

Elmar J. Kremer. *Analysis of Existing: Barry Miller's Approach to God*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. xii+143 pp. \$110.00 (hbk); \$29.95 (paper).

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Elmar J. Kremer provides a sound introduction to the thought of Barry Miller (Australian philosopher, Marist priest) in his book *Analysis of Existing: Barry Miller's Approach to God*. The exposition is clear and helpful, written with the tone of an admirer of Miller, keen to impress upon the reader the value of his arguments. The structure is systematic, following Miller's thought through his trilogy: *From Existence to God* (1992), *A Most Unlikely God* (1996), and *The Fullness of Being* (2002), though not in chronological order. Kremer's book brings together the thought of this radical thinker in contemporary metaphysics hoping for a more widespread critical engagement with his work. We will summarize Kremer's enterprise, and briefly begin the critique he calls for.

After an initial biographical sketch of Miller's life and intellectual development in Chapter 1, Kremer embarks on his second chapter by expounding Miller's threefold contention that:

- a) Existence is a property of individuals.
- b) Existence is a *real* property.
- c) Any real property of an individual is instantiated by a property instance in the individual, where the property instance of existence is unlike an individual's other properties in a crucial respect.

Miller's strategy for establishing (a) is simply to dismantle any counter-arguments. The first two arguments considered state that accepting existence as a property leads to both paradox and absurdity, the latter of which seems to have the most force. If existence is accepted as a property, then it seems that non-existence must also be accepted as a property. This latter claim seems absurd, for surely an individual's existing is a condition of its having any property, whereas acceptance of non-existence as a property would leave us with an *existing* individual having the property of non-existence. Miller responds by arguing that "Socrates does not exist" should be construed along the lines of "It is not the case that (Socrates exists)", in which case non-existence need only be accepted as a Cambridge property rather than a real property. This leads us to (b), for which Miller provides two arguments. First, he proposes to show that the presence of the property of existence makes a real difference to Socrates (thus, it is real), as "an effect of Socrates' existing is his being able to be referred to and conceived of" (27). Kremer suggests that a firmer solution might cite instead the property of "effecting

and undergoing real change" (28) as only present as an effect of Socrates' existing (thus, a real change), but rather than elaborate on this he proceeds to Miller's more developed argument for (b) which comprises a seven-step argument too lengthy to be expounded here. Regarding (c), Miller views real first-level properties as *property instances*. A property instance is as it sounds: an instance of the relevant property. According to Miller, a property instance is neither an abstract universal nor a trope, for the latter are supposed to be entities in their own right, whereas property instances are not; that is, they are inseparable from the individuals to which they belong, and thus incomplete.

At this point Kremer explains what Miller proposes as the most powerful objection to (a) – (c): in order for there to be a property instance there must be something for it to be a property instance of, but there cannot be something to be a property instance of prior to there being the property instance of existence (that is, surely there can only be something if that something exists). Miller suggests this problem arises because we think of property instances as logically posterior to an individual, whereas he proposes that we think of the property instance of existence as a property of a special kind (not posterior). Kremer writes, "Miller's proposal is that an individual's existence, alone among its property instances, is prior with respect to actuality to that of which it is a property" (35). This leads Miller to reject the inherence of properties in a subject model ("pins in a pin-cushion", 36) in favour of a new metaphor for the special case of property instances of existence. The new model compares the relation of Socrates' existence to Socrates with the relation of a piece of butter to the surface or *bound* which individuates it. Kremer writes:

Suppose a large block of butter is cut into a number of pieces. Each piece is distinguished from every other piece, and thus individuated, by its bound. On the other hand, the individuating role of the bound does not at all suggest that it has some actuality independently of the butter it bounds. Again, the bound is posterior to the butter with regard to actuality (36).

In the final section of Chapter 2, Kremer explains Miller's argument for property instances. He begins by alluding to Miller's Fregean sympathies which undergird his argument, an argument which begins "by claiming that a predicate in an atomic proposition is not a detachable expression" but rather "a pattern added to a name to result in a proposition" (44), which he backs up with a number of examples. Miller's next step: "he concludes that atomic propositions not only *exemplify* such common patterns or features, but also *contain instances* of them, which he calls predicate instances" (45). Because of Miller's commitment that predicates stand for properties, it is a fairly simple step to the further conclusion that what the predicate stands for is a property instance.

In Chapter 3 Kremer outlines the main thrust of Miller's *From Existence to God*. As explained in Chapter 2, Miller thinks that "Fido exists" is "made true by an ontological whole which is composed of Fido and his existence, and to which Miller refers to as *Fido's existing*" (49). The argument of *Existence* is twofold:

- 1) Fido's existing depends on something distinct from Fido's existing and its two constituents.
- 2) Fido's existing depends ultimately on an uncaused cause.

