An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion. Third Edition

By Brian Davies


[1] The second edition of Brian Davies’ An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion became a standard textbook for every teacher of A-level Philosophy of Religion, as well as for many undergraduate courses. Its popularity, one suspects, is partly due to its length of service – the first edition published over twenty years ago now – but also to the fact that for many years it was the best accessible work on what can be a very difficult subject to grasp. In recent years, however, it has been losing its grip on the market with a veritable plethora of textbooks for the student to choose from; delightful, accessible and colourful works by the likes of Peter Vardy, Michael Palmer, Peter Cole and so on. What gave these books the advantage is that they were deliberately targeted at the A-level market, providing well-proportioned chapters on each of the ‘issues’ in philosophy of religion, and supported with essay questions, text boxes, and web links. In comparison, Davies’ work was beginning to show its age.

[2] In addition, Davies’ book was always a frustrating experience for many teachers and students. It was somewhat unbalanced in its treatment of topics, seemed lacking in confidence on certain topics, especially science, and the opening chapter launches the reader right in at the deep end with verication and falsification; enough to put many a young reader off for good.

[3] Does the third edition of this seminal text, then, go any way to improving on the older versions? Immediately the reader will note a much more contemporary style that fits in with the current output in this field: chapters are divided into shorter sections, there are plenty of informative notes, a good choice of further reading, and at the end of each chapter questions for further discussion. This is much friendlier, and Davies has even relented by giving us an introductory chapter on concepts of God before dealing with the thorny issue of religious language.

[4] From the beginning, Davies grabs the reader by the collar and carries him or her off at high speed. He presents the standard problems associated with the concept of the classical God, that is the difficulties of creating ex nihilo, the immutability of God, His timeless nature and so on. These are important issues and rightly need to be addressed at the beginning; philosophy of religion would not be half as problematic if the classical theistic view could be abandoned. Where Davies seems to pull no punches is in the series of name-dropping. For example, on
the second page alone Davies makes reference to Maimonides, Avicenna, Aquinas, St. Augustine of Hippo, Leibniz, and Jonathan Edwards. Fortunately there are breaks when few, if any, scholars are mentioned before launching in again: page ten has Plantinga, Swinburne, Aristotle, Russell, Wittgenstein, and Locke, with the next couple of pages introducing Descartes and John Lucas. Whilst footnotes provide some background information on these individuals, it can seem somewhat overwhelming to the uninitiated. In that respect, this edition suffers still from its predecessor; that lack of balance which gives the impression that, whilst Davies certainly shows comfortable familiarity with his field, he does not always pause to consider the limitations of the reader. However, on the positive side, Davies does not restrict himself to the ‘classical’ scholars but brings the debate up to date.

[5] The unevenness comes across again when the author addresses religious language, preferring to split it into two chapters, as in the previous edition. However, whereas the 1993 edition places the chapters consecutively, the new edition has them as Chapter Two and then does not emerge again until Chapter Seven! It is puzzling in itself as to why Davies feels that issues such as verification, Wittgenstein etc. should be separate from analogy, metaphor, etc., but this is not helped by such a seemingly arbitrary arrangement of chapters. While Davies treads the landmine of religious language with mostly effective lucidity, trailing through the usual suspects of the field; from Flew and Ayer to Wittgenstein and Plantinga this topic still comes across as rather dense for the uninitiated and as an introductory text it is the uninitiated it should be addressing and could do with more illustrations.

[6] The usual classic arguments for the existence of God are considered in, on the whole, common and straightforward language. In terms of the cosmological argument, as in the previous edition, Davies introduces what he calls the ‘kalam’ argument as a reference to a ‘group of writers’ in the middle ages from the Islamic tradition. It is a shame that Davies is not more specific here and perhaps gives it the detailed attention that he so readily gives to the ‘group of writers’ from the Middle Ages of the Christian tradition. Rather, he presents the view of W.L. Craig as an advocate of the *kalam* argument rather than, frustratingly, the original Muslim proponents. However, perhaps Davies should be given credit for at least acknowledging an Islamic contribution here. The design argument starts in the traditional manner with William Paley, although by now I suspect that examiners find it difficult to suppress a yawn when faced with yet another essay that begins with William Paley, rather than his much more scholarly predecessor David Hume. Although briefly mentioned in a footnote, a more extensive treatment of the anthropic principle, as well as Richard Dawkins’ work would not go amiss. I was also puzzled that when looking at the ontological argument, Davies does not go into the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* arguments that seems such a concern of examiners at present.

[7] The chapter ‘Eternity’ in the second edition, which dealt with issues of God’s attributes, has now been dropped and replaced by two new chapters: ‘Divine Simplicity’ and ‘Omnipotence and Omniscience’, which essentially expand on some of the problems raised related to God’s nature, but is much more com-
prehensive and reflects more contemporary debate. This is undoubtedly welcome. Davies then devotes a chapter each to the problem of evil, miracles (although, again, this would sit more comfortably next to the chapter on religious experience), morality, and life after death. These have all been revised and are much more approachable for the novice.

On the whole, the book does still suffer from a degree of unevenness, especially in the chapter arrangements. But the careful sectioning of respective arguments that is now provided, together with a much improved layout generally makes this a much more accessible text than its predecessor. Whether it can compete with such an expanded market is open to question however.