

NIKK EFFINGHAM

University of Birmingham

Michael Almeida, *The Metaphysics of Perfect Beings*, Routledge, 2008

Almeida's book covers a wide range of issues arising from the existence of a perfect being. The selection of topics Almeida examines are all likely to be of interest to analytic philosophers of religion with a technical bent, so the topics collectively form a cohesive whole. There are eight chapters in all, each covering a different topic. Chapter one starts with 'arguments from improbability' (in particular, Rowe's version), which Almeida argues is not sound. Chapter two discusses issues in choice theory: if a perfectly rational perfect being always has to actualise the best world there is an obvious problem if every world is such that there is some better world than it; Almeida argues that we should give up on the idea that perfect beings must always select the better option. Chapter three examines van Inwagen's argument that there is no problem of evil because there is no minimum level of evil that is sufficient for God's plan; conscripting in issues in vagueness (specifically supervaluationism) Almeida argues that van Inwagen doesn't rule out there being levels of evil that are *definitely* unnecessary for divine purposes (so there is no level of minimum evil that is definitely necessary, but nonetheless there are some levels of evil that are definitely *unnecessary*). Chapter four examines Warren Quinn's 'puzzle of the self-torturer' (Almeida says it is 'much neglected' and I'm inclined to agree); Almeida provides, amongst other things, a close discussion of Arntzenius and McCarthy's reply, and responds to their worries. Chapter five examines the logic of imperfection (dealing with Anselmian concerns). Chapter six examines divine command theory (specifically, the version whereby the properties, but not the concepts, of being morally obliged and being commanded by God, are identical). Chapter seven and eight I discuss in more detail below. Certainly the breadth of topics considered is broad, and I'm sure any contemporary analytic philosopher will find much of interest in the discussion.

Regarding the book in general, two characterisations sum it up: unforgiving and dense; painstaking and detailed. Neither is a criticism. Throughout Almeida deploys the apparatus of logic and mathematics to best elucidate, discuss, and solve the various problems he puts under the microscope. Those uncomfortable with discussions of supervaluationism, different types of infinity, or routinely expressing portions of the

discussion as sequents of logic, will find themselves struggling with this book; hence, it is unforgiving and dense. However, for those more comfortable with such machinery, exactly those features mean Almeida provides a thorough, painstaking, and detailed examination of the issues at a level of precision that can easily be appreciated by those with an affection for such modes of expression. So whether this book will be readable by you will depend upon your level of comfort with technicalities. If you're unsure where you stand, then consider the following snippet:

There is no amount of evil k_n , ($k \sqsupset k_n \sqsupset 0$) in S such that for every increment i ($i > 0$) it is superdefinite that k_n is unnecessary for divine purposes and superdefinite that k_{n-1} is not necessary for divine purposes. (p. 73)

Where:

[...] it is *superdefinite* that k_n is unnecessary for divine purposes just in case the proposition is definite at every higher order of vagueness. If it is not superdefinite that k_n is unnecessary for divine purposes, then for some precisification at some higher order of vagueness, k_n is not unnecessary divine purposes. (p. 72)

If that daunts you, or you find it tricky to parse, this book is not for you; alternatively, if that level of precision suits your sensibilities, this book will please you no end and you'll benefit from, e.g., Almeida's technical discussions of comparing infinitely valuable worlds (pp. 155-58) or infinite options and choice theory (pp. 53-55) *inter alia*.

I'll end with a closer look at the final two chapters: Ted Sider's eschatological argument (chapter 7) and Almeida's combining of modal realism and God to resolve the problem of our being in a less than perfect world (chapter 8; Almeida also discusses hyperspace and multiverse theories used to the same end – he favours introducing modal realism above the latter two).

Ted Sider argues that if the options concerning our afterlives are discrete (e.g. heaven and hell) God has a problem for there will be two agents such that they differ only slightly when it comes to their moral natures, but one goes to heaven and one to hell. (Imagine, as Sider does, that their moral crimes solely depend upon the number of obscenities uttered: the man who utters n blasphemies is saved, the man who utters $n+1$ is damned.) This seems to rally against a straightforward principle of justice: that two morally similar people aren't treated radically differently.

