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METHOD

Legoito d'an hikanōs ei kata tēn hypokeimenēn hylēn diasaphētheiē.
('Our discussion will be on the right lines if it illuminates things in a way that is appropriate to the subject-matter in question.')
Aristotle[1]

1. THE NATURE OF THE SUBJECT

The philosophy of religion has unique attractions. At a time when academic philosophizing has become increasingly fragmented, separated off into a host of specialisms preoccupied with narrow programmes of 'research',[2] the philosophical study of religion has a stimulatingly wide purview and necessarily connects us with a whole spectrum of inquiries. It embraces practical moral questions (about how we should live our lives), as well as more theoretical moral issues about the objectivity of morality and the source of moral value; it takes us into the philosophy of mind – questions about the nature of the self and consciousness, and the extent to which we are ultimately responsible for our character and actions; and it delves into cosmological questions about the ultimate source of our world and of human existence. But perhaps most strikingly, it is concerned with our overall view of the nature of reality.

1 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* [c. 325 BC], Bk. I, Ch. 3, ed. T. Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1985).
2 Although the term 'research' has become unavoidable for those seeking funding in the humanities, it is in many ways a misleading label for the work done in the humane disciplines. See further J. Cottingham, "What Is Humane Philosophy and Why Is It at Risk?", in A. O'Hear (ed.), *Conceptions of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Hence, it necessarily resists division into hermetically sealed subdisciplines, and instead keeps alive the traditional grand vision of philosophy as the attempt to achieve a comprehensive 'synoptic' vision of things – one that endeavours to discern how (or how far) the different areas of our human understanding fit together.

These grand holistic questions are ones that many contemporary analytic philosophers are wary of; understandably enough, the needs of gaining a doctoral qualification and making one's career in a competitive academic world are apt to lead people to retreat into specialized niches where they can gain a respected expertise in a narrow area. There is surely nothing wrong with this specialisation as such – indeed, it can yield significant scholarly dividends. But for all that, I suspect that many people still retain something of the drive that led them to philosophy in the first place: an urge to deepen their understanding of what meaning, if any, their lives as a whole may have, or what kind of overall vision of reality may be possible. And sooner or later, this quest, the quest that has always been at the heart of the philosophical enterprise, is likely to draw us into the grand questions tackled by philosophy of religion.

This does not of course mean that all philosophers should become philosophers of religion, nor does it mean that philosophers of religion cannot themselves develop specialized expertise in particular texts or problems. But if we feel the pull of the ancient Socratic slogan, 'the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being',[3] then seeing whether we can achieve a framework for understanding our lives as a whole will be a task that we cannot put off for ever. At least 'once in our life' (*semel in vita*), as René Descartes remarked in one of the founding texts of modern philosophy,[4] most of us will be called to tackle this task. To be sure, we may not as a result decide to embrace a theistic worldview; an increasing number of philosophers today have opted for some form of 'naturalistic' alternative ('naturalism' is a highly problematic term, but has come to mean, roughly, the view that there are no ultimate constituents of reality apart from those studied by the physical sciences). But the question of whether theism or naturalism constitutes a more coherent and compelling outlook is itself one of the

3 Plato, *Apology* [c. 395 BC], 38a.
4 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* [1641], First Meditation, first paragraph.

grand synoptic questions of which we are speaking, and one that is central to the philosophy of religion.

As well as its unique attractions, philosophy of religion also presents unique problems. Almost any philosophical question may from time to time keep us awake at night, because of the intricate and demanding nature of the concepts and arguments involved; and philosophy of religion is no exception. But aside from that, there is a special aspect to the philosophical study of religion, namely, that the issues are ones in which practitioners generally have a strong personal stake, and which may even affect their entire sense of who they are and what kind of world they inhabit. In other areas of philosophy (in the case of a shift from foundationalism to coherentism in the philosophy of knowledge, for instance), there may well be a considerable intellectual struggle, but for the most part it is not one that has an impact on people's deepest commitments, or that pervasively affects their understanding of themselves and the direction of their lives. Religious belief, by contrast, is something that touches our most profound sense of who and what we are; and hence debating the validity of the theistic outlook can never be something about which the believer feels entirely detached. And similarly, the atheistic outlook is also one that implies deeply held beliefs about the nature of human life and the world we inhabit, beliefs in which the subject often has a significant personal involvement (for example, they may have been forged in the heat of a fierce struggle to break away from views inherited from parents or teachers); so here again, detached dispassionate evaluation is seldom the whole story.

