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A reconnaissance of theology and epistemology

1 Theological integrity between reductionism and positivism

The idiomatic phrase 'Christian thinking' in the sense of theological cognition means to identify something specific. Its fundamental problem has traditionally been stated something like this: 'How can human discourse refer meaningfully to a transcendent, incomprehensible and hidden God?' Theologians of up to a generation ago often called this the most basic 'formal' question of theology, and by this they meant to designate the possibility of an introductory theological exercise, in some sense logically prior to the study of specific Christian doctrines per se, in which the question just stated, or the even more concise formulation 'How is Christian theology possible?', is given serious consideration as a problem in its own right. As a preliminary or 'formal' exercise it was often referred to more technically as a 'propaedeutic' or a 'prolegomenon' to Christian doctrine. Yet this was not meant in any temporally linear sense as an *actual* condition or prerequisite for the possibility of engaging meaningfully in theological endeavours. (After all, theology is often practised very fruitfully without a great deal of attention to the question of how the theological enterprise itself is possible.) It was meant, rather, simply to identify, on a level more general than the specific doctrines, certain fundamental parameters or indispensable conditions of thinking within which those doctrines come meaningfully to be engaged. In other words, although this exercise is not an actual methodological prerequisite through which proper theological engagement must always pass, it is nonetheless an indispensable orientation to which theology must again and again return in order to test its orthodoxy and assure its meaningfulness.

However, as indispensable as this kind of orientation is, it is clearly evident that the formal question per se has fallen into disuse in the last several decades. There are several reasons for this, two among which are most prominent. The first has to do with the by now tedious and standardly intransigent stand-off between 'natural theology' and 'revelational theology', to which this formal kind of questioning has invariably seemed to lead in the past century.[1] This of course has been most prominently manifest in what many would today agree have become the rather unimaginative and stereotypical polarizations between Thomism and Barthianism as the main exemplars of each. (Recent scholarship suggests increasingly that Aquinas and Barth may share a great deal more in common on these formal questions than the traditional scholarly consensus has been able or willing to acknowledge.) At any rate, few today would deny the tiresome predictability and present stagnancy of that stand-off. The second reason for the abandonment of this kind of questioning has to do with the growing tendency, in an array of disciplines including theology, simply to deflate any questions that appear to lead to irresolvable conflict (the deeper 'post-modern' worry here is that irresolvable conflict tends to yield 'dualistic' answers) and to declare those questions themselves, by very reason of their intractability, to be misstated or 'un-genuine'. If one adds to this the prevalent perception that these 'formal' questions *must* be anachronistic by virtue of their being framed in the dualistic language of 'form' and 'content', it is easy to see how the prospects of any such propaedeutic theological enterprise have come to be viewed as doubly foredoomed.

There is a third reason, I think, for the current avoidance of this kind of questioning: namely, that in a theological environment where the most visible theological-philosophical exchange often takes place amid such qualifiers as radical, startling, subversive, erotic or profound, the character of what I am outlining here as an enquiry into Christian thinking or theological reasoning may initially appear to be somewhat drier fare. Yet I hope to show that although the present focus, at least initially, will be around the rather less seductive terminology of epistemology and consciousness, reference and intention, anti-realism and realism, act and being, it need by no means signify any less important or less relevant, nor certainly for that matter any less interesting or stimulating a study. Indeed there is a

1. Roughly, natural theology has typically been seen as operating on the basis of a continuum between reason (or nature) and revelation, and revelational theology on the basis of a humanly unbridgeable break between the two.

growing group of thinkers today, even, or perhaps especially, those proceeding from continental influences, who demonstrate forcefully that a reclamation of the more traditional if currently less fashionable philosophical concerns of modesty, attentiveness, clarity, logical consistency and integrity, and so on, need by no means suggest merely unimaginative 'incremental adjustments to a work already in place or positions already established'.[2] On the contrary, approaches that seek robustly to revive attention to these kinds of virtues can be strong arguments against 'the assumption – one that is virtually constitutive of the modern conception of what it means to be a philosopher on the continent – that originality and, yes, truth are always and only the result of a rush to extremes or a radicalization of thought'.[3] There are similar and equally compelling trends currently underway in analytical philosophy.

