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Review of *Purpose in the Universe*, Tim Mulgan, Oxford University Press, 2015:pp. 435.

Tim Mulgan argues against both BT (Benevolent Theism) and atheism, and for AP (Ananthropocentric Purposivism), the thesis of a God (-analog) who does not care about us human beings. He is agnostic about whether there is a literally a God, so we may state AP thus: it is as if there is a God with a good purpose but we do not feature in this purpose. Mulgan's case, from religious ambiguity (p.9), both supports and is supported by his combination of objectivism in meta-ethics with a utilitarian normative ethics that attaches great weight to suffering.

After expounding AP in the Introduction and discussing meta-ethics in Chapter 1, Mulgan argues in Part I against atheism. He adapts familiar theist arguments, although he attaches more importance to mysticism (Ch. 5) than many theists, and he puts the Ontological Argument in the context of mysticism. Part II, the case against Benevolent Theism, begins with the Argument from Scale, that in a large universe existing for billions of years it is likely that intelligent life will arise often and much of it will be more advanced than we are. This consideration is used, correctly I believe, to argue against privileging of human beings as the unique rational creatures. He then presents the Argument from Evil (Ch. 8), concluding that BT requires survival of death by humans and other animals. In addition he offers an argument somewhat similar to that from Hiddenness, the Argument from Religious Diversity. He also (Ch. 11) discusses the sort of reliance on survival required by BT. He judges it not to have much support unless we see it as part of a round of rebirth of the sort familiar in Hindu and Buddhist thought. In the last three chapters Mulgan discusses the implications his case has for morality, beginning with a dialogue (Ch. 11) in which starting from different assumptions the different characters reach versions of AP. In chapter 12 he takes some of the harshness out of the moral consequences of AP by arguing that even though God cares nothing about us we ought to be concerned about each other's welfare. Finally he sums up the moral theory that AP leads to.

Mulgan's project is both important and ambitious and his method is admirable, although complicated. He presents different mutually supporting lines of argument typically derived from disjunctive premises, resulting in a probability net.

I shall comment on of several features of Mulgan's case, but first consider the definition of BT (p.2). There are three clauses: (BT1) God loves each individual human being; (BT2) human beings are essential part of God's plan for the cosmos; and (BT 3) God created this cosmos (in part) because it would contain human beings. AP denies all three clauses and has as a corollary that there would be no Incarnation (p3). As Mulgan acknowledges, BT and AP are contraries not contradictories but he justifies his concentration on three positions, AP, BT and straightforward atheism because his 'primary aim is to introduce AP into the philosophical landscape'. That requires a case for it, not just a case against BT and atheism. So the intermediary positions are

important. I submit that for the sake of simple dialectic it is better to consider GBT (Generalised Benevolent Theism): God loves each individual. In stating GBT this way I assume that all normal human beings are individuals. So GBT implies BT1. But GBT also includes some of the intermediary positions that Mulgan notes, such as that God might not have cared at all that persons arise on Earth. Neither BT2 nor BT3 is implied by Christianity. Moreover the widespread acceptance that we do not know the divine plan in any detail supports concentrating on GBT rather than BT. I concede Mulgan has a good case against BT2 and BT3 but I reject his case against BT1. And I note that his Benthamite rejection of ‘caprice’ (p.17) is irrelevant to GBT.

The dispute between AP and GBT (or BT1) concerns the love of individuals. To say that God loves individual persons or loves individual kinds of person such as humanity is, I suggest, to say God loves us with our history. It is problematic to suggest that God loves us as individual before we exist, and so the love of individuals is not required as a motive for creation. The chief consequence of God loving us as individuals, then, is that God mends what is broken rather than replacing. The difference between this and Mulgan’s utilitarianism is not some slight preference for mending, but a willingness to do so even at the cost of much suffering.

In Chapter 2 Mulgan argues that BT provides a better explanation of ‘substantive moral commitments’ – those that hurt – than atheism, but that AP is as good an explanation as BT. To do so, he systematically examines a range of positions, and replies to objections, including the claim on behalf of BT that it explains how we know what is right and wrong. His reply is that if BT is correct there should be less ignorance of the moral truths.

