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FROM THE EDITORS, TZIPORAH KASACHKOFF & EUGENE KELLY

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BOOK REVIEWS

Bryan W. Van Norden, trans.: *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* and
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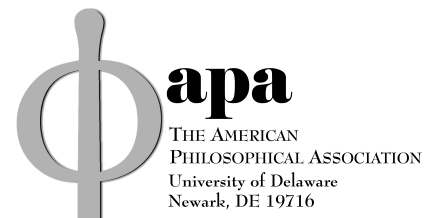
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Kevin J. Harrelson: *The Ontological Argument from Descartes to Hegel*

REVIEWED BY RUSSELL MARCUS

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readers would not be confused by this translation. Instead, if we alternatively take “zei” to mean “do harm to” and substitute it for “steal from” in the lines, the resulting sentences will surely make better sense.⁴

Another problematic translation is that of the sentence “shan yu ren tong, she ji cong ren,” which was translated as “he was good at unifying himself with others. He put himself aside and joined with others” (p. 48). The subject of the passage is indeed on showing the admirable attitudes and manners by which virtuous and great people learn goodness from others. But Van Norden’s translation here seems to have little to do with that, and this lack may well cause confusion to the reader. A more plausible reading is that “he (the Great Shun) regarded himself no different from others on (pursuing) good, and abandoned his own (evils) and followed others (on good).” The English words in the parentheses were possibly omitted in the original text. In 2A9.2, it would be better to translate the term “xian” as “talents,” rather than “what is worthy” literally. Thus, “In taking office, he did not conceal his talents” is more readable than “In taking office, he did not conceal what is worthy” (p. 49).

In Van Norden’s translation “and Qi and Chu were to attack it” in 3B5.1 (p. 80), the word “e” (hate) is missing. The correct translation would be “and Qi and Chu hated (its practice of benevolent government) and were to attack it.” In the next passage, it is also questionable to translate “lao ruo kui shi” as “the young and weak offered the sacrificial food” (p. 80). It is not that the young and weak offered the sacrificial food, but that they offered food to the people of Bo who were sent to farm for Ge by King Tang. Indeed, the two expressions were put together and formed a complete sentence in the original text, which justifies why we read the expression this way.

Van Norden’s second book, as its title suggests, contains those passages from the *Mengzi* that are taken to be the most important and essential ideas of Mengzi. By removing what he considered to be philosophically insignificant passages, this concise book offers the reader a chance of comprehending the core of Mengzi’s philosophy more quickly. The selections, for the most part, are accurate in terms of their capturing what is essential in Mengzi’s philosophy, but with several exceptions. One is that the translator selects 7A10 and abandons 7A21. Comparing the two, however, I do not see any reason why 7A21 is considered so less significant than 7A10 as to be not included. Actually, 7A21 contains important remarks on the relationships between *xing* (nature), *xin* (heart), and virtues, and should have been included in the selective translation. By the same token, 7B12, which addresses the practical importance of morality to the functioning of a state and society, should be no less important than 7B2 in Mengzi’s philosophy. But 7B12 is not selected either.

In the second volume, the translation has been separated from the commentary. This change in format from the first book should be welcomed. The two formats together offer alternative ways of approaching Mengzi from which readers can select. If a person likes to read the original text with the belief that reading commentaries would interfere and bias her potentially faithful understanding of it, she may choose Van Norden’s second book. The spatial separation of the text from the commentaries gives her the opportunity to focus on the text alone. On the other hand, the first book may be preferred by those who find it convenient to make a quick reference to the helpful commentaries on the passages they are reading.

In conclusion, while the two books by Van Norden have several minor problems of translation and commentary,⁵ they are truly successful and admirable. The works vividly show his meticulous research on Mengzi’s philosophy. His insightful

commentaries and notes, and the comprehensive introduction, shed light on the Mengzi’s canon and are pedagogically invaluable to college students as well as the general reader who wants to study Mengzi’s philosophy. Equally significantly, these two serious scholarly works represent important contributions made by him to the project of carrying the Mengzi’s heritage into the western world.

Endnotes

1. Cordial thanks go to Dr. Tziporah Kasachkoff for her invitation to write this review. I appreciate the insightful comments of Dr. Eugene Kelly on an earlier version of the review, which identified many errors and helped to improve it significantly.
2. That justifies why many philosophy programs require their graduate students to comprehend at least one foreign language, so that they may read the original texts in the language in which they were originally written.
3. While Van Norden claims explicitly that his translation is often functional rather than literal in the preface, I found literal translations, though not necessarily nonfunctional ones, as I will show in what follows.
4. More on this. Mengzi always believes that benevolent governing by means of virtue is the correct and efficient way of keeping a state in order and prosperity, which would in turn strengthen one’s kingship. By saying that a king is incapable of being virtuous, the subordinates actually deny the possibility and legitimacy of following a benevolent governing policy by the king, and thus in turn do harm to the latter. That is also why Mengzi tries to convince King Qi of his capabilities of being virtuous (1A7).
5. I pointed out these problems in this review for the purpose of alerting Prof. Van Norden, who might give a second thought to them if he publishes a second edition of the books.

