Logic and Theism: Arguments For and Against Beliefs in God, by John Howard Sobel. Cambridge University Press, 2003. 672 pages. $95.

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This is a terrific book. I'm often asked to recommend books on philosophy of religion from a skeptical point of view, and Mackie's *The Miracle of Theism* has been the only thing I could wholeheartedly endorse. Sobel's book gives me a second option. It's the best thing of its kind since Mackie's book, and in many respects it's better.

Sobel's book covers a very wide range of arguments for and against theism. There are two important exceptions: epistemological and ethical arguments. Given the significant role such arguments have played for theists from Augustine to C. S. Lewis, Plantinga, and Adams, this is a serious omission.

In addition to theistic and atheistic arguments, Sobel provides novel and useful analyses of omnipotence and omniscience (in Chapters IX and X), including sophisticated treatments of various paradoxes and supposed paradoxes.

God as the Worshipful One

In Chapter 1, Sobel takes on the question of defining 'God'. Sobel intends for his definition to engage with the practice of the Biblical religions, rather than that of philosophers. Sobel suggests that 'God' can, for these purposes, be defined as a being worthy of worship. This is a reasonable choice, although it does have the drawback of narrowing 'religion' to the single activity of worship. It might have been more fruitful instead to spend some time discussing the attributes of God to which the God of the Bible lays claim.

Ontological Arguments

Sobel's two chapters on the ontological argument (II, III and IV) are among the best in the book. His reconstruction and critique of Anselm's arguments are flawless, and he offers a new interpretation of Spinoza's version of the argument that represents a significant contribution to the interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy.

Sobel's account of the modern modal argument is accurate, but I think he's somewhat unfair to Hartshorne and Plantinga (on p. 20). So far as I know, Plantinga doesn't claim that a priori self-consistency *entails* logical possibility. He would claim, at most, that a priori self-consistency gives some support to the proposition that a thing is possible. And, in any case, I don't read Plantinga as resting his claim that God is possible on the a priori self-consistency of the concept of God. Plantinga refers to a variety of considerations (cosmological arguments, religious experience, etc.), not all of them a priori, in support of this claim.

Sobel's final assessment of the modal ontological argument is unduly negative, given his own analysis. It's true that, in the absence of a proof of God's possibility, the argument falls short of proving God's existence. Nonetheless, an argument can have significant merit without being a proof. To show that the argument has no merit, Sobel would have to show that there are no considerations that directly support the claim that God is possible without also directly supporting (to at least the same degree) the claim that God is actual. This he certainly hasn't done.

Sobel spends an entire chapter on Gödel's version of the ontological argument and provides a detailed and sophisticated account of the arguments and its variants. Sobel's principal focus is on the problem of "modal collapse": the fact that Gödel's premises seem to entail that there are no merely contingent truths. It is not clear that Gödel himself would have accepted the modal

collapse as a reductio of the argument, but Sobel is right in thinking that premises entailing such a collapse cannot be acceptable.

Sobel critiques Anthony Anderson's emendation of Gödel's argument, but there's another way to avoid the modal collapse. The crucial question concerns the domain of properties over which Gödel's second-order quantifiers are to range. Sobel (probably following Gödel himself) assumes that there is a property corresponding to every open formula, so he introduces properties like 'being such that grass is green'. These are the sort of properties famously used by Frege, Church, Quine and Davidson to prove that there are no such things as facts. There are alternative conceptions of properties that would avoid the collapse of all facts into the one Big Fact, and these conceptions would also block the modal collapse of Gödel's system.

We could distinguish between intrinsic properties and extrinsic or "Cambridge" properties, allowing only the former to serve as substituends for Gödel's variables. Then, the fact that all of God's properties are necessary would fit nicely with the classical Thomistic picture -- all of God's intrinsic properties are essential to him, God's contingent properties all involve His external relations to creation.

Sobel also argues against the necessary existence of a worshipful being. According to Sobel, nothing that exists necessarily can be active or efficacious: necessary beings, like numbers and sets, are wholly inert. However, Sobel offers little argument for this conclusion, apparently relying on a kind of induction from Platonic entities as paradigmatically necessary beings. This seems a weak induction, and, in any case, it is far from settled that logical and mathematical facts have no effects. For example, I argued in 2000 (in *Realism Regained*) that numbers and logical entities enter into everyday causal interactions by preventing the arithmetically and logically impossible.

