Booknotes

Although philosophers talk these days more than once they did about the illumination works of literature can throw on philosophical topics, there remains more than a degree of disciplinary demarcation when it comes to the enterprise itself. So, we imagine, few within the philosophical world will have come across *Simone Weil's Apologetic Use of Literature; Her Christological Interpretations of Ancient Greek Texts* by Marie Cabaud Meaney, published as it is as an 'Oxford Modern Languages and Literature Monograph' (Oxford University Press, 2007), and 'apologetic' and 'ancient Greek' will probably not have helped its philosophical dissemination either. This is a pity, because here is a book which, like its subject, does show how literature can take us deeper into metaphysical and ethical areas than many works of metaphysics and ethics, and in different ways; literature does so, when it does, because it shows what it might be and feel like to live with a particular metaphysical or ethical vision, what it would be for such a vision to inform one's life.

The works on which Weil and Meaney focus are *The Iliad*, Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Electra*, and Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*. Weil's great essay on *The Iliad* is by now fairly well known philosophically, as it has been referred to a number of times by philosophers who are not in the least concerned to explore its Christological implications (despite the fact that its English translation is in a book called *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*). And indeed, as Meaney points out, its spiritual meaning is not so much in what it explicitly says as in the stance Homer takes to what he describes. This stance is extraordinarily even handed between the Greeks and the Trojans, and shows, without sentimentality or illusion, a world in which men are treated as things and women as booty, and life being lived, as Hector's was at the end, 'far from hot baths', as Homer puts it. Weil's point of view is that the moment of grace in Book 24 notwithstanding (when Priam and Achilles momentarily recognise each other as fellow-sufferers), this is 'un tableau de l'absence de Dieu'. What Homer shows, as Weil says at the end of her essay, is that it is only those who have learned to know the empire of might (as the French were learning at the time Weil wrote), and not to respect it who are 'capable of love and justice'. But, as Meaney points out, a pure

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being of this sort, who might bring an end to the hubris and destruction we see in the Trojan War is not to be found in *The Iliad* itself.

According to Simone Weil, Sophocles was the Greek poet whose inspiration was the most visibly Christian, so much so that he was (in her view) more Christian than any tragic poet in the last twenty centuries. On this *prima facie* somewhat extraordinary claim Meaney comments 'This, for Weil becomes particularly clear in his *Antigone*, since this tragedy shows it is more important to obey God than men. Furthermore, Plato is a mystic, and the Greeks possessed unseen depths of spirituality. One must immerse oneself in the spiritual life these texts propose… (For the Greeks) philosophizing, especially with Socrates and Plato, presupposed a readiness to change, the wish to know oneself, and openness to truth. This is the attitude Weil desired from her readers, particularly when reading Greek tragedy.' But all this being so, one wonders whether 'apologetic' is quite the right term to describe Weil's Christological enterprise. If she saw intimations of Christianity among the ancient Greeks, then equally the Gospels are the continuation of a stream of thought we can find already in Homer – as Weil says. And with her hatred of ecclesiastical dogmatism and power, her dislike of missionary activity, and her conviction that God must appear in all places and times, Weil's apologetics would be something far more generous than what normally sails under that flag.

Antigone is regarded by Weil as an 'etre pur' who is able to absorb evil without passing it on to others. Creon claims that there is no justice or piety outside the city, and that security depends on his rule. For him Antigone is mad, and the love she professes is folly. But as we know, Creon finds no security, but is broken by the necessity of fate to which all are subject. What Sophocles wants his audience to recognise is the absolute supernatural law beyond that of secular power, and, in Weil's terms, that 'it is only what comes from heaven that can make a real mark on earth.' (Many philosophers would, of course, hotly dispute this; to which the response must be that, if Weil's interpretation is sustainable, *Antigone* shows us in a manner thicker than philosophical argument what is to live and think in those terms, as a preparation for any fully realised argument in the area.)

Antigone is a victim, and feels abandoned. There is no need to underline the Christological parallel, which is also very evident in *Prometheus Bound*. It is crucial at this point to recognise that Aeschylus' Prometheus is not Goethe's or Shelley's. He is not, or not principally, a defier of Zeus. After having helped Zeus against the Titans, acting as his wisdom, Prometheus becomes principally a lover of humans. He gives us fire and knowledge, and then suffers

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terrible and humiliating punishment from Zeus for disobeying him in this respect. But (to cut short a long analysis) perhaps in what he does, and in the punishment he suffers, he is really carrying out the deeper will of Zeus. And perhaps in being abandoned and tortured by Zeus and in his sense of utter abandonment, he is representing the road all must tread before any proper enlightenment. Not surprisingly Weil refers here to the Aeschylean theme, so prominent in *Agamemnon* of wisdom only being acquired through suffering. She also draws many pertinent comparisons between Prometheus and Job and, even more, between the relation between Prometheus and Zeus and that between Christ and the Father, and on the significance of the Cross. If, as Meaney correctly notes, Weil tends to play down Prometheus's anger towards Zeus, in what we know of the lost *Prometheus Unbound*, it seems there is eventual reconciliation between Zeus and Prometheus. Nor can it be said that Weil's reading of *Prometheus Bound* is in any simplistic sense apologetic. As Meaney shows, it allows her to wrestle with some of the most intractable problems faced by any theistic view of the world, problems as implicit in ancient Greek thought as in Christian.