The Ontological Argument from Descartes to Hegel

Kevin J. Harrelson (Amherst NY: Humanity Books, 2009), 255 pages, \$39.98.

Reviewed by Russell Marcus
Hamilton College

The standard undergraduate modern philosophy survey course is an impossible monstrosity. The very idea of paying appropriate philosophical attention, in a mere fourteen weeks, to two extraordinarily fecund centuries of work on topics such as the relation of our minds to our bodies, the methods of science, the nature of space and time, free will and determinism, personal identity, justifications for civil society, and arguments for the existence of God is absurd. The Great-Figures solution to this absurdity limits one’s syllabus to a few philosophers, say, Descartes, Hume, and Kant. The Great-Topics alternative covers a wider range of writers on a few themes such as substance, personal identity, and God. In addition to its undeniable utility as a research tool, Kevin J. Harrelson’s new study, *The Ontological Argument from Descartes to Hegel*, could be a good addition to a Great-Topics course. The book covers a surprisingly wide range of modern writers, and could also be a useful text for an advanced course that focuses exclusively on the ontological argument.

Harrelson states serious critical goals for the book.

I argue that the strategy for proving a priori the existence of God that remains in place during [the] period from Descartes’ initial argument in the

Discourse on Method (1637) to Hegel's final lectures in Berlin (1831), is both internally consistent and free of any easily identifiable error. More importantly, I try to show that the most common objections to the modern ontological proof...fail to identify any conclusive and universal fallacy. (18)

Harrelson divides the history of the ontological argument into three eras: pre-modern, including Anselm, Gaunilo, and Aquinas; modern, the focus of his volume; and post-Hegelian, which Harrelson mainly ignores. This division is a useful artifice, allowing Harrelson to focus on the era usually covered in Modern Philosophy courses. The book covers the standard presentations of the ontological argument (of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel), as well as expositions of it which are less well known (including those of More, Clarke, Wolff, Baumgarten, and Crusius). Harrelson's discussion of Huet's criticisms of Malebranche is amusing and useful, and his exposition of Mendelssohn's post-Kantian work on the argument is enlightening. His omission—with the exception of a few passing references—of Hume is curious. Despite the fact that Hume's criticisms of arguments for the existence of God generally focus on causal arguments (as in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*) the importance of Hume's principle that the truth-value of existence claims can never be discovered a priori deserves greater emphasis, especially in the discussion of Kant's work.

The inclusion of so many minor figures hinders Harrelson's narrative. In places, the book reads not as a monograph that traces the most important advances in the ontological argument but more like a dissertation, in which every mention of the argument by any minor figure is evaluated with every criticism taken to be worth remarking on. Still, Harrelson takes a firm critical stance toward the arguments.

Harrelson also impressively connects earlier work with later discussions of the argument. He consistently credits Aquinas for criticisms that might appear, to the student, as original with later writers. He connects Leibniz's work with that of Duns Scotus and Mersenne, and he cites Arnauld's anticipation of some of Kant's comments.

I would wager that a high proportion of philosophers, when prompted for the major flaw in the ontological argument, would point to Kant's claim that existence is not a predicate. Harrelson gives Gassendi proper credit for that point, and rightly notes that this point, standing alone, begs the question of whether God's existence is a single exception to the general rule that existence does not belong to the nature of an entity. Harrelson correctly insists that the full force and implication of the ontological argument cannot be understood when isolated from the specific contexts in which it appears, especially in the works of Malebranche, Spinoza, and Kant. Furthermore, Harrelson nicely shows that Kant's criticisms of the argument were aimed at versions of the argument found in the work of Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten, and he argues, plausibly, that Kant was unfamiliar with the seventeenth-century expositions of the argument.

Dangers can arise from analyzing a short, if subtle, argument too finely. Harrelson divides Descartes's version of the ontological argument into what he deems its most thorough version, the syllogism from the First Replies, and what he calls the perfection argument. The First-Replies syllogism contains the premises that what we clearly and distinctly perceive as belonging to an object really does belong to that object, and that we clearly and distinctly perceive God's existence as belonging to his nature. The perfection argument alleges just that existence is a perfection. Harrelson follows Harry Wolfson in calling the First-Replies syllogism the primary Cartesian argument.