In favour of (1), Miller argues for two positions which seem to be contradictory. First, Fido and his existence are *constituents* of Fido's existing, and are therefore ontologically prior parts. Second, Fido cannot be conceived of before he exists, and therefore cannot be conceived of as something that was able to be a constituent of his existence before he existed. Miller's response to this apparent contradiction is to say that Fido exists because he is caused to by something external to him. Thus, "Fido exists" is elliptical for "Fido exists *qua* conditional on something external" (50).

Regarding (2), Miller argues that the series of causes of Fido's existence is necessarily terminating. The series terminates with a cause which does not depend essentially on another thing for its existence. Thus, Fido is caused ultimately by a cause that is itself not caused to exist; that is, an *uncaused cause*. Miller furthers this by establishing a number of conditions about the uncaused cause of Fido's existence. First, it is not distinct from its existence. Second, there can only be one uncaused cause. Third, the uncaused cause is an individual only in an analogically extended sense of the term. Finally, the uncaused cause is not the universe, but is rather transcendent, and is termed "Subsistent Existence".

In chapters 4 and 5, Kremer explores Miller's attempts to investigate the nature of "Subsistent Existence", since such exploration is necessary to show that this being is the same entity as the Christian God. The discussion in these chapters follows Miller's arguments as laid out in *A Most Unlikely God* (and largely their order), although Kremer also uses *The Fullness of Being* to elucidate Miller's thought.

Kremer first lays out Miller's claim from *A Most Unlikely God*, that the controlling notion of theological discourse should be neither "perfect being" nor "negative" theology. The former allegedly fails to preserve divine transcendence, and the latter to allow for enough theological discourse. In seeking a middle path between these approaches, Miller again demonstrates his allegiance to Aquinas, who famously advocates this approach in *Summa Theologiae* Ia.13. In Miller's view, describing something as "the greatest F" need not mean that the object in question is itself a member of a series of F's which increase in greatness. To make this intelligible, Kremer sets out Miller's conception of the "limit case" of a series, as opposed to the "limit" simpliciter. In an ordered series of in/decreasing amounts of a property, the property instances concerned point towards a property instance with the maximum value of that property, which is the limit simpliciter—for example, the series of increasing speeds at which objects can or do travel points towards the speed of light. However, according to Miller, these series also point to a "limit case", which is to say some property or state is implied by the instances yet which is not an instance of the relative property at all. Hence, the varying speeds of bodies point towards (the possibility of) a body which is at rest—i.e. it has zero speed. Now an object with "zero" speed does not strictly have speed at all, although "zero speed" can intelligibly (though not literally) be described as a "speed".

Miller argues that Subsistent Existence is both the limit case of existence, and a "limit case individual" (i.e. the limit case of bounds of existence). The idea is that existence can be more or less bounded, and similarly bounds themselves can place more or less of a limit on the existence they "individuate". The limit case of the series of more/less bounded acts of existence is, therefore, "Subsistent

Being”—i.e. God, which has no bounds to its act of existence. Miller argues that God is thus also the limit case of (what makes) an individual, since individuals are differentiated by tighter/looser bounds, yet God is something which is completely without a bound, but still existent. Moreover, whilst it is true to say that things either lack existence entirely or have it in some degree, Miller also suggests that they have (or perhaps more properly, are constituted by) acts of existence of varying richness, where richness increases as the tightness of the bound decreases. Kremer notes Miller's observation that this is not to say that it is easier to say which entities are “richer” in existence than one another (who can claim to accurately compare the richness of a Picasso painting with that of a pangolin?), but it does commit one to the idea of a scale of more/less rich instances of existence *per se*. To say that God is identical to His existence is not, therefore, to make God a “thin” entity void of ontological content; rather it suggests that he is the “richest” entity possible.

