

**Andrei A. Buckareff and Yujin Nagasawa, eds.**  
***Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the***  
***Metaphysics of the Divine.* Oxford, Oxford University**  
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With characteristic flair, John Thatamanil once said that if theologians are like chickens in the coop of a particular religion, then philosophers are free-range. If so, the contributors to this volume are by editorial choice wild: they have left not only the pens of particular religions but also that of classical theism which has regulated philosophical thought about God for millennia; in some cases, they have stepped out of the farm of theism (personal ultimacy) into the realm of non-theistic ultimacy and beyond. The result of their collective explorations are nine alternative ways to think about God or ultimacy—three pantheistic (roughly, the view that God and the world are identical, often called ‘the One’), two panentheistic (roughly, the view that though the world is God, God is more than the world), and four that resist familiar categorization—as well as six critical reflections on these alternatives. The volume’s significance is captured well in the words on its back cover that it is “the first contemporary edited collection featuring the work of analytic philosophers of religion covering such a wide range of alternative concepts of God,” provided an “only” is inserted before “analytic”: other edited volumes that present alternatives to classical theism, such as Hartshorne & Reese (1953), Neville (2001), or Diller & Kasher (2013), hail from multiple disciplinary perspectives.<sup>1</sup> It is a milestone that analytic philosophy of religion is now ready to approach this topic in a sustained collective treatment, and by top scholars in the field at that.

One reason to read this book, then, is that it is groundbreaking. A deeper reason is that the volume accomplishes two important goals the editors set for it in their introduction—(a) to “extend the range” of metaphysical options about the divine beyond classical theism (2, 17), vital to those of us convinced that a classical God cannot exist and on a hunt for a God worth the name that can, and (b) to “open the door” to discussion of criteria of adequacy for concepts of God which aim to sort concepts that are genuinely of God from those that aren’t (6). Here I will sketch the nine notions that realize (a), adding as we go some comparisons and commentary especially about the problem of evil and the problem of unity (how can the many be

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, eds. *Philosophers Speak of God* (1953; repr., New York: Humanity Books, 2000). Robert Cummings Neville, ed. *Ultimate Realities: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher, eds. *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013).

One?). I will close by briefly discussing some criteria of adequacy that surface in the volume to show how it accomplishes (b).

The volume begins with two pantheisms, one by Peter Forrest, the other by Karl Pfeifer, both of which assume a non-reductive physicalism: their purely physical ontologies have elements that serve as “truthmakers for various non-ontological levels of description and explanation, some of which may be psychological or theistic” (48). Forrest employs a “properly anthropocentric” non-reductive physicalism: just as our brain processes correlate with our mental states, so also the universe’s physical processes correlate with (surprise!) universal mental states. Though we can’t know much about these mental states—presumably, the difficulty of “what’s it like to be a bat” is multiplied many-fold for “what’s it like to be the Universe”—we know at least that they include awareness of a single-body image (the universe) which in turn entails a unity of consciousness and thus a self. This self has agency: it increases the determinacy of the universe, which began in a state of massive indeterminacy. Given the scale of this conscious agent and perhaps the nascent traditional divine attributes it implies,<sup>2</sup> Forrest calls it ‘God’. Forrest’s “personal pantheism” has the most satisfying answer I have seen to the problem of unity: it’s not that the many are maya or modes but rather they constitute a network that accounts for the One’s consciousness, which means they are necessary for the One *to be one*. The view’s main drawback, though, is its implausibility: given how intricate our own neural networks are, how they need to follow patterns that play functional roles in order to produce awareness, and how easily upset the whole works is, it seems a real longshot that *any* sort of awareness would supervene on the Universe at all, even a low-level one for a few seconds, much less a unified, worship-worthy-level one enduring age after age.<sup>3</sup> There is also no reply here to the severe problem of evil pantheists encounter: God is not just permitting evil done by others but doing and being evil Godself. How can that be?

