest among which are Rawls’s very own inconsistencies, as he balances between the values of free expression and anti-sectarianism. Goodman has no consideration for Rawls’s secularism and argues that—provided participants in the debate do so being “naked,” this is with full transparency—the government should foster rather than hamper the involvement of different religions in political discussion, instead of abiding with factitious neutrality. In the third essay, the author explores what could be minimal universal moral norms. Here again, the author engages in a debate with Rawls on pluralism, which he criticizes for being based on secularism and moral minimalism; it is better to keep the conversation among cultures and individuals alive, according to him. A set of “minimal” norms is presented and analyzed; the Jewish Decalogue and a prototype of the “maximal” norms that cater to man’s inherent perfectionism are also analyzed. In the fourth essay, entitled “The road to Kazanistan,” Goodman once more makes use of Rawls, addressing his concept of “justice as fairness.” This concept, issuing from a thought experiment about an ideal, imaginary society, is to be based on rational criteria, or on “reflective equilibrium.” Participants in the experiment had identified liberty and equality as the most basic values to support the social framework. Goodman carefully identifies the vagueness and internal contradictions inherent to this position, while admitting, though, the merit of Rawls to have restored normative moral discourse in ethics and in political science.

The author still seizes the opportunity to treat the reader with a well articulated analysis of recent developments in international politics, particularly involving Islam. (W. V.)

Altman, Matthew. 2014. *Kant and applied ethics: The uses and limits of Kant's practical philosophy*. Chichester (UK): Wiley-Blackwell.

It may be amazing, but classic philosophers keep inspiring scholars until today and show themselves fruitful in the development of relevant perspectives on most actual themes. The picture offered by Matthew Altman shows Immanuel Kant in his freshness and flexible adaptability when confronted with contemporary ethical riddles. The book's unfolding follows a triple structure: in the first section, actual environmental and medical ethical issues are analyzed in the light of Kant's philosophy, including experimental research on humans and animals, and their suffering. While Kant does not treat animals as morally considerable, their welfare can be argued for in Kantian terms. In the second section, the author points at contradictions between Kant's views and his moral theory. Health care is good as far as it supports people's capacity to freely set and pursue goals in their lives. However, this freedom can become self-destructive, when autonomy and self-determination are invoked to ask for physician-assisted suicide or to refuse a life-saving treatment. Here it can be argued that there are limits to autonomy, as supported by Kant. In the third and final section, Altman evaluates the applicability of Kant's philosophy to contemporary issues, identifying limitations due to some of Kant's very own concepts. For instance, Kant refuses to involve social and contextual considerations in moral deliberation, leading him to develop narrow-minded and purely formal judgments on issues like mail-order brides. Likewise, his restriction of responsibility to the individual sphere prevents his practical philosophy from becoming fruitful in the context of business ethics and corporate social responsibility. Similar patterns may be perceived in his dealing with abortion and issues of personhood. Therefore, Altman recommends in his conclusion to compensate Kant's weaknesses with Hegelian-style *communitarianism*, which was echoed in the philosophies of contemporary scholars like Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor. Georg Hegel and his followers emphasize that the moral subject is not—as Kant imagined—an enlightened solitary, who deliberates on purely rational grounds what actions to perform, as if he was not already marked by others, by the community of which he is a part of, with its own traditions and history. Actually, no rational deliberation on moral issues would be possible without standards or norms, that are always the product of a specific context. Altman illustrates this on how Kant's philosophy has inevitable limitations. But he also brilliantly demonstrates through the book—which is provided with a rich bibliography—how Kant's moral thoughts are more than sufficient to figure as the main topic in this captivating and inspiring work. (W. V.)

Goldschmidt, Tyron. 2013. *The puzzle of existence: Why is there something rather than nothing?* Routledge Studies in Metaphysics. Abingdon (UK)-New York: Routledge.

“All philosophy starts in wondering” has been said since Plato. There would be no wondering if there was no sense of surprise in the encounter with something unusual. Such would commonly relate to features of the environment that are different from

those experienced in most other occasions. There is a form of surprise, however, that refers to the experience as such, not to its specific content or features. The question why there is something and not simply nothing is, therefore, considered as the most fundamental question and, perhaps, also the most philosophical one, since it underlies most other questions that pertain to some aspect or detail of things. Once the question is used as title or subtitle for a book on philosophy, it betrays the metaphysical orientation of the book. So is the case with the collection of sixteen essays that were edited and introduced by Tyron Goldschmidt under the main title of "The puzzle of existence." The essays are inspired by different disciplines, as the first one brings an introduction to the terminology (including "concrete," "abstract," "contingent," "necessary"...) and to the typical questions of metaphysics (like "Why are there beings that are concrete and contingent and why are they as they are?"), together with some of the typical "answers" (including the classical proof of God's existence as a "necessary" being, and the problematic consequences it entails for reality that may either become entirely "necessary" or be left without any explanation at all). Apart from offering a broad picture of metaphysics and its principal object, the first essay also has a catalyzing function in relation to the rest of the series, in which the major metaphysical themes are further discussed. Such is the case for the contingency/necessity issue or the "cosmological argument." Asserting the existence of a necessary being may comply with the requirements of the principle of sufficient reason (PSR), which keeps the question for an ultimate explanation relevant. Other approaches include the argument from composition and plurality, and the classical antipode of the cosmological argument, which is the "ontological" one. The editor rightly evokes the reluctance of many scholars to take the argument seriously, while they remain unable, though, to articulate why or on what point it goes in the wrong. As a result of the critique, the argument has been reformulated to match various critical suggestions. Consecutive contributions are taking a very different turn, shifting from facts-based to values-based orientation. The explanation of the contingent world would, then, occur in terms of purpose and goodness, and would still imply a transcendent being, but retain a cloud of mystery over the world's existence. A quite different approach consists in the appeal to metaphysics of modality, to the concept of "possible worlds," allowing the metaphysician to forego the position of a necessary being, but not that of contingent beings. Some modal theories, however, do affirm the possibility of there not being any concrete beings, or neither concrete nor abstract, or only abstract beings, while some others leave the necessity/possibility perspective and shift to the category of "probability" instead. Another "remedy" that was proposed by a contributor consists in letting modern science speak out on the matter. While science may explain concrete beings as the result of a process leading from extreme simplicity to ever growing complexity, or as the necessary result of "natural laws," it leaves a lot of fundamental questions simply unexplained, forcing scholars somewhat to...go back to "good old" metaphysics. The range of essays edited by Goldschmidt offers a diverse and subtle, though still accessible panorama of the metaphysical solutions to the problem of the world's existence. While this book may be part of a "possible world," being concrete and contingent, it probably will get its place on the bookshelves of many teachers and students in philosophy, and it will also prove to fit well in the class or seminar room with medium-to advance-level students. (W. V.)