On Cosmological Arguments

Sobel is guilty of the common fault of focusing too myopically on Aquinas's “five ways” passage in the Summa Theologica. We shouldn't read too much into Aquinas's “and all men call this God” clinchers -- he's not claiming there to have proved any of God's attributes, not even His uniqueness as First Cause. Aquinas' attempted proofs of these come later.

Sobel (on page 184) accuses Aquinas of inconsistency on the question of whether it is possible that “man begat man to infinity”. However, that phrase could be interpreted in two ways: (1) it is possible that there is a single human being with infinitely many ancestors, or (2) it is possible that at every point in the past, human beings were begetting other human beings. Claim (1) entails (2), but not vice versa. Both Aristotle and Aquinas consistently reject infinite causal regresses, although they both accept the possibility (at least) of an infinitely old universe. Human beings could have been specially created or spontaneously generated infinitely often in the past, with each human being having a finite genealogy terminating, ultimately, in the movement of the First Cause.

In discussing Leibniz’s version of the argument, Sobel argues that, for Leibniz, a “full”, “complete”, “sufficient” and “adequate” explanation must be a *necessitating* explanation. Leibniz himself disagreed: he saw that if the necessary truth of God's existence necessitates all other facts, that there could then be no contingent facts at all. Now, admittedly, it is somewhat mysterious how an explanation could be complete, sufficient, or adequate without necessitating the explanandum, but that's where Leibniz exegesis gets interesting. God had a compelling reason for creating the world He did, but ‘having a compelling reason to do x’ does not obviously entail ‘could not have refrained from doing x’. Such reasons “incline without necessitating”, as Leibniz put it. Sobel finds this idea incoherent: he sees no alternative to

necessary truth on the one hand and brute fact on the other, but he never provides a convincing argument for this dilemma.

Sobel doesn't discuss recent work by Gale and Pruss on the infinite regress problem. He does, however, consider my version of the cosmological argument that first appeared in *American Philosophical Quarterly* in 1997 and which I developed more fully in *Realism Regained* (OUP, 2000). Sobel and I agree about what is the most powerful objection to my argument: that we have good reason to think that the "Cosmos" (the totality of all wholly contingent states of affairs) has a cause, since it cannot have a contingent cause. I argue that this objection can be rebutted by pointing out that causes are always "more nearly necessary" than their effects, for which I offer several independent lines of evidence, including the relative fixity of the past. If I'm right, we have good reason to think that something that is minimally contingent, such as the Cosmos, will have a necessary cause. Sobel is unpersuaded, because he feels certain that it is impossible for something necessary to cause something contingent. So, in then end, we come back to the same, I think mistaken, objection that Sobel made of Leibniz's argument. If causation is typically indeterministic, as I hold it to be, there is nothing recherché about a necessary condition's having a contingent effect.

Arguments from Design

In his chapter on the design argument (VII), Sobel doesn't discuss modern challenges to the adequacy of Darwinian theory or naturalistic explanations of the origin of life (of the sort that recently led Anthony Flew to embrace a form of theism). He does consider the argument from the fine-tuning of cosmological parameters. Unlike many skeptics, Sobel is not attracted by a many-universes model that concedes that life-permitting universes are rare and that relies on observer selection to explain why we find ourselves in one. I think Sobel is right here, since such

models can't explain why *this* universe is life-permitting, while a theistic hypothesis can. Observer selection at best preserves one version of atheism from disconfirmation; it doesn't enable the many-universes hypothesis to be confirmed by our observations, and so it can't prevent theism from being confirmed by that evidence.

Instead, Sobel relies on a speculative theory proposed by Lee Smolin, according to which universes generate new universes through the production of black holes. This gives rise to a process of natural selection, favoring universes that maximize the production of black holes. It turns out that the very same parameters that generate large numbers of black holes also permit life. However, this proposal seems to miss the whole point of the fine-tuning argument, which is that a certain coincidence needs to be explained. Smolin's theory explains one coincidence (that the parameters of this universe are coordinated for life) but introducing a new coincidence (that the parameters that produce black holes also permit life). This new coincidence would provide at least as good evidence for a designer as did the original. For some reason, Sobel doesn't apply Bayes's theorem in these sections (pp. 277-284), as he does in other sections of the book, partly explaining why he overlooks this fact.