Kremer next outlines Miller's attempts to explore which series God is the limit case of. Miller's aim is to show that God can be said to have various properties usually attributed to God and creatures univocally by perfect being theology, on the understanding that the word “perfect” in these cases acts as an *alienans* adjective (i.e. which alters the meaning of the noun as in “decoy” duck), since God is really the *limit case* of series of more/less powerful beings, etc. Clearly, Miller needs some procedure to decide which series of limit cases have Subsistent Being as their limit case. He proposes the following criterion: the limit case of a property is zero-bounded if and only if “it can be attributed to God without imputing to Him any susceptibility to ... external influences” (92). As Kremer argues, this is initially very implausible, if the “susceptibility” is understood as the ability to be changed by another thing. For perhaps “being an abstract object” is the limit case of some series of properties (e.g. being a more/less rich concrete object). Yet whilst being an abstract object *entails* immutability, Miller would presumably deny that God is one such. Kremer, therefore, widens the understanding of “external susceptibility” by suggesting that since acts of existence are in some sense in potential as concerns their bounds, any limit case property which is bounding will imply that an entity with it has an act of existence which is susceptible to external influence. But this seems to obviate the utility of the criterion, since it now appears that being zero-bounded and lacking any external susceptibility are just conceptually identical. The absence of a clear criterion for judging which attributes are to be predicated of God seems, therefore, something of a hole in Miller's account.

Nevertheless, Kremer presses on with his attempt to delineate Miller's efforts to describe just which series God is the limit case instance of. In *A Most Unlikely God*, Miller selects three representative series: power to make things from more/fewer materials, the power to know more/fewer truths of the truths that one knows “passively”—i.e. by discovering their truth value had prior to one's intellectual activity—and that of knowing facts within the context of a wider/broader theory. God is the limit case of these series by causing things *ex nihilo*, knowing all things “actively”, and by having a necessarily all-embracing theory of the world which no phenomenon can thus “add to”. One worry which might be had about Miller's account here is that despite his concern to safeguard divine transcendence, which as Kremer notes is achieved by insisting that the relevant divine properties (e.g. the power to create *ex nihilo*, and to know all things “actively”) are only possessed by God, it is hard to see how Miller envisages a

fundamental ontological divide between God and creatures. Certainly, Miller seems to tacitly admit that God and creatures can be predicated of univocally, in that the properties which Miller predicates of God can apparently be understood by removing some imperfection from or adding some element to creaturely perfections in a way that does not involve invoking divine properties which are somehow unintelligible from the point of view of those familiar only with created beings and their properties.

Another worry concerns Miller's assertion that God knows all truths "actively". As Kremer notes, Miller also wants to maintain that God has knowledge of Himself, yet that God does not *cause* Himself to exist. Kremer suggests, therefore, that "[God] knows himself just by existing" (98). Yet Miller also claims that "God knows other things in knowing himself" (99). This, together with the fact that Miller asserts that divine cognition is "one simple act" (103) suggests that Miller is closely following Aquinas' account of divine cognition. Yet if so, then Miller might well (with Aquinas) be asserting that God can know that he makes creatures by knowing his own essence. This would contradict Miller's account of divine causality *ad extra* in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 is devoted to clearing up two types of objections to divine simplicity relating to freedom—firstly, that it renders divine knowledge and will necessary and thus impairs divine freedom of action *ad extra*, and secondly, that since God's knowledge/will are the cause of all things, there seems to be no real freedom of choice on the part of creatures. The first objection might be paraphrased as follows: if there is only one intrinsic divine attribute, and God exists necessarily, then so does this attribute. But surely God's knowledge/will that creatures exist is an intrinsic divine attribute. But then it seems that God necessarily knows/wills the existence of particular creatures, and that (hence) he does not enjoy "libertarian" freedom concerning the decision to create them, and further still, that their existence is (metaphysically) necessary. Miller's attempted rejoinder to the latter conclusion is to distinguish between "external" and "internal" modalities—i.e. between the statements "it is contingent that (God have cognitive state *w*)" and "God (contingently has cognitive state *w*)" (103). The former statement merely states that God has the potential for state *w* insofar as there is *some* possible world in which he has that state, whereas the latter maintains that in *this* possible world God can possess the cognitive state. According to Miller, since Subsistent Existence has no potential to change, God lacks the ability to possess some different internal state in the latter sense. Yet he suggests that nothing prevents Subsistent Existence in its "internal" state differing across possible worlds. If this is plausible then it will rebut the objection that the current order of creation is metaphysically necessary, and leaves a sense in which God can be said to "choose" which creatures exist in that this fact is determined by God's internal state, although given this state, God lacks libertarian freedom of choice. Miller, however, appears to miss the rejoinder that the identity of Subsistent Existence appears to be metaphysically necessary, as with the identity of all properties and natural kinds. If Subsistent Existence exists in all possible worlds, it is difficult to see how it can differ across them.