While Forrest thinks of ‘God’ as a count noun (such as ‘porcupine’) that refers to an awesome Universe, Pfeifer in “Pantheism as Panpsychism” suggests that ‘God’ is a mass term (such as ‘butter’) that refers to a kind of stuff pervading the universe (42-3). The kind of stuff is, first, very *fundamental*, like a field, so that unlike a pat of butter that is uniform throughout, the Universe can be diverse throughout by way of “field distortions” (44), and second, *intentional*. Pfeifer then argues that in light of the abundant similarities between intentional states and physical dispositional states,

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<sup>2</sup> Though none of this is explicit, Forrest has the resources to argue for readings of omnipresence and eternity since this Self is everywhere and everywhen in the Universe, omnipotence since it has all the power in the Universe, omniscience since it has knowledge of the entire Universe by bio-feedback. These categories of being will be non-modalized if the Universe is just the actual world and modalized if the Universe contains all possible worlds as on modal realism. See Leftow’s chapter “Naturalistic Pantheism,” (72). Nagasawa makes a similar modalized version argument explicit in his chapter.

<sup>3</sup> “Age after age” in case Forrest does not take God to be eternal; he takes the Universe to be massively indeterminate at the start, at which point though it may be numerically God it might not be qualitatively God since it might lack consciousness altogether. So the Universe probably would gradually become qualitatively God on this picture, when it reached a worship-worthy level of consciousness.

they have the same extension,<sup>4</sup> and because physical dispositional states are everywhere, intentional states are everywhere too—*voilà*, panpsychism (a.k.a. “panintentionalism”), and if intentionality is indeed God, *voilà*, pantheism. Pfeifer adds that this “intentional field” (my gloss) contains lower- and higher-grade intentional states where the higher-grades are built out of the lower-grades, a fact which opens up the Forrestian possibility that the Universe *as a whole* might be carrying super-high-grade intentional states built from the mix within it. So in the end Pfeifer uses the term ‘God’ both as a mass term for the intentionality pervading the universe and as a count term for this possible One. Given their harmonies, Pfeifer’s view has similar pros and cons to Forrest’s,<sup>5</sup> though he is more live to the implausibility issue: “the centralized organization” of intentional states might be tantamount just to the consciousness of an animal, or a comatose or schizoid human, etc., none of which counts as God (49, see footnote).

In contrast to Forrest and Pfeifer whose pantheisms are grounded in the physical, John Leslie’s pantheism is grounded in the mental as well as in the abstract ethical requirement that the good exist. Because he takes this ethical requirement to have “creative power” (why?),<sup>6</sup> and because he takes the greatest good to be infinite minds thinking infinite thoughts, he concludes that infinite minds thinking infinite thoughts exist. Interestingly, our universe is just one complicated thought that a particular infinite mind finds worthy of contemplation, and its coming to be is this mind’s act of contemplating it (58-60)—an idea that gets the slow phenomenology of existence right. How does God map onto this idealist metaphysics? Leslie’s idealist-pantheist answer: God is “the whole shebang” (61)—God just is all these infinite minds thinking these good, infinite thoughts and thereby realizing them, which makes God identical to all there is. Probably the biggest bar to embracing Leslie’s theology is the idealist metaphysics it assumes, a non-starter for many of us. However, in Leslie’s defense, ever since Nick Bostrum argued there was a significant chance that our universe is digital simulation all the way down,<sup>7</sup> I have taken idealism more seriously. In Bostrum’s idiom, is Leslie talking about infinite virtual CPUs running infinite apps?

Charles Taliaferro also makes idealism more plausible by arguing for John Foster’s “theistic idealism”: (i) mental experiences are more lucid and thus more certain to us than physical ones (149-57), (ii) the phenomenology of our mental experiences involves a subject having them (a *cogito ergo sum*, 160); therefore (iii) claims about the physical “logically depend on” claims about subjects’ mental experiences and (enter theism) God’s experiences too, to ground claims about things that can’t appear to humans. Though it is only quickly sketched here, Foster’s view

<sup>4</sup> Both are directed to x, thus can be unfulfilled when not x and fulfilled when x, etc. See 44-6.

<sup>5</sup> Pfeifer’s organic account of unity: the many are necessary for intentionality to arise in the One.

<sup>6</sup> For all Leslie’s welcome replies to forms of this question, I am still stuck here: how can a thing’s final cause explain its existence—how can the fact that x is good make x exist? A final cause *per se* seems neither necessary nor sufficient for existence: things exist without reaching their *telos* (e.g., we can be slovenly and merely subsist), so *teloi* don’t seem *necessary* for existence; conversely, worthy *teloi* don’t get realized (e.g., world peace), so *teloi* don’t seem *sufficient* for existence either.

