

Book Review

James Haag *Emergent Freedom: Naturalizing Free Will*

Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht: Göttingen, 2008. 247 pp. \$95.00, ISBN: 3525569882

The curriculum of the medieval university was structured so that the student who reached the apex of scholarly achievement—the doctorate in theology was the longest and most arduous program—had first graduated from the school of arts with training in natural philosophy. Grounding in natural philosophy was considered an essential component of a theologian’s training, and allowed him (they were always men) to freely discuss matters concerning the physical world. I refer to this history because the same sort of interdisciplinary theological engagement is what is so refreshing about James Haag’s *Emergent Freedom*, a work that is based on his dissertation. Moving between discussions of philosophy, evolution, metaphysics, and theology, Haag shows that it is still possible to train theologians who are able to engage issues that arise beyond the safe insularity of one’s own religious tradition.

The main argument of the book is that emergence theory offers conceptual resources to provide new answers to unyielding philosophical debates on the topic of free will. The problem with those debates is that both sides are committed to substance-based ontologies, and are thus forced to explain agent causation in terms of efficient causation alone, which puts one at a loss to explain our own sense of freedom of choice. The value for the reader is not necessarily in Haag’s conclusion—the shortcomings of substance metaphysics has been a recurrent theme in modern philosophy from the earliest objections to “the mechanical philosophy” down to the process and pragmatist traditions today—but the manner in which he presents his case. Haag argues for the conclusion using a combination of historical argument, philosophical analysis, and scientific theory in a way that I found eminently plausible, even if, as Haag himself freely acknowledges, his own position is only an initial step towards solving the problem of free will.

The first chapter outlines the assumptions that guide the book. Haag commits upfront to a form of “epistemological naturalism,” the idea that one should not attempt to explain the natural world by postulating explanations that rely upon supernatural causes. He also endorses Wentzel van Huyssteen’s theory of post-foundationalist rationality, an epistemological theory that offers grounds for theological reflection while avoiding the extremes of absolutist certainty and skeptical relativism. The second chapter provides a brief historical overview of the

rise and decline of emergence theorists in early twentieth-century British philosophy.

After the stage-setting of the first two chapters, Haag's argument begins in earnest in Chapter 3, where he attempts to bring clarity to the overlapping and tangled meanings given to the concept of emergence. He classifies the burgeoning literature on the topic into three categories: instants of emergence, theories of emergence, and dynamics of emergence. The first category describes works whose major goal is to identify the characteristics of phenomena in Nature that cannot be explained by reductionism. The second category refers to various attempts to provide a philosophical account of emergence theory, and here Haag distinguishes further between several options in the literature. The third category refers to attempts to develop the scientific underpinnings of emergence theory, of which the work of Terrence Deacon (who was on Haag's dissertation committee) is the only example. The reason why Haag puts Deacon's work in the third category seems to be that it tends not to engage the standard philosophical debates of the second category.

Skipping Chapter 4 for the moment, Chapter 5 provides an historical overview of the shift in understanding on causation in the early modern period. Whereas medieval scholastics embraced Aristotle's robust philosophy of causation, Haag argues that most early modern philosophers restricted causation to efficient causation alone. In other words, they excluded purpose-based explanations in favor of the view that all causes are the result of the actions of something external to the agent, which was a result of the mechanistic view of nature that emerged in the scientific revolution. A drawback of the historical chapters is that they read less like a history and more like an encyclopedia of major early modern philosophers, because a few pages or so are devoted to each figure in isolation from each other. To be fair, however, a proper history of the subject would require a dissertation unto itself.

Chapter 6 provides an overview of philosophical debates about free will, focusing in particular on how shared assumptions about the nature of causation underlie unyielding debates between compatibilists (who believe free will and determinism can coexist) and incompatibilists. By accepting the assumptions of early modern philosophy, Haag argues that philosophers will never be able to make progress in reconciling dueling intuitions about nature and human nature.

Chapter 7 explains how emergence theory challenges the ontological assumption that the world is composed of static particles. Shifting ontology helps to reframe concepts such as will, representation, and action that are essential for any satisfying account of free will. Haag argues that freedom should not be seen as the ability of a thinking substance to will states of affairs into existence, but the reduction of external constraints on self-organizing systems. This constructive proposal forms only a small portion of the book, further spurring the reader beyond the false comforts of reductionism even while admitting that there is much work left to do.

Chapter 4 and the postscript engage theologically with emergence theory, using this updated theory of nature to reflect on the idea of God. In the former chapter, Haag presents an overarching theological position that he calls Dynamic

Theological Naturalism (or DTN). Haag's commitment to epistemological naturalism renders his theology naturalistic on the whole. He argues, for example, that theologians produce imaginative constructions of God in light of limit experiences, not supernatural revelation. Following the work of Gordon Kaufmann, Haag argues that reflections on these limit experiences require that we abandon personalist conceptions of God the creator in favor of saying that God is creativity itself (i.e., that process that leads to novelty in the world). The postscript briefly focuses on theological accounts of human nature in light of emergence theory, endorsing Philip Hefner's concept of created co-creator because it acknowledges our biological "conditionedness" while allowing for human agency.

Many readers, I suspect, will want Haag to elaborate further on the theological portion of the book, specifically about DTN and his conception of God. He argues for naturalism by saying that the traditional view that pictures God as lying beyond nature lacks any convincing reason for it (88), and its dualistic assumptions violate his commitments to epistemological naturalism. Such an assertion requires more development, especially if theologians are part of the intended audience. Reimagining God as creativity is an intriguing idea; but it is not clear what creativity means within the context of Haag's version of emergence theory. I could not find reference to creativity elsewhere in his work, leaving one to wonder why it should play such a prominent role in theology if it does not first play a role in our science. Other readers will also want Haag to address the way that his concept of God resembles and differs from process models. Such comments do not imperil Haag's argument, but rather suggest paths for him to explore more fully in the future.

The real value of Haag's book is the way he combines historical and scientific arguments to diagnose the key failure of substance metaphysics: its impoverished view of causality. I recommend it to anyone who wants to understand the rationale and the specifics of emergence theory and to see its promise for addressing the central philosophical problems of the modern age.

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