The discussion of *Electra* is the shortest. It may make most sense if seen in its context, for, like the French in 1942, Electra can do little against her opponents. The temptation for her is to keep silent and compromise, like her sister Chrysosthemis; seduction by mass movements and submersion in their seeming irresistibility is what the individual has to fight. In short, as Electra waits for her brother, all the individual can do is to wait on God. As with Antigone, there is no third way: 'To long for God and renounce all the rest, that alone can save us'. And, as might by now be predicted, Weil also offers a mystical interpretation of Electra's waiting for Orestes, as a type of the *attente* of the soul subjected to the dark night of abandonment (*attente* being an aspect of Weil's thought much taken up by Iris Murdoch, among others).

Meaney calls Weil a strong reader, and she is to be thanked for reading Weil with us. There is no doubt that these strong readings of the ancient Greeks are rewarding and original on a number of levels, including the philosophical, despite their occasional wilfulness. A question, though, is raised by the whole enterprise. On the surface, what we see is Weil reading these famous Greek texts in an unfamiliar Christian way. But at a deeper level, if there is any plausibility in what she is doing, she is showing that Christian doctrines and attitudes are more universal than one might have supposed; *pace* Nietzsche and other anti-Christian philologists these very same attitudes are present *mutatis mutandis* in these 'pagan' texts. At the very

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least, this puts into question the uniqueness of Christianity. Add to that the heterodox nature (from a Christian perspective) of some of Simone Weil's central ideas (on necessity and theodicy, for example), and what we have here may be something rather more complex and potentially rather more fruitful than what might at first glance be expected from what is called a study in Christological apologetics. Meaney and Weil go far beyond that.

In contrast to Marie Cabaud Meaney there is no doubt that philosophers will have noted Thomas Nagel's new collection, also published by the Oxford University Press (in this case in in 2010). And to the extent that about a third of *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament: Essays 2002–8* is on the subject of religion, there is a degree of overlap. Nagel, though, is no Simone Weil, and is keen to assure us (reassure us?) that he is an atheist, and to all appearance devoid of the religious temperament. That being so, what he has to say is the more striking. He finds the normal humanistic attempts to find meaning for one's life inadequate and he thinks that a place should be found in public (i.e. state) schools for at least a 'non-committal discussion' of intelligent design (ID).

To take the latter point first, Nagel's position is that 'it is difficult to find in the accessible literature the grounds for the evolutionary biologists' confidence' that the evolution of life came about through random mutations in DNA, each of which enhanced fitness. Further, the origin of life remains 'a complete scientific mystery', and cannot be explained in terms of the laws of chemistry and particle physics. This being so, intelligent design must be a possibility, particularly for someone who believes in God. However, in the 2005 decision in the US courts banning ID from public schools, the judge made his decision against ID precisely because Michael Behe acknowledged in court that ID would be more plausible for someone who believed in God. But, comments Nagel, 'this is just common sense and the opposite is just as true. Evolutionary theory as a complete explanation of the development of life is more plausible to someone who does not believe in god than to someone who does. Either both of them are science, or neither of them is.' ID should be excluded from schools if it were bad or dead science, but so far all its opponents have come up with are 'necessarily speculative proposals' about how the problems alluded to by the proponents of ID might be handled by evolutionary theory.

In the book's title essay Nagel flirts with the idea that the natural order has a teleological drive to generate beings such as us that are both part of it, and able to understand it. Nagel thinks that this would give us a more satisfactory sense of the meaning of our

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existence than is available to humanism, which would locate the source of value in the world in us, as human beings. Nagel, by contrast, considers what he call a Platonic sense that the development of beings such as us, to whom the universe is intelligible, is non-accidental, 'part of the natural evolution of the cosmos'. On the other hand, not being religious, this rejection of mechanistic conception of the universe, which has dominated modern thought in the scientific age, does not, he says, 'postulate intention or purpose behind one's existence and relation to the universe'. Quite how, in the absence of intention somewhere along the line, Nagel's picture would differ from a basically naturalistic stance remains puzzling, however evocative it might be to see 'each of us' as 'part of the lengthy process of the universe gradually waking up' as he puts it.

But another, and different puzzle, concerns some omissions from the published version of 'Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament', as compared to its PDF version, dated September 11th, 2005, and still available on the internet. In the internet version, Nagel says 'the probability of a nonintentional, nonteleological bias in physics leading to the existence of life is no greater than the probability that life should emerge by chance'. There is, then a gap for religion to fill, at least until a better naturalistic explanation is found – though Nagel does interestingly comment that a creationist account of how life happened would be analogous to dualism in the philosophy of mind, in both cases essentially purposeless matter being infused with life or consciousness from outside.

In the internet version, but not in the book, Nagel also says this: 'Most people are believers or nonbelievers in the existence of God not as a result of argument, but in a much more basic way. They either see or experience God's presence in the world and in their lives or they don't'. And he follows Plantinga is saying that whether or not belief in God, construed in this way, is warranted or not depends on whether God exists. But just as in the case of our belief in the physical world, we should not think of ourselves as moving from subjective data and then inferring to God or the physical world as the only possible explanation of these data. Of course in the case of God (as opposed to physical objects) reasonable people disagree, but, says Nagel, the two 'diametrically opposed attitudes toward the natural order are both reasonable.' Or, to be more precise, he says this on the internet; which raises an interesting question both about the scope of a *booknote*, and also about the ethics of scholarly discourse. How legitimate is it to comment on things an author says in one form of publication which he has withheld from another – perhaps especially when the withheld comments are of great interest?

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