<sup>7</sup> Nick Bostrum, “Are You Living In a Computer Simulation?” *Philosophical Quarterly* 53:211 (2003): 243-55.

sounds panentheistic: because God ordains that our mental experiences “form a world for us” (160) and builds them out of God’s own thoughts, our world is God but God is more than our world.

All this talk of idealism primes us to read Yujin Nagasawa’s piece on modal panentheism, which (i) takes God to be the totality of possible worlds and simultaneously (ii) assumes modal realism—effectively taking logical space to be real and calling it ‘God’. Nagasawa’s view is interestingly close to Leslie’s: his “possible worlds” are like Leslie’s “infinite thoughts” of infinite minds, his modal realism like Leslie’s infinite thoughts made real by acts of contemplation, and his “totality” of worlds like Leslie’s “whole shebang”.<sup>8</sup> Nagasawa is interested in modal panentheism because of its surprising theological advantages, including that once we take God’s greatness to consist not in having maximally *positive* properties but maximally *encompassing* ones (92), God seems to get a bevy of traditional properties including unsurpassability (since nothing can surpass all possible reality), omnipotence (encompasses all possible power), and omniscience (all possible knowledge) among others. But modal panentheism has trouble with both the problems of unity and evil. In contrast to Forrest and Pfeifer’s views where God’s unity is organic, in Leslie’s and Nagasawa’s views it is a mere abstraction or concatenation: the set of all the infinite minds and their thoughts, the totality of all possible worlds. Such an abstraction seems metaphysically slight. It is also not a person, which makes the supposed “traditionality” of God’s properties above more apparent than real: God encompasses all power but cannot do anything, encompasses all knowledge but cannot know, etc. To his credit, Nagasawa also stares down how strong the problem of evil is on modal panentheism: because God is all that is possible and evils are possible, evils must be part of God—and not only all actual evils but also all possible evils, including the most heinous (101-2). Nagasawa concludes that moral panentheism thus “has disturbing moral implications” (102) and seems to abandon it for this reason (103).

Like Nagasawa, John Bishop & Ken Perszyk are motivated by the problem of evil to abandon a concept of God, but in their case it is an omniGod: a supernatural, personal *efficient* cause of the universe who can be blamed for intending the evil in the world. As an alternative, they develop a “euteleological conception of divinity” which is a natural, impersonal *final* cause of the universe, specifically: (i) perfectly loving relationship, the supreme good (121); (ii) “reality at its most profound...directed to reach Love” (121), and (iii) by itself the reason why the Universe exists (120). What kind of reality, metaphysically, can serve all three functions? Inspired by Pfeifer, we might take the euteleological “profound reality” to be a metaphysically fundamental field in which all things subsist, but instead of

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<sup>8</sup> The difference is that Nagasawa drops the infinite minds in Leslie’s view and thus stays open about what makes the worlds real and whether their reality is cashed out idealistically, materially, or in some other way. In light of their abundant formal similarities, one might ask why Nagasawa’s view is a panentheism while Leslie’s is a pantheism. The answer turns on a technical difference: Nagasawa identifies the universe with just our actual world (‘our’ is crucial here since ‘actual’ and ‘possible’ are indexicals on modal realism), so God entails the universe but the universe does not entail God; Leslie identifies the universe with all that there is, so the entailments between God and the universe run both ways. If Nagasawa took the universe to be all that there is, his would be a pantheism too, as he indicates on (93-4).

getting pulled toward massive objects as in gravitational fields, or toward higher states of intentionality as in Pfeifer's, things are "directed to reach" Love for Bishop and Perszyk. However the metaphysics work out, euteleological theism does ease the problem of evil by making God the force in nature that defuses evil instead of intending it.<sup>9</sup>

William B. Drees constructs an idea of God that is responsible not to religion but rather to science, mathematics and morality. He thinks any notion of God must involve both a metaphysical and a value aspect (196, 210). Cosmology contributes the metaphysical piece by recommending we think of creation beginning *with* time instead of creation beginning *in* time, which in turn suggests that God is not a pre-existing, transcendent individual causing the universe but rather a co-existing, immanent-but-transcendent-enough-to-ground "Ground of existence" (204). Mathematics and morality show how God might do this: God could be transcendent by being like the abstract universal truths in these domains and immanent because these truths get instantiated in concrete particulars by which we come to know them.<sup>10</sup> For the axiological piece, Drees references Steward Sutherland's view that God judges from "the view *sub specie aeternitatis*" which sees the interests of all, again by an act of abstraction from the interests of each (208). Drees integrates both pieces at the close: God is a metaphysical Ground of all that is, carrying within it an impartial perspective of all that should be (210).