These issues of commitment and involvement that are so often bound up with the practice of philosophy of religion might at first seem to suggest that there is something suspect about the philosophical credentials of the subject. Can philosophy of religion really be practised in that calm, dispassionate, purely rational spirit that is supposed to be the hallmark of proper philosophical inquiry? One possible response to this challenge is a 'neutralist' response: the philosophical student of religion should set aside his or her personal commitments and try to adopt the impartial perspective of, say, a judge in a law court. One should listen to the arguments, evaluate the evidence, and draw the appropriate conclusion; and if the results of this process are unpalatable to one's prior convictions, so be it – the obligations of impartial rationality should be paramount. We should, on this view, model ourselves on the

professionalism of a presiding judge in a law court, who might reach his decision somewhat as follows: 'as a property-owner myself, I might be emotionally inclined to side with the landlord in this dispute, but, given the evidence presented to the court, and the statute and case law on this issue, the correct legal judgment must be in favour of the tenant.'

Unfortunately, this analogy doesn't quite work. In the first place, if a judge finds herself too personally involved in a case, then the proper course is for her to decline to hear it and pass it on to a colleague. But in the momentous choices connected with religious belief, there is no way the questions can be declined or delegated. As Blaise Pascal, one of Western philosophy's most insightful writers on religion, put it: 'you must choose'.[5] This may seem a little overstated: perhaps after due consideration the right response might be some kind of agnosticism. But simply stepping aside from the question altogether is just not an option.

In the second place, the neutral model of decision making seems in certain contexts to be unstable. This instability is wittily exposed in the piquant address of the Usher to the jury in Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera *Trial by Jury*:

> Now jurymen hear my advice
> All kinds of vulgar prejudice
> I pray you set aside:
> With stern judicial frame of mind
> From bias free of every kind
> This trial must be tried
>
> Oh, listen to the plaintiff's case:
> Observe the features of her face
> The broken-hearted bride.
> Condole with her distress of mind:
> From bias free of every kind
> This trial must be tried![6]

Even those trained to be detached and impartial can and should recognize that there are cases where their personal commitments or emotional responses are simply too deeply entrenched for them to be confident that

5 'Il faut choisir.' Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* ('Thoughts') [1670], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1962), no. 418. Compare William James on 'forced options', in *The Will to Believe* [1896] (Cranston, RI: Anglenook, 2012), §1.

6 First performed 1875; libretto by W. S. Gilbert.

they can be set aside. More serious still, emotional commitments may operate at a subconscious level, exerting a subtle and not fully detected influence on which pieces of evidence appear particularly salient, or which arguments seem particularly persuasive. Religion is hardly the only field in which these points are applicable, but given the pivotal importance of the religious outlook (or its absence) in our lives, and the role played here by personal commitment, it seems worth spending a little more time at the start of our inquiry thinking about the pros and cons of the 'neutralist' model, and the implications for the appropriate methodology to be adopted in the philosophy of religion.

2. DETACHMENT AND RATIONALITY

'Arguments seldom work on men of wit and learning when they have once engaged themselves in a contrary opinion'; so wrote Thomas Hobbes in the mid-seventeenth century.[7] His contemporary Descartes vividly warned against the power of preconceived opinions (*praejudicia*) to cloud the 'natural light' of rationality.[8] Now clearly philosophy is, and should be, committed to the principles of rational argument, which means, most importantly, maintaining consistency and coherence in our thinking. We should, as Socrates famously said, 'follow the argument where it leads'.[9] In our own time, the prevailing way of philosophizing in the anglophone world that is known as 'analytic philosophy' (though that term is problematic in several respects) is rightly committed to upholding high standards of clarity and rigour – and let me make it quite clear at the outset that I subscribe wholeheartedly to those values – the values of the philosophical tradition in which I was trained. But in the way a considerable number of analytic philosophers tend to work, there is an additional dimension that seems more questionable.

This is the implicit assumption that the truth is, as it were, 'flat', and that we reach the best results in philosophy by eliminating all ambiguity

7 Thomas Hobbes, *The Questions concerning Liberty and Necessity and Chance* [1654], in *English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. W. Molesworth (London: Bohn, 1841), Vol. V, no. 38, Postscript, p. 435. By 'wit', Hobbes means intelligence.

8 See Descartes, *Meditations*, Synopsis, first paragraph; and *Search for Truth* [*La recherche de la vérité*, c. 1641], first two paragraphs.

