Booknotes, July 2009

It is well known that St Anselm spoke of *fidens quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding. But how exactly is this search to be understood? Most philosophers have interpreted the search as being for rational foundations of faith, for a grounding in natural reason for what is believed through faith. As a classic instance of this interpretation, St Thomas Aquinas's so-called Five Ways are often mentioned, as providing some necessary support in reason for faith in God, which would otherwise be ungrounded.

But if that is how Aquinas saw his Five Ways in this way, how are we to understand his statement that 'as other sciences do not argue in proof of their principles, but argue from their principles to demonstrate other truths in these sciences: so this doctrine does not argue in proof of its principles, which are the articles of faith, but from them goes on to prove something else' (*Summa Theologiae* 1. 1. 8, resp)? Nicholas Wolterstorff, who quotes this passage in his *Practices of Belief: Selected Essays, Vol II* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), says that Aquinas's dictum applies to the articles of faith, for which we need revelation, as opposed to faith's preambles (the existence of God and the like), for which demonstrations are available.

Be it as it is with Aquinas, for the humanist scholar and theologian Jean Cauvin (known to us as Calvin), the understanding which faith seeks is an understanding of what follows once the dictates of faith are accepted, rather than a proof of the pillars of faith. For in Calvin's and Wolterstorff's 'reformed epistemology', being rational does not necessarily imply having a rational foundation for what one believes. As Wolterstorff develops this thought, any attempt to ground one's beliefs necessarily involves taking some other beliefs as true or reliable, which from the point of view of a rational foundationalist, such as Locke, is bound to be arbitrary or infinitely regressive. Some things will just have to be accepted, without foundation, if the process ofjustification is ever tobe completed! And according to Wolterstorff science no more fulfils what he sees as the unfulfillable demands for justification of Locke and his followers for rational foundations than does religion.

Wolterstorff takes heart from the approach to epistemology of Thomas Reid, according to which we human beings have certain innate dispositions to believe what we see and are taught (a principle

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of credulity), along with a capacity for governing the deliverances of these dispositions; in their regard, we should operate a principle of innocent until proved guilty. So, for example, Wolterstorff makes much of the (true) story of 'Virginia', a faculty member in a top-flight American university who has a succession of powerful experiences, which as a Christian, she takes to be of God speaking to her. She does indeed consult others about these experiences, including a psychologist, but neither she nor the psychologist can find any good reason for not believing that they are not what she thinks they are. For her, in Wolterstorff's view, she is perfectly rational in adhering to her belief in these experiences. Others will disagree (most of her secularist peers, presumably), but why should this impugn Virginia's entitlement? After all, her critics will have their own ungrounded assumptions, including naturally a disposition to set the bar of rational belief at such a level that science creeps under, while religion doesn't. One feels that one has been here before, and that maybe that our current criteria of rationality are no sounder than were the logical positivists' criteria of meaningfulness.

Calvin, as reported by Wolsterstorff, believed that God has placed in us all a natural disposition to believe in Him, which would fit nicely into a Reidian framework. It might also be true, but it has the difficulty that since Calvin's time in the majority of intellectuals, this particular disposition to believe seems ineffective. Can this obfuscation of our natural theistic religiousness be put down to the effects of original sin, as Calvin would have had it? But if original sin is as pervasive as Calvin thought, what might this tell us about the general reliability of our Reidian dispositions to believe? Innocent until proved guilty is not quite what we are taught by the doctrine of original sin.

However we treat the dilemma raised by Calvin's thinking on the basis of faith, it is interesting that Wolterstorff is not the only contemporary commentator who wants us to think seriously about Calvin. In her novels (*Home* and *Gilead)* and in her essays (*The Death of Adam*), Marilynne Robinson takes Calvin very seriously indeed, apart from anything else inveighing strongly against the tendency since Max Weber to caricature the great reformer as if he were some sort of early apologist for capitalism and advocate of misogyny, rather than as what he was, one of the great humanist scholars of his time. More generally Robinson is concerned to rehabilitate our understanding of humanity against the tendency of modern intellectuals, including Darwin, Nietzsche and Freud and their multifarious contemporary followers, to denigrate our capacities and achievements in the name of science, and to see them as quite other and baser than how

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they seem on the surface. This task of humane rehabilitation was pursued in her Terry lectures, now published as *Absence of Mind* (Yale University Press, 2010). The focus of this trenchantly written book is human consciousness and its works – topics which Robinson shows clearly enough are systematically mis-represented by E.O.Wilson, Dennett, Pinker and the like. Arguing powerfully in favour of a unifying and reflective self, Robinson concludes that with human self-consciousness something quite new may have entered the universe, a change as she puts it that 'gradualism could not predict', something 'terrible and glorious'.

Religion is not Robinson's central topic in her new book, but she is adamant that our post-metaphysical, post-enlightenment attitudes are deeply flawed in comparison to earlier, even pre-scientific modes of understanding: 'It would surely be difficult to condescend to religion when it is articulate in terms accessible to Western understanding. An honest inquirer into its nature might spend an afternoon listening to Bach or Palestrina, or reading Sophocles or the Book of Job.'

One imagines that this thought would find favour with Jurgen Habermas, whose 2007 conversations with some Jesuit philosophers have just been published under the title *An Awareness of What is Missing; Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Polity Press, 2010). An unkind critic, having read this short book, might feel that precisely what is missing is a clear and unambiguous statement of what is missing. Less unkindly, it seems that part of what is thought by Habermas and his interlocutors to be missing in secular reason is both the ability to foster and reinforce human solidarity, and, more fundamentally, in the face of postmetaphysical defeatism about reason a capacity to question and legitimate its own procedures. It cannot be said that either of these points is developed in sufficient depth in the Polity volume to counter some pretty obvious rejoinders about the type of solidarity and legitimation certain very noisy forms of religion offer. Nor is it entirely clear what exactly Habermas wants reason to get from religion, beyond a recognition of its roots in earlier forms of religious thinking. But, along with what appears to be a degree of convergence between Habermas and Wolsterstorff on the tendency of secular reason to lack self-awareness, it is interesting to see in these three very different books some thoughtful intellectuals demurring from the secularism which had until recently reigned virtually unchallenged among the self-professed thinking classes. A sign of the times, maybe?

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