In a rich chapter near the end of the volume, Emily Thomas explores Samuel Alexander's theology, the first divine emergence theory on record. He thinks when "patterns" or "groupings" of substance become complex enough, qualities emerge within it, creating an ontological hierarchy. The substance of the universe is space-time, and as it grows in complexity, matter comes to evolve in it, then life, then mind and then deity (257). The universe now is at mind, so we are waiting for deity to emerge, and not from small "groupings" of things as in the other levels but from the universe as a whole. What will deity be like when it comes? "We cannot tell," Alexander says, because things can think only about the things *below* them in the hierarchy (258). We do know that 'deity' is for Alexander an indexical term for the unknowable next level above the one of focus, and that 'deity' in our mouths may in fact pick out not one but an infinite number of higher levels, which would make the universe an infinite *process* of becoming deity. Though by definition of 'deity' the universe will always be an "incomplete possessor of deity," Alexander is willing to call it 'God' in virtue of its being "in process" toward deity.<sup>11</sup> This makes his view sound

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<sup>9</sup> One still might ask though with Marilyn McCord Adams in her commentary on this piece how "we eliminate the parallel hypothesis" that things seem as directed to evil as they do to Love (137)? Bishop and Perszyk respond that euteleological Christians anyway can answer *a posteriori*: Jesus' death and resurrection show that the power of love is stronger than the power of evil, so Love will win in the end (124).

<sup>10</sup> In math, for example, we discovered the Pythagorean Theorem "early in human history as a way to create effectively straight corners" and then gradually grasped the general form "through abstraction and reflection" (206).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas' lovely phrase: "as the world grows, it becomes more completely the possessor of deity" (259). Also the process is progress for Alexander, since going up a level constitutes an increase in value for him.

like a pantheism, but he later denies this, saying in his picture deity does not permeate the universe “as it must...on strict pantheism” (260), presumably since there are the non-deity levels. Interestingly, if deity is only part of the universe, then Alexander’s view is also not a panentheism but its contrary: though God is the world, the world is more than God. As Thomas says, this leaves Alexander’s theology without a label (261).<sup>12</sup> Perhaps theos-en-panism?

Before we close with J. L. Schellenberg’s view—saved for last because it is qualitatively different from the others—here for the record are five general ways God can relate to the universe exhibited in the notions in this volume:

1. God can be the same individual thing as the universe, where that individual thing can be a concrete person as for Forrest and Pfeifer, or an abstract totality of things as for Leslie and Nagasawa. These views are pantheisms<sup>13</sup> and on them ‘God’ is a count noun. Or
2. God can thoroughly pervade the universe, as for Pfeifer and Bishop & Perszyk. If God does not go beyond the universe, this is a pantheism; if it does, a panentheism. Either way, ‘God’ is a mass term. Or
3. The universe can contain God, as for Alexander. This is a theos-en-panism. Or
4. God can be a universal abstracted from the universe and immanent within it, as for Drees. On nominalism about universals, this is a theos-en-panism; on Platonism, this is a classical substance dualism. Or
5. God can be the efficient and material cause of the Universe, as for Foster (though n.b. for him the ‘material’ is mental). This is a panentheism, since God must go beyond the universe in some way (temporally, ontologically) in order to be its efficient cause.