Sobel endorses Quentin Smith's argument that quantum cosmology provides a strong argument for atheism, since it entails that the existence of a life-permitting universe was only probable, not certain. This is supposed to be an irrational way for God to go about creating the universe. But what exactly is irrational about God's creating a condition C with the natural propensity of producing E with probability p (<1), and then actualizing E with probability 1? I suppose God does that sort of thing all the time. Presumably there was some small, finite probability that the water of Lake Galilee would support Jesus' weight in a upright position, but God intervened so as to bring about this result with probability 1. Smith and Sobel seem to

assume that any supernatural intervention by God would be irrational (since God could have jury-rigged the natural propensities to get the same result), but why is it irrational to do things one way rather than the other? Divine interventions don't “violate” probabilistic natural laws: the probabilities those laws give are ceteris paribus, the probabilities that would obtain in the absence of divine intervention.

Sobel accuses Richard Swinburne’s cumulative argument for God’s existence of committing a probabilistic fallacy. In doing so, however, Sobel ignores the careful construction of Swinburne’s argument in *The Existence of God*. At each step n, Swinburne argues that the P(En/T&E1&…En-1) is greater than P(En/~T&E1&…&En-1), where T is the theistic hypothesis an E1,..., En-1 are the pieces of evidence so far considered.

Hume on Miracles

Sobel provides an interesting and charitable reading of Hume on miracles. His introduction of infinitesimal probabilities (via non-standard analysis) is especially illuminating. It's hard to find fault with Sobel's conclusions, although their upshot for particular cases is not obvious. Many believers would argue that there are cases in which the falsity of the reports would require a greater miracle than the miracle reported, especially when a large number of witnesses are involved. I would agree that where a miracle is religiously significant, the probability of human deception or self-deception may go up, but the probability of divine intervention goes up as well. If there is a God, then writing the ten commandments on tablets of stone or raising a Jesus of Nazareth from the dead are the sort of thing He might well do.

Sobel repeats Hume's claim that miracles in competing religious traditions are mutually antagonistic, but this doesn't seem to be necessarily so. A theology that posited a variety of supernatural agents, with conflicting aims, might well be supported by all such miracle reports.

The Problem of Evil

Sobel's Chapter XII, on the problem of evil, is quite good, although it seems misleading for Sobel to claim to be defending "the logical problem of evil", since that phrase has traditionally referred to the argument which uses "evil exists" as its sole empirical premise. No orthodox Jew or Christian could deny that evil exists, but it is quite possible for them to deny that this world is not a "divine best bet" (an action that would maximize expected utility), which is Sobel's supposedly empirical premise.

Sobel challenges Plantinga's free will defense at only one point: Plantinga's claim that universal transwrold depravity is epistemically possible. With Plantinga, I see no reason for denying that such transworld depravity might be an actual fact. What evidence against it does Sobel offer? None, as far as I can see. Given that it's logically possible, and that we have no evidence against it, it would seem to be epistemically possible, as well. It may be improbable, but this objection would concede that the deductive argument from evil is a failure.

Sobel's discussion of the 'no best world' case was quite illuminating. I especially liked the analysis of possible mixed strategies (pp. 474-5), that is, the intentional use of randomized action, a notion derived from contemporary game theory. Such a randomized creation strategy could afford God infinite expected value, even if the value of each possible creation is only finite. However, as Sobel argues, this move merely reproduces the problem for the atheologian, since among mixed strategies with infinite expected value, some will have a higher value than others (as measured in non-standard analysis), with no upper limit.

Sobel claims, against Robert M. Adams, that it would be inconsistent with God's goodness for God to act on non-rational attachments to certain possible people, attachments not justified by their inherent worthiness to be loved. Sobel's entitled to his opinions on this point, but if the

problem of evil is going to count against the God of the Bible, it would seem that one would have to consult the Biblical conception of divine goodness, which seems quite at variance with Sobel's opinion.

The discussion of freedom and omniscience in this chapter was very insightful.

Pascalian Wagers

In Chapter XII, Sobel provides a brilliant and fair-minded analysis of a variety of Pascalian and Jamesian arguments for religious belief. The appendix on hyperreal (infinitesimal) probabilities and utilities is an invaluable resource on the many formal issues arising in this field. It should be consulted by anyone working on this problem.