Whatever the reasons for its having fallen out of favour, I want to argue for a return to this kind of questioning on the grounds that we ignore it or deflate it at great peril, more specifically at the very imperilling of orthodoxy itself. Yet with a view to avoiding the standard polarizations and stalemates, as just described, I want to ask the question in a somewhat different way. I propose to reframe the 'formal' question of Christian thinking – 'How can human discourse refer meaningfully to a transcendent God?' – as a twofold demand for integrity: a demand for the integrity of reason, or rational integrity, and a demand for the integrity of transcendence, or revelational integrity. More specifically, instead of pegging the varying approaches to theological reasoning in the typical conflicting manner at opposing poles (natural/revelational, Thomist/Barthian etc.), I plan rather to speak in terms of two polarities or extremes between which orthodox theology properly seeks to navigate its way. I shall designate these extremes by the terms 'reductionism' and 'positivism', which correspond exactly to the emphasis of one kind of integrity at the expense or to the exclusion of the other.

Reductionism in its most basic definition is simply the explanation of one thing in terms of another. It can occur in any number of ways and contexts. So, for example, in the cognitive sciences reductionism occurs when it is claimed that the success of psychological theories can be fully accounted for by neuroscientific theories, or more basically that

2. Stephen Adam Schwartz in the introduction to an important new book by Vincent Descombes, *The Mind's Provisions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. xiv.
3. Schwartz in Descombes, *The Mind's Provisions*, p. xiv.

psychological states *just are* bodily states. The same sort of claim is made by radically reductive materialist philosophers of mind (and some functionalists), who maintain that the mind *just is* the brain or that consciousness itself can be fully accounted for by physical functions inside the head. Another form of reductionism is logicism, which explains mathematics as a sub-discipline of logic, and so on. But, for philosophical realists at least, the broadest and most pervasive kind of philosophical reductionism is *idealism*. Idealism is deemed to be reductive because, in any of its historically varying degrees and guises, it at bottom does not want to allow for the full perceiver-independent integrity of a world outside the mind, but rather always demands to make the explanation of the world in some way necessarily dependent on the perceiver. Idealism thus reduces what the realist maintains is a world that exists in certain ways, whether it is perceived as such or not, to something the explanation of which is, in one way or another, necessarily dependent on the sensory and mental perceptions ('ideas') of the perceiver. In this light then, when we come to the analysis of religion or religious discourse, we find that the most common form of reductionism occurs precisely in this idealistic way: that is, in the explanation of religious phenomena or the content of theological statements in terms of 'projection theories', whether of psychological or sociological origin, for example as wish-fulfilment or fear-coping mechanisms along, say, Freudian, Feuerbachian or Weberian lines, and so on. All of these remain essentially forms of idealism inasmuch as they make religious experience and the subject matter of theological statements at bottom a product of mental or psycho-social processes or ideas.

However, it is important to recognize that for theology, unlike philosophy, it is not only idealism that can be reductionist in this sense. Philosophical realism or realist treatments of religion and theology can also qualify as forms of reductionism, even when they seek fastidiously to avoid the charge of naturalism. One sees this, for example, in different ways in the work Paul Tillich or John Hick, where religious transcendence, characterized as the 'ground of being' or as 'ultimate reality', is indeed given a kind of 'real' or perceiver-independent supremacy and autonomy. But even though they thus manage to avoid idealism (mind-dependence), what both of these approaches finally leave us with is a view of religious transcendence that in the end is still explainable in terms of something like a 'world enigma'. This effectively commits the same reductionist error as the idealistic projection theories, if in a somewhat different way, for it reduces transcendence merely to something mysterious within

immanence (e.g., ground of being, ultimate reality) and thus violates the integrity of transcendence. In more current language, the error made in this 'realist' sense is that of construing the reality of God merely in terms of 'ontological difference', as if God's transcendent otherness were expressible as just another higher and more mysterious version of immanentist otherness or difference; or in other words as if God's otherness could be understood in terms of the same ontological difference that exists between me and you. At bottom then, the first kind of error or extreme that orthodox theology seeks to avoid is the reduction of theological subject matter to any kind of natural explanation, even if that for which explanation is sought remains insolubly mysterious (world enigma). The point is that reductionism by definition, whether in the form of idealism or realism, compromises the integrity of transcendence, in the endeavour to make theological discourse about transcendence genuinely meaningful or referential.