9 Plato, *Republic* [c. 375 BC], 394d.

from our discourse and striving to emulate the austere, pared-down language of modern science. Increasing numbers of philosophers appear to subscribe to this kind of view; Brian Leiter, for example, has spoken admiringly of the recent 'naturalistic revolution' in philosophy which holds that philosophy should 'adopt and emulate the methods of successful sciences'.[10] But a leading contemporary philosopher of religion, Eleonore Stump, has recently voiced a growing disquiet about this trend in analytic philosophy, particularly in areas, such as moral philosophy and philosophy of religion, which are specially concerned with the significance of the human predicament and our responses to the deep moral and spiritual challenges of our lives. While fully supporting the precision and discipline for which the analytic tradition is rightly prized, Stump deplores its 'cognitive *hemianopia*' – its blindness to the kinds of insights associated with the right cerebral hemisphere, and its unwarranted tendency to 'suppose that left-brain skills alone will reveal to us all that is philosophically interesting about the world'.[11] The reference here is to recent studies in neurophysiology and psychology, which suggest that the left hemisphere of the brain plays a major role in the exercise of our logical and conceptual abilities, while the right hemisphere is associated with more intuitive, imaginative, and holistic forms of awareness. Some possible implications of this have been developed by Iain McGilchrist:

> There are two ways of being in the world, both of which are essential. One is to allow things to be *present* to us in all their embodied particularity, with all their changeability and impermanence and their interconnectedness, as part of a whole which is forever in flux. In this world we, too, feel connected to what we experience, part of that whole, not confined in subjective isolation from a world that is viewed as objective. The other is to step outside the flow of experience and 'experience' our experience in a special way: to *re-present* the world in a form that is less truthful, but apparently clearer, and therefore cast in a form which is more useful for manipulation of the world and one another. This world is explicitly abstracted, compartmentalised, fragmented,

10 Brian Leiter, *The Future for Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), Editor's Introduction, pp. 2–3.
11 Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 24–25.

static (though its 'bits' can be set in motion, like a machine), essentially lifeless. From this world we feel detached, but in relation to it we are powerful.[12]

This kind of distinction between two distinct but equally vital modes of cognition raises complex questions about human awareness that deserve more attention from philosophers generally than they have hitherto received. But with respect to the philosophy of religion in particular, at least one important lesson suggests itself. For many of the issues that arise in the subject, for example, the problems connected with human suffering, sin, evil, repentance, conversion, and redemption, and religious experience generally, even though technically expert argument no doubt has its place, we are also going to need additional resources.

What might these resources be? Eleonore Stump, in her recent study of the problem of evil, refers in particular to those arising from our manifold responses to the multiple resonances of literary, and scriptural, narrative. This chimes in with calls for a certain kind of narrative or literary turn in philosophy, powerfully advocated in the widely admired work of Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum argues that in learning to appreciate a great literary text we have to allow ourselves to be receptive and 'porous', knowing when to yield instead of maintaining constant critical detachment.[13] Somewhat analogously, Stump insists that literary narratives cannot be used as mere illustrative tools for philosophical arguments – that would be to 'demean' the role of narrative to that of a mere picture or example. She proposes instead an 'antiphonal' structure, where the narrative is considered in its 'disorderly richness', so that subsequent philosophical reflection can operate in a more deeply informed way, enlightened to aspects of reality to which it might otherwise have been blind.[14]

12 Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 93 (slightly adapted). It should be added that associating these two modes of awareness with the right and left hemispheres, respectively, is something of a schematic approximation, as McGilchrist himself stresses. There is evidence to suggest that in most people the respective functions do broadly correlate with neural activity in the relevant halves of the brain, but in normal subjects there is constant interaction between the halves.

13 Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 281–282.

14 Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, pp. 26–27.

Reflection on these points suggests that the appropriate style for philosophy of religion may be somewhat different from that which dominates the contemporary literature. This need not mean constantly bombarding the reader with quotations from scripture or poetry; but it might allow scope for a more generous deployment of scriptural and literary sources when these seem relevant to the arguments being discussed and when our understanding of the issues seems likely to be thereby enriched. The key point here is that much religious discourse is *multilayered* – it carries a rich charge of symbolic significance that resonates with us on many different levels of understanding, not all of them, perhaps, fully grasped by the reflective, analytic mind. Any plausible account of the human condition must make space for the crucial role of imaginative, symbolic, and poetic forms of understanding in deepening our awareness of ourselves and the reality we inhabit. And for this reason it may be a serious error to try to reduce all religious thinking to a bald set of factual assertions whose literal propositional content is then to be clinically isolated and assessed. Some philosophers may suppose that any departure from complete analytical detachment would involve a loss of philosophical integrity; and certainly there is need for philosophical caution whenever our imaginative and emotional resources are made use of. But equally, if we insist on maintaining a detached analytical stance at all times, this may be less a sign of intellectual integrity than what Nussbaum calls 'a stratagem of flight' – a refusal of the openness and receptivity that is prepared to acknowledge all the dimensions of our humanity.[15] The task, after all, is to enrich our philosophical understanding of religious thought and experience, and there is no reason to suppose that achieving such understanding always has to be a comfortable, detached, purely 'academic' matter. We might instead want to take on board Aristotle's reminder that in philosophy one's methods have to be suited to the subject matter under investigation.[16] And we may also want to reflect on Andrew Louth's observation that in the sphere of religion, true understanding characteristically involves a 'growth in experience [which] is not primarily an increase in knowledge of this or that situation, but rather an escape from what had deceived us and held us captive. It is learning