Mulgan’s discussion of the Cosmological Argument, in Chapter 3 is thorough and noteworthy for treating as a serious rival to literal theism, John Leslie’s axiarchistic explanation, which I explicate not as an implausible causal explanation but rather as understanding the way things are by appreciating their goodness and beauty. I take it that even if there is literally no God Axiarchism treats goodness and beauty as God by analogy. His discussion of the teleological argument is used to discern something about the cosmic purpose: it is ‘designed to be governed by intelligible mathematical laws; . . . it is arranged so that . . . creatures will emerge within it that can comprehend it; and, all the features of the cosmos are objectively significant’. (p.129) Amen.

The attention given to mysticism (Ch5) is refreshing: what altered states of consciousness show is puzzling but they seem to show something. As a *contextualist* Mulgan rejects the *perennialism* of William James, who assumed a common core for mystical experience. Instead he argues that mystics are moral experts, more in tune with cosmic purpose than the rest of us. This is ironic, because there does seem to be a common, albeit negative, core to mystical experience, the cessation of experience of oneself as an individual. And that might be thought contrary to GBT,

although I take it instead to undermine BT2 and BT3. For it supports the thesis that there is more to the cosmic purpose than relations with individual creatures.

Mulgan's treatment of the Ontological Argument is original in that he places it within the context of a mystical practice. Here is my attempt at paraphrase – an Anselm/Descartes hybrid: Mystics seem aware of something greater than can be conceived, therefore their experience is best explained in veridical terms.

Part II, 'The Case Against Benevolent Theism', presents three arguments, beginning with a welcome discussion of a problem that is not usually analysed by philosophers, the sheer size of the universe, which suggests it is not made for us alone. Although not conclusive, this provides a case against BT 2 and BT3. I would like, however, to note that Mulgan seems to suppose that God might care about superior beings but not us. (p. 217) I find that implausible. Assuming God has the capacity to attend to all creatures we would expect the appropriate concern for all creatures, even slugs.

Directed at BT1 and hence GBT is, of course, the Argument from Evil (Ch. 8). Mulgan's treatment is thorough with an emphasis on non-human animal suffering. He demands more than a mere *defence*, namely a possible scenario that would explain why a God who loves individuals permits the evil that surrounds us. I agree but potential *theodicy* suffices, namely an explanation that would be a satisfactory theodicy if nothing better can be found. My suggestion is that God starts off with an overall good and beautiful plan, of a sort that AP implies, which includes setting up laws of nature that cannot be broken; but once there are individuals God comes to be concerned about them and acts for their good in whatever ways are still possible given these laws. Mulgan's third argument, from Religious Diversity, is somewhat similar to John Schellenberg's Argument from Divine Hiddenness. My potential theodicy applies here too: if there is an adequate AP explanation, then it can be adopted by GBT.

Part III begins with a dialogue between Cosmo, Fi-Tu, Scaly, Mysty, Onto, Eve, and Immy, who represent starting points indicated by their names (Cosmological argument, Fine-tuning, Scale, Mysticism, Ontological Argument, Evolution and Immanentist Idealism, respectively) and assess AP as at least as favourably as BT and atheism. This dialogue is an effective way of summarising a complex probability network but I add two kibitzers: Classy, the classical theist, says that AP is nothing new: by analogy there is a good God, whose purposes transcend our merely human interests. Slug (my voice), believes God loves slugs in the appropriate way, along with humans, extra-terrestrials with IQ 1000, and angels, and eats lettuce to the greater glory of God.

Chapter 12 deals with human well-being from the perspective of AP. As elsewhere, Mulgan considers a variety of competing moral theories and so his conclusions are hard to summarize.

The overall position is that although not of cosmic significance human well-being does matter, but that we over-value the relative importance of the individual against the collective. That looks congenial, but it manifests the controversial threshold principle (p.275) that in an objective value-scale there is a threshold below which things lack cosmic significance. (Compare his idea that God might care for superior beings but not us.) This threshold principle may apply to our concerns, because we have limited resources: few share the Jain scruples about killing slugs to protect salads. I cannot understand why we would apply it to God.

Although the final chapter is purportedly the application of AP to morality, much of it can be appropriated by those of us who accept GBT but reject BT1 and BT2. For instance the discussion of Act Utilitarianism, Rule Utilitarianism and their hybrid is clear and to my mind persuasive but not especially AP-ish. Moreover, Mulgan's ethic of pure contemplation may well be the best response to cosmic values if our own human activities have little cosmic significance. And he may well be right that we have a lot yet to discover about what is valuable.

Because of his method of arguing it is easier to find specific points of disagreement than to assess Mulgan's overall case for AP. At least, though, he provides a welcome correction to the wrong sort of anthropocentrism in religion, one to which atheists are especially prone when setting up their target.