Almeida argues that there can be cases where substantially similar moral agents are treated radically differently for they might differ with regards to whether they are redeemable or irredeemable. But we can redux the Sider-style argument and imagine a string of agents such that some are redeemable and others are irredeemable and each only differs from the last in a subtly different way. Almeida considers this and replies thus: being redeemable can be vague and God will save everyone who isn't *definitely* irredeemable – only the definitely irredeemable go to Hell. (Rinse and repeat for higher order vagueness: if someone is borderline definitely irredeemable they don't go to hell; if someone is borderline borderline definitely irredeemable they don't go to hell, etc.) However, what is it to be 'borderline redeemable'? For some X, understanding what it would be to be a borderline case of X can be problematic e.g. with existence. Whilst I easily understand what it is to be borderline bald or borderline fat, borderline existing is harder to understand. Similarly, I have a hard time understanding what it is to be borderline redeemable. We certainly shouldn't understand it as being someone who is *close* to being irredeemable, or someone that we mere mortals might *think* is irredeemable, for the vagueness here is not of that sort; if it transpires, upon being taken to Heaven for eternity, that they are eventually redeemed then they – in being redeemed – were *definitely* not irredeemable all along! So instead we should be imagining that the borderline irredeemable go to Heaven and it is *never* clear whether they have been redeemed or failed to be redeemed. But now whilst God might not send anyone to Hell who shouldn't be there he does send to Heaven some who should not for now entrance to Heaven no longer requires definitely accepting God or definitely being redeemed. And that seems wrong. Take John 3:3 where it appears to be made clear that only those who are redeemed go to Heaven; given this theory we must give ground on that principle (for otherwise everyone in Heaven is redeemed and, contrary to the assumption, Heaven contains no borderline irredeemable people). So whilst one problem is solved, another – ensuring that only the redeemed go to Heaven – is introduced. Whilst not everyone may care that Heaven isn't entirely filled with, as it were, the 'right sort of people' (indeed, Almeida may not care for these scriptural worries) it seems a pressing problem. The rejoinder, of saying that being redeemable has a sharp cut off point, is denied by Almeida (as he endorses his 'Vague Depravity Thesis') – and rightly so! It is difficult to imagine a moral psychology wherein such a sharp cut off point would arise and, if there

were, it looks like a Sider-style opponent would be correct to argue that whatever minor psychological difference there is that makes one agent irredeemable and the other redeemable probably isn't the sort of feature that should lead to someone being punished for eternity.

Almeida's final chapter discusses using genuine modal realism (the thesis that possible worlds exist and are to be identified with spatiotemporally disconnected spacetimes) as a solution to the problem of there being a less-than-perfect world. Given genuine modal realism (GMR) there's no wonder that there exist people who find themselves in less than optimum circumstances for it is necessary that there are spacetimes containing such people. The main problem Almeida discusses is that the perfect being at that world must bring about that world and thereby bring about certain evils. He argues that the perfect being ends up being in the situation of a lifeguard who can save one of two drowning children: of each child it is true that she could make the drowning child's life better by saving them, but of the pair it is not true that they can both be saved. Similarly, then, Almeida thinks God is in the same situation: it is true of each individual that (unrestrictedly) exists, God could have made that individual's life better, but God cannot make *every* life better since, by logical necessity, there exist people who suffer horrendous evils. Just as the lifeguard leaves some to drown, God leaves some to horrendous evils. This is an interesting contribution to the material concerning combining genuine modal realism and theism.

However, whilst Almeida goes on to endorse modal realism, he is hesitant for two reasons: (i) the theory is ontologically extravagant (as it includes an infinite number of worlds on a par with the actual world); (ii) it cannot account for the possibility of there being disconnected spacetimes. But given the introduction of theism, such worries seem misplaced. Regarding (i), the standard line is that genuine modal realism is qualitatively ontological parsimonious, so Almeida must mean 'ontological extravagance' to be either that the theory is quantitatively extravagant or, in positing an infinite number of disconnected spacetimes of the given sort, simply absurd (a.k.a. the 'incredulous stare'). The former isn't really a problem if we think there's a commitment to possible worlds in the first place – be they abstract, or be they concrete, there will be an infinite number of them. The latter isn't really a problem because I take it the source of incredulity concerning GMR is that the explanation for why the spacetimes exist (i.e. that they're logically necessary) is so otiose or esoteric that it's not suitable to motivate making such a claim – only,

say, quantum physics (or some other physical theory) should make us think there are such spacetimes, not metaphysical armchair reasoning. But once we introduce God, this worry should fade away. In the same way that we might figure out (using armchair reasoning alone) that God would create three Divine Persons or free willed creatures to roam the Earth, if we believe God would have good reason to create an infinite number of spacetimes (e.g. because it makes for a parsimonious ontology) there should no longer be any incredulity as to what those worlds are doing there. Regarding (ii) we can tweak GMR: retain the ontology (so there is an infinite number of disconnected spacetimes) but alter the ideology, such that a disconnected spacetime needn't be a possible world and, instead, whatever object God cares to decree as being a possible world is a possible world. God generally decrees that any given spacetime is a possible world, but also decrees in some cases that the fusion of two spacetimes is a possible world. We have recovered the possibility of island universes. Indeed, a perfect being can now guarantee the gamut of possible worlds without bringing into existence a horrendous evil. Imagine God creates a world where someone apparently suffers unnecessarily, but is then rewarded. In the same way we can ask what is true at a certain region of space or at a particular disconnected spacetime, we can ask what is true at the earlier temporal portion of that world *considered in isolation*; considered in isolation, it's true at that portion that the person suffers unnecessarily (as we're ignoring the later portion where they are rewarded). If God further decrees that the earlier part of the world is a possible world (in addition to the whole) then it's possible that a person suffer a horrendous evil without God having to create a person who suffers it – that possibility is instead represented merely by the earlier temporal portion. In short: Almeida can, having introduced a perfect being into his ontology, monopolise on this fact to produce an even leaner theory.

All in all the book, will be eminently suitable – and interesting to – the technically adept reader.