Aquinas had argued that linking the existence of a thing with its essence in one's thought need not entail that the thing exists independently of thought. The First-Replies syllogism alone does, as Harrelson says, serve to block this important Thomistic objection. Yet its minor premise remains completely unjustified without the addition of the perfection argument. Harrelson's division allows him to trace different portions of the argument through the subsequent two centuries, but only at the cost of losing track of the connections between them. The First-Replies syllogism is not plausible without at least the implicit assumption of the perfection argument. The perfection argument lacks any conclusion about the existence of God without the implicit assumption of the First-Replies syllogism, or something like it. Separating the two arguments is useful for tracing the history of the argument, but unfair for evaluating its success. Harrelson's fine distinction, while likely to be useful to historians of philosophy, will elude many undergraduates, creating more confusion than it merits, pedagogically.

Harrelson's exposition of Descartes's version of the argument might have benefitted from attention to the differences between Descartes's own goals for his analytic exposition, in the *Meditations*, and his synthetic exposition, in the Second Replies. I wonder if the difference between Descartes's presentation of the argument in the Fifth Meditation and his First-Replies syllogism can be explained more effectively by considering Descartes's distinctions between proof, demonstration, and explanation (on which see his Letter to Morin, 13 July 1638, AT II.197-8). Indeed, Harrelson could be a bit more sensitive to the difference between an argument and a proof; he sometimes calls the argument in question the "ontological proof."

In contrast, Harrelson neatly distinguishes versions of the argument which rely on intuitive awareness of God's existence from those which are intended as demonstrations or proofs. The book covers the role of Descartes's mathematical analogy (that existence belongs to God's essence the way that the sum of the angles of a triangle belong to the triangle), the question whether possible existence is attributable to a perfect being, and the worry that there is a gap in the argument between conclusions of the existence of a perfect being and that of a necessarily existent being. His discussion of different versions of the argument, such as those of Malebranche and Hegel, which minimize analogies from human existence to the existence of God and which conclude that being is, rather than that God exists, is helpful. These versions support Kant's "ontological argument" label against those who, finding the term misleading, prefer to call the argument the "a priori" argument, or the Cartesian argument. Harrelson also distinguishes versions of the argument aimed at combating atheism from those versions which would be compelling only to those who already believe in God's existence. I would have preferred less discussion of the latter, intuitive versions, which strike me as insufficiently philosophical.

Descartes's work provides a unifying theme for Harrelson's book. Still, the text would have benefitted from a concluding chapter, looking forward toward the post-Hegelian and contemporary proponents of the argument, especially since Harrelson calls the argument unassailable. Indeed, the lack of a unifying conclusion makes it difficult not to feel that Harrelson has failed to reach his stated goals, even though he has surveyed and criticized an admirable range of arguments and counter-arguments.

I enjoyed reading the book and learned from it, but I do not recommend it for classes in which instructors rely mainly on primary sources. The book does not include enough of the original source material for students to be able to grasp the critical commentary without also consulting the primary texts.

Also, while some chapters in the book stand on their own better than do others, most chapters refer indispensably to earlier discussions, so that students cannot profit from reading them in isolation of the discussions in earlier chapters to which they refer.

Nevertheless, I would recommend the book enthusiastically to students searching for paper topics. It could be valuable for a Great-Topics version of the standard course in modern philosophy, or for more advanced undergraduate and graduate classes covering seventeenth- or eighteenth-century metaphysics. Harrelson's study is accessible and nearly comprehensive over its target era. He generally avoids jargon. He helpfully names some of the major arguments, and provides a useful glossary for unfamiliar terms. Each chapter has many useful endnotes, and there is an excellent bibliography dividing the primary texts from the more recent secondary literature. The book contains a fine index.

I hope that publishers will encourage the production of similar manuscripts covering other salient topics in the modern era. A bookshelf full of such studies would be a valuable resource for the graduate student and beginning researcher. That Harrelson's text will be useful to undergraduates is an added bonus.

One small, final caveat: Harrelson's over-use of quotation marks is distracting, and sometimes misleading. For example, Harrelson writes:

Descartes justifies this "predication rule" by appeal to the more general rule that "what is distinctly and clearly perceived is thereby true." (46)

The first set of quotation marks is otiose. While it is common to use quotation marks to indicate idiosyncratic usage, Harrelson uses them in almost every paragraph of the book, often repeatedly even within a single sentence. The words contained in the second set are a paraphrase, not a quote, of the cited section. The sentence would be better rendered without any quotation marks at all. Such infelicities are especially unfortunate since the ontological argument requires careful distinctions between uses and mentions, between concepts and objects, and between thoughts and concepts. I would not recommend the text to an undergraduate without first discussing proper usage.¹

Endnotes

1. Thanks to Shoshana Brassfield for helpful comments.

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Baier, Annette C. *The Cautious Jealous Virtue: Hume on Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Cohen, Jonathan R. *Science, Culture and Free Spirits. A Study of Nietzsche's Human, All Too Human* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2010).

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Warner, Michael, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, eds. *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

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