The error at the other extreme is positivism. Positivism gives theological subject matter a positive autonomy and authority that is set totally apart from any sort of natural (roughly, rational or empirical) scrutiny. Or in other words, it is to 'posit' transcendence or revelation in such a way that it remains fully authoritative over matters of reason and sense and yet also fully immune from the justificatory demands or jurisdictions of these. It is precisely in this sense that the logical positivism of twentieth century analytical philosophy was 'positivistic': it posited the inviolability of its two principles of cognitive meaningfulness – that is, statements are meaningful or intelligible if they are either empirically verifiable or analytically true (true by definition) – even though these principles themselves are neither empirically verifiable nor analytically true. It is this same tendency within theology that Bonhoeffer claims to detect in Karl Barth, when he accuses Barth of engaging in a 'positivism of revelation'. Again, it is debatable to what extent Barth is really guilty of this (perhaps any more than Aquinas is of reductionism) even if he may tend in that direction.[4] But the preliminary point has been made sufficiently clearly: positivism in theology is any position that seeks to uphold the integrity of transcendence (or revelation) by giving up the integrity of reason or of natural enquiry. Against this backdrop, the aim of the present study is to preserve integrity

4. A more obvious example of this extreme can be seen in what has come to be known as the Radical Orthodoxy project. Barth at least accords reason an authority in its own sphere whereas Radical Orthodoxy (at least in John Milbank) sees reason as self-destructive when it is not rooted in revelation or transcendence. (I have actually argued elsewhere that Radical Orthodoxy tends, relatedly, more toward a kind of gnosticism than positivism.)

on both levels: that is, without being drawn to the extremes at either end, to which emphasis of one kind of integrity at the expense of the other will inevitably lead.

One further introductory point must be made here with regard to the term 'meaningful' or 'meaningful reference' (which has already occurred several times in these opening paragraphs) with respect to the way I will be employing it in this book, especially within the context of speaking meaningfully of God. The point, most concisely, is that the word 'meaningful' can be used intelligibly in the present context without requiring a prior full-fledged exposition of a theory of meaning. For all that the term purports to designate here is the possibility of 'aboutness' or intentional reference in human discourse, and this is something entirely different from the more technical and abstract metalinguistic concerns about the 'meaning of meaning' as explored within the philosophy of language and linguistic theory. These questions are indeed important, perhaps especially so for theology where nowadays scant work is being done in that field. But insofar as they seek to approach the problem of meaning on a more general and abstract level, detached from human discourse (even if somehow claiming to be inclusive of it), those kinds of questions aim at something fundamentally different from the focus of the present study. In fact, the sense in which I am equating 'meaningfulness' with 'aboutness' or 'intentional reference' here, or making these terms univocal or identical, is not really asking about the 'meaning of meaning' in any interesting sense at all. The equation rather expresses something merely trivially true or tautological: that is, something that is true simply by the definition of these terms themselves as they pertain to human discourse. For example, when I ask you what you *mean* by a certain statement I am simply asking you to explain or to give a further account of what you *intend* to *refer* to by that statement, or what you intend that statement to express or to be about; and we do not need to come to a prior theoretical agreement on the 'meaning of meaning' for our discursive exchange to be successful or for there to be a genuinely communicative meeting of minds around a particular subject matter, whether agreeing or disagreeing.[5]

In fact we may engage successfully or intelligibly in discourse even if we disagree on virtually all the standard aspects of a theory of meaning.

5. It is important to note in the same vein that by asking about the meaningfulness of a statement in this trivial or tautological sense, I am not so much concerned with its truth or falsity but rather only with its intelligibility as an assertion of reference.