15 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 268.
16 See the epigraph at the start of the present chapter.

by suffering, suffering in the process of undeception, which is usually painful'.[17]

3. WAYS OF PHILOSOPHIZING ABOUT RELIGIOUS BELIEF

The points just made about the methods and language appropriate to the philosophical discussion of religious belief inevitably raise questions about the way in which philosophy of religion is currently practised. As standardly taught in university courses, a large part of the subject focuses on the domain of so-called natural theology – the examination of 'pure' rational demonstrations or probabilistic arguments about God's existence, which are intended to appeal to any rational inquirer, irrespective of their personal commitments or religious beliefs (or lack thereof). The aim is an impartial investigation of questions about the existence and nature of God that can be tackled by intellectual argument alone. But from what has been said in the previous section, it may already be clear that there is a certain cost to be paid if philosophy of religion is entirely or even mainly restricted to these kinds of inquiry. It is not that there is anything wrong with the careful analysis and critical discussion of arguments of this sort; on the contrary, such work can be philosophically valuable in all sorts of ways. But philosophy is about more than skill in evaluating arguments, or the accumulation of knowledge about the various moves and countermoves in an intellectual debate. At its deepest and most rewarding level it has always aimed not so much at increasing our *knowledge* (in the way that is true of many primarily empirical and scientific disciplines), but rather at enriching our *understanding*. As Anthony Kenny has aptly put it, 'Philosophy is not a matter of expanding knowledge, of acquiring new truths about the world; the philosopher is not in possession of information that is denied to others. Philosophy is not a matter of knowledge, it is a matter of understanding, that is to say, of organizing what is known'.[18] And the more one thinks about understanding, the clearer it becomes that it cannot operate just analytically but needs to work holistically, or synthetically, achieving, at its fullest, a 'synoptic' view of how far the various elements of our world fit together.

17 Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 37.
18 Anthony Kenny, *What I Believe* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 14.

Now the phrase 'our world', in this context, could be taken to mean simply a collection of facts, rather like a collection of atoms, expressible as the set of all true propositions. This very scientifically oriented conception was essentially the one Ludwig Wittgenstein held in his early work, the *Tractatus*: 'the world is everything that is the case'.[19] But even in that early work, Wittgenstein allowed that there were things that could not be said, on this austere model of language, but which might somehow be 'shown'.[20] Moreover, Wittgenstein's view of the nature of language and meaning underwent significant developments between the publication of the *Tractatus* and the composition of his other great masterpiece, the *Philosophical Investigations*; and these developments have important implications for the question of how we should approach religious language. Wittgenstein came think that there is no general form of language; rather, if we are interested in the meaning of linguistic utterances we should think about their *use* in a particular practice or activity – in a 'language game'. The term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of a language is 'part of an activity, or of a form of life'.[21] The lesson to be drawn from Wittgenstein's later philosophy is that if we wish to understand any type of language, including religious language, we have to look at how it operates as part of the culture in which it is embedded. Wittgenstein's interest in 'forms of life' (*Lebensformen*) was in some respects a 'holistic' reaction against the atomistic approach to meaning he had espoused in the *Tractatus* (where an individual proposition was taken to be a 'picture of reality').[22] Our language games, he later came to see, are interwoven with a web of nonlinguistic activities and cannot be understood apart from the context that gives them life.

The Wittgensteinian approach to religion may have problems of its own,[23] and the present book is not especially committed to defending the value of such an approach in general. (For example, in many

19 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [1921], trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1961), §1.
20 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §6.522.
21 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* [*Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 1953], trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), Part I, §23.
22 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §4.01.
23 See further J. Cottingham, 'Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion', in H.-J. Glock and J. Hyman (eds.), *A Companion to Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Wiley, forthcoming).