As Kremer continues to explain, however, later in *A Most Unlikely God*, Miller appears to change his position, because he wishes to assert that God possesses a free choice over whether to create in the properly libertarian sense. He therefore suggests that God's willing the existence of some particular possible

world does not imply the existence of a particular corresponding internal state in God. Rather, just by having the internal state of willing his own goodness, God can be said to “will” the existence of whatever created reality actually exists, although presumably the same internal state would counterfactually serve to ground a divine will that other created realities existed, if they did exist. Miller thus seems to adopt a radical “externalism” regarding the divine will that particular creatures exist—presumably the latter is determined by the divine internal state plus the existence of the relevant creatures. Kremer and Miller neglect to note that Miller fails to apply his new position to divine knowledge, meaning that (more controversially?) Miller holds that by knowing his own goodness and that it is reflected in whatever creation there is, God can “know” contingent creatures. Yet this view is doubly problematic. Firstly, one might think that God is in some proper (and “internal”) sense *ignorant* on Miller’s account—he does not know *how* his creation reflects his goodness. Whilst perhaps Miller might have appealed to “mental content externalism” as endorsed by Putnam and Burge, we note that the famous “twin earth” example often used to support mental content externalism involves the ignorance of relevant agents to allow that some of their content is determined by their environment. Yet this aside, we doubt that Miller’s theology provides an account of the way in which theists typically claim that items of God’s knowledge concerning creatures are *causative*—e.g. the thought that “God became Incarnate since He knew man’s sin”. Since, however, on Miller’s account, God’s knowledge does not involve any unique internal state in God, but just a relation between God and creatures independent of any such state, it seems difficult to understand how this relation can be the *cause* of any further divine action. A potential response here is that strictly speaking God’s knowledge is not the cause of anything, but the fact that some creaturely situation is known by God means that another is likely to occur, since all creatures exist to reflect God’s goodness as a result of His (rather “general”) will that this occur, and yet the existence of some creaturely circumstance makes another circumstance more likely to fulfil this role (e.g. the Incarnation might be more needful given sin). Still, one might think that this presents a portrait of a God who is far less intimately concerned with His creation than Scripture suggests.

Finally, Kremer explores Miller’s attempt to show that the “causal” nature of divine omniscience does not undermine creaturely freedom. Kremer mentions in a footnote Miller’s rather unique rejection of Molinism on the grounds that it assumes a picture of “choice” in divine cognition which is alien to Subsistent Existence—it would have been interesting to hear more about this. Miller actually tries to make use of the distinctive feature of divine causality explored above, which suggests that God creates all things *ex nihilo*, rather than “causing” states of affairs by acting on entities with prior existence. To express this notion, Miller again makes use of the internal/external operator distinction—God’s causation of creatures is properly expressed using only the latter. Thus God does not e.g. “cause the nurse to raise Socrates’ leg”, but rather that “(the nurse raises Socrates’ leg)” (117). This account of divine action has two positive consequences. Firstly, it means that creaturely and divine causality are not “in competition” as occasionalism or concurrentism might suggest: rather, they work on different levels (perhaps as in literature the author and the characters both cause events in different ways). Secondly, it means that any necessity that God’s will be fulfilled does not deprive creatures of their freedom by imposing necessity on their

actions, because their actions are caused by God *as free actions*, which is possible due to the unique kind of divine causation involving “external” operators. The idea here is presumably that whilst one cannot make a creature with (libertarian freedom) choose *y*, one can make it that (a creature with libertarian freedom chooses *y*), just as authors can apparently “make” their literary creations decide certain matters freely. Kremer notes, however, that there is a difficulty with Miller’s position regarding responsibility for sin—surely responsibility for sin lies with God as well as with creatures? Here, Miller seems to maintain that God can escape responsibility by not “willing” that the intentions which make actions sinful exist *per se*, but by nevertheless willing that the actions happen anyway. Since the latter entails the former, Miller should probably bite the bullet and concede some divine responsibility for sin.

In his final chapter, Kremer discusses several criticisms of Miller’s work, including a response to his argument for the existence of God by Graham Oppy, criticism of his use of “analogy” in God-talk by Katherine Rogers, a worry about the ability of Miller’s God to explain the existence of the universe by B. N. Langtry, and a discussion of the relationship between Subsistent Existence and God as presented in Scripture. This final piece of the book feels slightly rushed, as Kremer sketches and then rebuts objections to Miller which seem rather disconnected and worthy of further consideration. However, in fairness to Kremer, Miller’s work can only receive more rounded criticism when it is better known, and the earlier chapters of the book serve this aim well.

In all, *Analysis of Existence* is most successful as a comprehensive yet concise summary of Miller’s thoughts on God. Sometimes, however, Kremer seems to overlook tensions within Miller’s works which are not easily resolved, but which doubtless leave room for further development.