Thus, for example, we may disagree, in what is perhaps the most traditional sense, on whether the meanings of statements are to be defined at bottom by their 'truth conditions' (i.e., by correspondence to 'what is the case' in the world) or in terms of their 'use' (i.e., by the coherence of a statement within a certain context or worldview): in other words, I may be a realist and you an idealist about the theory of meaning. We may disagree further, and even more metalinguistically, about whether meaning is centred in some universal structure of language or in a universal structure of innate learning capacities, or in neither of these; or on whether meaning is to be assessed according to the 'intension' or the 'extension' of an expression; or on whether sentence-meaning or word-meaning should have priority in a theory of meaning, and so on.[6] We may have opposing views on any or all of these legitimate theoretical questions. But none of these differences will in the least affect the tautological or trivially true nature of the claim that when you ask me what I mean by a certain statement you are concerned *by definition* with what I understand that statement to be about; nor will our theoretical differences affect my ability to understand the question as such. Indeed, our very ability to disagree in theory on these matters, and to express ourselves accordingly, already presupposes a shared understanding of discursive meaningfulness as intentional reference.[7]

In other words, the claim I am making here is really only a very minimal one, one that serves merely to emphasize that it will be entirely from within this tautological or true-by-definition sense of aboutness or intentional reference that the question of meaningfulness in theological discourse will come to be posed in this book. Nevertheless, far from this 'trivial truth' making the theological task any easier, the very clarification of it as such only serves to set our initial problem into even sharper relief. For *transcendence*, *by definition*, can never be a 'referent' of reasoning in the way that *meaningful* discourse, *by definition* ('trivially'), demands that it must be. (Or conversely anything that could be a referent of thought would by that

6. See, e.g., Donald Davidson, 'Truth and Meaning' in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1984), pp. 17–36. See also Hilary Putnam, 'The Meaning of "Meaning"', in, *Language, Mind and Knowledge*, Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science Vol. VII (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), pp. 131–2. 'Intension' roughly defines meaning around the idea that sets of things have associated 'concepts' that they actually instantiate individually. 'Extension' roughly associates meaning with the set of objects in the world that a term seeks to identify.

7. It is of course true that a currently very prominent anti-rationalist sector of 'post-modern' thought will declare this whole philosophical enterprise to be a 'ruse', or to be fabricated and self-serving in the first place. But that is another story, with its own set of problems, and we shall discuss it extensively as a separate matter in chapter 2.

very possibility relinquish its claim to transcendence.) The 'trivial' or tautological question of meaningfulness on the epistemological level thus becomes precisely the intractable 'formal' problem of theological thinking stated at the outset of this chapter.

2 Theology and rational obligation within the basic structure of this book

With the foregoing distinctions and goals in mind, I want now to step laterally and make some parallel observations that will serve as a guide into an overview of the book's basic structure and main sections.

Few scholars today would dispute the assessment that over the past several decades we have been witnessing something like an epistemological revolution. However disparately aligned and irreconcilable the several sides may otherwise seem, on the *fact* of the 'revolution' itself, at least, there will be agreement on all fronts: from the anti-rational 'end of epistemology' advocates, through the varying shades of anti-realism, to the group of stalwarts still remaining in the realist camp. Now I want to suggest that at the heart of this revolution there is a very simple question which not only captures, perhaps better than any other, what this revolution is essentially about, but on the basis of which the current intellectual landscape can be mapped out in a particularly helpful way. The question is this: Are there any *intrinsic obligations* to thinking or reason per se? Or more fully, are there are any *inherent* features of thinking or discourse by which particular instances of it could be deemed to be 'proper' or 'improper', genuine or specious? This is not any new question. It has been asked in various ways and at various times by a wide array of prominent thinkers. For example, a persistently relevant essay by Kant entitled 'What is Orientation in Thinking?'[8] was trying to address precisely this question from within an epistemological context equally as volatile or revolutionary as the present one. And what I am claiming here, with this in mind, is that by laying out the present epistemological revolution against this question of intrinsic obligations or orientation in thinking, we will see unfolding a spectrum of responses to it, a spectrum that divides naturally and heuristically into three broad sectors.

8. This was written in 1786. It currently appears most prominently in English in Immanuel Kant, *Kant: Political Writings* (second edition), H. S. Reiss (ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 237–49.