Finally, we turn to Schellenberg. He is on the hunt for a “God of all time” per his chapter’s title—an idea of God with enough “temporal stability” (172) to carry us from now, 50,000 years into human development, through what might be a billion-year human lifespan. Given the high probability of mistakes about the details in our notions of God at this early stage, Schellenberg recommends we go “general in our thinking about God” and focus on the core they all share. He identifies this core as ‘ultimism’: the view that God is by definition ultimate in three ways (the three U’s): metaphysically (the “most fundamental fact” about the nature of things, 168), axiologically (Its value is not just unsurpassed but unsurpassable as Anselm said, 169) and soteriologically (by relating to It, we seek “the very greatest good” we can embody, 170). Schellenberg is absolutely right that we should go general, but as I have argued elsewhere ultimism does not go general enough: it doesn’t cover the many extant (much less possible) ideas of God that limit God’s nature in some way or that

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<sup>12</sup> Nor is there a label apparently for F.H. Bradley’s which Thomas says inspired Alexander’s view, or for an earlier iteration of Bishop’s which identified God strictly with Love but found the Universe to contain Love and not vice versa, since Love comes to exist only gradually as life evolves (see, Bishop, “How a Modest Fideism may Constrain Theistic Commitments: Exploring an Alternative to Classical Theism,” *Philosophia* 35 (2007): 387-402).

<sup>13</sup> *Pace* Nagasawa who reads his view as a panentheism. See footnote 8 for more.

lack one of the three ways of being ultimate.<sup>14</sup> It is thus not descriptive of how we have thought about God; it is prescriptive about how we should.

If indeed it is prescriptive, ultimism is not a substantive notion of God itself but rather a criterion of adequacy for deciding whether other substantive notions should count as genuinely of God or not. We are now reaching the final point promised at the start, to show how the volume opens discussion about such criteria. The volume abounds with examples of criteria of adequacy for being a notion genuinely of God. To name a few: obviously for Schellenberg, God must have (i) metaphysical, (ii) axiological and (iii) soteriological ultimacy; for Bishop & Perszyk, God must (iv) be worthy of ultimate concern, (v) trust, (vi) submission and (vii) worship, and (viii) save believers from “the large scale structural defects in human life” (114-5); for Forrest, a god must be worthy of worship (vii again, see his p. 22), etc. We can see already that some criteria are popular (e.g., worthy of worship was repeated), that they can appear at different levels of abstraction (e.g., Bishop & Perszyk’s savior role is an instance of Schellenberg’s soteriological requirement), and that they can require each other (being worthy of worship requires being worthy of submission according to Forrest, 22). Moreover, the criteria can be offered as necessary or sufficient for being a notion of God: for instance, Schellenberg says a notion must have all three U’s to be a notion of God, while Nagasawa takes being derivable from a notion that is widely accepted as genuinely of God as sufficient for being such a notion itself (91).

The recipe for using criteria of adequacy to judge whether a concept is genuinely of God has at least three steps: choose which criteria to use, then decide whether they are jointly or severally necessary or sufficient or both for being God, and finally apply them as described to selected notions. To demonstrate all too briefly: if we were to adopt, say, Schellenberg’s three U’s as criteria of adequacy and then take them as he does to be jointly necessary for being God and then apply them on notions developed within this volume, we would find that neither Alexander’s nor Pfeifer’s notions, for example, are genuine notions of God—Alexander’s because it is not metaphysically ultimate (the universe contains deity, not vice versa), and Pfeifer’s because, although it is metaphysically ultimate (God pervades the Universe), it may not be axiologically ultimate if the universe’s intentionality fails to coalesce well. On the other hand, Bishop and Perszyk’s notion *would* count as of God since it is metaphysically ultimate (God is “reality at its most profound”), axiologically ultimate (God is the supreme good), and soteriologically ultimate (God saves us from structural evil). The verdict for other notions in the volume is less clear since they are silent about at least one U. Drees’ notion of an impartial-Ground, for example, is both soteriologically ultimate (impartial) and metaphysically ultimate (Ground) but does not touch on axiological ultimacy; still, is it or could it be unsurpassable in value? If so, it would be a genuine notion of God on Schellenberg’s view; if not, not.

Future research on criteria of adequacy for notions of God is fertile ground. Still, true to the editors’ vision, this volume has “opened the door” to serious discussion of such criteria and offered an abundance of mind-expanding notions in need of being tested by these criteria.

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<sup>14</sup> Jeanine Diller, “The Conceptual Focus of Ultimism,” *Religious Studies* 49:2 (2013): 221-33.