2.1 A spectrum of obligation in thinking

If we now imagine this spectrum mapped out before us, we see at the one end of it a group of outlooks that simply answers the question at hand negatively. These are the self-described anti-rational or anti-epistemological outlooks; and what makes them anti-rational, at bottom, is precisely the denial that thinking or reason contains any intrinsic obligations or that there is any *inherent* normativity to rational discourse or processes. Because of their current popularity and present influence across broad sectors of the human sciences and theology, they are often taken to be a novel (i.e., 'post-modern' in the straightforward sense of the term) development, but they are not really anything new as such. In fact, they are, in basic respects, the same thing as what Kant was trying to describe two centuries ago in the forementioned essay when he used the term 'rational unbelief' to identify a group of intellectual outlooks that were then operating, in his words, according to 'the maxim of the independence of reason from its *own need*'[9] (original emphasis).

Expanding on this for the contemporary context, we could say that the current anti-rational trend involves precisely something like a shift away from the view of rationality arising *naturally* as 'need' (and thus normatively, orientatingly) and toward the view of rationality arising unnaturally or *artificially* as 'power' (and thus 'hegemonically' and 'self-legitimizingly'). More specifically, in ways that will be made clear below, the rejection of such a 'need-oriented' view of reason involves at bottom the rejection of the traditional consciousness-centred or semantic language of intention, reference and aboutness. The embrace of a 'power-oriented' view of reason involves the adoption in its place of the tactic-centred or syntactical language of 'coping mechanisms', or 'performativity', or non-purposive tactics in writing or in speech acts, and so on. We will discuss these anti-rational or negative responses to the question of rational obligation in some detail in chapter 2, but the real focus of the book thereafter will be on the different kinds of responses occurring on the positive side of the spectrum. The reason for this will be obvious enough: Any approach that rejects the idea of intrinsic obligations in discourse

9. Kant, *Political Writings*, p. 248. Kant's target at that point was a particular group of anti-rationalist outlooks, prominent among which was the radically fideistic pietism of Jacobi. The group of anti-rationalists today tend, to the contrary, to be from more atheistic quarters. But this is not always the case. For example, the Radical Orthodoxy project, cited above, is anti-rational in the sense I am describing here; indeed the radical pietism of Jacobi is among its formative influences.

will thereby also be unable to accommodate any talk of integrity, which orthodox theology with its intrinsic claim to authority must by definition be able to do, and which this book wants to make central. The summary contention of chapter 2 then, will be that, despite the good prospects they may initially seem to offer on several levels, nevertheless, because these anti-rational approaches cannot respond to the demands of integrity implicit in the claim to orthodoxy, their promise proves to be hollow and their strategies unworkable for theology.

It is at this point that the hard task of articulating a positive theory of theological reasoning begins. The task is made difficult in part because even as we move away from anti-epistemological responses at the far negative end of our spectrum and back into affirming the legitimacy of genuine philosophical or intentional-referential questioning for theological purposes,[10] we find that we are still, within contemporary theories of knowledge, confronted with the complex task of evaluating a widely disparate array of possible *positive* responses to the question of intrinsic obligations or orientation in thinking. As a way of gaining some mentally visual perspective on this, we can, by returning to our spectrum image, configure the affirmative responses to this question as taking place broadly between the two opposing poles of classical foundationalism and holism. But it is important as such to reiterate the proviso that, even though I speak here in terms of 'opposing poles', we are now dealing only with the positive 'subsection', so to speak, of the more complete spectrum of all possible responses to the question of rational orientation or obligation (from positive to negative), such that both foundationalism and holism, in the sense that I am speaking of them here, seek to offer different kinds of *affirmative* answers to the question at hand.[11]

With this in mind, we can now lay out a general comparison between foundationalism and holism in the following way. Foundationalism is the well-known (and currently highly polemicized) view that seeks to justify

10. I will explain the significance of philosophical questioning as intentional-referential questioning in the next chapter.

11. One of the reasons that this proviso is so important to bear in mind is that 'holism' in current usage has itself become a highly ambiguous term that is employed in confusing ways. It is used not only in the positive epistemological context in which I am employing it here, but also in a decidedly anti-epistemological vein, and the term comes to signify something importantly different in each case. In the former, rational sense, holism appeals to a kind of coherence theory which reflects certain basic commitments to normative stability. In the latter, anti-rational sense, it constitutes a radically free-floating kind of coherence. We shall discuss this distinction in detail in the following chapter, but it is in the former, normative epistemological sense that I use the term at this juncture.